



NSW.ACT

Christian Perspectives On Community Services

This is taken from a speech given by
Rev. Harry Herbert at the
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What is the particular contribution which UnitingCare makes to the community services which it operates? The first thing to say about this question is that I don't think that we should focus on UnitingCare apart from other Christian churches and organisations. So, most of the answer to this question will be from the perspective of the contribution of Christian churches in general rather than the Uniting Church in particular. However, there are some aspects which could apply in particular to us as Uniting Church service providers arising from our particular history and the way in which we express our part of the tradition of the Christian church, and this will be referred to at the end of this paper.

So, what is the special contribution of the Churches to social welfare programs. Over the years I have heard a number of people try to answer this question in different ways. I have heard people say, for example, that services run by churches are of higher quality. In response to this I would say that our services ought always to be of high quality. But I cannot accept that services run by community groups, even sometimes by private operators could not also be of the same quality and occasionally of higher quality. We need to say more than simply to affirm quality.

At other times I have heard people suggest that Christian community services are better because the staff, who are often Christian believers, are more dedicated. Again, this line of argument is not convincing to me. We all know that commitment to the organisation and commitment to serving the needs of clients is not limited to Christian people. When it was stated earlier this year in the Sydney Morning Herald by the public relations officer of Wesley Mission that Christians were more committed in their work, there was a strong protest from Jewish and other religious groups. In the end, the Uniting Church has apologised for what was said because it was offensive to other faiths.

Christian community services, it is said, are based on love and this is their distinctive characteristic. While I think that there is more substance in this reason than in the previous ones, again it is not totally sustainable. Being loving can be divided into two parts. . In the first, it can be described as respect for human rights, and although this is a Christian virtue, it is not a distinctly Christian one. The second part is probably best described as the human interaction that occurs in services between the staff and the clients. Again, Christians are not the only group to want to get that aspect of service delivery right.

No, I think that when we talk about Christian community services, we need to go back to inputs rather than outputs and outcomes, and to see that it is in the nature of the input that the Christian service is distinctive. Or, perhaps I should put it that it is in terms of inputs that the Christian community service is distinctive. Although I think that you need to be able to empirically prove some of this, and it can't just be a theory, I don't think my case is lost simply because someone can point to instances where it has broken down. In other words, because some Christian community services may be bad examples of almost everything, doesn't mean that there is not a general rule here that we can apply. Because we have seen in recent years instances of child abuse in church run institutions, [and a few were from our Church], is more an example of where our principles have been lost, rather than an example that we are no different to others.

But what are the distinctive characteristics? They come from what we believe about the relationship between God and humanity and what we believe to be the source of meaning and purpose in human life. This is not an exhaustive list, but I hope it is a helpful one.

The Nature of our Humanity

In our own part of the Christian tradition, it was Martin Luther who best understood the paradox between our freedom in Christ and our continuing in sin. Martin Luther expressed this in a number of ways. "Both things are true, no Christian has sin and all Christians have sin". "The saints are always intrinsically sinners; that is why they are declared righteous extrinsically", and my favourite quote, "we are sinners in reality, but righteous in hope". Of course, Luther was only echoing what St. Paul had said about justification in the Letter to the Church at Rome. When we understand Christian faith from this perspective we resist the temptation to fall into the self-righteousness which is one of the dangers of the Christian life. Christian welfare services are organised in the spirit of Jesus' command: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged". [S. Matthew 7:1]

Welfare services are to a great extent staffed and managed by people who tend to fall into the dangers of too much optimism about human nature [and that is the most common and the most forgivable failing] and those who are too pessimistic about human nature. You can see this division in many forms in the community services sector. The Christian understanding of human nature, which I would typify as a realistic one, avoids this polarisation, and enables us to help people in a way which is not moralistic. It helps us to be tough when we need to be and also not to expect more of people than is reasonable, and not give up on people because they fail.

Grace and Forgiveness

No matter how tough we might have to be sometimes, nevertheless church community services are always informed by the grace and forgiveness of which we are all recipients. Christians believe that people can change, that they can be converted. They believe that you must forgive another person even when they have done you a wrong, even more than once. A good example are the prison chaplains, who clearly have a different perception of prisoners than many other people who work in the criminal justice system, and I think it is very clear to the prisoners themselves that this is the case. Just as everyone of us relies on the goodness of God to pardon and forgive us, so there must be this spirit of grace and forgiveness in Christian community services. This is where it gets very difficult when Governments want church organisations to do things within the society, such as run detention systems or operate programs which have a punitive edge to them. Clients ought to know that when they deal with us we will persist with them. They should have confidence in us to stick by them, even when they fail. In establishing the MSIC in recent months, I have been disappointed that some people, even in the Church, have taken the view that drug users created their own problem and that they deserve no help from anyone else and if they die of an over-dose it is their own fault and it might warn others of the dangers. It's a point of view, but not a Christian one.

