

Congregational Social Work: An Experiential Sharing

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Abstract

Congregational social work is professional social work practice that takes place in the setting of a congregation. This term was first coined and used by Garland and Yancey in the year 2012. "Congregational Social Work" is defined as those social work services that are offered in and through a religious congregation, whether the employer is the congregation itself or a social service or denominational agency working in collaboration with congregations. In this paper "Congregational Social Work" is defined as those social work services that are offered in and through a religious congregation – a slum church in Chennai with the help and financial aid of the slum people and network with different stake holders. The topic itself is a new area for explosion. Social work collaboration with faith-based establishments, such as churches, has great potential to optimize internal functions and service to the community. Social Work has been practiced through churches as an expression of the love of Jesus Christ for many years. Social welfare programmes have been introduced through church mission agencies. The paper briefly presents about the background of the slum community, about the slum church and the methods applied as part of Congregational social work. Seven dimensions have been presented in this paper 1. Use of Appreciative Enquiry to discover the abilities of the community 2. Creation of Endowment fund for Education with the support of Slum people 3. Micro-Enterprise initiatives to provide job opportunities 4. Educational Initiatives 5. Exposure to Foreign countries for the slum people 6. Advocating and Lobbying for the rights of slum people 7. Shelter home during Natural disaster. This paper is based on personal experience of applying Social work in a congregation based in a slum community and the members belong to the same community.

Keywords: Congregational Social Work, Church Social Work

1. Introduction

Congregations are integral parts of communities. They are located in every town, city, or region. Community residents often choose to go to congregations not only for spiritual needs but also for social services They prefer to go to a congregation than a professional agency because many were unaware about the social service agencies. Congregational social work is a not much widely discussed, small, but growing area of social work practice. Each congregation, like each community, has its own distinct culture. Congregations are basically religious in nature but their guidance comes from their understanding of God as a divine being in their lives both corporately and individually.

“In the name of religion, a congregation may start a social service and the focus of a program will change when the spirit moves it”

This paper is based on personal experience of applying Social work in a congregation based in a slum community and the members of the congregation belong to the same community.

1.1 Appasamy Street Slum

Appasamy Street slum is situated in Chetpet, Chennai. The slum is situated in the banks of Coovum river and covered outside by the high-rise buildings and infrastructure in the Harrington Road. There are 487 families living on this stretch and roughly 3000 people living in that area. The slum has been affected badly due to floods in Chennai in the year 2015 and Vardhah cyclone in the year 2016. Most of the houses in the community are cemented sheet with one room which serves as a Kitchen, Living room and Dining room. Very few hut houses are also there. There is one public (community) toilet available in the community and used by the people. The slum has one Corporation Middle school inside the community and Health center. These people serve as rich labor force for the neighborhood community.

1.2 About the Congregation

The congregation (church) is right inside the community. The church was founded in the year 1989 by the slum members itself and affiliated to the Baptist denomination. The church is working for the deprived community for the past 28 years. The congregational social work is practiced from 2008 with different perspectives depending upon the need of the community.

2. Congregation as Social Service Provider

“The social workers engage in a number of core activities as they lead and serve in congregations. These include organizing people and systems; administering programs and services; assessing situations and systems; advocating; developing, and maintaining relationships; thinking creatively and critically; leading and serving groups; establishing boundaries and safety; teaching, mentoring, and supervising; obtaining resources; evaluating and researching; preaching and other public speaking; and developing knowledge and skills specific to the community in which they are serving”

Seven core activities are presented in this paper based on the experience from 2008 till date.

2.1. Use of Appreciative Inquiry

“Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a change management approach that focuses on identifying what is working well, analysing why it is working well and then doing more of it.”

The basic tenet of AI is changing the attention of focus on problems, to identifying strengths and abilities of the community and building on those strengths to build the organisation. This tool was applied with a structured questionnaire and given to the congregation members in the year 2009. 56 families were interviewed and the community strengths were discovered. The participants were also instructed to “Dream” for the church wanted to be in the next five years. Using this tool, the strengths of the congregation, a dream for the church were discovered. The vision and mission of the church were drafted.

