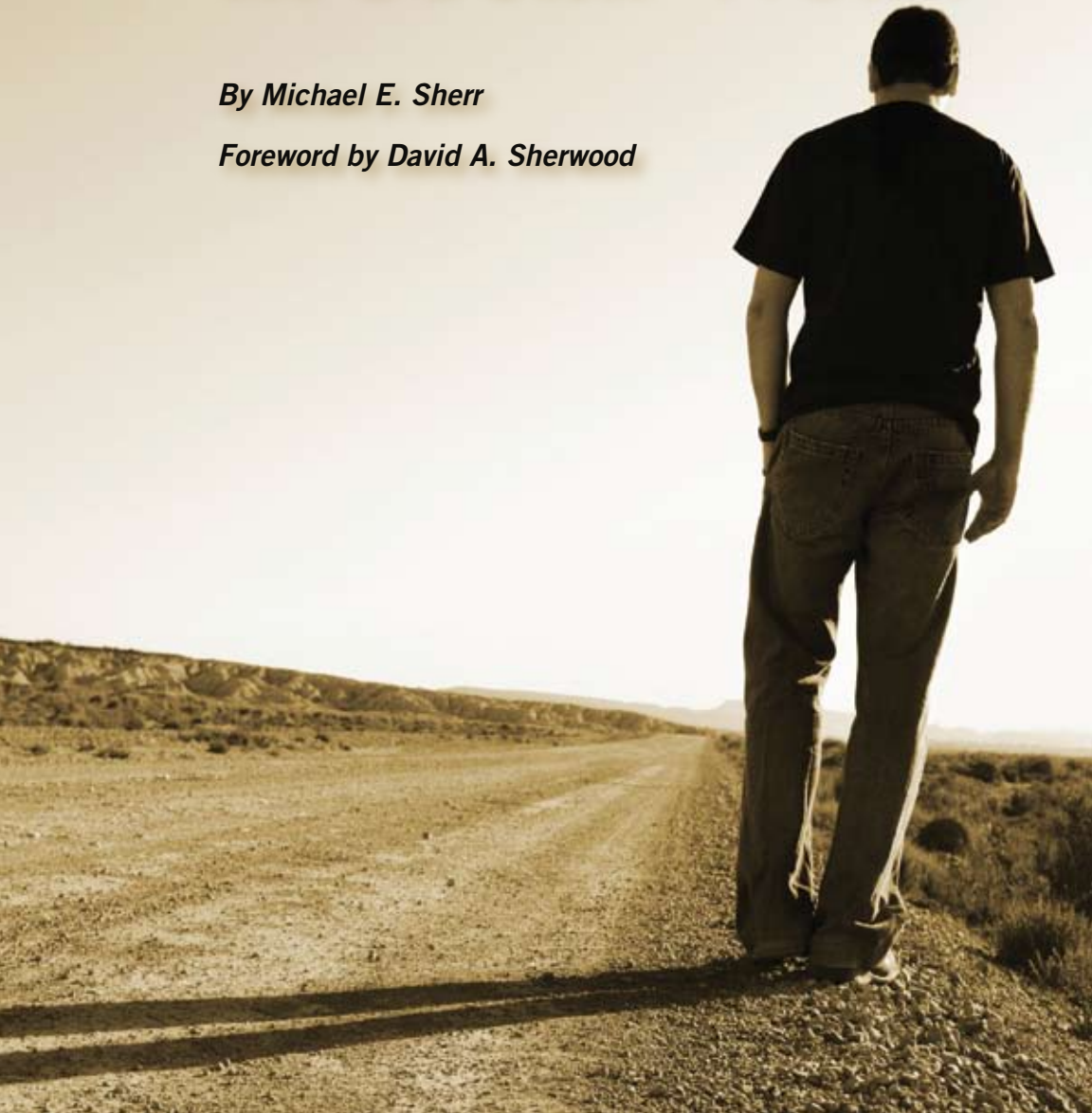
On Becoming a Christian Educator in Social Work

By Michael E. Sherr

Foreword by David A. Sherwood



On Becoming a Christian Educator in Social Work

By

Michael E. Sherr

Foreword by David A. Sherwood

To Stacey, Brandon, Noah, and Grace

and

To every Christian educator in social work—past, present, and future

North American Association of
Christians in Social Work
P.O. Box 121
Botsford, CT 06404-0121
ISBN 978-0-9715318-5-7

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Every one of us has a story, actually many stories, but most of us link our stories together to become a larger narrative about who we are and how we understand ourselves to be linked to the stories of others around us and to the worlds in which we find ourselves. These larger narratives inevitably link to how we understand identity, meaning, values, and purpose. For Christians, our stories are ultimately about how we relate to God through Jesus Christ and what that means to us moment-by-moment as we live our lives. Each of us is unique and no two stories are quite the same. And yet, if there is any truth to the Christian story, we each engage similar issues of meaning, values, and purpose. We love to hear each other's stories. They give us a chance to see through other eyes. We may learn. We may be encouraged. We may be challenged.

Michael Sherr has taken up the courage and vulnerability to share some of his story with us who find ourselves on our own unique, yet similar, paths of living into what it means to be a Christian, a social worker, and an educator. Michael writes about what it means to take seriously the call to be a Christian social work educator, seeking to be a faithful, whole person—one who authentically integrates faith, learning, teaching, and practice.

Michael writes from an earnest, practical, first-person perspective. He shares some of his story of becoming a Christian in a conservative Jewish family and his challenges in becoming first a social worker and then a teacher of social work students. Though grounded in research on student expectations and perceptions regarding faith integration in social work classrooms and a Christian worldview, this book is not a philosophical or theological treatise on integration and epistemology. The book is immanently practical. On the one hand, Michael explains the conceptual framework he has developed to think about the integration of faith, learning, and practice, but he is always pushing to apply the ideas in his own personal life and in the classroom. Some specific classroom components will be more applicable in explicitly Christian colleges

and universities, but the overall framework of thinking about the vocation of the Christian social work educator can be applied by Christian educators in any setting. Michael gives honest examples from his classes. Each chapter ends with suggested "Action Steps," challenging us to make our own applications in our own lives and classrooms.

Michael's conceptual framework for living out the integration of faith and practice is grounded in his own very personal experience of working with students in the light of his own personality and gifts and their needs and expectations. However, even with our own unique personalities and gifts, we can all benefit from listening to his story and seeing through his eyes. Not everything is different. We are brothers and sisters on a similar journey.

David A. Sherwood
Editor-in-Chief
Social Work & Christianity

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people whose friendship, love, and support have become a part of making this work possible. First is my family. Without Stacey, my wife and partner for the last twenty years, I would never have had the courage and persistence to write this book. My children Brandon, Noah, and Grace kept me grounded during the research and long hours of writing. I also say thanks to my father for his love and support. Thanks to my Uncle Jay and Aunt Sandy for their love and hospitality. I can still remember writing chapter one at their dining room table. The peace and joy I felt that week provided the momentum I needed to finish the book.

George Huff, my friend, deserves a lot of credit for this work. When we met at the 2003 NACSW convention, who would have thought our time together would have blossomed into such a deep and transformative relationship. We learned together, we laughed together, and now we are the closest of friends, holding one another accountable to living out our vocations as a tangible expression of our relationship with Jesus Christ. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Mary Curran, Jerry Hull, Diana Garland, Gaynor Yancey, and the rest of my colleagues from the Department of Social Work at Northwest Nazarene University and the School of Social Work at Baylor University.

People I want to thank on the scholarship side of things are Carolyn Lancaster, Rob Rogers, Nate Williams, David Sherwood, and Rick Chamiec-Case. This book would simply not exist without the patience and careful editorial eye of Carolyn Lancaster. She was patient and gentle in her critiques, making sure that what I had to say sounded good to others, and not just me. Thanks, Carolyn!

Rob Rogers, my friend and colleague, thanks for being a sounding board as I worked though each chapter of the book. This book comes from the deepest regions of my heart and soul. Rob helped me feel safe as I went so deep and felt so vulnerable. I don't think I could have written the book without him.

I wrote this book for Christian educators in social work, past, present, and future. During the 18 months of writing, I developed a new friendship with Nate, a gifted researcher and aspiring social work educator, whose passion is inspiring and whose potential is limitless. We have spent many hours working on projects, and reading and talking about Scripture. He is one of the few people I let read the book before it was published. In many ways, he became the face of my audience. My hope for him, as it is for anyone who reads the book, is that he engages in ongoing contemplation about the all-encompassing commitment involved in becoming a Christian educator in social work.

To David Sherwood, a friend and a mentor to so many, thank you. When I accepted the position to come to Baylor, my only nonnegotiable request was that I wanted David's old office. Through his scholarship, his humble and approachable demeanor, and a lifetime of selfless service, David showed a generation of faculty what it means to be Christian educators in social work. I walk into his office (I still think of myself as working in his office) everyday feeling blessed, joyful, and ready to live out my vocation. I wrote most of this book in his office. I am humbled and honored that he agreed to write the foreword.

Rick Chamiec-Case, my friend and colleague, I don't know if I can find the words to adequately express my love and gratitude. I will just offer a simple thank you, knowing that you know what I mean.

Most importantly, to the BSW student I met at the 2003 convention, the students who shared their poignant expectations and experiences, and all of my students thereafter. Please know that I listened, learned, and shared faithfully, even as I continue to learn. Thank you.

CHAPTER 1
MY STORY

Who I am and why I wrote this book are connected. The book represents a 17-year relationship filled with introspection, prayer, daily time in God's word, emotions from joy to grief, numerous friendships, and extensive research. The relationship to which I refer is my relationship with Jesus Christ, who calls me to surrender more of who I am each day and follow Him who loves unconditionally. I have learned that my relationship with Jesus is central to becoming a Christian educator in social work. My hope is that by articulating how my relationship with Jesus influences all that I do as a social work educator, I can inspire and encourage readers to reflect on what becoming Christian educators in social work means for them. I use the term "becoming" to reflect the dynamic and lifelong journey of continuous learning required of Christian educators. Indeed, one thing I have learned from colleagues with 30 or 40 years of experience, colleagues I consider mentors, is that they continue to work out what it means to be effective Christian educators. Let me begin by sharing my story.

I am a Jewish believer who came to faith in Jesus at the age of twenty-three. My upbringing is typical of many Jewish people in America. The first grandson of a patriarchal Jewish family, I was circumcised on the eighth day after birth, given the Hebrew name Mordecai, and attended ten years of Hebrew school three days a week until my Bar Mitzvah when I was 13 years old. My family was Conservative, so we would retain certain Orthodox rabbinical traditions, such as reading some of the worship service in Hebrew, celebrating the Jewish Sabbath regularly, albeit loosely, and keeping at least the major Jewish holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, better known to Christians as the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement. At the same time, we would practice certain Reformed tendencies, such as not keeping a kosher home.

Hebrew school taught me how to think of myself as a Jew and how to regard the Jewish faith. I learned that being Jewish meant I was part of a chosen group of people, chosen by God for some yet-unclear end. At the same time, I learned that I belonged to the most persecuted group of people in history, persecuted because of this "chosen" status. Most significant of all, I learned that being Jewish meant I could never believe in Jesus. A key to retaining my Jewish identity was in my rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, so much so that, as a teenager, it felt as though believing or even saying the name Jesus aloud was an act of treason, a sin of greater magnitude than even atheism. I can still hear my father saying, "you're walking away from your people" when I first told him that I was a Christian. I state this to say that only by the power of the Holy Spirit were my eyes, ears, and heart opened to the gospel, convicting me of the need to confess my sins and profess Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. My belief in Him, however, did not erase what I learned in childhood. Instead, I believe it has led to 17 years of conscious reflection.

For me, believing and confessing Jesus as the Messiah meant being ostracized from family and friends as well as re-contextualizing my identity as a human being. I had to change everything about my life and about my purpose for living. In the midst of making sense of it all, I found two things helpful—a doctoral course I took at the University of South Carolina and the book of Ezekiel. Looking back, I tend to believe that the two things were providential, though I did not know it at the time.

As a doctoral student, I took a required course at the University of South Carolina called The Principles of College Teaching. In that course, the instructor had students develop a personal mission statement that identified our purpose for going into higher education. He said that having a personal mission statement would help us prioritize our choices in terms of how much time to spend on research, on teaching, and on service. While I was in that course, I was also spending time studying in the book of Ezekiel for my daily devotions. I discovered my personal mission statement after reading the 33rd chapter of Ezekiel.

In the 33rd chapter, God calls Ezekiel to be the watchman to the Jews to plead with them to turn from their ways and live in obedience to the Sovereign Lord. Reading that passage and contemplating the assignment, I developed a personal mission statement that, to this day, encapsulates my purpose. I wrote:

> As a Messianic Jew, I believe God has called me to be a witness to believers who have grown up in the church and who may take for granted the amazing gift of being adopted brothers and sisters in Christ, sons and daughters to the Father. I believe God has called me as a watchman to challenge spiritual apathy and encourage believers to live in a way that exudes a sense of joy and purpose that comes from claiming their relationship with God.

I carry out my purpose in the vocation of becoming a Christian educator in social work.

Unprepared and Unqualified

In September of 2003, two months before defending my dissertation, I accepted a faculty position at Northwest Nazarene University (NNU), a small evangelical Christian university in Nampa, Idaho. Although I had a gift for research and a publication record to warrant teaching at a research university, I decided that I needed to teach at a Christian university with an opportunity to live out my purpose. The only problem was that I was too full of myself. I thought that compared to teaching at a research university, teaching at NNU would be easy. All I had to do was graduate, move to Idaho, and then spend all my time teaching students. I would also encourage students to grow in their faith and contemplate how their faith intersects with their preparation as social workers—no problem! This effortless and minuscule vision of becoming a Christian educator changed at the 2003 NACSW annual convention, just six weeks before I graduated.

At the convention, I helped facilitate a workshop on integrating faith and academic life (Jones, Wolfer, Sherr, and Cecil, 2003). Fifteen faculty (including the facilitators) from around the country attended the session. Although the stated purpose was to discuss teaching at public schools, the group consisted of faculty teaching in secular and religious settings. A BSW student from a small Christian university also joined the group. She was there as a volunteer to introduce the session, collect evaluations, and stamp our continuing education forms.

The workshop did not have the look or feel of a typical academic presentation. There were no power point slides, and we did not sit behind a table as a panel facing rows of participants in chairs. Instead, we sat in an intimate circle in what seemed to be a hotel room converted for the convention. Our original

intent was to begin developing support for faculty trying to live out their faith at public universities. Given the makeup of the group, however, our intention shifted to supporting faculty trying to live out their faith wherever they were teaching. For 90 minutes, the group pontificated about all the key areas for integration in academic life as only professors and doctoral students could pontificate.

I found most of the discussion useful and confirming. One colleague, for instance, shared that a key to integrating faith at a public university was to know our key principles, decide to what extent we are prepared to compromise on those principles, and then find employers that allow us to maintain the principles that we cannot compromise. After hearing his comments, I thought to myself, "Check, I am going to be teaching at a school that supports all of my core principles." Next, an experienced faculty person nearing the end of her career shared how it was important not to chase tenure. She talked about how she made tenure, gave it up to teach at a different school, made tenure again, and then gave up tenure again to teach at yet another school. The lesson I learned was to not make an idol out of the tenure process. It seemed to me she was saying that achieving tenure was not an end; tenure was a means to an end. I thought, "An important lesson regardless of where anyone of us teaches."

The discussion then shifted to research and scholarship. For a few minutes, we talked about the need for more literature and books written by Christian educators for students at Christian universities. As we were talking, I noticed that the student appeared visibly upset. She looked as if she were trying to hold back tears. Concerned, I interrupted the discussion to ask if she was okay.

She explained how her best friend and classmate died in an accident just two weeks before the convention. Next, she shared that when looking for support, the social work faculty told students to go to the religion department or the campus chaplain for guidance and prayer. There were no official social work gatherings to help the students talk about the death of their classmate and no discussions about how this death might affect their performance in courses or in field. She shared that, to her and her classmates, all the prayers and devotions before class and all the references to scripture were no longer authentic. At a time of crisis, when it counted most, the faculty had no idea how upset this cohort of students was feeling about the death of their classmate. Whether right or wrong, the students no longer perceived the faculty as invested in helping them integrate faith and social work.

Her response shattered my vision of what it meant to be a Christian educator. It also left me feeling unprepared and unqualified to teach at a Christian university. Here were experienced faculty (at least more experienced than a doctoral student) teaching at a Christian college who were unaware of whether or not they were effectively integrating faith and social work. How could a converted Jew, not raised in the church, possibly understand what is involved in becoming an effective Christian educator? All of a sudden, right there in the workshop session, I questioned everything. What was I actually supposed to do as a Christian educator in social work? Did I have anything to offer a Christian college or university that qualified me to stand in front of students and teach them? Moreover, with a wife and two children to think of, I questioned what I was supposed to do now. I had already signed a contract to teach at NNU, I had stopped looking for jobs elsewhere, and we were about to close on a house in Nampa, Idaho. Although I probably looked calm to everyone in the room, on the inside I felt exposed in front of God. I was terrified.

That evening I went to dinner with one of the attendees of our session. George Huff was a faculty member at Cedarville University, a small Baptist University in Ohio. During our conversation, he shared that he, too, was stunned by the student's comments. He explained that integrating faith and academic preparation was of utmost importance at Cedarville. In fact, the most important part of a faculty tenure portfolio at Cedarville is an integration paper where faculty communicates how their field and the way they teach in their field are rooted in and consistent with Scripture. Department Chairs and Deans review the paper every two years until tenure, and faculty incorporate the feedback as they revise the paper for their four-year and six-year review (Cedarville, 2007). The student's comments left both of us with the following questions:

- What good are our efforts as Christian professors to provide IFL experiences if students do not sense these efforts?
- If our efforts to provide IFL experiences are incongruent with the expectations of students, how can we identify those differences and adapt?
- What exactly is involved in becoming a Christian educator?
- What is unique about earning a social work degree from a Christian college or university?

