



North American Association of Christians in Social Work
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CHRISTIAN SOCIAL WORKERS AS LEADERS AMIDST CHANGE

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Title: “Christian Social Workers as Leaders amidst Change”

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Submitted Learning Objectives:

1. Understand how negative change imposed on faith-based organizations can be transformational in how the future is approached;
2. Identify the collaborative approach Social Workers can take to facilitate meaningful change; and
3. Describe key roles Social Workers play in serving as leaders of change within an organization.

Introduction

The life cycle of any organization weathers many ebbs and flows in response to a number of variables. Examples include staffing and leadership, funding, needs of society, to mention several significant ones. How an organization addresses these and other challenges can significantly affect its future in a number of ways. There are a lot of wrong ways to manage change and no one silver bullet-like right way. The Christian Social Worker is ideally suited to assume a leadership role in helping the organization to manage a variety of crises. This presentation will address the following learning objectives:

1. Describe a major recent crisis of change in the presenter’s organization;
2. Emphasize the importance of mission, vision and values of an organization at a time of crisis;
3. Describe how the presenter’s organization changed (and is changing) in the midst of an increasingly adversarial public sector environment; and
4. Present a set of conclusions regarding the role of the Christian social worker as an “agent of change” in the faith-based organization.

A. Organizational Background

Evangelical Child and Family Agency (or ECFA) was "born" in 1950 as an evangelical, non-denominational agency, in response to the earlier abandonment of a newly-born baby at a college dorm. Several evangelical Christian leaders committed themselves to doing ministry on a more proactive basis rather than waiting for another baby to be abandoned. Over the next 60 years, services steadily expanded, with the primary emphasis being serving children and families. In the mid-sixties the agency was asked by the newly-created state child welfare agency to provide foster care services in the Chicago area. Forty-five years of exemplary (as designated by

the state agency) services followed. By 2011, the Agency's continuum of services included Foster Care and Intact Family Services (both publicly-funded); Adoption; Individual, Couple and Family Counseling; Pregnancy Support Services; and Safe Families. ECFA was first accredited by the Council on Accreditation in 1980.

B. The Organizational Crisis

The signature event that precipitated the crisis was the passage in Illinois of the Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act in late 2010. The effects of that legislation began to unfold in the following months, affecting several Catholic agencies, one Lutheran agency, and ECFA. The language of the law exempted faith-based organizations from its requirements. The state interpreted the law by emphasizing the civil union protection aspects and narrowing the religious freedom protection application only to clergy officiating at marriages.

At the time the crisis unfolded, ECFA's work with foster and adoptive parents was focused on individuals and couples who were actively involved in a protestant, evangelical Christian congregation. No position had been taken by the organization on the sexual identity of prospective adoptive clients or foster parents.

The "handwriting on the wall" became clearer as consultations with legal counsel took place and the Board of Directors and its committees moved into high gear in understanding what was happening and what the possible consequences might be to the Agency. It became clear to the Board and the executive staff that the agency must adhere to the state's interpretation if it wanted to continue serving foster care clients at all. In other words, you do it the state's way or you don't do it at all. A prominent child welfare leader in Illinois stated it this way, "You are a wholly-owned subsidiary of the state of Illinois." The Board choices boiled down to these:

- Provide services in the manner defined by the state and forsake the agency's historical and current mission and maintain the Agency's largest program (70% of the annual budget); or
- Stay with your mission, vision and values and lose 70% of your income (including 242 foster children, 20 case managers and 185 foster families).

Consultation with legal resources led to the conclusion by the Board of Directors that to fight this with a lawsuit would only waste the Agency's financial resources. The legal team and the Agency Board concluded that its case was not winnable. The state was in a position of control.

