

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MISSIONARY DISCIPLE IN HEALTH CARE?

In November 2013, Pope Francis released the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*). This document outlines Francis' vision of the Church as discussed in the Synod of Bishops in 2012. The document consists of five chapters covering areas of the Church's mission, our communal commitment and the social dimension of evangelization. Francis calls all baptized to renew their identity as missionary disciples to help the poor and vulnerable and to bring the peace of Christ into the world.



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Ten years after the document's release, I believe the lessons shared are still relevant to today's environment. The guidance the Pope shares is vitally important to remind our ministry of the role of the Church in society.

## **WE MUST 'MOVE FORWARD, BOLDLY'**

Pope Francis begins *Evangelii Gaudium* by reminding us that the Church is "herself a missionary disciple."<sup>1</sup> This missionary disciple, whom God so loves, will "move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast."<sup>2</sup>

These are challenging words for the greater Church community and the ministry of health care. Our history has always been one of going to the peripheries to meet the community's needs. You may want to ask if your ministry is one of a missionary disciple, by evaluating: How in the last 10 years has your organization taken the first step to reach out to those most in need and advanced a culture that ministers at the margins?

## **WE CANNOT RISK BEING A BYSTANDER**

Francis repeats that "the Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a 'special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness."<sup>3</sup> He is astonished by the current media environment, asking how can it be that "it is

not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?"<sup>4</sup> Do we not continue to see this indifference 10 years later? Through the pandemic, the deaths of millions around the world became just another number reported on the nightly news. Our culture failed to recognize the individual lives taken from us and the need for a more concerted effort to help those left behind. As Francis states, "none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice ..."<sup>5</sup>

A second pillar of Church teaching which Francis writes of is our commitment to the common good. "God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between men."<sup>6</sup> The love of Christ moves us not only to the peripheries but also to renew the connections we hold nearby. As relational people, made in the image of a trinitarian God, we, too, must focus on the broader community. This dual movement of concern with individuals and the common good has been a continual dynamic expressed by the Pope. It is one that, at times, can be challenging to balance. But Francis reminds us that "what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is ... above all an attentiveness which considers the other 'in a certain sense as one with ourselves."<sup>7</sup>

Turning away from the poor and vulnerable and our common commitments has only become easier. We know the many ways in which our society creates a barrier with those it deems unworthy. Phrases like "the common good" have been weaponized as political. However, the Church and its health care ministry cannot risk being a

bystander. Francis fears such a reality. He writes:

“Any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will also risk breaking down, however much it may talk about social issues or criticize governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk.”<sup>8</sup>

We now have extensive data highlighting the importance of social conditions to the well-being of individuals. These social determinants of health have revolutionized how we approach health care. Our Church’s commitment to social justice and whole-person care connects strongly with this new approach. Therefore, how is your ministry finding new ways to stand with and help those most in need? Are we all going beyond talking about social issues toward active engagement with change?

#### **WE ARE ALL A MISSION ON THIS EARTH**

As many can see, Pope Francis has tried to renew and revise the formal structure of the Church. This document is an example of such reimagination. He believes that a change in structure will permit more people to participate in the missionary role of the Church. He hopes “that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat.’”<sup>9</sup> (Mark 6:37)

As the papacy and the Church question whether the current structure is properly aligned with the mission of Jesus Christ, its health care ministry ought to do the same. How has the U.S. health system prevented us from our original path? What new market demands cause us to fear new models of care or new demands from the community?

Each of us has a part in the mission of the Church. Francis recognizes his missionary role: “My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take

off; it is not an ‘extra’ or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth ...”<sup>10</sup> What do you see as your mission in the health care ministry? Can we

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reimagine our own structures so that each person can find themselves as a missionary disciple?

#### **CONTINUING TOWARD OUR VISION**

Pope Francis laid out a vision for the Church a decade ago. He emphasized the need to see the Church as a missionary disciple of Christ, one that goes out to the people and is committed to the poor and vulnerable and the common good. There has been some movement toward this vision.

We have much more to do. However, he gives us the courage to escape the comforts of complacency and the rigidity of well-aged structures. He invites us all to see ourselves as participants in this mission. This is not an easy request, and its mission did not originate 10 years ago. It certainly did not arrive today. Yet, Francis reminds us, “God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us.”<sup>11</sup>

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#### **NOTES**

1. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 40.
2. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.
3. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 198.
4. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53.
5. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 201.
6. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 178.
7. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 199.
8. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 207.
9. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.
10. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 273.
11. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 12.

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