

5 Spiritual Entrepreneurs at Ruby's Pantry

A lot of people think that we just give out food. Nothing could be further from the truth. WE GIVE OUT HOPE! It has been said that you can live only so many days without food, so many days without water and so many minutes without air, but you can't live a second without hope! And that hope comes through the kind acts and words of our over 15,000 volunteers who are the hands and feet of Jesus bringing our guests the good news of eternal life through Christ.

—Lyn Sahr, white male, founder of Ruby's Pantry, "Store Up Treasures in Heaven," August 23, 2016

Introduction: Conservative Christian Entrepreneurialism

The Ruby's Pantry (RP) home office website proclaims: "Tasty food finds for frugal families." RP is the community outreach arm of Home and Away Ministries, the latter having recently been rebranded Ruby's Heart. The goal of RP is to salvage and redistribute corporate surplus food. RP was founded in 2003 by Lyn Sahr, a pastor of a small, nondenominational evangelical Christian church in central Minnesota. It was named Ruby's Pantry after Sahr's grandmother, Ruby, a kind-hearted and devout Christian woman. RP first began as a Christian mission to Mexico and then morphed into a charitable food distribution service for rural communities in the upper Midwest. With the tagline "America's Rural Foodbank," RP articulates its mission in this way: "To procure and distribute corporate surplus food and goods to help fight poverty, hunger and disease in rural communities in the United States for those with low resources and in crisis through churches, food shelves and other local civic organizations." In an interview with Sahr, he

observed: “In the United States, it is not so different. We have plenty of children going to bed at night hungry and spending the entire weekend going without food anxiously waiting for breakfast before school on Monday morning.” As of August 2016, RP was serving approximately ten thousand families with a million pounds of food via approximately fifty distribution sites per year.

The conservative evangelical leanings of RP create a thorny space in which politics, religion, and business come together to inform how hunger is constructed and how solutions to hunger are framed. RP employs a model of what might be termed *spiritual entrepreneurship*, in which faith beliefs are integrated with business or entrepreneurial practices (Gandy 2016; Holton, Farrell, and Fudge 2014). Entrepreneurialism, of course, is the very foundation of capitalism. Entrepreneurs drive the creative-destruction process of capitalism by producing a new commodity, by opening up a new supply source, or by reorganizing an industry, among other things (Dees 1998). The core concepts of spiritual entrepreneurship are innovation, risk taking, and awareness of opportunities, all of which are tied to religious doctrine and faith beliefs. Marnie Holborow (2015, 72) argues that entrepreneurs are the “social icons of our neoliberal age.” Being entrepreneurial, she says, is “shorthand for having a positive approach to life and what it means to be a modern person, its appeal lies in its beguiling ‘can do-ism,’ with the promise of material benefit into the bargain” (77). Neoliberal ideology encourages self-determination, a “get up and go” attitude, having the right attitude, and a “positive mindset.” Mona Atia’s (2012) theorization of “pious neoliberalism” illuminates the tricky combination of religion and economic rationale that encourages individuals to be entrepreneurial in the interests of a better relationship with God. In these contexts, Atia observes that religion and economic rationale do not compete or contradict each other but rather are in sync with each other.

RP exemplifies spiritual entrepreneurialism and more specifically pious neoliberalism because of the integration of religious and economic rationales in its solution to hunger. For Sahr, supply and demand come together through God, who facilitates innovation, creative destruction, and opportunity. Sahr identifies himself as a “possibility thinker”—a quintessential blending of entrepreneurialism and spirituality: “Without God’s help we could not get 17,500,000 pounds of food, we would not have 9 semi-trucks and 20 some semi-trailers to haul and store food and we certainly couldn’t

provide food for over 130,000 families a year. Without God, we can do nothing. But with God, all things are possible! He's the reason I am a 'possibility thinker'" (July 8, 2015).

RP is entrepreneurial to the extent that it offers a new way of operating charitable food assistance and provides a new outlet for surplus food. Calling itself a "pop-up" food pantry, RP operates like a business franchise. It bypasses the national Feeding America network and sources food directly from corporations. The food is then transported to local distribution sites, run by churches, which are also "entrepreneurs," taking the initiative to organize pop-up food distributions in their communities. At RP, clients make a "donation" of twenty dollars for food, of which eighteen dollars goes back to RP to support logistics; the remaining two dollars is kept by the local church to invest wherever they see fit. Consistent with the spirit of entrepreneurialism, RP has made massive investments in equipment, space, and procedures to run its operation, from a fleet of semitrailers to forty-thousand-square-foot facilities to professional marketing and branding expertise. The RP home office has also started a Facebook page through which people can get notifications about RP and preview the kinds of foods available at the next distribution. There is an online "guest registration system" through which clients can prepay and pick up food at a particular time. Clients are referred to as "guests" in an attempt to reduce stigma associated with food assistance. RP has a loyalty card program, in which clients get a stamp for each visit and receive an extra share after ten stamps, which they can either keep or donate. There is also a sprinkling of RP merchandise that people can buy from the online shop on RP's website.

RP's conservative ideology is signaled in its slogan: "RP is a hand up, not a hand out," a phrase that goes all the way back to the racialized and gendered welfare debates of the 1990s. In the United States, the term *handout* is code for what's given to welfare recipients—a stigmatizing term implying that the recipient lacks independence and agency, is getting something for nothing, has his or her arms permanently outstretched to take something from others, and has a defective moral character. RP calls itself a "hand up" because unlike traditional food pantries, at RP people pay twenty dollars to receive food; they are thus not getting "something for nothing." The twenty-dollar fee is important materially and symbolically: materially, it helps defray logistical costs for the operation, and symbolically, it justifies the worthiness and deservingness of clients.

The construction of RP's clientele is centered on this imaginary separation between Us and Them. RP is for the so-called hardworking, deserving, and good citizens, but not for the paradigmatic Other, people who in the public imaginary take advantage of public assistance programs. Sahr positions RP as distinct from public food assistance programs and shows a disdain for welfare and government restrictions. Because RP does not receive government support, there are no procedures related to poverty governance such as eligibility checks or income restrictions. To receive foods, clients show up on the third Thursday of the month and pay twenty dollars for a "share." There are no restrictions regarding how many shares an individual can purchase so long as clients pay twenty dollars per share.

Ruby's Pantry—Duluth

Any church in RP's area of distribution—the upper Midwest—can start its own distribution, or a *pop-up*. Local pop-ups follow food safety regulations and protocols set by the RP home office about how food should be stored, displayed, covered, sorted, or contained; however, when it comes to religious-political ideologies, there is much more variation. Evangelism is central to the RP home office mission, but local churches adopt flexibility in how much religious content they have at their sites. Pop-up churches vary considerably in political orientations, from more conservative evangelical right-wing churches to more liberal churches.

In Duluth, the First United Methodist Church (FUMC), also known as the Coppertop Church, was one of the first distribution sites in the city and is currently the only RP distribution site in the city. Although the RP home office articulates a fairly extreme, conservative evangelical position, the Coppertop Church is politically liberal and identifies as an "open and affirming" church. RP–Duluth at the Coppertop Church is run by an inter-congregational volunteer board, in which both liberalism and conservatism are present. Here, the RP operation represents the complexity and shiftiness of neoliberal ideology. Larner (2000, 12) argues that there are many configurations of neoliberalism, and "close inspection of particular neo-liberal political projects is more likely to reveal a complex and hybrid political imaginary, rather than the straight-forward implementation of a unified and coherent philosophy."