Since that night, I have spent the last seven years actively searching for answers.

Searching for Answers

At first, my intention was to search the literature to find information that would answer my questions. I looked for any materials that could ease my anxiety by pointing out the most important parts of becoming a Christian educator. Although I did not find a book listing the seven habits of a successful Christian educator, I did find a starting point after reading through the website for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU).

The CCCU is an international association of over 100 colleges and universities. The mission of the CCCU (2009) is, "To advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth." Every college that is a member or affiliate member of the association has a public mission statement that ascribes to offering a distinctively Christ-centered education that emphasizes integrating scholarship, biblical faith, and service. The goal of Christ-centered education is to prepare students to work in various fields of study while also preparing them to integrate a Christian worldview, to live with Christlike character, and to engage the world in a Christlike manner (Hossler, 1995). I discovered that Christ, rooted in biblical and historic Christian faith, is the starting point for answering any questions related to becoming a Christian educator.

Arthur Holmes's (1999), *The Idea of a Christian College,* confirmed that Christ is indeed the starting point. Holmes wrote that the most important elements to the integration of faith and learning are faculty attitudes about their own faith, the place of scripture in teaching, and the culture of the classroom. Christian colleges need educators who are committed to struggling with the ideas and arguments in their fields while actively growing in their faith in Christ. He states, "The first task of integration is at the personal level of attitude and motivation" (p. 49). Holmes also asserted that faculty must teach students to draw on Scripture and other theological material to focus on the meaning of and God's purpose for work and the historical and philosophical foundations of every area of learning (p. 52-53). Likewise, he thought the culture of the classroom was important. He asserted that students need faculty committed to open-ended discussions in the classroom so that students can feel free to "explore the creative and redemptive impact of the Christian revelation on every dimension of thought and life" (p. 58).

His book was important because he articulated a framework to think about teaching at a Christian college or university. It made sense that becoming a

Christian educator meant being committed to a personal relationship with God, using scripture and theological materials to teach, and encouraging open discussions in class. His book, however, still left me feeling uncertain about integrating faith and learning with students. As much as I enjoyed and learned from reading Holmes (1999), I wondered how, even with his expertise and experience, he could be so sure about what he was writing. I could still hear the student volunteer saying that she thought the faculty was not invested in helping them integrate faith and social work and that the faculty had no clue. It seemed to me that unless faculty received feedback from students (and colleagues observing faculty that teach students), it was impossible to know if they were effectively integrating faith and learning in the classroom. Therefore, I continued searching.

Wolterstorff's (2004) work took my search to new depths. Whereas Holmes (1999) confirmed Christ as the starting point (and I believe Wolterstorff agrees), Wolterstorff asserted a more audacious and profound purpose for Christian universities and Christian educators. Although valuing a broad liberal arts education, Wolterstorff thought that it was not enough to teach students to integrate faith and learning in the various areas of study in the academy. He called for universities to move beyond preparing students as evangelists to bring Christ to the culture, instead preparing them as agents of renewal and social justice to bring Christ to the world. Stated differently, he posited that the purpose of Christian universities is to produce people with the character attributes necessary to bring about Christian community throughout the world.

Wolterstorff (2004) also emphasized Christian educators having the right attitude and motivation for teaching at Christian universities. He shared Holmes's (1999) concern for making sure Christian universities hire faculty committed to growing in their faith in Christ. He also thought Christian universities needed faculty struggling with the ideas and arguments in their field. In fact, Wolterstorff articulated the roles of Christian educators as involving both teaching and scholarship.

Christian educators, he said, needed to develop students ready to live out their faith in the here-and-now, seeking to address the challenges in the fallen world. Wolterstorff (2004) called Christian faculty to approach students with a developing empathy as they challenged them to live out their calling. He thought teaching students should involve interactive classrooms filled with stimulating and caring discussion. He also thought Christian faculty should

engage in faithful scholarship as one way of modeling how they live out their calling. Wolterstorff asserted that Christian faculty needed to meet the challenges of the world with their scholarship—scholarship that was faithful to a biblical vision of the world while using methodologically rigorous and accepted practices. He defined faithful scholarship as involving a responsible and critical balance of empirical data, theory, and beliefs.

As a social worker, I appreciated Wolterstorff's (2004) call for connecting Christian higher education to building community and to social justice. Even more, I identified with his apparent struggle to grasp his call as a Christian educator. After finishing *Educating for Shalom*, I concluded that God called him to be a Watchman as well. He was a Watchman reminding Christian universities and Christian educators to stay faithful to Christ as the starting point, to prepare young people to live out their love for Christ by living in right relationships with God, themselves, and others, and to respond to the problems of the world that prevent every human being from living in right relationships. Nevertheless, as much as I appreciated his vision and identified with his struggle, the same nagging questions remained. How can he, or any other Christian educator, know if he is actually preparing students to be the kind of redemptive agents he wants them to become without feedback from students? How does he, or any other Christian educator, know if he needs to adapt how he is teaching to make sure he is effective with each cohort of students? It is safe to presume that students attending Christian universities 30, 20, or even ten years ago are not the same as the students today. Consistent with Wolterstorff's view of faithful scholarship, I decided to look for empirical data to balance my search for answers. Specifically, I hoped to find research assessing student feedback.

The search for empirical data did not get me very far. Most of the research that existed focused on collecting data from faculty. For instance, Korniejczuk and Kijay (1994) developed and validated a stage model for evaluating IFL in the classroom by surveying and interviewing faculty. Hardin, Sweeney, and Whitworth (1999) assessed the extent to which IFL occurred by surveying faculty in teacher education programs affiliated with Christian institutions. Gustafson, Karns, and Surdyk (2000) investigated an IFL model for business classrooms by assessing full-time business faculty at religiously affiliated schools. Although these studies contributed to the scholarship of Christian education by adding data, I was left with the same unanswered questions.

Then I found an article on faculty perspectives of the integration of faith

and academic disciplines in Southern Baptist Higher Education (Cooper, 1999). At the end of the article, Cooper confessed his own skepticism for relying exclusively on data from faculty to grasp all that is involved in integrating faith and learning. He acknowledged that the only effective way to evaluate faculty efforts to integrate faith is to collect feedback from students (p. 10). He concluded that there was a need for studies examining the perceptions and attitudes of students at Christian colleges and universities (p. 11). Apparently, I was not the only one wanting data to bridge, what I have come to consider, the chasm of theoretical- and belief-anchored scholarship with input from the receivers of our efforts as Christian educators—the students.

A few studies collected data from students. The findings from one of them made the search for student feedback even more critical. In a study of alumni from Taylor University, Pressnell (1996) found that graduates ranked family, peers, and faculty members in their majors ahead of church as the most influential people in helping them understand how faith related to their current occupation. I thought, "If his findings were valid, that meant that, outside of family and friends, faculty had the most influence on how students integrated their lives through their work." I further thought, "If the influence of faculty was that important, feedback from students about IFL was vital to helping faculty be as effective as possible." This point in my search convinced me that there must be faithful Christian scholarship that collects data from students to provide faculty with developmental feedback. I searched one more time, looking for anything that came remotely close to assessing student input.

I found one study. Burton and Nwosu (2003) studied the perceptions of students in a single education course at a Christian university. In their focus group, they found that students expected the professor to provide IFL in their class. They also found that students were looking for specific teaching approaches and a welcoming classroom climate. Furthermore, they found that the professor's ability to communicate a caring attitude was very important to student perceptions of IFL occurring in the classroom.

I was encouraged to see at least two Christian educators attempting to assess student feedback. Given the limitations of a small study from one education course, however, I wrestled with the same nagging questions. What is involved in becoming an effective Christian educator? How can I know if my efforts of integrating faith and learning are helpful to students? At that point, I decided to stop searching the literature and collect data from students myself. I

saw it as a matter of professional survival. If I, as a Jewish man, had any chance of fulfilling my call as a Christian educator, I had to find out if I had anything to offer, what was expected of me, and what it meant to effectively integrate faith and learning in the classroom. Frankly, I did not want to spend the next 30 or 40 years doing work that I thought was important and risk having a lifetime of students leaving my courses thinking I was a moron.

Conducting the Research

Shortly after arriving at NNU, I submitted a proposal for the Watson Fellowship (a fund established by a retired chemistry professor at NNU to encourage Christian scholarship) to complete two projects on student perspectives of integration of faith and learning in the classroom. First, I wanted to interview social work students from different Christian colleges and universities to understand what they considered the salient indicators of effectively integrating faith and learning in the social work classroom. Second, I wanted the input of students from different areas of study commonly offered at Christian colleges and universities. A month later, I received a modest award from the fellowship.

The administration at NNU hoped that the findings could help NNU assess how faculty prepared students for integrating Christlike Character with Academic Excellence, two of the four institutional outcomes outlined in the university's mission (NNU, 2009). Apparently, the board of regents had recently challenged administration and faculty to pay special attention to documenting how they were fulfilling the university's mission. Borrowing Wolterstorff's (2004) expression, the board of regents wanted administration and faculty to be "holy dissatisfied" with how they prepared students. Sherwood (1999) echoed the reminder for "holy dissatisfaction" for social work faculty by pointing out that undertaking the intentional integration of faith into the study and practice of social work is a never-ending pursuit where "the best we can ever do is to take the quest seriously and keep working at it" (p. 1). For me, taking it seriously meant devoting the next five years to studying what effective integration of faith and learning was all about.

After receiving the Watson fellowship, I invited George Huff to work with me on the project. I also invited Mary Curran, the director of the MSW program at NNU, to participate as a consultant. In addition to being a professor of social work, Mary is an ordained minister in the Nazarene church. I wanted her to provide another set of eyes to look at the work George and I were do-

ing. In research method language, Mary provided another layer of inter-rater reliability.

George and I then developed an interview protocol using presupposition questions and scaling questions to elicit in-depth student perspectives. Presupposition questions are useful because they set up scenarios providing students the opportunity to share experiences, values, and opinions while minimizing the possibility of asking leading questions. Scaling questions present parameters for students to differentiate between faculty they perceive as effective at providing IFL and faculty they perceive as less effective (Glesne, 1999). The questions were also phrased from a variety of angles (first person, third person, hypothetical, past, present, future) to draw out a continuum of concrete to abstract responses (Patton, 1990). A few examples of questions from the protocol include the following:

- You are writing an article for the campus newspaper about how your professor teaches faith and practice in the class. What examples would you include in the article to support this?
- Your aunt asks what your professors at this University can give you that you couldn't get from the state school your cousin attends. How do you respond?
- Please finish this sentence—A professor that integrates faith and learning would never…
- Using a scale of 1 to 10, I want you to select and rank three professors based on your perceptions of their efforts to integrate faith and learning in the classroom. Without using names or identifying information, please describe how you arrived at the value for each professor? After describing how they ranked the professors, we then asked additional probing and clarifying questions to tease out the differences in their responses.

After piloting the questions with several of our own students, we then selected a purposive sample of social work students for focus group interviews from seven schools in the CCCU. We selected schools affiliated with different Christian denominations located in different parts of the country. Although not representative of all schools in the CCCU, we thought the diversity of the sample would at least allow for greater transferability of findings than what was already available in the literature. The affiliations were with the Baptist

Church, Mennonite Church, Evangelical Friends, Quaker, Seventh-day Adventist, Church of the Nazarene, and the Fellowship of the Grace Brethren Churches. The institutions were located in Idaho, Indiana, Ohio, Oregon, and the state of Washington—within a day's drive for either George or me.

Although we could have sent students an online survey or interviewed students by phone, I decided to have us conduct the interviews ourselves at each campus. I felt interviewing the students at their campus had two advantages. First, the campus setting offered the most natural method for collecting data from students, and I wanted them to feel as comfortable as possible. Second, by interviewing students in focus groups in their classrooms, students could extend or elaborate previous responses (Wilkinson, 2004).

George and I spent two years analyzing the transcripts, using a constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After each audio-taped interview, we transcribed and analyzed the data before conducting the next interview. The analysis followed a systematic process. First, we analyzed the transcripts on our own and then exchanged the transcripts with our comments for each of us to review. Next, we talked each Friday by phone, going over our codes and comments line by line. After reaching agreement on the emerging concepts, we compiled them into a codebook. Each week, before we analyzed more of a transcript, we reviewed the codebook to make sure we had no overlapping codes or concepts.

After coding all of the transcripts and agreeing on the codebook, we invited Mary Curran to analyze the transcripts on her own, using the terms we developed in the codebook. We then compared her analysis with the initial coding to assess inter-coder reliability. We agreed on over eighty percent (82.9%) of the concepts. Next, the three of us discussed all the discrepancies and came to a consensus for each concept. Finally, we categorized the concepts into different dimensions and created a conceptual framework that described how all of the findings fit together. Again, we developed the framework independently and then together, eventually arriving at a consensus.[1]

---

1 See Sherr, M. E., Huff, G., & Curran, M. (2007). Student perceptions of salient IFL indicators: The Christian Vocation Model. *Journal of Research on Christian Education, 16*(1), 15-33; and Sherr, M. E., Huff, G., & Curran, M. (2006). The integration of faith and practice by Christian social work faculty: BSW student perceptions. *Social work & Christianity, 33*(1), 58-76.

Developing a "Brother-in-Christ" Relationship

The research methods describe only a small part of the parameters for collecting and analyzing the data. The real story was the ongoing learning and the lifelong friendship I developed with George Huff.

Although we were systematic, it is important to note that the research was far from objective. As we analyzed transcripts and talked each week, we experienced an immediate impact from the work. Every week, students were teaching us how they experienced Christian educators, consciously or unconsciously, attempting to integrate faith and learning in the classroom. Every week, I found myself connecting stories from the data to classes I was teaching and to the interactions I was having with students in and out of the classroom. George found the research affecting his teaching and interactions with students as well. Our experiences influenced our conversations. The time we spent on the phone became more than just going over major themes and coding transcripts. We were sharing personal stories about how the data affected our teaching in the classroom, how we balanced our time between teaching, research, and service, and what we learned from our successes and challenges. Often our conversations turned to scripture, to theoretical and theological literature, and to our own emerging beliefs about what it meant to be an effective Christian educator in social work. We realized that the research was not Christian scholarship because our topic happened to focus on integration of faith in the classroom; it *became* Christian Scholarship (as Wolterstorf describes it) as we grappled with data, theoretical material, and our beliefs influenced by our understanding of Scripture.

Our work together also resulted in the deepest lifelong friendship, the kind of relationship where I believe the phrase "brothers in Christ" applies in its truest sense. Let me explain. Sharing the experience of questioning all that we assumed, working together for two years collecting and analyzing transcripts, and spending hour upon hour sharing personal stories of our work, our families, and our understanding of how our faith in Jesus Christ overflowed into every area of our lives allows me to describe our relationship, assuredly, as "brothers in Christ." I use the phrase to mean two people brought together under God's providence to support, affirm, and challenge each other to live out our understood calling as Christian educators.

Years after analyzing the last transcript and publishing articles from our work, George and I continue to email and/or talk by phone almost every month.

When either one of us has a professional dilemma, we count on each other for accountable, yet supportive guidance—guidance that goes beyond a venting ear or exchanging pleasantries to asking one another the most important, and sometimes toughest questions—How is Christ glorified most in the dilemma? Are we seeking His will and not our will? Given the circumstances, what is the best decision in terms of making us more effective with students as Christian educators in social work?

As awkward as it is to go into the depths of our relationship, I share this with the reader because I have learned that one of the key things needed to grasp and fulfill the high calling of becoming a Christian educator in social work is a "brother or sister in Christ" relationship with another Christian educator. A "brother and/or sister in Christ" relationship helps me navigate the competing demands of academia, guards me against the temptations of the academy (e.g., self-promotion, comparing myself to others, and trying too hard to be seen as "credible" by non-believing colleagues), and reminds me to put God first, relationships second, and work third. I encourage faculty to consider the relationships they have that keep them accountable to students and to becoming Christian educators in social work. I believe it is too easy in academia (in religious or secular settings) to mix up priorities.

A Humble Invitation

The years of reflection, searching, and research have helped me develop answers to what it means for me to become a Christian educator in social work. However, I am far from an expert. In fact, one of my seminal answers (and the reason behind the book's title) is that I am always *becoming* a Christian educator; I will never *be complete* as a Christian educator. As I will explain further in chapter two, accepting that I will always be learning and growing into my vocation is the only way I have learned to grasp all that is required of me in this high calling without feeling paralyzed and overwhelmed. This book, therefore, is not a list of practices or approaches. Rather, it is an invitation for faculty to consider what I have learned (and continue to learn) and use the pages as an opportunity for conscious reflection to arrive at their own answers. If sharing what I have learned encourages more current and future faculty to engage in conscious reflection about what it means to become a Christian educator in social work, the book will fulfill its purpose.

Action Steps for Engaging the Book

I offer a few action steps to assist readers in their conscious reflection of what becoming a Christian educator in social work means for them.

