Moving the Church to Social Action

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This special issue of *Social Work & Christianity* is intended to assist social workers to challenge the church to new frontiers of thinking and provide practical suggestions and interventions that will be helpful in addressing particular social problems—end-of-life care, poverty, intimate partner violence, dementia, and homelessness. The church community has demonstrated that addressing social needs has been a top priority over the past several decades (Unruh & Sider, 2005; Wuthnow, Hackett, & Hsu, 2004; Perkins, 1993). Many of these social needs have been approached from a theological lens, but have not been influenced by the new knowledge behind evidence-based or best practice interventions that may improve services to the congregants and to the community. Many of the recent evidence-based and best practices will sometimes complement the way the church already intervenes in several social issues, as well as challenge the church to engage current issues more deeply and address other issues differently based on new knowledge. Social workers trained in these new practices are capable of bringing a sustained focus, new interventions, and greater depth in confronting social needs that impact local congregants.

The articles in this special issue were produced as the result of capstone projects developed by students who were completing their dual-degree program: a Master of Social Work degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Master of Divinity degree from the Duke Divinity School. Students completing their last year in the dual program enroll in a required capstone course. This type of course enables students to integrate and apply both their theological and social work perspectives in order to assist the church community in addressing pertinent social issues that are currently confronting the church, but

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are sometimes ignored, unknown, dismissed, addressed superficially, and/or often not addressed in a sustained manner. Students select a contemporary social issue of their choosing (e.g., abortion, autism, substance abuse, LGBT, domestic violence, sexual abuse/incest, gender disparities, pornography, mental health) and develop an intervention that will be delivered (in some form) to their local church community. Students must also develop a rating scale to evaluate the success or effectiveness of the chosen intervention. Interventions are usually education based, and can be conducted through presentations at an annual church meeting, annual pastors conferences, mini-conferences within the community or their college department, educational seminars at a church meeting, or even delivered as part of, or the entirety, of the Sunday morning worship service.

The articles in this special issue are informational and inspirational. They are not prescriptive or exhaustive treatments of their topics, but will be useful in inspiring and assisting social workers involved in faith communities to work collaboratively with their faith leaders and laypersons to creatively think about ways to address complex social problems.

Such problems are often more pervasive than laity or even clergy can imagine, given the convincing portrayals of prosperity commonly witnessed when the church gathers for worship. Consider the following scenario:

> Sunday morning service began as it always did at Christ Community Church. People wearied from the week, yet dressed in their Sunday best, walked down the aisles to their familiar posts. Sadie, an older woman struggling with domestic violence for many years, sat at the end of the third pew and civilly greeted her neighbors, James and Lucinda. James recently lost his job at the plant, and Lucinda's stroke a few years earlier left her unable to work. They'd already lost their home of 22 years, and were now struggling to afford Lucinda's medications while keeping food on the table. Deacon Andy took his customary seat on the first pew, deeply burdened by the growing recognition that his beloved Virginia was slipping away to the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. The lively play of

> the Jones children toward the back pews obscured the fact that 7-year-old Jonah and his family were dealing with acute lymphocytic leukemia.
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> The liturgy proceeded as it always did. Clergy members led worship, invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit and praying with and for the people. Announcements regarding the church's ministries provided multiple opportunities for involvement in the life of the church. Parishioners enjoyed the choir's selections, listened intently to the lively sermon, and broke bread together. Nevertheless, as the service ended, Sadie, James, Lucinda, Andy, and the Jones family returned to their isolated worlds with their wounds virtually intact. Not only did each miss yet another opportunity to share their burdens, but each came away with an increasingly distorted image of what it means to be the church.