Goal of the Chapter

Grounded in the assumption that neoliberal projects are complex and not always ideologically coherent, the goal of the chapter is to show how spiritual entrepreneurialism and the politically conservative ideology from the RP home office get taken up at the local Duluth site. How do steering committee members and volunteers at the local distribution site in Duluth interpret the discourses, policies, and procedures of the RP home office? *Neoliberal stigma* refers to the social distancing and otherizing processes created through neoliberal political rationalities that operate at the levels of culture and institutions and play a role in subject and identity formation. This chapter shows how entrepreneurial food pantries like RP reinforce neoliberal stigma as well as the notion that social problems are the domain of individuals and can be solved through the marketplace. In this fun, festive, and entrepreneurial space filled with faith beliefs and good intentions, notions of food justice, entitlements, and food sovereignty are completely erased. The language of equality, equity, and social justice is displaced by the language of the economy, hard work, and self-reliance. The lack of critical thinking around neoliberalism and around issues of race, class, and gender reinforce the food gap, moving us further away from a rights-based approach to food security.

Hard Work at the Thursday Distribution

The Coppertop Church is a large, conspicuous, modern structure that sits atop a hill at one of the busier intersections in the city. Food distributions are held at this location on the third Thursday of every month. Like other food assistance programs, there is a vast amount of physical labor involved in organizing the food distribution. The labor is a coordinated effort of no less than fifty people working to distribute food to anywhere between two hundred and three hundred people in just a few hours. The semi-trailer carrying food from the warehouse in Pine City approximately 150 miles away from Duluth arrives at the Coppertop parking lot at around 3:00 p.m.—a massive truck filled to the brim with pallets. There are usually three or four steering committee members present on site, who run the operation with efficiency and managerial skills to match any chief

executive of a multinational corporation. However, unlike typical charitable enterprises in which women predominate, there is an even breakdown of male and female volunteers. The female volunteers tend to stay indoors and perform tasks of repackaging, organizing, and arranging while the men unload the trucks, carry pallets in and out, help guests carry their food out, and break down cartons. Pat talked about how physically challenging the job is: “You are on your feet from start to finish, from 3:30 to 8:30 or 9 o’clock. So that’s a long time. You are kind of running around, so, you know, I have a pedometer, and on Ruby’s days I put in around twenty thousand steps.”

Once the food is unloaded, the most labor-intensive portion of the operation begins: managing the quality of donations through packaging, repackaging, sorting, and cleaning. The optimism that permeates the space is reminiscent of the kind of esprit de corps that occurs amid a natural disaster, where differences are set aside and people pull together to get the job done. The volunteers do messy jobs like sorting through rotten potatoes and bagging loaves of bread. One time I volunteered, I was stuck emptying huge pallets of crackers into one-gallon Ziploc bags. It took twelve of us nearly two hours to fill about eight hundred bags of crackers. Another group of volunteers worked on emptying large sacks of oatmeal into smaller, one-gallon sacks, with still another group repackaging sweet potatoes. Some of the women who had been there before said, “Thank God we don’t have to do the potatoes this month; you haven’t lived until your finger has gone through a bad potato. These sweet potatoes are much better.” That day, there was no repackaging of regular potatoes, because everyone was getting a twenty-pound bag! The volunteers were industrious, excited, and working hard in the basement to get it all done before the guests arrived. Some volunteers were setting up tables with plastic cloths and arranging them in two rows on either side of the church basement. At each of the little groups, everyone was deeply engrossed in their tasks; there was some chatting, but most were deeply focused on their work.

The committee typically does not know beforehand what food is coming on the truck, which can be a challenge. Celeste remembers a few occasions on which gigantic blocks of frozen fish and scrambled eggs made their tasks particularly hard:

Celeste: One day they sent fish. I think there was salmon and maybe something else. But it was in a big thing like this [holds hands far apart], and it was frozen solid together. You couldn't pry the fish.

Interviewer: Because they weren't even wrapped individually?

Celeste: No, no, they were sides of fish all frozen together in one big block. They tried to work on it and couldn't get anywhere. They ended up not being able to give it out, and they had ended up giving it to Damiano's.

Interviewer: Because it must be a food safety issue, too, everybody digging their hands into this block of fish. Did you tell them?

Celeste: I think they told them about it. We got another one that was quite special was scrambled eggs, and they were in another one of these things, and they were frozen. Now scrambled eggs aren't the same as fish, they're already scrambled and they're cooked. This stuff, if you heat it up in the microwave and put some ketchup on it, it's not too bad, you know. We ended up, we had to buy a pitchfork, a brand-new pitchfork to break it apart. Since then, they have not sent us that or it was bagged differently. It's like they must be from McDonald's, these scrambled egg rounds, you could count them out, but they weren't frozen into a solid block.

These examples of massive quantities of frozen raw fish and scrambled eggs provide vivid images of how socially and ethically engaged volunteers in Duluth, Minnesota—at the periphery of the world system—contribute free labor to the cleanup and redistribution of corporate capitalist waste linked to national and global food regimes.

RP: A Ministry for the Body and Soul

Lyn Sahr is a charismatic individual, a gifted writer and opinion leader who does the discursive work required to create and nurture his organization's identity. Sahr seamlessly narrates Christian doctrine in relation to neoliberal values of individualism, entrepreneurialism, freedom of choice, and minimal government. Similar to a televangelist, but on a smaller scale, every month for the last three years (and sometimes twice in the month) Sahr has published letters on the RP website, in which he brings together piety, neoliberalism, and the problems of hunger and food insecurity. These letters go out as emails to the organizing staff at RP and to various distribution sites. Using business language, the home office of RP is referred to as "corporate"

by local distribution sites, and the letters are titled “From the Desk of Lyn Sahr.” These letters articulate, interpret, and clarify the values and mission of RP. The letters make clear that RP is a Christ-centered ministry that provides “food for the body, but also spiritual food for the soul.” Sahr labors this point in many of his letters, with statements such as “Food is only a small part of the importance of Ruby’s Pantry,” or statements like those in the opening excerpt. The volunteers of RP are referred to as the “lifeblood” of RP and compared to the “hands and feet” of Jesus. RP has twenty-five paid employees and approximately fifteen thousand volunteers. Speaking of the volunteers, Sahr invokes Christian imagery of the death and resurrection of Christ: “They lay down their life four or five hours for our guests at each distribution. Thank you for all you do! Volunteers are the life blood of our organization” (February 23, 2016). Sahr reinforces that volunteers are doing important work, even though it may not seem a lot and they may not receive recognition. The “loaves and fishes” story is a recurrent narrative used to point out that God can take a little and turn it into a lot.

