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“And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”

Galatians 6 : 9 – 10

Introduction

This paper is to discuss social work as it had happened in the past, happening now and what is likely to happen tomorrow in the context of Sabah, Malaysia. We must be aware that the “living past, so actively present in our attitudes, our ways of doing things, the structure of the services, in which we operate, and our ideas and ideals.”(1) Thus, some of the happenings in the field of social welfare in the past will be traced followed by the examination on social work as an evolving profession, current social welfare service delivery systems and some social policy issues. Equally important is the discussion of the implications of these issues for the Churches’ ministry of social concern.

Pre Independence Era

Sabah gained its independence through the formation of Malaysia in

1963. Prior to this, it (then North Borneo) was under the British North Borneo Chartered Company's rule and a British Colony since 1881. In the context of social welfare the poor, disadvantaged and the needy had to depend on the informal system of service delivery as "organized statutory form of social welfare services was unheard of" (2) until the influx of Chinese immigrants to whom the government then responded with the establishment of the Department of Chinese Protectorate charged with the responsibility of dealing with the Chinese affairs including the protection of women and girls, welfare of the migrant labourers, matrimonial problems, property distribution and the supervision of Chinese civil societies. Incidentally, these early Chinese labourers were recruited for settlement in the interior of the territory. Those recruited for settlement in Kudat are of Hakka ethnic group and predominantly Christians affiliated to the Basel Mission and the first *attap* roofed church was built in 1886 in Lausan. With the increase in the number of immigrant Hakka settlers from Hong Kong and China, other congregations were organised in other places and settlements and by 1914 not less than 7 congregations were established in the British North Borneo (Sabah). These churches had provided not only places for worship but also sources from which they sought most of their social welfare needs rather than the limited statutory services. (3)

The public social welfare service domain gradually expanded to include the establishment of the Department of Immigration and Labour to provide social welfare services mainly related to labour and immigration such as mutual-aid associations and societies including the Churches which provide the first call of assistance to both the newly arrived and settled

migrants, setting up of institutions and “outdoor relief” – cash assistance for old destitute persons, helpless women and girls. Then, in 1954 the social welfare scene in the State has taken another step towards a greater involvement of the government in meeting the social welfare needs of its people. This milestone marked the change of name of the Department of Immigration and Labour to the Department of Labour and Welfare and the establishment of a Social Welfare Council to provide support and coordination for the nonprofit organizations in the State. The name change had signified the importance and need for a new policy in social welfare towards professionalization and recognition of the contribution of nonprofit organizations which is committed to service rather than profit. This strategy towards professionalism is further enhanced by the recruitment of a professional social worker with creditable social administration experience from the British civil service to head the welfare division of the department and advise the government on social welfare matters.

Emergence of Professional Social Work

While social work was emerging as a profession in developed nations during this period such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom where it was driven by the purpose to improve the quality of life for all people through promoting and restoring a mutually beneficial interaction between individuals, communities and society the post independence saw another achievement in the development of social welfare in that it witnessed the separation of the Department of Labour and Welfare into two separate departments in 1967. The Department

of Labour was to take charge of all labour matters and administrated under Federal Government while social welfare was made concurrent matters which were to be responsible by the State Government through the Department of Welfare Services although certain services such as the correction for juveniles and young offenders were to be funded by Federal source. (4)

At this stage of development the government concurred the contemporary social work purposes in enhancing social functioning of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, connect client systems with available resources, improve the operation of the social delivery network and promote social justice through formulation of social policies. The department continued to tap the expertise of this British expatriate to move away from its connotation that social work was just a charitable endeavour towards a helping or empowering profession.

At that time social casework was the predominant method of social work and social workers have conceptualized the change process as the mutual adaptation of people (their clients) and their social environment. This method (together with other methods – group work and community organization) was introduced into the social work delivery system aimed at building the client's capacity to change, strengthening families, organizing groups and communities. However, the process of professionalization in the department was hampered by lack of professional social workers as almost all the social welfare officers received no professional training on social work. They have been labeled as paraprofessionals, having some knowledge and technical training in social welfare work but short of

formal education required for professional status and this declassification created tensions about their respective domains of activity. (5)

Social Work and Social Policy

Reflecting through the social welfare development since the 1st half of the 20th century we have seen social policies which had directed the formulation of social welfare laws and shaped the design of social service programmes. The early establishment of the Pauper Fund under the Paupers Ordinance 1923 was a good example in which aged poor and destitute persons were given 'outdoor relief' – a form of cash payment and shelter in the three 'pauper institutions' established under this 1923 Paupers Ordinance. Due to passage of time and its inadequacy and ineffectiveness to meet the need of the target population this Paupers Ordinance, in existence for 4 decades was repealed in 1964. A new scheme – the Public Assistance Scheme which is more extensive in coverage has replaced the 'Outdoor Relief'. The Department of Welfare Services has renamed the Paupers Institutions as Senior Citizens Homes and also took over their management with allocations from tax funds.

