

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL SERVICE

When and how is it appropriate for service providers to integrate a religious component?

Many Christian service providers prefer to let their actions stand alone as their witness. The view that explicit verbal evangelism is superfluous echoes a saying attributed to St. Francis: "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." A volunteer in one faith-based program put it this way: "We show our faith in God through our kindness to others." If a ministry does good deeds without ever pointing explicitly to Christ, however, many will miss the connection between human aid and God's love. We affirm that evangelism consists of both word *and* deed. Modeling the gospel through acts of compassion and the pursuit of justice can draw people to Christ—if they learn the spiritual source of our actions. Social service by itself is not evangelism. Ultimately, we believe, loving acts need the complement of the verbal presentation of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Others raise the concern that evangelism in the context of social service is inherently unethical. The word "proselytizing" has, in some circles, become synonymous with aggressive, insensitive tactics that force religion on unwilling targets. In our culture, affirmations of absolute truths are often labeled intolerant. Explicitly religious activities such as worship and religious instruction involving persons outside the church are viewed as distasteful, even offensive. These concerns are magnified for those in the vulnerable position of needing aid from a service agency.

We must distinguish, however, between appropriate persuasion and inappropriate coercion. Evangelism exposes persons to religious ideas or images in a manner designed to influence their beliefs. Providers of care must take care to present evangelistic claims in a manner that respects persons' dignity and freedom of religious conscience. But religious expression does not *inherently* constitute religious coercion. There is nothing intrinsically unethical about an honest, respectful attempt at persuading someone to accept a different system of belief, particularly when the dialogue is motivated by genuine concern for the person's current and eternal well-being. Whether such persuasion is appropriate in a given situation, however, depends on contextual factors, as will be addressed below.

Ethical considerations in evangelism and social services

While we affirm that overt evangelism is not inherently inappropriate — and in fact can be beneficial to clients — this does not mean that it is always appropriate in every situation, or that all evangelism methods are valid. We turn now to examine five ethical issues arising from the integration of evangelism and social services.

1. Evangelism versus "recruitment"

As Ram Cnaan writes, one reason many are skeptical of faith-based social ministries is the perception that they are "more interested in saving the souls of the needy than solving their problems. ... It is argued that some congregations use welfare activities to attract new members" (Cnaan 1999, 80). Ethical issues arise when a religious organization appears to offer a social service mainly in order to gain converts or to enlarge its membership rolls. No one wants to feel like the "catch of the day." Programs associated with a church or denomination must take care that their motivation is to provide genuine care for clients, rather than inducements for people to join their

faith group. Clients must not be pressured to feel a sense of loyalty to a sponsoring congregation that prevents them from connecting with another church that is better suited to their needs.

On the other hand, it is also unethical to discourage clients, either overtly or subtly, from attending the sponsoring church. Evangelizing clients without inviting them into the church's fellowship sends the message: "You are welcome in God's family but not in our congregation." If Christian clients never return after visiting a sponsoring church's worship services, this may indicate obstacles that prevent clients from feeling at home as church members.

It is important to help clients with new or renewed faith connect with a supportive church, whether or not it ends up being your own. For church-based social services, the goal should be to love clients enough to offer the embrace of the sponsoring congregation, while empowering them to select the church family best equipped to support their journey of faith.

2. *Mandatory versus voluntary evangelistic elements*

Faith itself can never be forced. It is never appropriate to make a service conditional on conversion, or to penalize a client for having different beliefs. However, may exposure to religious ideas or passive participation in religious activities be required? When is it appropriate to make evangelistic components of a service program mandatory, and when should they be optional?

We see mandatory religious elements as potentially appropriate in several contexts:

- C *Ministries to spiritual seekers or self-professing Christians.* Clients who are seeking to develop their spiritual life may prefer an approach to their social need which structures in religious elements. They may view required participation in spiritual activities as an asset.
- C *Ministries that address deep-seated negative patterns,* such as drug dependency or chronic homelessness. Many of these ministries place spiritual nurture at the heart of the program. Religious teachings and activities are designed to address the spiritual dimensions of the need, in combination with other therapeutic methods. If spiritual components are not mandatory, clients will not reap the full benefit of the program.
- C *Ministries that offer a one-time or minor benefit in conjunction with an evangelistic activity.* For example, a program might offer a free meal or food basket to people who attend a worship service. In such ministries the focus is the evangelism, and the social benefit is an accompanying "perk" that tangibly represents the message of God's love.
- C *Ministries to children.* In some children's ministries, such as day care and after-school programs, part of the purpose of the program is to teach children Bible lessons and Christian values. Children may be expected to sing Christian songs, memorize Scriptures, participate in times of prayer, and listen to Bible stories. However, caution should be taken in exposing younger children to overtly evangelistic invitations, such as "altar calls," which can pressure them prematurely to make a decision for Christ.

