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ARTICLES

Social Workers in Congregational Contexts

The Impact of a Spirituality-Based Support Group on Self-Efficacy and Well-Being of African American Breast Cancer Survivors:

A Mixed Methods Design

Exploring the Relationship between Clergy and Mental Health Professionals

Community Collaboration: Practices of Effective Collaboration

as Reported by Three Urban Faith-Based Social Service Programs

PRACTICE NOTE

Driving Miss Concepción: Some Thoughts for Churches and

Social Workers on the Unlawful Transportation of Unauthorized Aliens

REVIEWS

PUBLICATIONS

HOME STUDY



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Social Work and Christianity (SWC) is a refereed journal published by the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) to support and encourage the growth of social workers in the ethical integration of Christian faith and professional practice. SWC welcomes articles, shorter contributions, book reviews, and letters which deal with issues related to the integration of faith and professional social work practice and other professional concerns which have relevance to Christianity.

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Social Workers in Congregational Contexts

Vicki Moore Northern

This report presents the findings of a nationwide survey of social workers employed in churches. It utilizes a descriptive approach in identifying the roles, identity, job descriptions, and educational and networking needs of social workers in congregational settings. Using a questionnaire from a survey 20 years before (Garland, 1987) provided an opportunity for historical comparison as well as to build on the literature about social work practice within the church. A two-step snowball sample yielded 30 in-depth telephone interviews. Congregational social workers have a variety of job titles as well as job responsibilities that range from direct practice to social ministry leadership. They see themselves as social workers but experience conflict about how they think the church staff and congregation see their role in the church. Their greatest need is networking opportunities. The results of this study will enable churches and social workers to explore the roles of social workers in congregational contexts.

THIS ARTICLE ADDRESSES THE ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND NEEDS of social workers who practice in church/congregational contexts. Congregational social work refers to the professional practice of social work in a local church or congregation and describes a context for practice (Garland, 1987). A church social worker may be employed to help the needs of the church's members as well as to help the members meet the needs of their community.

Although the profession of social work is considered to be secular in nature, many of its roots are in the church. Through the years the relationship between the social work profession and the church has

ranged from mutual benefit to disdain (Garland, 1992). When the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 established Charitable Choice and encouraged faith-based providers of social services to collaborate with government, a new focus was placed back on the church as a source for help to the poor and marginalized (Sherwood, 2000).

In the past twenty years there has also been increased interest in the role spirituality plays in the lives of clients in social work practice and research. The social worker's knowledge, values, ethics, and skills are a valuable resource to the church in understanding the needs of the community, viewing those needs as a challenge for ministry, and helping prepare the congregation to provide service in a meaningful way (Garland, 1988; 1992). Many churches do not have the funds to employ a social worker, and those who are employed in these roles often carve out their own job description and do not have the opportunity for networking with other church social workers (Garland, 1987).

Garland (1987) documented the original research of congregational social work. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered and analyzed, describing the roles of church social workers in America. Since that time there has been an increased interest in the role spirituality plays in the lives of clients in social work practice and research, but little research has been conducted to explore the roles and responsibilities of social workers who work on church staffs. The purpose of this project is to describe the roles and responsibilities of congregational social workers, and to see if and how their roles have changed in the past twenty years since Garland's research.

Review of Literature

To explore the roles of social workers who work in congregational settings, it is important to define terms that refer to this context for practice. In addition, consideration of the history of social work will connect the field of "congregational social work" with the context of practice studied in this research.

Definition of Terms

Congregational social work refers to the professional practice of social work in a local church or congregation. In this article, the terms

church social work, *congregational social work*, and *parish social work* are used to describe this context for practice (Garland, 1987). Although church social work may also describe social work practice that takes place within an organization funded or aligning with a religious denomination, such as hospitals or privately funded children's homes, this paper will exclusively explore the functions of social workers who are employed in congregational staff positions. Joseph and Conrad (1980) coined the term *parish social work* and defined it as social work that takes place in the local church. Garland (1987) noted that the term *parish* refers to a geographical area. It is particularly applicable for congregations that are defined geographically, such as Roman Catholic parishes, although even Roman Catholic congregational members now may travel past one Roman Catholic church to attend one that they choose. Moreover, members of a church may not live close to their church building, but the church congregation is often concerned with the needs of the people who do live in its surrounding community.