2.2. Creation of Endowment fund for Education with the support of Slum people

The children in the congregation (mostly slum children) study in the nearby schools. They give least importance to higher education because of the fees structure. Even if the children pursue higher education they get a debt for their fees or mortgage their jewels. Taking this concern into account, the congregation created an endowment fund for children education in the year 2009 with two objectives

1. To support the education support
2. To give back to the community.

The congregation members had to give minimum of Rs.25 along with their subscription and in a year, we are able create Rs.42,000 as education endowment fund. With this fund, we supported children education and preference given to higher education. This indigenised fund increased grew with the contributions of many philanthropists nearby the slum community. The congregation were able to support 46, students who pursue their studies in the reputed institutions in Chennai. Through, education fund we have produced three professionally trained social workers, two Physiotherapists, One Advocate, One Engineer, Three Para medical students and 8 graduates. One of the congregation boy sent from our slum to Taiwan for his higher education and presently pursuing is doctoral programme there.

2.3. Micro-Enterprise initiatives to provide job opportunities

In order to support their economical need, the congregation were given an opportunity to run the college canteen of Womens Christian College from January 2010 to April 2011. This fund was used for the educational initiatives of the church and the labourers were from the congregation itself.

SWATE (Slum Women Association for Total Empowerment) Xerox shop opened in the community in the year 2011. This shop is to cater to the needs of the community and managed by the Women Self-Help group formed by the church. The profit is dived among themselves.

2.4. Educational Initiatives

Every year in the month of January the students who are appearing for the Government exams (SSLC and HSC) students were invited to church and taken classes on exam preparation. In the month of April, Career guidance class were taken for them and the opportunities available for their higher education. In the month of June, Achievers award - a programmes to appreciate the students who passed SSLC and HSC from the community. The Best student who have secured first mark in the specific subjects were given an award and a cash prize. Till now, 14 awards for both SSLC and HSC given by the church members in the name of their family members. The fund is locally generated and students were appreciated.

2.5. Exposure to Foreign countries for the slum people

Why the slum people should be given an exposure to foreign country with their own funds? This question is the basis for this initiative. In 2012, 11 of the members who serve as Executive Committee were taken for an exposure to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This is very tedious process of getting Passport, Visa and other arrangements. In the next year 2013, 34 of them visited Malaysia and Singapore with their own money. In 2015, 18 of them visited Bangkok, Thailand as part of their exposure. All the expenses were borne by them. A slum dweller can travel abroad? Can they support for their abroad tour? It is possible with their own support; the

answer is emphatic yes.

2.6. Advocating and Lobbying for the rights of slum people

In 2009, in the month of November there was an eviction threat due to the Elevated corridor connecting between Maduravoyal to Chennai Harbour which targeted to displace 12604 families along the banks of Coovum River. The community where the congregation is situated is also under threat. Looking at this situation, the congregation took the lead role, in meeting the collector to stop the eviction but the request was denied. With the help of many like-minded NGO's along with the community support a case was filed in the High Court of Chennai requesting for an interim injunction. The request was granted and in the final verdict the court has given the nod for eviction by serving a proper notice to the community and explanation has to be sought from them. This is a landmark judgement by the court and till now eviction has not taken place.

2.7. Shelter home during Natural disaster.

The congregation served as a shelter home for the flood affected people in the year 2015 and during Vardhah cyclone in the year 2016. With the support of Madras Christian College, the congregation supported construction of one house affected badly during flood in the year 2015. With the support of Action Aid a Community Task Group was formed. Through them, 122 houses were constricted. The church continues to serve as a shelter home during natural disasters.

3. Conclusion

Social workers serve as congregational leaders. Their role is to equip a faithful community to intervene compassionately in the social system, innovatively generate new ideas, advocate and lobby for the poor and to enhance caring interpersonal relations in ways that are consistent with Christian maturity.

“Congregations in poor neighborhoods do more social services than congregations in nonpoor neighborhoods, and congregations with more college-educated people do more social services”

Congregations with more resources do more social services but in this case the resources are limited but if we discover their strengths even a slum church can be self-sustainable and support social services. The methodology of applying social work can differ from different communities and if Congregations were able to understand the community strengths, they will be able to provide the solutions to local problems and express their faith through community service.

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