

Caring for the poor: Whose job is it—church or state?

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By Marv Knox

Editor

Care for people Jesus called “the least of these” requires response from both congregations and government, according to specialists who focus on ministry to the poor and on church/ state relations.

As participants in both church and state, Christians should minister directly to the poor and also advocate to the government on their behalf, specialists stressed.

Danica Simmons, a registered nurse at Mission East Dallas, treats Francisco, a patient at the ministry's clinic. Launched by Shiloh Terrace Baptist Church, Mission East Dallas provides medical care for uninsured and underinsured people—particularly the working poor—in eastern Dallas County. (PHOTO/Angela Best)

Christians are “citizens of two kingdoms”—God’s kingdom and the nation in which they live, said Stephen Reeves, legislative counsel for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

“As churches, we should be following Jesus’ model. Doing things to help the least among us is following his model,” Reeves said.

“As American citizens, we have the opportunity to influence policies and our elected officials. In being good citizens of both God’s kingdom and the United States, you can do that by advocating in the political realm.”

First and foremost, ministry to the poor is a Christian concern, specialists said.

“Jesus urges the (church) community to be involved in the needs of ‘the least of these,’” explained Fritz Gutwein, a lifelong Baptist who works as field coordinator for the National Council of Churches. “If we want to live in community with one another, we must be concerned about ‘the least of these.’”

But people who say only the church, and not the government, should care for the needs of poor people aren’t thinking clearly, added Jimmy Dorrell, executive director of Mission Waco, a faith-based community ministry in Waco.

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“Practically, it’s fallacious to believe the church can do what the government does for the poor,” Dorrell said. He cited research that shows each church, synagogue and mosque in America would have to contribute \$300,000 each year to fund the basic poverty-relief programs provided by the government.

“People say, ‘The church should be doing it,’ but we’ve lost that battle,” he reasoned. “We’re giving only about one-half of 1 percent of each congregation’s budget to meet the needs of the poor.”

Besides, the scale of need is just too massive for the church alone, Gutwein added.

“There are needs that can only be met by government; the church is just not capable of doing it,” he said. “Think about healthcare, or feeding the hungry. Those are huge tasks. They’re similar to infrastructure: We wouldn’t expect the church to pave all the roads between a person’s home and church.”

Melissa Rogers, an attorney and visiting professor of religion and public policy at Wake Forest University Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C., echoed that theme, stressing church and government should tend to their appropriate roles.

“There are some things that essentially only the government can do—like building and rebuilding levees in New Orleans or ensuring every American has healthcare,” Rogers said. “And there are some things only religious communities can do—like spreading the gospel and meeting other spiritual needs.

“And an additional part of the religious community’s job is to call on the government to do what only it can do—like maintaining a safety net for people in particular need of assistance, and making sure they’re safe and secure in the wake of disasters.”

Some Christians also need to get over the erroneous notion that government can’t be trusted to do something good, like helping poor people, Dorrell added.

“We’ve determined the government and society are evil, and we’re good,” he said. “That’s bad theology. Government was ordained by God; it’s the structure God created to take care of people. We as faith-based people should be the corrective force. Clearly, (government) goes off course. It’s the role of Christians to navigate back to a biblical viewpoint.”

So, if both church and state are involved in helping people in need, how do people of faith negotiate the fault line between the two potent institutions?

A key is how the work is focused and financed, explained Cynthia Holmes, an attorney from Clayton, Mo., who has served on the boards of several First Amendment organizations.

“The government needs to engage in social programs, but it doesn’t need to do the work of the church or the mosque or the synagogue,” Holmes said. “The Good Samaritan didn’t say: ‘Hang on. I’m going to get a government grant to take care of you.’”

And even though the tasks are enormous, congregations must keep their focus and identity clear, Rogers added. Congregations “should always maintain their independent and prophetic voice and not be encumbered by government rules and regulations.”

“As Christians, if we ask the government to do our ministry for us, that ministry is diminished,” Holmes noted. “A cup of water given in the government’s name is not the same as Jesus’ name.”

Both Holmes and Rogers suggested if churches wish to set up programs that receive government funding, they should create completely separate corporations.

“Churches should never seek or accept government funding for what they do,” Rogers urged. Churches that want to engage ministry that receives government grants can “spin off separate religiously affiliated organizations,” but even then, the lines between what is done for the general good and what is religiously oriented should be bright and wide.

“Don’t use (government) money to proselytize,” Holmes stressed. “Don’t ask the government to do for you what it wouldn’t do for others and discriminate against others. ... And don’t feel discriminated against just

because the government won't advance your religion."

A church goal in this kind of ministry should be "transforming culture," Dorrell said. That involves calibrated collaboration—working and interacting with both private and public sectors, including the government, whose services meet the needs of the poor and disenfranchised. "We collaborate, but we're not beholden to," he noted.

Rogers offers similar advice to faith-based ministries.

"Religion and government should be in conversation about these issues. But neither one should be commanded, controlled or co-opted by the other," she said. "Conversation is always good. Cooperation is sometimes good. But having either the government or religion trying to command, control and co-opt the other is never good."

An important part of conversation is advocacy on behalf of the poor, Reeves said.

"It is legitimate to look at our government's budgets, to see that they reflect our Christian values," he said. "Advocate and vote for folks who will be good stewards of our tax dollars."

And churches should bear witness to that advocacy with their actions, Gutwein insisted. "You can't do one without the other. You can't be involved in advocacy without being involved with the homeless who are on the street corners," he said.

Besides, involvement may not only serve the needy, but it just may save the church, he added. "It's important for churches to be involved if they're going to survive," he explained.

"People don't come to church because of orthodoxy, but because of what churches do. ... The primary thing is what the church is doing, not what

they believe. People get the orthodoxy after they come to church.

“And churches are getting it, too. First, they’re concerned about charity, but then they become concerned about the root causes of poverty, so they start doing economic development. Then, seeing the root causes that impact development, they get involved in advocacy.

“Charity, development, advocacy and justice. To meet the needs of ‘the least of these’ in society, we have to be involved in doing them all.”

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