

# Bold initiative: Social entrepreneurship

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

The daylong symposium was about “social entrepreneurship,” a relatively new idea in business education but a well-established phenomenon. The concept focuses on people who undertake innovations in the social sector—addressing problems in society and advancing a particular social mission to serve a larger good. We Christians have long had people who fulfilled this role—indeed, they founded many of the institutions we now take for granted.

I was struck by the response of one of the leaders when I asked about the origins of the social entrepreneurship movement. He said that while many of the most important social institutions in the United States were started out of faith-inspired motivation by churches and denominations, these organizations had lost their steam in the last few decades. Today, he said, much of the energy for social entrepreneurship is emerging in secular contexts.

He mentioned faith-inspired organizations—the Salvation Army, Goodwill, hospitals and many colleges and universities that denominations founded in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But then he began talking about Teach for America, a secular organization that has emerged over the past decade and now has a significant scale and scope of mission.

The term *mission* got me thinking about the connection to churches. Have we Christians lost our sense of social entrepreneurship in a time when society needs such strategies? We need a stronger sense of mission, one that leads us to take risks in the service of the gospel, risks such as starting new churches and creating new institutions even as we seek to preserve and revitalize those created by our forebears.

My colleague Greg Dees, a scholar in the field of social entrepreneurship, offers a definition that uses terms and descriptions that Christians can readily understand. He says that social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in the social sector

by:

- adopting a mission to create and sustain social value
- pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission
- reengaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation and learning
- acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand
- exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created

I am intrigued by how well this description fits the emergence of the Wesleyan movement in 18th-century England and the Methodists in the U.S. in the 19th century. My Methodist forebears had a passion to serve the mission of God; they relentlessly pursued new opportunities in service of that mission; engaged in continuous innovation, adaptation and learning; acted boldly and held themselves to high standards. As a result, there are fine educational institutions, hospitals and health care organizations, and other important institutions across the country that were founded by Methodists.

Yet across the mainline denominations we now take many of these institutions for granted, acting as if they have always existed and always will exist. And in many cases we have allowed their (and our) sense of mission to drift, so that many of them have become indistinguishable from secular counterparts. We may be nostalgic about them—they are a particularly poignant feature of many founders celebrations on college campuses—but unfortunately we are not invigorated by a missional sense of what they might become in the future.

To be sure, my description is oversimplified. African-American and evangelical churches and movements have tended to maintain more of a spirit of social entrepreneurship, initiating ministries, schools and other nonprofit organizations. But even in those sectors there has not been either the capacity or the focus needed to develop structures and institutions of a scale and scope to address critically important social problems.

I am not imagining that faith-based organizations ought somehow to be the primary agents addressing social needs—the government and other actors in the social sector have critically important roles to play. Nor am I suggesting that local

congregations ought to try to become quasi-public delivery agents of major social programs. Most churches are not equipped to be social service delivery agents in the ways initially envisioned by the organizers of President Bush's faith-based initiatives program.

I am suggesting, however, that a spirit of social entrepreneurship would reinvigorate pastors, congregations and Christian leaders with a commitment to mission.

Last year, Teach for America was the largest single employer of Duke University's class of 2007. I am not surprised, as young people are looking for ways to make a significant difference with their lives. When I heard that statistic, I wondered who we might be able to attract to ordained ministry and full-time Christian service if we were once again known for our spirit of mission, of adventure, of social entrepreneurship—all in the faithful service of the gospel of Jesus Christ.