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*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

## **THE ESTHER MODEL: A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO FAITH-BASED SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMMING**

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### **Workshop Synopsis**

Faith-based organizations are now able to access public funding to affect change within our nation's most deprived communities. Yet, many remain uncertain as to the way that they can provide viable service options via public funding without minimizing their ministry foci. This workshop will provide a framework to do both.

### **Introduction**

Am I endeavoring down a path of genuine Christian service if I do not explicitly evangelize, proselytize, or talk about Christ in the program in which I serve? As a Christian social worker, a ministry or lay leader, or an executive director, is it possible to jointly expand my communal impact by collaborating with government and at the same time stay "faithful" to the spiritual mission of my program? Is our ministry truly considered an authentic "ministry" if it does not include prayer, reading of scripture, and other acts of Christian worship? Why should our organization partner with government at all if we are not allowed to provide services in a way that works for us? Should faith-based social service providers ignore the faith dictums that often compel them to enter into acts of ministry? These and other questions often send faith-based organizations

scurrying in many directions in search of answers. There exists a level of apprehension, *rightly-so*, on the part of most faith-based social service providers that impede their desire to partner with government because many acknowledge that a partnership will result in the obscuring of their faith practices because of restrictions. The answers to these questions are important and must be considered before a partnership is sought and established between a faith-based organization and government.

As a result of the significance of these types of questions, an array of works have been published with an emphasis on the policy and legislative aspects of the “faith-based and community-based initiative,” charitable choice, and the equal treatment standards as they relate to the functioning of faith-based organizations. However, there appears to be a dearth of material that exists that peers into the “faith” aspect, as diverse in meaning as the term is, of faith-based programs. Simply, there seems to be little written which peers into the complexity of these often repeated questions. For example, consider the question: What does the absence of prayer, reading of scripture, and other acts of worship signify theologically for a faith-based organization that views these acts as being markers of its Christian service? The answer to the question may indicate whether or not one believes that Christian service can only be called true “Christian service” when these specific acts are part. Thus, the answer would also guide the individual as he or she develops and/or executes a program. Many chapters would need to be written to thoroughly explore these questions; yet, this paper will aim to begin the quest of exploration as it will (1) briefly provide a theoretical theological lens through which faith-based organizations may view alternative answers to their questions regarding one’s Christian witness and responsibility by way of a biblical paradigm; (2) make the case that “true ministry” is not solely defined by explicit faith practices; and (3) offer suggestions that will help to foster a faithful partnership between a faith-based organization and government if a partnership is sought.<sup>1</sup>

## Part I

### Reflecting on Scripture:

#### The Book of Esther on Christian Responsibility in the Public Sphere

The stories that are contained within the Bible are compelling sources of inspiration, instruction, and guidance for the readers. From the pulpit, masterful orators expound on scriptures that, albeit the distance in time and social location in which they were recorded, still speak boldly to the listeners in such a way that faith is enlivened anew. In the quiet of personal devotion the potency of the biblical witness can stimulate trust, hope, and love in the hearts and minds of those who reflect on Scripture. The Bible also provides an additional lens through which Christians can assess the world. Reinhold Niebuhr, the distinguished Christian ethicist, once informed his students at Union Theological Seminary in New York City that a minister ought to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Thus, Niebuhr was correct in his pronouncement that one could assume that in all matters relevant in the lives of Christians, the Bible, in addition to other sources, should always start as a primary starting point for any discussion. Thus, as Christian social workers from across North America converge to discuss social work praxis, it seems prudent to appeal to Niebuhr's advice, that is, locating our roles as change agents in both the biblical witness and extra-biblical sources. Our starting point for reflection as it relates to our Christian witness and responsibility, especially as social workers who serve in faith-based organizations, is one of the books found in the Old Testament of the Bible, namely, the compelling book of Esther.

The ten chapters of the book of Esther depict a spirited story about its main protagonist, Esther, and her uncle Mordecai. The story, which is one that is commonly alluded to by many because it lacks any mention of God, centers on the lives of the Jewish people within an oppressive state, Persia. The book of Esther, although it appears in the Christian canon, is a text that must be examined in context and through the lens of its place in the Jewish scripture; it first must be regarded as a book which resonates in the lives of the Jewish people as a monumental telling of one of their periods of exile. Yoran Hazony, a Jewish scholar interested in the political ideas of the Jewish people posed a question in his book, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther*, that is

indicative of a Jewish reading of the book of Esther when he inquires: “What can be the meaning of a book of the Bible in which there is no mention of God, however so incidental, if not to inform us, two thousand years before Nietzsche, that the evidence of God’s actions in the world has ceased—that earth has been unchained from its sun, that it has grown darker, colder?”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Hazony proposes that the exilic period, a period of “darkness” for the Jewish people, signified a point in time in which the Jewish people viewed God as inactive - a period in which they thought that God had “ceased” to act on their behalf. This point is critical for understanding the book of Esther in context because it highlights the idea that Esther, the brave heroine of the story, sought to act on behalf of her people even though she may have considered God to be totally absent – even if she felt that she had to act on her own without God’s assurance and help.