Church Social Work vs. Christian Social Work

Church social work is not to be confused with *Christian social work*. Christians who practice social work will inevitably be involved in integrating their worldview and beliefs with professional practice, but there is no one thing that can be defined as Christian social work (Van Hook, 1997). According to Garland (1988), "we speak of Christian farmers, but not of Christian farming" in reference to the type or context of social work practice (p. 255). Davis (1983) distinguished the difference between church social work and Christian social ministry, saying that Christian social ministry refers to "the activities carried out by redeemed individuals called by God to proclaim the good news to minister to the needy, and to seek justice for all" (p. 523). There may be social workers who are Christian who practice in a secular setting, and there may be non-Christians who work in a church social work setting.

Previous Research on Church Social Work

The only descriptive research on church social work was conducted 20 years ago by Garland (1987). In an effort to add to the literature and provide assistance to existing and future church social workers, Garland conducted a search for church social workers, but only 21 could be

located and interviewed. These social workers were all members of the churches in which they served and were involved in many social programs and ministries, including the micro and mezzo practice of direct work with individuals, families and groups, and the macro practice of developing and directing social ministry programs that may interface with the community. Their education chiefly consisted of an MSW or an MSW and/or a seminary degree with a major in social work. They had prior experience in professional practice, and some had served on church staff prior to their church social work role. Most of the social workers in the 1987 sample were of the Southern Baptist denomination, probably a result of the location of the researcher in a Southern Baptist seminary and the use of snowball sampling. Job titles varied widely, and they reported conflict between their own professional identity and how they were viewed by other church staff members and their congregations. Several referred to the church staff and membership having little knowledge about their role within the church or that they expected the social worker to 'do' ministries whereas the social worker tended to see her/his role as setting up the ministries for others to carry out.

Most did not charge fees to clients if they were in direct practice; their services were totally supported by the church. All of the respondents reported that they felt isolated (Garland, 1987). In almost any other context, there are other social workers with whom one can network, seek and provide supervision and consultation. For some, the congregational setting was, as one church social work has described it elsewhere, "a social worker's paradise," (Ferguson, 1992, p. 45) but for others, sometimes the response was "get me out of this vacuum!" (Garland, 1987, p. 32).

Since the 1987 research project, additional literature has been published about church social work. In 1992, Garland edited the book, *Church Social Work*, which introduced the context for practice, provided an in-depth historical review of social work, and provided seven chapters by social workers who practiced within churches, faith-based organizations, and as consultants to churches. Garland referred to three main characteristics of social work in a church setting: its context is a voluntary organization; its work is secondary to the host organization, and the "role of lay persons is central in church social work" (Garland, 1992, p. 7). In *Church Social Work*, Watkins (1992) described the role of the social worker who acts as a consultant to a church. Many churches seek to develop inner-city ministries, and the church social work

consultant can work with the church staff and congregants to provide knowledge about community intervention (1992). Also in the same volume, Ferguson (1992) described characteristics that distinguish church social work from another practice settings: the social worker may be able to reach some groups who might otherwise be unreachable or overlooked, the social worker has an additional identity and calling as a minister, and the social worker's practice is very broad to include preventive, rehabilitative, and proactive. Ferguson also explored the difference between the one-on-one micro focus—feeding the poor—and the social action macro focus—working to discover why the person is hungry and working to change societal conditions (1992).

In *Moving Faith into Action: A Facilitator's Guide for Creating Parish Social Ministry Organizations*, Lund and Heidkamp (1990) provide concrete steps to launching a parish social ministry committee. Four key content areas include theology, group process skills, social skills, and spirituality; the authors write from a Catholic and social justice perspective. Another guide, *Parish Social Work Training Guide* (not published), was prepared by the Woman's Missionary Union of Virginia for their Parish Social Work Program. The guide, prepared from a Baptist community ministry perspective, provides a history of social work, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, and information for assessing needs in the community. It refers to social work and social ministry interchangeably.

