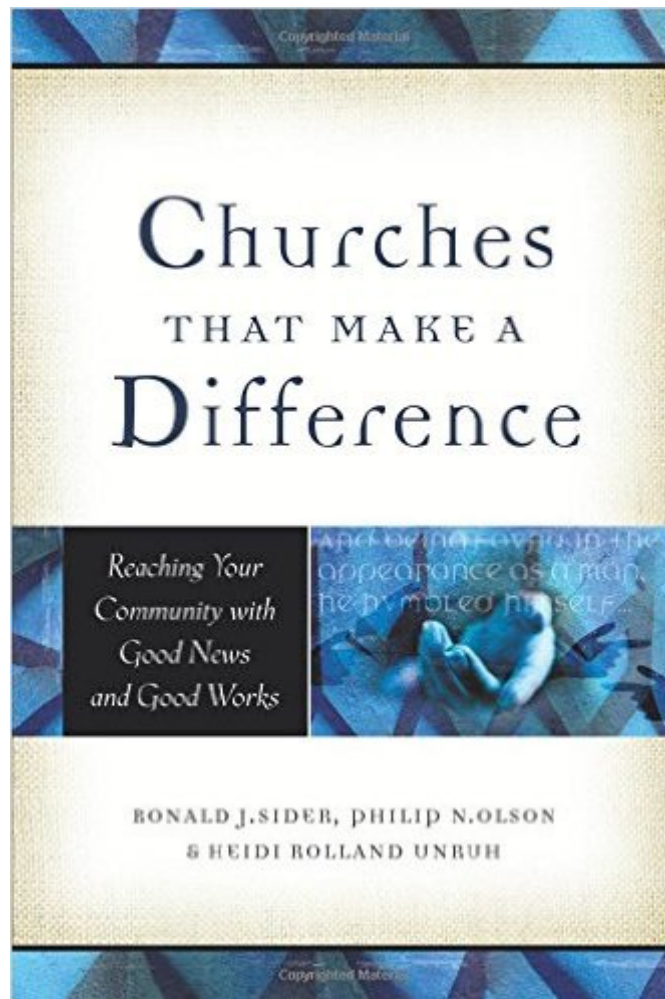


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Churches That Make A Difference: Reaching Your Community With Good News And Good Works



Synopsis

This book gives churches the tools to develop effective "holistic ministry" in their communities--a delicate balance of evangelism and social outreach.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ronald Sider has done it again. That is, he has left many of us who may not be fully engaged in significant social ministries in our communities, feeling a little less "holistic". Now this statement should not be mistaken for a criticism, but rather as an honest sigh or moan on the part of this pastor, and I suspect many others who far too often are ensnared in the traditional model of doing church. As I read "Churches That Make a Difference", I was impressed with the scholarship of this new resource. It attempts to bridge that age-old gap between evangelism (in the traditional context), and social action. The book is based upon a significant research undertaking conducted by Sider and his two colleagues, Heidi Unruh and Philip Olson. The research project sponsored by Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary examined the relationship between evangelism and social action in fifteen protestant churches in the greater Philadelphia area, and involved over 2,000 respondents. What I appreciate about this book is that it is well researched biblically, theologically, and scientifically. The authors are not novices, and this is not popularist fluff. The book gives generous examples throughout of churches bringing balance to an issue that for years has divided believers and reduced the effectiveness of many Christian churches. The reader is given a glimpse into success stories of "holistic" ministry, and testimonies of hope and assistance. I believe that

many 21st century churches desire to reach out to the world outside of their walls, but they may not know how to respond to this call to do so. Traditional models of evangelism which the church utilized well into the late 20th century seem unfortunately inadequate in a 21st century Postmodern culture and context.

Churches That Make A Difference has clearly been a popular Christian book, now having reached its third printing. The subtitle, "Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works", suggests the subject matter, namely - how to bring together Good News and Good Works in the Church. The book's great strength is that the content is based on fifteen "in-depth case studies" of Churches in the greater Philadelphia area. That is, it has its feet planted in reality. Among its weakness, in my view, are its "makeshift" theology - not because the authors espouse any theology in particular, but because the theology is not particularly well thought through, tending to fray especially in the details. The authors point out that "evangelism rarely happens by osmosis". "Loving acts need the complement of the verbal presentation of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. If people don't ask, and Christians never tell, how will anyone ever know the gospel?" That is, the gospel should always be presented clearly. On the other hand, however, "proclamation alone may ring hollow". The authors refer a great deal to "holistic ministry". This is ministry where "evangelism and social action are distinguishable but inseparable". Holistic ministry is "based on the understanding that the physical, spiritual, moral, and relational dimensions of human nature are intertwined. Churches of this type encourage faith commitments in the context of social activism". The book describes five classic models of social ministry in evangelical Churches today, as well as the option of forming coalitions or partnerships in social ministry. However, I sensed a void at the centre of the book, which has to do with the American "can do" attitude. In fact the concluding chapter is titled: "We Can Do It".

Best line in the book: "If its not there, everyone will know its missing." The book makes a strong case for more attention to social activity in advancing the gospel. Its a call for balance between word and deed. Each one depends on the other or there is a lack of balance; a church's ministry is not "holistic." Caring for the community shows that church is genuine. I sense the authors want to work on the Christian image to cure, what they perceive, as an unchristian attitude towards unbelievers. Many times the authors use examples and even statistics to support the assertion that many unbelievers are just put off by insensitive presentations that are void of compassion. I had to chuckle when they stated, "For every new believer transformed by the liberating Good News of

Christ, others have been turned off by offensive soul winning strategies." This is obviously true and many have seen over zealous believers turn away unbelievers who were lambasted with the truth. Such passion for the truth must be tempered by love or unbelievers will think Christians just want to win an ideology war. The authors may take their point a little too far however. A recent survey is quoted (pg. 64) demonstrating that 44% of non-Christians came away with a negative impression after an encounter with a believer (Christian Smith?). Only 44%? I would think even if the gospel were presented in the most compassionate way possible, you could not escape offending a higher percentage. Much of the problem I see in today's churches is the gospel is so watered down it wouldn't offend anybody. The true gospel by nature is offensive and certainly it will not matter how many programs your church performs, the truth remains. The gospel is offensive to human pride.

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