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## SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE BY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN ZIMBABWE: HOW CHURCHES IN HARARE AND BINDURA TOWNS ARE TACKLING SOCIAL CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** *Social work seeks to provide answers to social problems. Its history can be traced to philanthropic organisations and religious institutions like churches that made an effort to provide relief to the disadvantaged members of society. The need for standardised service through trained personnel in the provision of relief resulted in social work developing into a fully fledged profession. However, despite the advent of a new profession, the churches did not relinquish their social work related relief roles. Some churches integrated the new profession into their philanthropic duties yet others continued without including professional social work. This study looked at how churches in Zimbabwe are tackling social challenges and how their techniques relate to professional social work methods. It concluded that whilst churches are using the methods of social work, they lack trained personnel to meet the demands of professional social work. The paper recommends training of the church in social work for whilst at the same motivating the social work profession to build a strong interest in church based social work practice.*

**Keywords:** *Social work, church, social work methods, Zimbabwe*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The values of social work accentuate that its main target are disadvantaged people. Correspondingly, the values of the Christian faith emphasise that it endeavours to look after the poor, orphans, and widows. In the Bible, the Christian faith teaches its followers to love thy neighbour and thy neighbour is any person in need of help as evidenced by the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Social work's origins can be traced to charitable activities of philanthropic organisations and churches. The link between social work and churches is in the values of helping the poor and those in distress to overcome their social challenges.

## **SOCIAL WORK ORIGINS**

Social work evolved in response to the social problems consequent from industrialisation in Europe and America. Industrialisation contributed to the weakening of the traditional social support structures and there was need for substitute mechanisms to deal with the new social problems. One of the challenges created by industrialisation was destitution in urban areas. This increased as more and more people migrated from rural areas into the urban centres. Consequently, religious groups and humanitarian organisations attempted to cure the problems through relief assistance and religious teachings. These volunteers and humanitarians saw the problem of poverty as a temporary one and they felt they could overcome it. They established poorhouses, homes for the aged, hospitals and orphanages with financial support from governments of the day.

Several laws were passed in the United Kingdom in an attempt to deal with the problems of poverty and destitution. Such laws included the Poor Law of 1601, which was refined in 1662 and the Work House Law of 1696. These laws sought to categorise people in need of care and to provide relief to those most in need. The 1696 law sought to ensure that able bodied poor people were housed in work houses where they provided labour.

In the mid nineteenth century scientific studies were carried out and these studies exposed the vastness of the problem of poverty in the United Kingdom. By the end of the nineteenth century philanthropy was losing its credibility as a major social institution for remedying social distress. The poverty situation was worsening despite the efforts of churches and philanthropists. This saw the dawning of a new philosophy in the relief and emergency of coordinated charity activities and training of volunteers. In 1896 a training course for charity workers or social physicians (now Social Workers) was established in London. Further



improvements of this training resulted in the birth of professional social work. Thereafter, social work training spread throughout the world including Zimbabwe mainly through missionaries and colonial governments.

According to Clifford (1966) and Chogugudza (2009) Social Work in Zimbabwe emerged as a response to social problems such as crime, prostitution and destitution that were consequent to urbanisation. The training of Social Workers was started in 1964 with the opening of the School of Social Work (then School of Social Service) in Harare which was an affiliate college of the University of Rhodesia. The school was opened by Father Edward (Ted) Rodgers, a Jesuit Father of the Roman Catholic Church. Father Rodgers, now 87 years at staying at the Corpus Christi Jesuit Community in Bournemouth, Dorset, England, is a social worker, teacher and priest. At its inception, the school enrolled students who had attained junior certificate and these were trained to obtain a Certificate in Social Welfare. The school has grown to become a department under the University of Zimbabwe and currently awards a degree in social work at both graduate and post graduate levels.

As can be deduced from the foregoing discussion, both the development of social work at a global level and at a national level in Zimbabwe has roots in the philanthropic activities of churches.

## **THE HOLY BIBLE AND THE POOR**

Various Biblical verses have spelt out the clear link between social work and humanitarian assistance to people in need and those in distress. Some of these are indicated below.