Hazony expounds on this theme when he poignantly states that the “great events in the book of Esther are not those instances when clever converges of the plot can be interpreted as hidden divine activism. Rather they are found in the initiatives of Mordecai and Esther, who repeatedly choose to risk everything for the sake of right and truth.”<sup>3</sup> The key word that is found in the aforementioned statement is “initiatives.” Esther and Mordecai *responded* to their crises, *initiated action* even though they may have thought God to be absent in their exile, and *utilized their gifts* and resources for the betterment of the Jewish people in the midst of oppression. Although, Christians would argue that God is ever-present through the Holy Spirit and therefore never absent, it can be noted that Christians too are co-responsible (for initiating action in our world) through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, even in situations that may feel oppressive or unfamiliar to us (i.e. serving in a program that restricts our faith practices). Esther and Mordecai serve as stellar examples of a people of faith – living in a land wherein their faith is subjugated – responding to communal crises nonetheless. Harold Dean Trulear asserts, “The question becomes one of the stewardship of gifts and resources that are available when, like Nehemiah, Daniel, Esther, and other members of the exilic hagiography, people of faith move inside the very system that oppresses their people.”<sup>4</sup> For Trulear, what is significant is how the actors, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Esther utilize their gifts within an oppressive system. Hazony further develops the theme of human initiation

amidst the seeming absence of divine intervention in the book of Esther that drives the point in the following statement:

The most remarkable aspect of the book is not God's absence itself, but the fact that this absence does not induce defeat and despair. Quite the contrary, in fact: Mordecai and Esther prove that even in the grim new universe of the dispersion, the most fearsome evils may yet be challenged and beaten-as long as man himself is willing to take the initiative to beat them...Man may still participate in the actions of God in history, but he will not be called to them; he will have to initiate them. And man may still see God's justice and peace brought into the being in the world, but it will not be handed to him; he will have to build it.<sup>5</sup>

To borrow Hazony's words, it is important for Christians to realize that we are the vessels – with the assistance of the Holy Spirit- through whom God's justice and peace in our world are rendered and “built.” If Esther and Mordecai had refused to act because God was not in the equation, deliverance would not have come to the Jewish people. Or as Mordecai proclaimed most avidly to Esther, “For if you keep silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this (Esther 14:4, NRSV).” Mordecai's challenge can be rephrased to speak to the Christian social worker today: *Perhaps you are now in service as a social worker for such a time as this – a time in which the response of servants wane and the needs of many socially, economically, and politically oppressed peoples have amplified!*

As social workers, we are responsible for acting on behalf of our neighbors and communities without vacillation, but what shape does that responsibility take when we assert the religious epithet *Christian* before our professional titles? Moreover, what does Christian responsibility look like in the public sphere? To begin, the healer's principle, which undergirds the vocation of social workers is to “first, do no harm.” For many social workers who self-identify as Christian, this axiom can render many schismatic regarding their profession and religious affiliation by prompting them to believe that social workers should serve others without using their Christian experience / faith / beliefs / call as an additional motivation to serve. It can be said, that the nature of social work minus a Christian influence is reflective of service anyway and that the theme of service runs rampant in Christian texts and

tradition so that a social worker does not necessarily have to be Christian to commit to such work and vice versa. But often, a social worker who brings his or her Christianity into the service equation is often taught that he or she will harm the consumer and should therefore leave it out. Although, this point can be elaborated more fully in an ethics conversation, our point here is to explore how the nature of our Christian faith can provide inspiration or additional “fuel” for our vocation and acts of service even when we are working within non-sectarian, government, and faith-based organizations where faith practices are restricted. In essence, our vocational capacity to help and heal can be bolstered by our call to serve God and our neighbors. This is a theme that also is evident in the book of Esther. “The story of Esther is a lesson on how to live and fight in a world ruled by other norms and values, while still keeping one’s own identity as a people. Though God is never mentioned, many hints draw attention to the possibility that God is at work here.”<sup>6</sup> Within this statement, two valuable points can be identified: (1). The book of Esther teaches the reader how to “live and fight in a world ruled by other norms and values” while at the same time maintaining his or her own identity in an unfamiliar world; (2). The notion that one can “live and fight” in a unfamiliar world even if God is never mentioned with the possibility that God is at work.

