

“Being consistently conscious.” And so we do our best: taking risks, being smart, making errors, feeling foolish, doing what we believe is right, based on our best judgment at the time. We are imperfect, but we are steady. We are courageous but not faultless. As Lani Guinier said: “It is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong.” If we obsess about looking good instead of doing good, we will get caught in a spiral of ineffective action. Let’s not get side-tracked or defeated because we are trying to be perfect.

And so we move ahead, pushing ourselves forward on our growing edge. We know that although none of us are beginners in dealing with issues of oppression and empowerment, none of us are experts either. These issues are too complex, too painful, and too pervasive for us to achieve a state of clarity and closure once and for all. The best we can hope for is to strive each day to be our strongest and clearest selves, transforming the world one individual at a time, one family at a time, one community at a time. May we summon the wisdom to be devoted allies today. May we walk the walk, living as though equity, justice and freedom for all have already arrived.

Like most activists, I carry a dream inside me. As I travel nationwide for my work, I can actually see signs of it becoming true. The dream is that we will create in this country a nonviolent army of allies that will challenge and break the cycle of oppression and usher in a new era of liberation, empowerment, and equity for persons historically targeted by systemic oppression. Within each individual is the potential to effect enormous change. May we move forward, claiming with pride our identities as allies, interrupting the cycle of oppression, and modeling a new way of behaving and believing.

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### RETHINKING VOLUNTEERISM IN AMERICA



Gavin Leonard

About a year ago, an old friend of mine asked me if our old Mennonite church youth group—the one we both attended and he was now leading—could come down to Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine neighborhood to do some volunteer work. I work for an organization that develops and maintains affordable housing in this

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city's poorest neighborhood. My friend thought it would be a good opportunity for the youth from the small suburban town Bluffton, Ohio, to see what is going on in the inner city.

I had been working with volunteers for about seven years now and lately, I had been thinking a lot about the two types of distinct volunteerism approaches: "charity" versus "solidarity." As I see it, charity means coming in and helping somebody, with little or no regard for what that person or group of people wants or how they want to get it. There's an assumption made that anything a volunteer does is helpful. It's a top-down process.

Solidarity, on the other hand, is about working with that somebody to identify what it is that the people that are being helped need and want, along with how they want to get it. Solidarity assumes equality or at least recognition of a volunteer's privilege that leads to working more collaboratively and with respect. Solidarity is based on an idea that social inequalities exist in a context that one needs to take time to understand. Working in solidarity requires patience.

The lines between charity and solidarity are never clearly drawn, and I'd say the chances that somebody is going to say they're all about charity, are pretty slim. But, given the opportunity to take a bird's eye view of an organization or individuals' interaction in a volunteer setting, I think it's possible to see the distinction.

I talked through some of these issues with my friend and expressed my desire for this group of volunteers to intentionally be in solidarity with people that they are trying to help. Theoretically, I saw the chance to develop a process that would start far before the group came to Over-the-Rhine and would continue long after.

With deeper knowledge of the situation they were entering, how they relate to it, and how that relates to national policies, I feel like the opportunity could exist for a truly long-term positive change. In my work locally, the best volunteers have been the people who came to the organization through a charity-minded group, and then stayed connected by themselves in various ways. People who read our newsletter, stop by just to check in, read books or materials we suggest—these are the folks who add real capacity and value in a model of solidarity.

Volunteers who are aware of their shortcomings, vulnerabilities, and stereotypes, and who are willing to confront them head on, make a lasting difference. There is a recognizable feeling of authenticity and truth that emerges as we begin to notice our own problems and issues while we are working with others to address their needs.

In contrast, my vision of a charity-minded volunteer is one where the experience is a single, short-term event. I've seen more than a few individuals take in difficult and complicated explanations of serious social issues and then within minutes walk away joking about this or that. I'm not saying people need to pour their lives into the organization they are supporting for that day or two—but a concerted effort to extend these conversations into peoples' everyday lives would be valuable in creating real, longer-term change.

