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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

A JOURNEY OF INTEGRATING FAITH INTO PRACTICE

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Introduction

Lutheran Social Services, Inc. (LSSI) began serving the least of these in 1901. At the helm at that time was a Lutheran pastor who was driven by his faith to establish a formal mechanism for connecting orphaned infants and children to families who were willing to open their homes and hearts to these children in need.

At the turn of the twentieth century, when our agency was in its infancy, America's churches were more heavily populated, faith was the guiding force for most families, and the Christian church was perceived more positively than today.

When the Christian church's influence began to wane, and American society was being shaped by other forces, LSSI existed as one of many social *service* agencies in Fort Wayne, Indiana, until 1997, when we began to thrive as a social *ministry* organization. It was at this point in our history that we refocused, and our faith became the foundation for all we do.

This paper represents a synopsis of a presentation at the North American Association for Christians in Social Work convention in Grand Rapids Michigan, hosted by LSSI staff members, Angela Moellering and Gloria Whitcraft, entitled "A Journey of Integrating Faith into Practice".

Steps for Building a Solid Faith Foundation

We began our journey by posing the questions, "What does it mean to be a Christian social ministry organization"? How bold should we be in proclaiming our faith as the foundation for why we do what we do?

These questions were coming to the surface frequently at our agency. The leadership of the organization wanted to be clear about what the agency stood for and why we served those in need. We believed that as a Christian organization we had given up ground over the years that we did not need to give up. We have erred too far on the “safe side”.

Do we as social service organizations with Christian roots too often interpret the social climate of political correctness to mean:

- We cannot utter the name of Jesus when serving our clients
- When providing options to clients, we cannot talk about the local church as a resource
- We cannot state boldly we are Christ’s followers and will conduct business as such
- We cannot be what Christ called us to be

Philippians 2:14-16: Do everything without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like lights in the world, as you hold on to the word of life, so that my boast for the day of Christ may be that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

The lure of “political correctness” plagued us as we prepared our presentation for the National Association of Christian Social Workers. We questioned the appropriateness of reading scripture at the conference. Will we offend or alienate anyone by quoting the Word? Yet, as Christians looking at scripture as our point of reference is not merely appropriate. It is completely necessary and essential as we seek to live as Christ called us to live.

Philippians 2: 27 &28: Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear news of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind struggling together for the faith of the gospel, not intimidated in any way by your opponents.

As we looked at our mission statement: *Lutheran Social Services of Indiana* is a social ministry organization guided and sustained by the love of Jesus Christ. We will serve those in need, particularly those with few options and opportunities, we began to ask questions such as:

- What does this mean for us as an agency?
- Why do we do what we do?
- What do those who collaborate with us, fund our programs, volunteer for us, and receive services from us know about who we are and what we believe?

We believed we needed to be more deliberate about who we are and why we do what we do. We began to talk about our foundation of faith at staff retreats, in board meetings, with agency leadership, and during strategic planning sessions.

We believed God was calling us to be bolder as a Social Ministry Organization and as a body of Christ's followers. We believe what Jesus told his disciples in John 14:6, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me." Because we believe Jesus is the only way to God the Father, then, out of love, we decided we needed to share that message through our actions and our words. Thus was the beginning of our journey.

For LSSI, it began with the Executive Director seeing a need for our agency to be clear on where we stand on issues and to state that our agency's foundation is based on the essentials of the Christian faith. He received Board support and encouragement to begin to draft a Statement of Faith.

Leadership staff conducted research and developed a very beginning draft. The Board further developed the idea, refined the wording, and approved the final document. The following is our faith statement:

Lutheran Social Services of Indiana's
STATEMENT OF FAITH

We believe that:

– the only true God is the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct Persons in one divine Being.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor. 13:14)

– the Bible is the holy, inspired Word of God and is the sole, infallible standard for Christian faith and practice.

All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16,17)

– what the Bible teaches is relevant for our times. It is a living word that speaks to our present reality and present needs.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)

– the Bible reveals that all have sinned and are in need of salvation.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (Rom. 3:22-23)

– God has made provision for our salvation in the physical death and physical resurrection of His only Son Jesus Christ.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

- our Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation.

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

- the true Church consists of all those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and who serve Him in spirit and in truth, and that this is the fellowship of all believers.

There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all in all. (Eph. 4:4-6)

- every Christian is called to proclaim in word and deed the saving message of our Lord Jesus Christ and to “...love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and love your neighbor as yourself.” Matt.22:37

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you... (Matt. 28: 19-20)

- human life from conception to the end of life is God-created and thereby sacred.

When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Ps. 139:15b-16)

- because of Christ, we are called to passionately follow Jesus and respond by serving those in need, especially those with few options and opportunities.

The Lord upholds all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down. (Ps. 145:14)

If your organization is wrestling with incongruence between your beliefs and your image or actions, or you are just at the beginning of the journey of integrating faith into practice, here are some ideas on how to begin:

1. Be clear on what you personally believe. What are the essentials of your faith – the “deal breakers”? In what ways do you express your faith either verbally or in actions? Does your board and staff know what you believe?

In this day and age it is important for us as Christians to be clear about what we believe. As agencies and institutions of faith, it is imperative that staff, board, and constituents are clear about what we believe and who we are. This is not an “in your face” approach, but a measured, “this is who I am and what I stand for” approach.

Ephesians 6: 10 – 18: Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground. So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

2. Talk about the essentials of the faith when recruiting new board members, conducting staff meetings, interviewing new staff, developing leadership. If open faith statements are new to your organization, begin to set the tone.

An open statement of your faith, allows those who follow you to know where you stand and reveals that faith comments, conversation, and thinking are encouraged in your organization.

Deuteronomy 6:4 – 9: Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.