Drawing on the prosperity gospel, Sahr frames abundance as the material expression of God’s favor. Mona Atia (2012) notes that the linking of spiritual and material benefits is the hallmark of pious neoliberalism, and this is certainly a recurrent theme in Sahr’s letters. The idea that giving begets success and prosperity is seen here: “Who is greater blessed, those receiving the food or those who bring it!” and “He loves to surprise us with more blessings than we expect or comprehend ... when we live generously! Be a giant of generosity” (September 22, 2016). Conversely, the lack of generosity is met with fire and brimstone: “A wise old pastor once said this; *‘If you only have enough for yourself, you don’t have enough!’* He went on to explain that a person who is a thief must stop stealing, go to work, and share with those in need. He went on to say that *‘A person who is not generous is basically a thief at heart!’* I have never forgotten his words” (September 22, 2016). Sahr uses examples of famed Christian evangelists to show how important money is for spiritual ministry: “Billy Graham won millions of people to Christ all around the world. And God provided millions and millions of dollars to accomplish this calling” (August 23, 2016). Billy Graham was one of the main architects of the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps and religiomilitaristic ideology. Graham died on February 21, 2018, leaving in his wake all the discursive work necessary to bring together the militaristic,

economic, and moral superiority of America. Graham brought patriotism and Christianity together and created the political voting bloc we know today as the “evangelicals” (FitzGerald 2017).

In contrast to the prosperity gospel, “spiritual poverty” is another recurrent theme. Spiritual poverty, for Sahr, is the main reason that people experience hunger. Sahr outlines the dual problem society faces here: “Society is in trouble both economically and spiritually. We want to help meet the needs of body and soul. If we fail to do what we can, then we fail. But we believe that God wants us to help more people or we wouldn’t have the tremendous food supply that we currently have” (May 31, 2016). The cause and effect relationship between spirituality and material success is neatly tied together in Sahr’s examination of the “poverty bandit” (September 26, 2015). The letter starts out with a verse from the Bible: “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit” (Proverbs 6:10–11). In his analysis of this proverb, Sahr writes:

As I read this scripture I can’t help but think of those people who feel helpless and trapped in poverty. In these days of difficult economic times some people have actually given up the pursuit of their dreams for a better life. I know and understand what it is like to go without. But I never quit trying to find a way to improve my life and that of my family. When you make an honest effort to pursue your dreams of a better life, it is amazing what can happen. But again, don’t give up! When people give up and just sit and watch life go by, “Poverty will come on you like a bandit.” The “Poverty Bandit” will steal your joy and the scripture teaches us that the “Joy of the Lord is our strength.” Proverbs 6 describes a person who is sleeping and laying around doing nothing. I encourage you to pray and ask God to show you what you can do to improve your life and ask Him to provide a way.

Here it is not historical and structural factors that shape poverty and a sense of powerlessness, but rather laziness and giving up. The age-old gospel of prosperity solidifies the view that the rich enjoy the bounty of God’s blessing, while the poor are not blessed. In the image of the “poverty bandit,” we see the seamless integration of political, religious, and economic ideologies used to encourage self-reliance and self-improvement. The path to a better life is not by way of structural and historical reparations, but through spiritual therapy. It is through the complex blending of faith and

entrepreneurialism that individuals overcome their moral defects and learn how to be responsible citizens driven by a can-do attitude.

In Sahr's letter, race is concealed in the text but revealed in the imagery alongside it. The text has embedded within it an image of a Black man—the paradigmatic racial Other—with a shaved head. He is holding his head in his hands and leaning over a desk, with one arm extended into a clenched fist. It is one of only three images found across the sample of Sahr's letters. We cannot see the man's face or eyes. The only thing that is clear is that this is a Black man overcome with a sense of hopelessness, presumably because the poverty bandit has stolen his dignity and pride. The text superimposed on the image reads: "I call to God and the Lord saves me." The explicit connection drawn is that spiritual poverty leads to physical laziness, which leads to material poverty. The underlying interpretive context for this message is anti-Black racism. This individual presumably belongs to the category of people who "do not want to work and will not work"—a category Sahr outlined in chapter 2. This is a lazy person not taking responsibility for his life. Is it just coincidence that this picture was chosen to go with this particular text or does race truly lurk just beneath poverty discourses? All the social scientific evidence points to the latter (e.g., Feagin 2013; Gilens 1999). The white racial frame, which posits whites as superior and Blacks as inferior, is reinforced here when Sahr compares himself favorably, saying "*I* never quit trying to find a way to improve my life" (emphasis added). All in all, this text now joins the deluge of discourses circulating in society that reinforce age-old racist assumptions and stereotypes about people of color being poor and lazy, while absolving the roles of capitalism, structural racism, and a whitened Christianity in producing racial disparities.

An explicit and crude form of mother blame emerges in Sahr's letters as well, demonstrating the gendered avatar of neoliberal stigma. Mothers are blamed for everything today—the size of their kids, allowing their children to watch too much television, not monitoring their eating habits, and relying on convenience food (Boero 2010; Kirkland 2011). Mothers of color—in particular, Hispanic American and African American mothers—are particular targets, and the culture of poverty argument is evident in these discourses. This kind of mother blame is on display in a letter from Sahr: "Then again we have some parents who do nothing to try to make a way for their children. Recently there was a mother who didn't have enough

mother's milk to feed her baby, didn't have enough money to buy formula and didn't know about all the social programs. She mixed her milk with water, fed the baby and the baby died. The word tragedy does not begin to describe what has happened to her" (September 21, 2015). The analysis appears compassionate, but compassion here is used as a blunt instrument to beat the mother—a mother who did "nothing" to "make a way" for her child. Why did the mother not use the social programs? Why did she not know about the social programs? Absent from this discourse is any discussion of gender inequities, cuts to social programs, and the role of misogynistic systems of poverty governance that have made it a nightmare for women to get assistance.

In the following excerpt Sahr stirs up more suspicion about parents. Here Sahr's heart breaks for the children, who he frames as morally pure, innocent, and therefore deserving of sympathy and assistance, but parents are framed as guilty and suspicious:

Recently we were asked to help a local backpack program in Minnesota. I am astounded that anyone would not have food for their children to eat on the weekends. Is it because their parents are using their money for other things and the children are going without? Or do the parents just don't have enough money to buy adequate food for the children? I don't know and it really doesn't matter. What matters is that these special, innocent gifts from God are taken care of, provided for, and fed. Frankly, I find it heartbreaking. I believe there are eternal consequences for those who neglect and abuse children, but not just for the parents. I believe that we have a responsibility to stand in the gap for these children and it also has eternal consequences for those who are called to help and say "No!" I believe that Ruby's Pantry has been called to help provide and feed those who cannot take care of themselves without judging or blaming the children for the neglect of the parents. (June 16, 2015)

In this excerpt, the voices of mothers and fathers who bear the burden of raising children amid unrelenting hardship and who struggle and need help themselves are overlooked. People like Ashley, a young white mother who started using the food pantry because she did not have a job and food stamps were not enough, or Paula, a white woman who has six birth children and four adopted kids, who she is still taking care of, or Clayton, an African American man who is still grieving the death of his daughter and blames himself for her cancer. Absent from this discourse are the many reasons parents fall short of the mark in caring for children: lack of job opportunities; underfunded schools; residential segregation; the high cost

of college education; alcohol and addiction; lack of access to health care, treatment facilities, and mental health care; lack of child care; and a corporate food regime that creates hunger and food insecurity.

