

# OPINION

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## Sense of Compassion Withers in America

What has happened to the virtue of charity?

A few months ago I found myself feeling the need to write about honesty and how it is all too often seen as an outdated value which

can be dealt with by spin doctors and those who would trivialize its meaning. The same might be said of charity, a word all too often today only used to mean aid given to those in need. But once upon a time the word charity meant mercy and compassion. While our nation's aid to the needy may not have declined, it seems that our sense of

compassion has withered.

Take, for instance, what is happening to the poorest of the poor in the African-American community. A study this spring by the Children's Defense Fund found that although black child poverty figures had reached their lowest point in 2001 (before the spikes in unemployment of the past 18 months), the number of black children living in "extreme poverty," that is, in families with incomes below half the poverty line - was near a record high. Indeed, nearly one million African American children were living in "extreme poverty" even before the upturn in unemployment. In the wealthiest nation in the world, what has happened to the virtue of charity?

Similarly, there is anecdotal information from cities nationwide that there is an across the board increase of families in homeless shelters, struggling to survive in the midst of the loss of 3 million jobs over the past few years. Some of these homeless families are poor, working families. They are dealing with the fact that there is not one rural or urban area of our nation today where full-time minimum wage workers can afford to pay the full market value for housing. They are a product of our national decision to decrease federal funding for

low income housing for the past generation and private industry's failure to build affordable housing for the working poor. Yet, there is no outcry from Americans, either in Congress or in the general public. What has happened to the virtue of charity?

On another front, the administration has tried to quietly make changes in overtime law for American workers. Yet, this proposal by the Labor Department, which re-

posed to increase the categories of workers exempt from this law. The result may be even more poor, working Americans. This radical proposal so far has been diverted by Senator Tom Harkin's (D-Iowa) hard work, but one wonders, what has happened to the virtue of charity.

Then there have been efforts to radically change Head Start, an astoundingly successful federally-funded program for the nation's

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON



Yet Congress is mired in debate on how to make affordable drug plans a reality for our seniors. Similarly, there are 9 million American children with no health care coverage at all. Yet, we, in the nation with the most advanced health care in the world, seem unable to provide this most basic need to our most vulnerable. What has happened to the virtue of charity?

As we have shredded the safety net for the poor, for women, children and the elderly over the past decade, as we refuse to acknowledge that our health care system is in crisis and in danger of imminent collapse, as we have focused on testing for our students instead of learning, as we leave more and more workers and poor families to fend for themselves, and require those who receive public assistance to work longer hours with no child care, we seem to have lost our sense of compassion. A nation without charity is a nation which is losing in the struggle for its soul.

Bernice Powell Jackson is the executive minister for justice and witness ministries for the United Church of Christ.

Despite warnings that proposed changes will negatively impact poor children and their families, there are still efforts in Congress to "reform" Head Start

ceived no publicity and has undergone no public hearings, may impact as many as 10 million American workers who would lose their right to overtime pay for working more than the mandated 40 hour work week. This hard-won right for workers' compensation has governed wages for 65 years because of Congressional legislation, yet the administration has tried to end this protection for workers without changing the law. Instead, it pro-

poorest children and their parents. Despite warnings that proposed changes will negatively impact poor children and their families, there are still efforts in Congress to "reform" Head Start. What has happened to the virtue of charity?

Likewise, millions of senior citizens struggle to pay for prescription medications. Nearly a third of all seniors have no prescription drug plan and many find themselves unable to pay for their medicine.

## Oregon Kicker is Bad Public Policy

Even a raging economy won't save public services

BY JOHN LEWIS

In the final days of its longest-ever legislative session, the Oregon Legislature chose not to let the state slip further into the third world. They bravely raised taxes. But this short-term solution neglected to address two long-term problems: revenues will remain inadequate and the state has no revenue structure in place to deal with economic downturns.

Instead we have the "kicker," which can exacerbate revenue shortfalls.

The Oregon Center for Public Policy looked at our state economist's projections and the future is not bright. Even after six years of projected steady growth from 2004 to 2009, the state still won't have as much revenue for public services as it did in 1999-01 (taking into account population and inflation). Who can say for certain we will have steady growth? It might skyrocket. It might plummet.

Projecting the economy is like riding a roller coaster in the dark.

Economies are fickle. They go up and down and they take government revenues with them. The state's budget outlook can go from good to bad in a matter of months and Oregon won't be prepared.