Prostitution and trafficking of women and girls were social problems as they were so regarded in Sabah although they might not be so in societies where prostitution is legitimated. There were 144 prostitutes and 24 brothel keepers recorded in Sandakan in 1891. (6) Subsequently, a law entitled Women and Girls Protection Ordinance 1951 was enacted for the suppression of brothels and trafficking of women and girls in the colony.

Today, many social policies and laws were in existence to enhance the wellbeing of the people in the State. Some of them are Federal policies and laws applicable to the State and some are State policies and State laws including the National Social Welfare Policy 1990, National Social Policy 2003, National Policy For The Elderly 1995, Disability Policy and Action Plan 2007, National Child Policy, National Child Protection Policy, Child Act 2001, Care Centre Act 1993, Child Care Centre Act 1984, Destitute Persons Act 1977, Domestic Violence Act 1994, Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, Adoption Ordinance 1960, Old Age Assistance Scheme Enactment 1982, and Sabah Council of Social Service Enactment 1997.

Social Welfare Services Delivery System

It is acknowledged that social work practitioners work in different types of practice settings such as Government or private, primary or host, sectarian or nonsectarian, nonprofit or for-profit or independent practice. However, the two main sectors which are providing social welfare services in the state are subjects of discussion. They are the government and nongovernmental organizations or more specifically referred to as voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs).

Governments: Federal and state establish public social welfare agencies through legislations and allocation of tax funds and provide income for these programmes. The Department of Welfare Services is such a department which provides the traditional social welfare services such as income maintenance programmes, family and children services including

domestic violence, spousal abuse and adoption, disability, correctional services, services for senior citizens and support of community development.

The contribution of nongovernmental organizations – voluntary welfare organizations cannot be set aside from this discourse. In the State the efforts and programmes of VWOs which are registered with the Registrar of Societies Malaysia are coordinated and assisted by Sabah Council of Social Services, a statutory agency set up under the Sabah Council of Social Services Enactment 1997. Currently there are 25 such VWOs having membership with and receive annual allocations from this Council. Like their counterparts in other countries they engaged themselves in the areas of general welfare, emergency services, disability issues, family and children services, aging and health including mental health. The amount of grant given to these VWOs varies yearly depending upon government budget and programmes as shown below: -

Year	No. of Organizations	Amount (RM)
2005	23	801,700.00
2006	22	938,000.00
2007	21	960,000.00
2008	20	999,000.00
2009	19	1,244,000.00

The government’s allocation towards supporting VWOs in their programmes and activities increased yearly.

It should also be mentioned that there is another sector of VWOs whose legitimacy rests with other laws or government orders and they contribute a significant portion of social welfare work in the State. These organizations, sometimes being called associations where groups of people coming together to advance a common purpose, have chosen to operate on their own independent of financial support and control from the State except the regulatory authority. They are more likely to be affiliated to or under the auspices of a religious body such as the JIREH Home, Grace Centre, Monfort Youth Training Centre, Good Shepherd Home, Prison Fellowship, MERCY Malaysia, Sabah and IGAM – Alcohol. Typically, they receive income from multiple sources including private donations and gifts, contributions, endowments, legacy, foundation grants, allocations and fees for services.

Social Work Education

The importance of social work education has not gone unrecognized during this period of development. The government and the media have already alerted public attention to some of the social problems brought about by rapid social change. Sadly, little awareness that social work as a profession is uniquely equipped to address such social problems as it was the practice in other developed nations. To alleviate this situation and top the agenda the government through the Department of Welfare Services introduced staff development policies in order to tackle this issue. Accordingly, untrained social welfare officers were given scholarships to pursue social studies in the University of Singapore which was then one of the few institutions of higher learning in this region offering such

course of training leading to professional social work qualifications. Unfortunately, this programme was short lived and the number of officers sent for social work course was reduced to a handful only mainly because the focus of this training programme was blurred by other factors. Social work is viewed as non lucrative because of the comparatively low salary offered by employers and not a glamour employment. On the other hand “social work is not easy work. It can be emotionally draining as it is rewarding. It can be as frustrating as it is satisfying” says Professor Rosnah who is quite convinced that social work profession has a brighter future in the State when she wrote “the programme (social work degrees at baccalaureate, master’s and doctoral levels offered at the University Malaysia Sabah) will help the State to prepare future professional social workers who are dedicated, innovative and have a broad prospective towards community, their issues, challenges and problems.” (7)

Field of Practice: The Case of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities

As mentioned earlier social workers are employed in wide fields of practice. They work in public welfare such as the State Department of Welfare Services, juvenile justice system, health systems and family services as well as issues of persons with disabilities which is featured here as a case study.