### *Living and Fighting in a World Ruled by Other Norms*

In the book of Esther, as stated elsewhere in this paper, one reads the story of a disenfranchised people dwelling in exile in a world totally alien in terms of the cultural norms and values from which they had come. Esther lived in this vastly different world, but she also fought – or initiated action – in that same world. As Christians, we see ourselves as being part of the Kingdom of God, an existential place of being that often confronts and strongly contradicts the norms and values of our worldly home. We may find that legislation and policies birthed out of our governing bodies often clash with our Christian beliefs. We may discover that Christ’s teaching leads us down a path that is ostensibly counter-cultural. In the context of our present discussion, we may think that government’s decision to limit our faith practices in our social service agencies is uncomplimentary. But the book of Esther demonstrates that it is possible to live and “fight” (fervently serve) in an ethos in which our norms and

values may conflict. But we must remember that we are also charged with a responsibility to act in concert with government as social workers and Christians to bring about change in our world. Jonathan Chaplin, commenting on Christian responsibility in the public sphere stated, “The state is not simply ‘the organs of the state’ – parliament, the executive, the judiciary, the police and so on. The state is also us. In our capacity as citizens, as *members* of the state, we exercise co-responsibility – not equal responsibility, but shared responsibility – with government for deciding what the state should do, for the framing of public justice.”<sup>7</sup> Esther, a servant whose Jewish identity never changed amidst the difference in norms and values, lived out this notion of co-responsibility in the text. As Christian social workers we must reckon: If I serve in my local church or community center that is resistant to my faith, aren’t I to be faithful as a Christian because my faith challenges me to do so, my vocational credo hearkens me to do so, and my role as an active co-participant in the world beckons me to do so? Thus, *it is* possible to serve in an environment that maintains different norms and values, even if it is hostile to one’s faith, and still be faithful to one’s Christian call (because Christian tradition does not teach that the condition for one’s service is another’s acceptance of our beliefs) as well as one’s vocational call as a social worker (because it is the nature of the profession to serve – doing no harm – but producing much good in the lives of others).

#### *Maintaining one’s Christian Identity in a Secular World*

Esther’s abode in Persia did not invalidate her identity as a Jew. Both Esther and Mordecai lived in an environment that remained hostile to their identity; however, the story highlights the ability of both Esther and Mordecai to be multi-cultural in the truest sense; they were able to live as Jewish people in a Persian land. Interestingly, they were able to live as Jewish people without having to verbally identify themselves as such as evidenced in 2:10 which states, “Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell.” Although Esther’s resistance to name her tradition was governed by her uncle’s concern for her safety, it is equally important to note that Esther’s service (her persistence to “fight” for her people) was not impinged by her decision to remain silent about her tradition. Similarly, the Christian can draw a parallel: One’s Christian identity need not necessarily be hidden

nor openly acknowledged as a prerequisite for Christian service. This may help to undergird the assertion that evangelizing or the need to pronounce one's faith does not have to occur as Christian social workers canvass the terrain of the communities in which we work.

This concept is troublesome for some and it may cause many to feel as if they are "denying" Christ. But is not verbally acknowledging forthright one's religious tradition an honest denial of his or her God? Esther did not *deny* God, she just did not mention God after receiving guidance from her uncle that to do so would bring more harm than good. Jesus, himself, often made the choice to simply *respond to the needs* of those whom he encountered rather than acknowledging his divinity. Sometimes Jesus went as far as requesting those around him to keep his identity a secret. We too must be reflective about when and why we decide to identify ourselves. That is not to suggest that we ought to be ashamed, for we believe as Paul exhorted, that "we are not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ," but we must consider what is at stake when one of our prerequisites for entry into service / ministry is tempered by our need to acknowledge our beliefs verbally. For example, we must consider if our Christian identification and acts would make a difference in terms of limiting the number of consumers we serve because they are turned off by those very features of our programs? If so, as social workers and social service programs with a faith foundation endeavoring to impact the larger society through our services, we must consider if we are being faithful to our professions and call if we only chose to serve those who willingly align with our beliefs while failing to serve others such as the Muslim, Jew, or atheist in need of the same service who may ascribe to a different belief system? Some suggest that because consumers maintain a choice to receive the services of faith-based programs as they do with secular programs, consumers who do not identify with our faith dictums or practices could simply make the choice to receive services elsewhere. However, if a faith-based organization decided to operate a food kitchen, is it prudent as a provider and Christian witness to deny the food to some? Did Jesus require the hungry five thousand to choose or did he consider the needs of those who were hungry in his presence as superseding his need to acknowledge his divinity? In short, it is our *acts of service* which evangelizes and