3. Work toward developing a statement of faith. This is a document that puts in writing the essentials of the faith. What are the keys of the Christian faith? What do you believe that makes you a Christian agency?

Developing a statement of faith for an organization is a very specific process, and the end result will be a document unique to your organization. We cannot say do as we did because your experience will fit your organization and be a response to your faith. However, in the next section will discuss some ways in which a statement of faith may impact an organization and its leadership.

Faith Influences Leadership

1. *Faith enhances leadership.* Because the community has an understanding of what our agency stands for and has seen the behavior of its leaders, we are not asked to participate in some collaborations or events. However, we believe that from a big picture perspective, and ultimately, an eternal perspective, the opportunities and benefits for Christian leadership far outweigh the limitations.
2. *Faith guides the directions of programs, grant requests, community collaborations.* As opportunities become available in the community, our faith and the practice of it is part of the conversation and decision making process. One of the questions we ask is “How does this opportunity fit or not fit with what we believe?”
3. *Faith impacts are interactions with staff.* We attempt to demonstrate the same grace and love to staff that we ask them to show the clients they serve. The process of demonstrating grace and allowing our faith to impact our practice in supervision or management should parallel the grace we demonstrate to those we serve.

4. *Faith creates servant leaders.* As leaders, we demonstrate service to those around us by serving them. As leaders our focus is on others and their needs and successes. We model serving because of our faith, with no expectation of getting something back. We serve because of what Jesus has done for us.

Faith Integrated into Practice: The ECHO Program

To provide a glimpse of what integrating faith into practice looks like at LSSI, we will discuss the servant leadership demonstrated by the staff of the Education Creates Hope and Opportunity (ECHO) program. ECHO is a school- and home-based, case management program designed to help parenting teens stay in school and graduate with a high school diploma or G.E.D.

Since its inception in 1998, the outcomes for ECHO's participants have been outstanding, with over 90% of teen mothers staying in school and over 85 % of them graduating each year. With only 32 percent of teenage mothers graduating from high school nationwide, it is clear that ECHO is a successful program. We attribute this success to the staff's faith-based approach to service, which begins with servant leadership.

As supervisors, we believe that one of our most important tasks is to be a role model for service. As leaders, we try to set the tone for practicing our faith. We pray at meetings, and talk about the Lord Jesus as our guide for service and relationships. We openly pray and invite others to pray with us for the people we serve, and for our ability to continue to serve them, giving all praise to the Lord. We minister to the staff we supervise as a way of modeling the ministry we are asking our case managers to provide to the teen mothers involved in ECHO.

Our faith is the foundation for the relationship we strive to establish and maintain with the teen mothers. Knowing the grace of our Lord Jesus ourselves, we want to convey a sense of that grace to the teen. Specifically, we assume a non-judgmental attitude and we work to create an atmosphere that upholds her worth and dignity. We offer compassion, emotional support, praise, hope, and encouragement through our words and actions.

We believe that God had a plan for the teen mother before she was even born, and that the talents and gifts she possesses are God-given and provided to her for the purpose of realizing this plan. We convey this belief to the teens in verbal and non-verbal ways.

When the door is open for us, we talk openly with the teen mother about our faith as the foundation for being in service to her and her baby. We share our belief in the sanctity of life because all life is created by God. We communicate that our *love* for them is an extension of the love we enjoy from our relationship with God.

We advocate for abstinence by sharing our belief that God created the Sacrament of marriage out of love for us. We encourage the teens to love themselves as much as God loves them. We believe that if we can help the teen mother realize her value in God's eyes, she will begin to make better choices. We promote the idea that a choice to abstain from sex outside of marriage is a choice made out of love and respect for oneself and appreciation for God's love and design.

When the opportunity does not present itself to talk openly about our faith, we spread the gospel without using words. That is to say that we demonstrate our faith through our actions. We are there for the teen mother when we say we will be, we show kindness and compassion no matter what choices she makes or how she acts towards us on any given day, we believe in her and wait patiently for her to believe in herself, we look for and praise her for her strengths rather than focus on her weaknesses, and we carefully confront her when we believe it is in her best interest to do so.

Throughout the school year, we survey the teens in the ECHO program for their feedback on our services. Here is what two of our graduates had to say in their exit interviews:

"You guys are great. The program really helped me a lot. It isn't easy to be a mom when you're in high school. My mom and my aunt didn't want me to have my baby. I didn't know what I was going to do, and you guys were there for me. Thanks."

"I will never forget being in this program and my case manager. I was scared and I was so mad at myself and my baby's father. My mom was mad at me. My grandmother wouldn't talk to me. She was ashamed of me. I was ashamed of myself. My case manager made me feel like I could keep on going. I graduated. I can't believe I graduated!"

We are often asked why our outcomes in ECHO are so good. Why is that over 90% of teen mothers in the ECHO program stay in school when only 32% of teen mothers nationwide graduate from high school? We offer all glory and praise to the Lord. We believe the outcomes in ECHO are outstanding because we rely not on ourselves and our educational backgrounds to do what we do, but rather our faith in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

In summary, *Lutheran Social Services of Indiana*'s journey from social service to social ministry organization began in 1997, with our Executive Director's vision to refocus our attention on our Lutheran Church roots and Christian faith foundation.

Today, while we are still traversing the journey of integrating faith into practice, we have an established Statement of Faith and Guiding Principles that set our agency apart from other organizations, and clearly communicate who we are, what we believe, and why we do what we do.

Our choice to proclaim our faith as the foundation for our service has limited us in some ways, and opened doors for us in others. Ultimately, we are thriving and developing as an organization and as a body of Christ in ways we could not have imagined.

In this paper and the presentation at the NACSW convention, we hope to offer practical tips and encouragement to our brothers and sisters in other social services organizations for building a stronger faith foundation.