The church, the gathered people of God from local to global levels, is comprised of broken people, people from all walks of life who experience pain and suffering. This pain and suffering can be moral and spiritual, but is more often located in their biological, psychological, and social experiences of life and the world. To the degree that the experiences of life oppress or marginalize God's creatures, social action is a powerful representation of God's response to suffering through God's people. Faith-based social action is defined as the intentions and efforts of a church (individually and collectively, locally to globally) to create positive change in the lives of persons, families, and communities (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). This term is intentionally selected to note that both the scope and the agents of the activity may include, but are not limited to, those formally affiliated with the church. Consumers and agents may be persons internal to the church's sense of community (i.e., "members"), those who pursue church community in search of better understanding (i.e., "seekers"), and those who may have no formal or informal connection with the church (i.e., the disconnected and the so-called "unchurched"). There are also those persons whose history demonstrates former affiliations with the gathered church but who are no longer formally connected with a local congregation. These persons have often made important contributions to social activism, and can be arguably understood as agents of faith-based social action.

Some churches embody social action in their very mission and practices. You can find their congregants involved in the lives of other church members, and involved in providing for the needs of those who are hurting and suffering beyond the confines of the church. These churches have a strong commitment to global needs to serve the poor, orphans, widows, and other marginalized groups, and this is reflected in their budgetary commitments. No challenges or struggles seem daunting to their commitment to serve those who are in need.

However, the vast majority of churches encounter a number of barriers in moving to social action. Some of these barriers are primarily theological in nature, such as in the theological topics of doctrine of God, ecclesiology, theological anthropology, and soteriology. Our doctrine of God helps us perceive God to varying degrees as immanent or transcendent, involved or uninvolved in the mundane matters of life. Soteriology deals with our understandings of God's salvation in the world, using traditional concepts of atonement, grace, and redemption, but also pressing reflection about the extent of God's salvific activity. For example, does the Great Commission of Matthew 28: 18-20 direct persons and churches toward merely evangelistic efforts, or does salvation more thoroughly require discipling whole persons? The Apostle Paul advises the church at Philippi to "continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12, NIV), which suggests that we must do more than just participate in evangelistic activities.

Another primary barrier to social action lies in differences regarding ecclesiology, or how a church understands itself to be church. The degree to which a church may choose to become involved with social issues is closely associated with its identity in relationship to such issues. To what degree is homelessness, for example, understood to be an individual moral failure versus the failure of societal systems to care for the most vulnerable (e.g., the young, those suffering from mental illness, economically or racially oppressed persons)? Our notions of a theological anthropology, or how humans relate to God, are also invoked. What does it mean for a church to have a prophetic voice in its community? Wolterstorff (2006) remarks that our Christian imperative is to emphasize justice, not charity, in our responses to the oppressed. In his view, charity is necessary but not sufficient in our faithful responses to evil in the world.

How does the church engage the broader culture? In the words of H. Richard Niebuhr (1951), do we work against, of, above, in paradox to, or in transformation of the culture in which we find ourselves? To

what degree do our voices count when speaking to power at municipal, regional, state, national, and global levels? What forces or institutions constitute "power"? Even when our polity clearly articulates a theological stance, e.g., meeting the needs of those in crisis such as the Haitian earthquake that occurred January 12, 2009, to what degree do clergy and laity at the local church level embody those ideals? In what ways, if at all, do we see ourselves as our brothers' and sisters' keepers? Many churches will discuss what should be done, but fall short of providing immediate or sustained assistance to this group of hurting people.

In addition to our theological differences about social action, churches often lack a broad conceptualization of the specific methods for creating social change. In their descriptions of social ministry, Heidi Unruh and Ron Sider (2005) describe four social ministry types: (1) relief services (e.g., giving a hungry person a fish); (2) personal development (e.g., teaching a person to fish); (3) community development (e.g., giving people fishing equipment); and (4) systemic change (e.g., helping everybody get fair access to the fish pond). They further note that such ministries can be described by their focus of action (e.g., individual versus corporate) and the nature of the benefit provided by the ministry (e.g., direct versus indirect). Social action, as we define it here, requires that churches address, but not be limited to, individual needs, and address both manifested needs and the factors that contribute to those needs. Christian social workers, with their knowledge and training in meeting social needs, are often overlooked as potential resource persons who can assist the church in moving to social action.

