# RELATIONSHIP-BASED LEARNING OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE: A MUST FOR CHRISTIANS IN SOCIAL WORK

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Cultural competence is an increasingly important value and skill in the field of social work today. Much of the literature on cultural competence in social work advocates for cultural self-awareness, knowledge of and skills for working with people from different cultures.  There are a variety of educational ways to obtain these skills and knowledge, however, only recent literature on the topic advocates for more experiential learning of culture through intentional relationship-based, cross-cultural engagement both in and outside of the workplace.  According to this newly developing idea, some of the best cultural learning comes not just from training and research, but also from interacting with, living among, and getting to know those from different cultures.  In today's society of ever-increasing diversity, there is a great need for this quality of cultural competence – a quality that has been left out of cultural competence conversations for too long.

For Christians in the social work profession, the building of cultural competence through relationships and experiences is not just a goal to be reached for improved social work practice, but it is an essential part of God's calling for us to bring reconciliation to his world.  Therefore, Christian social workers must take this path to cultural competence more seriously.  By exploring definitions of cultural competence, strategies to obtain it, the reasons why relationship-based cultural competence is needed, and incorporating Christian perspectives on reconciliation, I will demonstrate the extreme importance of relationship-based cultural competence for social workers, and particularly, Christians in social work.

To begin, a definition of cultural competence is necessary.  In social work literature, there are a wide variety of definitions of the term, most of which include a combination of micro- and macro-level approaches.  One of these definitions describes cultural competence as the behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable effective cross-cultural engagement with culturally diverse clients (Lynch, 1998). Another definition uses a slightly different perspective.  It argues that "cultural humility" is a better goal

than "cultural competency" in that cultural humility emphasizes a "lifelong commitment to self-evaluation, to redressing the power imbalances in the patient-physician dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities" (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 117). These definitions emphasize both micro- and macro-level cultural competence because they include evaluation of both the self and societal structures, and the utilization of the understanding that comes from such evaluation.

Another micro- and macro-level guide for cultural competence is the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. Its definition of cultural competence includes the following three elements:

1. "Social workers should understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures;

2. Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups;

3. Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability" (NASW, 1996, p. 9).

This definition of cultural competence emphasizes education, knowledge and understanding as important factors of cultural sensitivity. However, this important guide for social workers fails to include any experiential/relational component as a means to gaining more culturally competent attitudes and interventions. This is excluded from the definition despite the seemingly holistic approach it has because of the micro- and macro-level approaches it describes.

Additional definitions emphasize *either* the micro- or macro-level approaches to cultural competency, but not both. On the micro-level, cultural competency definitions are as simple as successful cross-cultural communication. In Mary Suppes and Carolyn Wells' book, *The Social Work Experience,* the term is described as, "the skill of communicating competently with people of contrasting cultures" (Suppes & Wells, 2003, p. 134). Another definition adds to this communication piece, describing cultural competency as "the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build upon ethnic, sociocultural, and linguistic diversity" (Lynch, 1998, p. 49). This definition is more self-focused in that it advocates for positive thinking and feeling about human diversity. Another micro-level approach takes on a client-caseworker perspective, claiming that cultural competency is the ability of service providers to respond in the best way possible to culturally diverse clients by maintaining awareness of their strengths and weaknesses (Lynch, 1998). These micro-level approaches focus on the practitioner in terms of his or her attitudes, feelings, and responses.

Perspectives that have a more macro-level approach advocate for services and policies that acknowledge and respect cultural differences in human services. In their book, *Generalist Practice with Organizations and Communities*, Karen Kirst-Ashman and Grafton Hull Jr. define cultural competence in the organizational context. They describe it as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures which come together in a system, an agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in the context of cultural differences" (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006, p. 206). With this definition, the authors show that cultural competence is a common link of understanding that connects staff, policies, and service structures into a whole that can work effectively with cultural diversity (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006).

