

COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITIES PROPOSAL

July 2015

I. Stories

For the second time in two years a group of Ann Arbor residents, living in tents located on public land, well-hidden from the public, have been forcefully removed from their living area. There were some references to potential safety issues because the site was close to a railroad, but no incidents had been reported. Proper notices were given and offers of help to relocate were made, but in the end the campsite was bulldozed, trees and brush removed, and remaining personal belongings were thrown away. The rule of law was observed; violence was avoided; "humane displacement" was practiced.

A member of City Council assured the residents that there was no city owned land available to them and suggested that maybe they could find some private land. One resident pointed out that there weren't enough beds available in shelters and that many homeless people cannot qualify for shelter beds. He said "I won't have a place to go at night." The city council person said "I don't have a solution."

A few days later it was reported that private parties had found places to stay for almost everyone who had been evicted. Local government was not involved in the remediation of this issue.

The world's great religions all include a version of a fundamental principle which is expressed in the negative and the positive. "Do not treat others as you would not like them to treat you", and "Always treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself." If this principle were applied in the described situation, how might things have turned out differently? If existing building codes, land use policies, and health regulations provide real barriers to creative ways to reduce homelessness, can reasonable modifications be considered?

Homelessness is only one community issue that could be impacted by an intentional application of the "golden rule". Others include conflict management and resolution in law enforcement, the judicial system and schools, and a variety of policy issues that result in economic and racial disparities.

County and City governing bodies in our area have a history of supporting direct budget funding of human service agencies, have allocated significant additional funding to support expanded affordable housing and are putting into place an updated plan to reduce homelessness and expand public transportation services in underserved areas. This proposal speaks to ways we might be able to build on these positive signs of compassion already in place.

"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

II. Beginning Response

The International Campaign for Compassionate Cities is a global campaign inspired by the Golden Rule (treat all others as you wish to be treated yourself) to raise awareness of the benefits of compassionate action. Its purpose is to encourage local government leadership from around the world to create a framework which encourages the expansion of efforts towards increasing compassion through local initiatives, policy and projects. These efforts usually include stakeholders from government, business, faith communities, peace and justice groups, neighborhoods, and service providers.

Much of the immediately following discussion is derived from a scholarly paper authored by Professor Jane Dutton of the Ross School of Business, The University of Michigan, and two associates. We use the terms "subject", "others", and "systems" to refer to the person wanting to observe the golden rule, the objects of the potential compassion, and the societal systems/structures in which the people function.

At its base, compassion is an interpersonal process involving the noticing of pain and suffering, feeling empathetic concern, making sense of the situations of the others and the subjects, sometimes through interactive processes, and acting to alleviate the suffering of another person. This can take place either within or outside a framework of religion.

Recent social research has shown that basic human responses and interests are as other-serving as self-serving, and humans are born to be kind, empathetic, and co-operative, suggesting that compassion is a normal way of personal interrelating and thus central rather than peripheral to understanding human experience.

Compassion heals the others both physically and mentally, calls up positive emotions such as gratitude, reduces anxiety, and increases attachment and commitment. There is some evidence that compassion also may have a positive impact on the subject as in seeing oneself as a caring person, or a negative impact as in distress from not being able to relieve another's suffering, or not doing the best thing. There is evidence that compassion psychologically develops stronger connections among people, perhaps by breeding trust. There are also some findings that witnesses to compassion may experience a higher level of pride in the way that people behave toward one another and tend to take less punitive action against others not related to the compassionate episode who have transgressed in some way.

Compassionate behavior is easiest when subjects and others are similar in one dimension or in general, such as shared genders, races, values and beliefs. It is also affected by the degree of closeness between the subjects and the others, how much common experience is present, how much one knows about the other, job relationships, etc. Social power also plays a role – people in dominant positions generally do not express pain and suffering as much as those in less dominant positions, and may not express compassionate behavior as much. People with less social power often express more feelings of compassion for those with higher social power, than do those with even higher positions of social power.

A major challenge for communities, is how to apply strategies to increase the levels of compassion in subjects, others, and bystanders where there are significant differences in racial, cultural and economic backgrounds and where unshared values and existing social systems need to be overcome. This context provides a special challenge and there is an

opportunity to test how different intervention tactics influence the overall level of empathic concern in a community.

