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BY  
JEREMY P. ROBERTS  
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## The Local Church's Involvement in Social Ministries

There may be no other time in American history that social ministry is more important in North America than now. Homelessness abounds. Starvation grows. Sicknesses prolong. The change agents for the growing societal problems of mankind are found in local churches around the world.

Between addressing the biblical necessity of the local church's involvement in social ministries and elaborating on the extent to which this is needed, local churches may become healthier in reaching their respective communities and the world for the glory of God and betterment of humanity. In order to address this biblical necessity and examine to what extent it should be pursued, the body of the text will separate into four sections: definition, biblical analysis, extent of emphasis, and implementation.

### **Definition**

“Social” is defined as “of or relating to human society, the interaction of the individual and the group, or the welfare of human beings as members of society” (Merriam Webster). “Ministry” stems from “διακονία,” translated as “ministry” or “service.” διακονία refers to basic tasks such as waiting tables (Acts 6:1), benevolently assisting the poor (2 Cor 9:12), and preaching the Gospel (Acts 20:24). Therefore, “social ministries” is defined as “serving human society for the betterment of their wellbeing.”

Social ministries are different from “parish ministries” which are directed to serving members of a local church. Social Ministries involve more than community service and lobbying for concepts to progress a community. Social ministries involve reaching out to the impoverished, homeless, sick, and imprisoned to assist them in

recovering from the physical, emotional, and spiritual setbacks they recently faced. Social ministries also involve reaching out to communities to motivate and educate people about how they can reach out to serve others despite their own personal setbacks.

If a person or organization fails to tie someone back to Jesus and point to Christ's cross, it is not social ministry—it is social activism. Social ministries are a way to express the love of Jesus Christ to someone through actions, and the reality of representing Jesus Christ is clarified during the time of serving.

### **Biblical Analysis**

The Bible clarifies the need of the involvement of the church in social ministries. God's Word teaches this truth through [1] creation, [2] justification by faith, [3] universality of Christian vocation, and [4] justice (Fred Glennon, "Ethical Challenges for Social Ministry Today: Some Theological and Ethical Considerations," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 23 no 4 August 1996, 279-286).

#### **Creation**

Man is created in the image of God, and is endowed by God with inordinate worth (Gen 1:27). Man being in God's image entails dignity and worth. Respect for this worth and special creation took place at the emanation of mankind when God created Adam (Gen 2:4-17). Before the Tower of Babel and separation of tongues and races, man was specially created by God and was given opportunities for creativity (naming the animals, Gen 2:20), relationship (In Gen 2:18, God said, "It is not good that the man should be

alone.”), self-transcendence (tending the garden, Gen 2:15), and rationality (Gen 2:20, Adam knew he lacked a helper fit for him.).

From the beginning of creation, God has entrusted man to faithfully steward all He created. With this background of man’s worth and responsibility in creation, Psalm 148:1–5 teaches that all of creation must look to God and sing in a proverbial hallelujah chorus of praise to the LORD. If this sort of cosmic chorus is to take place, the creation of God in His image—mankind—must be cared for properly by believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and local churches around the world. As man is specially created by God in His image, humanity must care for one another and serve one another for the betterment of their well-being in order to bring greater glory to God.

### Justification by Faith

Transitioning from the Creation of man and woman in Genesis 2 to the Fall in the following chapter, man’s sinful nature disrespects the intrinsic worth God has for the beings created in His image. Apathy of others’ societal needs, violence, selfishness and hedonism are all consequences of sinful self. The need for forgiveness of man’s sinfulness is evident when biblically analyzing social ministries.

Forgiveness of sins does not make the newly-converted Christ follower an immediate and long-standing servant to society, but it makes the passion to love God and love others more evident by serving those created in God’s image. James supports this by stating, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jms 2:24, ESV).

