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Democracy in action for God

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ABSTRACT:

A recent graduate reflects on becoming involved in a socially aware and progressive profession. This involvement leads to a conclusion that Christian librarians can share professional activities despite having distinct motivations.

Introduction

As an American who lived and studied in Australia for almost ten years I was excited to move back to the USA to begin work at the public library in my hometown. In May of 2005 I completed my Masters of Arts in Information and Knowledge Management at the University of Technology, Sydney and began applying for library jobs. A position was available in my small hometown in Texas, I was successful in my application and began work as a reference librarian in July of 2005. There are many elements to library work that are still fresh and intriguing, with one of particular interest I will focus on here.

Democracy in action

One element of my work that I find interesting is the faith-based motivation for much that I do appears very different to the motivation many of my professional colleagues have. My spiritual life as a Christian is what directed me to libraries – living out the unbiased love and help of all people is a large part of what Jesus called us to. In my experience of American and Australian culture most Christians care deeply *in theory* about everyone but have very little or no interaction with people outside a narrow demographic. I suspect this is true of many western cultures, and the causes of this are as complex as they are numerous. While I will not delve into analysis of *why* this is, I do want to emphasize that I have a strong personal desire to avoid interacting with only a small slice of the world's population. I am thankful that libraries are inherently democratic organizations that are open to all the public. Libraries systematically allow library staff to interact with almost all demographics. There is a strong presence in many libraries of those who are socially or economically disadvantaged simply because the library as a public domain will accept them. While living out an aim to interact with a wide variety of people is challenging, I wanted to share a professional

perspective that is still very fresh because of my recent entry into the professional library environment.

I would estimate that roughly 65% of the library patrons I deal with regularly live below the federal poverty line, which is \$9,800 for an individual in 2006.¹ If we go back to the Greek language origin of 'democracy' we find the combination of the phrases *the common people* and *to rule*.² I don't want to argue over the exact meaning of democracy, but the central point I take is that each person's voice counts. All citizens have equally valid rights and responsibilities, and this is true regardless of if they are exercised equally. The sad truth is that most people who live below the federal poverty line have no influence on mainstream society. With no permanent address and a physical appearance that does not comport with regular paid work, these people become the silent citizens effectively removed from national participation and consciousness. While equality of possibilities in society is terribly complex, I want to offer a small glimmer of interesting hope.

The power and uniqueness of public libraries

In public libraries – every single one across the nation, indeed across most of the world – any person can walk in or call and have questions answered. As librarians within the profession I think we can lose sight of the significance of this. The reference or information services section of your local library is extremely unique in modern culture. Each of those employees is committed to unbiased answers to any questions asked. The core component is in the name – *public*. Any member of the public, whether you pay taxes to support that local library or not is entitled to have questions answered. You can be of any race or political persuasion – your question will be listened to. I find it important to reflect on this element of my job: every person's request is of equal

significance. The first months of working at an information services desk I was exuberant that such a point of contact existed for people. While not offering any guarantees on answers, there is at least a guarantee to be heard by a person and the best attempt possible to get the information you need.

I work as a librarian because I have a direct connection to people on the fringe, and that direct connection has amazing potential for social change. While my professional role does not allow me to evangelize verbally during work hours, I minister in service to many people every day. I remember the apocryphal St Francis of Assisi quote “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” The most common questions I receive revolve around social and relationship issues, such as “What are the laws for divorce in this state?” Running a close second is how to contact someone either via the internet or by finding a phone number. I have been surprised how many times I have been asked, “I don’t really know who to talk to, but I have some friends/family I haven’t spoken to in many years. Can you find their phone number?” Now these are just normal questions on the surface, but a homeless person deciding to contact a family member after years of silence can be highly significant. Seeking divorce laws because you are the victim in an abusive relationship is a significant step in life. What these patrons do with such information is not the role the librarian – that falls into the category of social worker, counselor or pastor. But as a librarian you get direct involvement in the process of social change. Libraries are democracy in action – each voice has equal weight in asking for information and in deciding what to do with that information. For me this is the innate power of libraries, and part of the shame they get used less than they could. While this is nothing new to practicing librarians, I find it crucial to remind myself of these topics and issues regularly.

Conclusion

Librarians are largely very committed to serving the community and to social change in general. The American Librarian Association (ALA)

is a very active and progressive organization that is growing more politicized. Now that I have engaged with ALA in conferences and publications I have come to recognize a critical difference between my motivation as a librarian and the one, corporately, they seem to assume. I find myself surrounded with similarly acting people with very different motivations. Many librarians who care nothing for relating to God still care deeply about helping low income or disadvantaged patrons. At some ALA meetings I have heard discussions that religion is further subjecting our disadvantaged patrons to humiliation by morally judging them. Religion that is removed from genuinely relating to God can provide bondage, and even humiliation, but Jesus provides truth and freedom. His yoke is easy and his burden is light when compared with what the world can pile on people’s shoulders. Being surrounded by seemingly like-minded individuals with very different motivations makes me question. As a librarian I ask myself, ‘Can I be a part of a progressive, liberal, active organization because I know Jesus, not despite it’?

My own conclusion? 1 John 2:15–17. Being in the world but not of the world allows me to be involved in democratic social change *for* God, not despite my relationship with Him. I hold no disdain or animosity for those with other motivations, but I find myself caring about my job and our patrons for distinct reasons. I hope to remind myself of these reasons regularly across my career. †

REFERENCES

Harrison, Ross. *Democracy*. Routledge: London. 1995
Federal Register. Vol. 71, No. 15. January 24. 2006. pp. 3848-3849

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Federal Register*, 2006, pp. 3848–3849

² Harrison, p.3

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