In conclusion, literature concerning social work practice within church settings has increased but continues to be sparse. In addition, no new research has actually studied the roles of church social workers. Therefore, this project sought to: (1) identify social workers who are working in congregational contexts; (2) determine the roles and responsibilities of the social workers; (3) explore the educational and professional needs of congregational social workers; and (4) ascertain or initiate networking for social workers in these roles.

Methodology

For her study 20 years ago, Garland (1987) designed a 56-question phone survey protocol. This study used the same protocol. It asked respondents such questions as their job title, whether or not they liked their title, and how they would name their jobs if they could. It asked respondents to describe their job responsibilities, what they

and others expect from their roles, short-term and long-term goals, demographic characteristics of clients they serve, nature of clients' presenting problems, whether or not they charge fees, theories that inform their practice, theology that informs their practice, evaluation methodologies they use, ethical dilemmas they face, and professional resources they use or need. It also asked respondents to describe their professional identity (e.g., "Do you/others on staff/congregation see you as a social worker?" "As a minister/clergy person?"). The interview gathered demographic information such as age, gender, education, and professional memberships.

Subjects/Population/Sample and Limitations

There are no authoritative sources or existing databases of church social workers. I compiled a database consisting of social workers who were likely to be employed in a church setting, such as members of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work, the attendance roster of a parish social work training course in Virginia, and names provided by my network of colleagues. A website search yielded a list of megachurches (congregations with regular attendance of more than 2000), since it was hypothesized that large congregations were more likely to have a specialized staff role like social worker. The first five megachurches contacted did not have social workers on staff, however, so I abandoned this strategy. I then requested an email list of the membership of NACSW, reasoning that this approach might reveal church social workers. The limitations of using email as a method to locate parish social workers exists in that there may be those who do not use email. In addition, some people delete email without reading it if it is from someone they do not know. There are likely church social workers who do not belong to NACSW or are not known by the church social workers I identified. It is a form of snowball sampling; although the membership list was used originally, people who responded to the emails often provided names of other church social workers who might be willing to participate. This sampling limits one's ability to generalize to the broader population of church social workers, but this descriptive approach using a variety of contacts represents the current reality for gathering data on this population.

Although I did not have a list of respondents from the original report, it is very likely that some of the same respondents were interviewed for this study. Garland's study was conducted from Louisville,

Kentucky, when Garland was a professor at Carver School of Church Social Work. When she moved to Baylor University School of Social Work ten years later, we worked together, although we did not work together on this project. Garland's previous research included a nationwide search and yielded only 21 church social workers. Although many ministers and laypersons provide social ministry, the pool was restricted to persons with degrees in social work (B.A. in Social Work, B.S.W., M.A. in Social Work, Master of Religious Education in Social Work accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, M.S.S.W., or M.S.W.) who were employed either full- or part-time by a church or considered a member of the church staff.

Data Collection Procedures

Initially, an email letter was sent to everyone in the NACSW database ($n = 1200$) who had email addresses asking if they qualified and if they would be willing to participate in this research. The email was titled "What do social workers in congregations do?" Additionally, any known social workers affiliated with churches were also sent the same email. Upon receipt of a positive email response, I replied via email to schedule a convenient time for a telephone interview. The final sample consisted of 30 completed phone interviews. I recorded by hand the respondent's answers.

Findings

This article reports findings concerning social work roles, job titles, job descriptions of social workers in congregational contexts, and perceived educational and networking needs. The article and job descriptions are posted on the Baylor School of Social Work website at http://www.baylor.edu/social_work/.

Demographic Identity of Sample

The respondents were located in sixteen states, with Texas in the majority ($n = 7$) followed by New York and Pennsylvania ($n = 3$ each). They represented thirteen denominations: 11 Baptists, 5 Catholics, 4 Presbyterians, and one from each of 10 other denominations (Church of Christ, Christian Fellowship, Wesleyan, Community Church, non-

denominational, Reformed Church of America, Christian, Church, African Methodist Episcopal, Nazarene, and Pentecostal). These findings correspond with Garland's 1987 study where 11 of 21 respondents were Baptist, and the largest number was found in Texas.

