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Relational Care as Ministry to the Marginalized

This article seeks to show that the marginalized are as much social and relational beings as the non-marginalized and hence deserve a ministry of intimate loving care which in some circles is known as relational care. Mission to the marginalized may be considered a special ministry because of the difficult conditions people already find themselves in. Nevertheless, what is important is not so much who marginalizes who, but an awareness that as humans we need to re-establish those God-given links with one another. Such links or relationships will not only help us understand our relationship with God, but will also help us affirm one another as his most valued creation regardless of our status, religion, or race. The development and use of a relational care model is essential to those seriously contemplating a ministry to the marginalized.

Who Are the Marginalized?

Marginalized people can be found almost anywhere in the world. But who are they? Is it necessary to look further “out there?” Or is it my neighbor who is marginalized? Within and without the church doors there are many who feel they are not welcomed into full fellowship or acceptance because they are vulnerable in different ways because they are disabled, divorced, illiterate, imprisoned, HIV/Aid stricken, poor, uneducated, or unemployed; or they may be marginalized because of gender, ethnicity, race, or geographic location. John M. Perkins reveals that “we live in a critical hour in which the ‘least among us’ (Luke 9:48) are growing at a frightening rate. We can no longer see the pain and suffering as something that takes place ‘over there’ in Third World settings. We now hear the cries of our own people, especially those in our urban centers” (Perkins 1996:21).

The question of who the marginalized are and even why they are marginalized may be as important as the question of what they need. Many

times the Christian church or community at large thinks the only way to minister or attend to the needs of such people is to provide them with the materials or services which they need the most, but from a distance. Such an attitude often treats the marginalized as objects and not human beings. There is a tendency also by governments and organizations to overlook the fact that marginalized people are as much human as are the privileged and they have the same rights as any person who walks the surface of the earth.

Caf Dowlah observes that “there are literally mountains of evidence that suggest that the LDCs [least developed countries] have increasingly been marginalized in the rapidly globalizing world economy, and much of this debacle can be attributed to economic globalization, to the processes of economic integration of trade, migration, technology, and financial flows around the world, that took place during the second wave of globalization” (Dowlah 2004:12). Consequently, whole nations may be marginalized, sometimes societies or communities, but quite often it is individuals who bear the brunt of marginalization in their daily lives.

But is it only governments that turn a blind eye or worse still, contribute to the marginalization of people? How about the Christian church and its various organizations? How about church members at a personal level? And what does the Bible say about the condition, treatment, and fate of marginalized people?

Serving people—any people—at a material or superficial level will neither bring the intended change to the recipients nor satisfaction to the benefactors. Why? Because human beings are divinely created persons who are related to each other through a common linkage to the proto-humans, Adam and Eve. Humanity was created to love God and to love one another, but they were also created in the image of God. People are relational beings—not cold robotic creations that have no care or concern. God’s question to Cain, “Where is Abel, your brother [or sister]?” (Gen 4:9), is a question for everyone to ponder. Because humans are relational beings, Christians must not only acknowledge that they are responsible and keepers of their brothers and sisters (including the marginalized), but God’s people must also know where they are in each local community.

If human beings are relational beings, it follows then that they will interact relationally, that they will care for one another in a reciprocal and mutual way. This means humans are to exhibit and offer relational care to one another regardless of color, race, religion, status, ethnicity, or geographic origin. Under this setting, marginalization is a misnomer in any true Christian setting. Marginalization then, properly understood, reflects the human attitude toward others gone awry. Marginalization is a manifestation of humanity allowing the venom of disinterest, insensitivity, and

carelessness to poison relationships. A mission to the marginalized is an attempt to reverse this sad phenomenon through a better understanding and practice of relational care.

What Is Relational Care?

Because humans have been created in the image of God, they always have a craving for a loving and caring relationship first with God and, second, with other human beings. But that is not the end of the story—they must be at peace with themselves. In other words, if any of this relating is amiss, then they need relational care to restore it. Until the world church community realizes that the marginalized need to be helped with the provision of a safe environment in which the relational presence of God, the church, and individual is felt, the marginalized could still be the loneliest of all God’s creation in spite of the numerous and often well-intended efforts to meet their material and other needs.

The marginalization of others symbolizes a people whose human connections with others has been bruised, severed, or rendered dysfunctional. Reuniting those connections or mending those relationships is the basis for relational care. Without relational care, few will feel the urge to offer charitable services to other human beings. Engendering any rewarding human linkages would indeed involve “differentiating between the dysfunctional and functional connections that people commonly form with other people, possessions, objects, ideas, or experiences” (Marx 2010). This then calls for a comprehensive profiling of all the communities in the target areas with the aim of establishing who are the marginalized, what were the initial and current causes of this marginalization and—most important—what are the present barriers to the restoration of self-worth, relationships to one another, and to significant others.