- Daily prayer for reliance on Him and for making His will our will—as you will discover, the vocation of becoming a Christian educator in social work can be overwhelming and impossible without being rooted in the notion of reliance on God. Pray also for God to make His will your will.
- Sharing your story—write out or tell someone about your story. Looking back, how did you get here? What does it mean to you to be a Christian educator in social work? Invite others to share their story. What does it mean to them to be Christian educators?
- Developing a personal mission statement—use the following words to begin developing a working personal mission statement. You will have an opportunity to revise your mission statement throughout the book.
  - As a Christian educator in social work, my mission is to …

CHAPTER 2
GRASPING THE HIGH CALLING

All faculty members have to sort out how they spend their time. Although influenced by university context, years of experience, and specific roles in academia, faculty members often devote portions of their time to teaching, research, and service. After accepting my first position at Northwest Nazarene University, I made the mistake of limiting my view of work to these three areas of responsibility. I thought teaching at NNU meant shifting my primary responsibility from research to teaching and service. Even with the desire to live out my personal mission statement in the context of a Christian university, I did not realize that becoming a Christian educator in social work involved a commitment to every area of life. How I spend time in relationship to God, to my family, to my colleagues, to my students, and to my field of study all matter. In fact, if I were to summarize in one sentence all that I have learned so far from reflecting, searching, and research, it would be the following: Becoming a Christian educator in social work is a high calling where *every* facet of life is relevant.

In this chapter, I describe seven commitments that characterize our high calling. Then I introduce the conceptual framework that emerged from the research. I expect some readers will agree with some parts of the framework and disagree with others. This book is not intended to be a prescriptive list of practices or approaches. Instead, I encourage readers to think about the framework as one way to engage in conscious reflection about what it means to become a Christian educator in social work. Please draw on or ignore some or all the components, as you deem useful.

Seven Commitments

Recognizing that every facet of life was relevant as a Christian educator did not translate directly into active responses. I needed to know, in concrete terms,

how I was supposed to use my time. What became apparent in my search for answers were seven overlapping commitments that operationalized this high calling.

I offer the seven commitments while acknowledging the limitations inherent in qualitative research. Although far from a validated list of factors that predict an effective Christian educator, the commitments did emerge from an attempt at faithful scholarship. I posit that becoming a Christian educator in social work involves a relationship with God marked by a genuine commitment to:

1) Developing and maintaining a thorough knowledge of Scripture;
2) Living an active and consistent Christian life;
3) Spending time and energy getting to know students;
4) Supporting students while expecting academic excellence and challenging beliefs;
5) Having expertise and experience in the curriculum areas of social work education I am responsible for;
6) Providing specific integration of faith and learning (IFL) experiences with curriculum material; and
7) Developing a classroom environment where students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Chapters three through seven examine the commitments in depth. Here I elaborate briefly on each one.

Developing and Maintaining a Thorough Knowledge of Scripture

On the surface, making a lifetime commitment to developing and maintaining a thorough knowledge of Scripture seems obvious. From an intellectual and pragmatic perspective, this commitment seems essential for anyone interested in a relationship with God. There is nothing profound in arriving at the conclusion that spending time in Scripture is part of becoming a Christian educator. Surely, I could have figured that out just from reading the literature or talking to an experienced mentor. The years spent interviewing and analyzing transcripts from students, however, expanded the purpose for reading Scripture from being a daily discipline for personal edification to a distinct part of my responsibility as a Christian professor in social work. Students we interviewed (and I believe the parents that pay for them) came to a Christian college or university expecting

to take classes from faculty who developed and maintained their knowledge of Scripture. In addition to (and not in place of) sorting out how I spend time on teaching, research, and service, I have learned that part of fulfilling my responsibility is spending significant time in Scripture contemplating how my relationship with Jesus influences (and is influenced by) everything I teach and study.

Living an Active and Consistent Christian Life

The influence of spending time in Scripture must transcend the classroom to other areas of life. There are no false dichotomies between personal and professional life as a Christian educator. Although students may not hold themselves to the same standards, they want faculty who are committed to living consistent lives. They want to know that the Christian educators they see interacting with their families in the community are the same people they encounter in the classroom. If a faculty member is genuine and personable with their family in the community, students expect faculty to be the same in on campus. In the same way, a commitment to an active religious life is important. Devoting significant time to prayer, fellowship, worship, community ministry, missions, and other actions involved in an active Christian life are all relevant to becoming a Christian educator in social work. Again, *every* facet of life is relevant.

Spending Time and Energy Getting to Know Students

Every facet of students' lives is important as well. Students identify faculty who are genuinely interested in getting to know them as more effective at integrating faith and practice in the classroom. I have learned that becoming a Christian educator in social work requires a commitment to investing time and energy listening to the life stories of students. Analyzing student interviews convinced me that if I am sincerely interested in equipping students to think deeply about how their faith intersects with social work content and practice, in addition to all the other responsibilities as a professor, I have to find enough time to communicate that I actually care about them and want to know about their lives.

Supporting Students While Expecting Academic Excellence and Challenging Beliefs

Caring about students is also a central component of teaching and advising. The students we interviewed were not looking for another friend to share

life stories. They were looking for educators who were more concerned about students learning than they were with covering content. I learned that becoming a Christian educator requires a commitment to supporting students in pursuit of their education while expecting academic excellence and challenging beliefs. In operational terms, I learned that whether interacting with students in the classroom, during advising, or in other capacities, I am responsible for maintaining the integrity of the faculty-student relationship and communicating four messages at all times. One, I am genuinely interested in their doing well and meeting their vocational goals. Two, I care about their lives and will work to be as flexible as possible when situations happen that interfere with their education. Three, I hold them accountable to the rigors and requirements of their studies. Four, I will challenge their beliefs in as far as they interact with the knowledge, values, and practices of becoming professional social workers.

Having Expertise and Experience in the Curriculum Areas of Social Work Education

In addition to investing time in a relationship with God and relationships with students, Christian educators must make a commitment to developing and maintaining expertise in areas of the social work curriculum. The focus of expertise must be twofold—as a social work researcher and practitioner and as an educator teaching students. Regardless of the school or university, I learned that having an active research agenda, finding time to practice, and improving my teaching are all part of becoming a Christian educator in social work. I arrived at Northwest Nazarene University thinking there was no need or time to work on research and scholarship. I was wrong. The students we interviewed wanted Christian educators teaching courses informed by involvement in research and currency in the literature. In the same way, they perceived faculty with practice experience as more effective at helping students contemplate how their faith influences what they are learning. For Christian educators, the tripod of teaching, research, and service becomes more than a responsibility to universities and the social work profession. It's a commitment that is part of equipping students to live out their vocations.

Providing Specific IFL Experiences with Curriculum Material

The students we interviewed looked for faculty to provide specific IFL experiences throughout the social work curriculum. Beyond developing exper-

tise as a researcher and teacher, therefore, I learned that becoming a Christian educator in social work means making an ongoing commitment to finding or creating teaching units, curriculum modules, and other experiences that help students synthesize and evaluate their beliefs in connection with what they are learning. In chapter six, I discuss salient approaches students perceive as useful for IFL. Here it is enough to assert the following point. Incorporating specific IFL approaches in every course, from research methods and statistics to practice with individuals, is important if we want students prepared to integrate their faith in all aspects of ethical social work practice.

Developing a Classroom Environment where Students Feel a Sense of Belonging and Acceptance

Students echoed Holmes' (1999) and Wolterstorff's (2004) sentiments about the importance of classroom culture and management. Students want to engage in stimulating and open-ended discussions about the impact of their faith on every dimension of social work education and practice. They want faculty to challenge them to live out their calling. For those kinds of discussions and learning experiences to occur, however, they want faculty who can create classroom environments that elicit feelings of belonging and acceptance regardless of religious (or any other) beliefs. As an educator, I am responsible for creating classroom cultures where students feel safe enough to examine their views in the context of learning to become social workers. Let me be clear, I believe that without commitment to spending time in conscious discernment and preparation for classroom management, the time faculty spend in Scripture, living an active Christian life, investing in students, developing expertise in the field, and using specific IFL strategies may not translate into providing Christ-centered education.

An Overwhelming and Impossible Answer

I set out in search of a concrete answer to what it meant to become a Christian educator in social work. Specifically, I wanted to learn what students (juniors and seniors) experienced as the most important characteristics of faculty they considered "effective" at integrating faith and learning. As the seven commitments became clear, I found myself feeling overwhelmed. Early on, I even felt frustrated and defensive. Perhaps the students we interviewed were naive or disillusioned. I thought, "They don't really understand what is involved in conducting research, teaching a full course load, and serving on numerous

committees. Aren't I entitled to a personal life outside of work?"

As I went further into the analysis of the transcripts, however, I realized that what students were sharing was consistent with the literature. Their responses were also consistent with my belief that a relationship with Jesus affects every area of living. I had my concrete answer. Taken together, becoming a Christian educator in social work requires a "personal level of attitude and motivation" (Holmes, 1999, p. 49) to develop a thorough knowledge of Scripture, to live an active Christian life, to get to know students, to provide support while expecting academic excellence and challenging beliefs, to have expertise and experience in the core areas of social work education, to provide specific IFL experiences, and to develop classrooms where students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. The answer just seemed impossible, even for the most seasoned and dedicated faculty.

What is Impossible for Us is Possible for God

It was one thing to read about the essence of Christian education from experts and question the validity of their assertions without empirical data from students. It was quite another thing to realize that student perspectives are consistent with the literature and their expectations of faculty are all consuming. I was not prepared to experience the magnitude or bear the burden of accepting that responsibility. I felt disheartened, similar to the way the rich ruler felt after he asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life.

After Jesus recounts several of the Ten Commandments, the rich ruler felt assured of himself answering, "All these I have kept since I was a boy" (Luke 18: 21, NIV). His feelings changed when Jesus told him to sell all he had and give it to the poor. He became sad. He was not prepared to surrender everything. In the same way, I was comfortable with my effortless and minuscule vision of becoming a Christian educator. I thought choosing to teach at a Christian university was evidence enough of my faith. The years of research that followed the workshop at the 2003 NACSW convention suddenly brought me back to the same place, feeling exposed and incapable in front of God. I felt heartbroken when I realized there was no way I could ever fulfill all that is part of being a Christian educator in social work. I also felt guilty because I did not know if I wanted to surrender everything.

In the midst of such despair, the rest of Jesus' interactions with the rich ruler and the crowd become clear. Just as Jesus explains that, "it is easier for a

camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25), I accepted that it is impossible for anyone to fulfill all that is required as a Christian educator. He then says to the crowd, "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). The juxtaposition of Jesus' response with the despair of the ruler and the crowd highlights the most important part of being a Christian educator in social work. Apart from an active relationship with Jesus and a firm grasp on the Gospel of Grace (acceptance of the unmerited gift of salvation), it is impossible to fulfill all that is required as a Christian educator. Stated differently, developing and maintaining an active relationship with Jesus is the primary responsibility of Christian educators. The seven commitments required of a Christian educator in social work *build upon* that relationship and exist *because* of that relationship. The ability to balance the diligence it takes to develop and maintain expertise, with the humility to accept the futility of our efforts apart from a relationship with Christ, is critical. It requires a vocational view of social work practice and education.

The Christian Vocation Framework

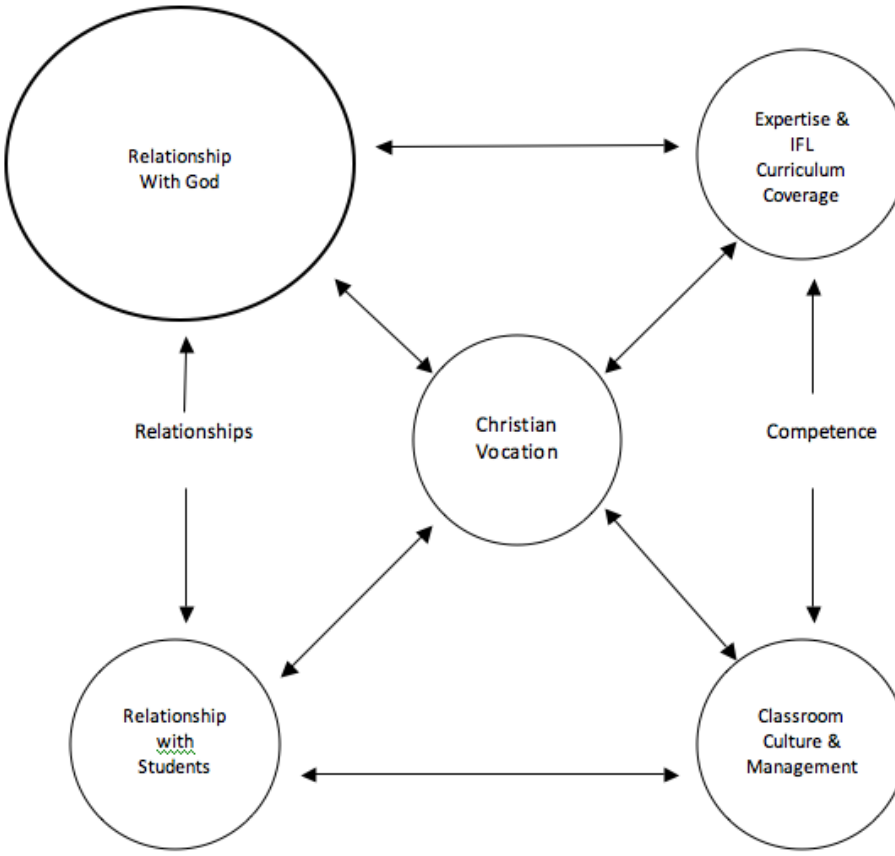
What is the desired outcome for students graduating with their BSW or MSW from a Christian college or university? I believe this is a question deserving conscious reflection and articulated answers from every faculty member teaching in a social work program at a Christian college or university. I encourage program directors and department chairs to have their faculty articulate on a periodic basis what they understand as the chief end of their work with students. I do not think faculty members have to agree on the answers, but they do need to talk about it and respect each other's viewpoints. The question is too important to take for granted. One of the things I appreciate most about teaching in the School of Social Work at Baylor University is the diversity of views in answering that question and the respect my colleagues and I have for our different perspectives.

My answer emerged as a serendipitous finding as I sought to understand what was involved in becoming a Christian educator in social work. When students graduate with a BSW or MSW, I want them prepared and committed to their *relationship* to God, themselves, and others and committed to the diligence it takes to be *competent* professionals to respond to the problems of the world that prevent every human being from living in right relationships. In other words, I want them prepared and committed to ethical social work

practice as their Christian vocation. Although there are many ways of defining Christian vocation, I use the phrase to refer to a divine calling where students divert their energies from all self-seeking irresponsible pursuits to one course in which faith and devotion to Jesus Christ can find mature fulfillment (Calhoun, 1949). Students taught me that preparing them to identify, commit, and fervently pursue their Christian vocation as social workers requires having faculty fulfilling their Christian vocation as social work educators.

Figure 1 displays the Christian Vocation Framework (CVF). The framework describes how the seven commitments fit together. I use the framework as a reminder of the purpose of my work and the components that inform how I spend my time.

Figure 1: The Christian Vocation Framework



Briefly, the CVF consists of two main categories—developing relationships and competence that are connected by two-sided arrows. The arrows signify the reinforcing nature of the categories to vocation and the categories to each other. For instance, investing time in a relationship with God is a component of faculty developing competence in providing IFL curriculum coverage. In the same way, investing time in relationships with students and developing expertise in the field can influence and reinforce faculty relationships with God. Likewise, facilitating an academically challenging and accepting classroom setting where students have a sense of belonging is connected to faculty developing relationships with students. Competence in providing effective IFL experience is also connected to developing the classroom culture. Moreover, the large and bolded oval representing a relationship with God connotes the primary importance of that category to the framework. Taken together, the extent to which faculty fulfill their Christian vocation as social work educators is dependent upon all four categories, while investing time on the four categories reinforces their Christian vocation as social work educators. Finally, the framework serves as the outline for the next five chapters of the book.

Action Steps

- I've listed the seven commitments of a Christian educator in social work that emerged from the research. Create your own list of concrete ways of investing time in becoming a Christian educator in social work. As you contemplate the list, would you use any of the seven commitments? What would you add? Are there any commitments you would phrase differently or remove altogether?
- In writing, draft your own response to the following questions:
  - What is the desired outcome for students graduating with a BSW or MSW from your college or university?
  - What attributes and characteristics of faculty will help students meet the desired outcomes?

  Consider putting these questions on the agenda at a faculty meeting. Ask colleagues to draft their own responses. Then facilitate a discussion comparing the answers.

CHAPTER 3
THE FOUNDATION: INVESTING IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

"I am the way and the truth and the life." (John 14:6)

One of the habits I can't escape (and I don't know if I necessarily want to) is the tendency to synthesize and contrast my current relationship with God with what I learned and experienced going to synagogue and Hebrew school throughout childhood. For instance, I was taught that because the third commandment reads, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Exodus 20:7), the name of God is never to be spelled out in full. Instead, I learned to write "G-d" or "L-rd." Although I know now that how someone *spells* the word "God" has nothing to do with their *relationship* with God, each time I read or write either word I find myself reflecting on how judgmental I was and how terrible I felt about seeing those words in print. I used to think how disgraceful and ignorant! God is so holy that he is to be revered. I also used to think God was untouchable. I felt extremely guilty because I knew there was no way I could follow and maintain every Jewish law, custom, and ritual at all times. When I read Scripture, I think back to many of the Jewish customs and practices I learned with the same dialectical duality—as a symbolic act of reverence and as a myriad list of behaviors, procedures, and rules that I will never get right and, therefore, will never be good enough or quite ready to have a relationship with God.

John 14:6 invokes a primary contrast that helps synthesize my Jewish upbringing with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Before I believed in Jesus as Messiah, having knowledge of and practicing Jewish laws and customs was not enough to *know* God personally as "Abba" father. The knowledge and rituals only taught me *about* God. Now as a Christian, I have faith that Jesus is the way to

know God. With my faith, the knowledge and practices of Jewish customs have become more meaningful. They enrich the depths of my relationship with Him and reinforce my resolve to live out that relationship in the here-and-now.

