



Teaching Leaflet

Legacies of Care Lesson Five: The Church's Response

“Recent History: Turbulent Decades”

The Great Depression

The stock market crash in 1929, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl derailed the myth of American prosperity, success and indestructibility. The nation that viewed itself as “God’s Favored,” suddenly was thrust into economic ruin. Even the “worthy” found themselves bankrupt, homeless and waiting in soup lines. The structures that society had depended upon to support it, even for those who worked hard, had collapsed. In a few short months, all knew what it was like to be poor.

The church and individuals stepped into the gap as much as they were able. People shared what they had. They seemed to understand as they had not before that the unkempt man who knocked at the backdoor and asked if he could rake leaves for a sandwich could well be their father or brother or son. There was a rare unity and commonality inspired by the nation's misfortune. Even government was not prepared for the economic devastation of this great depression! This served as the precursor for the creation of the Social Security Act of 1935.

Government to the rescue

Franklin D. Roosevelt, first elected president in 1932 and serving in that office until his death in 1945, ushered in unprecedented federal aid and assistance to lift a destitute nation to its feet. His New Deal included the Social Security Act, and his Works Project Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps put thousands of Americans back to work. Once again, every man had an opportunity to work and make his own way – all through efforts provided by the federal government. Women would not enter the workforce in any significant way until the World Wars of 1914 and 1941, and after the first war, they quickly returned home.

This period of time became the demarcation point in more recent contemporary society at which government accepted primary responsibility for the social welfare of its citizens. The idealization of the “work ethic” quickly returned as Roosevelt provided opportunity, and by the time America entered the Second World War, the concept of merit concerning the poor was firmly in place again. The Wars brought renewed prosperity to America; women stayed in the workforce following WWII, forever changing this economic dynamic; and the gap between the wealthy and the poor widened. Those on the welfare rolls of the nation rose dramatically.

The Sixties rock the nation

A number of societal forces shifted dramatically during the 1960s, shaking the nation and its citizens to their core. A spirit of anti-authoritarianism rocked the government, the church, political parties, inner cities and the culture. Racial tension between whites and African Americans escalated, women protested for equality in the workplace, free love and experimentation with hallucinatory drugs enchanted the nation's youth. Meanwhile, anti-war sentiment against the United States' engagement in Vietnam and distrust in the Nixon and then Johnson presidencies was unprecedented. The assassinations of three of the country's brightest leaders – John F. Kennedy in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, and Robert F.

E Kennedy in June 1968 – stunned the American people. Once again, the country was in chaos as the dependable systems of the past failed to adapt and respond to massively changing societal needs.



Although the white, Protestant churches in large part sidestepped the turbulence outside their narthex doors during this period, the African American churches did not. Their pastors and leaders pressured the government to address the issues of poverty and hunger, especially among African Americans. King's leadership in the Civil Rights Movement aroused the sleeping lion of inequality and racism.

Church involvement during this time included the initiation of many self-help programs to address teen pregnancy and substance abuse.

LBJ's War on Poverty

Several significant federal aid programs were begun during the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 and his War on Poverty, which he envisioned would overcome poverty and usher in a Great Society, began in 1965. This legislation ushered in many of the social welfare systems we still rely upon today, including:

- Voting Rights Act
- Affirmative Action
- Economic Opportunity Act
- Older Americans Act
- Administration for Children and Families
- Medicare and Medicaid
- Food Stamp Program
- Elementary and Secondary School Education Act

Family values of the Seventies

The 1970s brought the Watergate Scandal, the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon, and the Iran Hostage Crisis during Jimmy Carter's administration. Economic recession and gas shortages created financial stress. The American Psychological Association issued a statement that homosexuality is not a mental illness, which created a new dialogue about the definition of family, with the gay agenda mobilizing on the heels of the APA announcement.

The Catholic Church, in response to these events and to the 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision on abortion, aligned with the Republican Party, creating the morally conservative nature of the party. Many other mainline churches that previously had focused on social ministry began to focus more on internal structure, maintenance of programs and boosting membership (Hessel, 1992). The church also began relocating ministries to help individuals out of their buildings and relied on hired personnel instead of church volunteers to run the programs.

Reagonomics and The New Poor in the Eighties

Tired of chaos and the perceived moral decline, the nation elected Ronald Reagan for two terms as president beginning in 1980, welcoming his moral, social and economic conservatism. It was in this decade that the Moral Majority or Christian Right gained popularity and political power, championing – if not issuing the clarion call for – a return to morality and conservatism. This moralistic agenda resurrected the belief that individual flaws and weaknesses were the main reasons for the increasing numbers of people on the welfare rolls.

Reagan called for increased involvement from all sectors of U.S. society to address social welfare needs. In essence, he challenged the nonprofit sector and churches, in particular, to meet the social welfare needs of the country.

His economic mandate called for extreme budget cuts in education, job training, public service employment and social services. Despite his assurances that people in need would not suffer, Reagonomics created what became known as "The New Poor." Individuals suffering with mental health problems who had been in institutions and hospitals were turned out into the streets, with no means to continue their medications and with no place to live. Homelessness in America escalated dramatically.

E Reagan's policies were influenced by the work of Marvin Olasky, a journalism professor at the University of Texas, who researched the work of the church in meeting the needs of the poor during the Great Depression. Olasky was a proponent then and now that the church is more successful in meeting social welfare needs than the government. He believed that if the churches could meet the needs of so many people during the Great Depression, then it could surely meet the needs of the poor in today's society. This ideological perspective was the start of what has continued to impact the nation's response to those in need from the early days of Reagan's presidency into the first decade of the 21st century.

Reagan's ambitious attempt in the 1980s to scale back the welfare state failed because of public opposition, but the groundwork he laid would influence Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush in the succeeding years.

Compassionate Conservatism: The Nineties

George H.W. Bush continued to emphasize conservative values, which included an attack on the "culture" of welfare. He blamed liberals for this environment and the welfare state it created. He tried to make social welfare reform a state issue and promised to waive certain federal regulations to expedite this shift.

Bill Clinton assumed the presidency in 1992 promising to "end welfare as we know it." He proposed providing health care and job training to welfare recipients, requiring them to hold fulltime work within two years. Once again, Olasky was an influence on presidential policy-making. Olasky's 1992 book, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, stated that the responsibility for caring for the poor should be moved away from the government to individuals and private organizations, including the church. He believed the church gave the most personalized care to the poor and also the strict discipline that he believed was needed, in some cases, to lift the poor out of poverty (Bartkowski & Regis, p. 4). Olasky's premise was based on the possible transformation of the poor so that they would no longer be dependent on the distribution of food, clothing, or shelter by any entity.

This "compassionate conservatism" led Congress to enact the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, which established Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in 1997, effectively ending 60 years of federal entitlement for poor families. This era created welfare-to-work programs as a way to effectively address general poverty and to move people from "generational poverty" to independence from government aid.

Clinton's administration also opened an office for Faith Based Initiatives, but it did not become fully active until George W. Bush's administration.

Faith-based initiatives

George W. Bush, with the support of the Christian Right, has continued the social agenda of the previous administrations. During his first term of office, the Faith Based Initiative Office was fully activated, preparing the way for churches and parachurch organizations to assume responsibility for many social welfare functions.

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