

***The Social Vocation of the Church:
Fidelity to its traditions and compliance with the State***

composed by Faith Communities Called to Solidarity with the Poor

1. Current Context

Tenth Avenue Church (TAC) has been running two outreach programs: *Oasis*, a drop-in lunch program that has been operative for the last 9 years, and *Out of the Cold* (OOTC), an evening meal and overnight shelter program held in the church gym for the last 3 years. Through these ministries TAC seeks to serve Jesus through caring for those in need in our community by providing healthy meals and shelter. The programs offer a place of welcome and community with dignity and respect for our guests. *OOTC* and *Oasis* have been designed to serve the immediate neighbourhood and wider community.

In 2005, TAC applied for a development permit in order to build an addition to their existing building. During this process the Planning Department of the City of Vancouver became aware of *Oasis* and *OOTC*. Although other departments were already aware of the existence of the programs (i.e., *OOTC* was established with the help of the Housing Center), the Planning Department decided that these programs were outside the scope of the current “church use” permit and TAC would need to apply for a “social services” permit. TAC did not agree with this assessment as they believed that feeding the poor was within the historic definition of “church usage.” However, TAC applied for a social services permit and the planning department began to process it.

In the spring of 2006, TAC received calls from a neighbour alleging drug use on the front porch of the existing church building. Prior to spring 2006, neighbours had filed just three minor complaints with the church.

A few months later, due to construction issues, the entrance for *Oasis* guests changed from the alley behind the church to the front entrance on West 10th Avenue. Neighbours were sent a letter informing them of this temporary change and were invited to a meeting at the church to discuss any possible concerns or questions. These two events sparked concern amongst several neighbours. The concerns centered on a perceived increase in drug activity and crime in the neighbourhood. Some neighbours believed that the programs of the church were directly contributing to these increases, though subsequent statistical analysis by the Vancouver Police Department confirmed that there were no measurable increases in crime or drug traffic in the surrounding neighbourhood.

Neighbours began to complain to City Hall and the issue attracted media attention from the *Vancouver Courier*, *Vancouver Sun* and other outlets. Two neighbourhood meetings were held in June and July of 2006 followed by a development permit board meeting in September 2006.

The church was granted a conditional permit for the programs. The conditions included developing a management plan in consultation with the neighbourhood, monitoring the city block for potential problems, and some minor building upgrades. TAC has completed the conditions of the permit and is waiting to receive the final permit from the City of Vancouver.

TAC is concerned that the decision to classify “ministry to the poor” as “social service use” and not a “church use” is a precedent-setting decision. Although the church has complied with the conditions of the permit, and desires to work in cooperation with the neighbourhood, it is still not in agreement that the additional permit is required for these core ecclesial activities.

2. The Christian Scriptures and the Church’s Social Obligation

The Christian community of faith draws its vision, mission and identity from many sources, but one of its central sources is the collection of historical texts it designates as its sacred scriptures. These texts represent the writings that the earliest christian communities embraced as significant for their self-understanding and vitally important to their ongoing life. For Christians, the life and teaching of Jesus, and the texts that bear witness to them, are central to the formulation of their vision and mission.

The writer of one such account (Mark) presents a story of Jesus interacting with children. His followers were engaged in a contentious debate about who was the greatest among them, vying for positions of importance and status within the group. Jesus responded by invoking a short maxim: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." In other words, status within his movement was not to be based on the usual markers of social prestige or cultural success, but on service to others, especially the vulnerable and the outcast. As a way of illustrating what he meant, he walked to the edge of the crowd, took a child and brought the child into the middle. He put his arm around the child and uttered this statement: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:33-37).

