

# Background

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## The Difference One Church Can Make

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People are in need in towns across America. Who is responsible for meeting their needs? Who bears responsibility for acting for the public good in our communities?

While some look immediately to the government to provide solutions, local church congregations have enormous potential to meet people's needs and advance social welfare.

Consider the case of one middle-sized church in Leesburg, Florida. In this town of fewer than 25,000 people, many live in poverty, drug and alcohol addiction are rampant, and a quarter of the population lacks health insurance. Where can they turn for help?

An alcoholic named Bob received help at a local men's center. Sierra,<sup>1</sup> an 11-year-old who was abused and abandoned by her parents, found a safe place to live at a nearby children's shelter. Doug, an elderly black man diagnosed with hypertension, asthma, and a severe lung disease, was cared for at a nonprofit clinic for the uninsured. In each case, Bob, Sierra, and Doug received more than adequate care from ministries of the First Baptist Church (FBC) of Leesburg.<sup>2</sup>

In case after case, FBC's ministries have succeeded in mending broken lives and serving the public good. Their success is no accident. It is attributable to at least three characteristics embedded in FBC's approach. Members who provide help demonstrate:

- A deep sense of personal responsibility and love for those in need,

### Talking Points

- A single congregation can make a great difference in a community, as the First Baptist Church of Leesburg, Florida, demonstrates.
- Members of FBC show a deep sense of personal responsibility and love for those in need, motivation rooted in an abiding sense of belonging to their community, and faith that touches all areas of the lives of people they serve.
- FBC is an example of social responsibility going hand in hand with personal faith. Although members strive to serve all aspects of people's well-being—emotional and spiritual as well as physical and financial—they remain faithful to their core beliefs.
- The ministry village at FBC demonstrates that, for its members, religion is much more than a private hobby. By living out their faith in ways that directly shape and serve their communities, churches have powerful potential to meet people's needs and advance social welfare.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/bg2167.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/bg2167.cfm)

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- Motivation rooted in an abiding sense of belonging to their community, and
- Faith that touches all areas of the lives of the people they serve.

By living out their faith in ways that directly shape and serve those outside the church's walls, volunteers at FBC demonstrate the difference that one church can make in the surrounding community.

### A Sense of Responsibility and Love

When faced with pressing social needs, the members of FBC of Leesburg look first to their own congregation for solutions. "Many churches feel that when something needs to be done, they must hire someone to do it," observes Pastor Emeritus Charles Roesel. "We do not do that."<sup>3</sup> Instead, members of the congregation volunteer to spearhead efforts to provide the needed care.

In 1982, the congregation opened a rescue mission for homeless people. Several years later, it created a separate shelter for abused children. In 1987, FBC added a center for crisis pregnancies, followed two years later by a shelter home for displaced women and their children. Today, FBC operates a "ministry village" called the Christian Care Center, Inc., consisting of seven facilities on four acres of land. Over 500 volunteers from FBC's congregation help to operate more than 70 ministries, from large facilities in the ministry village to in-home services for the elderly.

What motivates members of this medium-sized church to go to such lengths? They believe God has given them the responsibility—and privilege—of loving others.

Pastor Roesel says that although God works through many channels to meet human needs, from individuals, families, social agencies, and Christian organizations to government, the primary agent for His activity is the church.<sup>4</sup> In Roesel's view, God calls the church to serve those in need as part of the church's obedience to Jesus Christ. "Because God loves persons and cares for their needs," he asserts, "we are to love them, minister to them, and witness to them of His love."<sup>5</sup>

FBC members begin their work from a sense of responsibility, explains Roesel. "But once they begin serving, they fall in love with the people themselves, and this motivates further service."<sup>6</sup> Such responsibility and love for others cannot be defined and authorized by a legislative act or enforced by government procedures.

### A Sense of Belonging

An additional feature in the success of FBC ministries is that they form strong relational bonds among people, anchored in a sense of belonging to a meaningful community.<sup>7</sup> FBC members are motivated by the sense of belonging that they experience as members of the church. Roesel explains this with the Greek term *koinonia*. "*Koinonia* is a deep sense of belonging to one another," which sustains people in the challenging and difficult work of serving the neediest. "If God's people are to witness and minister to a lost and hurting world," states Roesel, "*koinonia* must be the sustaining context in which they find their strength and will to do so."<sup>8</sup>

Intimate *koinonia* is another factor that distinguishes FBC ministries from government programs. Although elected officials often speak of govern-