Social service programs that incorporate mandatory evangelistic elements should adhere to several ethical guidelines. First, programs should distinguish between *active* and *passive* participation in

activities of a spiritual nature. Passive participation entails being present during a prayer, worship service, or evangelistic presentation. Active participation which mandates a personal spiritual response (such as repeating a prayer) may cross the line into inappropriate coercion. Second, the program must be careful that the benefit is offered as a blessing and not a bribe. Staff must communicate that they will care about clients and seek to meet their needs regardless of whether they choose to accept the faith teachings. Another ethical key is to inform prospective beneficiaries in advance about the program's religious nature, and not to force people to enter the program against their will. People must have advance notice of the evangelistic activity so they do not feel tricked into hearing a "sales pitch."

Mandatory evangelistic elements are not appropriate when they abuse the relationship or erode the trust between client, program, and donors. Contexts which warrant caution against mandatory evangelistic elements include the following:

- C *Ministries that serve a population that largely belongs to another religion*, such as Muslim immigrants. Even passive participation in the activities of another religion can violate the edicts of some faiths; joining in foreign religious activities may also be seen as disloyalty to their culture. Adherents of other religions may face pressure from their family and community not to convert. Clients must not be placed in the position of choosing between their religious conscience or cultural allegiances, and the receipt of aid.
- C *Ministries to emotionally and socially vulnerable clients*. It is unethical to use religion as an instrument of power over desperate persons (indeed, over any person!). Mandatory religious elements may seem threatening to clients who feel powerless or have been abused by authority figures in the past, such as mothers on welfare or victims of domestic violence. Vulnerable clients may not be aware, or may not believe, that they have the right to reject the beliefs of the host agency. They may go along with religious activities and mouth faith statements out of fear or guilt without experiencing real inner transformation. This demoralizing experience can lead to resentment against Christianity and create further obstacles to evangelism.
- C *Ministries that work in partnership with secular or interfaith agencies*. The conditions set by ministry partners may limit the options for required (or even optional) evangelistic presentations. Community organizing coalitions often have an inter-faith or even a non-faith-based membership, making it inappropriate for one partner to impose religious elements that contradict the beliefs of other partners.
- C *Ministries that receive government funds, or private funds with restrictions on evangelism*. While public policy has been changing to allow greater freedom of religious expression in faith-based social services, for most programs funded directly by government, religious elements must be optional (this is discussed in more detail below). Some private foundations also have strictures against required (or any) evangelistic elements.

We note that some form of *optional* evangelistic elements may be appropriate in each of these cases. Programs that refrain from mandatory religious activities may be intentional about fostering relational evangelism, for example. Just because clients should not be required to participate in religious activities does not mean that they must be deprived of voluntary opportunities to receive spiritual nurture.

3. *Manipulative versus appropriate evangelism methods*

Evangelism is not inherently manipulative. Claims about religious truth do not, in themselves, pose a threat to clients. Rather, providers of social care are to empower clients to make informed life decisions based on their assessment of those claims. This means that the evangelistic component must be presented in a loving, sensitive, respectful and relevant way. Clients must be allowed freedom to make their own decisions on matters of faith. High-pressure tactics, guilt manipulation, degrading harangues, and forced conversions can create lasting wounds and close people's minds to the gospel. Inappropriate evangelism methods discourage people from coming to faith, as well as impeding the social service goals.

Manipulation entails trying to bribe, threaten, or shame clients into a religious response. Manipulation may be overt, as in giving preferential treatment to those who convert or penalizing those who reject the invitation to faith; or it may be understated, as in conveying a general sense of disapproval for non-believers. One woman's testimony, posted on a secular welfare-to-work website, provides a lamentable example of religious manipulation:

The job I work on is run by a Christian organization. Some of the people who work there belong to the owner's church. I am not a Christian but I do have respect for all religions. These people do not. . . . Some of the names I have been called [by Christian co-workers] are devil spirit, nonbeliever, and welfare recipient. My job is always threatened by the management. Each week I go to work wondering whether I'll be fired. . . . I have never stated my religion to any of my co-workers; however, I have declined requests to come to their church. . . . This job is over for me, I know.

