

# Things go better with neighbors

Mary O'Connell interviews John McKnight

*Are Christians called to be servants? John McKnight doesn't think so.*

*"Services"—by professionals and institutions—destroy the ability of family and community members to help each other, says McKnight. He cites Jesus' words, "I shall not call you servants anymore, but friends" to argue that Christians are called upon to be "fair friends." That means to live justly with each other. And for Americans particularly, McKnight says it means curbing the runaway impulse to have the best of everything.*

*McKnight, a Northwestern University professor long involved in civil rights and community activism, adds that churches must lead the way. "The church is one of the few places left where people come together to talk about something other than being consumers."*

**Society has come to rely on professional and institutional solutions to situations that used to be handled by families. For example, you've written about bereavement counselors replacing the support that used to come from friends and family at the time of death. What's behind this?**

**The best answer I know to the question of how and where this transformation happened comes from Karl Polyani in his book *The Great Transformation*. He argues that most societies and cultures developed as a whole. The way you play and think and work and pray and sing weren't divisible, at one time—they were all intertwined, they were manifestations of the same**

thing. People wouldn't say, "Now I'm working, and after that I will sing, or pray." They wouldn't even use those words. It's hard for us to understand how those tasks went together, because we have taken them apart.

Have you ever seen one of those little wooden-ball puzzles? You take it apart, and you have 30 or so oddly shaped pieces, and you can never get them back together again. Those 30 pieces, *that's our world*. And the professions are here to help us tend to each one of those pieces. When they were all together—playing, working, eating, praying—you knew that in their correct relationship they would be healthy. Now, with everything taken apart, you can't have a healthful way of everyday life. So you look for ways to put these parts of life back together again, in the name of health. A health club—a windowless, airless space with immovable bicycles and heavy things to lift—that's an artificial way to put things back together.

I was once at a meeting where a group of us from all over the world, but mostly Westerners, were talking about health—about exercise, recreation, eating right, stopping pollution. One of the people there was a man named J.P. Naik. He was one of Gandhi's disciples, a very well-educated Brahmin. During the British occupation he had been tried and exiled to a peasant village where he spent 30 years. J.P. listened to us for four days, without saying anything. When I finally asked him what he had to add to all this, his answer was, "I don't understand. You have spent all this time trying to think about health. And you have come out where the people in my village are *now*—without having to go through all this."

The peasants' life has embedded in each day all the realities of food and work and exercise.

But the peasant doesn't say, "Today I will hitch up my plow and plow 30 rows for exercise; today I will eat green vegetables for nutrition; today I will deal with my wife and children to keep a good relationship with them." A culture is the historic knowing of a people of how to cope with their environment. And a technologically dominated society is a place where people have no knowledge. They have substituted expert knowledge. But they have no knowledge.

Aren't you idealizing the peasant and ignoring the benefits of technological society? If your Indian peasant develops cancer, where is he better off—in his well-balanced village or in a place where he has access to the techniques that might cure him?

An Indian peasant living beyond the age of three is likely to live as long as a Westerner. And he or she is likely to die a good death, on a deathbed, with relatives around, rather than in a hospital, hooked up to machines, cut off from the family. So you can say, "We've cured cancer"—which we haven't, but anyway—but a whole set of other things have come along with that, including the pollution that caused the cancer in the first place.

So what can the community do that institutions can't do?

Health is the result of working/eating/living/breathing in a way that makes sense as a whole. Someone said, "Health is the unintended side effect of living a good life." That notion, by the way, is deeply embedded in Eastern religions; the idea that health isn't something you put into yourself, that it's about right relationships.

Do you think Jesus ever talked about health? The Old Testament does—but Jesus was concerned about right relationships. He understood that health is the name for how one is, in a Christian sense.

Then let's talk about creating those right relationships.

It's very hard for one individual to do it. It's only possible for a group of people. Society is so

broken—so invaded by individualism, by consumerism. Video claims the home, packaged goods claim the marketplace, packaged knowledge claims the school.

If you wanted to look for a place where health could be generated, about the only place you would find would be a church. The church is one of the few places left where you could find people who come together who want to talk about something other than being consumers.

There are historical precedents for what you're talking about, aren't there? In Chicago, for example, the church has a long history of being a center for community organizing. Is that still true? Is it still important, or how has it changed?

It's more important than it used to be. In the 1940s, at the local level, there were many places where people could come together. There were local unions. There were ethnic associations. There were political organizations. Even the political machine, with all its faults, reflected in some ways the communal values—at least more than the political parties today, where the only way you can touch them is to touch the TV screen. There were local businesses and enterprises. And then there were the churches. So early community organizing involved identifying leaders of these associations and mobilizing them around the issues.

But if you go today to many neighborhoods, most of those other groups—local unions, ethnic associations, and so on—have disappeared. So what's left? What's left is the Holiness MBE Church of God, or St. Procopius.

