

Who set's the agenda for the church?

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The current discussion over federal financing of faith-based ministries to provide social services has overlooked two crucial issues that need to be considered by all contenders.

Religious organizations, members of congregations, government funders and critics on all sides of the issue need to ask *who sets the agenda for the church?* Ask the member of any congregation what the activities or priorities of that organization include and they will answer with a plethora of agenda items including evangelism, education/discipleship, counseling, providing social services and the like.

In addition to these self-determined (or biblically-determined) activities, religious organizations are continually asked by others in the community to do many other things that may or may not be a high priority for them. Pastors receive almost-daily mailings asking them to devote a sermon to a worthy cause, social concern, health effort or political position. Community groups, the press, government agencies and individuals each have their own idea of what religious organizations or congregations should be doing and do not hesitate in trying to bend congregations to meet their own agenda.

In the face of this, congregations must have in place a clear plan reflecting what they believe that they should do achieve their mission purpose. Those who are susceptible to any new project or cause proposed from the outside will find themselves divided among many purposes.

At the same time, as much as government or grant money may be tempting in order to provide additional services, faith-based organizations must be ready to turn down such help if it in any way compromises their core purpose or calling.

Mark DeMoss of Samaritan's Purse was absolutely correct when he told the *New York Times* that the group's president and chairman, Franklin Graham, would rather do without federal funds than abandon religious principles. "The fundamental question is," Mr. Graham was quoted as saying, "is it practical, is it appropriate, to expect an organization who does what they do because of their belief system -- which then becomes their ethos - - is it fair to ask them to do that but not to share their belief system or ethos that motivates them?"

"Our position on it is that it is not fair. Nor is it correct to ask us to do what we do, but lock our faith in the closet."

While many watchdog groups are exercised by the prospect that some group, somewhere might give thanks to God for the food they are feeding to the poor, they have helped to divert attention from the bottom line of any social service—whether or not people are genuinely being helped or even assisted to move from those causes that have led them to be homeless, hungry or whatever.

In fact, many workers with the needy have discovered that a religious commitment can transform a life and move a person into being a productive citizen, along with the eternal spiritual benefits that they have received.

Several decades of this writer's experience in supporting the work of Christian rescue missions have witnessed scores of affirmations by former addicts and homeless people that their escape from the streets and a dysfunctional life has come only through their new-found relationship with God.

"Look how far God has brought me," Patrick Hamilton told me as I was writing an article for the Miami Rescue Mission two years ago. "I was sleeping in the streets, in abandoned buildings, doing drugs. Now I'm driving a big truck, I get to see all 48 states and I'm making money."

"The Miami Rescue Mission brought God into my life. God has been good to me."

Interviews I have conducted with people working among street children and their dysfunctional families have brought similar affirmations.

"Street kids are an obvious symptom of deeper problems in a society," reflected Jeff Anderson, a missionary who works with street children in the Philippines. "The moral and spiritual depravity of a society is the deepest and greatest need."

The family is the key to getting a child permanently off of the street, said missionary Thomas Moak who works with street children and their families in Brazil. "The lack of a father figure is usually the main reason a child is working or living on the streets. Either the father is absent, in prison, or he is addicted to drugs or alcohol and turns violent." Moak added that his center not only works with the children but with their family to overcome the problems that caused the child to leave home. "A Christian family is the key to success," he reflected. "When a street child and his family accept the Lord, the child stays off the streets. It's that simple."

It may be that we will have to decide which is more important: whether protecting people from the transforming power of religious belief or helping them to get out of their despair and poverty. In "protecting" people from the benefits of religious compassion, we may also be preventing them from getting their lives on track and becoming a productive member of society.

Who set's the agenda for the church?, Mar 13, 2001