The majority of the respondents were employed as full-time staff ($n = 21$), some worked part-time ($n = 8$), and one worked part-time but was not financially reimbursed by the church. Respondents had worked in their current role an average of four and one half years and a median of two years, with a range from three months to 33 years. Twenty of the respondents (66%) were female. This contrasts slightly with the 1987 study in which 12 were male and 9 were female. Ethnicities included Caucasian ($n = 26$), African American ($n = 2$), Hispanic ($n = 1$) and Asian American ($n = 1$). The average age for the church social workers was 45 years, which was also the median. The mode was 34 years, with a range from 23 years to 71 years.

All respondents had baccalaureate degrees. Seventy-seven percent ($n = 23$) had master's degrees in social work, 23 % ($n = 7$) had completed a seminary degree, and 7% ($n = 2$) had doctoral degrees in ministry. Those who did not have the MSW degree had undergraduate degrees in social work. Of the 23 who have master's degrees, one had a Master in Religious Education (M.R.E.) with a social work concentration, and one had the M.R.E. earned before the program was accredited at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In the initial email letter, the researcher requested that only social workers with degrees from schools accredited by the Council on Social Work Education respond, but that specific question was not asked during the interview. See Table 1 for a frequency distribution of education by denominations.

Table 1: Education

	Baptist	Catholic	Presbyterian	Other
Baccalaureate Degree in Social Work	1	2	2	2
Baccalaureate Degree in Social Work and MSW		1		3
Baccalaureate Degree in other major and MSW	2	1	1	5
MSW and Seminary Degree	2	1	1	
Baccalaureate Degree in Social Work, MSW and Seminary Degree	1			

	Baptist	Catholic	Presbyterian	Other
Seminary Degree with Social Work concentration	2			
Master of Church Social Work	1			
Doctor of Ministry	2			

Respondents indicated a wide range of previous job experiences, including social work/counselor ($n = 10$), church related ministry ($n = 8$), administration ($n = 5$), business ($n = 3$), and no past job experience ($n = 4$). The congregations created the role of church social worker especially for the four who had no past social work experience. One of them had worked at the church in an internship prior to graduation. See Table 2 for a comparison of demographic findings between Garland and Northern's research.

Table 2: Demographic Comparisons

	Garland (1987)	Northern (2003)
Sample size	21	30
Gender	57 % male 43 % female	30 % male 70 % female
Locations	12 states most: TX	16 states most: TX
Denominations	9 represented most: Baptists	13 represented most: Baptists
Full-time	95 %	70 %
Graduate degree	90 %	77 %
Prior SW job experience	100 %	87 %

Job Description

Seventy-seven percent ($n = 23$) of the 30 church social workers said that they had a formal job description. Four volunteered that they wrote their job description. This is an increase from 57% of respondents in the Garland's 1987 study who stated that they had a formal job description. Responsibilities varied widely between macro practice: creating and overseeing ministries ($n = 10$), and mezzo or micro practice: providing direct services ($n = 7$), with most providing both types of services ($n = 13$). Most job descriptions included coordinating ministries, training volunteers, and developing programs within the

church that might serve the church body and/or the community. Those programs included divorce support groups, counseling, and providing emergency assistance. Some were willing to share their formal job description, which may be found at the Baylor University School of Social Work website (http://www.baylor.edu/social_work). One macro social worker described her role:

I understand my role is to be sure that the financial, medical, relational, and spiritual care needs of the community and the congregation are met. We're a large congregation so we have lots of teams, and I work with the leaders of the teams.

Three church social worker salaries were either fully or partially funded by outside sources that were connected with the church. One considered this an "oasis of opportunity." She stated that the church encouraged her to write her own job description. She saw her role as:

To start slow in the community and work from the inside out, rather than to do our programs on the community. I wanted to be able to knock on the door of any 12 doors in a 10-block area we tagged and have the mother call from the kitchen, "Come on back!"

Other church social work roles included clinical practice, immigration assistance, children's education ministry, bereavement counseling, and emergency and financial assistance.