I believe this contrast is relevant for Christian educators. The foundation for becoming a Christian educator is to love Jesus Christ as Lord. Apart from loving Christ, practicing the seven commitments is insufficient for faculty becoming Christian educators. When loving God is the basis of the seven commitments, however, faculty are more effective as Christian educators and practicing the commitments become more meaningful.

I often wonder about the faculty of the BSW student whose classmate died just two weeks before the 2003 NACSW annual convention. I wonder if they unintentionally became too focused on the busyness of academia, on all the other important responsibilities, and neglected spending time investing in a relationship with God. I also reflect on her comments as a voice of accountability, questioning how I spend my time as a Christian educator. Her comments, along with the literature and the data from students, reveal that a relationship with God is vital for becoming an effective Christian educator in social work. Jesus really is the way, the truth, and the life of Christian education. He is the starting point. In fact, the thesis for the chapter is this—*Investing in a personal relationship with God is the primary commitment of every Christian educator.*

The rest of this chapter describes three attributes of faculty relationships with God that seem to resonate most with students as indicative of faith integration. The attributes include: 1) An active personal relationship with Jesus Christ; 2) A sense of accountability to the Lord; and 3) A faith maturity characterized by personally and professionally tested experiences.

An active personal relationship with Jesus Christ

Readers may find what I am about to write offensive. Identifying oneself as Christian is not enough for becoming a Christian educator in social work. Identifying faculty as Christians was crucial to students; however, it represented only a fundamental basis for a relationship with God. Holmes (1999) and Wolterstorff (2004) share essentially the same sentiment, asserting that Christian colleges need educators who are committed to struggling with the ideas and arguments in their fields while actively growing in their faith in Christ. Both scholars are concerned with the underlying attitude and motivation of educators at Christian colleges. Stated differently, how a faculty member lives

out his or her faith is of utmost importance. My relationship with God is personal, but as a Christian educator, it is definitely not private. The "personal, but not private" principle may be applicable for all believers; however, the quality of the relationships faculty have with Jesus Christ is connected directly to becoming effective Christian educators.

After years of reflection and research, I want to articulate the qualities of a relationship with Jesus Christ that I've learned are vital for Christian educators. I do so with a humble spirit, recognizing that the depths of a relationship with Jesus Christ are ultimately indefinable by mere words and can never be understood fully by the finite limitations of any research method. I believe there are three overlapping qualities about a relationship with Jesus Christ that are important for me as a Christian educator. These qualities are also consistent with the qualities students described in the interviews. First, it is a genuine and passionate relationship. He *is* my priority. Second, as my priority, I consciously assess everything I learn and study in social work (and in life) with my relationship with Christ as the primary lens. Third, my relationship with Jesus serves as an authentic living model for students learning to integrate their faith and their practice. Let me elaborate on each one.

A genuine and passionate relationship. As an educator and scholar, I find great satisfaction and joy in my work. I keep an active research agenda and have written on a variety of topics. I derive much joy in meeting regularly with colleagues from various disciplines to read and discuss theological and philosophical texts. I consider preparing courses and teaching students to become social workers a true blessing. But, the most important part of my life and my work is the loving relationship I have with God. One of the things I realized after confessing my sins and asking Jesus into my life was that God, through Jesus, actually wants to be in relationship with me. He was no longer untouchable. Since my baptism, I seek and run to Jesus as my Savior with arms wide open and my heart desiring Him above all else. Moreover, He is so important that spending time pursuing an active relationship with Him is my greatest passion and joy. The author of the book of Hebrews writes, "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers" (Hebrews 2:11). Having lived the first 23 years of life out of the family, I feel so fortunate to have a God we can call "father" and a Savior we can call "brother." As such, I try to live out my relationship by investing significant time in prayer and reading God's word each day. My family and I are also active in worship, in all

its forms, including how we worship God with our time and our money, inside and outside the walls of the church. My relationship with God is the primary influence over every part of life.

As awkward and exposed as I feel expressing my relationship with God in writing, I decided to risk being completely vulnerable to make the following point: An authentic and active love for the Lord is a prerequisite for becoming a Christian educator in social work (or any field). The specific practices and expressions of a relationship with God may be very different, depending on denominational customs, languages, and cultural norms, but the relationship must be authentic and active. Jesus' words are especially relevant for Christian educators, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (John 15:4).

The primary lens for knowing. The fruit produced from an active relationship with Christ can take many forms. For Christian educators, two forms of fruit are essential; the relationship becomes the primary way of knowing about social work and the relationship produces fruit that is visible for students. When engaging the profession as a practitioner, educator, and scholar, what I come to know about social work is filtered through my relationship with God. I spend significant time in prayer and in Scripture, questioning and seeking how what I am reading and learning corresponds with my faith. For example, I wrestle with defining terms such as social justice and well-being apart from a definition based on Christ-informed views of justice, mercy, and redemption. I evaluate human behavior and practice theories by what I know about God. When I conduct research or teach research methods, I wrestle with the philosophical underpinnings of knowing implied by each research method. I question what I mean by the phrase "evidence-based social work practice." I question what counts as evidence.

At the same time, what I learn about social work influences my relationship with God. For example, years ago, after publishing an article evaluating the effectiveness of a faith-based homeless shelter and substance abuse program, the limitations of the program whose overemphasis on spirituality seemed to cause more difficulties for clients challenged my beliefs. More recently in another research study, the unintended pressures clients felt to talk about religion regardless of having informed consent again challenged my beliefs. The clients were in such need of assistance they would do or say anything to gain access.

Moreover, as I was preparing to teach an HBSE course, I read in an HBSE textbook about the coming out process experienced by lesbian and gay individuals. As I read, it reminded me of how ostracized I felt when I first became a believer. In the beginning, I kept my faith hidden from friends and family because I was afraid of permanently damaging those relationships. It took a few years for me to feel comfortable. When I did, I came out slowly, waiting to tell members of my family last. Reading that textbook influenced my faith and how I view the issue of sexual orientation. The point being, it is essential for Christian educators to approach social work within the context of a humble and dynamic relationship with God—a relationship which we transform and are transformed by the profession of social work.

Visible for students. Awareness of faculty relationships with God was a recurring theme in student interviews. Students need to see evidence that the faith lives of faculty are genuine. They notice when Christian educators in social work (or in any field) have an active and transformative relationship with God. When students see evidence, they perceive faculty as more influential in their lives. The evidence, however, must be authentic and not contrived. Students recognize what I call "stilted faith integration," that is, attempts by Christian educators to manufacture integration experiences apart from a desire to make themselves available for the growth and transformation that occurs from an genuine relationship with God. I am working and living out my faith as I pursue my vocation as a social work professor. My relationship with Jesus serves as a living example for students because it is authentic, because they see the transformation that is occurring in my life.

The students interviewed realize that some faculty may have a strong personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but they do not see it. When they do not see evidence, the relationship remains unknown—and students want to know. As one student shared, "They could have an amazing relationship; just the way that they express it, I can't tell. Maybe they don't understand that because we are a Christian university, they are supposed to integrate their faith." As will become clear in the next chapter, the visibility of our faith is instrumental to our relationships with students. For now, application of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:14-16 is especially notable for becoming a Christian educator in social work:

> You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

> In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

A sense of accountability to the Lord

For Christian educators, part of a genuine and visible relationship with God is evidence that we are fulfilling God's divine purpose for our lives. In other words, we are fulfilling our vocation. As Conyers (2004) explains, the essence of vocation, "is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but are called forth to a divine purpose" (p. 18). Students want faculty who they sense are living out their divine purpose as social work professors. Students expect and assume that Christian educators uphold a higher standard of accountability that influences how they carry out their responsibilities to students, administration, and all others. They also look to faculty as models of ambassadorship. I believe that being accountable to the Lord involves seeking the Holy Spirit in ongoing conscious assessment that my vocation is and continues to be as a Christian educator in social work. Students we interviewed do not want what I call "faculty dead weight," meaning faculty whose divine purpose at a Christian college or university has moved on and they are simply going through the motions. My prayer is that I would recognize if and when God calls me to faithfully serve His purpose in another way, that I would not teach even one semester going through the motions. As one student commented:

> Professors have more purpose behind their teaching and their career because they see it not only as their job but as their ministry—that God placed them here to serve—and so that gives them added incentive to do their best and to do a quality job.

Dr. Jerry Hull, former department chair of social work at Northwest Nazarene University, was accountable to the Lord, fulfilling his divine purpose as a Christian educator. His ministry was teaching social work. It had been his ministry for over 35 years. When I first arrived at NNU, Jerry offered to meet with me each week for prayer, Bible study, and discussion about our vocation as Christian educators. I still remember many of our conversations and incorporate several of his IFL approaches in the classroom. The greatest lesson I learned from Jerry, however, happened 2500 miles away at the Council on Social Work Education 51st annual program meeting (APM), in New York. Jerry was not even there.

I attended the APM in New York to present research I had finished with a colleague. At the time of the session, we presented with three other scholars. One of the other presenters noticed the NNU school affiliation on my nametag and asked me if I knew Jerry Hull. After I responded, she shared that Jerry Hull was one of her professors at Trevecca University, where he started his teaching career. She continued sharing how, despite feeling out of place, Jerry Hull's genuine concern for her and his passion for social work kept her interested enough to stick it out and finish school. I affirmed, "He is still the same." He still cares for his students and remains zealous about teaching social work. He is living out his divine purpose.

Perhaps the most demanding and thorny expectation of students is that they actually look to faculty as Christian role models. Students look for faculty conducting themselves in a manner that is characteristic of being ambassadors of Christ to the field of social work and beyond. In addition to learning from faculty capable of teaching the content, students look for faculty to help them learn to represent themselves as Christians in diverse settings.

As a social work scholar and academic, I admit that I have a hard time grasping what being an ambassador of Christ means in action. On one hand, it is difficult to operationalize the construct because it seems impossible to measure. One issue is that being an ambassador for Christ is all consuming. It also seems that faculty can live out this concept in extremely diverse ways and yet be equally effective. On the other hand, I know from experience how unique the culture of learning is for students (from all religious backgrounds) and for faculty when each member of the faculty lives out this ambassador concept.

I have learned through research and experience that students pay attention to who faculty are in and out of the classroom. For me, therefore, every aspect of our work needs to be as ambassadors of Christ. The projects we work on, the quality of our work, the way we treat colleagues, the way we spend time with family, our lives as husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers all matters. It is all part of the vocation and students are watching. I believe being an ambassador for Christ is part of what philosopher Alvin Plantinga (1994) means when he suggests, "We shouldn't assume, automatically, that it is appropriate for Christians to work at the disciplines in the same way as the rest of the academic world" (p. 292). In addition to providing a credible Christian critique to epistemology in social work, the way we carry out our work in and out of the classroom should be distinctive—distinctive in that we live out Paul's words to

the church of Corinth in all we do, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Co 5:20).

A faith maturity characterized by personally and professionally tested experiences

In addition to an active and accountable relationship with God, students look for faculty with faith maturity. For present purposes, I use the phrase faith maturity to mean "battle-tested" and ultimately "steadfast" in the Gospel of Grace—the fundamental precept of Christianity. During their academic preparation, students are often confronted with fundamental questions and ethical dilemmas about self-worth, justice, purpose, and the chasm between ideals set forth in writing and the reality of what happens in practice. Students perceived that it was important for them to have faculty who remained committed to a relationship with Jesus Christ after confronting some of the ambiguities and paradoxes in life, paradoxes that social workers deal with possibly more than any other professionals.

Though I am not completely comfortable with Fowler's (1981, 1996) stages of faith, his overarching premise is useful to understanding the importance of faith maturity for Christian educators in social work. The essential difference between his early and later stages is an orientation to faith characterized by challenges requiring reevaluation and deeper understandings about our relationships to self, to others, and to God. Let's face it, we are preparing students to work with people in situations where their unbridled altruism, often fueled for students at Christian colleges and universities by a desire to live out their beliefs, collides head on with the most extreme forms of despair, abuse, racism, poverty, and other injustices. When students experience the collision, they are likely to question their beliefs. Moreover, it's reasonable to assume that, for some students, the collision can literally shatter their beliefs. Part of their education and preparation is learning to engage in critical reflection in response to the contradictions and value conflicts they will face in practice and in life. Stated differently, in the midst of such depravity, they must be able to encounter Jesus Christ as the manifestation of God's unconditional love that gives rise to their commitment as change agents of renewal and social justice in the fallen world (Wolterstorff, 2004). To that end, students need faculty who can guide them because they've been tested by their own personal and professional experiences. As one student shared:

> You just go through a lot in social work, and having that experience and knowing that the professors have gone through some of the same questions and the same type of circumstances where they've searched God's Word looking for answers, they will be able to aid us in our journey.

The specific kinds of experiences that faculty encounter are less important than the reevaluation process that occurs because of the experiences. Students need faculty who, after years of tested experiences, continue to reevaluate all that they know and believe. At the same time, students need faculty who, as they continue to reevaluate all they know and believe, find they remain steadfast in their belief in the Gospel of Grace—even after experiencing circumstances where greater understanding (based on reason and intellect) doesn't always exist. Instead, greater understanding may come from the lessons of humility, obedience, and/or renewed wonderment when we experience the finite end of our ability to fully grasp the knowledge of God. I humbly believe that preparing students for their vocation in social work requires faculty with that kind of tested faith maturity.

Let me share a few personal and professional experiences that have tested or continue to test my faith. The most personal and tested experience was my mother's death. Losing her at a young age was difficult. The thing that causes me to pray and search scripture most earnestly, however, is thinking about her soul after death. I don't know if she believed in Jesus as the Messiah. I never heard her confess her sins and ask Jesus into her heart. At the same time, when I read the end of chapter 11 in the book of Romans, I want so desperately for Paul's words to mean that she as a Jew will be saved with the rest of Israel. After years of prayer, searching the Scriptures, and pastoral consultation, I remain uncertain. Still, I believe and know with all that I am that Jesus is God's only son, whom He sent to redeem his people. Remaining uncertain about my mother's salvation also reminds me of how limited I am by reason and intellect to fully understand God. I know what Job means when he answers God:

> "I know that you can do all things;
> no plan of yours can be thwarted.
> You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?'
> Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,

things too wonderful for me to know.
You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.'
My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:2-6)

Another personal experience that tested my faith occurred in 1999, a few weeks before Thanksgiving. The pastor at the church my wife and I were attending preached a sermon on the parable of the great banquet in Luke, chapter fourteen. He told the congregation that instead of throwing a Thanksgiving meal for ourselves and our family, the church wanted to host a banquet for "the poor, crippled, the blind and lame" (Luke 14:21). As a social worker practicing at a community mental health center at the time, I was greatly encouraged by his sermon and plan for the church. That week I invited almost every group home resident in our county for Thanksgiving dinner at our church and over 80 people accepted the invitation.

When I met with the pastor to tell him the good news, he became very upset and angry. He started yelling at me, telling me the church was not prepared to serve such people. In his mind, even though he preached that Sunday on feeding those in need, he really meant that he wanted the church to provide Thanksgiving dinner to residents of a local apartment complex in our town. He did not mean for church members to literally invite the poor, crippled, blind, and lame of our day. Instead, he was hoping that some of the residents at the apartment complex would eventually become members of the church.

In the end, the clients from the group homes came for Thanksgiving and the meal turned out as a wonderful opportunity for fellowship and service. The pastor even apologized for getting so upset at me. Nevertheless, that experience made me reevaluate my faith and calling. At the time, I was about to enroll at a local seminary to begin work on a Master of Divinity. The exchange with my pastor, however, caused me to reassess the best way for me to live out my faith. A few months later, I retracted my application to seminary and applied instead for my doctorate in social work. Again, I remained steadfast in my faith in Christ, though I recognized through this tested experience that my divine purpose was not as a pastor but as a social work educator.

Finally, the research journey that led to this book was a tested experience. A few years into the research, I took a position at Baylor University. By this time, I completed and published the two studies on student perceptions of the salient indicators for effectively integrating faith and learning. During my first semester at Baylor, I received additional support to conduct an additional study to develop and assess the psychometrics of a scale based on the Christian Vocation Framework. Before I could begin the research for that study, however, the campus newspaper published a story on my research that elicited a negative reaction from colleagues around the campus.

Before I arrived at Baylor, the campus had recently gone through several years of political turmoil as the university sought to define its future as both a research-intensive institution and a university that valued integration of faith and learning. Although I was unaware of the political unrest and my research did not include data collection from anyone at Baylor, the proposal was seen by some as an attempt to rehash the past. I was upset and confused. On one hand, I did not want to pursue the study if it was going to cause so much strife on campus. On the other hand, it made me reevaluate my vocation as a Christian educator at Baylor University. Experiencing the hyperactive reaction on campus, I sought the advice and wisdom of my colleagues in the School of Social Work. In a meeting with several faculty members, Rob Rogers, another colleague with whom I developed a "Brother-in-Christ" relationship, offered the following words that penetrated my soul. He said the following:

> If the goal of your research is to test the framework, then do the study. If the goal is to help faculty think seriously about becoming Christian educators, then you are getting feedback that a quantitative study is not the way to do it.

Rob's words helped me realize that my goals for the next study had more to do with my own selfish interests and less to do with carrying on faithful scholarship. At that point, I turned down the money, apologized to my colleagues, and thanked them for their support. I also decided to leave the research findings open-ended, with all the inherent limitations of qualitative research, and share what I learned in this book.

