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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

HELP, I’VE FALLEN AND I CAN’T GET UP

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Abstract

In order to provide faith-based services to those that are impoverished, one must understand the theology of the poor. This workshop will explore the association of theology and poverty, as well as present a model for providing services to this population.

Introduction

There was a single mom with two children who found herself in the cycle of poverty and homeless. This mother was a hard worker and was determined to make a decent living and provide for her children. She was a college graduate, yet she still found herself struggling financially. This mother often found herself moving from house to house, friend to friend, and nothing seemed to work out. Eventually this mother had to move into a shelter with her 8 and 11 year old daughters. One day while her youngest daughter was out on the steps of the shelter playing, she was pushed off the stairs by one

of the other children living in the shelter. The little girl noticed her hand was bleeding and ran to tell her mother. The mother realized that her daughters' hand was cut wide open and she needed to get her to the hospital quickly. The mother rushed to her old beat up car and it would not start. With very little money in her pocket; the mom used what she had to call a cab. After returning from the hospital the mother was approached by the shelter owner, who stated, "If you can afford to call a cab, you can afford not to live here at the shelter". Once again this family was homeless.

Every night before this mother went to sleep, she read her bible and she got on her knees and said her prayers. Her faith was the only thing that gave her hope for a brighter future. Many people often ask, "What does theology have to do with poverty?" I pose to those individuals, why don't you ask my mother, because we were the family in the story.

Christian Theology

Theology is defined as the study of concepts about God's nature, will, attributes, and relationship with humanity. All of these concepts can be found in the Word of God.

The "Word of God" is complex and can be used to describe several things. In John 1:14 it is used to refer to Jesus Christ as the Word of God made flesh. "In speaking of Christ as the Word of God incarnate, Christian theology has attempted to express the idea that the will, purposes, and the nature of God are made known in history through the person of Jesus Christ. It is the deeds, character, and theological identity of Jesus Christ, and not merely the words that he uttered, which make known the nature and purpose of God". (McGrath, 2001, p. 166) With this concept if we can understand the life of Christ, we can understand theology.

The Word of God can also be used to refer the evangelistic message of Jesus Christ. The focus of this message is the fact that God sent his only son to earth to be crucified for our sins; he was buried, and raised on the third day to sit at the right hand of the father. John 3:16 states, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”. (NIV)

According to McGrath (2001), Jesus Christ had significance in three theological areas. These three areas include Jesus Christ as the revelation of God, as the bearer of salvation, and defining the shape of the redeemed life. Jesus makes God known. It is impossible to know God without the revelatory power of the work of Christ.

The Word of God can also be used to refer to the bible itself. The bible is the revelation, inspired by the Holy Spirit to teach us about God. (II Peter 1:20-21) In 2 Timothy 3:16, we learn that all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching us God’s will and way. For Christians, the bible should be the standard for testing truth. The bible is not merely a book of stories, legends, and myths. The bible is God-breathed, and it has complete authority (McGrath, 2001). The bible is the only authority for Christian Theology.

Poverty in America

According to Payne (2001) Poverty can be defined as “The extent to which an individual does without resources. The resources are the following: 1) Financial: Having the money to purchase goods and services; 2) Emotional: Being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior; 3) Mental: Having the mental ability and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing), to deal with daily life; 4) Spiritual: Believing in divine purpose and

guidance; 5) Physical: Having physical health and stability; 6) Support Systems: Having friends, family, and back up resources available to access in times of need; 7) Relationship/Role Models: Having frequent access to adults who are appropriate, who are nurturing, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior; and 8) Knowledge of Hidden Rules: Knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group” (Payne, DeVol, and Smith, 2001, p.11).

Often times when individuals think about the idea of poverty the first thing that comes to mind is money. “The opposite of poor is not rich. The opposite of poverty is not wealth. It’s “enough”. Enough indicates the condition of wholeness, adequacy, and having one’s needs met” (Stafford, 2005, p. 90). In order to have a clear understanding of poverty one must be able to assess an individual’s access to enough of the eight resources listed above.

Nearly 13 million children in the United States—18% of all children—live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level—\$20,650 a year for a family of four. Research shows that, on average, families need an income of about twice that level to cover basic expenses. Using this standard, 39% of children live in low-income families.

Many of us have seen the effects of poverty in the neighborhoods we live in, work in, or simply just pass by on a daily basis. The effects of poverty on a neighborhood can be devastating. As Alan Keith-Lucas stated, “The ‘War on Poverty’ did not abolish poverty. There was no progress in either the ability of people to do without government help or in the incidence of relative poverty” (Lucas, 1989, p.120). The reality is the

problem of poverty is still an issue and as Christians and practitioners we have a huge role to play in helping families gain the resources they need.

Theology and Poverty Working Together

One morning while sitting at my desk, I received a phone call from a potential client. She called to inquire about the services we provide. As I proceeded to explain our services, she exclaimed on the other end of the phone, “I am so glad that you are a Christian agency. I want help for my family and I called so many people for help and none of them provided faith-based services”. This is the desire for many families who are seeking help in social services.