The church has become the vital center of communities, much more so than in the past. The United States is a generally secular society. Churches in the past have been mediating institutions, as they helped immigrant populations adjust to a new society. That's still true, of course, for new immigrants. But most church populations now are insiders. So the church is now asked not to be a mediator but to be the center of community.

What would that look like, if the church took on that challenge to be the center of community? I'm thinking now, not of an inner-city parish facing a day-to-day struggle against hunger, homelessness, poverty, crime—but of the kind of parish where I imagine most *Salt* readers live, where they are aware of and concerned about these problems, but don't fight them out day-to-day.

What might it look like? I'm thinking this out as I talk to you.

A consumer society can become so pervasive that most questions of values don't get asked—because they can't be conceived of in the first place. But if you think of putting the church at the center of society, I suppose it would have to get involved in an exploration of basic Christian values. The church would have to make a serious and thoughtful effort to deal with the traditional Christian values of simplicity, community, ser—  
—ood, and poverty.

w, if you say, "I am a consumer"—not just of goods and services, but a consumer of health, a consumer of education—if you say, "I am pursuing the good life for me and my family," and *then* you say that simplicity, community, servanthood, and poverty are basic Christian values, it seems to me there's an unquestionable dissonance between those values and society's definition of a good life. So you'd have to start first by asking in a Christian community, a community with the church at its center, is it possible to be a consumer?

Would you like to spell it out further? Instead of being consumers and spending money on ourselves, should Christians be packing up food packages and clothing to take down to the poor and hungry in the inner city?

I would not start by saying: the trouble with some people in our society is that they're not able to be consumers because they're too poor—and then rush out to bring them some things to  
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e're talking about values, we should start by acknowledging that America's principal sin is consumption. So before Christians free *others* to

consume, they need to look at their own consumption.

American consumption, first, is the principal cause of the pollution of God's world. I read somewhere that this country produces 70 percent of the world's garbage. Second, our consumption is the principal cause of our lack of wisdom, health, and justice—because we thought we could *buy* those things.

Third, American consumption is the principal cause of the degradation of the Third World, by leading the world into an impossible industrialism only to make a desert out of it. Look at Africa. The people can't exist on what they grow because they've become dependent on U.S. markets. Mexico is going through the same thing right now. They have become dependent on America buying their oil—and now that the prices are falling, things are coming apart.

Finally, our consumption is the principal cause of the collapse of the inner cities. I'm thinking of the work of people like Anthony Downs and Art Lyons: they've shown that what made Chicago inner-city neighborhoods collapse was the building of the suburbs. We've consumed the city and thrown it away.

It seems to me that an individual or community that is really concerned about the city should move back into the city. Most of the city's decay was built through the shopping-center suburbs and the shift of people there along with the economy. Sure, suburbanites can live their lives there and send bags of food back to the poor neighborhoods—but that's ignoring that the suburb is one cause of the problem they're trying to deal with.

What would you say are some of the other causes?

A lot of the problem goes back to the peculiar American circumstance: that the United States was a *new place*, made up of people who came here and used *new land*, and were able to keep on moving. The result has led Americans to believe that all problems could be solved by having *more*—because there always *was* more.

Now that reality has begun to give out. Americans have found out that there are a lot of things of which there is *not* "more." There is just so much air, and if we choose to, with our toxic

fumes, we can kill it. There is just so much water, and if we choose to, with our acid rain and our PCBs, we can kill it. There is just so much land, and if we choose to, we can poison it.

There is a point in the use of our tools and the development of our consumption that brings us to the realization that God's universe is not limitless, but a perfect sphere. America is facing the problem of Nemesis, reaching beyond what God has given us as ours. And who is paying for us to go beyond the limit? The poor are paying now. And our children will pay in the future.

So if I were in a Christian community, and if we were being really serious about trying to pursue what I see as truly Christian values, I would find it much more important to lower my own consumption than to pack up food bags to send to the poor.

Could you go back to talk about servanthood?

I've finally come to the conclusion that I don't think servanthood has any possibility of being a positive value.

Everytime I see anyone who says they are "rendering a service," they're making good money at it. The exercise coordinator at the health club is "rendering a service." The doctor on the golf links is "rendering a service." The lawyer, the "public servants" who dine at the city's finest restaurants—they're all "rendering a service." When I hear the word service, I think: they must be washing people's feet. But I notice a conspicuous lack of foot-washing. There are no servants who render services, there are only servants who act more like lords than like servants.

Remember what Jesus said in John, chapter 15? "This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. A man can have no greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his friend."

That's the part we always hear. But we don't hear the next three lines.

"You are my friends if you do what I command



you. I shall not call you servants anymore, because a servant does not know his master's business. I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father."

This says to me that to be a servant is to be a person who has not reached the Christian ideal, which is to be a friend—a member of a community of friends. That's what Jesus was saying. The Gospel says that our mission is *not* to be servants. When we have a Christian understanding of that—then I doubt that you can "serve" people in the inner city from the suburbs. A Christian has to try to be a friend—and being a friend is about fairness.