There are many more personal and professional experiences that have and continue to test my faith. Through it all, God has confirmed for me that social work and social work education is my vocation. At some point, most of

our students will experience (as many of us have as practitioners in the past) situations in the field where they realize the circumstances are such that what they thought they knew about the extent of human depravity and injustice will challenge all they believe, that all of their social work knowledge, values, and skills are rendered inadequate in the face of such unspeakable conditions. I am convinced that students need faculty, mature and tested in their faith, whose divine purpose is to prepare them for effective and ethical practice in those dire situations, while teaching and encouraging them to always seek discernment from God that social work is their vocation.

Action Steps

- Reevaluate priorities—Make a list of all the commitments you have as a social work educator, such as all the projects you are working on, the course preps, the committee work. Now ask yourself the following questions: 1) Is your relationship with Jesus Christ your primary commitment? 2) Is your allocation of time congruent with your relationship with Him being your primary commitment? This week, make one minor change in your schedule or routine to allot more time to actively engage in your relationship with Christ. For example, commit to waking up early for prayer each morning or commit to using your time at lunch to read Scripture.
- Reflect upon your relationship with Jesus—I've articulated three qualities of a relationship with Jesus Christ that I believe are vital for Christian educators. The relationship must be genuine and passionate, the primary lens for knowing about social work (and life), and visible for students. How would you describe the characteristics of your relationship with Him? Now think about your students. What do you want students to know about how God fits into your work and life? What do you think they notice or observe?
- Refining and affirming your personal mission statement—complete the following sentences in light of what you've read so far.
  - My vocation and/or divine purpose is …
  - As a Christian educator in social work, my mission is to …

CHAPTER 4
THE DISCIPLESHIP: INVESTING IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

A primary finding emerging from our research was the significance of having faculty who were committed to developing relationships with students. Almost every student we interviewed referred to the importance of his or her relationships with faculty as a salient indicator of effective integration of faith and learning. From a pragmatic viewpoint, I am quite confident in stating my position that the nature and investment faculty make in relationships with students influences their faith integration. In this chapter, I do not use the following pages to defend my position directly; instead, I explore questions surrounding the purpose and nature of the relationships that students need with Christian educators in social work. Specifically, I address the following two questions. First, why is it important for faculty to invest in relationships with students? Stated differently, what is the purpose of the relationships? Second, what are the underlying qualities of relationships with students that are conducive to fulfilling the purpose of the relationships?

Consistent with the rest of the book, I set forth my responses with a humble spirit. My intention is to provide a starting place for readers to reflect on the place of relationships with students as part of the vocation of Christian education in social work. I, therefore, offer my perspective in first person, informed by years of reading, studying, and thinking consciously about the two questions, though well aware of my limitations and shortcomings.

Why is it important for faculty to invest in relationships with students?

I find examining the purpose of faculty relationships with students is one of the fundamental questions for Christian educators in social work. Indeed, I believe it is a fundamental question for Christian educators in every discipline,

but I leave it to other scholars to examine the necessity of their relationships with students in their own fields. I limit my discussion to examining why student relationships in social work education are important, especially in social work education at Christian colleges and universities.

Understanding the purpose of faculty relationships with students is essential for me because it informs how I allocate my time among the competing demands of academia. I must admit that my first inclination is to stay focused on research and scholarship. I am a task-oriented person. I find it easier (and more pleasing) to order my days with work that allows me to feel productive. I desperately want to cross-off things I have done on my "to do" list. If I understand why I am supposed to do something, I am more likely to consider it part of my task as a Christian educator. I use the following paragraphs to explain why I consider relationships with students as one of the primary tasks of my vocation as a Christian educator in social work.

At the end of chapter two, I asked readers to reflect on the desired outcome for students graduating with their BSW or MSW from a Christian college or university. I also shared my answer. I stated that I want students prepared for ethical social work practice as their vocation, committed to their *relationships* to God, themselves, and others, and committed to the diligence it takes to be *competent* professionals ready to respond to the problems of the world that prevent every human being from living in right relationships. A consequence of articulating my desired outcome for students was that I needed to articulate the essential attributes of Christian education in social work that would produce the kinds of students I think we should graduate. In pondering the essential attributes, I came to understand why relationships with students are so important. In fact, I now believe they are crucial to graduating students ready to live out their vocations as social workers. Let me explain.

Social work is a profession of action, a profession of doing. I have argued elsewhere that social work is an applied profession (Sherr, 2008) since social work does not have its own exclusive base of knowledge. Social work education involves equipping students for ethical and competent practice. As such, we teach students an array of knowledge, values, and skills all intended for training them to be effective in their practice. Even in social work courses that focus on theory or research, the understanding of theory or knowing from research focuses primarily on the use of that knowledge in practice (perhaps as it should). Hence, the Council on Social Work Education (2008) considers field education the signature pedagogy of the curriculum.

Robert Wineburg (whom I consider a mentor) used Rodan's *The Thinker* as a metaphor in my undergraduate social work policy course to explain the difference between social work and some of the fields of knowledge upon which we draw for practice. I believe it is a helpful metaphor. He shared that sociologists, psychologists, and economists, for example, represent the thinker in that they study human issues and social problems apart from engaging people in the process of helping them enhance their well-being. In contrast, social workers get down from the seat of thought to engage people at the point of dealing with the issues and social problems that challenge their well-being. Moreover, the research we do and the knowledge we develop occurs during the action of helping and serving, as opposed to studying on the sidelines for the sake of discovery. In fact, some social work scholars would consider research for the sole purpose of discovery as exploitive. The point is that social work education emphasizes the development of knowledge for engaging in the active process of helping people.

I want to make clear that my description of social work is only a statement of how I see the profession. I tried to refrain from adding any value-laden language. A critique of the utility of this active approach to education is worthy of an elaborate treatment, though it is beyond the scope of this book. Such a critique would also take attention away from the point of the discussion, which is to explain why faculty relationships with students are so important. I will say that social work's active approach to education, grounded in the purpose of service to people and the environment, is what I found so appealing about the field. I also think it is the reason many students feel drawn to social work as well. They often share on their admission essays how they want to "learn to help others."

What is important for our discussion is to assess how the emphasis on action coincides with preparing students for social work as their vocation. In this regard, I believe social work education does not involve enough intentional content or time for the kind of discernment necessary for vocational learning. Students may learn to develop self-awareness and reflection skills, but the emphasis (and perhaps rightly so) focuses more on improving their practice and less on considering *why* they practice. Moreover, students may learn to guide their practice by the NASW *Code of Ethics* (1999), but they do not learn to evaluate the congruence of the ascribed goods and virtues inherent in the *Code of Ethics* with their beliefs as Christians (or other religious beliefs).[2]

2 Some faculty members will have students with different religious beliefs in their courses, even at Christian colleges and universities. Thus, it is important to create

It seems to me that preparing students for their vocation requires a certain amount of time contemplating who they are, what they believe, what they are learning, and how it all fits together for them in understanding what it means to fulfill their divine purpose (Conyers, 2004). It also seems important to me that students learn to contemplate deeper foundational questions that undergird the active practices of social work. For instance, what gives man or woman the right to self-determination? Why are human relationships so important? On what basis can we claim the inherent dignity and worth of human beings? On what basis can man or woman expect to enhance his or her well-being? What does it mean to advocate for justice? How do we define justice? Are there goods that are universal and goods that are amenable to contexts? How does their understanding of the gospel influence their answers to these foundational questions and how do their answers influence their understanding of the gospel? Moreover, it seems important to me as a Christian educator to help students develop the capacity, discipline, and commitment to a lifetime of contemplation. To live in right relationships with God, themselves, and others, students need to appreciate the role of contemplation in helping them deal with these dynamic relationships.

Invoking Rodan's *The Thinker* again as a metaphor, social work as a vocation involves a certain combination of sitting and thinking with getting down from the seat of thought to engage people in practice. Combining reflections from Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther helped me understand and articulate this relationship as it applies to social work.

In his reflections on the relative importance of the active and contemplative life, Aquinas regarded the contemplative life as more important than the active life (Aquinas, trans. 1923). At the same time, he recognized that the necessities of the present life might require that we attend to the works of the active life. He concluded, therefore, that the relationship between the two should be thought of as an addition, not a subtraction. The works of the active life do not replace the contemplative life; rather, the works of the active life are in addition to the contemplative life. His position is consistent with Scripture. For instance, when the Grecian Jews complained because the Hebraic Jews were overlooking their widows in the daily distribution of food, the Apostles gath-

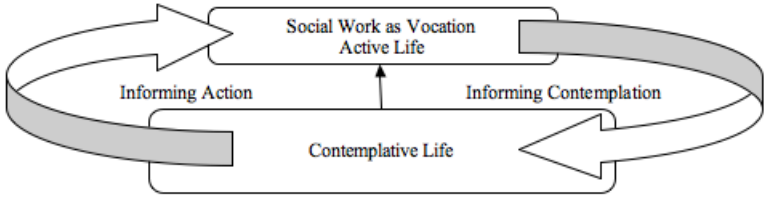
---

relationships with Christian and non-Christian students. Faculty relationships with non-Christian students can still develop from genuine concern about their lives and looking for opportunities to encourage deliberate reflection about their purpose.

ered the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and Wisdom" (Acts 6: 2-3).

Martin Luther extends the relevance of Aquinas' reflections to social workers by expanding the definition of vocation and calling beyond the works of the church (Luther, trans. 1960). Luther insisted that there is no difference between laypeople and priests; rather, God calls all of us to be a royal priesthood carrying out our providential purpose. Considered together with Aquinas, I view social work as the providential action informed by and informing the life of continual contemplation (See Figure 4.1). Moreover, I believe preparing students to develop and commit time to their contemplative life in relationship to social work practice (and perhaps other areas of their lives) is *the* essential attribute of Christian education in social work. For example, students at any university may learn about the end of the life cycle in a HBSE course, or learn to use their interview skills to conduct hospice interviews as field interns. The defining purpose of a Christian education in social work, however, is to prepare students for a life of continual reflection where their faith in Jesus Christ *transforms* what they learn in class. It is not enough to teach students the skills for conducting a hospice interview with someone dying from terminal cancer. Christian educators need to prepare students to come home after the interview ready to think about their purpose in life and their understanding of concepts such as justice and well-being used in social work, juxtaposed with their understanding of mercy and restoration, that then informs their future practice.[3]

Figure 4.1:
The continual contemplative and active life for social work as vocation.



3 See Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2009), for an accessible, succinct articulation of the importance of contemplation as a part of Christian higher education.

I can now address why I think faculty relationships with students are so important. Preparing students to develop and invest time thinking about how the contemplative life informs social work and how social work informs the contemplative life takes conscious attention in and out of the classroom. I examine establishing a Christ-centered classroom and incorporating faith and learning into the curriculum in chapters five and six. The purpose of both chapters is to create a classroom culture and an approach to the curriculum that encourages students to think as deeply as possible about everything they learn in relation to what they believe and how it fits with social work as their potential vocation. Nevertheless, as I described earlier, social work education is an action-focused endeavor. The interactions between faculty and students in the classroom and in the explicit curriculum can provide students, at best, with experiences and assignments that challenge them to consider how what they believe coincides with what they are learning. The limited amount of time in the classroom, however, makes it difficult to attend adequately to the deeper theological and philosophical questions inherent in answering "why" they practice social work. If I am genuinely interested in equipping students to develop the capacity and commitment to contemplation necessary to pursue social work as their vocation or divine purpose, then I believe I must invest time in discipleship relationships with them. I consider my relationships with students, therefore, as one of the primary tasks of my vocation as a Christian educator in social work.

What characteristics of faculty relationships with students foster discipleship?

As one of my primary tasks as a Christian educator, I was particularly interested in understanding and articulating what characteristics students considered vital for faculty-student discipleship relationships. I learned there are five common qualities students consider conducive to building discipleship relationships with faculty.[4] They want to know that they are the primary area

4 Space does not permit me to elaborate on the role of discipleship relationships with non-Christian students at Christian colleges and universities. Briefly, some of my closest colleagues adamantly disagree with the idea of faculty members developing relationships with students, Christian or non-Christian. My position is in line with Smith (2009) that the purpose of a Christian university is the same as the church—to form disciples of Jesus Christ. As he describes, the Christian university exists to, "extend and amplify the formation that begins and continues in Christian worship" (p. 221). See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic).

of interest in our professional lives, they want us to care for them and get to know them, they want us to be willing to share our lives with them, they want us to engage in profound dialogue with them, and they want us to pray for and about them. What follows is an elaboration of each quality along with how I try to cultivate them in my interactions with students.

I must confess; I find this part of my vocation the most challenging. In some instances, I learned from my mistakes. In other instances, I continue to struggle. As I examine the five qualities, I will also try to articulate some of my mistakes and struggles in hope of encouraging readers. I believe learning from mistakes and struggling with aspects of work are important parts of fulfilling a vocation. I agree with John Henry Newman's view on divine callings: The more I seek to fulfill my vocation, the more sensitive I become to my own limitations (1900). I find investing in relationships with students reminds me most of my flaws, my sins, my shortcomings. It is the one part of work where I find myself dependent most on God's grace. I take heart in Paul's words, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).

Students are the primary area of interest in our professional lives

One of the most challenging responses from students in our research was the relative position they expected to hold in our professional lives. At first, I wanted to discount or minimize this finding. I did not anticipate this level of responsibility, and I thought their expectations were unrealistic. Nevertheless, when almost every student we interviewed from different schools with different denominational affiliations shared this perspective, it was hard for me to interpret the message in any other way. I began this research with the intention of learning what students expected of Christian educators and they were telling me—"We want faculty who care enough about our vocational development that they put us first in their professional lives." The faculty members they perceived as putting them first were the ones with whom they were engaged in discipleship relationships.

I interpreted this finding as a challenge to the core of my will. It was a matter of deciding whose vision I was going to embrace. The vision I thought God wanted of me was to teach at a Christian college or university but also to become a prolific scholar. With each interview transcript I analyzed, I heard God speaking to my conscience saying, "Your vision is selfish. You want to call

yourself a Christian educator, but you want to define the terms. If you want to fulfill your divine purpose, your will has to die and you need to trust My will." Eventually, I discerned that this finding was a call to selfless obedience—a call that went against my will, a call I hear and with which I wrestle repeatedly.

I want to share a few strategies I use to communicate to students that they come first and that I genuinely want to engage with them as they pursue social work as their vocation. At the same time, the strategies are as much about my desire to surrender actively to God's will as they are about communicating to students.

Students' work comes first. The simplest way I practice putting students first is to put their work first. I decided early on that I would stop everything on which I am working when students take exams and submit papers and other assignments. When students take an exam, I grade the exam immediately after they finish before working on anything else. When students turn in a paper, I stop working on all of my scholarship and research projects to grade the papers. If possible, I try to provide feedback within 24–48 hours. Putting students' work first also helps remind me to keep my priorities in order—God's will, not mine.

Make myself available almost anytime. During the school year, I make myself available to students anytime before 10:00 in the evening. In addition to allowing them to contact me at my home phone, I try to push aside and rearrange my schedule if they need to meet with me at any time for any reason. Other than the mandatory faculty meetings I have to attend, I learned to leave my schedule open and flexible. I also learned to do the majority of my research and scholarship during the school year in my office. I want students to see me in the office, available for conversation as much as possible.

Learn to write and work with the door open. This strategy emerged over a few years of trial and error and the feedback of a colleague. Early in my career, I used to put a "do not disturb" sign on my door when I was working in the office. Other than my scheduled office hours, I kept my door closed and the sign up so I could work in solitude. I figured I would make myself available to students before and after class and during office hours. I thought if they really needed or wanted to see me, they could come by during the allotted times. Otherwise, they could reach me by phone or email.

I had very few students come to see me when I closed the door and posted the sign. Still, I did have a number of developing relationships with students from class and figured I was attentive to them while maintaining time

boundaries that would allow me to write. As George Huff and I analyzed transcripts, however, I decided to remove the sign and just work with the door closed. I also told students in all my classes that they were welcome to stop by the office anytime to talk for any reason. Though I took down the sign, nothing really changed. Very few students came by to talk. For a while, I rationalized that I let students know I am available; if they want to see me, they will. In the meantime, I will just keep working with the door closed.

Then, a few years after I began teaching at Baylor University, I asked Dr. Gaynor Yancey, the Associate Dean of the Baccalaureate program, to provide me with some constructive feedback to help me improve my relationships with students. It seemed to me that Dr. Yancey had an innate gift for developing discipleship relationships with students, and I really wanted to see what I could do to communicate my availability to them. She shared a few things that led me to initiate two drastic changes that have been quite successful. The first was that I decided keep my office door open almost all the time.

I have learned to work with the door open. The past few years I have disciplined myself to read, write, analyze quantitative and qualitative data, grade papers, review research proposals, and prepare for class with my door open. In fact, the only times I close the door is when I am on a conference call, having a personal conversation with my wife, or talking to students. Since keeping the door open, my interactions with students have multiplied exponentially. Students stop by to say hello, call out to me in the hallway as they are walking by, and sit down for in-depth conversations. In addition, more students ask me to write reference letters. When I write the letters, I can provide informative summaries because I know so much more about them. I can write about their performances in class as well as their goals and intangible qualities I learned about them outside of class.

I also believe I increased my productivity. I am teaching the same number of courses and have published at the same level as in the past. What I discovered is that when I keep the door open, I feel free to work and write all the time. When students or colleagues stop in, they provide the breaks from some of the monotony. What's more, I end up engaging in meaningful theological and philosophical discussions that encourage students to think deeply, fosters creativity in my work, and influences my relationship with God.