In one of the richest, most advanced industrialized nations in the world, the multiple reasons for hunger are sidestepped with Sahr's words "I don't know, and it really doesn't matter." The most important and critical connections between hunger and poverty, patterned along gender, class, and race lines, are glibly swept under the rug. Tellingly, in Sahr's analysis, Ruby's Pantry, a program that distributes surplus industrial food, is presented as the most effective solution not just to hunger, but to the problem of material and spiritual poverty. Sahr employs the Christian metaphor of "standing in the gap" to motivate people to donate to RP. People who give to RP have the opportunity to become saviors—white saviors—to poor children abandoned by their irresponsible and morally defective parents. Here whiteness lurks just beneath the surface of the term *savior*.

Fracturing of Conservative Christian Ideology at RP–Duluth

In Duluth, the initiative to start RP was taken by a woman named Bonnie. Bonnie was a member of the Coppertop Church. According to members of the steering committee—the group that came together to organize RP in Duluth—Bonnie's energy and excitement for the program was infectious. Celeste, another steering committee member, described how she was invited for a meeting by Bonnie one time and soon found herself in the thick of it. Multicongregational steering committees are not typical for RP distribution sites, so unique to RP–Duluth, Bonnie contacted other churches in the area to see if they would like to be involved. RP–Duluth today continues to be organized and run by this very same steering committee, the members of which come from a variety of denominational, class, and political backgrounds and have just stuck with it through the years. The committee did its research before contracting with RP. They vetoed one food distribution organization because it only distributed perishable food items; another program was vetoed because "it just did not fit." Rev. David Bard, the minister at Coppertop at the time, noted that this organization had Bible verses inserted into meal packages, which made some members uncomfortable. The committee decided instead to go with RP because it provided healthier food in larger quantities and was better

managed, and though it was faith-based, it did not prescribe religious content for the distribution sites.

Steering committee members varied in their appreciation of the conservative evangelical orientation of the RP-home office. The two members at either ends of the political spectrum were poles apart in their thinking on this. Ellen, a middle-aged white woman, found the explicit Christian perspective of the RP home office problematic. She talked about how uncomfortable she felt after the initial presentation from RP, because it sounded quite religious. Ellen described her church as “socially active, very justice oriented where self-worth is important” and took offense that RP framed its work as Christian because, as she exclaimed, “I mean, it is more than the Christians that are doing this work.” For another member, Nathan, the most conservative member of the steering committee, the fact that RP was attached to a Christian ministry made it more meaningful. He felt that the larger goal of RP was to bring people to church: “By having it at a church we might be getting people through the door that have never been in. Does that mean that they are going to have to come back? We hope so, but at least they have stepped in and they know that it is a faith-based program. Somehow I see it as if they are accepting that there is a God and that He is caring for them through us.”

These two members also varied in how they thought about the problem of hunger; they both believed that hunger could not be eradicated, but for different reasons. For Ellen, who identified as extremely liberal, the problem could not be solved because of class struggle. As she noted: “I think there is always going to be people who have and people who don't have.” On the other end, for Nathan, the problem of hunger could never be eradicated because people are too proud to help themselves: “Eradicate the food issue? No, I do not think it will ever go away because it is so much bigger than everyone realizes, and I say that because everyone has private issues. Everyone has ‘I don't want anyone to know that I need it’ and some people have been able to overcome and say yeah, ‘I really need the help’ and they go get it. Others never will and so there is always going to be the problem which may not be as visible. No, I don't think it will ever, not in this country where everybody has everything.”

Despite religious and political differences, steering committee members felt they worked well together, referring to these differences as “nonfactors.” Celeste explained: “That's never been an issue. It's, yeah, the faith

backgrounds are different, but for some reason, it's kind of like, the moral values are consistent, the moral values, the right and wrong ... You're dealing with helping other people. People need to eat, and this is so basic that that kind of difference is a nonfactor." Their practices were motivated by religious, secular, and postsecular humanist beliefs, and in this space, they found common ground in being able to bring food to others. The fact that you could get so much food out to people for twenty dollars was the primary motivating force, as noted by Cynthia: "Most families are one hospital bill, one car breakdown from economic disaster, so if they can come up to the Coppertop and get twenty dollars' worth of food, that's worth so much more, holy moly, it's a lifesaver for them. It's a lifesaver."

Although faith was the motivation for their work, many committee members were rankled by the conservative evangelical approach of the RP home office. Their response was to ignore these aspects of the program, keeping their eyes on the more pragmatic goal of providing food. Cynthia, an older white woman on the committee, noted: "I think that the majority of people sitting at our steering committee, they're far more liberal in their theology and their thinking than Ruby's Pantry is. We just don't play that game." Celeste rolled her eyes. She said that she did receive the letters from Sahr, but said, "Do I read them?" and then loudly smacked her hand, evoking a parent admonishing a naughty child who has not done her homework. She added: "It's almost like we're not trying to sell faith here ... You know, I don't mean it to be a negative, but hey, we're working on food. We got to get the truck unloaded, and we got to get, and you know, try to be nice, try to be kind, say hello to the people, be nice, you know, all this kind of stuff. It's so basic. The faith is there but it's kind of underlying."

Twice a year, the RP home office has regional meetings, and local sites are invited to participate. RP sees it as a kind of religious revival, explained Cynthia. "They are trying to grow a community and bring everybody together in the space that is doing this great work." This is all very well and good, but it annoyed her that they push religion so much: "So we have very loose ties to Ruby's Pantry in Pine City. They'll do our annual meeting and we always send a couple of people down to it, but over the years, we've grown less and less interested in it, because it's very ... Their theology is very conservative and so, most of us are offended by it. We'll sit there and make these terrible comments to each other, which is really bad, but we do

it because it's like 'don't call me down for a two-day conference and then spend hours of it with Christian music and that stuff.'" Cynthia noted that when the RP folks start to talk about the "evangelical stuff," that's "when we go to the bathroom or get a refill on our coffee because really, we're not interested."

The RP home office encourages local sites to have places where people can pray and receive prayer through the laying on of hands, but committee members felt this was not practical at Duluth. Unlike smaller rural towns in Minnesota and Wisconsin that are more homogenous in terms of religious and political beliefs, Duluth is a city with people from diverse backgrounds. The general feeling among steering committee members was that people came to get food, not religion. Celeste explained: "I think some of the folks here, if you were trying to sell religion to them, they would go right out the door. Our group, our people, it's a lot different from here." Rev. Bard typically offers a prayer with volunteers before the start of each distribution. Cynthia stated: "David is very good at walking that fine line of giving thanks for the food, giving thanks for the people who are volunteering. I'll say this ... it would be pretty hard to be offended by the prayer by almost anyone. You know what I mean? It's not like he's up there. 'Oh, Jesus,' he's not doing that, but he's being thankful. I think people appreciated that spiritual aspect to the work we were doing."