Manipulative tactics also include "stealth" evangelism, or sneaking in religious elements, particularly mandatory elements, without clients' prior knowledge or consent. Manipulation can also take the form of promising that conversion will bring an immediate change in one's socio-economic status. It is disingenuous to present faith as a quick-fix or feel-good answer to all of someone's problems. Evangelistic efforts should stress not only the relevance of Christian faith to personal well-being, but also the long road of discipleship that true Christian faith entails.

The attitude of staff and volunteers towards clients is another key factor in ethical evangelism. How are clients treated—with condescension or respect, condemnation or loving kindness? Are staff considerate of people with different beliefs? Do staff make the attempt to get to know clients as unique and valued individuals? Is the evangelistic message presented in a way that is relevant to clients' felt needs and issues? Is the presentation sensitive to their cultural and socioeconomic context? Program evaluations can seek clients' feedback on the religious and relational aspects of the program in order to assess these questions. Clients can discern whether staff share the gospel because they authentically care for them, or out of a sense of obligation or condescension. "Evangelism takes place best when the target community is treated not as a project, but as a people who have dignity and deserve respect" (Tiersma 1994, 18).

4. *"Faith-specific" versus "faith-neutral" evangelism.*

Faith-based programs may be either "faith-specific" or "faith-neutral." They may convey a specific

set of religious beliefs rooted in a particular religious tradition, or they can affirm "faith" in a more general sense. The Transitional Journey welfare-to-work program sponsored by Cookman United Methodist Church includes examples of both approaches. The material in the "Sisters of Faith" spirituality class, which is optional, is explicitly Christian. The teacher lays out the basics of Christian faith and invites students to experience spiritual renewal through conversion. The mandatory self-esteem class, in contrast, is faith-neutral. It draws on religiously-rooted concepts such as humanity's God-endowed dignity, but the texts and teachings are not specific to Christianity. The class encourages clients to develop their spiritual side, but leaves open how they define spirituality.

Whether a program should be faith-neutral or faith-specific depends in part on context. Some government-funded programs must avoid "sectarian" expressions in order to comply with church-state restrictions. (This is true for some funding streams not covered by Charitable Choice, which permits faith-based programs to maintain their specific religious identity.) Interfaith programs present another context which may call for a faith-neutral approach. For example, the Interfaith Hospitality Network, which houses homeless families at area congregations for week-long spells, has a clear spiritual ethos. They do not, however, teach guests explicitly about any particular religion during their stay. As a church volunteer in this program explains: "It is appropriate to say, 'When I am stressed I light candles and meditate, or I pray and give my burden to God.' But it is not appropriate to say, 'Let me tell you about Jesus.'"

In many contexts, however, we believe faith-specific evangelism is not only ethically justified but theologically proper. Faith-neutral programs that talk about God's love only in a generic sense stop short of the whole truth about God's plan for humanity. They can imply endorsement of a deistic religion that substitutes faith in "faith" for faith in Christ, spirituality for salvation, and self-realization for conversion. This message finds popular acceptance in social service programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, and in our broader culture through shows like *Touched by an Angel*. This approach can be helpful in introducing people to faith, but if people are never encouraged to take the next step of trusting in Jesus, their relationship with God will remain shallow. The Christian message centers on Christ. Evangelism should ultimately point to the Jesus who proclaimed, "I am the way, the truth and the life," and "Come, follow me!" Faith-neutral programs deprive clients of an opportunity to encounter the Christ who died for their sins, who rose to bring them salvation, and lives to intercede for their needs (Romans 8:34).

Faith-specific does not, however, mean faith-exclusive. While Christians should not be neutral about what we believe, we must be neutral in accepting all people regardless of what they believe. We must be honest with people in presenting truth-claims about our faith, without rejecting or condemning people who believe otherwise. We may tell clients, "This is what I believe, and according to my understanding of biblical faith this is the only way to know God" — but not, "You are a bad person if you believe otherwise." We may say, "I do not share your beliefs, but my faith leads me to respect and serve you no matter what" — but not, "I do not share your beliefs, and if you don't agree with me it is a waste of time to help you." We must model civic dialogue by respecting persons of other religions or no religion, even if we disagree with their beliefs.