Social Services Provided Through the Local Churches

Providing social services through the local church ministries is not a new phenomenon. Recent evidence-based literature has indicated that faith-based congregations do indeed assist in tackling social service problems for their church congregants and the community through the provision of prevention and treatment programs in a variety of ways (Blank, Mahmood, Fox, & Guterbock, 2002; Green, 2007; Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001). The services provided by congregations are often categorized in three areas: services directly for congregants, services for the community, or services for both. Services are also categorized as long-term or temporary/emergency services (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001). Regardless of the social class of the neighborhood or the congregants,

most churches provide these services to some degree: food, housing/shelter, clothing, services for senior citizens, support to those who are homeless, mentoring of youth, marriage and family counseling, health assistance, education, domestic violence counseling, substance abuse self-help groups, educational tutoring, prison ministries, after-school programs, adult literacy, and vocational training programs (Chaves & Tsistsos, 2001; Green, 2007). In other words, many churches are now adept at providing relief services and promoting personal and community development (Unruh & Sider, 2005).

There is a growing body of empirical evidence and anecdotal data that suggests gaps exist between social needs and the church's capacity to meet them fully (Unruh & Sider, 2005). Social services provided to most church congregations are conducted with low intensity, meaning that many congregations, due to lack of funds or lack of vision, have not employed a staff person full-time. As a matter of fact, in Chaves' and Tsistsos' research, only 6% of the churches employed a staff person who devoted 25% of the time to social service projects (2001, p. 671). In addition, much of what we know in this area indicates that "congregational social services are much more commonly characterized by attention to short-term emergency needs, especially for food, clothing, and shelter, than by attention to more personal and intensive face-to-face interaction or by holistic attention to cross-cutting problems" (p. 670). Thus, there remains a dearth of churches that attend to systemic change.

The social issues that are commonly addressed by most congregations are indeed very important, but there are a myriad of rising social issues such as Alzheimer's Disease, children diagnosed with autism, persons who identify as lesbian, gay, or transgendered, and teen suicides, that the church has either ignored, dismissed, denied, or is struggling to address. Indeed there are a number of chronic social issues that continue to plague the church. How do churches address those congregants, individuals and families who suffer with chronic mental health issues such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and eating disorders, persons who self-mutilate, incest survivors, interpersonal and domestic violence survivors, persons struggling with substance abuse, members living with HIV or AIDS, and a host of other problems that are part of every local congregation? Do churches have the newest empirical knowledge or are they aware of the most recent evidence-based practices that could inform some of the topics above? New knowledge, such as the bio-psychosocial-spiritual perspective,

would be very useful for the church in assisting that faith community in thinking about social problems differently. In order to bring about positive change in the lives of persons and families suffering within the faith community, trained social work professionals can assist the church in intentionally addressing rising and chronic social problems with the best evidence available.

Social Workers as Resources to Faith Communities

Christian social workers often perceive a call not only to service in secular settings, but also to share their professional knowledge in congregational settings, particularly in their own faith communities (Northern, 2009). However, a void sometimes exists between the expert use of professional skills in public/professional arenas and the application of those skills in what is increasingly thought of as a privatized religious life. Still, there are a variety of ways that Christian social workers can serve congregations without transgressing ethical standards of the NASW Code of Ethics and the NACSW standards. There are several roles that social workers perform that could assist the church in its movement to social action (Chamiec-Case, 2002).

First, Christian social workers can serve in the traditional role of service broker and liaison between agencies and faith communities, providing valuable information to faith communities about processes, procedures, and resources that are typically foreign, even intimidating to persons outside of governmental social services. Likewise, Christian social workers can inform social service agencies of resources, such as food pantries, clothing, tutoring, or faith community nurse programs that are available at local churches.

Second, social workers have always functioned in the roles of consultant and facilitator, which can be invaluable to local churches. In this role, social workers can gather critical knowledge and assist the church in developing plans to address problems that are challenging to the pastor and church leaders. Consultation includes the skill of "give and take" and utilizes the church's strength, expertise, information, and resources to best address the particular problem.