*Deuteronomy 15 vs 11* "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open- handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land"

*Matthew 19 vs 21* " If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven ."

*Deuteronomy 15 vs 7-8* "...if there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard- hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother. Rather be open- handed and freely lend him whatever he needs".

*Proverbs 22 vs 9* "...a generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."



## **INCREASING GAP BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL WORK IN WESTERN COUNTRIES**

The advent of social work as a profession no doubt furthered the objectives of the church. However, as time went on, the social work profession operated separately from the church. This gap could have resulted in two challenges. Firstly, the church could not adopt the preferred methods of social work. Secondly, the role of social work deteriorated in other countries where professional social work grew strongly.

Tiritto (2012:17) argued that:

*The church and its resources (its people) have been overlooked in the provision of social services. The agenda for the coming decade must include efforts to link social work with the church to contribute to the development of a society in which principles of charity are again incorporated.*

The church is strategically positioned to play a significant role in social services. According to Cnaan (1997), 71 percent of Americans claim to be members of a church or synagogue and 41 percent report having attended church seven days prior to the survey. These views were supported by Tobin, Ellor and Anderson- Ray (1986) who reported that 3 out of 4 persons more than 60 years old report that religion is important in their lives whilst 4 out of 5 of persons more than 65 years old attend church or synagogue regularly. Further to this, Tirrito and Spencer-Amado (1996) reported that people's spirituality increases morale and happiness. They also argued that church leaders are respected and they are leaders in society. Studies like the ones alluded to here have not been carried out in Zimbabwe but estimates for those who attend churches may be above 80%.

## **THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL SERVICES IN ZIMBABWE**

In Zimbabwe, churches have been instrumental in the delivery of health, education and food relief services. Some churches have helped in the political liberation of the country whilst others are contributing to improvements of human rights.

As noted earlier, over 80% of Zimbabweans may be church goers. They attend various churches. These churches may be grouped as Christian and non-Christian churches. Christian churches, which are the bases of this study, may be classified as follows:

- Churches of Western origin
  - Catholic Church.



- Protestant churches like Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Salvationists and Adventists.
- Churches formed in Zimbabwe or Africa (African churches)
  - Apostolic churches (*vaapostora and church dzemweya*) like Johanne Marange, Johanne Masowe, African Apostolic Church-Mwazha, Apostolic Faith Church-Mugodhi and Guta raMwari.
  - Zion churches like Zion Christian Church Mbungo.
  - Reformed churches like Reformed Church in Zimbabwe.
  - Pentecostal churches like Zimbabwe Apostles of God Africa (ZAOGA), Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), United Family International Church (UFI), Hear the Word Ministries and Family of God (FOG).

All these churches have played an important role in the provision of social services in Zimbabwe. Some of these specific roles include:

- Mission primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions ranging from schools, colleges, vocational institutions and universities. For example, Mission primary and secondary schools were established right across the country by churches with foreign origin. Locally formed churches have also played their part. Zion church runs Mutendi School, AFM church runs Rufaro School, Johanne Marange runs St Noah School whilst ZAOGA runs Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU).
- Mission clinics and hospitals like Howard Hospital of the Salvation Army, Karanda Hospital of the Evangelical Alliance Mission and Mbuya Dorcas Hospital for ZAOGA.
- Homes for the elderly and orphans for example Matthew Rusike by the Methodists and Bumhudzo Old People's Home by the Salvation Army.
- Food relief services offered by the Catholic Relief Services, World Vision and Lutheran Relief Services.

### **INCREASING ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE SOCIAL SERVICES**

In 2012, the Department of Social Services (DSS) reported that the church was playing an important role in caring for orphans and other vulnerable children, caring for people living with HIV/AIDs, providing food relief, providing agriculture and generally to improve health and education. The Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) together with the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) reported that on top of services highlighted by the DSS, churches



are also contributing to peace and equality through promotion of human rights, mediation in politics and promotion of tolerance to reduce violence.