1. Sierra's name was changed in this piece.
2. The medical care center is jointly sponsored by the Leesburg Regional Medical Care Center.
3. Donald A. Atkinson and Charles L. Roesel, *Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ: Ministry Evangelism in Today's New Testament Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: LifeWay Press, 1995), p. 141.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
6. Phone interview conducted by author on June 16, 2008.
7. For a discussion of the need for people to belong to a meaningful community, see Ryan Messmore, "Longing for Belonging and the Lure of the State," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2063, August 20, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/bg2063.cfm>.
8. Atkinson and Roesel, *Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ*, p. 79.

ment as the centerpiece of a national community, it cannot foster this kind of personal fellowship. Government binds people to itself vertically; it does not bind people closely to one another horizontally as churches can. Roesel stresses that *koinonia* is not something that can be “manufactured or orchestrated artificially.”<sup>9</sup> It cannot be generated by commands of law or cultivated by government checks. Rather, it is a way of relating usually found in associations rooted in kinship, locale, and, especially, religious faith.

As FBC of Leesburg demonstrates, when service to the needy arises from *koinonia*, it gains an added depth and community grounding that can motivate and sustain long-term care.

### A Faith That Touches All Areas of Life

Grounded in a robust sense of responsibility and community belonging, congregations like FBC’s view their faith as relevant to all aspects of life and their mission as encompassing all kinds of need.

Roesel urges churches to follow the example of Jesus, whose concern for people, he asserts, touched every aspect of their lives. While giving priority to their spiritual needs, “Jesus was concerned for whole persons—body, mind, and spirit.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Roesel claims that the Apostle Paul was concerned not only for people’s spiritual health, but for their well-being in every area of life.<sup>11</sup>

This full-orbed faith integrates love for God with love for neighbor. Loving one’s neighbor involves helping to meet their most pressing needs, whether it is companionship for lonely prisoners or a cup of cold water for the thirsty. FBC ministries reflect the biblical verse that quotes Jesus as saying, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). Far from being relegated to a private hobby or a set of rituals, obedient faith is something FBC lives out publicly in countless practical ways that meet people’s tangible needs.

### Concerns About Social Action

Providing aid to people in need is seldom easy or automatic for any congregation. In the early 1980s, when a ministry to destitute citizens of Leesburg was proposed, FBC members resisted. Roesel says his congregation struggled with concerns that likely prevent other congregations from taking similar actions in their communities. Some FBC members were afraid that the new ministry would attract unfamiliar and indigent people into their midst. Others were wary of focusing too narrowly on social action, a concern propelled by the social gospel movement of the early 1900s.

The social gospel refers to the teachings of social planners and preachers who were troubled by urban squalor that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. Inspired by figures such as Walter Rauschenbusch, many in the movement blamed social ills primarily on unjust political and economic structures and looked to the state as the means to redeem them.

More traditional theologians thought that the social gospel represented a narrow reduction of the gospel and expressed the liberal rejection of central doctrines of the Christian faith. According to Roesel, the social gospel’s optimistic view of human nature was at odds with the idea of original sin. Holding that people’s main problem is not sin but ignorance, the social gospel deemphasized the need for personal salvation and focused instead on social action. Roesel says that this “gave rise to churches that practiced social ministries without addressing the spiritual need for forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God.”<sup>12</sup>

The memory of the social gospel episode in American church history often raises red flags today when more traditional Christian churches consider social engagement. This was true for some at FBC who, according to Roesel, rightly understood that social ministry is not the church’s sole purpose.<sup>13</sup>

9. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

11. For example, Roesel points to 1 Cor. 16:1–4 as evidence that Paul actively raised money to meet the needs of God’s people who were experiencing economic problems in Jerusalem. See Atkinson and Roesel, *Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ*, p. 17.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

But if the social gospel narrows the focus of faith to social action, some reactions against the social gospel narrow faith's focus in the other direction—i.e., to spiritual issues only. The resulting view presents a false dichotomy: The church will tend to people's souls; the state will tend to their bodies and bank accounts.<sup>14</sup>

### Compassion Without Compromise

FBC's ministries succeed in part because they refuse to narrow the focus of their faith. They strive instead for social action that is integrated with the core tenets of their members' faith.