The role of teacher and trainer, the third function, is one that is manifested by many social work professionals. In all of the articles for this special issue, the social worker takes on the role of teacher and trainer. Some address familiar topics regarding aging and end of life, but

they also bring in different perspectives that challenge the traditional responses that are often very familiar to the church community. Within this community, social workers can be used to train a group of trainers on particular topics so knowledge can be dispensed by many people with a broader impact on addressing the particular topic.

Fourth, the traditional role of social work advocacy is another area that may be valuable to the local church. An advocate is one who works to bring about change on behalf of one who is disenfranchised or powerless to act for herself or himself. The leaders may need to be taught that advocacy is one of the skills developed by social workers from their training. It is essential to help pastors and church leaders understand what advocacy is so that they do not feel that a social worker performing this role is challenging their leadership. For example, advocating for the needs of those who have developmental disabilities within the church congregation may mean that the expectations of promotion from one Sunday School class to another be addressed in a different manner among this group.

Fifth, Christian social workers can greatly facilitate the accessibility of psychotherapy to their fellow congregants. In some churches, social workers function in the role of professional counselors and are used as referral resources when pastors deem that their own level of expertise is no longer viable in meeting the counseling needs of the individual or family congregant. Christian social workers may or may not accept referrals of persons from their own places of worship due to the challenges of dual relationships. Likewise, consumers vary in their willingness to undergo psychotherapy from a professional they have previously known. Consequently, it is important to equip clergy leaders with multiple referral sources.

Finally, in some cases, social workers can work with clergy to establish a pastoral or congregational care ministry for congregational members. In addition to identifying multiple referral sources in the surrounding community, some churches have established care ministries that provide direct psychotherapeutic or counseling services to members by trained and licensed mental health professionals. These services may be offered by the church at low or no cost to members, or may be broadened to include some services for members of the community. Moreover, some care ministries offer supportive services through such programs as Stephen Ministry, where laypersons are trained on such topics as active, nonjudgmental listening, confidentiality, boundaries,

and crisis care. Importantly, laypersons learn about the limits of their training and are instructed in specific procedures for facilitating referrals when they approach such limits. Thus, Christians in social work can play a pivotal role in the local church by administering programs that feature "a continuum of care" that leverages the skills and gifts of professionals and laity alike.

The Articles

This special issue includes six articles. Following this introductory article, the next article focuses on the role of the church in responding effectively to needs for care at the end of life. The third article focuses on a novel intervention that aimed to increase congregants' understanding of the complexity of poverty through an experiential exercise. The fourth article addresses intimate partner violence (IPV) and how social workers can assist pastors and church leaders in responding in a sensitive and planful manner. The fifth article offers guidance to social workers helping churches to support persons and their families affected by dementia. The final article addresses the role of social workers in educating about, advocating for, and practicing radical hospitality towards homeless persons.

Empowering, Educating, and Advocating: How Social Workers can Help the Church Integrate End of Life Into Congregational Life—Lindley Sharp Curtis

Empowering congregations to meet the needs of the seriously ill sounds like something that the church already does quite well. Yet, Lindley Curtis provides a different perspective as she challenges the church to specifically address the complex issues associated with serious illness and end of life care. She also provides recent statistics on the "age wave" that is occurring in our nation, and discusses the racial and ethnic disparities in end of life care for a number of minority groups. Social workers are an important part of faith communities and can provide needed resources and support to these families. Even though the end of life is inevitable, feedback from the congregation members who received this intervention indicated that many clergy and lay leaders do not feel equipped to comfortably address end of life issues (Qualitative feedback from the evaluation of the intervention, April, 2008). Although empirical

evidence is scant on how faith communities address end of life issues, the author's intervention was aimed at encouraging the faith community to shape its church community culture in ways that encourage people of all ages to face, explore, and become familiar with issues related to serious illness, death, and dying instead of encouraging surface-level program implementation.