Roles and Responsibilities

Respondents indicated a wide range of titles for their positions. "Director" or "Minister" of Community Ministries was the most common ($n = 8$). Eleven titles contained the word "minister," twelve contained the word "director," three used "coordinator," and four indicated other titles: "church assistant clerk," "social worker," "ordained deacon," and "staff counselor." Two of the respondents were the senior pastors of their church.

When social workers were asked if the title described their work, 90% ($n = 27$) responded either "yes," or "mostly but not completely." Ninety-three percent ($n = 28$) liked or mostly liked their title. They were more evenly divided about keeping or changing their title. Out of 30 respon-

dents, 47% ($n = 14$) would choose the same title if it were their choice, and 53% ($n = 16$) would choose a different title. Respondents provided examples of social services provided in their church. Not all social services came under the direction of the church social workers, depending on their areas of focus. For example, the church social worker who worked with the counseling center at his church did not work with benevolence. One children's education church social worker did not work with clinical issues. Another respondent spoke to the need to know one's church when considering issues to address. She said "we have a higher educational level in our church. So any community need regarding education, they will respond to that! So we have ESL, literacy, and tutoring."

Professional Identity

Church social workers responded to five quantitative questions about their identity as a social worker and/or minister and their impression of the congregation's view of them as either a social worker and/or minister. All respondents viewed themselves as social workers in some capacity; of course, this is not surprising since most were contacted through a professional social work organization. Nevertheless, respondents felt less certain that others on the church staff viewed them as social workers. One said, "Pastoral staff assume I'm a one-man show who can promote everything myself and handle everything without their support." In response to "do others on the church staff see you as a social worker?" 57% ($n = 17$) responded either "yes" or "a significant part," and 43% ($n = 13$) responded either "a minor part," or "no." Sixty-three percent ($n = 19$) believed that the congregation saw their social worker role as either only a minor part of their professional identity or did not see them as a social worker at all. Two responded "they have no idea what I do." Another said "the congregation sees my responsibility as overseeing what we already have instead of being challenged in new areas." With regard to macro or micro practice, one said "people have the expectation that I'll take care of it, but my role is to set it up for others to carry through, and to support them."

In Garland's 1987 study, 90% ($n = 19$) saw themselves as a minister. In this study, when respondents ($n = 30$) were asked if they viewed themselves as a minister/clergy person, the same number ($n = 12$) view themselves as a minister as view themselves as a social worker, but eight see the title of minister as part of their identity "in some significant ways

but not totally,” and 30% ($n = 10$) see themselves as minister either in a minor sense or not at all. Respondents have even less confidence that their congregations view a social worker as a minister. Because the question asked, “Does the congregation see a social worker as a minister/clergy person?” the respondent had to reply to the congregation’s viewpoint of a social worker as a minister, not whether the congregation viewed that respondent as a minister. Five respondents have the word “pastor” in their job title, yet only two respondents replied “yes” to the above question. Seventy-three percent ($n = 22$) responded either “a minor part,” or “no,” and one did not know what her congregation thought. Chi-square analysis was conducted to evaluate the association of gender with respondents’ opinions concerning whether the congregation viewed social workers as ministers. Although no association was found $X^2(4)=7.275, p=.122$, it was interesting to note that no females responded “yes” that the congregation viewed a social worker as a minister, and more females ($n = 9$) were likely to say “no” than males ($n = 3$). Consequently, a larger sample may have yielded significant findings.

Social Work Practice within the Context of the Church

I asked two questions about theology and social work within the church: “How does your theology and the theologies of your church community affect your practice?” and “Is your theology and the theology of your church community complementary or conflictual?” For most respondents, their theology and the theology of their church were complementary ($n = 22$), not conflictual ($n = 1$), but it was a mixture of both for others ($n = 7$). Many expressed this complementarity in the ways it was expressed in the ministries of the church. For example, the social worker in a church that provided an elegant meal for the homeless, with linens and table service rather than a cafeteria line, described the ministry’s congruence with social work values:

[The ministry] highlights the grander ideas of social work—respect for the dignity of the individual and the client’s right to self-determination. We try to be individualized and personal with each service, influenced by our call to be gracious, not just provide the service.