Lessons on relational care to the marginalized may be drawn from three areas that I discuss below: Jesus, the New Testament Church, and the *Ubuntu/Botho* African philosophy models.

Jesus Christ: The Exemplar in Relational Care to the Marginalized

The ministry of Jesus on earth was one of love, compassion, and restoration within an intentional relationship which he offered to all. Jesus had his own group of marginalized people among whom he served. According to Robert J. Karris, the gospel of John depicts Jesus’ ministry to a category which included “those who are made marginal because they do not know the law (7:49), those who are marginal because they are not Jews, but Samaritans (4:4-42), those who are marginal because they are

chronically ill (9:1-41), those who are marginal because they are women” (Karris 1990:11).

One of the reasons why Jesus effectively ministered to all, but specifically and successfully to the marginalized, was that he identified with or was practically one with them. He characterized the marginalized in many ways: “There is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from him. He was despised, and we did not esteem him” (Isa 53:2-3). No wonder it was the marginalized that responded to him most effectively. Yet it is clear that they saw some relatedness between themselves and Jesus. They could identify with him and that attracted them to him.

Furthermore, “Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) shows us a pathway to a deeper relationship with the poor [and marginalized]” (Perkins 1996:33). His communication with the woman showed that Jesus had not allowed himself to be consumed by the syndrome of marginalization. Even the woman could not believe his unique way of doing things, and she asked: “How is it that you, being a Jew, ask drink from me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans” (John 4:9).

Here we find Jesus showing love and ministry to a marginalized community in another country, to a person marginalized by her gender, and to one who was also marginalized for her shady way of life (prostitution). Jesus demonstrates the power of the gospel and shows that he is willing to sacrifice his life for the marginalized. His ministry was that of one who crossed barriers, creating a new Christian community, restoring Israel as a community where sinners such as Samaritans and Gentiles were not only invited but welcomed (Motyer 1995:76). If this were not true he would not have risked his life by associating with and healing the marginalized or by becoming their spokesperson on issues of social justice. But of course all this came with consequences: “A final reflection upon a Messiah who ministered to the marginalized is that this Messiah himself became marginalized. He identified himself so much with the marginalized that he himself was thrown out of the synagogue. And then condemned by both religious and political authorities, he became, as the crucified, the symbol of the marginalized” (Karris 1990:109).

With all this activity and sacrifice, it is disturbing that the New Testament church still missed the point on the importance of an inclusive ministry regardless of a person’s status. In the next section, we see Jesus starting all over again to re-emphasize the need to do ministry in a way that embraces the marginalized.

The New Testament Church and Relational Care to the Marginalized

The New Testament Church was first built on a membership which was largely Jewish. Gentiles were the marginalized group. It took drastic divine intervention for Peter—a Jewish Christian himself—to acknowledge the duty to minister to Gentiles. In Acts 10, God sends Peter a vision in which he is instructed to “kill and eat” the contents of a great sheet which was lowered to him from heaven “wherein [were] all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.” While Peter revolts at God’s instruction to partake of the unclean things three times, he finally perceives God’s purpose for this vision.

A deeper understanding on how to treat the Gentiles occupies Peter’s mind and he is able to say to Cornelius and his other Gentile companions, “You know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come to one of another nation: but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Peter then utters one of his greatest fundamental truths concerning God’s relations with humanity: “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons. But in every nation he that fears him, and works righteousness, is accepted with him” (Acts 10:34-36).

Not only was Peter converted from the sin of marginalizing people of other nations, he shared his new experience with the hard-line Jews who still thought otherwise, vehemently defending his ministry in the house of Cornelius. It is amazing that “they that were of the circumcision” who had contented with Peter for associating and ministering to Gentiles, also saw the light and they too uttered in unison: “Then has God also to the Gentiles granted repentance to life”—holding their peace and glorifying God” (Acts 11:18).

There are several lessons that can be drawn from Peter’s experience in relation to the ministry to the marginalized. First, it must be known that as much as God “is no respecter of persons,” no other human has the right to segregate, oppress, discriminate, or demean others on whatever basis. Second, God expects all who intend to do a ministry to the marginalized to repent as individuals as well as corporately as a body of any practice, attitude, propensity, or inclination to marginalize others. Last, but not least, when the marginalized are treated with dignity, love, and care, they are most likely to trust the care-givers and even more importantly, will likely become receptive to the Word of God.

It follows then that no one should attempt a ministry to the marginalized, including the Adventist Church, if there has not been personal repentance of the offense of marginalizing people. Jesus says, “In as much

as you have it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me" (Matt 25:40). A ministry draped with hypocrisy is a ministry weak and fragile.