Rev. Bard, the pastor at the Coppertop Church when distributions began, was described as the "glue that holds it all together" and "a big cheerleader" for RP-Duluth. Rev. Bard, a mild-mannered and jovial man, identified as a progressive Christian, with a social justice orientation to his ministry. Born and brought up in Duluth, Rev. Bard was well-known in the community for his humility, generosity, and activism. For him, doing this food work was a direct outcome of being a person of faith, as he explained: "I mean, I really believe that as a follower of Jesus Christ I need to be doing things that reach out and help other people and help make the world a better place." Despite concern in his congregation about damage from food and drink to the sanctuary, Rev. Bard persuaded the congregation that it was an essential part of the church's ministry. To keep his congregation committed to hosting RP, on Sunday mornings before the RP distribution, he would say, "Remember folks, Ruby's Pantry is coming up. It's such a good program. We're so proud to have it here at the Coppertop," and the following Sunday

he would let his congregation know how many people came to RP and how much food they distributed that day.

The steering committee has also organized initiatives to make RP more than just about distributing food. During 2012, at the time of the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, the committee used RP as a site to sign people up for insurance. Because two hundred to four hundred people show up at each distribution and most people wait at least an hour or two before they get their food, RP provided the perfect opportunity to provide other services. There were health care navigators on site for several months explaining options and eligibility to people on a case-by-case basis, and organizers created a confidential area where folks could have those discussions. This is another example of the fracturing of political ideologies at RP–Duluth. Opposition to the Affordable Care Act was the mainstay of conservative politics during the Obama years, and this kind of government “welfare” is something the RP home office would frown upon. However, this was a nonfactor for the organizing committee, who found it empowering. Pat noted: “So we were meeting other needs besides just the food access ... that was actually very, I guess, empowering you know to help people in those situations and there is a certain sense in Ruby’s Pantry where everyone’s in the same boat, so nobody feels like other people are watching them get their information.”

Fun and Festive!

The atmosphere at RP is fun, festive, and welcoming. The distribution is punctuated by a sense of excitement and anticipation. The ideological strains of compassionate conservatism and benign suspicion are not discernible at all—in fact, all that comes through is the kindness and abundant generosity of strangers. On a typical Thursday, the registration and sign up begins at 4:00 p.m. as the volunteers are repackaging food and rearranging the tables in the distribution area. By 5:15, the food is repackaged, the pallets lined up, and people are all signed in and waiting in the large foyer and sanctuary until their numbers are called. Volunteers wait excitedly for clients to come through with their laundry baskets, eager to give out the food. RP usually has no trouble finding volunteers. They come from local churches and the broader community. RP attracts groups such

as school groups, cheerleaders, high school dance teams, and college organizations, all of which contribute to the fun and festive atmosphere. When Rev. Bard was still at Coppertop, he played the host, as he liked to call it. He stayed with guests in the sanctuary and spent his time explaining the process to new people.

To reinforce the importance of dignity, particular communicative practices are adhered to at the distribution. For instance, terms such as *guest* and *partner* are used to greet people, instead of *client*. Throughout the setup period, committee members emphasize the importance of being friendly and social. "It is important to smile at people, because we're here to help. This is why we're doing this—to help others." Every time I volunteered, I was constantly amazed at how, through the hustle and bustle, volunteers continued to pay attention to the needs of individuals. For instance, one time the line stopped moving and I was in a hurry to keep it going, but the other volunteers waited patiently, offering to assist the elderly folks holding up the line. For volunteers, interactions were brief but meaningful. Ellen explained that if she sees people with canes or walkers, she will walk up to them and say hi and see if they need help carrying out the boxes. She knows a disabled couple that comes in, and she has formed a friendship with them by always making sure she finds them a place they can sit down. Nathan observed: "I guess when you are in a helping type of role like that then you can feel like you have little more permission to say, really, how are things going for you?"

For volunteers, getting food and the social aspect of volunteering were important motivating factors. At least half or more of the volunteers were also clients. While you still had to pay, a perk of volunteering was that you could skip the line and pick up a share at your convenience. Jennifer, a client and volunteer, said: "I don't know, I must say, it's fun actually because we do really work hard but I appreciate getting the food too." Nathan described the feeling of volunteering as "addictive". Katherine, an RP client and volunteer, uses RP pretty consistently—not only for the food, but also because it allows her to connect with other people. She stated: "To tell you the truth, it's kind of a social thing. There's people that go there at 2:30 or 3:00 and it's the same people all the time. I really look forward to going there and talking to these people."

“A Hand Up, Not a Hand Out”

A letter of Sahr states: “When we started Ruby’s Pantry it was to be generous to all people who needed a hand up. After all these years I would like to think we have been doing that” (September 22, 2016). The phrase “a hand up, not a hand out” is a popular expression of neoconservative ideology that emerged from the doctrine of compassionate conservatism made famous during the welfare debates of the 1990s. *Compassionate conservatism* is a worldview that encourages reaching out and social engagement with those in need while simultaneously holding people accountable. In this framework, helping others means holding people to task—ensuring that they are good stewards of one’s compassionate giving and that they do not become dependent on your compassion (Elisha 2011). RP is just one in a long line of conservative Christian organizations to use this complex blend of business and Christian doctrine in social engagement. For example, Heifer International, a US-based organization with a mission to “end world hunger and poverty,” via entrepreneurial solutions, also describes its work as “a hand up, not a hand out.”

Using compassionate conservatism, givers are asked to utilize discretion, discernment, and discrimination in their acts of charity, making distinctions between those who are “deserving” and “underserving.” In an ethnographic study in Knoxville, Tennessee, Elisha (2011) explored the complex theology through which white, socially engaged evangelicals wrestled with the idea of compassionate conservatism. Elisha found that on the one hand, evangelicals desired to be selfless and gracious, to give with “no strings attached,” but on the other hand, they also believed it was their mandate to instill godly virtues in others, particularly the virtues of moral, financial, and spiritual accountability, seen as lacking among the poor and indigent. The result was persistent fear among conservative churchgoers about the “hazards of entitlement” and “service-induced dependencies.” This struggle resulted in the formulation of informal rules and guidelines through prayer and consultation with other volunteers to assess the sincerity of those seeking help and to prevent “indiscriminate charity.”

Unlike traditional food pantries, which provide food free of charge, a defining organizational practice of RP involves a payment or a “donation”

of twenty dollars for a share. This fee serves the dual purpose of helping RP defray operational costs and preventing indiscriminate charity and service-induced dependencies. This point is brought home in Nathan's words: "You need food for life and when we say that Ruby's Pantry is a hand up and not a hand out we are letting people know that we understand you need help and here is some food to help you, but *we are not just giving it to them*" (emphasis added). The statement "we are not just giving it to them" captures the essence of compassionate conservatism; simply put, RP is not free. The fee of twenty dollars is a way to distinguish RP from other forms of public assistance derogatorily termed *handouts*, by which people supposedly get something for nothing.

The "hand up, not a hand out" discourse constructs a clientele that is different from traditional food pantry users. In the political imaginary, RP clients comprise the Us (the hardworking individuals and families simply needing help to get by), whereas traditional food pantry users are Them (the lazy welfare recipients). In this otherizing framework, character and dignity are determined not by genuine character and dignity, but by one's ability to pay twenty dollars.