The gesture of bringing a child into the center and embracing it is significant. On previous occasions, Jesus brought a person with a withered hand into the middle of a village gathering in order to heal him (3:1-5), and he touched those who were suffering from diseases or other afflictions (see 1:41; 3:10; 7:33; 8:22). In the current scene, the child represents all those who are physically, socially, and economically weak, those who are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and exclusion. Jesus precipitates the movement of the child from the periphery to the center, from exclusion to inclusion, from the place of no social importance to a place of recognition and significance. His statement reinforces the child's value by equating the welcome of the child with the welcome of himself and his God. Rather than be pre-occupied with their own status and pursue their own importance, his followers should be welcoming the physically weak, economically vulnerable and socially excluded into their midst. It is in welcoming the victims of injustice, inequality and exclusion and embracing them as brothers and sisters with irreducible dignity and worth that we fulfill our true vocation.

It is integral, not peripheral, then, to the church's fundamental vocation as followers of Jesus to welcome into our midst those who are economically excluded and socially marginalized. We are co-participants with them in the kingdom of God, and so share this reality together. And this orientation of justice and compassion, of care and hospitality toward the weak, the vulnerable and the excluded is not limited to this one passage in Mark's account of Jesus. It runs as a major theme throughout the biblical witness.

One of the key components of the Torah vision of life in the land, articulated in a variety of specific injunctions in Exodus and particularly Deuteronomy, is the mandatory provision for the socially vulnerable and economically weak, so that they might be supported as fully valued, meaningfully participating members of the community. To foster and ensure participation, regular rhythms of inclusion within their community life were set in place that blocked spiraling inequality and marginalization. For example, orphans, widows and strangers were to be welcomed into the annual community festivals and celebrations (Dt 14:28-29; 16:11-14; 26:12-13); farmed produce was to be left in the field for those who were hungry to pick and eat (Dt. 23:24-25; 24:19-22); day laborers were to be paid at the end of each day (Dt. 24:14-15); the socially weak were to be given fair access and due process in legal matters (Dt. 24:17-18); slaves were to be treated fairly and set free after six years with adequate provision for supporting themselves in the community (Dt. 15:12-18).

The biblical prophets had a passionate eye for justice and fervently maintained that care for the socially weak and economically poor was to be woven into the fabric of Israel's political mandate (see Psalm 72) and community life. Amos and Isaiah present God as being deeply offended by practices of community worship and institutional religious celebration that lacked accompanying action on behalf of those vulnerable to violence and exploitation (Amos 5:21-24; Isa 1:12-17). True actions of religious devotion were not restricted to the practices of individual piety or collective rituals (i.e., praying, fasting, etc.), but must include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and providing the homeless with a home (Isa 58:6-7, 10). It is inconceivable that the community of faith addressed and exhorted by these biblical texts could live into its identity and fulfill its mission apart from actions of social justice and human compassion for the weak and vulnerable in the community.

In the Christian scriptural tradition, there is ample teaching regarding the social dimension of the faith. Matthew presents a scene in which feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and welcoming the stranger are identified with doing so to the Lord himself (Matthew 25:31-46). The Johannine writer puts it this way: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3:17-18). James forcefully asserts that simply holding to certain teachings or a system of beliefs accompanied by patterns of religious piety is of no real value. He writes bluntly: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:14-17).

All of this makes abundantly clear that social practices of hospitality, responding to the needs of the poor, and taking up the work of social justice are not peripheral or optional to the religious life of the faith community. On the contrary, such practices are utterly essential to its identity and mission. The Christian scriptural witness forcefully asserts that a believing community that does not incorporate these social practices into its own life and work is failing in its religious vocation.

3. The Christian Church's Historical Fulfillment of its Social Calling

Christian churches have rendered social services from the beginning. The care of “widows and orphans” was cited as the test of “true religion” in the New Testament (James 1:27), and the early church shared the wealth of its constituent members “as each had need” (Acts 2:44-45;4:32ff.).

As the church grew, and particularly after it was sanctioned by the Roman imperial government in the fourth century, the church extended its charitable reach to the populace at large. Pope Gregory I, for example, won lasting esteem for his office as he used both personal and ecclesiastical resources to stave off starvation among the citizenry during a barbarian siege of Rome in the late sixth century. Monasteries throughout Europe grew to provide not only alms, but also shelters for travelers, employment for the destitute, havens for orphans, and schools for the poor. Monastic and fraternal orders were also the grounds out of which the institutions of both university and hospital emerged in the high middle ages.