Seeing the Poor and Moving Towards Justice: An Interactive Activity—Joy Turner

The Christian church has a long and varied history of serving the poor and confronting poverty, yet these responses have frequently been short-term and have not addressed the structural aspects of this issue. This paper explores the issue of poverty from a social justice perspective, highlights the structural aspects of poverty that are often overlooked, reports on a successful intervention for increasing the church's involvement in poverty elimination efforts, and makes suggestions for ways Christian social workers can provide churches with the necessary tools to think differently about poverty in their own communities and beyond. The author has developed an experiential activity that increases a person's understanding of the challenges of moving out of the socioeconomic stratum of poverty.

Social Worker's Role in Helping the Church Address Intimate Partner Violence: An Invisible Problem—John Michael McAllister & Amelia Roberts-Lewis

Domestic violence, more recently known as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), threatens the well-being, security, and lives of millions of women each year. This social problem impacts women of all races, ethnicity, social economic levels, and across national and international settings. This article provides background information on the physical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of a victim's experience, the cycle of violence, and why women stay in such situations. Ways in which a variety of church doctrines and teaching have inadvertently influenced some women to stay in abusive situations are reported. In contrast to these traditional responses from the church that have commonly maintained the status quo, this article highlights the strengths and resources of the church that can be used to assist victims of violence.

Social workers who work in the field of IPV can provide concrete suggestions and become a useful resource for pastors and religious leaders who want to respond in sensitive, thoughtful, and beneficial ways to women who are experiencing abusive relationships.

Aging, Memory Loss, Dementia, & Alzheimer's Disease: What the Church Can Do to Help—Susan Moore Pincus, Kristen Register, & Amelia Roberts-Lewis

The devastating effect of dementia and Alzheimer's disease, with its concomitant caregiver strain, is beginning to be recognized and felt within church communities. The majority of Americans who are suffering with Alzheimer's are being cared for by close family members. Social workers can assist the church in providing increased awareness, involvement, and advocacy for this population and their caregivers. Educational seminars and creative use of volunteers are necessary components of addressing the impact of this devastating disease. Theological and social implications are discussed throughout this paper with specific interventions suggested as the church is "called to action" to respond in a different way. This article acknowledges that the church indeed has numerous ministries geared to the elderly, but a sustained focus and commitment to caregivers and for family members with Alzheimer's disease is advocated.

Radical Hospitality: Welcoming the Homeless Stranger—Mandy Sackreiter & Tonya Armstrong

Christian hospitality calls us, at the very least, "to welcome the stranger as one worthy of being considered a household member" (Reynolds, 2006; Matthew 25:35-36). Changing the way we think about the homeless population is the challenge presented by Sackreiter and Armstrong's article on meeting the needs of the homeless. Radical hospitality is a paradigm shift that moves us from just giving "monetary change" to the homeless on the street, and challenges us to provide *a "personal space" to share with* the homeless person in meeting needs. Addressing the fears and concerns of church congregants in meeting these needs is the beginning of a discussion that could propel us into future thinking about this group. The theme of inclusive welcoming emerges as one of dire importance to Jesus as he urges his followers to love their neighbors

as they love themselves, particularly those neighbors who are vulnerable and marginalized, such as the hungry, homeless, naked, sick and imprisoned. Sackreiter and Armstrong provide the challenge, information, and discussion as to how to provide "radical hospitality."

Conclusion

Social workers who are part of local church congregations are encouraged to help the church move to social action by sharing their skills, knowledge, and creativity in addressing social issues that are challenging, taboo, or just difficult for the church to address in a sustained manner.

It is obvious that churches are interested in meeting the needs of both their congregants and broader community members. However, responding to some of the new challenges and upgrading their interventions in how they address chronic and familiar issues by utilizing current best practices and new evidenced-based information is often out of their purview. Churches may want to consider the hiring of professionals who are trained in both theology and social work. Importantly, the more plenteous the opportunity for in-class and field education integration of these disciplines, the more likely that dually-trained social workers can initiate sustainable social action, implement more nuanced strategies, and respond with greater understanding to the complex needs of the faith and broader communities. These social work professionals will be invaluable resources for unfolding new visions of social action in the 21st century. ❖

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