Another respondent said:

I never thought of them as separate. What does the Lord require of thee...to love mercy, walk humbly...Also to teach a man to fish. You have to be strong enough to hold up the pole. Then teach to fish, but neither do any good unless he has access to the river...Love mercy—means feed a man a fish. Walk humbly—means teach a man to fish. Justice—means access to the river.

Referring to the connection between her theology and her practice within the church, one respondent described how it affected her practice:

...Consistently and peripherally. Our church emphasizes grace as much as God's justice. We emphasize healing, give people the chance to work through issues over time. We understand people can't become whole just because we tell them to. My own theology has changed because of life experience and this setting. The big question—what's up with all the anguish in people's lives? Where's God in all this? We grapple with those questions.

And another:

I like to think it's the bedrock foundation of much of what we do. It's not just about helping people, but to help them find the love and peace that only the Lord can provide, the love and peace that comes through community.

For the ones who saw some conflict, the church's outreach stance might be different. One said "they don't mind funding programs in Africa, but it's difficult to motivate them to see our own area as a mission field, to stop 'blaming the victim.' They don't want to think about homelessness."

And when the church social worker and the pastor disagree:

There are times when my theology and my pastor's don't go hand in hand, but he gives me freedom to do what I need. He is an evangelist through and through; there is tension there. I think the motivation for the church should be out of gratitude of what God has done for us and because He told us to do it. We don't have to manipulate people.

Seventy percent ($n = 21$) of the 30 respondents felt that their theology strongly affected their practice. One respondent said:

[My theology] makes me color outside the lines. When you go to social work school, they tell you certain things. I'm a Christian. I don't force my ideas on anyone. I believe you don't have to choose one or the other. They go hand in hand. I see social work as a ministry. I'm not afraid to hold my client's hand. I can pray with a client. It's expected in the church. I can use Erikson's theory and not be afraid. In the workplace, you may not have people watching you, if doing home visits. Some clients want to pray. I don't push my beliefs on people. At the parenting class via CPS [Children's Protective Services, where the respondent also works], I didn't bring it up, but at graduation, it came up anyway—they prayed and read scripture!

Seventy three percent of the respondents ($n = 22$) said that they had to adapt social work principles or theories to fit their work. Two referred to the difficulty of dual relationships and roles where the worker may counsel with an individual one day and worship with him the next. Another church social worker commented: "wearing 10 different hats is difficult," and another said: "With working in a church, I have to adapt practices of social work with the doctrine of the church. Basically, I have to justify everything I do with the biblical principles, so I'm often looking to scripture."

One respondent told her congregation that she thought that Jesus was probably the first social worker. She connected the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics number by number to biblical references for the church to understand the connection of social work ethics with biblical principles.

When questioned about ethical dilemmas faced by working in the church, responses varied. Ten could not think of any ethical dilemmas during the interview, but the remaining 20 respondents referred to dual relationships, social work within the church (having more liberal beliefs/approaches than the church the social worker is serving), administrative issues and decisions (such as if the pastor's focus is evangelistic but the worker's focus is wholistic), social justice issues (what if the church members are not interested in discussing or acting on issues such as fair trade, human trafficking, homosexuality, or abortion?), confidentiality

(remaining vigilant about confidentiality even when other church staff members do not), and balancing work and family (how much time the social worker gives to work versus the time she/he needs to give to one's family, or "what if *your* teenager does not want to be involved in the youth program?").

One respondent spoke about the confidential issue of reporting child abuse. She said:

It was my duty [to report], and others may not assume if they tell me things that are endangering a child, they may think I betrayed them when I had to report. They may have thought of me as a minister where all is confidential.

Theoretical Perspectives

One of the questions asked of the respondents was about the theories that informed their practice. As a multiple-choice question, options included these theories: behavioral/learning, gestalt, task-centered, systems, ecological, client-centered, existential, and psychodynamic. Respondents were given the option to name other theories.

Church social workers named the following theories as most helpful: systems ($n = 25$), behavioral ($n = 23$), client-centered ($n = 23$), task-centered ($n = 17$), and ecological ($n = 11$). Other named theories identified in the "other category" included strengths perspective, crisis intervention, reality therapy, and biblical theories. Organizational theory was not named as a theory used in practice.