In a society of limited resources, if you live beyond your limits, so that you are taking away from your neighbor—that's the threshold of sinfulness. You can try to live on the other side and believe you're being a servant by giving back some of what you've taken—but it doesn't work.

Citizenship is this: it is being *fair friends*. A democracy is a society of *fair friends*.

But is being "fair friends" enough? What about people who really need help, beyond just fairness? What's the Christian's role there? Or do we let institutions handle that?

There's a group called the Georgia Advocacy Office (they're not a government agency, that's just their name). The people there have taken much of their motivation from a Catholic layman at the University of Syracuse named Wolf Wolfensburger. He's traced all the studies and reports that show what's wrong with institutions.

There are people whose total environment is professional and institutional. They are labeled: convict, old, retarded, mentally ill. And each of them has this peculiar modern status: professionals surround them, and they are denied the right to produce. They are perfect consumers. They do nothing but consume goods and also professional services.

The people in Georgia steal these labeled folks away from the professionals.

How do they do it?

They do it by finding the people that the profes-

sionals lay the strongest claim to: the people who are "most severely" retarded, or mentally ill, or whatever. These are the people whom the professionals, when they give tours of the institution, point to and say, "You see her, all curled up in the corner, unable to care for herself? *She's* the reason we need to have an institution like this." The people from the Georgia Advocacy Office find her, and they take her away.

Their great art is that they see that curled up person in the corner is *Cynthia*. They know that because they can still see the remnants of a smile of her face. And they can find someone who wants her.

But isn't she there in the first place because nobody wanted her?

No, no, she's there because the *professionals* wanted her. All their training is oriented toward her, all the incentives are toward her being there. The professionals *need* her because they need to serve her. When I visit the family where *Cynthia* lives now, there is not the slightest smell of "service" there. The woman is a part-time beautician, and her husband is a bus driver.

There are people all over this country who are waiting for the call to care. But professionals have denied them this call. That's a sin to deny people the opportunity to care.

Is *Cynthia* really better off where she is now? After all, in the institution she was fed and clothed and her needs were tended to. Why are you so sure she is better where she is now?

One of the people doing this is a Georgia man who directed a sheltered workshop for the retarded. I asked him once, "What are retarded people like?"—a naive question, maybe, but I wanted to know. He answered, "I don't know. I have only been with retarded people in a place designed by people who are not retarded."

The people at the Georgia Advocacy Office say they never know who they're bringing out, because it's never the same person. Their eyes are always opened.

Americans have built a society focused on building on people's weaknesses. And the churches have been wrong for supporting these systems in the name of charity. A Christian

community should make its goal to bring the exiled back home. The people should ask: "Who from our community is in prison?"—and get them out. "Who is in an institution for the retarded?"—and bring them back home. They should start with their own.

Would things start to change if people did this?

I guess you could say that the kind of thing the Georgia group does could be one of the means of regeneration of our communities.

Families, for example, aren't doing too well in this society. There's nothing magical about that. Families work together when there is work to do. But when all of the basic functions of the family are pulled apart, when teachers do the teaching and doctors do the healing and so on, then families end up having no purpose.

Communities are like families. If they don't have any functions, then they too will break apart. So perhaps the key to regeneration of our communities is in part the opportunity to engage in some of the functions that professionals have claimed. Perhaps Cynthia gives an opportunity for the regeneration of her community. The professionals had said, "We'll take her." And when the community let the professionals take away "the least of these," they lost something essential to the community. So part of the regeneration of community is the restoration of "the least of these." Another thing is that now Cynthia's family needs the support of their neighbors and friends—they can't do it all on their own. So that's another way in which she helps create the regeneration of community.

And there's more. The world of professions and institutions—the world of General Motors, and Northwestern University, and the Home for the Retarded—these are utopian places. They are designed to make things right, and straight, and organized, and correct, and perfect. They extract a price: that you have to put your life in their hands. But they promise that you will come to Utopia: we'll kill your cancer, they say, and do away with ignorance and poverty and disease.

But there is this terrible reality that is constantly about us, even in the face of these utopian systems: People still die. People get born who can't talk. People get invaded by the devil.

At the center of the institution is the manager. But at the center of the Christian community is the cross. That's the peculiar thing about a Christian community: announced at its very pinnacle is tragedy, fallibility, the intractable, the rejected. A Christian community builds out from the center, and the center is tragedy, death, suffering, pain. We build out from that. But when we send away the least of these, the Cynthias, *we've taken away the vital center*. When we bring them back in, it will regenerate us all.

When I was a kid in Ohio, there were people on the street with crutches. There were people who couldn't say their names. There were people who screamed out loud occasionally. There were old people on benches. As I grew up, they all disappeared. Now I'm in an institution, a university, where everybody stands straight, is young, can hear. It's a perfectly broken community because its center is gone—there is no cross. And the regeneration has to start with bringing back the people who are "the least of these." It starts with people like the people in Georgia, who can see who Cynthia is. That's regeneration. ■