speaks! God works through our service; therefore, God is ever present and at work even when we are verbally silent about God. As one writer plainly states, “So, everything we do for our neighbors is not merely activism, social service or social action; it is a service to Christ himself. All of our social actions have a Christological meaning. The neighbors become ‘the sacrament of Christ’.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Part II**

A Matter of Perspective: What comes first, the prayer or the bread?

A study conducted by the Acton Institute, which examined how faith relates to the organization and delivery of human service programs nationwide (N= 564) found that 36.2 percent (n=204) reported that faith is communicated implicitly, mostly through “acts of caring” on behalf of recipients, 23 percent (n=130) communicated their faith explicitly and “see the role of faith as being critical to participant change” and 14.4 percent (n=81) communicated faith explicitly and viewed faith as being so critical to participant change as to make it mandatory for program clients to participate in the faith dimension of the program.<sup>9</sup> This study examines programs that fit into one of several categories, namely, faith-based programs with implicit faith inherent in its service and programs with explicit (voluntary or involuntary) faith-infused practices inherent in its service. The research also underscores one of the many central debates present within social work / social welfare fields as it relates to the true definition of “faith-based initiative.” How are these programs to be defined?

There are many useful ways in which one can approach the “faith-based” terminology. However, Amy Sherman provides two very useful paradigms for describing one’s faith-based program. Sherman utilizes the terms “salad ministry” and “brownie ministry” to signify those programs that distinctly compartmentalize between their faith practices (i.e. Bible study, prayer meetings, etc.) and the social services provided (i.e. food pantry, job readiness preparation, etc.) like an after-school program held in the basement of the church clearly separated in time and location from the prayer and Bible study services held in the sanctuary of the same church.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the term “salad ministry” symbolizing the distinctiveness between the parts of a program like one can clearly distinguish the diverse vegetables in a salad. On the contrary, Sherman describes those programs in which the faith practices are intricately connected to the

provision of the social services (i.e. a residential substance abuse treatment program whose care includes use of Scripture and prayer) as “brownie ministries,” that is, those programs whose ingredients cannot be easily separated like the eggs, flour, sugar, chocolate, and other ingredients cannot be separated when forming a brownie. This distinction is useful as a means to clarify the difference. This paper seeks to argue that “salad ministries” are no less Christian than “brownie ministries” if in fact a program decides to identify its Christian faith implicitly.

The Acton Institute study cited previously shows that programs tend to equally view faith as that which can be implicitly or explicitly pronounced. Many groups see faith as an inhibitory factor in social service delivery while others see faith as being a necessity for effective service. Arguments can be made for both cases. However, the inclusion of explicit faith practices seems to be a popular choice, even at the expense of its impact possibly being thwarted. Many faith-based groups fear that a faith-based program that does not “come out of the closet”<sup>11</sup> will fail to be authentically Christian. Dave Donaldson and Stanley W. Carlson-Thies challenge this notion in the following statement:

After all, the mission is to help neighbors and neighborhoods in need and not just to be true to an abstract plan or vision of service. It could be that the plans have to be modified in order to actually accomplish the mission of service. Might it be true that to faithfully serve our neighbors, we should change how and when we present the gospel or insist that staff be both expert and faith-filled? Being faithful to our mission of service could require rethinking our service ideas-not clinging to them because we think change must mean a loss of purity.<sup>12</sup>

Rethinking and changing the way we visualize and provide service does not necessarily imply our denial of the potency of the Gospel or Christ. It may be prudent to ask ourselves the question: When someone is hungry, what comes first the prayer or the bread? With Christ as our example, we can answer with assurance that when another is hungry our response should be to feed him or her at the outset. The response to the need is the prayers of the hungry actualized and quickened. Like Esther, we must determine the best means to an effective end. Esther reacted though her God-talk was nonexistent, but her silence about God came alive in the actions she committed on behalf of her people.

