CHRISTIAN CHARITIES

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What do the scandals in Kids Company and Age Concern mean for Christian charities?
Category: Observations

A few years ago, there was a storm about what was seen as the excessive salaries being paid to Charity CEOs. At the time, I was a Charity CEO, but as my salary was hardly excessive (or existent, for that matter), I could afford to take a sidewise look atÂ the whole thing.

However, over the past few months there have been a number of high profile cases which have hit the headlines and which do not paint charities in a flattering light. There was the case of Olive Cooke, who committed suicide after apparently being hounded by charity fund-raisers, the problemsÂ at Kids Company, the RSPCA has been criticised for being too political, and now allegations are being levelled at Age Concern.

Whatever the rights and wrongs in the details of these case, it is clear that charities are coming under scrutiny as never before and that they can no longer simply assume that people will be well disposed towards them because of their good works. In passing, similar things could be said about the church!

I'd like to briefly explore some of the implications of this situation for those churches and agencies in the UK who enjoy charitable status.

A bit of background; to put it simply, a charity is an organisation which enjoys certain tax breaks (especially the right to accept gift-aided donations) in return for doing good in society. The work of the charity is overseen by a group of trustees, whose role is essentially to make sure that the charity is doing what it is supposed to, while staying on the right side of the law. What most people don't realise is that charities are hedged about by a vast amount of legislation. There is far less red-tape involved in running a small commercial operation than there is in running a charity. To my mind, there is a real question about the benefits of charitable status for some smaller organisations; it causes a lot of headaches and may not bring that many benefits.Â Sometimes, Church or mission leaders say that the government has no right to interfere in what they are doing. I'm sorry, butÂ if we want to benefit from government tax concessions, then we need to comply with the rules that cover those concessions.

In order to qualify as a charity, an organisation must be able to demonstrate that they are working towards a permissible charitable objective; for example the prevention and relief of poverty or the promotion of animal welfare (you can find the full list here). Â Key to the work of many churches and agencies is the objective "the advancementÂ of religion". Given the situation in the UK, much of the public view of organised religion and the scrutiny that charities are facing, I suspect that this objective will be removed from the list sometime in the next few years. Any church or mission agency which has the advancement of religion as their sole charitable objective may wish to review their operations if they want to keep the gift-aided donations flowing.

However, my main issue is an ethical one. Christian charities are not only called to obey the law as it stands, but in the light of their calling, they should maintain higher standards than the legal minima.

The role of trustees is absolutely key in the running of charities. In the current environment, it is not enough to have a board which is composed entirely of well intentioned people who support the particular ministry. As the CEO of Wycliffe Bible Translators, I was deeply indebted to those trustees who brought professional skills in finance and law to the table. They raised issues and asked questions that I would never have thought about, but which were vital if the organisation was to function legally and ethically. That being said, a board needs balance, I wish we'd had more people with overseas experience, in particular in dealing with funding and grants overseas and there is undoubtedly a place for people who represent and understand the position of the average Christian in the pew who support the charity. Most Christian charities struggle to find trustees; please consider whether this is something you could do.

Another area of concern is in the way in which charities raise and spend money. "The love of money is a root of all evil" and this is as true for organisations as it is for individuals. Christian charities have to guard against a fixation on cash and donations. Here are some suggestions:

- Christian charities should not "over promise". It is impossible to say how many churches will be planted, or how many souls will be saved for a given donation, so don't say it.Â Promising that you will achieve things which are not yours to promise is dishonest.
- Be transparent about where the money is going.
- Acknowledge gifts promptly and courteously.
- Don't pressure people into giving to you. Emotional blackmail and manipulation are powerful fund-raising techniques, but they should be off limits to Christian organisations. The Lord loves a cheerful giver, but I'm not sure what he thinks about someone who has been made to feel so guilty that they hand over a wodge of cash to salve their conscience.
- If you are in receipt of government funds, don't hide this from your donors. There are a number of Christian organisations which receive substantial state-funding. This is something to be celebrated.

The recent scandals have an impact on the reputation of the charity sector. I received a number of letters asking me about my salary in the wake of furore a few years ago. However, when Christian charities are seen as acting with less than best practice it has an impact on the reputation of God's people and ultimately on reputation of the Lord we serve.