Interestingly, unlike the welfare discourses of the 1990s that persist today and can be found at places like Chum, RP offers a new entrepreneurial language of optimism linked to values of self-help, a can-do attitude, and personal accountability. The twenty-dollar payment, instead of being framed as a cost, fee, charge, or price, is framed as an "opportunity for dignity":

Ruby's Pantry is "**a hand up, not a hand out.**" In reality, people feel good helping the organization with a small financial contribution. Participants receive an abundance of food. Often the families will leave with over \$100 or more worth of groceries. ... When attending one of our distributions you are truly a guest and partner in this ministry. A guest because our volunteers are there to serve you with enthusiasm and partner because you are given an "opportunity for dignity" by donating \$20 to help cover the operational costs.

Paying this money is not a burden here, but rather an invitation to citizenship and a more dignified way of being. In using the phrase *opportunity for dignity*, RP effectively produces a space where food assistance can be doled out and received in a nonstigmatizing manner. Paying twenty dollars leads to the perception that clients are contributing members of society, deserving and responsible citizens who are not taking something for nothing.

Valid citizenship in the eyes of RP accrues from the marketplace. Citizenship is reduced to economic citizenship; clients earn their dignity by paying twenty dollars for their food. Twenty dollars transforms the identities of people within the RP space from stigmatized welfare recipients to fully human beings worthy of respect and dignity. Simply put, paying the \$20 humanizes and dignifies individuals.

The racialization of welfare recipients lurks right beneath RP's discursive practices. The RP home office website states that a large part of its mission is "to activate people in being alert to the needs of others ... regardless of race, religion or ethnicity." Even as a routine color-blind clause is used here, the white racial frame persists. In an interview, Sahr described RP as providing an "opportunity for dignity, so people did not have to feel like they are on welfare." He compared RP to other food assistance programs in the "inner cities of Milwaukee and Minneapolis" by referring to people in "those communities" as "poor people who are used to hand outs." In the United States, the phrase *inner city* typically implies disinvested neighborhoods populated by poor people and communities of color, people who are also usually stereotyped as lazy welfare recipients. The designation "hand up, not a hand out" in this context is a racially coded one. So when Lyn Sahr writes: "When we started Ruby's Pantry it was to be generous to all people who needed a *hand up*" (emphasis added), he is indeed qualifying that RP is not for "all people" but rather a particular segment of the population *who need a hand up*. RP is not for "those people" in the inner cities who are used to handouts; instead, RP is for financially, morally, and spiritually accountable people—racial codes used to imply white people.

Nathan verbalizes the intention of the RP program by saying that RP is meant not for welfare recipients but for a "different type of people":

You need food for life and when we say that Ruby's pantry is a hand up and not a hand out we are letting people know that we understand you need help and here is some food to help you, but we are not giving it to them ... Many of the people who come through our program are just above the threshold that is set by other distributions. They have got a job, but because they are just above that threshold, they are struggling to make the ends meet. Some of the other distribution programs that are out there, those people might be working too, but they are also on to some kind of subsidy program, maybe they have got EBT cards for food or maybe they have got their rents subsidized, *so they are a different type of people*, although we see some of them come to our program as well. (emphasis added)

In Nathan's analysis, hardworking middle-class folks are ignored by the system and have slipped through the cracks while public resources continue to be funneled toward poor people. Thus, since the government does not support these deserving citizens, RP has stepped in to fill that gap. Put differently, RP exists to help those people who work hard but do not meet the income-eligibility criteria for public assistance programs. In this discourse, policies and systems set in place to enable historically disenfranchised communities are viewed as harming folks in the mainstream. In the following excerpt, we see Nathan wrangle with the question of who is worthy of assistance:

We do not have any income limitations, we don't have any frequency limitations, we do not have any quantity limitations, meaning if you wanted to come in and get more than one share we just ask that your contribution be equal to the shares that you get. This is where with other programs you get two weeks or three weeks of groceries, I don't know what those guys do but it goes back to *how does one make the determination that you are worthy?* You are not because you make just a little bit too much money. That young mother with young children just because she has a job that makes a little bit more money, she has daycare expenses, so really this mother here this week does not have daycare expenses, *what makes her more worthy than the other one that really could use that hand up and make use of nutritious food for the kids? I mean, so that is part of the problem, how do you make that determination and say you are the one.* I don't know how to answer that question. (emphasis added)

Although the more liberal steering committee members showed resentment for the explicit evangelism of the RP home office, they were easily recruited into the more conservative discourses of the marketplace, where dignity was attached to the ability to pay. They believed the assertion that paying twenty dollars offered clients an "opportunity for dignity," even as food justice concerns and concerns of equity were erased from the discursive space. When asked to describe the program, Kaitlin said: "Faith, respect, honesty, sharing, caring for others, and nondiscriminatory." Rev. Bard observed that from a spiritual perspective there was something moving about providing food for people: "Dignity. I think one of the things about this program is that it is a program that helps people stretch their food dollars, and I hope they are treated in a very dignified way. It is kind of a guest relationship." Notably, he was the only individual to point out that traditional food shelves do really important work because coming up with twenty dollars is a challenge for many people. Ellen, the most

liberal member of the group, liked RP because it did not have eligibility criteria typical at traditional food shelves; however, she reverted to using language of accountability to talk about RP: “The other thing I like about Ruby’s Pantry is that I truly believe, if people pay something they have more of a vested interest and they have retained some of their self-respect. They don’t feel like they are getting charity. They feel like they are getting a deal; it’s a whole different thought.” Thus even Ellen, the most liberal member of the group, remained uncritical of the false distinction made between a hand up and a handout and reinforced the value of charitable capitalism.

Food Surplus and Cost Explained through Spirituality

RP is distinct from traditional food pantries because of the sheer quantity and type of food distributed. RP hands out massive, abundant, and spectacular quantities of food, anywhere from fifty to one hundred pounds of food per “share” (i.e., a preset amount of food distributed to each individual for twenty dollars). There are no restrictions on how many shares an individual can purchase so long as they pay twenty dollars for each share. Indeed, it is not unusual to see people picking up two or three shares for neighbors and friends. In the initial years, there was shock and awe on the part of clients regarding the quantity of food, including expletives of pleasant surprise: A whole twenty-pound sack of potatoes per share! Twenty cans of Coca-Cola sodas per share! A two-gallon container of boiled eggs! The quantity is so large that clients bring laundry baskets and suitcases to pick up their food and often need the help of volunteers, wagons, and shopping carts to carry food back to their cars. Because there is no government support, one does not see unfamiliar USDA commodities. Instead, the typical food distribution has many branded items, such as Coke, Yoplait, and Gold’n Plump chicken. Clients are expected to take everything because it makes the process more efficient; if they do not want an item, they are encouraged to redistribute.

The surplus food that ends up at RP is the result of an unjust system of food production; however, this injustice is never exposed and never part of the discourse. This is true of RP and food pantries in general. Consistent with an entrepreneurial can-do attitude, RP bypasses the Feeding America network and has its own system to procure surplus food. Sahr notes that

corporations now call him up and say things like, “We have ten thousand pounds of potatoes, how soon can you pick it up?” Sahr spoke about a relationship RP has with Gold’n Plump chicken, a Minnesota-based company. He recounted a story about how Gold’n Plump uses a lot of Mexican immigrant labor, but because of language issues, mistakes are often made, and those “mistakes” come to RP. One time, a migrant Mexican worker injected the chicken with the wrong marinade, so a chain restaurant that Gold’n Plump supplies chicken to refused to accept it. This incorrectly marinated chicken ended up at RP.