## Conclusion

One of the central themes that I attempted to present in this paper is the idea that the book of Esther may be useful in helping social workers and faith-based organizations frame their response to social problems. This paper sought to provide a framework of understanding for social workers and organizations so that they can think more critically and theologically about the ways in which they undertake their work, service, and ministry. The initial and most evident bias, consciously made evident within this paper, is the insistence to argue that faith-based organizations that seek to partner with government but refuse to do so because of a belief that the restrictions which limit explicit faith practices impedes *true* ministry may not be totally true. In fact, this paper seeks to explore the book of Esther as biblical proof that one's preference to name God does not disqualify one's faith base. The book of Esther is a biblical book included in the Jewish and Christian canon even though God is not even mentioned. Esther, the main character, was an active agent of change in the book even though she was compelled to refrain from self-identifying as a Jewish person. Much conversation continues to occur regarding policies and the like; however, not much is considered regarding the nature of the faith-based programs and the theological belief systems that serve as the foundation for their mission and service. This paper sought to locate a practical spiritually where faith and service can mutually exist. As such, I offer the following several considerations for reflection:

- Faith-based programs do not have to be explicitly faith-based in order to be considered “truly” and “authentically” Christian. Moreover, there is a need for organizations to reflect on its own theology of service or missions so as to develop an understanding of what prompts it to enter the service field. They must pose and respond to the questions: What do we consider to be a Christian response to need? Is it important for us to identify implicitly or explicitly our faith? Are we a considered a “salad” or

“brownie” ministry and how does the answer to this question impact our decision to partner with government?

- The notion of service as ministry must be seen as a powerful tool of Christian witness. For many, talk and rhetoric concerning faith and God appears to be of utmost importance, but for Esther *-and Christ-*, God-talk was less important than service. Faith-based programs should seriously consider the idea that faith actually comes alive in others when God is at work in their lives. Can our service become the means through which God works? Certainly so!
- As social workers, we are charged to do no harm. This does not imply that sharing our faith can be equated to harming consumers nor does it imply the converse. However, what it does imply is that social workers must be cognizant about our motivations, speech, and actions. We must consider: How does the manner in which we provide our service hinder or help the consumer? As a social worker, who happens to be Christian, is it possible to allow my vocational obligations to coalesce with my faith and beliefs? Is there something apparent in both that compels me to serve in whatever land I dwell even if the norms and values of the people differ from my own?

There are many more questions to ask, but this paper is just a mere beginning in a process of deep theological reflection by way of a biblical story. This is not an attempt to claim this one perspective as that which supersedes all others, but it is an attempt to provide another alternative to ministry that is often not considered. The book of Esther is one book out of sixty-six in the Christian canon in which we can turn. Thus, the invitation to explore the role of the social worker and work of faith-based organizations in the context of theology and biblical literature is still open. This particular paper, the Esther model, is the mere beginning of an attempt to put words to what it means to be Christians who work as social workers and within social service programs that are Christian based. The conversation is open to continue.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief concept paper will attempt to explore the first two points highlighted in the thesis statement with the goal of unpacking theoretical framework of this model; whereas the workshop will aim to address the practical issues of ministry / service (namely point three) as they relate to this model.

<sup>2</sup>Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* (Tel Aviv: Shalom Press, 2001), 244.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 247.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Dean Trulear, *The African American Church and Welfare Reform: Toward a New Prophetic Perspective* (Washington DC: Center for Public Justice, 1999), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Hazony, *The Dawn*, 248.

<sup>6</sup> Sabine M.L. Van Den Eynde, "If Esther had not been that beautiful: dealing with a hidden God in the Book of Esther," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (Winter 2001), pnf.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Chaplin, *Faith in the State: The Peril and Promise of Christian Politics* (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 2000), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Mortimer Arias, "Rethinking the Great Commission," *Theology Today*, 47:4, (January 1991), 414.

<sup>9</sup> Beryl Hugen, Fred De Jong, and Karen Woods "Faith Makes A Difference: A Study of the Influence of Faith in Human Service Programs," *Acton Institute Policy Forum*, 6, (Summer 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Amy L. Sherman, *The Charitable Choice Handbook for Ministry Leaders*, (Annapolis: Center for Public Justice, 2001), 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> I am borrowing this phrase as it relates to faith-based programs from personal communication with Dr. Stanley Carlson-Thies, Director of Social Policy Studies at the Center for Public Justice, Annapolis, Maryland.

<sup>12</sup>Dave Donaldson & Stanley W. Carlson Thies, *A Revolution of Compassion: Faith-based Groups as Full Partners in Fighting America's Social Problems*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 184.