
Paul Magno

Food for the hungry a matter of justice

This fall Zacchaeus Community Kitchen began its 18th year of operation, serving a basic meal of soup, sandwiches, and tea to about 500 people each morning. It emerged from the social ferment that convulsed our country in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an effort by Christian peace activists to respond to the needs of the poor they encountered in our nation's capital.

Martin Luther King had been killed years before, but his mighty vision of a society based on justice and non-violence inspired such efforts. The very basic biblical imperative to share bread with the hungry, to show justice and compassion for the poor, led to the establishment of Zacchaeus Kitchen in 1972. In addition to providing food for the hungry as a matter of basic justice, Zacchaeus has been a place where we have learned a great deal: about our society's food production and consumption habits, about homelessness, hunger, poverty, and racism, but also about what we cannot help but call the grace of God, who has invited us into a place—Zacchaeus—where we learn to love the poor, to see Christ in them, as the Gospel promised we would, and to form community with them. This is and has been the spirit of the place, and I have been honored to have been part of it.

By way of sharing my experience at Zacchaeus—I have been involved in one way or another for 15 years now—let me describe who we feed and how we manage that. Our dining room on a given morning will probably see 400 or 500 people come through for a meal. These will be overwhelmingly black men; they would range in age from 20 to 80. Most of them live on the streets or in shelters, although an alarming number eat with us because they are employed in circumstances that don't allow them to make ends meet. In the racist society in which we live, about half of the young black men in our city can't get jobs if they want to and those who can hold marginal, low-paying jobs with no security or benefits to speak of. Hence the large and growing number of able-bodied young, black men eating at our soup kitchen.

We also worry about the elderly men and the small number of women we see consistently in our dining room. We typically speak of feeding 500 a day, twice the demand we faced even as recently as two years ago. How many we

actually feed in a day can fluctuate widely depending on the time of month, the weather and the time of year. Though we are talking 500 now, we are concerned that we could be overwhelmed by the numbers we might face at the coldest part of the coming winter. Friends involved in similar work all over the country likewise report that the need has increased, so it is not a matter of the problem of increased suffering being unique to Washington, D.C.

Zacchaeus, consistent with its philosophy, relies entirely on donated resources to carry on its work. We do not pursue grants or government funding, but subsist on donations from churches and individuals to pay our bills. Accordingly, we have on the order of \$100 per month to spend to purchase staple items with which to keep Zacchaeus running. We rely for food primarily on two private sources. One is our weekly food run, in which volunteers simply go from merchant to merchant at the wholesale outlets and beg for food. What we get is primarily produce, occasionally some meat or dairy items. This food, which would ordinarily be disposed of by the merchants because it is unsalable, with a bit of effort on our part, becomes the basis of over 1,000 meals a week at Zacchaeus and assists a couple of small shelters in town as well.

Our second steady source of food is what comes to us from the church groups that volunteer to cook at Zacchaeus, who purchase and bring in the meals they cook. This accounts for over 40% of the meals provided at Zacchaeus.

USDA supplies have declined

Our other major source of food, of course, is the commodities which the Agriculture Department makes available to programs such as ours. Many of these items are an irreplaceable part of our effort to feed the many who come to Zacchaeus to eat. We use items such as rice, spaghetti, macaroni, peanut butter, honey, and oil, steadily, week in and week out, to prepare our daily meal. In addition we use both canned and dried fruit, dried beans, canned meat, and potatoes consistently when these are made available. Generally, the variety, frequency of availability, and quantities of these items increased briefly for a few months last year but has been stagnant of late.

One area that has hurt our program has been the decline in availability of dairy products. This has meant an end to the supply of butter, dried milk, and, especially, cheese. As we understand it, this is a result of changes in price support policies toward dairy farmers and subsequently of the terms on which these items are available to the state agency which then provides them to us. Whereas a year or two ago these were designated as surplus items by the USDA and distributed on that basis, they are now sold, I believe, at market prices to state agencies. Accordingly, the District of Columbia, with an already strapped budget, has opted to purchase less expensive food items, and forego these.

