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The Calculus of Charity

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The Calculus of Charity

Abstract

Online access: <https://worldrenew.net/our-stories/calculus-charity>

Keywords

calculus, charity, World Renew, generosity

Disciplines

Christianity

The Calculus of Charity

Thomas J. Clark

How to raise \$1,000,000 for World Renew with one simple word.

Most writers don't put "calculus" in their titles because they want readers; alas I am not most writers. I actually believe that mathematics is a beautiful part of God's creation and can be enjoyed by all, though that conversation will also have to wait for another day. Instead my goal is to write about how even small actions can make difference. Mother Teresa said that "we can do no great things - only small things with great love." I think the calculus of charity is a way of summing up a large number of small actions into something big.

In chorus, our voices can make a difference.

Many people care deeply about supporting the work of World Renew, an organization whose mission is to "join communities around the world to renew hope, reconcile lives, and restore creation around," being compelled to do so by "God's deep passion for justice & mercy." Some do this through financial support, others through prayer, and others by putting on a green shirt and serving with their hands and hearts. Our prayers for justice to prevail in the world matter. Ideally, each gift of support or service is soaked with prayers for the shalom of God's Kingdom to come in general and in specific ways. World Renew's mission is to join God in that work and can do so through the chorus of support it already has. But, there is another means of support you may not know about.

Recall with me Jesus' parable of the widow and unjust judge. The widow pesters the judge for justice and eventually the judge responds in Luke 18: 4-5: "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming," (NRSV). We can call on God in prayer for justice in the world, but we can also call on our human institutions as well, even if they are secular. I think we need to do both. In chorus, our voices can make a difference. Indeed, the glut of this widow's supplications finally combined to affect change through the one with the means to make a difference.

This parable reminds me, because I'm a mathematician, of the concept of infinite series. One of the most surprising results in calculus is how by adding enough numbers, even enough very small numbers, one can attain very large sums. For example, the numbers $1/2$, $1/3$, $1/4$, $1/5$, $1/6$, keep getting smaller and smaller as the denominator gets larger and larger. Yet, if you sum enough of them, i.e. $1/2 + 1/3 + 1/4 + 1/5 + 1/6 + \dots$, the sum can be as large as you like, bigger than 1,000,000 if you keep adding enough numbers in this pattern. How can such small numbers sum to something so large?!?It's unbelievable.

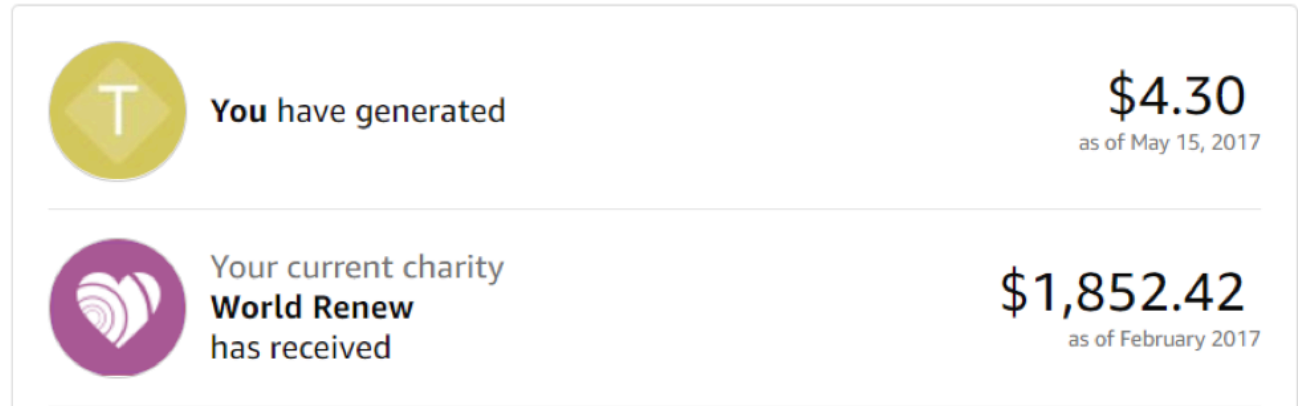
It is also true that by combining enough small donations, a very large donation can be made. True enough, though how can one word raise a million dollars for World Renew? That too seems unbelievable. It would have to be just the right word. It would have to be the word "smile." That's it. That one word.

The Christian Reformed Church has about 300,000 members. If each person gave \$3.34, that would generate over \$1,000,000. Here's the catch, *they don't have to give that \$3.34 themselves*, they can simply ask someone else to give it on their behalf. Each one could ask the Amazon Corporation to make that \$3.34 donation on their behalf, asking for justice again and again using that one word, "smile."

By navigating to smile.amazon.com instead of www.amazon.com, one can effectively ask Amazon to make a donation following each purchase. In fact, they will donate 0.5% of the subtotal to the charity of your choice, and you can choose World Renew. It's easy, every time you think of making a purchase at Amazon, type smile first: most browsers will autocomplete the rest of the web address and any purchase you make will then trigger a donation to World Renew. To get to \$3.34, you'd need \$668 purchased at www.smile.amazon.com. Now that seems like a lot, it may take a while and that's ok; it took a long time for the widow to get justice too. However, many people already do shop at Amazon. A college student could easily spend that much on books in a few years. I can see what my contribution has been over the last few years...

Every little bit counts

When millions of supporters shop at smile.amazon.com, charitable donations quickly add up.



It is not much, but it does add up.

Imagine if everyone in the CRC together made this change. What could be raised to bring justice and hope to world in need of it? *We can together pester the Amazon Corporation, which does not explicitly fear God, to support shalom in our world.* The more people who join in, the more small donations will add up – so tell your friends too.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that you spend any more money at Amazon.com than you already do. Part of working for shalom is supporting your local community businesses. *However, if you are already shopping there, then you might as well say "smile."* More than that, each time you type "smile" into the web, you can remember the work of World Renew and pray for them. Typing "smile" may encourage to support World Renew in other ways.

That one word can do something big; it could easily raise \$1,000,000, but it's going to take a large number of small contributions to get there, and that's the calculus of charity.