Make personalized initial contacts with students. The other drastic strategy I implemented was to make the initial contact with students to get to know

them better. Computer technology has really made this strategy simple. The week before each semester, I write a personal email to all the students in my courses as well as to students I am advising. I share a few things in the email. I share how I am looking forward to the semester, how my goal is to equip them to practice social work as their vocation, and that it is important for me to get to know them, their goals, and their interests. In addition, I ask students to stop by my office during the first few weeks of the semester so I can get to know them better. It is not a mandatory requirement, just a sincere invitation. Although I do not keep track, I venture to estimate that a significant percentage of the students come by at the beginning of each semester.

We care for and want to know our students

Students want faculty to care genuinely about them. Students translate faculty they perceive as caring genuinely for them as more effective at faith integration. In their view, faculty members are more than course instructors. They are Christian educators who, because of their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, want to know their students more intimately. Students want faculty who are interested in getting to know about all the areas of their lives. They also want faculty to care about their personal and professional goals.

If done authentically, communicating genuine care and concern is simply a matter of using the communication skills we teach students. At the outset, I try to ask students open-ended questions that invite them to share their stories. I want to learn about their background, where and how they were raised. I want to learn about their current situation, their hobbies, and their interests. I want to hear how they ended up as social work majors and what they envision for themselves when they graduate. I also want to know about their faith lives (Christian or any other religion) and if and how their beliefs influence their desire to become social workers.

Willingness to share our lives with students

Communicating sincere and genuine interest in students early in their education establishes the seeds for discipleship relationships. I discovered that just as I am interested in hearing students share their stories, many students were interested in learning more about my story as well. Other than books and stacks of papers, I fill my office with pictures of my wife and children as well as a few Jewish religious items. For instance, I keep my talis and yarmulke bag,

my tefilin, and traditional Passover items such as a Seder plate, matzah cover, afikomen bag, and Kiddush cup in the office. Undoubtedly, at some point in my initial conversations with students, many ask questions about the pictures or the Jewish items that lead to questions about my story. When they ask, I believe it is part of my vocation to share. When I do share, I give a concise account of my testimony, how I was raised, how I came to believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and how I discerned that Christian education in social work eventually became my vocation. I also invite them to let me help them discern and prepare for social work as their vocation.

It is also important to share our family and our homes with students. Part of mentoring students in discipleship relationships is helping them figure out how social work fits with other areas of their lives. Remember, part of equipping them to pursue social work as their vocation involves helping them learn to live in right relationship with God, themselves, and others. I believe part of equipping them is a willingness as a faculty member to live out Lydia's example in Acts, chapter sixteen. After hearing Paul share the Gospel, she invited him, Timothy, and Silas to her home, saying, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house" (Acts 16:15).

I think it is important for students to see our lives in and out of the classroom. They need to see how social work fits in our lives. They also need to see our lives as consistent with what we say and teach them in the classroom. My family and I have students over for holiday meals, cookouts at the end of semesters, and meet with them and their families for meals out in town. We also make an effort to get to know their families as well. Stacey, my wife, views our interactions with students as a ministry for the whole family. I believe when students get to know and see faculty as authentic people working out our faith and our vocation in the everyday details of life, they venture deeper with us in relationships that equip them for social work as vocation.

Willingness to engage in profound dialogue

The essence of faculty relationships with students is being available to venture with them in profound dialogue. The reason I spend so much time and energy developing rapport with students is to establish the trust necessary for authentic reflection. As I get to know students, I guide our dialogue to encourage them to reflect on the circumstances of their lives, their talents, their interests, and opportunities in light of their understanding of the Gospel of

Jesus Christ and the entire Christian biblical narrative. My intention is to help students develop the desire and capacity for contemplating how their faith in Jesus Christ frames every dimension of their lives and, especially, their training and practice in social work.

I want more for students than a career in social work. I want them to find and fulfill their divine purpose. I want students to think consciously about how their Christian beliefs influence their lives as social workers. In the same way, for students that come from different religious or spiritual backgrounds, I want them to think consciously about how their beliefs influence their lives as social workers. I have found that only by developing authentic relationships with students am I able to have the kind of profound dialogue needed to guide students to find their divine purpose. Let me share a couple of examples. In each example, I use pseudo-names to protect the confidentiality of the students.

I met Brandon Arthur in his second semester of school. During his education, Brandon and I had numerous discussions outside of class about a variety of topics. We met in my office, ate a few meals together, and I was able to meet his wife and son. Brandon was an ordained minister. He returned to school after being the pastor of the same church for almost 30 years. The last few years at the church became very stressful as he was trying to balance ministering to people in the congregation while dealing with the chronic health issues of a family member. His experiences eventually led him to realize that he no longer wanted to minister to people as a pastor; instead, he wanted to minister by walking alongside other people dealing with chronic health issues.

As my relationship with Brandon developed, his transformation from a pastor to a social worker became the main topic of discussion. It was not easy for him. On the surface, it looked as if everything was fine. He excelled in the classroom and did well on all of his assignments. He quickly developed friendships with classmates and was someone to whom other students turned for help when they struggled to understand concepts or complete their work. In my conversations with Brandon, however, he shared how difficult it was for him to let go of his former identity as a pastor. He shared countless stories, good and bad, about his experiences with the congregation. He described his struggles with the loss of responsibility and status, as well as a significant loss of income. Still, he loved the social work courses and felt as if he had made the right decision.

Our most profound dialogue centered on his own relationship with God. The last few years, between pastoring the church, taking care of the family

member, and transitioning to school, Brandon had lost the joy and need he had for his own relationship with God. He carried the weight and burden of all the changes on his own, while presenting a confident and caring disposition. He even noticed how easy it was for him to offer help to other students, get to know about their lives and their struggles, yet share little of himself. Eventually, in one of our discussions, I challenged him to reengage his relationship with Jesus by making time for Him each day. I told him it was the only way to know that God was calling him to be a social worker. I also questioned how he could minister and walk alongside people in the depths of their despair without being grounded in his own faith in the Gospel. I shared that the challenge for him was not to complete the coursework but to find his joy in having a relationship with God again. I encouraged him to open his Bible and go to Jesus in prayer, confessing to Him about letting the troubles of his life become so overburdened that he abandoned his own relationship with God. Over the next year and half, we met regularly to review and reflect upon what he was reading and to discern if social work was indeed his vocation. After graduation, Brandon accepted a position as director of a psychosocial rehabilitation program at a local mental health agency. He also became a member of a different church where he continues to mend his relationship with God.

I met Noah Andrews in my research methods course. A few weeks into the semester, Noah came by the office. As I try to do with most of the students in my classes, I spent time asking Noah about his story. I was interested in getting to know how he chose social work as a major. He shared how he grew up working for his parents in their family restaurant where he learned to juggle multiple responsibilities at the same time. He also developed a strong work ethic. It was one of his greatest assets. In addition to working for his parents, he worked as a group home counselor on the weekends. In his work at the group home, he met several social workers. Eventually, he thought it made sense to earn his degree in social work.

Noah was an active student in class. He asked good questions and made other insightful responses. Even though he was young, his real world experiences seemed to prepare him to get the most out of his education. As the semester went on, however, I noticed a few instances where Noah turned in his assignments late. When he did turn in his assignments, his work appeared careless and poorly executed. There were also a few occasions when he looked as if he was falling asleep in class (it could have been my teaching). Eventually,

I felt there were enough things going on in class to warrant more discussion.

A few times after class, I initiated casual conversation with Noah to find out how he was doing. I also shared my concerns about his performance in the course. Apparently, Noah was having difficulty balancing the demands of school with all the other things going on in his life. By this point in the semester, he was having trouble with all of his courses. The problem, however, was that he felt as if he could not change his schedule and did not know if he really wanted to change it.

Finally, after our third conversation after class, we had our most profound dialogue. I asked Noah if he had ever given any thought to what might be his divine purpose. He loved working at the restaurant and knew he could work there full time and eventually run it. He was considering social work as a back-up plan in case he did not want to work in the restaurant his whole life. In all his planning and working, however, he never stopped to think about what God wanted for his life. I encouraged him to begin spending time in God's word each day and begin contemplating what he thought God wanted for his life. We spent the next few weeks talking after class about what he was reading and thinking. He eventually decided to withdraw from school and work full time at the restaurant.

Grace Gomez was the first person in her family to go to college. As migrant farm workers, her parents always wanted her to do well in school and eventually go to college. Grace was one of the hardest working students I have ever had the privilege of teaching. She kept up on all her reading, gave maximum effort on all her assignments, and took all of the class exercises very seriously. She never approached her work as just going through the motions. As Grace's advisor, I also had the privilege of developing a trusting relationship with her and talking about her goals for the future. She was unsure of what concentration area to pursue in her advanced year of school. She knew she wanted to work with Hispanic/Latinos, but she was not sure in what capacity. Eventually she decided to pursue a dual concentration, focusing on clinical and community practice.

During Grace's final semester, she applied for a position as the cultural life coordinator for a university that had a large percentage of Hispanic/Latino students. Although Grace found the job description intriguing, the position was not exactly a succinct fit with her social work degree. It was also not something she had envisioned doing. Still, she liked the idea of having the

opportunity to enrich the cultural lives of students at a university. I wrote a strong reference letter for her and even made a phone call to express my confidence in her doing well in the position. Grace had a good interview with the Vice Provost for Student Life who offered her the position several weeks before she graduated. She had a week to decide. It was during that week that we had our most profound dialogue.

Grace came to my office to share that the vice provost offered her the position. She shared how dumbfounded she felt about receiving the offer. She never thought she would get the job. Now that she had the offer, she was not sure if she could do it. She questioned her preparation, her ability, and shared her fear of failing. She also became emotional. Her voice shook slightly and she spoke with a timid tone. As she talked, it seemed to me that the magnitude of her years of hard work, finishing school, and having the opportunity to work in an influential position was too much to bear. We spent the next two hours normalizing her feelings, reviewing all of the people in Scripture God called to do things beyond all they could imagine, the need for her to cling to her dependence on Him, and the peace she had in Jesus to respond in obedience to risks involved in her taking the position. Grace spent a few more days in prayer and then accepted the position. She started a few days after graduation.

Willingness to pray for and about students

I believe prayer plays a prominent role in the vocation of Christian education. Though we did not ask students about prayer directly, nearly every student mentioned prayer as a key characteristic conducive to developing discipleship relationships with faculty. In the next chapter I explore the role of prayer in cultivating a Christ-centered classroom setting. Here I refer to faculty spending time in their own prayer lives praying for and about students.

Becoming a Christian educator in social work enriched my prayer life. Growing up Jewish, praying seemed too ritualistic. There were set prayers we recited for various purposes, but I do not remember praying as a part of a loving relationship with God. When I first accepted Christ, most of my prayers focused on figuring out how to tell my family and on figuring out what believing in the Messiah meant for how to live my life. Students taught me, however, that as a Christian educator my prayer life needed to be more about the people God called me to shepherd and less about myself. Now I take time to pray for all of my students, past and present. I pray that they find their divine purpose. I

pray that they learn to remain dependent on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and seek to read His word daily. I pray about their individual circumstances. Most importantly, I pray in union with Scripture. In other words, when I pray for students, it is consistent with and informed by God's word and not apart from it. For example, when I pray for students dealing with family issues outside of class, I do not simply pray for things to get better. Rather, my prayers are consistent with Jesus' response to the disabled man at the pool, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8). I pray for other friends to offer support as they continue pursuing their purpose in social work in the midst of, and even because of, their family issues.

As a faculty member, I am responsible for maintaining appropriate boundaries and perceptions in relationships with students. I am well aware of the inherent risks involved in making myself so available to them. In spite of the risks, however, I believe it is important for me as a Christian educator to venture with students in equipping them to pursue social work as their vocation. I accept the risks and do what I can to minimize them. For instance, I talk with a trusted colleague regularly about my relationships, I never travel alone with a student, and I never let relationships with students have any impact on their academic performance. Most of all, as much as I pray for students, I spend a significant amount of time praying for God to help me navigate relationships with students so that I can fulfill my purpose as a Christian educator.

Action Steps

- Get to know every student—Make time at the beginning of each semester to get to know every student outside of class. Invite students to come by your office the first few weeks of school. Tell them how you think it is important for you to get to know them better as their professor.
- Experience the blessing of praying for students—Think about the students in your courses. Make praying for students a consistent part of preparing for class. I recommend praying for each student by name on a weekly basis. Pay attention to how your consistent prayers for students influence your relationships with them and with God.
- Put students first this semester—Find tangible ways to communicate to students that they are your primary interest.

CHAPTER 5
CREATING A CHRIST-CENTERED CLASSROOM

I believe Christ-centered social work education occurs when faculty commit to growing in their relationships with God and with students, and commit to continuous learning as teachers, researchers, and scholars. The foundation for becoming a Christian educator is an authentic desire to seek an active relationship with God marked by acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, an unwavering commitment to spending time in prayer and Scripture, and a passionate longing to worship God by the way we live in every area of our lives. Preparing students for social work as their Christian vocation involves equipping and challenging them to integrate continually the knowledge, values, and skills needed to practice with an active commitment to Jesus Christ as their foundation. Students need faculty who are experts in their field, who continually seek to improve their teaching, and who are genuinely interested in discipleship relationships with them.

In chapters three and four, I focused on faculty relationships with God and with students. Now I turn my attention to integrating faith and social work in the classroom. In this chapter I focus on classroom management and culture. I discuss specific approaches for integrating faith with the curriculum in chapter six. Before moving on, however, I want to reemphasize how interrelated faculty relationships with God are with being able to integrate faith in the classroom. While having an active and mature relationship with God does not suffice for becoming a Christian educator in social work, it does appear to be a necessary basis for integration in the minds of students. I have learned that students are discriminating consumers. They notice when attempts at integration are half-hearted, done out of duty, forced, or insincere. Everything I cover in the next two chapters comes with the following caveat—the most important element to

integrating faith and learning in the social work classroom is the underlying attitude and motivation of the faculty.

Cultivating Good Soil

In the Parable of the Sowers, Jesus tells a powerful story that I find especially relevant for Christian educators. Let me share it:

> A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear. (Mt 13:3-9)

As a young believer, I used to read this parable focusing solely on the farmer throwing the seeds. I used to think to myself, "the farmer controls throwing the seed, just as I control sharing the gospel. God controls what happens after I share the gospel, just as the farmer does not control the type of soil." The more I read this passage and the more I continue in my relationship with God, however, I realize the parable is as much about preparing the soil to receive the message as it is about sharing the message. Anyone who enjoys landscaping and gardening can attest to how important it is to prepare the soil. In the same way, social science researchers can attest to how important it is to plan for a study. Although it is impossible to control for all the extraneous variables in a study, a well-planned methodology can increase the probability of a study producing useful findings.

The same is true for integrating faith and social work in the classroom. Developing competence in managing a classroom of students and cultivating a Christ-centered culture creates an environment conducive to faith integration. As a neophyte instructor at Northwest Nazarene University, however, I used to approach teaching too much as the farmer sowing seeds. I spent numerous hours working on course syllabi, thinking about what I wanted to cover each week, developing lectures and assignments, and planning how to integrate Scripture and other theological material throughout the course. Doing all that planning made me feel confident, prepared, and ready to deliver material. What I did not do was

consider the classroom setting with any reverence. I did not think about student interactions, seating arrangements, or the courses students were taking before and after my class. I did not think of each student's life circumstances or the group dynamics. Most importantly, I did not approach the classroom as the soil needing conscious attention to create an atmosphere conducive to integration.

My reverence for the classroom setting changed as I analyzed student interview transcripts. Almost every student shared that for integration to take place faculty must consciously create what they called a "safe classroom atmosphere." In addition to having expertise in an area of study and being able to provide a lecture, students expect faculty to know how to handle a classroom. They expect Christian educators to create an environment where they can explore how their faith integrates with what they are learning. Now, after years of teaching experience, I learned to treat each course in every semester as a small congregation of students entrusted to me by God to prepare them to worship Him in how they interact as students and work to become social workers. My responsibility as a teacher of small congregations of students is to approach each class session with divine reverence and to hold myself to a higher standard as a Christian educator. This is a higher standard where I am expected by students, administration, and God to cultivate a classroom culture that equips students to worship Christ in how they learn social work knowledge, values, and skills integrated in their relationship with Him and not apart from it. My objective in every class is to create an environment (to cultivate good soil) where students feel safe enough to consider how their relationship with Jesus Christ influences, and is influenced by, all they are learning.

Practices that Create a Christ-Centered Classroom

I use the remainder of the chapter to describe some of the practices I believe cultivate a Christ-centered culture in the classroom. Most of the practices are explicit and relevant solely for teaching at a Christian college or university. A few practices maybe appropriate for teaching social work in any context.[5]

---

5 I do not have the research or experience to offer adequate suggestions for adapting the practices in state-supported or secular universities. In the future, I hope that a Christian educator in social work at a state-supported or secular university will conduct research in that context and offer further guidance. For an illuminating discussion from another field, see Chris Anderson, "*Teaching as Believing: Faith in the University* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004).

Approach Each Class with Reverent Fear

I meet with the pastor of my church for breakfast or lunch every few months. The last time we met, I asked him if he ever feels nervous leading worship or giving a sermon at church. I told him that he always seems so comfortable. The pastor shared that he does not necessarily feel nervous; rather, he feels the weight of responsibility involved in leading people to know, love, and worship God. In addition to spending numerous hours preparing his sermons, he and the elders pray for all of the families they anticipate will come to church, all the new people, and anyone who has not accepted Jesus Christ into their hearts. He also prays for God to help him surrender his pride, his personal ambitions, and his vanity so that the congregation focuses completely on praising and glorifying Christ as our Lord.