As noted by Jones and Butman, “It is out of a desire to alleviate suffering that many Christians today are interested in the mental-health field. There is a strong desire to enrich Christian ministry by drawing upon the resources of the developing field of psychology and its related disciplines. What thoughtful pastor or counselor would not want to use all available knowledge and techniques to make his or her people-helping skills as effective as possible” (Jones and Button, 1991, p.17)?

How can we avoid the union of theology and poverty when the bible gives so many examples of God’s desire for the poor to be helped. Psalm 147:3 informs us that God is a comforter and healer to the brokenhearted. He will defend those that are defenseless; he hears the cries of the hopeless and comforts them as mentioned in Psalm 10. As a way of honoring God, we have the responsibility to help the poor, widows and orphans as stated in James 1:27. The bible tells us in Proverbs 14:31 that, “Those that oppress the poor insult their maker, and those that help the poor honor him.” Jesus never

turned his back on the poor and needy, II Corinthians 8:9 tells us that he became poor and needy, so that we might become rich.

Psalm 9 says that God is the shelter for the oppressed and that the Lord is known for his justice. In the New Living Translation of the bible, justice is defined as “the administration of the law that determines what is right, based on principles of equity and correctness, and rewards accordingly”. Righteousness is defined as, “living by a divine or moral law.” The Lord is very displeased with those that are participants in injustice. In Isaiah 4:13, Isaiah reprimanded the leaders and the princes because they took advantage of the poor he said that they would be judged first by God. These scripture passages among many more provide evidence that theology and poverty must be addressed together.

Jesus is a moral example of how our lives should be lived. Jesus ate with sinners, washed the feet of those that would betray him, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and made the lame walk. I believed our role as practitioners is summed up in Isaiah 61: 1-2, “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor”.

As Christians we have the power to bring hope to the clients we work with. The social work profession is committed to change. As times change, people change. As people continue to change the world continues to change. Social work is not what we do, it is who we are. II Timothy 4:7 states, “I have fought a good fight I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful” (NLT). This is my prayer for the social work profession, that we would fight the good fight of poverty, finish the race of the fight for justice, and remain faithful in this fight until the return of Christ.

A Model for Change

Presbyterian Children’s Homes and Services (PCHAS) got its start in 1903, when a mother dying from tuberculosis asked her minister to help her find someone to care for her four young children.

The primary goal of PCHAS is to provide services to children and families in order to promote success. We have been commissioned by The Synod of the Sun of the Presbyterian Church, to provide a variety of Christ-centered child care services which minister to the spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, and social needs of the dependent, neglected and troubled children and youth, together with their families.

Mission

The mission of PCHAS is to provide Christ-centered services to children and families in need. There are four ways that PCHAS accomplishes its mission. They include group homes, H.O.P.E Foster Homes, Child and Family Programs, and Advanced Education and After-Care. The Child and Family Program is the point of focus for this workshop.

The goal of our Child & Family Program is to address issues before a crisis results in out-of-home placement of children.

Often, families need help as they face a crisis such as death, divorce, illness, violence, homelessness, alcohol/drug abuse and other situations. The Child and Family Program deals with these issues while working to keep families together. We help remove the barriers that can prevent families from receiving the services they need.

Currently PCHAS has Child & Family Programs in the following cities: Abilene, Austin, Corpus Christi, Corsicana, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Kilgore, Longview, San Antonio, Temple, Wichita Falls and Shreveport, Louisiana.

Who We Serve

- Families in need of emotional support
- Single parents who need help
- Grandparents raising grandchildren
- Families struggling with children's difficult behavior
- Adolescents not living at home
- Parents who are at the end of their rope

We will:

- Visit families in their homes to assess needs
- Identify strengths and determine areas in which families can grow
- Develop goals to stabilize families, promote change and instill hope
- Help families locate and access community services
- Build parenting and life skills
- Offer family and individual counseling
- Teach families the importance of daily routines, managing behaviors and healthy relationships
- Assist with out-of-home placement if needed.

Conclusion

Many faith-based programs provide services to the poor, but do so with a lack of understanding of the dynamics of poverty and the theology. In order to provide effective services to the poor, practitioners must be able to identify and understand the association between theology and poverty. During the introduction, I told the story of my mother and expressed how vital her faith was to see beyond where she was. Many families we work with, lack the knowledge and skills to see beyond where they are. Hebrews 11:1 tells us, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. We must be able to help our clients believe beyond what they see.

As Jimmy Dorrell states, “Change is painful. It requires incredible honesty and humility to acknowledge that the behaviors of the past must be replaced with new patterns of life. (Dorrell, 2006, p.60). As advanced practitioners we must identify the mistakes that we have made in the past concerning the poor and learn new patterns of helping the poor. All social workers are encouraged to examine their own theology and how that theology unites with their service to the poor.

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