The number of persons with disabilities registered with the government authorities as at May 2009 for Malaysia and November 2009 for Sabah are 258,918 and 19,213 respectively. (8) Against the total population of

Malaysia it is a fair assumption that there are a significant number of persons with disabilities who have yet to come forward to be registered and benefit from the services provided by the government.

As shown by the various policy papers and legal instruments disability work in Malaysia is now shifting from charity to the rights based approach in which persons with disabilities have the same rights as the able-bodied society which must adapt to their needs and rights. Such pertinent laws and policies include *the National Social Welfare Policy 1990* which was formulated to propel the well-being of the people and social stability towards the creation of a society that is independent, blessed with equitable opportunities and caring. The policy is now in place in that social welfare is a joint responsibility of the government, civil society organisations, community, private sector and individual.

This *National Social Policy (NSP)* sets the goal as “to create a progressive and established Malaysian society with every member having the opportunity to develop his/her potential to the optimum in a healthy social environment based on the qualities of unity, resilience, democracy, morality, tolerance, progress, care, fairness and equity in accordance with the goal of Vision 2020”. It is particularly relevant to tackling the problems associated with persons with disabilities. It talks about equal opportunity, non discrimination, social inclusion and above all the generation of multi-sectoral synergy which is so vital for service delivery and development.

Making the difference

Biwako Millennium Framework for Action: towards an Inclusive, Barrier-free and Rights-based Society for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, signed in October 2002 at the city of Otsu, Japan was adopted at the beginning of the new millennium and it is structured to supplement the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and targets. “An inclusive” society is a society for all and a “barrier-free” society refers to a society free from institutional, physical and attitudinal barriers, as well as social, economic and cultural barriers. A “rights-based society” means one based on the human rights of all individuals where persons with disabilities are valued and placed at the centre of all decisions affecting them.

The *United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)* re-affirms existing human rights in the context of disability and focuses strongly on the issue of prejudice and discrimination that disabled people worldwide face on a daily basis. It is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 – Act 685 of Laws of Malaysia was passed by Parliament on 24 December 2007, gazetted on 24 January 2008 and enforced on 7th July in the same year. This Act emphasizes full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

It adopts the rights based approach and the social model of rehabilitation. This Act has essentially transformed disability work from what was traditionally regarded as charity to developmental, empowerment and social inclusion.

The latest shift in the policy related to disability is the inclusion of mental patients as persons with disabilities. This is in compliance with the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 in which persons with mental impairments are included in the definition of persons with disabilities for a prolonged period of not less than 2 years as assessed by a competent psychiatrist. Generally, a healthy mental state refers to efficient perception of reality, self-knowledge, ability to exercise self control, self esteem, ability to form affectionate relationships demonstrating appropriate sharing, reciprocity, and sensitivity to the feelings of others and productivity in meeting everyday demands. The absence of such positive state of mental health, showing up in people's daily lives may well be categorized as having mental disorders (Refer to *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*). (9)

The involvement of social work in mental health has long been established where psychiatric social workers are part of the multidisciplinary teams (others may include psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychiatrist nurses, occupational therapists and dieticians) in understanding problems, assessing behavior, and proposing treatment plans. The inclusion of persons with mental impairments as persons with disabilities or "Orang Kurang Upaya" may have provided another impetus towards deinstitutionalization of persons with long term mental impairments.

They may be cared for in “half-way houses” or day care centres or in their own homes. In fact this deinstitutionalization process in the social care has gained momentum as early as in the 1960s in England due to various factors such as spiraling increase in public spending, cost on residential care, rising number of residents, and negative aspects of residential care. (10)

Social Work: a challenge to the Church

Early social work practice has rested its basic assumptions on, among others that human betterment is the goal of any society and the social bond between man and man should lead to the realization of universal brotherhood. (11) More recently, the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics in USA had declared that the primary mission of the social work profession is “to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (12) and adopted the 6 core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence for social work practice. Most recently, Dubois and Miley had developed 12 tenets as the common base of practice for the social work profession and 2 of them had been singled out here to highlight their connectivity with the religious values: “empowering people, individually or collectively, to utilize their own problem solving and coping capabilities more effectively; promote social justice and equality of all people in regard to full participation in society.” (13)

Thus, social welfare, being a system of laws, programmes and services which provide for the meeting of social needs in order to promote the well-being of people and the humane functioning of society should be developed under the auspices of governments. However, non governmental organizations, churches included have a significant role to play in supplementing and complementing the government's efforts in the provision of a wide variety of health and welfare services and other related programmes responding to human needs.

