

Concern for needy people is gospel truth, not partisan politics, CBFâs Vestal insists

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WACO—God identifies with the poor and the powerless, and Christians encounter Christ when they serve the weakest of the world's citizens, Daniel Vestal told participants in the Baylor University School of Social Work's annual "family dinner."

"Concern for the poor and the powerless is not partisan politics. It is central and integral to the gospel of Jesus Christ," stressed Vestal, staff leader of the Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Daniel Vestal, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, addresses a dinner gathering sponsored by the Baylor School of Social Work.
(PHOTOS/Baylor)

Baptists haven't always realized that truth, Vestal said, acknowledging he did not comprehend the connection between Christ and the poor when he was a young person growing up in a Texas Baptist church.

"The gospel used to be more about pie-in-the-sky than the here-and-now," he recalled. His own "social conscience" awoke almost exactly 40 years ago, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

Vestal was a graduate student at Baylor in the spring of 1968. "I realized I bore responsibility for social and economic justice," he remembered.

Wandering in the wilderness

But many Baptists still have been “wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years,” while the gap widens between rich and poor Americans and between rich and poor nations, he said.

Social workers trained at Baylor are “wonderful examples of practitioners of the gospel,” as they serve the poor and powerless, Vestal said. Unfortunately, they do not represent a dominant position among Christians, he added, lamenting, “The wind of the Spirit (regarding compassion for the poor) is getting more of a hearing in the world than in the church.”

Still, throughout the Gospels, Jesus continually expressed love and concern for the poor. He even went so far as to tell his followers the criterion for their own divine judgment will be how well they cared for the poor and powerless, he said.



Esther Reyes of Laredo, outstanding Bachelor of Social Work student, is congratulated by Gaynor Yancey, associate dean of the Baylor School of Social Work.

Since Pentecost—not long after Jesus’ ascension to heaven, when the Holy

Spirit encompassed the young church—"Christ is no longer limited to time and place," and the church's task is to minister on behalf of Christ to the poor, for whom he cared so deeply, Vestal said.

Christian social work is distinctive, because it is centered upon Christ, who is "hidden among the poor," he said, adding Christ also is "served among the poor" when the needs of the weak and powerless are tended.

"If you want to see the face of Christ, go to the poor, the powerless, the suffering," he advised. "As you take Christ to them, you will find he already is there."

Awards

Baylor's School of Social Work announced winners of its annual student awards at the dinner, held at First Baptist Church of Woodway April 24. They are:

- Christen Argueta of San Antonio, outstanding Master of Social Work student.
- Esther Reyes of Laredo, outstanding Bachelor of Social Work student.
- Flor Avellaneda of McGregor and Melissa Ishio of Tsukuba, Japan, "Spirit of Social Work" recipients.
- Sarah Bush of Carrollton; Amy Downs of Henderson, Ky.; Joyce Hull of Chicago; and Crystal Leatch of Houston, excellence in research.
- Irene Thomas of Lewisville, outstanding grant writer.
- Sally Neeley of Mineola, BSW intern of the year.
- Viviana Triana of Colombia, field intern of the year.