As one can see, cultural competence is a value and skill that varies in depth and perspective in social work literature. Based on the above definitions, a possible summary of cultural competence could

be the self-understanding, knowledge, and skills/values-based abilities necessary to work competently and sensitively with culturally diverse clients in micro- and macro-level settings.  Though definitions vary from practitioner to practitioner, cultural competence is highly sought-after and spoken about in the social work field.  However, as with the "what" of cultural competency, the "how" is also difficult to articulate.  Perspectives on how cultural competence should be obtained vary throughout the literature.

Strategies for developing cultural competence vary from perspective to perspective just as definitions of the concept do.  However, most contain some overlap of ideas.  These overlapping ideas include practicing self-awareness, gaining cultural knowledge, learning cross-cultural engagement skills, and spending time with those of different cultures.

The first of these action steps toward cultural competence is self-awareness.  Many social work publications emphasize that social workers should become aware of their own culture, values, biases, beliefs, and lifestyle before working with clients of different experiences and perspectives.  Not only should there be "clarification of the interventionist's own values and assumptions" (Lynch, 1998, p. 50), but also "an 'ongoing self-examination' of your attitudes about people with backgrounds different from your own" (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006, p. 410).  This is to say that social workers must be aware and in check of their personal biases, stereotypes, and attitudes toward others.

Another perspective adds an element of contextual self-awareness.  Sarah Lanier, author of *¿Por qué somos diferentes?*  (2004) (which translated means, "Why are we different?") explains that individuals are to be aware of culture-based conflicts that their people and history may have with others.  She argues that we have a responsibility to know where our histories have overlapped so that we are not ignorant to the way people view and react to us.  Hilary Weaver also advocates for this in her study of Native American clients and social work practice.  She found that Native American clients want their caseworkers to have knowledge of their history, culture, and present-day realities as related to the

history, culture, and current realities of more dominant groups (Weaver, 1999).  Theologian Miroslav Volf also views this knowledge as necessary.  He writes about the importance of knowing past inhumanities in his book *Exclusion and Embrace,* as related to the words and experiences of holocaust survivor and author, Elie Wiesel:

> If the victims remember rightly, the memory of inhumanities past will shield both them and all of us against future inhumanities; if the perpetrators remember rightly, the memory of their wrongdoing will help restore their guilty past and transform it into the soil on which a more hopeful future can grow (1996, p. 131).

Through these examples, it is evident that remembering where histories overlap amongst groups and individuals is extremely important for practitioners working with diverse clients.  The knowledge of these memories and information must be acknowledged and dealt with sensitively in social work practice.

Self-awareness – both personal and contextual - is an important piece of cultural competence that must be ongoing.  As Weaver says, "striving for cultural competence is a long-term, on-going process of development" (1999, p. 218).  In practicing cultural sensitivity, continuous assessment of the self, personal biases and attitudes, and historical context are very important elements that must not be forgotten or ignored.

A second step towards cultural competence, according to social work literature, is the process of gaining cultural knowledge.  According to the literature, this can be done in many ways, from formal education to professional training.  Kirst-Ashman and Hull propose two strategies for gaining cultural competence and preventing "cultural encapsulation", which is essentially stereotyping (2006, p. 411).  The first strategy is that agencies should "provide or support formal training to staff concerning cultural sensitivity to diverse client populations and consciousness-raising about the various expressions of

cultural encapsulation" (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006, p. 411).  The second strategy suggests that

"agencies can also assist practitioners' informal 'ongoing development of multicultural skills' by

encouraging that staff 'stay… abreast of multicultural research, seek… consultation, and participate… in

informal supervision groups with other practitioners'" (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006, p. 411).  This

perspective shows the importance of formal and informal cultural knowledge development and practical

ways with which to obtain it.  In sum, social workers must make a "commitment to ongoing professional

development through formal and informal learning and skill acquisition that continues to enhance

practice" with diverse populations (Organista, 2009, p. 300).

