

CHURCHES AND PUBLIC FUNDS: RISKS OR REWARDS?

Heidi Rolland Unruh and Jill Witmer Sinha

PRISM, March/April 2001: 11-13.

Charitable Choice, and the accompanying national conversation about how best to support the social contributions of faith-based organizations, are opening new doors to direct government funding of the social service work of congregations.

With the new funding opportunities for church-based community services come troubling questions. Can churches accept government funding without losing their autonomy, undercutting their private donor support, compromising their religious identity, secularizing their message, muffling their prophetic witness, or wilting their spiritual vitality?

Such concerns have teeth. Doubtless, some churches that accept public funds *will* reap regretful consequences. Some churches may fall victim to hard-nosed separationist ideologues wielding legal clubs; others may suffer from their own administrative or spiritual shortcomings. Their experiences will provide a solemn warning beacon to others considering the same path.

But we should also attend to pioneer churches that have succeeded in using Pharaoh's gold, in the words of one entrepreneurial pastor, to do God's work. These churches also serve as a beacon, illuminating what is possible when state resources meet faithful, holistic Christian service. Once you have met a former welfare recipient who is now supporting her family and tithing her income, once you have seen a former drug addict volunteering to serve food to the hungry in her church's soup kitchen, once you have heard a former homeless person's testimony of discovering the power of prayer, skepticism tends to dissolve in gratitude and awe.

Here we share stories of two such beacon churches.

Faith Assembly of God

As the men and women enter the church basement on a chill February morning, they are greeted warmly by name. Laura, the program director, seems to be everywhere. She gives out hugs and jokes to the people who have come in for food, as well as to the other staff, who like Laura are all volunteers. Myrna enters and signs in on the state-mandated attendance form. Sherrie, a motherly volunteer, listens to Myrna share her anxieties about an upcoming custody hearing. Sherrie hugs Myrna as she reassures her that God cares about her situation and listens to prayer.

As more people gather in the room, Laura announces that anyone who wants can join in the prayer circle. Those gathered hold hands, and a volunteer prays for the requests that are shared. Afterwards, the volunteers begin giving out the food bags. Some leave right away with their food; others stay to browse through the clothes hanging on a portable rack, to chat with staff, or to pick up the Christian literature and church activity calendars stacked on a table.

Around noon, those who are still in the room are invited upstairs to the sanctuary for a worship service, led by the pastor. The sound of singing accompanied by a tambourine wafts downstairs. Meanwhile, the volunteers bustle to prepare a hot meal, mop the floor, put the pantry in order, and set up tables and chairs and plastic tablecloths. After the service concludes, the group files back downstairs to share a hot lunch. They are joined by several neighborhood residents who are not interested in the worship service, but who appreciate the meal.

The food ministry of Faith Assembly of God, a predominantly African American, medium-sized congregation, began in 1982 in response to the many senior citizens and families on public assistance in the neighborhood. Jesus' example is their inspiration, says the pastor, Rev. Richard Smith. Jesus modeled compassionate love for people who had been abused by society, and he fed the crowd of people who came to him needing care.

Faith serves a hot lunch three days a week to 35 people or so each meal, and provides dry groceries to people who meet the state's income requirements. The church also supplies some of the food for the church's transitional living program for recovering substance abusers, which houses up to eleven men at a time. Rev. Smith estimates that the church serves 350-400 people per month through its combined food program. The church does not have a large budget, but the congregation supplies ample volunteers for the ministry. About half of the funding for the food program comes from state grants and food donations. (Because the public funds are from the State, not the Federal government, they are not covered by Charitable Choice.) The budget is also supplemented by a private foundation grant.

"We're trying to reach their souls and their spirits as well as just feed their belly," says Laura. The program's spiritual quality is evident, though no one is required, or pressured, to join in the prayer or worship times to receive their food. Volunteers nurture relationships with regular food recipients and look for opportunities to share the Good News in informal ways. When women come in looking like they have been abused or stressed, Laura says, "It gives me an opportunity to approach them in love. I don't push the 'You're going to hell' message. I try to show them how much God loves them and that they're precious in His sight."

The warm, caring atmosphere draws people as much as their need for food. It is not uncommon for neighborhood residents to come by even when it's not their day to pick up food—to ask for a coat or for a prayer, to drink a cup of coffee, or just to pass a few hours in a safe and friendly place. People know they will always be treated with dignity, unlike other bureaucratic food programs where the attitude, according to Laura, is "Get in line, show us your I.D., okay, next."

As staff get to know food recipients' needs, they refer them to other church programs such as the Men's Rehabilitation Home or the parenting support group. Food recipients are always welcome to attend Sunday services. Rev. Smith estimates that about 25 of those served in the last year have come to Christian faith; a few have joined Faith Assembly. Some of these former recipients have now become volunteers. They know from personal experience how groceries can be a vehicle for imparting emotional support and spiritual care as well as nutrition.

The state helps to provide the food; the church offers the hugs and the prayers. This formula works for the residents in Faith's community.

Transitional Journey Ministry

After learning about Charitable Choice, Rev. Donna Jones decided to develop an explicitly Christian ministry for welfare recipients, which would address not only job readiness but the "spiritual issues that keep people from full empowerment." The State shocked her church, Cookman United Methodist Church, by awarding it a contract. Cookman, a small African American church in the inner city community of North Philadelphia, became the first church in Pennsylvania to receive federal welfare-to-work funds under Charitable Choice. It since received a second contract, and is now in its third year of service, with 43 program graduates.

