

More than a free lunch: Many ways to give

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

[Lydie Raschka's article](#) on her experience of helping serve dinner to homeless and hungry people at Thanksgiving raises issues that I think about a lot these days. Raschka reflects on her “thinly disguised slumming” and acknowledges that most of the white volunteers serving the black and Hispanic guests would go home and eat gourmet Thanksgiving meals.

It's an issue for many of us in this wealthy and comfortable nation, with its underclass of the poor, hungry, unemployed and homeless: What exactly is the faithful response, individually and institutionally?

On almost every corner of Chicago's Michigan Avenue is someone asking for money—sometimes quietly, sometimes aggressively. Two people claim spots outside the church I serve, one a double amputee in a wheelchair, the other a man who sits with his dog in his lap in all kinds of weather. Passersby know them by name. Tourists give them a lot of money. You can hardly afford to open your wallet to all who beg, so regular pedestrians develop an eyes-straight-ahead strategy or mumble, “Sorry, not today—maybe next time.”

Should we provide food or work politically to address the causes of urban poverty? There's no simple answer. In her book *Living Well While Doing Good*, Donna Schaper, pastor of Judson Memorial Church in New York, takes a strong stand on the side of justice, not handouts. After giving some change to a limping boy in South Africa and then being surrounded by 50 other children with their hands out, Schaper vowed that her giving “would no longer be spur of the moment. Indeed, now I say no to all beggars on behalf of long-term sustainable change.” About the little boy in South Africa she says: “He does not need my guilt—he needs my money, well spent to create a good world for him and all his friends. He needs my money—what I need is principles to guide me.”

I agree with Schaper that we ought to be investing a lot more resources and energy into changing political and economic structures to address the massive needs for housing, education, health care, jobs and public transportation. But I'm not ready to shut down the lunch program or the Thanksgiving dinner.

It is a matter of both/and, not either/or. We need both social justice advocacy and efforts to meet human need when it presents itself. That's why my church supports Protestants for the Common Good, which both lobbies state government in Springfield and provides free lunches. It has an advocacy committee that helps church members make their voices heard and their influence felt; it also sponsors Sunday night suppers for the neighborhood. It partners with other churches and with synagogues to make sure that in our affluent neighborhood a meal is available somewhere every night for people who are hungry. One of those partnerships is with Catholic Charities, which organizes the Monday night suppers and, yes, a festive Thanksgiving dinner.