Educational and Professional Needs

Respondents were asked about what they would like to see in social work education and what resources might be helpful to them. Six respondents had attended the former Carver School of Social Work at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and referred wistfully to a School of Church Social Work.

Educational needs focused on:

- Ethical issues of social work within churches
- Dual roles
- Learning how to educate and motivate the congregation toward social justice and volunteerism

- How to collaborate with agencies and other churches
- Conferences on this subject
- Education about the dynamics of church culture
- Grant writing
- Counseling skills
- More schools providing education about practicing within a congregational context

Resources the respondents would like to see included the following:

- Networking abilities
- More research on church social work
- More funding
- Internships for students
- Conferences
- More time to do what they are trying to do now
- More community-based organizations being affiliated with churches
- Solutions to the isolation and loneliness of the role

One said: “there are no manuals out there. There are only two of us that do this in our large city. How do we do this? Where do we go to find this out?” Another said: “I feel isolated. Journals, conferences, I’m OK there. But to get with someone over lunch would be nice. I want more accessibility.” For those who worked part-time, maintaining boundaries was also difficult.

During one semester of this study, I participated in a seminar with nine MSW students at the Baylor University School of Social Work who were in the concentration year internships in churches. Six were placements where a field instructor was not on site; the students carved out their own roles. The students spoke to issues of role stress, trying to carve out their roles as both student interns and advocates having to educate the church about social work practice. Other role stress factors named by the students included dual relationships, role identity, shifting hats, professional acceptance, confidentiality, supervisor/supervisee relationships, boundaries, definition of terms and language, church politics, and identifying the client for practice (church or individuals). The issues named by the students were almost identical to issues named by the social workers who were formally employed in congregational contexts in this sample.

Networking Opportunities

Respondents were very enthusiastic about the research and requested to read the results. Another stated that she had received ten emails from other social workers who had heard about the research and wanted to encourage her to participate. A Washington, D.C., lobbyist from the National Association of Social Workers also contacted me because she had heard about the study. These responses illustrate the lack of current research on this topic as well as high interest in church social work. Everyone interviewed stated that they wanted to be part of a database or directory of church social workers, some kind of way to network and share with others in similar roles.

Conclusion

Summary and Reflections on Findings

This study identified 30 social workers who were working in congregational contexts, determined the roles and responsibilities of the social workers, and explored their educational and professional needs.

The same questionnaire from Garland's original research on church social work was used for comparison and addition to the literature. Comparing Garland's 1987 study and this research, it appears that within the structure of the church, congregational social workers have developed more defined roles. Formal job descriptions rose from 57% to 77%. In addition, all 21 respondents in the Garland study mentioned emergency assistance as one of their roles, but this was not a role for 23% of the current sample of congregational social workers, especially for those who provide chiefly macro practice of grant writing and directing the volunteers who work with the emergency assistance.

There continues to be a dissonance with regard to professional identity within the church and lack of clarity about the role of social worker as seen by the congregation. Networking continues to be a desired option as many feel isolated in their role.

One of the questions asked of the respondents was about the theories that informed their practice. As expected, systems, ecological, and behavioral theories were most often named, but it was surprising that organizational theory was not mentioned. With the church operating as a unique organization, in many ways unlike a secular social service agency,

it appears that learning about the organization of the church itself would help the social worker in the professional practice in a secondary function. The need to understand working in a church setting was stated by workers in response to the question of what educational needs could help them.

When the Garland study was conducted in 1987, email was not a common method of communication. As illustrated with the church social worker who said she had received 10 emails about this study, *word-of-mouth* now has an additional meaning. The ability to contact social workers through the NACSW e-mail list-serve as well as other lists and emails yielded almost immediate responses. This method of communication will have impact in locating additional church social workers as well as setting up networking opportunities through websites.