In this brief example, we see how injustice is bursting at the seams of the hunger industrial complex. In an attempt to stave off hunger for people in the United States, the injustices that foreign migrant laborers face are swept under the table. Substandard pay, health hazards, poor working conditions, stolen wages, and debt all make migrant labor a modern-day slave trade (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Holt-Giménez, Patel, and Shattuck 2009). However, no one likes to talk about these issues because migrant labor subsidizes the US food system. For democrats and republicans, this is a win-win situation. Companies benefit from cheap labor, consumers benefit from cheap food prices, and the hunger industrial complex benefits from the surplus food that is created, which good whites get to dole out. In the feel-good spaces of charitable capitalism, these injustices are erased.

In official discourses, Sahr employs a spiritual framework to answer the question of surplus food. Sahr is extremely proud of the fact that RP is faith-based and self-sustaining without receiving any government funding: “Because we proclaimed to be faith based, many people privately told me that it was not possible to be faith based and receive any corporate donations. My response was always the same, ‘We will not ever, ever be a secular organization! We will serve anyone and everyone but we will never hide what we believe’” (February 9, 2015). RP is only self-sustaining if we ignore political economic factors that allow FBOs to engage in spiritual entrepreneurialism—factors such as immigrant labor, government subsidies, tax breaks, and tax credits that incentivize food overproduction and corporate donations of surplus food (DeLorme, Kamerschen, and Redman 1992). Sahr sidesteps these factors in favor of spiritual arguments. RP has never run out of food because God provides, he says:

What about running out of food? Shortly after we purchased our distribution center in North Branch in 2005, we ran out of food. It was a Friday and there were two distributions the next day with no food in the warehouse. Not even a loaf of bread. It was 10:00 AM and I had already called every donating company I could think of. So I prayed and said, “God You have a problem. I didn’t ask for this ministry. This was Your idea, not mine. So tomorrow I will have no choice but to go to the two distributions sites and tell the people the truth. You did not provide!” End of prayer. Within 10 minutes the phone started ringing and companies started calling us to donate food. ... We hauled food that night until 8 PM and we had more than enough for the distributions. We have never looked back. (March 1, 2015)

In focusing solely on God’s blessing, Sahr ignores the global political economy that creates surplus food: neoliberal trade liberalization of agricultural commodities mandated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in exchange for loans to developing countries (Holt-Giménez, Patel, and Shattuck 2009), land grabs by multinational corporations, and the removal of tariffs that once protected farmers in the Global South, to name a few. Ignoring political and historical realities, Sahr praises the generosity of corporations: “Our food donors have been unbelievable with their generosity. We pray for our donors that God will bless their companies for their generosity” (April 10, 2015).

Poverty Governance at RP

By design, RP is meant to exclude those who cannot pay twenty dollars for food pantry food. The RP home office is full of critique for government income-eligibility criteria found at traditional food pantries but itself sets a fee of twenty dollars, which acts as a form of eligibility. The unspoken assumption is that charging twenty dollars makes it fair, just, and non-discriminatory: a system open to all because the market is always fair and just. However, for highly food insecure folks, paying twenty dollars a share is a heavy price, so RP is not an option for them—at least, not a dignified one. What happens if a client cannot afford to pay twenty dollars at RP? In practice, this rarely happens, because most people call ahead to check prices and procedures. However, there was one “ugly incident” that Rev. Bard described as his worst experience with RP:

I think my worst experience was fairly early on. There was a woman who had come and was slightly belligerent to the person from our church who had worked

to get this organized. She basically told her that if she did not have any money, it was her obligation to give her food. She kind of rubbed that woman the wrong way. The woman who started Ruby's Pantry was a determined sort of woman. She was not going to take that and she actually ended up calling the police who escorted the woman out. ... To be honest I would have managed the situation slightly differently, but I also did not feel that it was appropriate for me to overstep the woman who had gotten things going. She felt that this woman had really behaved badly and just needed to leave. I felt if that was her decision I was going to back her up. That was probably my worst.

Kaitlin also recalled the incident, but in her version of the story, layers of moral meaning centered on fraud and abuse were added on to the character of the woman: "It wasn't that she didn't have the money, but that she was asking for a free share. She was just asking for a free share because she was just trying to get loopholes, you know—like, oh, you said free, or a freewill donation or whatever or, so she took it out of context. I could understand if you don't have the money, but it wasn't like she didn't have the money, it was just like she was trying to fool the system or something." It is not clear how Kaitlin knew the woman had money to spare—they did not know each other from before—but what is clear is that there was no dignity afforded to this particular "guest," who was escorted out by the police.

In recent years, the RP home office has come up with a more formal process to handle such situations. The RP home office distributes gift certificates to each distribution site, which are awarded to people who cannot afford the twenty dollars. However, there are strict surveillance procedures for this, which are reflective of poverty governance procedures but at a smaller scale. A person who cannot afford to pay the twenty dollars is allowed to receive one free certificate per year for what is then no longer called a *share*, but a *blessing box*. The individual's name is recorded at the local site, and these names are sent to the RP home office. These names are also kept at the local site to verify that the same person does not receive more than one free box a year. Committee members say that it is quite tedious keeping strict accounts of it all and there is a lot of paperwork involved. Ironically, these procedures are similar to poverty governance procedures at traditional food pantries and that SNAP recipients undergo. In sum, for people who can pay twenty dollars, there is a "no questions asked" policy in place, but for those who cannot pay, moral and procedural accountability measures are set in place to ensure against fraud and abuse.

There were some behaviors that were deemed “fraud and abuse” as per the RP home office; these were behaviors that did not follow the rules of the marketplace. There were clients and volunteers who “abused the system” by going through the RP distribution line twice—in essence, getting a double share for the price of twenty dollars. There were also volunteers who tried to pick something they should not or get more of an item. Nathan rationalized this kind of abuse: “In any program there is always the possibility for abuse. We probably had some individuals that might take advantage of the program, but I think that is true of any program, and so what we have to do is just pray that that percentage of individuals that might take advantage of the program is negative. We do not have any way of tracking that. We do try to talk to the volunteers.” Sahr noted cases of individuals returning food to the grocery store and encouraged people to report such behavior. He writes:

In our effort to help people there is, and always will be, people who are critical of Ruby’s Pantry and some that will actually cheat, break the rules and jeopardize the entire program. Over the past three months we had someone try to return some of our products to a grocery store for a cash refund. Recently we had someone try to return a product to a store to exchange it for one that was fresher. When this happens the manufacturers and suppliers are immediately notified by the store and they immediately call us. They have zero tolerance for this and we have to really seek forgiveness to pacify them. They get furious. In both recent cases we had to quit sending their product to those two particular distribution sites. What a shame. Like is so often the case, one person ruins it for everyone. ... Anyone caught selling food, returning food to stores for credit, exchanging for other items of the same or different product, or breaking any other rules pertaining to our program may be permanently banned from attending any Ruby’s Pantry distribution. If you are aware of any of this behavior taking place please let your distribution site leader(s) know so they can address it. Doing the right thing will always be right and it will assure that the program will continue to bless many people in your area that need food. (August 10, 2015)

There is strong condemnation and reprisals for people who engage in this kind of behavior.

