

Wellbeing in communities run by Christian organisations

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Recent revelations of abuse within Christian institutions have made it easy to get the impression that communities they manage are sinister rather than safe places. How can these communities, that bear the name of Christ, safeguard the wellbeing of the vulnerable as He requires?

Two millennia have seen many organisations established by Christian people seeking to fulfil God's commands of mission and service to society. These include hospitals, schools, social service organisations, university residential colleges and universities. While these so-called Christian organisations have been established by Christians, their purpose may be to provide services and create communities which are open to everybody, regardless of whether they profess a different faith or none at all. With the passage of time, many of these organisations and their communities have gained a reputation for high performance, and become selective, even prestigious.

Significant shifts away from traditional understandings of gender, gender roles and sexuality in recent years have led to allegations that some Christian organisations might use their established positions to victimise non-Christian members of their communities. In an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, peoples of fundamentally differing beliefs will come into greater contact and, potentially, conflict. This raises questions about whether Christian organisations have an underlying bias against those who are

not Christian. Will the committed Muslim be discriminated against by their Christian carers because of their religious views? Will those experiencing gender fluidity suffer covert or overt prejudice if they entrust themselves to Christian organisations committed to a binary view of gender? Will Christians withhold help from those judged to be in rebellion against the commands of God? Will the Christian belief in the judgement of God at the end of life be extrapolated to Christian organisational practice in the here and now?

Are church and Christian organisations safe?

Considerations of negative impacts on the individual within communities have attracted significant government and media attention in recent years. The recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has documented historical failures of Christian organisations in this regard. There has been significant work by different denominations to address these concerns.² Another example has surfaced in the wake of the same-sex marriage plebiscite in the suggestion that religious schools might expel students on the basis of their sexual orientation.³ This has become a significant ongoing political issue.



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Luke 10:25-42

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

Within the higher education context, the Australian Human Rights Commission's inquiry into sexual misconduct within universities⁴ required institutions working within the sector to review their policies and procedures in this regard. This present article is based on the review recently undertaken at New College, an Anglican residential college at the University of New South Wales, and which included comments received from the resident and alumni communities.⁵

Considerable research efforts into the impact of communities on wellbeing have typically focussed on optimal outcomes for individuals, usually in terms of need or attribute. Specifically, commentators have considered the alignment of high-performance institutions to optimal outcomes for individual community members.⁶ By comparison, there are relatively few major works devoted to considering the potentially *negative* impacts of community on wellbeing in general. A principal reference in this regard is Nelson and Prilleltensky's monograph, *Community Psychology: In Pursuit of Liberation and Well-Being*.⁷

The two principal purposes of this article are first, to establish a clear Christian benchmark for the care of individuals within a community; and second, to examine how the care of individuals should be undertaken practically within a community run by Christians. What, if anything, do those of differing views or practices have to fear in organisations run by Christians?

Jesus gives His followers no option but to be safe for everybody.

The Law of Love..

When Jesus is examined by a Jewish lawyer on how to live the perfect life, he prompts the lawyer to enunciate the summary commands from the Law of Moses. The first command concerns our duty to God: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength'; the second, our duty to others: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:25ff; Deuteronomy 6:9, Leviticus 19:18).

These commands extend beyond those under Jewish law to all who follow Jesus (John 13:34-35; Galatians 5:13; 6:9-10). The implications of being commanded to love neighbours as oneself are profound.⁸ The affection and care that any follower would extend to their own affairs are to be extended to their neighbour. If you are concerned that your children are adequately housed and fed, so should you be concerned that your neighbour's children be similarly provided for. If you do not wish your possessions to be pilfered, you will take effort to protect and warn your neighbour of the presence of thieves. If you see your neighbour enjoying some peace and quiet in his garden, you will refrain from commencing your electric guitar practice.

The neighbour of the Christian can expect to be treated with respect and consideration.

... Love with no excuses

Still not satisfied, the lawyer presses Jesus further: who are these neighbours you expect me to love (Luke 10:29)? Does the background,

behaviour or belief of some people disqualify them from 'neighbour' status?

In response, Jesus tells a story. A man is robbed, beaten, and left by the road. The first people on the scene are a priest and a Levite, both people of special religious dedication, but each of them passes by, offering no help. Their behaviour might seem callous to modern ears, but to Jesus' hearers it would have made perfect sense. This was a lonely route, frequented by robbers, and the apparent corpse may well have been a trap for the unwary. Further, contamination by a corpse would have significantly disrupted the duties of these respected religious figures. Common sense and a balance of probabilities made ignoring the apparently dead man by the priest and Levite seem a perfectly right and sensible thing to do.

The term 'Good Samaritan' has become synonymous with someone who goes out of their way to help another. However, Jesus' original story has profound meanings that this modern English usage misses. The original Samaritans were of mixed Jewish race. Over the six centuries preceding Jesus they had perpetrated gross injustices against the Jewish people, becoming the detested Palestinian neighbours of Jesus' time. They had provided the means through which hostile intruders attacked the Jewish people. They had desecrated holy places of the Jewish people in the most offensive manners. In Jewish minds, they were profane, traitorous half-breeds—the most despised of peoples. The contempt of Jewish people was well understood by the Samaritans.