In achieving these objectives discussed above, churches utilise a variety of methods from education, social, theology, agriculture, counselling, psychology, business and others. However, the most dominant techniques they use are also the most dominant methods in social work. These methods include casework, groupwork and community work. Specific techniques include counselling, social assistance, income generating projects, community participation and advocacy.

In contrast to the deteriorating role of the church in social services in Western countries, it can be seen that in Zimbabwe, the role is increasing. However, this increasing role of the church has not corresponded with an increase in adoption of professional social work.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Social work can be practiced in various settings including churches, hospitals, non-governmental organisations and many others. With the rising levels of poverty, increase in orphans mainly due to HIV and AIDS, climate change leading to droughts and high levels of unemployment, a lot of churches provide relief to their members and the community in general. This has been done through provision of food and other material hand-outs, counselling, provision of medical assistance to members and capital to start income generating activities in communities. These services are provided to members using the main methods of social work like casework, group work and community work. The providers of these services are not trained in social work. In the Christian faith, those offering social services include pastors, church administrators, deacons, union leaders and others. The lack of training can affect effectiveness of their methods and may disadvantage members.

### **AIM OF THE STUDY**

This study aimed at assessing the social work interventions being utilised by churches in reducing the challenges of their members and members of the community who are in distress. The study hopes to motivate the church in Zimbabwe to be interested in professional social work at the same time motivating social workers to offer their services to churches.



## **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

This research involved 40 Christian churches in Bindura and Harare Towns. Initially Bindura town was targeted but it failed to raise the required number of respondents hence the addition of Harare. These two towns were selected because they were convenient to the researchers in the face of resource and time limitations. Each church provided a single respondent. The researchers targeted the leaders of church stations but this was only achieved at 21 stations. The research tool was a standard questionnaire for all the 40 respondents. The questionnaire asked questions relating to background of the respondent and their church; understanding of social work; social challenges respondents were dealing with; techniques used to solve the challenges; and utilisation of social work methods. Four key informants were interviewed used an in-depth interview guide. These were two senior social workers and two senior pastors. All respondents gave their consent after it was explained that the research was confidential and non-judgemental. Data was analysed with the help of Microsoft Office computer packages and thematic content analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Background to respondents and churches**

Of the 40 respondents, 52.5% (n=21) were pastors with a pastoral qualification from a bible school and 47.5% (n=19) held various capacities within the church. These constituted 9 deacons, five church elders and five pastor's wives. All respondents were involved in addressing social challenges of congregants.

The churches that participated included 25 Pentecostal churches, 5 Roman Catholic churches and 10 Protestant churches. An futile attempt was made to include apostolic churches as locating possible respondents was difficult.

None of the respondents had training in social work. Training in social work related qualifications was available for 50% (n=20) of the respondents. The training included certificate of attendance in HIV/AIDS trainings, child protection, counselling and home economics.

### **Understanding of social work**

Questioned on their understanding of social work, the respondents generally showed an understanding of the profession. 77.5% (n=31) were able to define social work. However,



12.5% (n=5) confused social work with social welfare whilst 10% (n=4) showed lack of understanding of social work.

Asked on the role of social work, 90% (36%) positively pointed out the roles of social work. Main roles included provision of social welfare, providing social support, counselling and promoting human development. Nonetheless, 10% (n=4) linked social work to physical caring for the elderly, orphans and person with disabilities.

After an explanation was given on what social work involves, respondents were asked to shade light on the relevance of social work in their churches. All respondents (100%, n=40) pointed out that social work was indeed relevant to their churches.

Probed on why they do not have social workers working for their congregation, 100% (n=40) said their social programmes were limited to warrant a full time social worker but 50% (n=20) went on to say that their mother church could not employ a social worker because of limited funding. All respondents (100%) indicated that they would hire a social worker if they could afford salaries. However, 37.5% (n=15) said they will prefer to hire a social worker who belongs to their church.

All respondents (100%) said they would enrol for a qualification in social work if resources are made available.

### **Social challenges dealt with by churches**

Asked on their view of social problems 80% (n=32) said social problems emanate from Satan and evil spirits. Further to this, 20% (n=8) said social problems have various causes including evil spirits. The types of social challenges dealt with by the church included the ones shown on Table 1.

