

Ministry, mission and the meaning of service



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Reading about a local Christian ministry supported by hundreds of churches, I was struck by the wide range of “outreach,” offering food and clothing for people in crisis, emergency financial assistance for rents and utilities, shelter, healthcare and service for veterans. It was good to see they offer job training and education resources as well. And, of course, chaplaincy services in our county jail system with Bible studies for incarcerated citizens. Having worked in the nonprofit world for a long time, I know how much time, effort and funding goes into this kind of service work. I also know firsthand how some of these “outreach” programs are designed to bring women, men and children into faith and into churches.

I’m not questioning the sincerity of all such ministries or criticizing the good work they do. Our chaplaincy work in California was supported by many congregations, but not only churches. We received support, and welcomed volunteers, from churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and meetinghouses. The chaplaincy served people of all faiths and none – we had no “conversion agenda,” so we could enjoy partnering with a diverse spectrum of the faith community.

“Helping hands” can offer practical assistance with one hand, while passing along sectarian beliefs in the other.

Sometimes the mixed message is subtle, and sometimes more open. The classic example is the “Rescue Mission” or Salvation Army approach: listen to our sermon, take our literature, attend our Bible study, and we’ll shelter you, feed you, help you. Now, I’m not saying those things may not help some people, but there’s something that just doesn’t sit right about the “We’ll help you, if you join us” model. Isn’t that a conditional sort of compassionate service? The original “Good Samaritan” story might remind these folks that assisting others in need shouldn’t require anything but a desire to render assistance, and doesn’t even require religious beliefs, at least our particular beliefs.

More concerning, from my perspective, is when any public monies support “faith outreach” organizations. “Do unto others” seems to apply. If you don’t want to give money to a group that gives a loaf of bread with a Bible, or a group that hands out coats with a Qur’an, you can choose not to donate. When a government agency grants funding to these groups, we are unwilling supporters.

Am I suggesting we never donate to a religion-based program? Not at all. My concern is “what else” is being distributed, “what else” is being passed along, through the programs? Most of us know about “shoebox” and “backpack” giveaways. Sounds like a nice, thoughtful way to make a child’s eyes light up. Then, when you peek behind the curtain, you find the intention is to slip in an evangelical message, a Bible, an in-

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vation to church. The actual intent is to convert children to one narrow kind of faith. The “success” of these ministries is measured in souls saved.

I worked closely with Pastor Steve, whose lively evangelical church hosted our emergency shelter with a coalition of many congregations. Steve understood that our program did not allow proselytizing and reminded parishioners of this rule of respect. A friendly welcome was great, but preaching to shelter guests was inappropriate. He was a wonderful colleague in our work.

I have no problem with a religious group reaching out to help neighbors in need. If a representative mentions they are Catholic or Methodist, Buddhist or Jewish, Muslim or Hindu, I don’t see any issue. If that person invites someone to their services, no big deal. Yet, if it is implied or explicit that the assistance depends on participation in religious services, prayers, rituals or other requirement, to me this “ministry” is mere missionizing to propagate the faith. Personally, I have little respect for this “bait and switch”

approach to human service. Either show compassion as an act of a compassionate human being, with no strings attached, or be clear you are primarily interested in evangelizing – the immediate need is secondary.

The ministry organization I was reading about has over 6,000 volunteers, including jail chaplains. We can assume these are Christian chaplains reaching a captive audience to spread a particular kind of Christian beliefs. The prayer that guides them is stated: “Take our hands, work through them. Take our lips, speak through them. Take our minds, think through them. Take our hearts, set them on fire.” The intent is to provide “godly counsel” and, in their supportive housing program, they seek “to equip [residents] with the word of God and show them how it is relevant to their lives.” Once again, this is a Christian-centered ministry, so on one level this sounds appropriate.

I would simply ask: Isn’t it enough to serve someone without expecting them to serve your Lord?

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).