C. Board and Executive Staff Roles

1. The Board of Directors took a very active role in discerning what direction to take, but they respected the professional perspective of the five administrators, three of them MSW's and one BSW, who meet with the Board routinely. The institutional memory of the administrators totaled about 90 years, a significant factor in the decision-making process. The tasks of the Board can be summarized as follows:

- Relied on the administrative staff for information and guidance;
- Sought legal counsel early to receive guidance on legal issues;

- Kept an open mind, but realized that any decision needed to be unanimous to avoid an immediate or eventual schism among Board members; and
 - Took a deliberate and prayerful approach in discerning God's direction.
2. The Administrative staff members took a respectful approach to the Board's authority and refrained from employing a persuasive approach with the Board. The administrative staff's tasks can best be summarized as follows:
- Interpreted what was happening "on the ground" as a result of contact with the other affected agencies – five Catholic and one Lutheran (LCMS).
 - Maintained close (daily) contact with the Board chair;
 - Kept the staff regularly apprised of developments; and
 - Took a deliberate and prayer-centered approach in discerning God's direction.

D. Leadership Role of Social Workers

ECFA has employed Social Workers throughout most of its history, from the Executive Director and Program directors to the staff providing direct services to clients. Currently, 13 out of a total of 20 professional employees possess a degree in Social Work, 12 with MSW's. Several social work interns from private and public universities choose ECFA as an intern site.

Four Social Workers played key and unique roles in the course of the events and resulting challenges facing the organization. While they worked together as a team they had different perspectives about what was happening.

Executive Director: Ken has been with the organization a total of 37 years and executive director for over 20 years. He maintained a sense of calm during the crisis and kept the agency on an even keel on a day-to-day basis. He stayed in frequent contact with the Board chair (a pastor), who played a steady leadership role with the Board. The Executive Director respected the role of Board members. He did not pressure them, nor did he remain on the sidelines. In fact, he was the primary source of information the Board needed for considering the options presented and the risks and benefits of each one. He respected the range of opinions voiced. The executive director and the board maintained a clear focus on the Agency's mission. He also was the primary contact with the state child welfare agency.

Director of Child Welfare Services: Like the executive director, Barbara had a long history with the Agency as Director of Child Welfare Services. Her program was in the "eye of the storm". She played a steady, supportive and prayerful (she's the prayer warrior) role with her staff and her administrative colleagues. On the night the Board voted on its course of action, she declared, when asked by the Board Chair, her support for the Agency to continue providing foster care services for the state. She did so realizing that the expected consequence would be that the state would likely choose to discontinue the contract with the Agency that had spanned about 50 years. She then witnessed the program she had built for over 25 years be partitioned to two other organizations and the loss of her job. Barb has since returned to the Agency as Adoption Supervisor.

Director of Clinical Services: Of the four administrators, he was the newest person on the Administrative Team – a total of ten years. While not directly involved in the affected program, he envisioned the impact that losing the Foster Care Program would have on the Counseling Program he supervised. On one hand, a number of foster care clients, served by the counseling program, would be lost. On the other hand, the program had met all of the requirements to become Medicaid-certified, a requirement for the Agency to continue providing foster care services. The end of Foster Care services would also end the requirement for being Medicaid-certified.

Controller: Tim is not a Social Worker, but he was critical to assessing the financial ramifications for the Agency. Social Workers, for all their skills and altruism, need the realism of a financial professional in their midst.

E. The Board's Decision – 5 / 40

The Board of Directors made the decision about the course of action to be taken. The multitude of meetings that preceded their decision helped to prepare the Board to act. Nevertheless the decision was still difficult with many uncertainties and perspectives. Several questions reflected those uncertainties:

1. How will the Agency fare without its largest program and funding stream?
2. How will the staff of that program be affected?
3. What will the relationship with DCFS be in the future?
4. How important is the Agency's mission?
5. What will be the response of the organization's donors?

The Board chair knew that the vote had to be unanimous one way or the other. A split vote would not be in the best interests of the Agency. At the decision meeting, all Board members and administrative staff were provided an opportunity to express their opinions, reflecting a variety of perspectives. After several trial votes and more discussion and prayer, the Board voted unanimously to inform DCFS that the Agency 1) desired to continue providing foster care services and 2) the Agency would uphold its mission, vision and values in doing so. In other words, its commitment to licensing homes of evangelical families would continue.