The findings were generally very similar to the Garland study in 1987. The response rate to the mass email letter was larger, but the sample size of 30 was not significantly larger than the 21 interviewed by Garland. The predominant denomination in the sample of both studies was Baptist, with the largest number in Texas, as in the Garland study. Church social workers in the Garland study were employed an average of six years; in this study it was four and one half years. In the Garland study, 57% of the respondents were male; in this study, 67% were female and 33% were male. In the Garland study, all respondents had previous social work experience, but four of the 30 respondents in this study were new to the profession, one had served in a field internship in the church in which she was hired, and for four, the position was specifically created for them. There is a positive correlation that social workers whose theology is compatible with their perception of the church's theology also feel that their theology strongly affects their practice. The majority of church social workers in this sample felt their theology was congruent with the theology of their church. They also felt that their theology strongly affected their practice.

There might be to be an interesting gender distinction in whether or not social workers are considered minister/clergy. When asked if the congregation thought of the social worker as a minister/clergy person, more males were likely to say yes, and more females were likely to say no, although this difference did not reach statistical significance.

The percentages of denominations represented in this study did not change significantly from the previous study; Baptists still had the majority. One possible reason is the past existence of the Carver School of Church Social Work with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and

the consequent formalization of social work as a ministry field in Baptist life. Although only one Carver graduate was identified in the Education table, several alumni were listed in columns with seminary degrees.

Implications

The field of church social work is still rather new and uncharted. The social workers with whom I spoke were very busy but willing to provide data for adding to the literature on this subject. Issues of social justice and motivating volunteers within the church elicited strong responses, and it could be informative to probe deeper into these subjects. Some of the church social workers had years of experience and were able to base programs on knowing their church and the needs of the community. Those years of experience would be very helpful to social workers new to the church as a context for practice.

Congregational social workers practice within the church, but many of the issues they face are the same as social workers who practice in secular settings: linking people with systems, enhancing problem-solving skills, promoting social justice, and working within organizations, whether social work is the primary or secondary function. However, church social workers do face additional issues more frequently than social workers in other contexts: dual relationships, administrative issues, and isolation. Social workers appreciate the ability to supervise and consult with each other, but when the church social worker knows no one else who works in the same capacity, the issues that are unique to church settings can become more stressful.

More literature is needed from those who practice church social work, to share their stories as well as their joys and challenges. For example, when I began this project, a fellow social work student was already employed in church social work but had not yet completed her degree, so she was not interviewed. Her organization has since promoted her to supervising five church social workers who practice in churches. She has presented her experiences at conferences and is writing about it for publication. There are at least two religious-based organizations I am familiar with, Buckner Baptist Benevolences, and Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services, that come alongside churches by hiring and placing church social workers within partnering churches, aiding in salary and benefits, yet providing the social worker with the autonomy to work from within the church programs rather than trying to infuse the organization's

programs on the church. For churches that lack the funding to hire a social worker onto church staff, this offers another way.

Networking was named as a large need. Who else is out here practicing in this context? We now have the internet, and with opportunities for email, blogs, and websites, it is much more possible to 'reach out and touch' and to connect with other church social workers. The establishment of some sort of directory for church social workers would provide an opportunity for networking and consultation.

For persons from churches who read this and would like to consider adding the position of social worker to their congregational staff, some examples of job descriptions are available. For new church social workers, learning the steps that seasoned workers took would be beneficial to avoid pitfalls. A group has been created on Facebook that is open for membership, networking and discussion (See Author's Note below).

When I first began this project I harbored a hidden hope that I might be able to put together a job description of church social work so that churches could utilize it when seeking to hire for such a position. Now I realize the naiveté of believing I could compile a singular job description. Church social workers have many roles and different positions, even in the same denominations. In fact, it appears that church social work is a microcosm of the diversity of our profession, ranging from clinical services to macro-practice and across the population groups in a great variety of settings.

Several other things surprised me: it was still difficult to find social workers in churches even with international email and pretty good networking; social workers—no matter where they work—are very interested in this place of practice; and I was deeply moved by the passion, variety of roles, and needs of church social workers who are still pioneers in this context.

My hope is that this article may challenge and inspire churches and social workers to seek opportunities to work together in the shared goal of reaching out to community and the world. ❖

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Author's Note: This article can be found on the Baylor University School of Social Work website at www.baylor.edu/social_work/research. For copies of job descriptions, please email the author at Vicki_Northern@baylor.edu. For opportunities to network, a Facebook group has been created: Church Social Workers.