

“The Least of These”

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While imprisoned in Birmingham, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote of the struggle for civil rights: “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”¹

If we take an honest, hard look at our society, we can see seemingly endless examples of government actors creating, perpetuating, or ignoring a system that uplifts some while simultaneously oppressing or abandoning others. But if the government can create systemic *injustice*, it can surely implement reforms to create systemic *justice*; indeed, that should be among its primary goals! The preeminent attribute of good government should be that it diligently surveys the system it has created in order to identify and eradicate inequality, inequity, and injustice in that system. As Dr. King said, we are all “tied in a single garment of destiny,” which means that the whole system is broken if any part of our society is frayed or unraveling. And just like with a garment, the fraying in a society usually begins at the margins. For that reason, good government should work to create systemic justice by focusing on the marginalized—those referred to in scripture as “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40).

1. Martin Luther King Jr. to C. C. J. Carpenter and others, April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, 2, http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf.

Government officials and agencies can make a difference in marginalized and neglected communities in many ways, particularly at the state and local levels. Oftentimes we focus so much on national politics that we overlook the potential of state and local government programs to do good in the community in creative and inexpensive ways. I first learned about the positive power of local government as a teenager when I participated in a county-run youth commission in my hometown. The commission was a youth-driven advisory board that provided diverse youth from across the county an opportunity to learn about civic engagement, gain leadership skills, and provide a generationally different perspective to the county council. Each year, the youth commission would study a topic, conduct research using a variety of methods, and prepare and share a report with the county council. This was important for the council; they needed the voices of youth from across the county to help them in their policymaking. The adult leaders of the youth commission supported us as we researched, planned, and prepared. Through their government service, I could tell that the leaders of the program cared about me and my fellow youth commissioners. Even when I didn't feel I had anything valuable to add, they encouraged me. I was a quiet kid, and I was scared of using my own voice. I originally joined the youth commission because I wanted to be more involved in my community, but at the time, I had no idea the impact it would have on my life. It was a formative experience that helped me find my voice and see how I could make a positive impact in my community. The youth commission showed me how government can make a difference in the lives of young community members.

I also saw the power government can have in our lives through the work my father did in my community. My father is a proud African immigrant who honors our Mozambican heritage while also celebrating his American citizenship through active civic participation. When I was in high school, he decided to run for a city council position. He was disappointed with some local government decisions, and he decided to get involved. He made it clear to me that, when you see difficulties in your community, you have a responsibility to fix them, rather than simply complain or lament them. When he was elected, he had opportunities to make changes in the community and be part of the decisions that influenced the lives of others. I learned firsthand that some of the most important and impactful public policy is debated and passed at city council meetings that are scarcely attended by the community. It is up to each of us to get involved in local government and in our community if we want to make a difference.

It was those lessons that spurred me to make my own run for the Provo city council in 2017, while still an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University. By 2017, I had lived, worked, and volunteered in the community around BYU for years. During that time, I had become keenly aware that many of my fellow Provo residents did not feel heard or represented by our city’s leadership. I knew I had the obligation to help but was initially unsure how best to make a meaningful difference. Emblazoned on a local sign is Provo’s motto: “Welcome Home.” As I contemplated the many challenges confronting my community, I resolved that Provo could not honestly claim to welcome *anyone* home until it seriously sought to welcome *everyone* home. When I learned that the city councilman representing my district would be running unopposed for the second consecutive election, I realized how I could fulfill the obligation I felt to my community. At that moment in time, running for elected office was the way for me to do it. So, at twenty-three years old, I filed to run for the Provo city council. There were certainly challenges and difficulties, but there were also immense learning opportunities. Most importantly, it was an opportunity to give back to a community about which I cared deeply. I found opportunities to listen to residents, to find commonalities with people with vastly different life experiences, and to celebrate our differences. It is said that successes build confidence, but setbacks build character; while I did not win that election, the experience reaffirmed to me that local governments have a unique power to amplify marginalized voices and meet the needs of those who struggle.

