

SOCIAL MINISTRY

Haskell M. Miller, *Social Ministry* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000),

Social ministry generally not been emphasized as an integral part of pastoral tradition. Thus, many pastors have been relatively unaware of this dimension of their responsibility. Other have found it convenient and expedient to disregard it. In either case, social ministry has often been limited to dispensing tokens of paternalistic aid. Few pastors have been committed to passionate advocacy of social change to improve the lot of the needy or correct conditions of injustice (Miller P. 13).

But Gradually, the situation is changing. More and more people entering the ministry have become socially aware through their educational backgrounds, the mass media, or personal experience. These individuals are bringing to the pastoral ministry more comprehensive, wholistic understanding of how the gospel relates to conditions of community life. They are eager to interpret the good news and see it implanted in all its fullness and redemptive power (Miller P. 13).

Miller claims that social action is a necessary part of pastoral responsibility. It is neither optional nor avoidable. Everything we do as pastors has social implications (Miller P. 23).

(Ex. 23:11). Miller asserts that the Bible expresses an incessant and unequivocal concern for the poor. Moses on Mount Sinai received instruction that field should lie fallow each seventh year “that the poor of your people may eat” from them (Ex. 23:11) (Miller P. 25).

Amos (2:7) prophesied against those that “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (Amos 2:7) (Miller P. 25).

Prov. 29:7: The author of Proverbs declared: “The righteous know the rights of the poor; the wicked have no such knowledge” (Prov. 29:7).

Luke 6:20: Matt. 11:5: Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). Moreover, he cited the fact that “the poor have good news preached to them” as proof of the authenticity of his ministry (Matt. 11:5).

The God we see in the Bible is deeply concerned about the plight of the poor. Can we doubt that God expects Christians and the church to be concerned also? (Miller P. 25).

According to Miller, poverty is not only causes deprivation and suffering, it humiliates and degrades. Moreover, it evokes a sinful pride in successful people who dwell in its presence behind their barricades of power (Miller P. 25).

The problem is poverty is not matter of scarcity, but rather a difficulty of the mind, heart, of purpose and will. What church must do? This, the church must recognize, is where the gospel is focused.

The gospel seeks a change of spirit, which through the power and grace of God prompts humanity to care more lovingly and adequately for all of its members (Miller P. 25).

Cause and Effect of Poverty: Poverty is not only deprivation; for most of the poor, it is hopelessness. Because they see no chance of improving their lot, many become demoralized and sink into irresponsibility. When this occurs, it gives those with superior advantages an excuse for alienation. It enables them to make judgments and feel justified in the neglect that produced the demoralization (Miller P. 26).

The Rich: Successful, prosperous, middle-class people withdraw from the poor to live in suburbs or special housing projects. There they enjoy a privileged social life as far from the sight of poverty as possible. The wealthy tend to be so imbued with class consciousness that they live behind walls, gates, and guards, as insulated as possible from all other social classes (Miller P. 27).

The plight of the poor, therefore, is explained in terms of powerlessness, discrimination, and absence of the love Jesus spoke about (Miller P.27).

Tax: Where sales taxes exist, the poor pay a larger proportion of their income in taxes than do other people. The usual excuse given by the more prosperous for this disparity is that it is a way for the poor to “pay their share.” This excuse, however, does not take into consideration the fact that the poor have no opportunity to get their fair share in the first place (Miller P. 28).

The Poor in the Court system: Even in the courts, justice is not evenly dispensed. The poor are more heavily penalized, primarily because they do not have the money to pay expensive lawyers to defend them (Miller P. 28).

Welfare system for the poor: If they take refuge in the welfare system, they are subjected to many forms of humiliation. In fact, the welfare system is being operated so reluctantly and negatively that it is being accused of being punitive (Miller P. 28).

Matt. 26:11: You will always have the poor with you: Miller suggests the church not to take comfort in Jesus’ observation that “you always have the poor with you. He was not approving or accepting poverty. He was saying that its existence should not be used as an excuse for neglecting to worship (Miller P. 29).