## Universality of Christian Vocation

Each vocation in human society that gives care is valuable as it contributes to the betterment of mankind. Whether a man drives a garbage truck or an accountant keeps proper financial records for the thriving and advancement of a company that meets peoples' needs, utilizing vocation for the betterment of society and the glory of God is a biblical concept. In Amos 5:21–24, God notes His frustration of people who engage in rituals while failing to worship and states, “Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen” (Amos 5:23). Conversely, people who engage in genuine worship of the Lord must not fail to also serve society.

## Justice

The Catholic Bishops in the United States gathered together in the mid-1990s to discuss economic justice for all and concluded that a just society structures itself in such a way that everyone can have a part in the structures and life of the community. In order for man to live a dignified life and one that reflects value, having a valuable role is necessitated. Catholics are known as strong proponents of social justice and believe once they meet God upon their death, God will ask them what they did for the least of society. Whether one believes this theological stance of the Catholic faith or not, a universal moral test for any society is how it treats the most susceptible members of their culture.

Social justice can have the propensity to drift into a socialistic political philosophy. The Bible does not teach that all rich people must give an equal share of their earnings to the poor to serve them. The rich young ruler worshiped his money in Luke 18:18–30 and Jesus told him to rid himself of his idol so his concentration would be on

the Lord Jesus Christ. Some people who are lovers of money may need to give everything away, but this is not an overarching rule for all wealthy Christ followers.

Despite social justice not requiring equal distribution of funds, if one has much and another does not have enough to provide basic needs such as shelter, clothing, and food, it is just and godly to provide these things in order for all people to engage in meaningful participation in community. If there is a societal structure in place to distribute resources, the process should serve the members of the culture that have unmet needs with highest priority.

The needs of social justice do not solely include providing for the physical necessities of the oppressed, but also fighting for processes to assist those without power in a society to assist in the betterment of humanity within that culture. Furthermore justice may include serving human society for the betterment of their well-being by fighting against societal rules that contradict the laws of God (e.g. abortion).

### **Extent of Emphasis upon Social Ministries**

The extent to which churches should emphasize social ministries is relative. It is not as simple as expressing a certain amount of hours, dollars, or percentages in order for a church to fulfill her responsibilities as societal servant. Context is the vital factor in determining the extent of emphasis upon this duty. Beyond context, the extent of emphasis upon social ministries must involve teaching by their elders or pastors, followed by personal prayer and scriptural study for personal development.

## Context

The majority of the American culture is individualistic and self-focused. Contextually, in many areas of Israel, residents of kibbutzim naturally think more about the betterment of others in their community. The extent of emphasis upon social ministries is needed more in the American culture than it is in the kibbutz culture because it is not as much of a natural process from others in the community. The church in America, or any other wealthy Western country with societal emphases on *self* instead of *sodality*, necessitates a greater emphasis upon social ministries, but how does one determine the extent?

Determining to what extent emphasis should be placed involves the enthusiasm and needs for specific priorities of social ministry. A church must look at her community, note the needs, and ask if anything can be accomplished to meet those needs. If the church has the manpower and money, they need to do their part to assist in filling that void.

Some churches may claim they lack the financial ability to meet many of the needs. In this case, a church must look at their finances to ensure they are using the moneys entrusted to them by God for the greatest effectiveness to fulfill the Great Commission and to assist in the betterment of humanity.

The lack of funds to completely finance a social ministry may result in needing to reach out to other churches in the community who face a similar situation. The pooling of money and manpower can result in serving the society with less strain on one local church. Besides the positive effects upon the society needing the ministry, this assists with building relationships of brothers and sisters from different churches in the same community.

After determining what the context of the culture entails, a momentum of communication and passion for serving the community and the world furthers the cause by seeing the church embrace the passion. This communication, combined with personal growth, results in better understanding to what extent social ministries should be emphasized.