F. The State's Response

When informed of the Board's decision the following day, the response of the DCFS Director was concise. They would not accept the Agency's response and would not sign a new contract for foster care services. The Foster Care Program would be split among two other entities within three weeks. After 50 years, ECFA was out of the foster care business. The Director of Child Welfare Services, who administered the program, was laid off. The agency went from 65 to 25 staff members. Two offices were closed. One hundred, eighty-five foster families were transferred to two other providers.

What did not change were the mission and vision statements. The Agency affirmed its roots and decided that it would not link its future to the public sector, in a state that is politically charged and financially challenged.

G. Key Questions Posed

As this crisis unfolded, the agency's counseling program and administrative staff considered possible future opportunities, while still grieving the loss of 37 staff, 185 foster families, and 242 children in placement. Two basic questions were asked: 1. *"How might we bring services to people, rather than waiting for them to come to us?"* and 2. *"What future ministry / service opportunities might God lead the organization toward?"*

H. New Possibilities Emerge

Because of this crisis, two possible new initiatives began to emerge: 1) serving as the local hub for providing families in crisis with short-term, no-cost placement options of one or more children with host families. This is called Safe Families for Children; and 2) partnering with a local retirement community to provide transitional support and mental health care to its residents. This program is called Good Transitions.

I. Two Years later – A Glimpse

Now, two years after the State rejected the Board's proposal to continue serving foster children, but without altering the mission, vision and values that were the organization's foundation. The following are current snapshots regarding the Agency's health and status:

1. The bedrock of support from contributors has remained strong through tough economic times. The Board's decision has been repeatedly affirmed by the organization's friends and constituency;
2. The Agency is smaller and leaner. Reliance upon state funding has decreased from 76% to 46%;
3. The state of Illinois increased its utilization of an Intact Family Services contract by 50%. This service has not been subsidized by the Agency as was Foster Care.
4. The financial report for the most recent fiscal year was the most positive in the Agency's history, with a favorable balance in both Illinois and Wisconsin;
5. Several foster care staff have returned to fill other newly-created positions or other vacancies;
6. The Agency's Counseling Program is embarking on the Good Transitions initiative in collaboration with the retirement community; and
7. The emphasis on serving the state through contracts has shifted to how the organization can partner with churches, especially smaller, under-resourced ones, in addressing the needs of people in their midst.

J. Implications for Christians in Social Work

Our organization has had the opportunity to learn a number of things about the value of its Social Workers, in what has become an increasingly secularized profession:

- Faith-based organizations are vulnerable to crisis-generated changes;
- Christian Social Workers bring a faith-sensitive and incarnational perspective to their work with individuals, families and organizations that recognizes the reality and hope found in God's activity in our contemporary world;
- The concept of Servant-Leader, while not always acknowledged in secular circles, is one that fits comfortably with Christian Social Workers employed in secular setting. Faith-based settings are seedbeds for growing servant-leaders of the future.
- Christian Social Workers play a key leadership role in helping organizations navigate change, whether gradual or crisis-borne, using a collaborative approach with others within, and outside, the profession;
- Christian Social Workers are, by nature, "in, but not of" the world, leading to opportunities to understand the demands that change makes on people and to engage with them in meaningful ways. "...in and not of..." is a challenge not easily met.
- Boards of Directors and other decision-making bodies rely upon the worldview of Christian Social Workers for policy, procedure and practice norms; and
- The boundary between private, faith-based organizations and the public sector are increasingly complicated and present unprecedented threats to those organizations that overly depend upon the public sector for funding. Do we want to be a "wholly-owned subsidiary" of the state as one public official described it?

Conclusion

The experience of ECFA over the past two years has shown us that God is not absent in the midst of crisis. Our naturally human and finite perspective can lead us down the wrong path.

While good answers or responses come out of important collaborative relationships, better answers evolve out of a Spirit-led approach to discerning God's will for the organization.

While we may desire to be "rescued" from crises or dilemmas, we have been given a multitude of gifts of which to be stewards on the journey.

Change, while intimidating ("I don't want to change."), can also be liberating ("I now see possibilities that I could not see before.") How we as Social Workers go about the process of managing change in ourselves and in the systems we help to manage, determines whether liberation is the outcome for ourselves those we serve.

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