Around that same time, some of my BYU classmates and I noticed similarly unmet needs on campus. So, we decided to organize a student group, the Women of Color Club, to provide support and community for students whose difficulties lie at the intersection of race and gender. In cofounding BYU’s Women of Color Club, I learned from so many women how to show love and acceptance and how to foster a sense of understanding among those from different backgrounds. It had been difficult for many women of color to find community at the university. Individuals stepped up to make the club a reality on campus. Women of color and others pitched in to help. Even those who had good experiences on campus and didn’t long for that community recognized our needs and difficulties as valid, and they took initiative to be part of the solution. We were able to create a club that could foster a community for women of color, and it was because of the work of people who cared and wanted to work with a clear purpose and an understanding that

“whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” The Women of Color Club did not change policies, but its creation served to aid members of the campus community who were struggling and needed space. This is a model of what good government can and should do—create spaces for diverse groups to find community, celebrate their differences, and learn from one another.

After graduating, I worked at a Utah state agency, where I set a goal to develop a youth council program for the state of Utah. I remembered my own experience as a youth commissioner, and I wanted more young people to have the opportunity to feel that their voice mattered. After several months of work, the Youth Council of the Utah Commission on Service and Volunteerism began operating in 2019. My work with those inspiring youth taught me so much about the power of service and the influence that young people can have on their local communities. In conjunction with nonprofits, schools, and city councils, these youth, each in their own corner of the state, were able to address a specific issue in their respective cities. Again, local government had provided a program to engage with an often overlooked group (for example, young people) and empower them to improve their communities.

In addition to my job responsibilities, I also had opportunities to work with youth as a volunteer with Peer Court, a juvenile justice diversion program for youth in Salt Lake County. Employing a restorative justice framework, this program works specifically to help kids who have committed minor offenses in school. While the program is under the umbrella of a nonprofit organization, it has significant support from government agencies. It gives the offending youth an opportunity to counsel with their peers, make amends, and learn and grow from their choices. This program is another example of how government can serve to help offenders and victims in order to build stronger communities through kindness, love, and clear purpose.

All these experiences helped me understand that government action, while necessary, is only part of the solution; the other part is the willingness of community members to engage with those programs. Good government needs people to contribute in a variety of ways. It starts with being informed, voting in local elections, and remaining engaged between elections by attending community meetings and communicating our wishes to government officials. It also involves volunteering to serve the needs of marginalized or at-risk community members. Maybe it is through running a business that allows employees to do pro bono work while being paid by the company. It could take the form of

marching in a rally or even organizing an event to showcase art that highlights an important issue. Some people do research to find clear ways to solve problems; some people donate items to those in need. There is no shortage of ways to be involved when we actively engage with purpose to support the positive programs and initiatives put in place by justice-minded government actors. In thinking of purpose, I am often reminded that scripture commands us to "succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees" (D&C 81:5).

Ultimately, there are so many different ways to be involved. It is through a clear purpose that meaningful impact happens, and our purpose must include service for the marginalized with a remembrance that "all are alike unto God" (2 Ne. 26:33). In working in the community, I have learned so much from others about how to ensure that this purpose is clear in impactful work.

It may seem that the work individuals do is not important or that you must be in a leadership position in order to create change, but that is not true. Good government starts with individuals deciding to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause," and it starts with focusing our efforts on meeting the needs of the marginalized in our community (D&C 58:27). Good government starts with us.

Tinesha Zandamela is a native of southern Washington and a lifelong member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Throughout her life, community involvement has been deeply important to her, especially as a Black woman and daughter of an immigrant. She has directed a pedestrian advocacy organization and worked for domestic and foreign NGOs and government organizations. Tinesha is an honors graduate of Brigham Young University. As a student, she ran for Provo City Council in 2017 and cofounded the BYU Women of Color Club. Recently, Tinesha worked as a community engagement specialist for the Utah Commission on Service and Volunteerism and later as a victim advocate at a county Prosecuting Attorney's Office. She currently lives in Virginia and attends Georgetown University Law Center.