I am convinced that God expects Christian educators to approach a classroom of students with the same reverent fear. Preparing students to practice social work and contemplate how what they learn is rooted in their relationship with Christ is kingdom work with the potential for lasting results. I learned from student interviews that I had better take the responsibility of cultivating the classroom environment seriously. James writes plainly, "Not many of [us] should be teachers, my brothers [and sisters], because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). I approach every class session with a sober self-assessment of whether I am ready to be authentic, ready to engage students as individuals and as a group, and ready to surrender all my insecurities so that I can be vulnerable enough to lead students in exploring how what I am teaching them integrates with their beliefs about Jesus Christ. It is not enough for me to teach students to understand and use course content in practice. To call myself a Christian educator, I have to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages students to explore how the course content intersects with their religious beliefs (Christian or any other).

Communicate Intentions at the Beginning of the Course

The beginning of every semester is the time for establishing expectations for courses. In addition to using initial ice-breakers, making general introductions, and reviewing syllabi, I share my hopes and intentions for students taking my courses. I share explicitly that Scripture is my primary lens for synthesizing and evaluating theories, my understanding of people, topics, practice, and research methods relevant for social work. I share further that the reason I teach

social work at a Christian university is that I believe my purpose is to guide students in going beyond learning the course content to examining how their religious beliefs influence and are influenced by what they learn and to help them fulfill their divine purpose. I challenge them to spend time daily reading God's word and praying for God to give them eyes to see and ears to hear as they seek to understand how their faith intersects with their schoolwork.

As I share, I deliberately use a gentle tone with enough inflection in my voice to communicate my joy for teaching social work at a Christian university and my enthusiasm for helping them fulfill their divine purpose as social workers. I know some students may not come to class thinking of social work in terms of a divine purpose; however, by communicating how serious I am about social work as their vocation, I believe I encourage them to begin contemplating the fundamental questions. Is social work their vocation? If it is, in what capacity may God be calling them to serve and practice? How invested are they in the amount of time, work, energy, and patience needed to prepare for more than a job, an occupation, or even a career, but their vocation?

Establish and Model Class Norms

Establishing and modeling rules for safe and meaningful dialogue is also part of communicating intentions. Just as social workers in group practice use the first group to establish norms and promote cohesion, I believe it is important for Christian educators to use the first few class sessions to establish the class norms that will help students feel welcome and safe, especially students with different religious beliefs. Specifically, I negotiate with students to speak in first person, to use the same empathetic skills with peers that they will with client populations, and to respect that students have diverse life stories, diverse religious beliefs, and different levels of comfort sharing. I also make a verbal contract with students to allow me to interrupt and remind them to speak in first person as they participate in class, especially when they share about themselves or respond to dialogue from fellow classmates.

Tell Your Story

Authenticity, appropriate disclosure, and vulnerability are important norms for a Christ-centered classroom. Students need to feel safe enough to ask tough questions, risk being genuine, and to disagree with one another and with the instructor. Sharing my testimony is one crucial way I model speaking in first person

and establish authenticity, appropriate self-disclosure, and vulnerability as class norms. I believe that if I am unwilling to risk being authentic and vulnerable to create a Christ-centered class culture, I cannot expect students to do it either.

When I give my testimony in class, I keep it short and relevant to social work students. I begin sharing a few background details such as where I was born, the makeup of my family, the synagogue I attended during my childhood, and my Hebrew name. I then fast forward to talking about meeting my wife, a Christian woman raised in a family where Christ was the center of their household. I share how she and her family shared Christ's love with me. I share how they were a witness to me in how they interacted with each other, how loving and patient they were, and how quick they were to put others before themselves. They never preached to me or explicitly asked me to go to church. I tell students that having grown up in a divorced home where my parents fought all the time, I was curious as to what it was that made this family so close.

Next, I fast forward to the events that led up to my baptism. I share about the death of my grandfather and mother that led to me wanting answers to deep existential questions. What happens when I die? Is there really a heaven? What is the purpose of living? What is my purpose? Questions that led me to talk with my Rabbi, my wife's pastor, and begin to pray (although not knowing who I was praying to at the time) and read Scripture every day. I share that my prayer everyday was, "God, whoever you are, teach me and show me what you want me to learn as I read Your word." I then share how God convicted me that He is Yahweh and Jesus Christ is the Messiah, His son whom He sent to save us from sin so that all who believe will spend eternity with Him.

I focus the last part of my testimony on how my relationship with God influenced my decision to become a social worker and eventually a professor that teaches social work at a Christian university. I share briefly about experiences I had as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and how those experiences led to my decision to pursue doctoral education. I also share that before I applied for admission to the PhD program at University of South Carolina, I thought of pursuing a Masters of Divinity. I also share how I discerned what direction to pursue by turning to God through Scripture where one particular verse emanated in my mind and heart, a verse that every time I read or say confirms my vocation as a social worker. Then I recite the verse, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James

1:27). I end my testimony by telling students that I hope to play a small part in helping them grow and confirm their purpose.

Arrive a Few Minutes Before and Stay a Few Minutes After

Although it is not always possible, I make a habit of coming to class a few minutes early and staying a few minutes after. I use the time before class to engage students in conversation about their day, their weekends, and how they are doing in class. I also use the time to provide feedback on their participation in the class. When a student shares something insightful or asks an intriguing question, I try to remember and tell them before the next class. If a student shared something personal in a prayer request, I make a point to ask them how things are specifically around what we prayed for in class the week before.

I have also asked students to adjust their participation so that others feel safe. A student in one of my courses was overly enthusiastic, often laughed excessively loud in class when I or another student shared something humorous, and at times disrupted the dialogue in class to the point where I felt as if it prevented other students from engaging in discussions. She was a good student and I did not think she intended to disrupt the class. I decided to arrive early one week hoping to talk with her. When I saw her, I found a space for us to talk alone, shared how much I appreciated her enthusiasm, but asked her to tone down how she interacts in class so others feel more comfortable sharing. I asked her specifically to maintain her bearing in the classroom and to become aware of how often she talks in class and how it influences her classmates. Our conversation led to her adjusting her participation. More importantly, over the next few years, we developed a rapport with one another and had several other conversations, some I consider profound dialogues.

Sometimes my classes are in buildings that house a coffee bar or food court. When my classes are in those buildings, I try intentionally to arrive even earlier and sit in the food area. At times, I buy a cup of coffee and look for opportunities to sit and talk with students from class. I use the time to ask students about their week, learn more about their family backgrounds, and go over anything from class about which they might be unclear. Over the course of a semester, the brief conversations help me create a critical mass of rapport that helps nurture an atmosphere of safety and belonging in the classroom.

Staying a few minutes after class also provides opportunities to build rapport with students. In fact, I believe it is a critical time for faculty interested in

helping students integrate their faith with the course content. The time after class is when students often ask questions and look for clarification and reassurance about assignments. I believe the way faculty handle the time after class relates directly to students sensing the authenticity of interest in helping them integrate faith and learning. Being responsive and patient with students after class communicates genuine care and concern, a key component identified by students for effective integration. Before interviewing students for this research, I used to rush out of my classes to walk hurriedly across campus to check my email, continue analyzing data from a research project, or keep working on an article. I rationalized that I did not want to reinforce doorknob communication with students. My patented response to most questions was, "send me an email with your question and I will get back to you later tonight or tomorrow." As I analyzed the transcripts and discovered how important relationships with students are for effective integration, I realized that being available after class was imperative. Now, I make an effort to answer every question and communicate my availability outside of class before leaving the room.

An unexpected benefit of staying a few minutes after class is the opportunity to walk with some of the students back to the social work offices. When students ask questions that require a longer response or more in-depth conversation, I invite them to walk with me back to my office. The five or ten minutes it takes to walk back to the office affords another occasion to communicate caring and interest that I believe carries over to the culture of classroom.

The conversations I have walking with students also allows me to engage them in deeper, contemplative discussions. Sometimes discussions focus on class content or broader topics pertinent to social work. At other times, discussions are more personal. In either case, the discussions are always relevant to the broader purpose of preparing students to treat social work as their vocation. For instance, in a practice course with communities and organizations, a female student stayed after class to ask me a question about applying what we learned in class. The topic of discussion that day was strategies social workers can use to engage the larger community to become involved in addressing the underlying social problems that lead people to need the services offered by agencies in the first place. The student returned to school to earn her graduate degree after working as a volunteer coordinator at a large residential facility. She continued working in that position as she attended school. I invited her to walk with me to the office. As we walked, I learned more about her position

and responsibilities. The executive director at the agency wanted her to put together a community education proposal and implement a plan for increasing volunteer participation to work with staff to set up and speak at public forums. When we reached the office, she sat down to talk further. After another 20 minutes, I offered a few possible options; then we strategized about initial steps she could put into action.

Another student waited to speak to me after a research methods class. As we were walking out the door, she stopped to tell me that she was thinking about dropping out of school for the year and possibly transferring to another university. I invited her to walk with me to the office. She continued explaining that her father was terminally ill and her mother, who took care of him, was coping with her own health issues. She also shared, however, that she was the first person in her family to go to college. Next, she mentioned how proud her parents were that she attended such a good university, a university she always dreamed of attending. After hearing more of the specific details, I asked her if her parents asked her to come home. She said no. I then asked if she talked with her parents about coming home. Again, she said no.

When we arrived at my office, we sat down and talked further. Eventually she shared feeling torn about what to do to help her mom and dad. I advised her to go home for the weekend to have a frank conversation with her parents. I wanted her to ask them if they wanted her home. I also advised her to spend time praying and seeking God's will regarding her decision. It was early enough in the semester that she could wait a few weeks before withdrawing from classes without receiving a grade. Then, right there in the office, I asked her permission to pray for her. After we prayed, I asked her to talk to me next week after class to keep me posted about her decision. I told her in the meantime, I would pray each day about her family. For the next week, I prayed earnestly about her and her family. The student went home and talked with her parents. A few minutes before class the next week, she sat down at the table where I was eating lunch to share that she decided to stay in school. She said her father vehemently told her that under no circumstance should she drop out of school and move home. Together as a family, she and her parents decided she would stay in school and come home on the weekends. At the beginning of class, when I asked for prayer requests, she disclosed what was going on at home and asked the other students to pray for her.

Pray

Authentic prayer is another way of creating a Christ-centered culture. Authentic prayer is not just a technique; it is prayer with and about students that occurs as an overflow of the active prayer life of the faculty member. I have learned that three types of prayer are vital—pre-class prayer, planned prayer, and unplanned prayer. I think faculty should contemplate if they are committed to all three types before deciding to pray in the classroom. Students were consistent in suggesting that it is better for faculty to choose other ways of cultivating the atmosphere then to pray disingenuously. Although nearly impossible to decipher how they know, in terms of a research study, students say they can tell when prayer is authentic or insincere.

Prayer represents only one way of integrating faith in the classroom. I know of colleagues who are passionate about integrating faith and learning who choose not to pray in class for valid reasons. For instance, some faculty members may not be comfortable praying in front of people. Other faculty members may be uncomfortable because they are concerned with the imbalance of power between faculty and students. They are concerned about having students with different religious beliefs who may feel awkward hearing their professor pray in class. The point is that Christian educators have diverse views about the use of prayer in the classroom. What is important for readers is to engage in conscious reflection about their own prayer life and discern if and how prayer may play a role in the classroom. Considering the Christian Vocational Framework, authentic prayer in class sets up expectations for students about all the areas of the framework—faculty relationship with God, relationships with students, and the competence of the faculty to integrate faith with curriculum content. I advise readers to consider prayer in class seriously. Do not pray out of habit or haphazardly. Now, let me share why I choose to pray in class and describe the three types of prayer in more depth.

I spend a significant amount of time reflecting on why I pray in class. The combination of reading God's word daily, searching my own thoughts and feelings, and talking with colleagues about this issue is something I do on an ongoing basis. At this point in my faith life, I believe strongly in the use of authentic prayer in the classroom. Authentic prayer is one way of expressing my sincere love for God and for students. In Romans, 12:9-11, Paul states the following:

> Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.
> Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one an-

> other above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

I pray at the beginning of class because I love God and my students. When we pray together, I encourage them to be joyful learners, patient with themselves and with one another, and remember their purpose—to care for God's people in need.

I pray to remind my students and myself that God is the foundation of all knowledge. Knowing and believing in Jesus Christ is always relevant when it comes to learning and practicing social work as vocation (or anything else as vocation). If Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived, says that fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, it is good enough for me. In fact, Solomon is so certain of it that he writes it at the beginning of his reign in Proverbs and again towards the end of his reign in Ecclesiastes. As a Christian educator, I believe my responsibility is to help students learn with humility, acknowledging God as the root of all knowledge and wisdom. When I pray, I often ask God to help students and myself stay rooted in Christ as we discern how what we learn coincides with our Faith in Him. I post a verse on the door of my office that I often recite in class. The verse states, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8). I pray with students as a way of encouraging them to evaluate everything they learn with Christ as their primary epistemological lens.

Finally, I pray in class because I believe in the omnipotence and omnipresence of the one and only living God who loves us so much that He sent His only son to die on the cross as a substitute for our sins. I believe God is active in the world. He listens and answers our prayers. As I teach students theories of human behavior, practice skills for individuals, groups, and families, or research methods to evaluate their practice, I want them to develop the intellect and skills to help people. I also want their faith lives to mature with their understanding of how what they learn intersects with their beliefs. I continue to pray at the beginning of every class, however, because I remain in awe of the wonders of the Lord and I want students to remain in awe as well. Even Paul, who received the finest training under Rabbi Gamaliel and whose knowledge of Torah was unsurpassed, often prayed to God out of pure amazement—the best

example being his doxology that he seemed to break into spontaneously as he was trying to explain God's plan in Romans 11:33-36. He prayed:

> Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

I pray in class every week because I continue to receive the kingdom of God with the unbridled wonderment of a child's heart. I believe Christian educators need to model and encourage students to acknowledge the limits of reason and to pray to God out of sheer amazement. Acknowledging the unsearchable wonders of God is always part of the three types of authentic prayer that I believe are vital with students.

Pre-class Prayer. Sometimes the things we learn from mentors are things not to copy. I remember as a doctoral student seeing my advisor scrambling to get ready for class. He would be too busy working on a research project, editing an article, or grading student papers. I have discovered in my own experience, however, that if I scramble to get ready, I pay too much attention to what I have to do in class and not enough attention to tuning into the lives of my students. I eventually changed how I prepared for class by reconsidering my priorities and elevating the role of prayer as being an important part of class preparation. It is something I learned directly from scripture.

All throughout Jesus' life and ministry, He found time to pray in solitude. All of the miracles He performed, all of the parables He shared, all of the preaching to the crowds, and even before He sacrificed Himself for us, Jesus buffeted all He did with prayer on His own. Jesus demonstrates that everything He did in public grew out of His own relationship with the Father and the active prayer life He had with His Father. In the same way, I have learned that stepping in front of a room full of students I want to prepare for social work as their vocation requires taking the time to withdraw from everyone and everything and use the time to pray.

Therefore, authentic prayer in class actually begins before class. About an hour before every session, I stop working on other projects; I stop answering emails, and begin focusing on the course. I use part of the time to go over the outline I prepare each week. Then I use the rest of the time to pray. The specific

content of my prayers before class may change each week. Nevertheless, I try to pray for every student by name, for God to be active in all the areas of their lives, and for Him to guard my words and actions in class so that He can use everything I do and say for His glory.

Planned Prayer

I set aside the first 5–10 minutes of every class for prayer. During the first class session, before praying, I explain to students the reasons I choose to pray. I also acknowledge that some of students may have different religious beliefs and offer them a sincere invitation to use the time as a moment of silence.[6]

Prayer at the beginning of class sets the stage for deeper reflection and communicates openness to spiritual questions and concerns. I also use the time to ask students for prayer requests and to share requests I have. Sharing prayer requests serves two functions. First, it gives me an opportunity to learn about students' lives outside the classroom and gives me a chance for appropriate self-disclosure—both important components to developing relationships with students. Second, I believe it helps me to model the unique relationships I have with students, just as students will have to interact in unique relationships with clients. On one hand, as a Christian educator, I am in reciprocal relationships with students as brothers and sisters in Christ, or as people made in God's image. On the other hand, in the current context, I am in a position of some authority, and it is my responsibility to maintain the appropriate boundaries conducive to helping them and holding them accountable for learning.

Accountability is a common theme in my prayers with students each week. In addition to praying about requests, I use Paul's instruction to the church of Colossae to frame the content of what I say. Let me share Paul's words here:

> Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Colossians 4:2-6).

---

6 Thanks to Jerry Hull, Professor Emeritus, Northwest Nazarene University, for helping me appreciate the importance of prayer in the classroom, while offering a sincere invitation to non-Christians to use the time as a moment of silence.

I often pray to help students remain watchful or attentive to what we are covering in class. I ask God to help students to use their time wisely, to make studying their priority at this time in their lives so they are prepared to practice effectively, proclaiming the Gospel of Christ with their actions and with their words. I give thanks for having a classroom full of students who want to become social workers. I give thanks for living in a country and working for a university where we are free to worship God without fear of persecution. I also pray that God would help me to be a faithful servant as a support and guide to every student working diligently to become a professional helper.

I alter the content of my prayer when I give a quiz or an exam. I pray for God to help students relax and recall the information. I pray for God to help students keep the whole process of evaluation and test taking in perspective. I ask God to help students remember that they are already perfect in His eyes because of their belief in Jesus Christ. I remind them in my prayer that their self-worth and value as people made in God's image has nothing to do with their grade on an exam, that their performance on a quiz or an exam is only an indication of their knowledge of the material. A number of students every semester make a point to share how much they appreciate my prayer and reminder about their self-worth before exams—even the students that do not perform well on the exams. I believe praying for students puts them at ease, whether or not they prepared adequately for an exam.