Yet in Jesus' story, the Samaritan who next approaches the beaten man avoided by the priest and Levite offers help immediately. He does not ask questions about who the person is or where he came from; puts himself at risk for the sake of the injured man; immediately acts to help and provide his available resources to care for the injured man; and gives—with a promise to give more—to ensure the recovery of a man who, quite possibly, would have had no time or kind words for him. Jesus concludes with the lawyer that those who would be obedient to God must behave like this Samaritan.

Consequently, a person is a neighbour in spite of their social status, race, beliefs, possible hostile attitudes or their past or present failures. Further, a Christian's care for a needy neighbour transcends pressing religious observance, inconvenience, potential risk and demand on personal finances. This care is not to be withheld, even temporarily.

Love of the vulnerable

Some modern framing of the ethics of wellbeing applies uncompromising utilitarian reasoning—weighing up outcomes so as to



Image: Standard Bible Story Readers, 1995, p.10

Luke 15:1-7

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus.

²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

³So he told them this parable: ⁴"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

maximise desirable outcomes for as many as possible (or minimise detrimental impacts to as few as possible).⁹ Contrary to Nelson and Prilleltensky's claim that 'Convincing philosophical and religious positions ... are insufficient to mount social policies that meet the needs of minorities, women, families, children and the disadvantaged',¹⁰ Jesus takes a very focussed and effective approach: time, care and resources should be targeted towards the most vulnerable.

In Jesus' teaching, focus on the vulnerable individual stands out most clearly in His parables of the lost (Luke 15; including the famous story of the lost or prodigal son). Critics of Jesus had objected to Him spending time with wrongdoers, the marginalised, and those rejected by society. Yet he not only spent time with them, He welcomed the opportunity to do so (Luke 15:1-3).

Jesus' first response to this criticism comes in the parable of the lost sheep. He challenges

His hearers' lack of concern for the lost, and their preference to concentrate on the safe majority. Their disregard shows them to be out of alignment with God's principal concerns, which are not for the safe and well, but for those who are lost from Him and need rescue.

There are many in communities who are well and largely self-sufficient, and who can look after themselves and enjoy the advantages of the broader social context. Jesus' words and behaviour reflect His quest to seek out the most marginalised and vulnerable and focus a significant proportion of His time and energy on them individually.¹¹

In contrast with utilitarian approaches, Jesus' focus is on the vulnerable individual—here in terms of reconciliation to God and their restoration.

The Gospels highlight Jesus' concern for those in need. Over two millennia, it is this example of Jesus that has given His followers a concern for convicted wrongdoers, the marginalised, and those rejected by society. Robust procedures and social policies of organisations that claim to be Christian must prioritise those that are most vulnerable.¹²

At this point, we have established Jesus' benchmark for Christian care: care for others as for oneself; rejection of excuses that might be inferred from assumptions about identity, behaviour or belief; and active identification of those potentially most alienated and most vulnerable within a community. How then should the care of individuals be undertaken within in a community run by Christians?

Wellbeing in community practice

We start by examining three examples. This does not pretend to be an exhaustive analysis, but does illustrate some of the challenges as we move from the complex individual to the networked complexity of the community.

First, we possess limited knowledge. Even as we endeavour to love another as ourselves, the love expressed may not match the other's need or situation. My Japanese neighbour might be profoundly generous and share the Wagyu steak from his barbeque with my family member who has Alpha-Gal syndrome. However, the anaphylaxis generated by red meat with Alpha-Gal does not mean that the gift will be beneficial.

Secondly, individuals may engage in activities that cause danger for others in the community. Common sense demands that those responsible act to protect others in the broader community. The wellbeing of a given individual may be impacted by censure on behalf of the community—an entirely appropriate application of utilitarianism.

Thirdly, and as an extension of the second

point, community caution about risky or antisocial behaviour may create precautionary rules to discourage behaviour that might tend towards disruptive or disreputable outcomes. For example, at New College possession or consumption of alcohol within public or community residential areas is prohibited. While the consumption of modest levels of alcohol may not negatively impact the wellbeing of an individual, community rules may also trigger censure of the individual responsible for a breach.

The human condition

Jesus does not excuse antisocial behaviour by appealing to the notion that societies consist of agents in competition for resources and food, as Darwinian survival concepts might suggest. His concern is that our problems are fundamentally much deeper. Moral evil is a reality that inhabits the hearts of all people—something far more sinister than desires to fulfil physical needs (e.g. Mark 7:14-23). It includes a host of intentions that lead to destructive and bullying-type behaviours: deceit, sensuality, envy and pride. All of these come from within.

Christian organisations should be keenly aware of the risks such predatory attitudes pose to the vulnerable within the communities they supervise—attitudes that potentially infect us all.

In practice

Communities will contain both vulnerable individuals and tendencies to evil that are real. Consequently, weakness, misconduct and exploitation within communities are inevitable. If a community is to be regulated by a Christian ethos with regard to the wellbeing of its individual members, there must be policies and procedures in place to both recognise vulnerability as well as to **identify, monitor and discourage misconduct**. To be properly Christian, these must recognise the diversity of individual members in both personal characteristics and belief.



