

The Myth of the Church and Social Service

Mr. Nelson Leung 梁國全 (Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement)

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Churches in Hong Kong have been actively involved in social services. Since the coming of missionary to China, they opened up and undertook diversified services to relieve the poor, assist the weak and spread the gospel by establishing schools. Up till now, different denominations have built up social service departments and have been continuously developing, while local churches deliver services at their meeting places, with preaching and serving happening at the same time, to bless the whole society and act as a good testimony.

However, because of the professionalization of social service and a highly systematic management, the service provided by churches tends to rely on government subsidies. This increases the burden of the administrative work and reinforces the culture of just satisfying the quota. Doing social service has eventually manipulated by many external elements. The preaching of gospel can no longer be done at the same time and churches are no longer in control of the roles they are playing and the assistance they could provide. At the same time, churches are busy pastoring and therefore much tension has been created for they have to do social service at the same time. Facing the needs of the society, that means, delivering social service and preaching the gospel at the same time, churches have to plan wisely and to be clear of their own standpoint in order to overall develop their own churches.

Because the scope of discussion of Christianity and social service is a macro aspect and also wide, the discussion in this passage might not be deep enough. I hope I can explore from both the church and social aspects in order to stimulate imagination.

Government Subsidies and Social Services

As mentioned earlier, some existing denominations, organizations and churches have officially established their social service departments, offering professional and comprehensive services and service recipients are taken care well. This is widely recognized. It is also undeniable that the establishment of Christian social service organizations will help in applying for resources from the government, which could enhance their development in the long term.

But frankly speaking, there are quite a number of hidden worries in the social service development of church organizations. Because of the subvention system and the matter of accountability, professionals including frontline workers and management staff have to be employed when delivering services. This will create conflicts in enforcement when considering the missions of the running denominations. It also leads to changes in the original intention of delivering social services as well, which brings in more burdens than synergy. And eventually, the original ideas and expectations have faded away. According to Rev. Lo Lung-Kwong (盧龍光), many internal administrative problems occurred after Christian organizations have received subsidies from the government. The original serving mission of “Responding the Social Needs” has been lost. (From Issue 2296 of Christian Weekly, 24 August 2008)

On the other hand, churches have received subsidies from the government to establish social service centres. They use these centres to hold religious activities. The centres deliver services during service hours. This matching is originally good. But professionals are needed in running the services, so churches outsourced the services in order to make them more professional. Pastors could no longer preach the gospel in the centres. This indicates the division of social service and preaching the gospel from the church. I was a social worker on the frontline and had the experience of the Centre-in-charge of a social service centre. I understand that it is not easy to achieve mutual attention and division of labour in order to maintain a balance between social service and missionary. The problem is not social service itself but the administrative structure, the development of professionalization and the expectation under the government subsidy system which could enlarge the disagreement. You could imagine, while the senior pastor is senior than the centre-in-charge, how could the non-professionals lead the professionals and do supervision work? Even if the senior pastor has had the training of a social worker, the adjustment of roles is still very difficult. Who is the leader? Who makes the integration between social service and preaching of gospel? If the senior pastor also acts as the centre-in-charge, the collaboration will be very difficult. How could the assimilation of the pastoral role and social service role happen? I understand that churches have to devote financial and human resources in which outcomes are need to be evaluated. This has created difficulties for churches when doing social service and they might be reluctant to proceed.

Recently, there has been a pastor complaining to me that though the social service department of their church has not received government subsidies, their management committee focused on professionalization, and therefore, there are many limitations when doing the matching up which created tensions in terms of human resources and financial burdens of the church. My suggestion was,

we could not embrace the traditional ways of doing by solely focusing on professionalization and making no changes. Otherwise, social services will only become a burden which will not benefit the preaching of the gospel. Churches have to be clear about the scope of professionalization in social services and could not wishfully think that social services will match with preaching the gospel perfectly. I observed that there is no direct connection between social services and preaching the gospel in most cases: social service is social service and preaching the gospel is preaching the gospel. Social services in denominations and churches have started to run independently. Social services and spreading the gospel are now developing separately.

Churches and Social Service

According to “Hong Kong Church Survey 2014”, 66.0% of churches use their meeting place to provide social service, which is 849 churches out of the total and slightly higher than the 63.9% of the year 2009. Among the 16 categories of social service, places provided for self-studies room and helping the poor covers 198 and 186 respectively. Over 90% of the churches are self-subsidized (see table 1). Other common social services include the provision of study rooms, elderly centres, community centres and serving new immigration etc.

Social Service Category	Serving Churches		Subsidized by Government	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Self-studies room	198	15.4%	4	2.0%
Helping the Poor	186	14.5%	15	8.1%
Study Room	125	9.7%	51	40.8%
Elderly Centre/ Service	116	9.0%	48	41.4%
Community Centre	94	7.3%	15	16.0%
New Immigrants	88	6.8%	3	

Table1: Churches providing source service by category and government subsidy

Almost 70% of Hong Kong churches are middle-sized or small churches. Many of them are short of actual resources and human resources and could only run in the self-subsidized way or only some categories receive related subsidies. In this circumstance, they could fully utilize their space for social service and get in touch with neighbours and the public to do pastoring and caring work. These enhance flexibility and mobilization. Flexibility refers to the ability to change in the quantity and form of service.