A third strategy for gaining cultural competence, which overlaps somewhat with the knowledge

piece, is learning cross-cultural engagement skills.  Not only does this include generalist social work

skills, but more specifically skills that show sensitivity to other cultures and perspectives.  This set of

skills is characterized by patience, openness, a willingness to learn and be taught by the other (Lanier,

2004), a non-judgmental attitude, tolerance of silence, and humility, rather than by arrogance or

professional superiority (Weaver, 1999).  Also included in this skills set is an extra emphasis on the

strengths perspective.  Social workers must develop their skills to identify, appreciate, and draw upon

the strengths of their culturally diverse clients, since they are the ones who best understand their own

contexts, current situations, and preferred outcomes (Kirst-Ashman, 2006).  Social workers must learn

the skills to help clients "discover and embellish… strengths and resources in… assisting them to achieve

their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings, and society's

domination" (Saleebey, 2002, p. 1).  These skills are important additional pieces to culturally competent

and sensitive social work practice.

The fourth and most recently developing strategy (and as  I argue, the most important strategy)

for gaining cultural competence  is spending time with and getting to know those of different cultures

both in and outside of social work practice. This strategy emphasizes experiential learning of culture through intentional cross-cultural engagement and relationship-building, including spending time with and working with individuals from different cultures and participating in their daily lives (Lynch, 1998). A supporting perspective suggests that cultural competence is best achieved when people leave their comfort zones and become foreigners themselves. Such an experience opens the door for greater understanding of what it is like to be in the minority or "on the outside" of a particular group (Lanier, 2004). Whether an individual travels internationally or just spends more time in a different community in their own hometown, Lanier encourages listening, observation, humility, and curiosity. Approaching others different from us in this way will enhance our learning in cross-cultural engagement. Miroslav Volf says,

> We enlarge our thinking by letting the voices and perspectives of others… resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from *their* perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives" (1996, p. 213).

Learning such as this through interaction with and learning from others could never be achieved by simply researching or receiving cultural training (Lanier, 2004).

This cross-cultural engagement and relationship piece of cultural competence is increasingly important because of the social work profession's tendency to turn cultural competence into an expertise (Suppes & Wells, 2003). This is made quite evident in the previously-mentioned definitions of cultural competence. They fail to include relational/experiential components of the concept, and emphasize self-awareness, knowledge, and skills, which are common components of an expertise. Although these components are important to cultural competence, they must be balanced with relationship-based cross-cultural engagement to avoid the transforming of cultural sensitivity into a set

of technical skills, since completing a certain amount of studies and skills trainings cannot guarantee holistic cultural competence.  When cultural competence is viewed as an expertise, social workers forget the importance of inter-personal cultural learning as a more genuine way to understand others.

For this reason, anthropologists Arthur Kleinman and Peter Benson argue against the "fashionable term" of cultural competence altogether: "One major problem with the idea of cultural competency is that it suggests culture can be reduced to a technical skill for which clinicians can be trained to develop expertise… culture is often made synonymous with ethnicity, nationality, and language;" then generalized cultural assumptions can be made, such as, "Chinese believe this," "Japanese believe that," which fail to see the uniqueness of each individual (2006, p. 1673).  The authors explain that, "cultural factors are not always central to a case" (Kleinman & Benson, 2006, p. 1673). Thus, caseworkers must try to approach clients without assumptions or expectations.  Along with this, caseworkers should build relationships with others different from them so that they can develop a more genuine understanding of others, rather than keeping to themselves and pinning cultural generalities on those whose race or ethnicity matches their assumptions.  Therefore, cultural competence must be refocused to be more relationship-based and require more person-to-person interaction, as more recent literature has encouraged.

Because of the risk of "professionalization" of cultural competence in social work, Kleinman and Benson encourage ethnography, which shows a person through actual experience "what life is like in a 'local world', a specific setting in a society" usually quite different from the "local world" of that person (2006, p. 1674).  Through this type of cross-cultural, relationship-based experience, the importance is placed on "understanding the native's point of view" (p. 1674).  This is different from the "expertise" understanding of cultural competence because it is involves relationship, humility, and engagement.

This understanding also throws out the "trait list approach" to cultural understanding and "the technical mastery that the term 'competency' suggests" (Kleinman & Benson, 2006, p. 1674).

