

The Detroit News

Act empowers private charities to help poor



FR. ROBERT SIRICO

As the dust begins to settle in postwar Iraq, the contentious debate over U.S. and European foreign policy will no doubt continue. While this debate is important, the conduct of domestic policy should not be ignored.

In mid-April, advocates of civil society solutions to our nation's most pressing social ills saw an important piece of domestic policy legislation — the CARE Act (Charity, Aid, Recovery and Empowerment Act) — pass in the U.S. Senate.

This legislation is important, most notably in its philosophy of how to help people and the specific incentives it offers to private charity. The legislation is the product of many years of debate over the effectiveness of welfare state programs.

By offering tax incentives to those who choose to donate to private charities, the CARE Act constitutes yet another repudiation of welfare state ideology and its failed policies. It is notable that it has taken decades for lawmakers to realize legislatively the power of personal choice and American altruism compared with coerced giving, via taxation, in addressing the social ills and charitable needs of our nation.

Welfare state policies assume, to varying degrees, that people, especially the American people, are selfish, parochial and unable to see the big picture of human need. These policies are, of course, quite out of sync with the reality of everyday American life — a perpetual handicap of the bureaucratic elite.

In fact, a gamut of very large to very small non-governmental, local religious and community charities form a vibrant web of assistance, education and healing all across this nation. The CARE Act recognizes that people want the freedom to contribute their

Faith and Policy

New column begins

The Detroit News today begins a new Saturday column "Faith and Policy." Religion and spirituality often affect public policy issues, but sometimes get ignored. So we asked six Michigan clerics to write on these issues on a rotating schedule. The columnists are:

■ Bishop Keith Butler, founder and pastor of Word of Faith International Christian Center, a nondenominational Protestant church in Southfield that oversees 15 other satellite churches in this country and overseas.

■ Marianne Williamson, a best-selling spiritual author whose books include "Healing the Soul of America," who lectures frequently at Renaissance Unity, an interfaith church in Warren.

■ Imam Mohamed Ali Elahi, who founded and heads the Islamic House of Wisdom in Dearborn Heights and was a spiritual leader in the Iranian Navy before immigrating to the United States in 1992.

■ Rabbi Adam Bergman, director of Jewish studies at the Jewish Academy of Metropolitan Detroit in West Bloomfield.

■ The Rev. Edgar Vann, pastor of the Second Ebenezer Baptist Church in Detroit and a former president of the Council of Baptist Pastors of Detroit and Vicinity.

■ Fr. Robert Sirico, a Roman Catholic priest, who starts the "Faith and Policy" column today.

economic resources to encourage and support effective compassion within their communities and not the inefficient, impersonal bureaucratic programs of the welfare state — programs that have the effect of turning compassion into dependency.

The specifics of the CARE Act are impressive, even if they are a little stingy — Washington is still not completely sure it trusts private charity. Specifically, the CARE

Act creates individual charitable tax deduction of up to \$400 for individuals and \$800 for couples who do not itemize on their tax returns. It would allow holders of individual retirement accounts to make tax-free charitable contributions from their accounts. Other important provisions include providing enhanced deductions for donations of food and books to charitable organizations and reducing and simplifying the excise tax on foundations.

This piece of legislation is important because it recognizes the effectiveness of private charity, as well as the obstacles these charities face in a heavily regulated welfare state. The CARE Act's efforts to offer tax incentives to spur private charitable giving, as well as giving technical assistance to help smaller social service providers do more good works for those in need, are long overdue.

We will see a better thriving of private-sector charities by reducing some of the economic and regulatory burdens, especially for those groups that seek or have 501(c)(3) status as a tax-exempt charity. As a result, the web of effective compassion providers across the country will be even more able to address the problems of those in need.

While the CARE Act reflects a well-deserved repudiation of the failed policies and programs of the welfare state, it is only a beginning in rolling back the legislative distrust expressed in much of the social policy of the past 30 years. Assuming the House of Representatives passes this legislation as well, we can be confident that we are a few steps closer to restoring the legitimate autonomy of civil society — a more humane society that is both more free and virtuous.

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