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"HOW CHURCH WELFARE AGENCIES CAN ADAPT TO SOCIAL CHANGE"

By Peter J. Hollingworth

There is nothing new about social change. It is only another way of referring to the historical process itself.

The crucial difference between past history and recent history is really the rapidity of change. The main problem for the church and its agencies is the difficulty in keeping up with the rate of change.

Social change has recently become something of a voguish term, to the point where recently I read a report in which it was written in capitals! This causes me to ask whether social change has somehow become a secularised version of the Biblical notion of "the mighty Acts of God"! But more significantly, the question prompts another – is there a sense in which the changes we are witnessing relate to the work of God himself? The Diocesan Social Services Review affirmed something of this in its 1978 report to Synod when it said –

> *The Role of the Church in Welfare: The Church must acknowledge*
> *first of all that God is already in the world working through*
> *all people of goodwill, in a variety of different agencies,*
> *whether government or non-government, religious or secular.*
> *This means that Church based welfare initiatives should always*
> *seek the fullest cooperation with other agencies in the*
> *community relating to them as co-workers in a common cause*
> *of social justice and development.*

This is not to suggest the inevitability of human progress in a linear sense, because such a view ignores the fact of original sin. However, there tends to be an assumption in some circles that social change is always good and that it is an automatic path of progress towards enlightenment. Keith Lucas has described this philosophy as H.P.U. (Humanist, Positivist, Utopianism).[1] This issue needs to be dealt with at the outset because it seems to be implied in some of the words and actions of some of the new breed social workers and social scientists. Thus in their striving for 'social change', there is just a hint that these struggles for change will lead to some form of millenium in our time.

Is there any substance to such a view? Certainly if we look at the broad sweep of history, there have been some significant improvements in our social arrangements.

As Christians, we can at least go as far as saying that –

> *The Christian doctrine of God the Holy Spirit is the basis for*
> *the Christian belief that new perceptions of basic truth are in*
> *constant revelation and that attitudes of mind which pertain in*
> *one day are inappropriate the next. So the Spirit has stimulated*
> *Christians to adopt new attitudes and methods in meeting the needs*
> *of individuals and communities.[2]*

This certainly offers us scope for optimism and a measure of cautious idealism, but it offers no sound basis for utopianism. Here we would do

well to espouse what Richard Niebuhr categorised as a Lutheran position
on the relationship between the church, social and the historical process.

> *Christ is the hope of the world who stands beyond history with*
> *Christians accepting the paradox of trying to be faithful to*
> *both.*[3]

With those introductory remarks it may be useful if we examined the
following table which, in a most general way shows how our social arrange-
ments have changed over time, and also offers a framework in which to
discuss the church's welfare agencies.

HOW SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS HAVE CHANGED THROUGH HISTORY

Historical Stage	Type of Society	Characteristic Social Relationship	Characteristic Welfare Method	Responsible Agency	Characteristic Religious Mode
1	Medieval, pre-Scientific, Hierarchical	Dependence	Charity and Corrections	Noblesse Oblige, Church	Spiritual Incorporation
2	Capitalistic	Independence	Residual	Family and Market Place	Rescue, Extraction
3	Socialised Planned Democratic	Interdependence	Developmental, Institutional	State and Non-Govt. Agencies	Engagement, Partnership, Pluralism

As society evolves, as people place more emphasis on social objectives
(i.e. the 'quality of life') and as governments try to plan for the pro-
vision of broadly based welfare services, we must ask ourselves again,
how church agencies can relate to these changes? One problem is that some
of them were founded and shaped during the last phases of the second epoch
in the table and are struggling to adapt to the different demands of the
third epoch.

Should they even try to adapt? Should they simply phase out and hand
over their resources for the state to run? There are some like the prominent
world theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg who believes that -

> *The specifically social activities of the Church (its welfare*
> *organisations, child care centres, nursing and hospital*
> *establishments, schools, etc.), are subsidiary and temporary.*
> *The Church engages in these activities as a substitute for the*
> *political community. The Church's effort should be directed*
> *toward making the state ready and able to assume these*
> *responsibilities which are appropriate to the political*
> *structures of society. It is a strange twisting of its sense*

*of mission when the Church becomes jealous of the state and wants
to monopolize certain welfare activities. The Church's satis-
faction is in stimulating the political community to accept its
responsibilities.*[4]

Such a statement is far too sweeping because it overlooks the
positive things that church welfare agencies are able to achieve. There
are nine such factors which we might consider.

