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The great commission

## Is Social Ministry Evangelism?

Recently I attended a seminar sponsored by two Lutheran organizations in St. Louis. It was organized to help social organizational leaders discover ways to collaborate. The presentation on collaboration was excellent. But the presenter continued to make a statement that I did not agree was completely accurate. He redefined "evangelism."

At least four times during his three-hour presentation he said to the employees and volunteers associated with many Lutheran social organizations that were present, "Social ministries work in the community is evangelism. Right?" I listened, amazed, as I heard those around me, even pastors, respond with a "yes" to his question.

I want to address this issue in this month's column. The following is my response to his statement and the question in the above paragraph: "No, that is not right. Social ministry work in the community is not 'always' evangelism."

The answer is "YES" when social organizations offer their clients a *Bible* study that shares Christ, devotional materials, *Bibles*, conversations with volunteers and staff who share the law and Gospel and/or invite clients to attend Christian worship services. Some social ministries even hire chaplains and spiritual life directors to minister to the clients' spiritual needs.

The answer is "NO" if the social organizations do not share Christ with their clients. Certainly, the social organization and those that volunteer or work for these organizations are doing good work. But if they are not teaching clients about *God's Word*, sharing the law and Gospel, or helping clients learn about the Lord and what He has done for them then they are 'not' doing evangelism.

Social organizations associated with various Christian denominations do great public relations and raise the awareness about their church body. Some

people refer to the work social ministries do in the community as "pre-evangelism." Pre-evangelism is building a positive, trusting relationship with someone who doesn't know Christ. I would agree that social ministry work can often be pre-evangelism, but remember that pre-evangelism is 'not' evangelism.

There is another reason why some social ministries do not share Christ with their clients. Sometimes social ministries cannot share *God's Word* with clients because they have accepted financial support from, federal, state and local government agencies that restrict what they can and cannot say to their clients.

Please note that I am not against social organizations. Helping people with their many and varied physical, mental, and social needs is critical in today's world and needs to be done by the Church. What I'm concerned about is redefining what the *Bible* says about this topic and saying that social ministry is always evangelism.

*What does God's Word say about evangelism?* Christians normally associate evangelism (also known as outreach and witnessing) with the Great Commission. Let's review what it says in *Matthew* 28:19. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always."

Those who evangelize (an evangelist or witness) "go and make disciples." Disciples are followers of Jesus. Those who are disciples are baptized in the name of the Triune God. They are forgiven of their sins because of the suffering and death of their Savior, Jesus Christ. They know He rose from the dead and that they too will rise and have eternal life in heaven because of their faith in Him. Disciples (also known as believers or Christians) continue to grow in the knowledge of *God's*

*Word*. And they know God walks with them through good times and bad.

Family Shield Ministries is an organization I founded in 1994. It grew out of my work in evangelism and education. The mission is to educate and equip people to know Christ and grow in *His Word*.

I've written this column on witnessing since June of 1994, taught extensively about various forms of evangelism for over 25 years. I've written several books on evangelism, as well as topics on spiritual nurture and family life. One of my newest books is *Witnessing—A Lifestyle*. This book and the workshops that Family Shield Ministries present using the book as a resource are designed to equip Christians to share their faith in their daily life. I teach that witnessing is more than doing good works and demonstrating our faith to others through actions. Words are also necessary. As Christians we need to learn how to share the law and Gospel effectively (*Matt.* 28:16-20).

No one can be saved (*John* 3:16) by doing good works or being good, but many non-Christians and unsaved people believe that if they are good like the Christians that offered them help with their need, then God will accept them. Some of the social organizations clients may even join a Christian church believing this.

It is the law (*Romans* 3:20) and the Gospel (*Romans* 1:16) that transforms minds and hearts. No one can be saved by their good works (*Eph.* 2:8, 9). But, it is also true that God has prepared works for us to do in advance (*Eph.* 2:10). We do these good works because we love God. But, our good works do not save us.

Family Shield Ministries offers educational programs on evangelism, spiritual growth, and family life. Many social organizations want to use staff and volunteers to share the Gospel with their clients, but often they are not trained to communicate the message of God's love effectively. Family Shield stands ready to help social ministries train volunteers and staff who work with clients in the community so when the Lord opens the door, they can share their faith effectively.

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