This recently developing strategy of cultural competence must be more strongly encouraged in social work practice. Perhaps it is a more uncomfortable approach to cross-cultural understanding, but it is in discomfort that learning potential grows exponentially – something that a cultural training session inside the walls of an office building cannot offer. Many practitioners forget that the best kind of knowledge, skills, and values of cultural competency come from the simple act of living among and engaging with those who are different from themselves. Practitioners will understand their client populations best not just through books and the attainment of academic knowledge about them, but through personal relationship with them. Books can only teach so much.

My own personal experiences have also proven this idea to me. When I studied abroad in Central America in the spring of 2009, I wrote multiple times about my experiential, interpersonal learning in my travel journal. I wrote, "I am learning so much through my experiences in this culture… I never would have come close to learning these things if I was sitting in a classroom back home this semester". This is not to say that my classroom experiences added nothing to my cultural understanding – actually, they greatly enhanced my ability to learn, analyze, and respond in cross-cultural engagement – but my understanding would have been incomplete without such an experience that brought me outside of the classroom and outside of my comfort zone. Thus, such experiences and relationship-building are necessary for more holistic cultural competence.

This brings us to the question of why there is such a great need for cultural competence in the first place – and more specifically, the relational piece of cultural competence. What has happened or gone wrong that has caused cultural competence to be so important? The answers to these questions can be found in both social work literature and Christian literature.

One aspect of social work practice that shows the need for cultural competence is in administering social services.  Human service agencies and organizations have a tendency to practice social work without much cultural sensitivity if they are not intentionally doing so.  Some argue that "social workers and social welfare systems [impose] American middle-class norms as rigid standards for clients" (Weaver, 1999, p. 218).  There are unspoken pressures in our society - and therefore in the way we practice social work – for people to conform to the ways of the dominant culture, or otherwise keep their distance from it.

Theologian Miroslav Volf agrees that these societal pressures exist.  In his book *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996)*,* Volf discusses how dominant traditions tend to drown out the voices of other, smaller traditions.  He explains that the "grand idea" (the values and desires of the dominant culture) sets up its goals "as the single goal of the universal history and then forces the multiple streams of history into the great river that flows toward that goal" (1996, p. 106). Through this, Volf explains that the dominant culture – lacking cultural respect, sensitivity, and understanding - tries to push others to follow its norms so that its agenda will be accomplished.  In social work settings, practitioners must be careful not to push their clients in this way.  Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2006) argue that there is always room for improvement in social service agencies' cultural competence skills and practices:

> Agencies may be neither culturally competent nor particularly sensitive.  Most agencies can improve on or expand their cultural competence.  Agencies might need to provide continuing education for employees or expand the range of cultural competence to specific cultural groups.  Some agencies may need to take a long, hard look at the entire concept of cultural competence and make major revisions in their mission (p. 206).

This is a good reminder that social service agencies and practitioners must evaluate their approach to working with diverse clients to determine whether they are pushing clients to certain solutions or

allowing them to determine their own.  This is necessary in our culture that has a long history of pressuring minority groups to conform to the norms of the dominant group.

A term that captures this phenomenon and has unfortunately thrived through two turns of a century as a positive thing is the term, "melting pot".  It represents the cultural assimilation of immigrants into one homogenous group known as "Americans".  The melting pot idea became most popular pre-World War I by playwright, Israel Zangwill (Hirschman, 1983).  A line in the script of his play, "The Melting Pot", describes the American melting pot as celebrated in the early years of the 20th century:

> America is God's Crucible, the great melting pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!  Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories… But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to… Into the Crucible with you all!  God is making the American (Hirschman, 1983, p. 397)!

Zangwill paints a picture that shows immigrants (namely, white Europeans) as ready and willing to rid themselves of their cultural identities in order to take on the new, majority-group, "American" identity – a romanticized picture to be sure, which excludes immigrants of non-white ethnic groups.  Realistically, this shedding of original cultural identity has not so much been the desire of the immigrant, but more so the pressure of the dominant culture on the immigrant ever since the first arrivals of different ethnic groups to this country.