This has been the double effect of implementing unbri-

dled market economics into our society's food system, that there is effectively greater hardship for both the producers—the farmers—and the consumers—the poor and working-class people whose numbers and needs have been increasing, especially among people of color. We know that in addition to the racial characteristics of poverty, homelessness, and hunger, it has increasingly become the problem of women and children.

I recall reading a few months ago that one in four young children in our country lives in circumstances of poverty. These, too, rely, as my own family does, on government-supplied commodities for basic nutrition. While the numbers of such people in need continue to grow in our cutthroat economy, the availability of these food supplies does not—it even diminishes! To draw again on our experience at Zacchaeus Kitchen, the single most reliable source we have had for large quantities of meat is the USDA commodities program. The canned pork and canned beef we've received has been indispensable to our ability to provide the quality of the nutritious meals we presently serve. Without such basic foods I daresay we would be compelled to drastically curtail service, something that would be virtually unconscionable in this period of increasing hunger in our city. These foods are very badly needed by programs such as ours.

I'm aware that there is a need to be concerned with maintaining a viable farm economy, too. Indeed, without the farmers, nobody eats. The people who grow the food—and I mean the working men and women who plow the fields and harvest the crops, not the agribusiness people who have hijacked our food economy for profit—need to be able to work their fields *and* make an honest living *while* the food they grow meets everybody's need and right to eat decently. I have had the good fortune to travel all over this country over the years, including to our nation's farmlands. It seems clear to me that we have the land and the talent and wealth in this country—in short, all the means—to provide abundant food for our people and many more besides.

If there is any place in the history of the world where the biblical miracle of loaves and fishes can occur, it is in our society. But as in that Scripture story, accomplishing the miracle depends entirely on our willingness to understand that people have the right to eat and that those with the means to provide food need to respond to hunger as a matter of compassion and justice. We are in crisis in this society because we disparage our most basic resource—our people—across the whole spectrum of our society and because too many of us have insisted on scrapping with each other for the crumbs from the rich man's table when we ought to unite as Martin Luther King showed us, in a non-violent struggle for justice for everybody. We have done our best over nearly two decades to participate in such an effort at Zacchaeus Community Kitchen and we would invite any of you to come and see for yourself what a miracle of caring and sharing looks like and how it can free our society.

Elsie Pilgrim

Health holocaust of the medically indigent

Martin Luther King's legacy was well known in the black community, and especially by many people who had worked hard in the field of civil rights. They had tried very, very hard. And even before Martin started, there were many, many people, especially in the state of New Jersey—where you might have thought many rights had already been put into place. But I am here to tell you, in 1946, there were many things still closed to all types of citizens in the state of New Jersey. For example, there were blacks who were not allowed to go into nursing schools in New Jersey. There were theaters which were closed to blacks. Some theaters were opened, if you would sit in the balcony. And there were entertainments such as roller-skating rinks, and many other businesses where you were not even allowed to work.

I myself, as a young child, as a teenager, I remember going to Woolworth's and putting in an application to work. The woman looked at me, and she smiled, and she put my application into the wastepaper basket.

Still, those who believed in civil rights and economic justice for all people struggled on. And when Martin Luther King came on the scene, we thought, this is truly the anointed one, this is the one who will lead us all. And we all got together, people who were white, black, blue, green—because many of the things that Martin Luther King talked about, economic justice, really rang true for all people. Such as the farmers, those people who were in the West, those people in the East. It had a common ring of clarity and truth. And even those who went to the U.N. expounded on some of the thoughts of Martin Luther King. And one of the main things was about the right of every person to have good health care. And there were those who took up the cause and who are still trying today. There are people, regardless of whether they're white or black, who still try, within the inner cities, to see that all people get decent health care.

But I will still say to you today, there is still, in the United States, a double system of health care, a dichotomy. There is a system of affordable health care for those people who can afford it, and there is a system of no health care at all, for those people who must use Medicare. When I talk about those people who have absolutely no health care, these are