TABLE 1: Distribution of respondents by social challenges they deal with

<i>Type of Social Challenge</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Delinquents	40	100%
Child abuse	35	87.5%
School fees	30	75%
Domestic violence	22	55%
Divorce	18	45%
Infidelity	10	25%
Income	9	22.5%
Housing	9	22.5%



### How churches are dealing with social problems

The researcher wanted to know how the churches are dealing with social challenges. Their responses are indicated below:

TABLE 2: Distribution of respondents by methods of dealing with social challenges

<i>Method of intervention</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Prayer	40	100%
Fasting	35	87.55
Handouts (cash or in-kind)	22	55%
Counselling	30	75%
Groups	18	45%
Training	10	25%
Income generating project	9	22.5%
Referring	9	22.5%

### SOCIAL WORK METHODS AND ACTIVITIES EMPLOYED BY CHURCHES

Tallied with social work methods, the specific activities that were mentioned by respondents are summarised below.

TABLE 3: Social work methods and activities employed by churches

<i>Method of Social Work</i>	<i>Activity</i>
Casework	Providing counselling, food handouts, shelter, payments for health, school fees and clothes.
Groupwork	Camps for children and youths and support groups for widows and single mothers.
Community work	Running schools, health centres, training centres and institutes including two Universities, day care centres, income generating projects, housing schemes, support for prisoners and street kids.
Administration	Working with stakeholders and mainly the Department of Social Services to help children in need of care, facilitate adoptions and fosters as well as HIV/AIDS programmes.
Research	None of the researched churches was directly involved in research.

### DISCUSSION

The church continues to play the role of sharing the burden of the poor and providing an opportunity for people who are socially dysfunctional to gain capacity to function. In its



quest to achieve this, the church has also joined other stakeholders in areas like HIV/AIDS and child protection where vital training is available.

It is uncommon for people to confuse social work with social welfare since they have a common root and a common mission. However, it is worrying to find church leaders who are unaware of social work, a key profession in the management of social issues mainly to do with children and families. This calls for the social work profession to market itself. Marketing increases the number of people, including church leaders who would want to acquire a social work profession and at the same time, increase employment opportunities for qualified social workers.

The list of social challenges being dealt with by the church proves that these are the same challenges social workers are facing in Zimbabwe today (4). On the one hand, the techniques and intervention methods being used by churches, except for prayer and fasting, align to social work methods supporting the need for training.

Overuse of prayer and fasting by church leaders as a way to solve social challenges aligns well with their background and teachings from the bible. However, it diverts from the principles of social work which believe that social problems originate from the individual and his/her environment. Social work, moved by rigorous social inquiry, refutes that problems may arise from supernatural beings. Social workers believe that supernaturalism affect the way professionals handle problems in society. They believe that looking at problems as emanating from evil spirits and Satan takes blame away from the individual and society.

Whilst churches, rely heavily on traditional methods of social work like casework and group work, it is encouraging to note that their community work is outstanding. Community work, unlike group work and casework, is developmental. As a method, community work tackles the causes of poverty.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study recommends training of church leaders in social work. The Certificate in Social work offered by the University of Zimbabwe and the Women's University may fill this gap. Noting that the church is not well conversant with social work, it is suggested that social workers in Zimbabwe should approach churches to provide them with social work services at voluntary, part time and full time basis. It is time the social work profession markets



itself, so that it is known and social workers are consulted in matters that directly involve children and families. It also recommended that during their training, pastors should have a course that fully addresses social issues and methods of intervention, of course in line with church doctrines. It might also be useful to adopt dual programmes, for example, a dual degree programme in social Work and theology or Theology and Social Work. This way, the twin and related objectives of ministry and social service may be effectively achieved.

## CONCLUSION

The church deals with social issues that are dealt with by social workers as their core function. They employ methods and activities of social work in dealing with such social challenges. However, in terms of personnel, the church is ill equipped to deal with these challenges. Given that the church is contributing significantly to dealing with multiple social challenges in Zimbabwe, there is need to strengthen the role of the church. One of the ways to achieve this is through professionalising social work practice by churches in Zimbabwe

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