Suppes and Wells state that, "racial and ethnic minority groups, earlier in this country's history, were expected to become part of a national 'melting pot'.  Minority groups were thus pressured toward giving up cherished aspects of their cultural identities" (2003, p. 134).  Although the authors claim this melting-pot pressure to be something of the past, I would like to argue that it still exists; the

authors' failure to see that should make us uncomfortable, because we help sustain the pressure when we fail to see its power.  In his book, *Searching for Whitopia* (2009), Rich Benjamin makes a bold claim that we live in "an America that does not mind a little ethnic food, some Asian math whizzes, or a few Mariachi dancers – as long as these trends do not overwhelm the white dominant, culture" (2009, p. 5). He argues that we live in a culture and society that would still prefer a homogenous melting pot to a mosaic, which is made evident by things such as institutional racism and disparate, segregated communities.  In *Exclusion and Embrace,* Volf discusses this tendency of humanity to desire homogeneity.  Throughout history, nations of the world have desired:

> One people, one culture, one language… [We] want a pure world and push the 'others' out of our world; we want to be pure ourselves and eject 'otherness' from within ourselves.  The 'will to purity' contains a whole program for arranging our social worlds – from the inner worlds of ourselves to the outer worlds of our families, neighborhoods, and nations (Volf, 1996, p. 74).

Because of our desire for a homogenous melting pot society, Volf explains that we reject others in order to maintain ourselves; this makes an impact not only on individual people, but on communities and nations.

Along with the pressure of the melting pot phenomenon, we also have a tendency to see ourselves as good and others as evil (Volf, 1996); ourselves as normal and others as abnormal (Elmer, 2002). "When we think we are normal, we make a rather fatal slip into believing that we also are the *norm* by which everything and everyone else can be judged" (Elmer, 2002, p. 59).  Therefore, instead of accepting cultural differences, humanity has fallen into the habit of pushing the other to become like them or pushing the other away altogether.  Volf talks about four different types of exclusion, which he describes as:

1. Elimination (for example, ethnic cleansing or genocide)

2. Assimilation (be like the dominant culture if you want to survive)

3. Domination (for example, caste systems and exploitation)

4. Abandonment (the needs of the suffering are seen but ignored).  (1996)

These four types of exclusion show the tendency of humanity to desire a homogenous melting pot and/or the exclusion of the other, which demonstrates the extent that reconciliatory, relationship-based cultural sensitivity and competence are needed in and amongst societies across the world, and more specifically in social work practice.

These claims should challenge us to look at ourselves - do we live in a way that embraces some but excludes others?  Do we let people be who they are or do we expect them to become more like us in order for us to accept them?  Does our social work practice embrace cultural differences or push clients to the lifestyle and problem-solving of the dominant culture?  Does our lifestyle and community encourage or hide from intercultural relationships and racial reconciliation?  Without intentional practice of cultural competence and cross-cultural engagement, pressures towards homogeneity will continue to exist in social work practice and in the larger society.

These problems of the desire for homogeneity and societal pressures to conform to the dominant culture are part of a larger picture of problems that social workers, both Christian and non-Christian, must caution themselves against. Bryant Myers of World Vision International, a faith-based international development organization, explains this larger picture by identifying four particular areas of destructive bias that human service practitioners must be careful to avoid.  These biases are another demonstration of the need for cultural competence in social work practice.  First, Myers (1999) cautions against "pride in conditioning" (p. 59), which overlaps with the previously-mentioned "dominant professionalism".  Myers explains that since we are well-educated (conditioned) as professionals, we must resist the temptation to push our views and problem-solving approaches on to our clients (Myers,

1999).  High levels of education do not give practitioners the permission to assume that their solutions

take precedence over those of clients.

Second, Myers cautions against dominance.  We must be aware of and resist the desire to be

dominant over others, both personally and culturally; those of privilege in society cannot assume their

advantage to be an inherent part of who they are: "those who have been privileged in a society [must]

recognize that their advantages are based on systems that disadvantage others," not on anything that is

inherent to them (Lynch, 1998, p. 50).  Jeremiah 17:11 in *Today's New International Version Study Bible*

(2006) says, "Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay are those who gain riches by unjust means"

(p. 1275).  This is to say that the rich and powerful have their advantage through unjust ways, such as

through societal structures, as Myers described.  This proverb and Myer's caution both warn those of

privilege against domination because their privilege is not inherently theirs – it is given to them through

cultural and societal structures and the resulting advantages or disadvantages for different groups of

people.