Canadian history itself has been marked by churches providing resources of money, land, and personnel for the common good. Hospitals (run by denominations as diverse as Roman Catholic and the Salvation Army), recovery and treatment centers for alcoholics and drug addicts, halfway houses for “wayward women” (as the nineteenth century had it) and shelters for battered women (in the twentieth), orphanages, after-school youth centers, vocational training centers, legal clinics, language training for immigrants, and soup kitchens for the desperate all testify to the manifold presence of Christian involvement in Canadian society.

Whether it is the reputation of nineteenth-century “Toronto the Good” that was formed out of such networks of church organizations, or the “All People’s Mission” in Winnipeg that welcomed and integrated waves of immigrants into that province’s social tapestry, or the work among the poor on Vancouver’s East Side—churches have been vital to Canada’s general welfare.

4. Current Challenge

When the City of Vancouver determined that TAC was exceeding its church use function by offering meals and shelter to the city’s poor population, it revealed a very restricted understanding of the church’s identity and mission. Biblical and historical witnesses testify to the church’s essential mandate of service to those in need and solidarity with the poor. This vocation is fundamental to its identity regardless of whether it is consistently realized in specific church practice or not. On this issue there is no room for debate or negotiation: the church is commissioned to live out its calling of practicing social justice and compassion for the vulnerable and poor.

The church is also legally mandated to work for the relief of poverty, which would include both addressing the immediate effects of poverty (providing food and shelter) and working to change economic structures and political policies that create and perpetuate poverty. Undertaking the work of mercy and justice, then, does not require special permission from the governing authorities. From the standpoint of its theology, history and legal status, any definition of the church that reduces its identity and practice to mere doctrinal adherence or religious worship would force it into a state of unfaithfulness to its own vocation.

It might be argued that the City of Vancouver is not prohibiting TAC from fulfilling its social vocation; it is merely providing oversight of its programs and in so doing mediating the conflict between the Neighbours’ fear and concern and TAC’s missional practice. The regulations it imposes are for the orderly administration of the social services being provided, setting up a framework of accountability for TAC with their immediate neighbours and with the City. Viewed in this way, city-imposed permits and their accompanying regulations constitute a benign set of operational restrictions and requirements.

The historical unfolding of this situation and the consequent conditions of operation imposed by the City, however, reveal a rather different analysis. The City began to intervene seriously in TAC's practices when some neighbours raised loud concerns about the programs being offered, and their intense protestations emerged when the entrance for the guests was shifted from the back alley to the front doors on 10th Avenue. It was the sight of more than a hundred poor people in their neighbourhood that sparked the conflict between the neighbours and the church. Although TAC offers many programs within its building to many groups of people, the primary concern of the neighbours, and thus the City, was the presence of poor people among them.

The City, with its requirement of permits, management strategies and reporting mechanisms, is attempting to impose on the church conditions for operation that serve to increase social control of a segment of the population that is viewed as potentially disturbing to the well-being of property owners. So the issue is not that the church offers meals to hundreds of people each week, but that the church offers meals to hundreds of **poor** people each week. The City stepped in to defuse neighbourhood conflict, but did so by imposing conditions on the church that require it to maintain control and surveillance of this population. In this way, the church's stance of solidarity with the poor-- a stance that entails personal care, a deep recognition of individual dignity and worth, and the struggle for social justice-- is profoundly compromised. Those who come to *OOTC* and *Oasis* are friends, brother and sisters, and are to be welcomed as such.

In this case, the City could have helped by initiating a community planning process which would engage the larger community not only in identifying specific problems and developing short term actions to deal with them, but also in developing longer term proactive strategies to address social issues faced by the community. Specific caring programs addressing local needs would then be greatly affirmed when they are embraced by the whole community rather than operate in a context of tension between a church and its neighbours. The City might then be more successful in fostering community partnership rather than in resorting to imposing onerous regulations and overseeing operational compliance. What is needed, we feel, is for the City to promote cooperative community partnerships, to re-accept caring as church use, and not to impose mechanisms of social control over the irruption of community tension.