(1) Church Agencies can fill Gaps in the Welfare System:

Governments usually can't do it all. Indeed the wider they try
to spread their welfare nets, the looser the weave and the larger
the gaps become. This of course increases the likelihood of
certain individuals and groups continuing to fall through the
net. Such has been the experience of countries like post war,
post Beveridge Britain, where there was a concerted effort to
create a cradle to grave welfare state. Thus non-government
agencies will probably always be needed to fill the gaps in
local situations, by assisting minority groups and other people
who are excluded from the main welfare system for a variety of
reasons. Church agencies, provided they are small, sensitive
and flexible enough to respond to emerging new needs can play a
valuable part in filling those gaps in welfare systems which will
never be perfect.

(2) They can offer Alternative Service Choices:

A pluralistic, multi-cultural, democratic society places considerable
value on the concept of choice. This means that the different
denominational or ethnic groups can offer services which their
members will relate to with greater ease. Thus accessibility to
service can be increased and client levels of satisfaction can be
raised if there is a concern for the range and variety of services.

(3) They can Counterbalance excessive Bureaucratic Centralism:

There ought to be a degree of creative tension between the government
and non-government sectors. Within an atmosphere of mutual inter-
dependence and cooperation, the state can rightly insist on such
matters as accountability and planning while the non-government
organisations can emphasise flexibility in meeting human need and
by acting as advocates on behalf of citizens in general and dis-
advantaged groups in particular.

It is to be hoped that the Brotherhood of St Laurence's new Un-
employment Rights Service will achieve such a relationship with
government in dealing with the problems in the particular area
of unemployment benefit claims and entitlements.

(4) They can Humanise Welfare Service Programs:

Government services can often become excessively concerned with
rules, regulations and bureaucratic convenience, to the point where
their clients may sometimes feel confused, frustrated or alienated.
Several government departments have made strides in trying to
humanise their services but there are always likely to be problems

arising out of the bureaucratic process itself.

Church agencies, if they are small enough and sensitively planned, may be able to overcome some of these problems although in the past the larger agencies have not always been entirely free of such problems themselves.

(5) *They can act as an Ideological Counterbalance to Secular Utopianism and other forms of Radicalism:*

Over the past few years, Marxists and radicals of various kinds have tended to make the running at the level of ideas and idealogy. We tend to forget that there is a radicalism which comes from Our Lord Himself and from the Old Testament prophets rather than Karl Marx and the neo-Marxists. This has its own distinctive insights into the nature of God, man, history together with a strong commitment to justice and development. Sometimes these Christian insights will be in dialogue with the secular humanisms of the day, and sometimes they will be in profound disagreement with them. If church welfare agencies take positive steps to encourage their staff to think and to read, they can be power houses of creative thought and action, particularly if the general climate within the church is conducive to this.

(6) *They can give Expression to the Church's Diaconate:*

Justice and service and care are not optional extras for the Christian church. They are central to its missionary task because they are the practical expressions of the second commandment. The New Testament warns that "Whoever says he loves God, and hates (or ignores) his neighbour is a liar" (1 John 4:20). Mission without service usually leads to an unworldly pietism, so that Christians need to have opportunities to "do the Gospel" if they are to respond to the mission of God in the world.

(7) *They can Pioneer New Services:*

In the past, church agencies have been able to claim that they have been innovators in the welfare field. There is now a real danger of them resting on their laurels as they become entrenched in service patterns of former times. Every church agency should aim to have at least one innovative and pilot project in operation at any given time. There is nothing quite like an innovative program within an agency in sharpening up the thinking of its Board and staff. This is because it acts as a catalyst for change within the agency itself.

(8) *They can Act Cooperatively with other Agencies:*

If they have the will, church agencies are well placed to work in close cooperation with other community agencies, Councils of Social Service and similar bodies in thinking and planning together. There is an important issue too in the area of resource sharing. Those agencies which are well endowed have a responsibility to share with other agencies who have similar objectives but who lack the resources to run their programs effectively. Not only does this notion of

sharing emanate from the doctrine of love or charity, but it is also in harmony with the new social relationships of interdependence and partnership, which are so characteristic of the third epoch. (Ref. table).