Third, Myers cautions against distance.  Practitioners tend to be with people like their clients

only during work hours.  We are "in the field" when we are working with the poor and/or those different

from us (Myers, 1999).  Myers warns against only knowing these people at a distance and encourages

that we open ourselves up to them and bring them into our everyday lives, in agreement with

relationship-based cultural competence.  Myers explains how many biblical perspectives also advocate

for this lifestyle.  In Psalm 133, David describes a world without distance between people, "How good

and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity" (TNIV, 2006, p. 1000)!  Many other Christian

perspectives also advocate for this in literature which will be further explored in the next section.

Fourth, Myers warns practitioners against denial.  By this Myers means that we have a tendency

to deny the plight of others out of apathy or when it conflicts with our lifestyles.  Myers explains that,

"this all-too-human reaction allows us to remain untroubled and unchanged, leaving the poor to adapt to us" (Myers, 1999, p. 59).  In the Bible, James 2:15 says, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.  If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it" (TNIV, 2006, p. 2078)?  Such a reaction shows the disheartening apathy that so many are guilty of.  Both James and Myers argue that the plight of others should make us uncomfortable – even angry – to a point that we are moved to action.

These four areas of destructive bias as connected with the desire for homogeneity and dominancy-driven exclusion show a great need for cultural competence – a cultural competence that does not necessarily come from formal education and training but from relationship-building and engagement with different cultures.  In a broken world that has such tendencies to exclude and dominate, the need for reconciliation is great.

In response to this need, Christian social workers have a great responsibility, based not only in social work values, but also in their Christian faith.  Christian literature and the Bible have much to say about the idea of relationship-based reconciliation.  Different from social work values, Christian values do not view this reconciliation and relationship as a professional means to an end; rather, Christians take it to mean that God desires that we heal broken relationships between people, communities, and nations in a world plagued by sin and brokenness.  We as Christians strive for this out of gratitude and praise to God for reconciling himself to us through the death of his son, Jesus Christ.

Many Christian perspectives – particularly the Reformed tradition – stand strong in support of this desire of God.  The Heidelberg Catechism, a document of the Christian Reformed faith, emphasizes the importance of the biblical mandate in Matthew 22 to love God and our neighbors: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.  This is the first and greatest commandment.  And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"

(TNIV, 2006, p. 1648).  The Heidelberg Catechism adds that because we are all fallen, sinful and imperfect, we often fail to do this; it explains that "[We] have a natural tendency to hate God and [our] neighbor" (Heidelberg Catechism, 1975, p. 2).  God wants us to become aware of our sinful tendency to push away our neighbors and to love our neighbors according to his commandments.  From the basis of many Christian perspectives and perhaps obviously, this love cannot be shared if we remain distant from our neighbors.

By embracing and loving our neighbors, we take part in reconciliation.  The Belhar Confession, a document of beliefs on unity, reconciliation, and justice created by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, explains this idea of reconciliation.  It supports a universal Christian church formed through Christ's reconciliatory work; this universal church consists of "the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another" (Belhar Confession, 1994, p. 3).  Miroslav Volf supports this view of reconciliation: "God's reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other" (1996, p. 100).  However, Volf reminds us that just opening our arms to others is not enough – we must adjust our attitudes in such a way that we allow God and others to change our hearts.  Volf says, "Reconciliation with the other will succeed only if the self, guided by the narrative of the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment of its identity in light of the other's alterity" (1996, p. 110).  As Christians, we must live in a way that brings reconciliation between people by opening our arms to others and being willing to learn from and be changed by them.  Since Christ reconciled himself with us, we must continue his redemptive work by reconciling ourselves with others.