5. Wider Challenges

Although the focus of this reflection has been on the specific situation arising at TAC, the issues it raises are much broader, as the precedent once set may be applied to all churches in all municipalities. What is ultimately at stake is not whether a church can afford to meet the onerous conditions and cost of the "social service" permit, but the state's restricted definition of a church to that of religious worship only.

The first challenge, then, is for the church to actualize and stand firm in its commitment to the poor, to maintain its struggle for justice, and to welcome the vulnerable and the excluded into its midst, in ways that affirm their dignity and worth. The church must resist the temptation to procure social acceptance and gain political influence through compliance with the interests of the powerful in preserving the *status quo*, which often requires participation in methods of social control that are destructive and dehumanizing. The church must guard against limiting its own mission to promoting acts of individual piety, advocating adherence to personal moral norms, or servicing its own programs of communal worship. The time has come for the church to embrace its true calling to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with its God" (Micah 6:8). If the church is the presence of Jesus in the world, and if the life of Jesus and his stance of being with and for social outcasts is our guide, then we can expect, like our master, to be at odds with those who wield political authority and economic power. Undoubtedly such a stance of solidarity and resistance will entail a cost, but this it must accept as followers of the Crucified One.

The second challenge for the church is to help citizens see beyond the often used terms of homelessness and poverty. Initially those terms were adequate descriptions for smaller-scale and short-term societal problems. Charities were then an appropriate response. As individualism and consumerism intensify in our society, however, self-fulfillment has taken priority over compassion for others, market housing has often been preferred to social housing, and tax-cuts are more desirable than welfare rate increases. As the number of the homeless skyrockets, many citizens, including Christians, are indifferent or afraid to assist the homeless and instead maintain a distance from them. As the distance between people increases, alienation and dehumanization also increases.

Currently at the public level, “homelessness” and “poverty” have become the terms of choice to cover up a much more serious problem of human alienation. Defined simply as a lack of home and income, they imply that the solution lies in an occasional dose of funds and provision of housing. Such “solutions” remove responsibility for the deep and ongoing problem of structural injustice and inequality, and thus blind us from seeing the need for much more substantive change. Since the terms “homelessness” and “poverty” cloak the reality of systemic injustice—they simply name conditions that somehow arose—the solution is reduced to one of voluntary charity rather than structural transformation, and perpetuates the practice of false even if benign generosity.

So here lies the third challenge: to help the City find its rightful place. To be sure, the state has a legitimate interest in, and responsibility for, maintaining order and safety on the streets, neighborhoods, and in all public places. They are also charged with the responsibility to preserve individual citizens' freedoms and rights. However despite popular thinking, their duties are to both paying and less-paying tax-payers (the poor) alike. To prevent slums from growing, their tasks have to include caring for society's needy, enforcing by-laws against irresponsible single room accommodation owners and encouraging caring service by individuals and organizations. The state needs to note the church's continuing value to the state in promoting these concerns of order, justice, and compassion, and realize it is the state's legitimate interest in, and responsibility for, helping the church do those things and interfering with it as little as possible. On the part of the church, it is its divine vocation to embody and remind the state of its responsibilities, to call it to a more restorative version of itself, and to do what it can to promote order, justice, and compassion whether the state cooperates with it or not.

So for the church in Canada today, there is still much that it needs to do to live out its purpose. We must collectively humble ourselves and rediscover our collective mandate to take care of the groaning creation in redemptive ways, and to help others live out our shared human responsibility. In the final analysis, our challenge is not about reconciling **one** church and the state, but by God's grace it is about helping the church, all citizens, and the state to rediscover their rightful places within God's whole creation.

(Entire article will be posted in www.streamsofjustice.org)