The women in the program learn computer skills and study to pass their GED tests, and a job developer matches them with employment opportunities. The church's food closet and clothing exchange are available to meet immediate needs. Classes on life skills, budgeting, and self-esteem develop the women's confidence and work readiness, and work through emotional barriers to progress. The program also includes several explicitly religious, optional elements: weekly worship services, group and individual prayer, and a spiritual development class ("Sisters of Faith") which explains the Gospel and invites clients to make a faith commitment.

As at Faith Assembly of God, the informal, relational dimensions of the Transitional Journey program are as important as its formal curriculum in addressing the spiritual and emotional needs of clients. While "the government sometimes loses sight of persons," says Rev. Jones, Cookman staff's interactions with clients affirm "Christian values of hope and personhood." Clients often call or visit staff for personal support outside program hours. In the class, as well as informal personal conversations, staff pray for the women, encourage them with words of God's unending and unconditional love for them, and share Scriptures that apply to their situation. Almost all of the staff are Christians, though most do not attend Cookman.

Rev. Jones explains that to succeed in the transition from welfare, the women need both job skills and spiritual resources:

The Sisters of Faith curriculum that we use is trying to build that inner strength, so that when the stressors come, people have some tools that they can use to manage the stress — whether it is prayer, or reading, or meditation, or just going in the living room and screaming out to God. Ÿ That curriculum is probably more important than a math class or a computer class, because it's that curriculum that is going to sustain them when the kid is sick, the boss is calling, they have to work overtime, and they have to take the third shift.

The brochure, like other program materials, is explicit about the program's faith foundations, and introduces Transitional Journey as "A Christ-Centered Job Development Program." Many students chose the program specifically because they wanted a faith-based approach. The program is equally clear, however, that its intent is not to force religion on anyone. The handbook states clients' rights in bold letters:

C Please note that the spiritual component of this program is NOT MANDATORY. You

*do not have to participate in prayer, Sisters of Faith or the Friday [worship] Service.
C If you choose not to participate, another spiritual or non-spiritual activity will be provided.*

Students entering Transitional Journey sign waivers stating that they are aware of its Christ-centered nature, and of their right to opt out of religious activities. A Muslim client, for example, uses the time during the Sisters of Faith class to practice her computer skills. Not only does the program excuse her from Christian activities, it also provides her space for the daily prayers required by her faith. "I come here and get the benefits without compromising myself," said this Muslim student. "They respect me and I respect them."

Overall, the program's religious nature has been perceived by the State and by clients as an asset. One client reflected, "Learning about God helps you. ... I felt like if I like had God in my life before, it would have helped me more toward my education. It leaves you more at peace." Student evaluations cite the spiritual care as one of the most beneficial aspects of the program.

Negotiating the right boundaries between church and state, however, has not been easy. The church's learning curve was steep, and the ride has often been bumpy—such as when the church learned that they could not use the contract money to purchase Bibles as textbooks for the faith development class (a private donor stepped in to fund the Bibles).

And there have been other challenges. Like many other nonprofits working with government, Cookman has been frustrated by burdensome paperwork, bureaucratic regulations, and delays in government checks. Moreover, staff say their effectiveness is limited by state welfare policies which pose obstacles for their clients—such as the requirement that clients enter an initial job-search phase and accept any job they find, which interferes with building a needed foundation of life-skills training and lowers job retention rates. The receipt of state funds, however, has not prevented Rev. Jones from advocating for changes in the welfare system. Because of the church's reputation on the "front lines," her opinions have earned the right to be respected.

If it were not for the freedom allowed by Charitable Choice to create a program consistent with their beliefs, using Christian staff, Rev. Jones doubts it would all be worth it. "Before, I never considered federal money because I felt it meant we couldn't maintain our religious integrity," she explains. The Transitional Journey program's freedom to express its religious beliefs in compassionate action has translated into effective assistance for many women seeking financial and spiritual freedom. "The gospel is liberating," affirms Rev. Jones, "and we're dealing with people who need to experience that freedom and hope."

Programs like Transitional Journey and the food ministry of Faith Assembly of God demonstrate that it is possible to blend state-funded social services with spiritual and emotional support, without compromising the church's religious identity or clients' First Amendment rights. The fruits are evident: Lives are changed; families and communities are strengthened; the church's gifts blossom; God is glorified; new hope is born.

Stanley Carlson-Thies describes Charitable Choice as a dance where both partners, church and state, are still learning the steps. A successful partnership requires the partners to move in delicate and graceful harmony. Each side will no doubt stumble a bit—but this

does not annul the basic goal of the dance, which is to create a common good greater than either side could accomplish alone.

For evangelical churches, having a vibrant faith, a clear mission, and a passion for sharing God's love for "the least of these" through both word and deed are essential ingredients for making Charitable Choice work. The ability to provide quality social services in a setting of fiscal accountability is a prerequisite. Strong, flexible, and savvy leadership is another crucial factor. Successful church-state collaboration also requires a fundamental respect for the law and the willingness to work out thorny issues in good faith as they arise.

Even with these qualities, not every partnership will succeed. And not every church that possesses these qualities will feel called to participate in state funding programs. But on the whole, American Christianity—and America—would be better off if more churches looked like Faith and Cookman.

The dangers to the church in accepting government funds are real. The question is whether our guiding star should be the dangers, or the possibilities.