Service of Neighbour

One of the biggest challenges in any community service is dealing with difficult clients. When staff believe that they have done the very best for someone, it is disappointing, and sometimes shattering, to receive criticism, and even abuse. We tend to live by the theory that when we do something to help someone, they should be grateful about it. However, a Christian understanding is helpful here because it should be remembered that our actions ought to arise from what we believe rather than for a need of approval and thanks. We should not be providing services in order to win approval, either of our neighbours or of God. We ought to do it because it is a free response on our part to the grace and goodness of God towards us. We should see service of neighbour as a fundamental part of the Christian life, not designed for our glory, but in order to glorify God.

There are some Christians who wrongly use justification by faith as an argument against involvement in community services at all. They do not understand community services as a Christian ministry at all. This is a great mistake and they ought to hear what that great man of justification by faith, Martin Luther, himself said : “Our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is obtained by works”. But, as he says “works neither can nor ought to be wanting”.

I am always fascinated by people who say to me about the community service work of the Church that they don't know why the Government doesn't simply do these things. Apart from the practical aspects of that issue, it amazes me to think that some people are arguing that there is not some obligation laid on us by our faith to be engaged in services to the community. Whether some ought or ought not to be run by ourselves or the Government is one thing, but these people are saying that these activities are not really part of the ministry of the Christian church. Now, some may respond and say that individual action is all that is required and we don't need organised community services. But I would challenge that. Of course, every one of us has an individual role to play, but many effective acts of charity need to be on an organised basis. Service, is the third part of the triangle of Christian life, along with worship and witness.

Justice and Advocacy

One of the distinguishing marks of church community services should be a commitment to human rights and a willingness to go beyond service delivery and to take up issues from the basis of social justice. Some people will argue that those who provide community services are compromised by that very fact and cannot be true advocates. I would dispute that point of view, while recognising that there is a measure of conflict. However, a Christian community service cannot be limited to putting band aids on social situations. There is nothing wrong with putting bandaids on, but it is wrong to do only that. Running a soup kitchen is fine, but it must lead on to dealing with the issues that put people in a country like Australia in a position where they have to rely on handouts for food. As the late Helder Camara of Brazil so nicely put it, “ When I give food to the hungry they call me a saint. When I ask why are people hungry, they call me a communist”.

Community

Back in 1993 when Ann Wansbrough wrote her critique of John Hewson's Fightback package, one of her main criticisms was its emphasis on individualism. There were many dangers in that Fightback approach which tended to emphasise that we would all look after ourselves and it was only in extreme cases that the community would have a common obligation. So, public housing funding was to cease, and people were to be taken off unemployment benefits after six months, and so on. A fundamental Christian belief is the principle of mutuality, of being our brother's keeper, and of taking action as a community, not just a collection of individuals. The Church itself is a community and when we gather around the Table at the Holy Communion we are celebrating the community that we share in Jesus Christ.

Today a great deal of emphasis is put on market forces solving all of our problems. Individuals competing in a market. What the Uniting Church of Christ in the US said about the market in 1989 bears repeating: “The market is not God -and it is not Satan. It was produced in history -a socially constructed reality with great, yet specific, capabilities and very specific and great limitations. Once it is demystified, removed from the structures of heaven and hell, we can examine its capabilities and its limits and we must resist all efforts to re-mystify it”. Because of their ultimate allegiance to God, Christians are in a good position to do just that. Our faith in God, and our belief in the importance of community gives us an important defence against those who would promote an individualistic approach to our society.

Hope

All Christians live in the hope of the Kingdom. Not a vacuous hope, but a hope based on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Not a hope that causes us to sit on our hands, but a hope that stirs us to action. All our community services ought to do their work in the context of that hope.

But, also, because of our hope in God's Kingdom, we are not deluded into building that Kingdom for ourselves. Community service work is hard and it is tough. If you think that you are also responsible for building the Kingdom, it will be impossible. Our faith helps us to take the long view of things.

So, there are some very distinctive features of a Christian community service. There are some distinctive reasons why we are involved and some distinctive characteristics about how we are involved. While all of these issues are generic Christian ones, I think that some of them refer especially to our own Church. We have established a great reputation for getting our hands dirty, for keeping advocacy high on our agenda, and for being prepared to do difficult things.

The work that we do in community services is not an added extra to the Church, it is not somehow less important than worship than witness, but it is a fundamental part of the Christian life and we should be confident about it and committed to it.

The community service work of the Uniting Church has a long history, it is innovative and courageous. It is solidly based in the Christian Gospel, and brings a distinctively Christian understanding to its work. It is an essential feature of the Church.

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