Ironically, RP’s policy of charging twenty dollars but calling it a donation has raised some eyebrows and legal questions about whether this is fraud itself. Because of legal ramifications involved with tax write-offs, RP’s position is that the twenty-dollar fee is not for the food itself, but a “donation”

used to defray logistical costs. If RP charges people for the food, then food donors cannot receive tax write-offs for their donations—a key incentive for charitable giving. Thus, the website clarifies: “We give everyone the opportunity for dignity by giving a cash donation of \$20 to help cover fuel costs and other associated expenses. **We do not sell food!**” In my interview with Celeste, a steering committee member, she often used the term *buy* or *purchase*, but would then stop short, saying, “Oh, ‘buy,’ wrong word! Nothing is purchased, it’s *donated*.” When I asked her why she didn’t use the term *buy*, she said it was frowned upon by “corporate” because of IRS regulations. She then observed the contradiction: “A donation is an undefined amount. Again, this is not an undefined amount. This is a fixed-amount donation.” There are several disclaimers that RP does not sell food, but as Executive Director Shaye Moris of Second Harvest Northern Lakes Food Bank pointed out, “Transit costs or not, they’re still charging.”

The Duluth steering committee meets once a month to make decisions about the operation and to figure out how to use the two-dollar fee per share that stays with them. The RP home office describes the two dollars as a “tithe back to the local sponsoring church” and encourages sponsors to be entrepreneurial with these funds. So far, the Duluth committee has used the money to purchase bags, wagons to help carry food out, and plastics to cover the tables. The money is also used to fund special requests in the community, such as a breakfast program at a local elementary school or the Red Cross. However, Cynthia noted that it was actually quite a burden to figure out what to do with the extra funds. She exclaimed: “There are so many people and so many issues in Duluth, how do we decide who or what to give it to?” She explained that now they just give the money to Chum or to one of the other organizations in Duluth because they are much more familiar with the needs of the city. The irony here is that Chum is a social organization that gives “handouts” to the poor and is part of the very same welfare state that the RP home office is critical of.

Conclusion

Deploying a combination of Christian conservative beliefs and business practices, RP carves out a unique space for itself in the charitable food assistance arena. The discursive practices of RP captured in the slogan “RP is a hand up, not a hand out” contribute to stigma against the food insecure

by reinforcing divisions between the deserving and underserving poor. RP frames itself as a program for those who are hardworking and deserving, citizens who simply need a “hand up,” whereas traditional food pantries are for the paradigmatic Other—a raced and classed group of people who receive undeserved handouts in the public imaginary. RP reinforces the idea that poverty is a problem that some people have that stems from moral, spiritual, and cultural factors, not from forces of structural violence. In this framework, spirituality, self-help, and market-based approaches are the solution. Amid the hustle and bustle of organizing surplus food for people, the roles of whiteness, capitalism, and Christianity in the production of negative difference are obscured. The lack of critical thinking around the discursive practices of RP means that it is just one more way by which stigma is reinforced against the poor.

Volunteers, even the more liberal ones, were easily recruited into neoliberal definitions of dignity. Stuart Hall (1988) once argued that the power of neoliberalism (or Thatcherism) was its ability to constitute subjectivities and discourses about the world that made sense to people in a range of different social positions. This was certainly the case with RP. Steering committee members rejected the religious evangelism of the RP home office on the one hand, but applauded the conservative link between dignity and economics on the other. Individuals and organizations were framed as potential entrepreneurs that, through a can-do attitude, could put aside their differences and come together to end hunger. In this fun and festive space of giving and getting, the language of equality, social justice, and rights was erased, while entrepreneurialism, abundance, industrial surplus food, big brands, and the generosity of corporate America was celebrated.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The resurgence of hunger and food insecurity can be linked to neoliberal policies at local and global scales, yet neoliberal solutions like RP continue to be offered as solutions to fix the hunger problem. At the national level, as long as there is underemployment, unemployment, low wages, structural racism, and gender inequity, there will always be people who need food assistance. At a global level, as long as food continues to be controlled by monopolistic food corporations, neoliberal multilateral organizations, and

powerful nation-states, there will be increasing food gaps (Holt-Giménez, Patel, and Shattuck 2009). From a policy perspective, what is needed to end hunger is a radical transformation of the food system, increased entitlements, and increased opportunities for people to provide food for themselves. There is an urgent need to build a joined-up local and global movement that can resist corporate food regimes. There is a need to orchestrate a food system based on sustainable ecological production, community control, and social justice (Allen 1999; Poppendieck 1999; Riches and Silvasti 2014).

The point of this chapter is not to isolate RP as a singular organization engaged in this kind of charitable capitalism, but to draw attention to a growing trend in the food assistance arena: the turn from welfare to entrepreneurialism as a way to solve the structural problem of hunger. Indeed, this is happening not just in the emergency food assistance sector, but also in the broader food movement with its celebration of community gardens or what Pudup (2008, 1228) refers to as “organized garden projects,” whose goal is to put “individuals in charge of their own adjustments(s) to economic restructuring and social dislocation through self-help technologies centered on personal contact with nature.”

With regards to stigma, the shift to entrepreneurial models has at least two important considerations. First, organizers need to carefully consider the broader implications of their discursive practices. A neoliberal logic is often used to dismantle stigma, where money is equated with power and dignity, but this comes with consequences; it reinforces stigma against those who receive government assistance and against those who have limited means and resources to participate in such entrepreneurial projects.

A second point to consider is the question of how neoliberalism, justice, and faith are brought together in the food arena. In FBOs, there has been a semantic (and material) stretching of the market into the realm of social action and charity. Capitalist logics of mass production; supply and demand; and branding and marketing are used to sell charitable goods and services. By most accounts, including my own, neoliberal values are not in sync with justice-based approaches because of the reliance on individualistic conceptions of freedom and prosperity that involve the commoditization of goods and services. That said, neoliberal projects are complex and not always ideologically coherent, as seen at RP. Although neoliberalism always implies entrepreneurialism, entrepreneurialism does not always

imply neoliberal values and goals; one can use the fruits of capitalism for the redistribution of wealth and toward the attainment of social goals as seen in the historic case of the Black Panther Party (Broad 2016).

In practical terms, for organizations engaged in entrepreneurial solutions, they must remain focused on the voices of the oppressed and constantly illuminate the intersectionality of oppression—to ask questions about who is missing from the picture. Whose voice is not heard here? Who is being left out? Perhaps entrepreneurialism can be in sync with justice when it is used for the self-determination and liberation of oppressed communities—when it is grounded in a deep critical understanding of the links among capitalism, race and class, and histories of oppression. There is some evidence to suggest that even neoliberal spaces of governmentality can be successful when they put their trust in people who appear the least deserving and allow participants to write their own scripts (Pudup, 2008). RP falls far short of this ideal; because even as it doles out massive quantities of industrial food, it reinforces age-old stigmatizing scripts centered on the politics of race, class, and gender.

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Feeding the Other

Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries

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Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries

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