We must also convey our trust in clients' capacity to make reasonable choices concerning their spiritual journey. This means assuring clients that we support their right and responsibility to reach their own conclusions regarding their beliefs, without conceding that all beliefs are equally valid. At times — for example, if the client has made it clear that he or she is not interested in Christianity

but still wishes to explore matters of faith — the client's best interest requires our listening and asking guiding questions while reserving our personal convictions.

5. Evangelism in the context of secular programs.

Most of the above discussion has centered on faith-based programs. But what of service providers in secular programs, whether private or public? What does appropriate evangelism mean for them?

Many secular programs prohibit employees from bringing up religion with clients or engaging them in spiritual activities. Christians must adhere to workplace regulations (see Col. 3:22). Illicit evangelism is not a credit to the gospel. Even when policies do not permit overt evangelism, however, staff have several options open to them:

- C In many cases it is appropriate to let clients know that you are a Christian — either verbally or through ornamental symbols such as a cross — and that you are available to address spiritual issues, if they choose to initiate it.
- C It is always appropriate for staff to respond honestly and explicitly to spiritual questions raised by clients, particularly in speaking autobiographically about your faith (rather than telling others what to believe).
- C When a client expresses a desire to explore spiritual topics like salvation or Scripture interpretation, arrange a time to do so outside the context of the program, if such a meeting would be appropriate to the nature of your relationship with the client.
- C Be prepared to give references to churches, ministers or spiritual counselors who are competent to address spiritual felt needs in a loving and culturally appropriate way.
- C There is no law against praying for clients on your own time! Seek out another Christian staff worker to join you in interceding for clients. (Be sure to respect rules of confidentiality in sharing prayer requests.)

Talk to your supervisors to clarify the guidelines. The boundaries may not be as strict as you have assumed. While verbal faith-sharing might be prohibited, for example, some employers may not object to offering clients printed religious material such as a devotional book, particularly when the material is relevant to the need at hand. Raising the question with supervisors can also heighten their awareness of the connection between spiritual and social well-being.

Evangelism in the context of government-funded social services

Because of the First Amendment, programs that receive government funding pose a special case. The laws concerning government-funded religious social service programs are still in transition, and different kinds of government funding (depending on the level of government and the type of program) are covered by different laws. However, we believe the following general guidelines for faith-based programs are consistent with the letter and spirit of Charitable Choice statutes.

1. *No government funds may be expended on direct evangelism.* The 1996 legislation known as

Charitable Choice includes this provision: "No funds provided directly to institutions or organizations to provide services and administer programs under [this provision] shall be expended for sectarian worship, instruction, or proselytization." Faith-based programs may spend their own money on evangelistic elements (such as Bibles or religious tracts), but spending direct government funds on religion violates the First Amendment. (It currently appears that indirect funds, such as vouchers, may be expended for religious activities).

2. *Evangelistic elements must be voluntary.* Clients must be allowed to opt out of participation in religious activities. For this right to be meaningful, programs must be able to compartmentalize the overtly evangelistic activities from the social service, so that clients can receive the social benefit without participating in religious exercises if they so choose. (This does not mean that the social service must be sanitized from religious influence altogether.) Clients cannot be penalized for their religious beliefs (or nonbelief).

3. *Clients have the right to request an alternative provider if they object to the religious setting.* No one should be forced to receive services from a faith-based provider. Clients must be able to choose freely between programs.

4. *Programs must disclose their religious nature.* Agencies must be up-front with clients about their religious affiliation and activities, so that clients can make an informed choice about their program selection.

If your program is funded by government, become knowledgeable about Charitable Choice and relevant case law. Clarify any gray areas with appropriate officials — but do not assume that officials correctly understand the law themselves! You may need to advocate for your position if local government officials are not properly implementing Charitable Choice, for example by prohibiting even voluntary, privately funded religious activity in your program.

A model of appropriate evangelism in the context of social services

The type and amount of evangelism involved in a faith-based social service program ultimately depends on the specifics of the program context and the needs of individual clients. The following seven guidelines can help providers of social care discern and develop "a gentle and winsome public witness" (Sherman 2001, 34) that is appropriate in any setting.