It is important to be aware, and to always remember, that our country and society were not constructed to be fair, compassionate, or empathetic toward many of the groups who have lived here from the beginning, and that, in fact, the country has thrived on its elaborate brand of social hierarchy. It is important to remember that every institution produced over the history of the nation was set up by law to reinforce class, race, gender, (and other) exclusions; exclusions that by definition demanded their opposites – deeply embedded systems of inclusion. It is important to be aware that the cultural and ideological underpinnings of those inclusions/exclusions have been so thoroughly woven into our everyday social fabric that they remain unexamined and unchallenged in the mainstream.

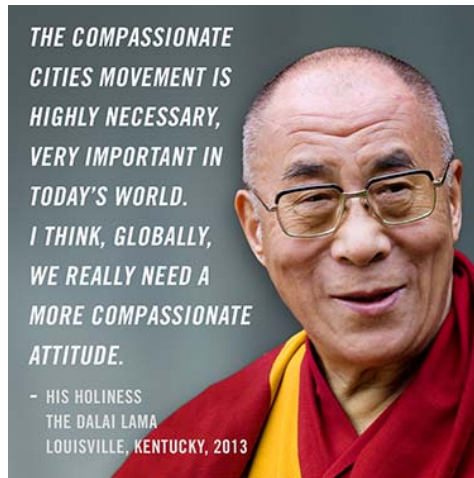
A most difficult challenge will lie in increasing community-wide awareness of the need to take on the role of changing the countless habits, practices, and rules that constitute not those behaviors that we commonly deem to be unfair, but those that pass for normal; to acknowledge that the focus of compassion is not only on changing the conditions of the others, but to changing the hearts and behavior of subjects. And it is not just dealing with subjects as they relate to others, but with subjects in their roles within systems in the broader society.

In order to realize a compassionate society, it is essential for all of us to become profoundly self-aware of the dual nature of our nation's historical inclusions/exclusions and to work to root out those cultural, ideological, and legal norms that continue, in the present, to operate "beneath the radar". The greatest level of compassion will only be possible if it occurs in concert with two things: A) a far-ranging self-examination on the part of the historical beneficiaries of our social set-up, combined with B) a willingness to listen very intently to the needs of those who historically have been excluded.

Working from that connection, even a part of the premise of the "Golden Rule" -- in either its active form (*do* unto others), or passive form (*don't* do unto others) -- has to be challenged, because it is a premise that makes the situation entirely *subjective*. The decision about what to do, and the resultant positive or negative impact it may have on others, is left entirely up to the person observing the rule. There is an underlying assumption, however subtle, that what works for the subject also works for the other -- that what the subject judges to be an act of kindness or restraint will also be received by the other as beneficial. It grants license to act, however mindlessly, largely out of self interest.

We must consider an extension to the Golden Rule such as; **treat others the way both you and they want to be treated, and influence social systems to treat all people as they want to be treated, with fairness, justice and care.**

An important element to this effort is to develop an evaluation component to measure actual impacts of various strategies. We will work with groups such as the CompassionLab at the Ross School of Business at the U of M to develop this component.



This local Compassionate Community initiative (CC) offers the possibility of applying the resources and spirit of The International Campaign for Compassionate Cities to help foster local expressions of compassion in personal, family, professional and public life. The CC project seeks to build upon the existing progressive values of our wider community to identify and apply strategies that will lead to a further embrace of compassion as a primary value upon which our individual and communal lives are built.

The organization, Charter for Compassion, <http://charterforcompassion.org/>, has grown to coordinate and provide resources to groups around the globe to work toward a higher standard for a just economy and a peaceful global community. As of July 2014, organizing campaigns are taking place in over 280 communities worldwide.

A group within the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice ("ICPJ") has been gathering input from our community, and has reviewed actions of other communities, in the development of this proposal.

The goal of this phase of the initiative will be the adoption of resolutions presented to the City Councils of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, and to the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners to affirm the Charter for Compassion and to commit to help develop and implement a plan to increase levels of empathy and compassion in the respective communities.

III. Evaluation

One goal during the local planning process has been to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders from business, education, religion, government, and service providers to provide input to this plan. The following people have agreed to be part of an advisory board.

Bob Guenzel - retired County Administrator, Board Chair WHA

Jane Dutton - professor in the U of M Business School and Department of Psychology and founder of U of M CompassionLab.