(9) *They can Foster Community Participation:*

In this respect the Diocesan Social Services Report to the Synod of 1978 has some important things to say.

> *A second vital role is to provide organised services in order to meet human need in the most effective and dignified way possible. Such services should seek to remove barriers between the service giver and the service receiver. This process can be aided by seeking to involve the users in decision-making processes, both in relation to the planning and the implementation of those services.*
>
> *Service programs which operate along these lines also have the important effect of fostering a sense of community. In turn, this leads on to the third role which is to assist in the task of community integration. Christianity has a strong doctrinal commitment not only to the corporate nature of the church, but also of the whole world. It is because of this belief in sharing a common life that the church is committed to the task of bringing people together, across their differences, to acknowledge their common humanity and their need for each other. When this begins to take place, then a community comes into being.[5]*

Again, such a task, a task, along with the commitment to justice and service is central, rather than peripheral to the church's mission in the world.

WHAT MUST CHURCH AGENCIES DO IN ORDER TO RESPOND TO SOCIAL CHANGE?

(1) They must seek better understanding in overall terms of where the society is heading and seek to influence those directions in accordance with Biblical revelation.

(2) Then they must endeavour to sharpen up their goals and objectives, removing any areas of confusion or woolliness especially in the area of the operational goals.

(3) In doing so, their efforts to plan should reveal a measure of flexibility and a capacity to change direction if this becomes appropriate.

(4) In defining the overall objectives in relation to change, they must strive not only for change in the individual, but also in the society itself. In this way they are more likely to become change agents rather than change respondents. Harvey Cox once correctly described the church as "God's Avant Garde". The Review said -

> *When the church has done this, it must seek amendment of*

life through vigorous social action initiatives. These
initiatives should be concerned with the reform and
eradication of unjust structures. Though the Kingdom of
God will never be finally realised on earth, the church
in its social action must aim to see that the world has
at least a foretaste of what the future might be like.
As the Lord of History constantly leads His people out of
bondage into freedom, so they must work with Him for a
society which is at once just, sustainable, and participatory
in its relationships and its structures. As He is dynamic
and not static both in His nature and His acts, so His people
must also be committed to social change.[6]

(5) As far as its service programs are concerned, agencies should -

(a) Run service programs which emphasise human growth and development.

(b) Develop internal mechanisms that evaluate the effectiveness of services in meeting stated goals.

(c) Encourage in their structures the opportunity for participation, not only among staff but also among clients.

(d) Endeavour to localise their services, minimising distant, centralised management structures. In this respect too the Interim Report of 1976 of the Review stressed the need for agencies to ensure that local programs were properly integrated in the life of the locality or region where they were operating. This would in turn, have the effect of making them more flexible, more responsive to local need and more participatory in their decision-making processes.

(6) Welfare planning in the broadest sense has become essential in modern urban society with its complex problems and stresses. No longer can welfare be left to ad hoc arrangements and indeed the community will no longer tolerate widespread hardship arising from a lack of planning.

Governments now find it necessary to respond to such problems by trying to set new social planning objectives. Here church agencies should seek to relate positively and actively to such objectives, without being co-opted by them. They can and should be critical of government and community programs provided that their criticisms can be substantiated.

Let the last word come again from a theological statement in the Diocesan Social Services Review -

It is of the utmost importance that the Church should continue
to be active in community welfare both through corporate agencies
and through individual Christians working within the secular world:
only from an involvement within that world will it have a right to
speak and be heard. It is never enough for Christians merely to
cast a critical eye on all imperfect human endeavour; nor is it
enough to serve uncritically in an imperfect world. As Spirit-led
people, moving towards but already experiencing the Kingdom of God,
they also have a responsibility to work for a society reflecting
this character.[7]

REFERENCES:

1. *Paraclete.* No. 1, 1974, p.5.

2. *Diocesan Social Service Review Steering Committee Working Papers*, 1978, p.21.

3. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture.*

4. Cited in *Eschatology and Ethics*, Carl Bratten.

5. *Diocesan Social Service Review Steering Committee Working Paper*, 1978, p.20.

6. Ibid. p.20.

7. Ibid. p.22.