1. *Appropriate evangelism is based in love and respect for the client.* Christ-like love — not guilt, rote obligation, or moral censure — is the cornerstone of genuine evangelism. We love clients because Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19), and we want to share the goodness of God's grace. We long to see clients experience a healing, transforming encounter with Jesus. At the same time, respect for clients' God-given dignity ensures that evangelism does not become condescending or overbearing. Evangelism rooted in love means listening to clients rather than doing all the talking, gently persuading rather than pushing, demonstrating God's love through our lives and actions as well as words, and allowing people to explore Christianity at their own pace.
2. *Appropriate evangelism is not manipulative.* The theological doctrine of freedom of conscience cherished in the Judeo-Christian tradition insists that we should not—indeed

cannot—force faith on others. While required participation in religious activities is sometimes appropriate, aid must never be conditioned on receptiveness to the evangelistic message. We must serve people whether or not they accept the gospel, care about their whole being whether or not they recognize the spiritual dimension of their needs, and love them whether or not they understand that God loves them through us. This is the standard set by the grace of God, who freely "sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45).

3. *Appropriate evangelism is intentional and invitational.* A prevalent myth is that if you simply give non-Christians a chance to rub shoulders with Christians, they will catch a dose of the gospel. But if people do not ask, and we never tell, how will those we serve learn the good news about Christ? Many contexts allow evangelism to be more than simply an open-door policy for clients to inquire about faith. Staff should be trained in how to discern spiritual needs and to share their beliefs in sensitive ways. Be intentional about creating opportunities for spiritual nurture and inviting people to take the next step in their faith journey. Be patient but persistent in looking for ways to help people connect with the gospel.
4. *Appropriate evangelism is founded on relationships.* Formulaic, impersonal evangelism methods rarely connect with people in a meaningful way. While corporate evangelistic events, such as worship services or group Bible studies, have an important place, they should be complemented whenever possible by the cultivation of personal relationships which foster openness and trust and add credibility to the message. Social service providers, however, must be aware of how power dynamics shape their relationships with clients. They must be careful not to take advantage of persons, reinforce dysfunctional relational patterns, or reduce relationships to a evangelistic tool.
5. *Appropriate evangelism is context-sensitive and creative.* There is no such thing as "one size fits all" evangelism. As Moody Memorial Church pastor Michael Allen writes, "Although the very essence of the message, namely, who Jesus is and what He did, cannot change, the presentation of the message must" (224). Developing an appropriate evangelism strategy requires familiarity with the program's constituency, cultural context, organizational dynamics, and external restrictions, as well as the needs and attributes of individual clients. Effective evangelism also entails sensitivity to the leading of God's Spirit, and creativity in devising fresh ways to communicate God's grace.
6. *Appropriate evangelism is transparent and honest.* Whether by choice or in response to external pressures, many Christian programs do not include explicit references to Christianity in their mission statement or other descriptive documents. If a program does integrate religious elements, however, it ought to be clear about its spiritual character. The Faith-based Ministries' Code of Conduct declares:

We commit ourselves to open, straightforward, clear, consistent communication about our religious identity to our volunteers, service beneficiaries, donors, and government. ... Our desire is to allow potential staff, volunteers, participants, and government contacts to make choices about involvement with our organization on the basis of full and accurate information ... (Sherman 2001, 34).

In other words: Say who you are, and be who you say you are.

7. *Appropriate evangelism complies with rules and regulations.* Abide by guidelines for religious activity set by your employers and by the program's partners and funders. If these regulations unduly constrain your commitment to caring for persons' spiritual needs, you may wish to consider other employment or funding options.

What does this model look like in action? One example comes from Transitional Journey Ministries (TJM), the church-based welfare-to-work program mentioned above. Students were taught job skills (computer, GED, and work readiness classes) and matched with employment opportunities. They were also provided with optional spiritual resources: weekly worship services, prayer, and a spiritual development class. TJM staff also addressed spiritual and emotional needs one-on-one as students shared their personal struggles. Students were invited but not pressured to attend the sponsoring church. Student evaluations noted that TJM felt different than other programs where they had encountered demoralizing, condescending attitudes. One student, Shawna (not her real name), came to the program with ten children, a eighteen-year history of substance abuse, and a fourth grade education. Her life was in turmoil, and the five-year limit on her welfare clock was ticking. The program's therapist helped her set goals and develop an action plan, but Shawna was simply unable to cope. She became suicidal. The therapist asked Shawna if she wanted to meet with the pastor of the church for spiritual counseling. In the pastor's office, Shawna reaffirmed her faith in Christ. She was welcomed by the congregation at Cookman United Methodist Church and was baptized there. Eventually she graduated from the program with a job. While she still faced many obstacles, she had begun making progress toward her life goals.

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