I talked to my friend about the differences I saw between charity and solidarity and I was hopeful we could do more than just your typical weekend-charity

outing to the hood. I suggested that the youth group participate in a process that led up to the trip to Cincinnati, and then spend significant time talking about it afterward. I suggested an essay that tackles some of these issues—a review of *Sweet Charity*, a book by Janet Poppendieck—as a starting point for discussion. It seemed to me that setting up structured conversations and background in the months prior to a visit would lead to an experience with considerably more depth and impact.

I heard back a little while later that my friend couldn't commit to a process; he just didn't have the time. He was passing it on to the new youth group leader, along with copies of our correspondence. The next time I heard from the new leader, it was to say that the youth did not have time to do something like this, and they were sorry, but they wouldn't be able to make it.

To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. I really had hoped that the group would be interested in engaging at this level. It's the kind of thing I really only felt safe asking of a church that I had attended for many years and I don't feel it was unreasonable.

Realistically, it's hard work. Working in solidarity takes a commitment and ability to listen and learn that often raises very tough issues that most of us would rather not deal with: racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other socially divisive realities can't be ignored once you really start to pay attention.

I wrote back expressing my feelings and decided that this was a fight I'd have to fight another day. As a leader on the non-profit side that works with volunteers, I'd like to share a level of responsibility here. I really need to work harder to carve out space and time to engage with potential volunteers in a way that not only suggests, but also supports a process of working towards solidarity. I also feel that the supervisors and community service liaisons at churches, schools, and universities need to carve out similar time and energy. At the end of the day, the full burden of moving such a process needs to be shared.

## Engaging in a Better Way

My involvement as a volunteer has been fairly extensive for my age and I've spent a lot of time and thought on what it should look like. What I've come to believe is that we need to be very intentional, forthcoming, and thoughtful about how we engage in the communities we want to help.

*Sweet Charity* by Poppendieck is a well-researched look into the unintended consequences of charity work. It shows how volunteers are often just playing out their own guilt and working to achieve a level of personal fulfillment. It shows that charity often views the poor as sub-human and if and when this benevolent mentality is not checked it has the potential to actually hurt, not help, the people who are supposed to be gaining something. We often ignore the systemic problems that are actually causing the holes we seek to plug. I think she's right to question this process, and it's something that all of us should take a hard look at in the current context of the growing wealth disparity and increasing reliance on charities.

Charity often comes across as patronizing and disingenuous. Corporations often spend nearly the amount of money advertising the fact they made a contribution to a non-profit as the amount of the contribution itself. And it's truly shocking how few of the volunteers I interface with actually ask a heartfelt question.

Solidarity takes more time. To think about and learn about a person is difficult. Not to mention that poverty is depressing.

Still, without professing to have the whole thing figured out, I'd like to make four suggestions for working towards a better way of engaging as volunteers:

1. **Learn about the organization.** Spend some time learning about the organization you'll be going to work with before you start the job. Don't create more work for it—do your research independently and then ask questions.
2. **Learn about the larger issues.** Look for resources that focus on the systemic issues that create the conditions you'd like to see eradicated. That way you can join the dialogue on how to eliminate the problem itself, not just its symptoms. Ask thoughtful questions of the leader or liaison.
3. **Express your appreciation.** Recognizing that volunteer work is often much more beneficial to you—whether as an opportunity for personal fulfillment, or a way to see a place you might not otherwise have access to, or simply as a way to pay off your parking ticket—saying “thanks” is something far too few people do.
4. **Find small ways to engage after leaving.** Sign up for an email list, a newsletter, stop by once in a while. If all of us take baby steps towards becoming more engaged as active citizens, we'll be on the right track.

Leaders of non-profits should work to maintain an up-to-date resource list for volunteers, and leaders at institutions bringing volunteers could establish a checklist that they discuss with volunteers covering ways to stay engaged before, during, and after the brief engagement.

So, how do we actually implement these types of steps and conversations so that we are moving in a positive way towards solidarity?

Volunteerism in America is a complicated web of individuals, groups, and institutions that are all shaping how we view people that are not like us. I think it is high time we make a concerted effort to share the responsibility and move towards a long-term solidarity model for volunteerism that is respectful, dignified, and purposeful. Charity will only get us so far.