Unquestionably, religion and in this case Christianity has played a significant role in the development of social work as a profession as reflected in the social work literatures. Although the natural and primary function of the church is to bear witness to God's Word: it is about the salvation of the soul. However, such witness must always be in both word and deed, if the life of the church is to be consistent with its message and what the gospel proclaims also impels Christians both individually and corporately to show concern for persons and to serve them at their point of need as shown by the Letter of Paul to the Galatians: "*They desired only that we should remember the poor the very thing which I also was eager to do.*" *Galatians 2 : 10*

While the church's priority is "service to God" it must also reaffirm its belief of institutionalizing a caring culture and the creation of a caring society in line with the social policy as formulated and advocated by the government. In carrying out such social welfare services through the church either in its individual or corporate expression it can be a joyous and self-less response of love growing out of faith in Christ but the

delivery of such social welfare services should comply with the service standards set by government, social work professional and much more, the church.

It is to be recognized that the church like any other non governmental organization (NGO) is constantly constrained by limited resources and the priorities of their disbursements. Nevertheless, in the context of the diversity and complexity of our society there are always a variety of responses to such situation which may be considered appropriate. Thus, the church must resolve this dilemma and come out with a clear and decisive social policy and practice to guide the congregation and individual.

The church owes its existence to the Grace of God and the people it serves in the community. It is therefore essential to reach out to the community regardless of their social and economic status, physical condition or political affiliation in conformity to the universal declaration of human rights. The rights and dignity of any human being especially persons with disabilities must be taken into account and the church should be alerted to the manner in which their social need is met. Persons with disabilities must have access to build environment. Unquestionably some churches are disabled friendly with appropriate ramps, suitable toilets and barrier-free structures for the physically disabled but there are others which are not barrier free especially those chapels which are located in a place other than the ground floor. Thus, inaccessibility to these places of worship is still a major barrier for persons with disabilities and universal or inclusive design is the solution as it is cost effective and will benefit

not only persons with disabilities but also older persons, pregnant women and parents with young children.

Charitable giving is the act of giving money, goods or time to the unfortunate, either directly or by means of a charitable trust or other worthy cause. As a religious act or duty it may be referred to as almsgiving or alms. The poor, particularly widows and orphans, and the sick and disabled, are generally regarded as the proper target group of charity but other social problems such as teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug dependence, child maltreatment, spousal abuse, HIV/AIDS and natural calamities do require proper intervention as called by *1 Timothy 6:17-18* “*Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy; Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share.*” The church’s concern in social welfare may be expressed by the development of services and institutions when community need calls for them. This extension of social concern is not to be the end in itself, but is to be seen as part of the total responsibility of the church in order to avoid marginalization in the community in line with the inherent task to proclaim the Word of God in such a way that it makes all of its members alert and responsive to human needs in their own community.

Ways Forward

It is indeed heartening to note that social work in Malaysia is now shifting from charity to the empowerment approach and that it is both

a way of thinking and a way of doing. The future social workers must continue to have a conceptual understanding and practical skills of the interplay of human behavior, practice and policy to ensure that every person will enjoy social wellbeing in our community.

Our society is changing rapidly. Social policies being formulated to tackle the psycho-socio and economical problems brought about by this rapid social change need to be considered in the continuum of universal or selective benefits depending on the size of the allocated welfare cake.

There is a greater awareness on the availability of social work education opportunity in the country. Quite a few institutions of higher learning are offering degree courses on professional social work and that employment opportunities for social workers either in the public sector or associations will further be enhanced if social work achieved its professional status in the country. Furthermore, VWOs should consider more seriously professionalizing their social work by engaging more qualified social workers in their programmes to be comparable to their counterparts in the developed nations.

The church, being a non-governmental organization is called upon to reexamine its role in the light of the current social needs in exploring the possibility of formulating a sustainable social concern policy for itself, the congregation and individuals.

As conclusion the following teachings from the Holy Bible are highlighted for our mutual sharing: -

“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5 : 16

“I have been young and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread. He is ever merciful, and lendeth; and his seed is blessed. Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell for evermore.” Psalm 37 : 25 – 27

Listen, my beloved brethren: has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” James 2 : 5

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