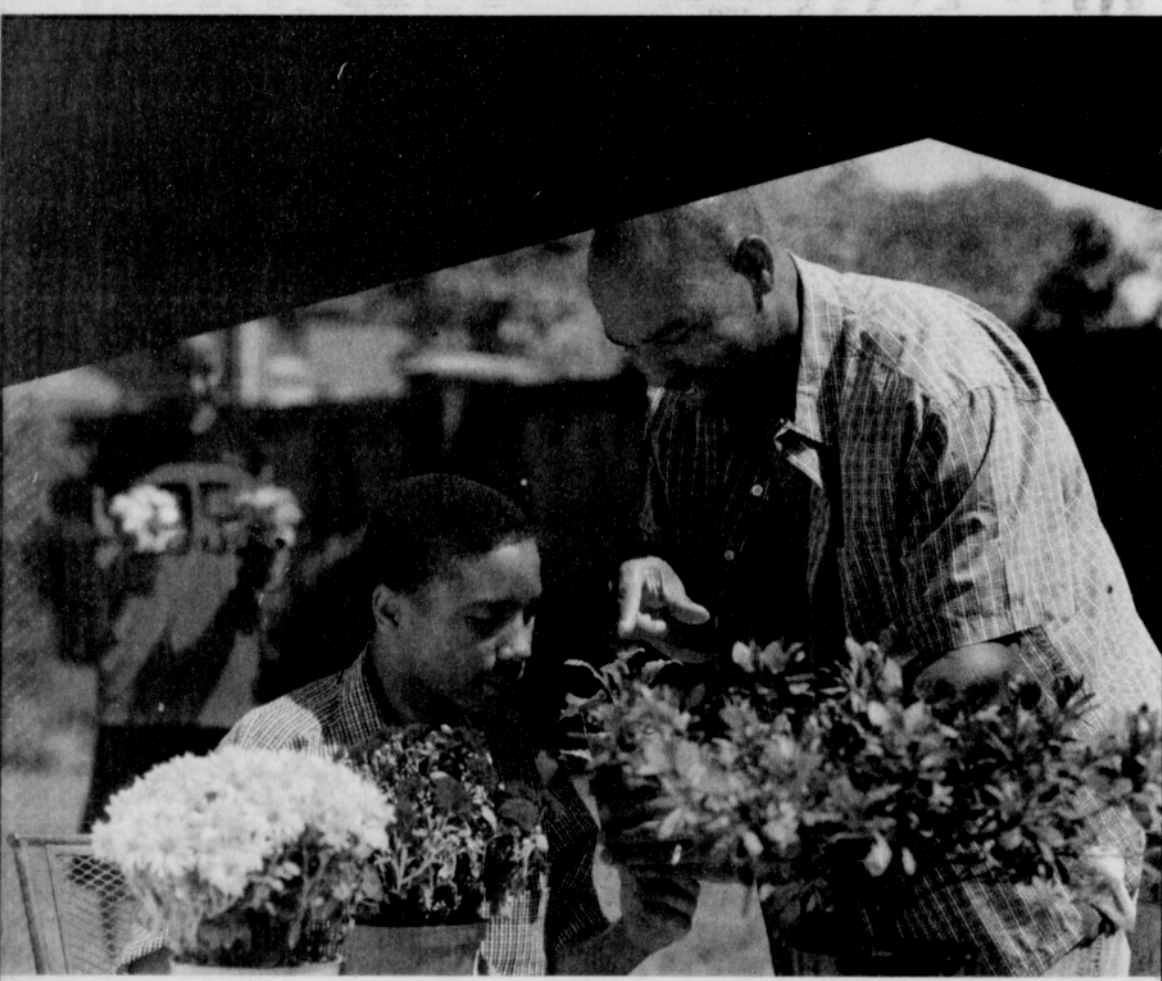
Oregon needs to be prepared. We need our policy makers and the voters who elect them, to recognize that budget and revenue deci-

sions are long-term decisions. Under-funding any public service now will make it that much harder to fund adequately in the future. We need to raise enough revenue, over time, to fund schools, roads, and other public services at an adequate and sustainable level. Some courageous legislators have developed a solution for the short term; we need them to hold on to that courage and recognize that Oregon's public needs will require more revenue in the long term.

We need to acknowledge that the kicker is bad public policy. Any time actual revenues exceed a projection published two years earlier, by just two percent, all of the extra dollars get kicked back to taxpayers. Imagine our economy, in the mud right now, sprouts wings and flies in 2004. The Dept. of Revenue collects 15 percent more than state economists projected this summer. Fifteen is greater than two. All of it goes back to taxpayers and there is no additional money for schools, or roads, or to save for the next rainy day.

Oregon needs to redirect the kicker to a rainy day fund. Our Legislature will still be limited in its ability to spend, but it will have a financial cushion to help keep government running during an economic downturn. They won't need to enact sudden tax increases or draconian budget cuts.

John Lewis is administrator of the Oregon Center for Public Policy.



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## Letter to the Editor

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### Personal Attack Hides Real Story

I have heard the political advice that if the facts are against you, argue personality.

That is what the Portland Tribune has done with its sensationalized attack on Rev. W.G. Hardy Jr.

Whatever Rev. Hardy's sins, they did not play a role in the death of Kendra James nor did they play a role in Officer McCollister's ill-advised obstinance that pushed the incident from frustrating to fatal; they did not play a role in allowing the wounded James to lie dying on the ground without medical treatment; they did not play a role in the officers involved getting together at a restaurant to get their stories straight; nor did Rev. Hardy's sins play a role in the three-day delay before McCollister was questioned.

Whatever Rev. Hardy's sins, they do not play a role in the community-wide knowledge that a police officer can escape responsibility for killing someone by simply claiming fear without regard to the reasonableness of that fear; they do not play a role in the fact that you

are more likely to be shot by police in Portland than in New York City; nor do his sins play a role in the devastating critique of the Portland Police Department's training and protocols.

Whatever his sins, or the sins of any one of us who believe the police need reminding that they are public servants and not public bullies, and even the sins of those who would never criticize a police officer for anything, all those sins are immaterial to the Kendra James shooting.

However, the facts are not on the Police Bureau's side - despite the disgraceful non-indictment of Officer McCollister based on the specious, but official, argument that fear alone - reasonable or not - exonerates all police officers.

No wonder, then, that their allies in the media (Tribune) rush to change the subject from facts to personalities. I wonder what role the police played in bringing this to light. Should we now expect police blotter details on all police critics?

Ruth Alice Anderson