Advocacy: Miller suggests that we can be part of the solution. “You can teach understanding and fairness. You can pay and demand decent wages. You can vote for economic policies that express ethical concern for the interests of all parties involved. You can stay aware and oppose unfair employment practices, wages, or discriminatory treatment of any kind. You can reject social class attitudes and cultivate attitudes of compassion and caring. Whenever possible, you can help poor people help themselves. You can say on guard against paternalism and seek ways of actively identifying with those who need your help. In short, you can be, and ought to be, advocates for the poor (Miller P. 29).

Miller introduces an excellent outline what socially responsible ministry involves which was found in the report of a seminar held at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC, 1987: (Miller P. 31). Add this statement in Chapter IV, the Mission.

1. Socially Responsible Ministry involves a “radical critique” of society, depending in part on careful listening to the oppressed.
2. There is no neutral ministry. All ministry is socially responsive in some way. Socially Responsible Ministry is a liberating ministry that emerges concretely out of the oppressed community.
3. Socially Responsible Ministry requires social analysis and consciousness of the ethos we live in. It demands personal, institutional, and ecclesial self-critique. It is not the same focusing on social issues.
4. Socially Responsible Ministry features praxis or struggle for liberation of the oppressed. It requires critical awareness of the tendencies that derive from our own social location. It needs memory and vision – past and future.
5. Socially Responsible Ministry follows the logic of *mission dei*, the mission of God, in its wholeness, and participates in the unified mission of the church.
6. Socially Responsible Ministry is oriented to doing justice, making peace, and caring for creation. It requires walking with the oppressed in shared ministry and in working for social policy change. It affirms the communal nature of human existence and is expressed in all basic functions of the church.
7. Socially Responsible Ministry requires “solidarity” – loyalty to disregarded people, not ideological causes. It is rooted in spirituality and love, guided by the vision of shalom. It requires critical analysis and institutional reform (Miller P. 31).

The Biblical Story

The Old Testament is the story of God’s extensive involvement in the affairs of a society of people. It recounts how God was concerned with their pain and suffering. The interest he showed in their liberation from oppression became one of the central themes of the Bible (Haskell Miller P. 47).

Jesus’ passionate concern for human welfare was highly conspicuous, especially his concern for the poor and mistreated (Haskell Miller P. 47).

His emphasis on the kingdom of God had earthly significance as well as spiritual meaning. The love that Jesus advocated had a strongly social, as well as personal, dimension Bible (Haskell Miller P. 48).

Viewed in human terms, Jesus’ cross was the result of his relentless interference with the social order of his day. There was a special social action implication, therefore, in his

challenging declaration that those wishing to follow him must take up their crosses daily and follow his example Bible (Haskell Miller P. 48).

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, his followers, including Peter, Paul, and many others, became notorious disturbers of their societies' status quo. They were genuine social activist Bible (Haskell Miller P. 48).

Haskell Miller suggests pastors to consider the following actions.

Advocating

People suffer many different kinds of injustice. Sometimes they are in no position to do anything about their situation. You and your church can help them by analyzing their plight and becoming their advocates (Haskell Miller P. 64).

Protesting

When the nature of a situation is such that other forms of action seem inappropriate, one of the many forms of protest can be used. This mode of action is direct, confrontational, and always available. It publicizes conditions and can often be effective in producing needed change. Protesting is such a natural way of reacting that it can take many forms that vary in effectiveness. Common forms of protest are picketing, striking, marching, rallying, impeding, resisting, and boycotting (Haskell Miller P. 65).

Cooperating

Other people and agencies within your community are also working for its welfare. You and your church should cooperate with them. This can be a significant form of social action. It speaks loudly of genuine concern for human welfare. Community organizers have often complained that ministers and churches are uncooperative. This is not only a bad image to have, it is also bad churchmanship and a poor expression of Christianity (Haskell Miller P. 65).