The Belhar Confession continues by saying, "separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly… anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted" (1994, p. 3).  This means that Christ has indeed

conquered the sin of our exclusion of others, but we must not then sit idly by - we must continue to be

his instruments of reconciliation until his final redemption.  Out of gratitude for the undeserved grace

and forgiveness Christ has given us, we must forgive and show grace to one another.  The Belhar

Confession says that through this grace, forgiveness, love, and pursuit of community, we build the unity

that Christ so desires for us.  As it is stated in 1 Corinthians 12, the body of Christ is made up of many

parts: "just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with

Christ" (TNIV, 2006, p. 1944).  The chapter goes on to say that each part of the body needs the others in

order to function as a whole, arguing that "there should be no division in the body" and "its parts should

have equal concern for each other" (p. 1944).   Through this scripture and the Belhar Confession we see

that "we need one another" (1994, p. 4) to achieve wholeness and reconciliation, for reconciliation

cannot occur with only one person or one group – there must be *mutual* embrace (Volf, 1996).

Many other Christian perspectives also encourage this reconciliation through giving time to

others, knowing them, and living among them.  Dr. John Perkins of the Christian Community

Development Association challenges people to live out this reconciliation and embrace of others like

Jesus did.  He explains, "Jesus relocated. He became one of us. He didn't commute back and forth to

heaven" (Perkins, 2009, p. 1).  He supports this statement with Biblical text from John 1:14: "The Word

became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (TNIV, 2006, p. 1776).  Shane Claiborne, author of *The*

*Irresistible Revolution*, is passionate like Dr. Perkins about this idea.  He talks about how Jesus spent a lot

of time with people unlike him; he did not maintain a "safe", "comfortable" distance, but rather

invested in others' lives (Claiborne, 2006).  Duane Elmer also describes this relational Jesus in his book,

*Cross-Cultural Connections* (2002):

Reading the four gospel accounts, we see that the amount of time Jesus spent with people is

quite impressive: with individuals, with his disciples, with the masses, in people's homes, on the

hillside, on the road, at wells and in the towns.  Everywhere he went he invested heavily in

people's lives.  (p. 131)

Jesus was passionate about living among and spending time with people quite unlike him, leading a

lifestyle which he challenges us to lead also.  Shane Claiborne criticizes Christians for failing to model

their lives after Christ in this way:

We can admire and worship Jesus without doing what he did.  We can applaud what he

preached and stood for without caring about the same things.  We can adore the cross without

taking up ours.  I had come to see that the great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians

do not care about the poor but that rich Christians do not know the poor (2006, p. 113).

Here Claiborne is speaking about the rich and the poor, but the idea also applies to people of different

cultures and addresses our failure to know each other.  He challenges Christians to get out of their

comfort zones to live a more radical Christian life by engaging with and walking alongside others, just as

Jesus did.

These Christian thinkers and biblical perspectives strongly encourage Christians to take seriously

the call to live among and get to know others that may be quite unlike them.  This is an important and

necessary step towards reconciliation.  This challenge is also presented in the newly developing ideas for

learning cultural competence in social work, which encourage much more experiential, relationship-

based learning than skill acquisition and attainment of cultural knowledge.  The reconciliation of

Christianity combined with the relationship-based cultural competence of social work poses a significant

challenge to Christian social workers – a challenge to live differently both in and outside of the work

place in a way that brings people of different cultures, beliefs, races, and ethnicities together.

Christian social workers must take on this challenge and opportunity, not only for more effective interventions with diverse clients in social work practice, but also for reconciliation between people that God so desires.  It greatly enriches our professional, spiritual, communal, and personal lives in many ways.  As it says in the book of Revelation describing the kingdom of God, "I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (TNIV, 2006, p. 2130).  With this as our ultimate goal and image of eternity, we as Christian social workers must recognize and act on the need for such an image to be made reality in our world today through relationship-based cultural engagement, sensitivity, and understanding.  May we as Christians and social workers never cease to challenge ourselves to live our lives in intentional ways that break down cultural, racial, and ethnic barriers in pursuit of reconciliation.

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