Dave Hile - Hile Creative

La Ron Williams - community activist

Rev. George Lambrides - co director Interfaith Round Table

Mary Jo Callan - Director Washtenaw County Department of Community and Economic Development

Grace Kotre - community activist
Christopher Taylor - Mayor of Ann Arbor
Rev. Paul Simpson Duke - First Baptist Church, Ann Arbor
Chuck Warpehoski - Director ICPJ and Ann Arbor city council member
Yousef Rabhi – Former Chair, Washtenaw County Commissioners
Rev. Julianne Smeck - St. Mark Lutheran Church, Ypsilanti
Pastor Jerry Hatter - Brown Chapel AME
Rabbi Robert Levy - Temple Beth Emeth
Fr Dan Reim – St. Mary’s Student Parish
Claire Tinkerhess - Fourth Ave Birkenstock
Amanda Edmonds - Mayor of Ypsilanti

IV. An Example of Possible Next Steps Following Adoption of the Resolution

ICPJ will take the lead in forming a coalition of nongovernmental community activists to undertake the tasks described below. The intentions will be to keep the local government informed about the progress of the program and to maintain an open invitation for its participation as deemed desirable.

Recruit the Program Team Build a coalition representing an appropriate range of community groups.

Determine the Focus of the Program. How will it build on the "beginning responses" contained in this Plan; specifically will we adopt the extended version of the Golden Rule as our vision statement. *"Treat others the way both you and others want to be treated, and influence systems to treat all people as they want to be treated, with fairness, justice and care."*

Establish Context Through the Experience of Other Compassionate Cities

Determine target individuals, groups, and organizations with which the program will interact.

Develop the Action Elements of the Program

- Workshops
- Simulations
- Educational events
- Story telling about existing examples of compassionate behavior
- Selected responses of compassion relating to current public issues such as homelessness, restorative justice, and economic inequality and sustainability of working families.

Establish a web presence To provide a local community resource for Compassionate Communities, publicize meetings and events, and share ideas with our supportive network.

Evaluation Component How best to evaluate impacts of the program in producing changed hearts, and changed lives?

APPENDIX A

The Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion - to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate - to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures - to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity - to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings, even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

APPENDIX B

More Detailed Initial Program Steps

We propose to establish an intentionally-designated, urban-area, just and compassionate community, comprising two cities (Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, Michigan) and Washtenaw County, and to launch specific educational and action steps to create more just and compassionate solutions to pervasive community issues that cause suffering to segments of our population. We understand that this initiative will require techniques to help produce changes in hearts and minds to enable people to consider new solutions to known issues such as homelessness, conflict management in public schools, and the interplay among wages and poverty among the working poor in the community.

Here are some specific steps that will be taken:

1. Request two city councils and the county board of commissioners to pass resolutions declaring their jurisdictions to be just and compassionate communities

2. Conduct a variety of educational and consciousness raising events including a workshop sponsored by the Compassion Lab of the Ross Business School of the University of Michigan, 3-5 community book reads of Karen Armstrong's *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* sponsored by local congregations and ICPJ, and a series of free "mindfulness" sessions for the general public, sponsored by Mindful City.

The workshop will engage attendees with different strategies for enabling compassion in organizations. It will also invite attendees to consider the barriers and disablers of compassion. Together we will devise practical ideas for how to foster compassion in diverse and distributed communities.

The "mindfulness" sessions will engage attendees in a combination of teaching, discussion and experiential exercises to uncover and build up the intrinsic compassion that is part of human nature. There will be 3-6 events over a 4 month period, scheduled at various times to maximize potential participation.

3. Organize a day-long kick-off conference to identify root causes of economic inequality, and specific strategies to promote increased economic sustainability for working families in our community.

The conference will feature: emerging and established social justice leaders as keynote speakers (2), a speaker/panel to historically contextualize the issue as well as speak to existing local efforts, an interfaith panel of faith leaders in our community to give faith based context, and a variety of small group break-out sessions on topics relevant to specific action strategies to pursue. The overarching call to action would be to challenge faith communities and other people of conscience to develop/strengthen plans to address economic justice and sustainability in our communities and to provide continuing leadership support for that effort.

4. ICPJ will develop a coalition of private organizations, in addition to local governmental units, to participate in this initiative. These organizations will include

- Ross School of Business, University of Michigan,
- Ann Arbor Center for Mindfulness,
- Religious Action for Affordable Housing,
- M.I.S.S.I.O.N,
- ACLU,
- Friends of Restorative Justice,
- American Friends Service Committee
- Growing Together Task Force

What is the timeline

The initiative has been in the planning and development stage since August 2014. Proposed resolutions will be presented to the local governmental units for action by the end of August. The initial educational events will occur from September 2015 to January 2016. The day long action conference will occur in February 2016. Additional steps in the initiative will be identified during this period for implementation during the remainder of 2016 and the first 8 months of 2017.