If all were to experience conversion before they begin a ministry to the marginalized the ensuing ministry would reach the same proportions as Paul's did to the marginalized Gentile world. Paul was converted while persecuting the Christians and was commissioned by Jesus to his special ministry "to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). God needs apostles to the marginalized as much as he needed the apostle to the Gentiles. However, as mentioned above, conversion is a prerequisite.

***Ubuntu/Botho* and Relational Care to the Marginalized**

The Bantu peoples of sub-Saharan Africa have a philosophy from which the Christian church can learn. *Ubuntu* (South Africa) or *Botho* (Botswana) is an African humanist philosophy which encourages members of the group to enhance human dignity in their communities. Under the Botswana setting, *Botho* is "one of the tenets of African culture: 'It encourages people to applaud rather than resent those who succeed. It disapproves of anti-social, disgraceful, inhuman and criminal behavior, and encourages social justice for all. *Botho* as a concept must stretch to its utmost limits the largeness of the spirit of all Batswana. It must permeate every aspect of our lives, like the air we breathe, so that no Motswana will rest easy knowing that another is in need" (Botho and Vision 2016).

Under the *Botho* philosophy, an individual cannot be larger than the community. Thus, one has to be sensitive to others, showing care and love to them; in reciprocity, the community loves each person in return. *Ubuntu/Botho* has proven to be one of those footprints of God in those cultures that had never learned of Jesus. Indeed the command, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12) reigns supreme in the spirit of *Ubuntu/Botho*. Incorporating the *Ubuntu/Botho* philosophical construct into Christian practice will have dramatic results in understanding an individual's role in the community.

Certainly *Ubuntu/Botho* sets a distinctive between Western individualism and African communalism. This can be observed in the fourteen *Ubuntu/Botho* virtues: hospitality, compassion, empathy, tolerance, respect, interdependence, collective solidarity, patience, kindness, reconciliation, cooperation, warmth, forgiveness, and supportiveness (Hanks 2008). Clearly all of these virtues are relational. Marginalized people would be better served by Christians who possess these virtues; after all they are all biblical ethical virtues.

Relational Care: Implications for a Ministry to the Marginalized

Ministry to the marginalized must move from the fringes to the forefront, from the back streets and alleys to the main thoroughfares of ministry. As Christians, God's love for us as his creation must direct our altruistic passions towards other human beings. Relational care as ministry to the marginalized is nothing but Christian endeavor based on love that begets love, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8b). This love may not be directed in only selective ways while failing to reflect it in the same way Jesus demonstrated that love for "love is born in the space of relation" (Reynolds 2005:197). Marginalized people's responses to gospel outreach are more positively influenced by loving ministering hands than by faceless charitable gifts. Loving from a distance is indeed the antithesis of human to human love and interaction.

There will be considerable self-discovery whenever serving among the marginalized. Because marginalized people are vulnerable, relational care givers have no choice but to allow themselves to also become vulnerable through opening up of themselves and facing the possibility that they too could be marginalized. For example, the marginalized at times may be broken people needing healing and restoration. Unless the relational care givers themselves come to see their own brokenness before God, they may never live and communicate at the same wave length with the people they want to share their life, gift, or help with.

Conclusion

Mission to the marginalized needs a loving human touch if people are to experience a more meaningful relationship with God and with other people. Christians are the agents for this relational care. Jesus demonstrated relational care when he served marginalized individuals, select groups, and even communities in areas of poverty, hunger, sickness, demon possession, and social injustice. The New Testament church aptly embraced the new command to minister to marginalized Gentiles. This called for the church to change its negative attitudes towards them with the result that the greatest growth in the church was due to the conversion of the Gentiles who felt the warmth of transformed Christians.

Today, the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other Christian denominations have various entities such as ADRA and World Vision International which are constantly seeking to restore the dignity of humanity in the spiritual, social, physical, and emotional areas of life. These services will be more appreciated if the relational care givers resonate with the spirit of *Ubuntu/Botho*—a humane interaction inclined to restore the dignity of all people in any community.

Perhaps before engaging in a ministry to the marginalized, everyone should ask the following questions: "My brother, my sister, what are you doing for Christ? Are you seeking to be a blessing to others? Are your lips uttering words of kindness, sympathy, and love? Are you putting forth efforts to win others to the Savior?" (White 1948:39). However, one would need to "become acquainted with them [as] preaching will not do the work that needs to be done. . . . This work cannot be done by proxy. Money lent or given will not accomplish it. Sermons will not do it. By visiting the people, talking, praying, sympathizing with them, you will win hearts. . . . To do it, you will need resolute, persevering faith, unwearied patience, and a deep love for souls" (White 1948:41).

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