

Churches need to be relevant within their communities

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by Randy Bright



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Last Sunday, one of our pastors announced in the sermon that our church would be taking on a new role and ministry and that would be to seek out ways to eliminate poverty in our community. Our church has been very mission-focused over the past decade, sending youth groups and others to foreign countries and helping others in the neighborhoods near our church, but this is something different.

I was pleased with this announcement, having written about and advocated that churches should be involved in their communities. In the past, I have said that churches should be so important to their communities that it would never occur to them that churches were unimportant or irrelevant. The fact is, many churches have become exactly that – unimportant and irrelevant – to their communities, introverted to the point that they no longer function as the church should.

There was a time (and thankfully still is, with some churches) that when someone was in need, the first place they could go for help was their own family, and after that, a church, regardless of whether they were believers or not. That began to change around the time of World War I when the progressive movement began to take root and soldiers returning from Europe came home with very secular ideologies they had witnessed there.

Though Americans were still very pro-church and pro-Christian during the Great Depression, they began to demand of government some kind of guarantee against poverty. Franklin Delano Roosevelt attempted without success to pass his Second Bill of Rights, which would guarantee all American citizens a home, medical care and a job to eliminate poverty, and though Lyndon Johnson managed to get laws passed for his Great Society (his war on poverty), it was a complete failure.

Now what we are witnessing is the largest population of Americans living in poverty (or who would be living in poverty if not for the open coffers of the U.S. Treasury) and an economic system with its punishing progressive taxes that are designed to eliminate the middle class.

This means that the task of eliminating poverty in this country is a daunting task, not just because so many are financially poor, but because they are spiritually poor as well.

A very large portion of Americans have become so dependent upon government that see no need for the church, and may even see the church as a kind of competition with the government. They have begun to think differently, to hold ideas that give them security in knowing that they don't need to ask for help. Why ask when the government runs advertisements encouraging people to take the help that they offer, without shame?

The scriptures tell us that our faith is dead without works, and gives the example that we should help the poor, but it also says that those who don't work should not eat. This calls for an accountability not just from the recipient of help, but also for the giver to be discerning of the help that they give.

Without that discernment, we emotionally and spiritually cripple people, and the result of the lack of discernment from the government is exactly what we have in this country, an entitlement class.

The point of this is not that churches should not be helping people or doing their best to help those in poverty, but that it is no longer as simple as it was in the past. Things have changed significantly in the psyche of Americans over the past century, but in the past four years the change has been so enormous that it represents complete paradigm shift.

One of the more significant shifts can be found in the meaning of the word "community." It no longer means a group of people who live in some proximity with each other, synonymous with a village, town or city. It has become something considered by planners and city administrators to be mechanized, a machine that if properly designed and executed will solve the ills of mankind and create happiness and social justice, free of the bindings of religious morals.

For many of those people there is no room for or need for churches. This is why in recent years we have seen examples in of churches that have been forced to stop feeding the poor and the homeless because this interfered with the government.

Churches can still be relevant in their communities, and they should do everything in their power to do so, but they must be prepared to deal with situations and consequences that they could never have imagined before, including maintaining a place within the community itself.

It is the noble thing to do, and the right thing to do, and may well be the thing that helps churches keep their place at the table. How good would it be to hear communities once again say, "we need our churches"?

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