Although devotion to God may well be our personal highest priority, in terms of Christian organisational operation, God's command to love neighbour dictates immediate attention to the wellbeing of those in our care. Jesus is clear that religious observance is no excuse for not helping.¹³ Consequently, **care for each individual in their community will be an organisation's highest operational priority.**

In high performance organisations, attention is often drawn to the most impressive members—the stars. Jesus' example means that the leadership of Christian organisations must not allow these high achievers to distract their attention from the vulnerable in their care.

Yet being a recipient of care can be embarrassing if weaknesses are paraded unnecessarily. Love of neighbour dictates that care be exercised with the **utmost respect and discretion**, as practised by the Good Samaritan.

There are a number of confounding factors in the practice of pastoral care within a community:

1. **False allegations** that aim to conceal personal wrongdoing and weakness, or to injure another party, are possible. Respect, discretion and possible **pastoral support** for both victim and alleged perpetrator should be exercised when dealing **with untested allegations** until such time as these can be verified.¹⁴
2. **Onlookers** will be inclined to protect their own interests—as did the priest and Levite who preceded the good Samaritan. Passive responses by onlookers to misconduct will undermine pastoral endeavours. An important aspect of community cultural development is to encourage practical neighbourly care by all members.
3. **Encouraging disclosure** by anyone feeling threatened. In general, no one wishes to parade their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Four key practical elements to encouraging disclosure are:
 - a. **Clear definitions of misconduct.**
 - b. Commitment by organisational leaders to **responsive action** where allegations are received.
 - c. Communication across the entire organisation of **how such Christian principles work in practice.**
 - d. Having staff with **dedicated focus to monitor community behaviour and encourage disclosure.** In terms of this present contribution, staff should be actively looking out for situations in which members are becoming vulnerable.
4. **Entrapment** of victims by perpetrators can discourage them from disclosing their concerns. Perpetrators may first involve the vulnerable in compromising behaviour, which is then used to discourage victims from seeking help. There is no simple solution to this issue but to reassure the potential victims that their wellbeing is

the highest priority and that discretion and compassion will be exercised. What may or may not have been done remains a secondary consideration to their immediate protection and restoration.

Recent concerns have been expressed regarding the safety of Christian organisations. Further, it has been suggested that Christian organisations would victimise individuals whose beliefs or behaviours might not be aligned with perceptions of Christian orthodoxy.

Jesus gives His followers no option but to be safe for everybody—no matter who they are or where they are from. Christian community pastoral care should be founded on three core aspects of His teaching: the law of love; love with no excuses; and love of the vulnerable individual.

The principal risks come from the underlying evil intentions of us all—in this context, constant vigilance is called for. Here we have enunciated what we see as the key aspects, founded on Christian principles, of the highest standards of pastoral care when addressing the potential negative impacts on individual wellbeing within community. ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 The author acknowledges careful review and helpful comments from Colin Noble and Dani Scarratt.
- 2 See E. Hine, 'Church responses to the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse', *Case Quarterly* #52, 2018, pp21-25. Also, in the same volume, W. L. Peirson and D. Scarratt, 'Apologies and apologetics', pp3-6.
- 3 E.g. www.sbs.com.au/news/morrison-says-religious-schools-should-not-expel-gay-kids-as-ruddock-recommendations-leaked
- 4 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Change the course: National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities*, August 2017, ISBN 978-1-921449-86-4 (available at www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/change-course-national-report-sexual-assault-and-sexual), accessed 1 August 2017.
- 5 www.newcollege.unsw.edu.au/sydney/ahrc-response
- 6 M. A. White, A. S. Murray and M. E. P. Seligman, *Evidence-Based Approaches in Positive Education: Implementing a Strategic Framework for Well-being in Schools* (Springer: 2015).
- 7 G. Nelson and I. Prilleltensky, *Community Psychology: In Pursuit of Liberation and Well-Being* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2010).
- 8 For completeness we note commands in the Bible to care for fellow believers that go well beyond a call for love of neighbour. Possibly the most vivid is Jesus' command that His disciples love one another as He has loved them (John 13:34)—that is, to love to the point of sacrificial death.
- 9 These ideas have a long history, including John 11:50, and culminate in J.S. Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1863). Cf Jeremy Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789).
- 10 G. Nelson and I. Prilleltensky, *Ibid.*, p56.
- 11 Examples from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are too numerous to cite. Perhaps the most poignant is His interaction with the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:24ff, Luke 8:40ff).
- 12 Mark Bennett has provided a recent specific outworking of this in the context of care for refugees, 'Refugees and belonging in destination Australia!', *Case Quarterly* #51, 2018, p9.
- 13 There are many examples from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Some special examples are Mark 3:1ff and Luke 14:1ff.
- 14 Trauma informed approaches recognise impacts on victims, falsely-accused perpetrators and onlookers. Trauma is defined by 'SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach' as follows: "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being." Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884 (2014), p7.