In so doing, they adopt the view of Covenant Theological Seminary Professor Anthony Bradley: The primary problem with the social gospel was not its concern for improving social institutions and structures, but its tendency to reduce the entire gospel to this at the expense of emphasizing personal sin and redemption.<sup>15</sup>

At FBC, by contrast, social responsibility seems to go hand in hand with personal faith. Roesel quotes Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones on this point: "The social gospel divorced from personal salvation is like a body without a soul; the message of personal salvation without a social dimension is like a soul without a body. The former is a corpse, the latter is a ghost."<sup>16</sup>

C. S. Lewis came to a similar conclusion by drawing an analogy between a healthy society and a fleet of ships.<sup>17</sup> To mount a successful voyage, a fleet requires at least three elements: individual seaworthy vessels that stay afloat, cooperation among the vessels so that they do not collide, and a common understanding of the destination so that a fleet bound for Singapore, for example, does not arrive in Sydney instead. If any of these components is missing, the

voyage will fail. Lewis said that the same requirements exist for a successful society. Neither individuals of good character nor just laws and social structures are enough on their own: A healthy community needs both, along with a proper vision of the good and of the ultimate purpose of humankind.

Although members of the FBC consider personal faith to be crucial for achieving one's ultimate purpose, this has not hindered them from also tackling social ills such as drug addiction and poverty. In demonstrating true love and concern for people's well-being, churches must be attentive to all three factors: the personal, the socioeconomic, and the theological.

### Meeting More Than Just Spiritual Needs

The tangible result of FBC's approach is demonstrated by the people it serves. Consider Bob, the alcoholic mentioned at the outset. Now 54, Bob was abandoned by his mother when he was a child. Two years later, he learned that she had adopted two girls. "Since then I never felt I was worthy of anybody's love," he says.<sup>18</sup> Bob has had difficulty sustaining healthy relationships in his life, including with his wife, his family, and former employers. Like too many in his situation, he turned to abusing alcohol and prescription drugs to cope with what he describes as a "huge hole in my heart."

What are Bob's most basic needs, and what is at the core of his dysfunctional behavior? His case illustrates why a restricted view of the church's social responsibility does not provide effective answers.

At FBC's Men's Residence, Bob was offered help not only physically, but also emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. Because FBC focuses on the entire person, it was not content simply to provide Bob with a clean bed and hot food. When FBC members

13. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

14. For more concerning this dichotomy, see Ryan Messmore, "Private Faith, Big Government: Understanding the Impact of Marginalizing Religion," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2123, April 15, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/bg2123.cfm>.

15. Dr. Anthony Bradley, "The Social Gospel and Protestant Liberalism," lecture delivered at Acton University, Grand Rapids, Michigan, June 13, 2008.

16. Atkinson and Roesel, *Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ*, p. 26.

17. See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), pp. 70–72.

18. Interview by author conducted at Men's Residence, Christian Care Center, Leesburg, Florida, on June 24, 2008.

opened their first rescue mission in 1982, they provided mostly material support, but they soon learned that this was not enough to break cycles of destructive behavior and emotional wounds. Therefore, they transformed the rescue mission into a long-term residential ministry that teaches basic life lessons and gives men real hope of lasting change.<sup>19</sup>

FBC served Bob in ways that impersonal welfare checks and subsidized housing cannot. Staff and volunteers focused on his ultimate purpose in life, his cultivation of moral and spiritual disciplines, and his sense of being accepted by God. The day before graduating from the program, Bob exclaimed with tears in his eyes, “Before I came to this ministry, I felt I was not worthy even of my own mother’s love, but now I feel worthy of God’s love, and that makes me able to love others for the first time.”<sup>20</sup>

That is the difference one church can make when it serves all aspects of human well-being.

### **Faith Communities Effectively Serve the Common Good**

Public discourse often portrays religion as a private hobby that is best kept out of the public square,

but the ministry village at FBC tells a different story: Entire communities can benefit when faith is exercised in public.

The ministry village at FBC shows that churches—and public discourse in general—need not restrict spiritual issues to the private sphere, leaving so-called secular issues for the public square. In serving public needs while remaining faithful to their core beliefs, FBC ministries demonstrate an important point: In many areas where government has claimed increasing responsibility, churches are often more than adequate for the job.

Government, no less than churches, should understand the potential benefits of local congregations acting publicly for the common good. Government should not claim and should not be granted a monopoly over responsibility for the public good. FBC’s lesson is clear: When churches exercise leadership in the arena of public welfare, everyone is likely to be better served.

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19. For example, the FBC program enforces a strict schedule of study and chores during the day and a curfew of 10 p.m. because many men at the residence are used to sleeping during the day and being awake and active at night. Simply getting the men in the habit of being awake during normal business hours of society increases their chances of finding and succeeding in a work environment. The FBC also offers classes in basic financial and budget management, which encourage personal savings and wise spending.

20. Interview by author, June 24, 2008.