### Teaching Social Ministries

Teaching elders or pastors in local churches serve as the cheerleaders of involvement in social ministries. Exhibiting servant leadership in this vital process and plan of service results in pushing the extent to which a church engages in social ministry to a new level. It is the responsibility of the elders or pastors to know and study the culture of the local church they serve, then teach of the societal needs to the church and push them to love their neighbors by meeting their needs. The teaching of these leaders results in more maturity amongst the congregation and greater discernment as to what extent emphasis should be placed on social ministries.

### Personal Growth through Social Ministries

All churches benefit from serving and giving to others. Social ministries are important, but churches must not obsess over them as the makeup of their identity; their identity should be found solely in Christ as He is the bridegroom (1 Jn 4:7; Eph 2:13). While the extent to which churches should engage in social ministries should not serve as the identity of the church, it should be prevalent enough to exhibit a reputation of care, love, and altruism throughout the community and around the world.

A greater level of intentionality in serving others and furthering the betterment of mankind in the name of Jesus Christ results in closer connection to God. Personal growth is a byproduct of engaging in social ministries for both individuals and local church bodies.

### **Implementation**

Within the implementation process, there are two levels: individual and structural. Individual social ministries involve giving food to a needy family during the Thanksgiving or Christmas holidays, or mowing a widow's grass because she cannot afford to pay a landscaper. Structural social ministries include an organization in rural Nicaragua building water wells, or a mass effort to give medical assistance to AIDS victims in Malawi.

Properly implementing social ministries into the life of a local church involves a balance of both individual and structural social ministries. If the individual implementation process is neglected, people fail to experience the joy of looking in another person's eyes and serving them in the name of Jesus Christ. Not implementing the structural level of social ministries results in masses of people failing to receive long-term and effective service.

#### **Individual**

When many people think of social ministries, the individual level is what comes to mind. Clothing distribution and food pantries are aspects of this ministry. Implementing individual social ministries heavily relies upon context. If one serves in an urban

community, serving the homeless community with shelter and nutrition is a necessity for the local church. If a church is in a community with an abnormally high amount of foreclosures, being a part of teaching debt reduction classes would be an ideal individual social ministry.

Since the key to effective individual social ministry is contextualization, this may necessitate demographic analyses and more purposeful observance of one's surroundings. Implementing individual social ministries must take place, but serving people on an individual level is an un-ending proposition. The only way long-term effective change can occur is through the structural level of social ministry.

### Structural

The goals for individual social ministries are simple to note, but determining the intent of structural social ministries lacks the same clarity. Despite the desire to assist a mass group of people with systemic transformation, people or organizations who benefit from others' misfortune may feel threatened. An example of this is if a population struggles with malaria due to bugs biting them and a structural social ministry gives nets to cover all of the beds in a third-world country, pharmaceutical companies that provide medicine for patients facing malaria may become upset. This sort of political problem is a necessary evil in structural social ministry.

### Implementing Individual and Structural

As this essay addresses the biblical necessity of the local church to become involved in social ministries and to elaborate to what extent this is needed, the implementation of the

local church within structural social ministry must involve one or a combination of the following options: [1] the local church is an extremely large church and has the financial and manpower needed to implement structural social ministry, [2] the local church partners with many other churches to pool money and people to implement this strategy, or [3] the local church partners with a parachurch organization such as a denomination.

An overlap of implementing both individual and structural social ministries results in healthy and effective service to human society for the betterment of their wellbeing. Local churches can consistently experience both first-hand touching of their community, and being a part of a large structural social ministry. This allows the local church to be reminded of the big picture of serving humanity for God's glory.

### **Conclusion**

Assisting in the betterment of human society and their wellbeing for the glory of Jesus Christ is a necessity for all churches. Unless one sees the hurt and suffering of a society on a consistent basis, engagement in this service must emulate with fervent intentionality. Knowing the orthodoxy of social ministry without exercising orthopraxy results in building a Gnostic commodity and failing to further humanity or glorify God.

Social ministry is vital. It starts with every follower of Christ and every local church deciding to exhibit faith and engage in serving. May more churches take part in this service for the glory of God.