Mobilization refers to the participation of the congregation. Churches could respond adequately according to the setting.

Generally, the space covered by self-studies room is more flexible and therefore middle-sized and small-sized churches are more than happy to provide. Through picnics, small-group gathering and visiting families etc., churches could easily get in touch with grassroots. Perhaps pastors do not have enough experience and so more time is required. But if they want to be more devoted, efforts and time needed lead to tension. In this case, churches could cooperate with other Christian organizations to compensate their own weaknesses. At the same time, pastors need the participation of brothers and sisters to get support in order to promote service, and enhance pastoring and caring so that the churches will not only focus on social service and affect the quality of pastoring on the whole.

Preaching and Social Service

According to “Hong Kong Church Survey 2014”, regarding the ways churches preached, only 25.1% adopt the pure message preaching. Most of them combined with social service. 72.8% adopted practical service as the form of preaching, which is a big increase compared to 60% of the year 2009 (refer to table 2).

Ways of Preaching	2004	2009	2014
Message	96.4%	96.3%	97.3%
Service	57.7%	60%	72.8%
Charismatic	11.3%	15.2%	15.9%

Table 2: Ways of preaching

Adopting service as the preaching strategy, as it is named, service is only the method and the extension of getting in touch. It is not constrained by space and setting. Churches could adopt the outreach method by preaching in schools, the community or home visiting and small fun fair. In other words, churches could plan according to their own resources and timing, using a “less is more” strategy, which is applicable by middle-sized and small-sized churches.

Moreover, I think middle-sized and small sized churches (about 50-100 members) could cooperate with other churches nearby, to connect pastors and believers to carry out service. This could start with pastors by exchanging the sermon stage, providing revision space, family activities and adventurous activities for youngsters. These could drive churches forward and reinforce the leadership of pastors.

Church Mission and Social Service

In recent years, the Social Welfare Department has been using various channels to get in touch with churches. They invite churches to establish non-subsidized neighbourhood centres. The government leased the site with a discount so that churches could also use the site for both social service and church gatherings. These are normally found on the ground floor of public estates. Basically churches do not receive subsidies from the government. The expenses are borne by the churches. However, this method of providing service via neighbourhood centre in high profile still bear the same pressure in the provision of social service even though they have a greater degree of autonomy. Looking at the churches I know, they need to employ 1 to 2 members of staff to run the programme in order to respond to service needs. Adjustments in finance and workload are needed. Some pastors have shared that there is definitely a tension in the use of labour, especially the drop-in service everyday. Because of short of human resources, pastors have to be involved as well which creates lots of pressure. Pastors spend more time on social service than pastoring. Churches need to make certain adjustment in providing social service and preaching the gospel in these cases. For instance, they may first minimize drop-in service by shortening opening hours and decreasing the number of sessions, that is no need opening 2 to 3 sessions everyday, so that there is an adequate allocation of service and human resources. In fact, churches should not ask how much social service is enough, but should start with the mission of the church, so that preaching and serving are “inseparable”.

In the preface of “使命群體 Win · Build · Send”, Rev. Lin Tak-Kit (連達傑) mentions that “Mission Church” is a spiritual group that Jesus Christ has redeemed. It is called by the Lord to serve different missions on earth in various regions, races, cultures and nations. In other words, Mission Church has to “Get people, Build, Send”. As a community with mission, the church will blindly pursue professionalization if it spends too much time to develop social service. It will focus on service if it receives too much government subsidies. These are obstacles for pastoring. Like Rev. Kwok Lai-Wang (郭乃弘) says in “更新地方教會的策略”, “the distance between the kingdom of God in heaven and the kingdom on earth is very far, and they are separated by lots of human factors. The mission of the church

is to shorten the distance and connect (especially the idea of God and idea of men). The church should reflect the qualities of the kingdom of God on earth by diligent mission and service” (page 56) As a result, social service of churches should not only be enhanced in quality and quantity, but also realizing the mission of the church and do a good job on the connection of gospel and service.

Conclusion

I would like to quote the sharing of Mr. Lau Kwok-Wai (劉國偉), ex-director of Fellowship of Evangelical Students (HK) in “五十年來社關路” to conclude. “Looking forward to the future, if the church has a concrete responsibility on social concern, then it must review its motives, have a long-term strategy in mind, structure the work and administrative framework, seek for the connection point between social service and building church (not necessarily plant a church, but must connect with other churches), so as to devote into the group or community in need in long term”.

I hope that Hong Kong churches could escape from the myth of “Social Service”, to achieve the mission of the church.