Unplanned Prayer

During the school year, some students will experience stressful or heartbreaking circumstances that overwhelm their ability to function in the classroom. They may look visibly upset and unable to maintain their bearing. When someone becomes noticeably distressed, it changes the atmosphere in the classroom. Students cannot focus on the course material and are looking for instructors to guide them in how to handle the situation.

I believe the way instructors handle these situations makes a lasting impression on students perceiving them as effective at integrating faith and learning in the classroom. These moments are so significant because they become tested experiences for faculty and for students happening right in the classroom. As I shared in chapter three, tested experiences involve experiencing things that do not go well, do not go according to plan, and challenge the dynamic nature of our relationship and faith in Jesus Christ. In short, tested

experiences challenge the steadfastness and authenticity of our faith. When an unplanned event happens in my class, it is an opportunity for me to confirm or fall short of student expectations of having a Christian educator who has a mature and active relationship with Christ. All of the time and energy I spend teaching students to hold fast to their relationship with Christ, to integrate their faith with everything they are learning, and to pursue social work as their vocation magnifies and condenses into these unplanned events because they challenge whether I authentically live what I teach.

I have to admit, when a student looks visibly upset in class, I feel awkward and uncertain. I sense the atmosphere in the room becoming anxious and uncomfortable. If I could, I would prefer to ignore what is happening. In a way, I can feel the animalistic desire of my flesh wanting to run away. I believe it is in those uncomfortable moments when an active relationship with God, rooted in spending time in Scripture and maintaining an active and authentic prayer life, makes it possible to be moved by the Holy Spirit and obedient through faith in Jesus Christ. I believe it is because of my faith in Christ that I am able to gather myself, ask the student to share what is wrong, and suspend everything else we are doing in class and pray. Let me share a couple of examples.

Halfway through a class and toward the end of a 10-minute break, Brenda Lieberman, a sophomore in my statistics course, walked through the door in the back of the room with tears coming down her face. Holding her cell phone in one hand and a tissue in the other, Brenda went over to her computer station, wiping her eyes as she sat down to get ready for the rest of class. By now, other students were looking over in her direction. Ian Edwards, Sarah Grace, and Rachel Dominguez, a few of her friends, left their seats and went over to console her.

I stood at the front of the room by the computer station ready to begin. As I looked around at the students, it was obvious that they were engrossed in their concern for Brenda. We had a lot of information left to cover that day that required their undivided attention. We had a mid-term in two weeks. Students also had to complete a graded lab assignment that got progressively harder after each session. They had to focus on learning the new material if they wanted to complete the lab assignment. I decided that I had to do something.

I walked over to Brenda, and in a gentle voice, asked her what was wrong. Brenda shared that her mother had been battling breast cancer for the last year and half. During the break, her father called to tell her the results of a recent

biopsy that indicated things had gotten worse. She was scared. As she spoke, a few other students looked as if they were holding back tears. At that point, I asked if she was okay with the class taking a few moments to pray for her and her family. After she agreed, a few other students joined Ian, Sarah, and Rachel in laying their hands on her. I then asked the students to bow their heads and pray as the Spirit led them. I closed the prayer after a few moments of silence. Students then returned to their seats and prepared to continue working on the material. I gave Brenda the option of leaving the class early and stopping by my office later in the week to go over the material. She decided, however, to stay and finish the session. From that point in the semester, she updated the class weekly and I continued praying for her along with other student requests.

Twenty minutes into the beginning of a practice course for social work with groups, communities, and organizations, a graduate assistant opened the classroom door just enough to peek her head inside the room. After I motioned her to come in, she walked around to the front and handed me a small piece of paper with the following note, "Elizabeth Watson was rear ended on University Drive. She is okay but at the ER being examined as a precaution."

Only 12 students were enrolled in the course. Most of them knew each other well enough to know if someone was going to be late or absent. In fact, Lucy Arnold, a classmate, spoke to Elizabeth on her cell phone earlier that morning. The students and I were also wondering aloud where Elizabeth was. She had not missed class before and we were already concerned. After I read the note, I decided to share it with the class. We then stopped our discussion, bowed our heads, and prayed. Elizabeth was back in class the following week.

Devotionals

I begin every class with a devotional. Along with spending a few minutes in prayer, devotionals create a Christ-centered culture in the classroom. I use the term devotional to mean the authentic and intentional sharing of Scripture verses or inspirational readings with the intent of benefiting students through reflection and dialogue. The devotional time, however, is not a time for teaching *to* students, but a time for learning *with* students as we reflect on the readings together. In fact, I often learn as much from student comments and insights as they learn from me.

I believe devotionals are authentic when they emerge from the personal reading and reflection of faculty. As I spend time reading Scripture each day,

I deliberately juxtapose God's word with everything I do at the office—the research projects I am working on, the papers I am grading, the committees I serve on, the syllabi I develop, and the classes I teach. The devotional passages I read to students come directly from the present interactions between the textbook, journal articles, or other materials for class and the Scripture verses or other inspirational materials I am currently reading. Although I carefully plan and assign specific Scripture passages as part of the weekly reading and assignments in many of my courses, I only select devotional readings from what I read that morning or one or two days before class.

Based on my experience facilitating devotionals at the beginning of every class for the last seven years, discussions with students generally go in two directions. Sometimes devotionals lead to covering specific material as we talk about weekly course readings or content learned in class, in context of the devotion. On other occasions, devotionals draw attention to areas of growth and accountability as they develop into well-rounded individuals and vocational social workers. Regardless of the direction, I often guide students to contemplate one simple and straightforward question. I ask them to consider how the devotional reading influences or shapes what they are learning in class and what they are learning about social work as their vocation. I also invite students with different religious beliefs to participate in the discussion as a way of exploring why they are pursuing a degree in social work. I challenge and encourage them to spend time in Scripture and prayer each day, seeking God's will in how they live out their response to that question. Now, let me share examples of devotionals that led to each kind of discussion.

Devotional Title: Discerning how we spend our time

Studying Second Thessalonians the morning before my statistics for social work course, I read the following passage:

> In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right

> to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."
>
> We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.
>
> If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother (2ndThessalonians 2:6-15).

As I read the passage, I thought about the assigned reading students had that week and the time they needed to study the material. The reading covered levels of measurement and other basic but crucial concepts. I planned to cover the material in class. Still, students needed to put in their own work to apply the concepts as we moved onto complex material later in the semester. I know statistics is usually not their favorite course. Nevertheless, they needed to develop at least a minimal level of competence so they could be critical consumers of practice literature and have the ability to evaluate their own practice. I decided to begin class with a devotional that focused on how they spent their time.

After beginning class with prayer, I read the Scripture verses, paused for a moment, then asked my question, "What, if any, implications does this passage have for this course and/or how you go about practicing social work as your vocation?" Then, following a few moments of silence, students began commenting about negotiating all of the interesting and tempting ways of using their time at school. The general sentiment in the room was that it was okay to have fun at school; however, they needed to allow enough time for their work. I shared how I used to let my work pile up and then retreat into temporary idleness as a coping mechanism. I would stay up late watching television, watching the same sports highlights over-and-over again, trying to avoid thinking about how much work I had left. I also shared how I learned to stay on top of my work by doing a little each day. More importantly, I shared that as I learned to do a little each day, I found that I spent less time engaged in meaningless activities.

A comment from a student in the back of the room then focused the discussion on interacting with people that tempt us away from priorities. Several students commented about being involved in relationships with boyfriends

and girlfriends consumed by idleness—relationships marked by one person not engaged in anything productive while pressuring the other person with feelings of guilt for not spending enough time with them. Another student shared how awful her last relationship was with a boyfriend who never left the house, played video games all the time, and just seemed to have no ambition, except to be involved in this student's life. She told the class that it was not until she broke up with him that she realized how much time she wasted in that relationship.

I ended the discussion by encouraging students to use their time wisely. I advised students to seek God's help, praying for discernment in how to spend their time and to know when to say no to friends asking them to participate in idleness. I reminded them how important it was to put adequate time into their studying, to treat the next few years as their preparation for God's divine purpose for them. We then transitioned seamlessly to the rest of the class agenda.

Devotional Title: The attributes of good leaders

During the third week of teaching a social work leadership and management course, I assigned students readings from two different books on leadership. The chapters addressed leadership styles and the qualities of effective leaders, the topics of discussion that week. The class met from 8:30–11:45 every Saturday morning. That semester, I was involved in an early morning Bible study that met every Friday. We were studying First and Second Timothy, so for six weeks I spent every morning engulfed in reading and thinking about passages from those two books of Scripture. The week leading up to class, I woke at 5:45 each morning to read and scrutinize over chapter three in First Timothy. On Thursday, I decided to include the first seven verses of the chapter on my class agenda as the devotional.

Saturday morning, after we prayed, I read the passage. Allow me to share it here, as I believe it is relevant for Christian educators.

> Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone

> does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap (First Timothy 3: 1-7).

What followed was an extended discussion that overlapped into the content from the assigned readings. In fact, we did not talk about the scripture verses until later in the discussion. Instead, we talked about the key attributes of leaders listed in the chapters. After reviewing the attributes, students offered additional observations from their own experiences working with people in leadership. Some students talked about characteristics they appreciated in their field instructors. Other students shared examples from their work supervisors. One student, a former athlete, shared how important it was for her to respect someone in leadership. She continued sharing that although she did not particularly like her high school basketball coach, she respected her because of how tough she was and how well prepared she felt before each game.

I eventually asked students to think about the passage from the devotional. I noted that the chapters in both books did not mention anything about the personal lives of potential leaders. I wondered aloud if they thought personal choices and how people interacted with their wives, husbands, sisters, brothers, and children, had anything to do with the qualities of good leadership. Students expressed divided opinions. A third of the students shared that the personal and professional lives of leaders were equally important. More students, however, expressed concern about placing too much emphasis on the private lives of people so long as they performed well in their work. A few students added how they thought the personal lives of leaders was relevant, but did not think it was realistic to ask or make decisions about hiring people based on their personal information. Their comments led to a brief review of the discriminatory practices prohibited by the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Laws.

About halfway through the class, we took a ten-minute break. When we returned, I created a role-play scenario for students to discuss in their pre-assigned groups. I asked them the following:

Consider the attributes of leadership discussed in the chapters. Each group is a board of directors charged with hiring the next executive director for their

agency. The groups must decide if the group is ready to hire someone to set the vision for the future of the agency, to supervise a large staff, and to manage a multi-million dollar budget, if the person has terrible credit, is unable to manage her personal finances, and is described by family members as careless and narcissistic.

We spent the rest of the class session discussing material from the chapters in the context of that role-play scenario. At the end of class, I challenged students to consider what, if any, implications their personal lives have on their ability to lead others and to practice social work as their vocations.

Action Steps

- Cultivate small congregations of learning—Think about the courses you will be teaching next semester. As you prepare, approach each course as a small congregation gathered to worship God in the form of learning. Use some of the practices described in the chapter or develop your own to create a "safe classroom atmosphere."
- Arrive early and stay late—Begin creating Christ-centered classrooms by making yourself available to students a few minutes before and after class.
- Thinking about prayer and devotion in class—Faculty differ on their use of prayer and/or devotions in the classroom. Although I think both practices are important, I recognize there is a lot more to integrating faith and learning than prayer and devotion. Take time to ask colleagues about their use of prayer and devotion. Develop and articulate your own position on the use of prayer and devotion in the classroom. Perhaps bring it up as a question at your next staff or faculty meeting.

CHAPTER 6
INTEGRATING FAITH AND LEARNING THROUGHOUT THE CURRICULUM

I have a U-shaped desk in my office. Three stacks of papers representing different research projects are on the left. The printer, the phone, and all my reference books are on the right. I keep my computer in the center situated between a paper stand on each side. I use the paper stand on the right to prop up journal articles, books, and other materials I use to prepare for class or to incorporate in my writing. I use the paper stand on the left to hold up one article, Alvin Plantinga's (1994) "On Christian Scholarship."

Plantinga's (1994) article has greeted me every morning for the last seven years. I leave it in front of me so I can look at it throughout the day. I use the article as a source of inspiration and accountability. In the article, Plantinga describes two distinct functions of Christian scholarship—to provide a credible Christian critique of modern intellectual thought and culture and to work at the various areas of science and scholarship in a distinctive way consistent with a Christian point of view. Every time I glance over to it, I ask myself two questions. I ask myself, "Am I providing a credible Christian voice in social work?" Then I ask, "Am I going about my work in a distinctive way, such that it is evident that everything I do is consistent with my love for Jesus Christ?" I apply both questions to my research, my teaching, and my service.

When I prepare for teaching social work, being distinctive takes on a specific meaning and application. Just as Paul had a thorn in his flesh that God would not take away, I wonder constantly what is distinctive about me as a Christian educator in a private Christian university. What do students see in me that is different from what they see taking the same courses at another university? The courses students need for a BSW or MSW are quite similar from one school to the next. The tuition at Baylor and NNU is higher than state-supported universities

and schools. Student salaries upon graduation are likely to be the same regardless of where they earn their degrees. If students want smaller campuses with smaller class sizes, they have numerous state-supported and other nonsectarian alternatives. At the root of my thorn, I question what I, or my colleagues, have to offer students to justify the existence of our programs? While I believe preparing students for social work as their vocation is important, I recognize, and honestly fear, how easy it is to hide behind our intentions as Christian educators and in reality provide students with a comparable social work education at best, or even worse, a diluted education, at a higher cost.

Most students choosing to study at Christian colleges and universities are looking for a distinctive learning experience. They come to school with at least three expectations of faculty teaching them social work in the classroom. Students expect faculty to have expertise in areas of the curriculum. They expect faculty to have an active and mature knowledge of Scripture, developed from an authentic faith in Jesus as the Messiah. They expect faculty to integrate their knowledge of Scripture and their authentic faith across the entire social work curriculum. In this chapter, I explore these three expectations. My intention is to convey the essence of each expectation, at least as I understand them, and to articulate how I "live into" those expectations. Then I share a few salient approaches students perceive as useful for integrating faith and learning into the curriculum, along with examples of how I incorporate the approaches into my teaching.

Expertise in areas of the curriculum

As a neophyte faculty member, I had a misguided view of all that was involved in becoming a Christian educator. I thought choosing to teach at a Christian university meant focusing more on teaching and very little on research and scholarship. I was wrong. Sure enough, there were, and still are, experienced faculty members in social work and other disciplines that shared my erroneous view. I learned several common excuses used to avoid developing and maintaining expertise in areas of the curriculum through research and practice. One excuse available was, "it is unreasonable for me to publish or conduct research when I have such a large teaching and advising load." Another excuse available was, "I don't have the institutional support needed because I teach at such a small university." Another common excuse was, "research and scholarship did not account for enough of my performance evaluation to warrant spending that much time and energy writing for publication."

The three excuses, along with countless others, may seem reasonable at the surface. The excuses, after all, are at least partly true. I also believe it is easy for young and experienced faculty at Christian colleges and universities to surround themselves with enough colleagues to help maintain what I call "the misguided illusion" that research and scholarship are not as important as they are at research intensive universities. Our students, however, are not fooled.

Students expect their instructors to have areas of expertise in social work—it is a key attribute of faculty they perceive as being able to effectively integrate faith and learning. Let me state this differently. Students expect faculty members who stand before them in the classroom to be experts in what they are teaching. Students want faculty who develop relationships with them and share similar beliefs, **but** faculty beliefs and relationship skills are not substitutes for becoming respected scholars in social work. The students we interviewed want both—faculty who provide a credible Christian voice through research and scholarship and faculty who use their expertise as part of creating a distinctive learning environment in the classroom. Although students may not articulate the importance of research and scholarship for Christian educators as eloquently as Plantinga, they see it as important and directly relevant to the quality of their education.

Many years ago, when I turned in the final copy of my dissertation, I had to fill out a survey that asked me to identify my primary function in higher education. The question included several categories including teaching, research, service, and advising. At the time, I paused for a moment to reflect on the decision I made to accept a position at a small Christian university. I wondered if accepting that position meant having to rearrange how I viewed my responsibilities as an educator. Feeling a mix of emotions from a sense of peace to dismay, I picked up a pencil and colored in the circle next to teaching. If I had the opportunity to answer the question again, I would color in all the circles.

Students need faculty providing a credible Christian presence in social work by producing high quality research and scholarship *and* bringing their expertise into the classroom. For Christian educators in social work committed to preparing students for their vocations and committed to integrating faith and learning in the classroom, there is no false hierarchy of functions. I believe our vocation is a never-ending quest to learn and grow in our field as we learn and grow in our relationships with God and students. This is precisely what we are equipping our students to do as Christians in social work.

Active and Mature Knowledge of Scripture

In chapter three, I addressed how important it was for Christian educators to have an active and authentic relationship with God. I also discussed how essential it was for faculty to make a lifetime commitment to developing and maintaining a thorough knowledge of Scripture as part of having an active and authentic relationship with the Lord. Here I focus on maintaining a fresh and mature knowledge of Scripture as it relates to teaching in the classroom.

Faculty members are most effective integrating faith and learning in the classroom when students perceive their efforts as natural and authentic. For students, natural integration occurs when faculty desire to integrate their own faith with what they are teaching, studying, and learning. Natural integration never feels forced or arbitrary to students; instead, references to faith always seem genuine and communicated with a sense of hope and wonderment. Studying and contemplating God's word because of a sincere and authentic desire to worship and spend time with Him is the only way I know to develop the rich and mature knowledge of Scripture that translates into natural integration in the classroom. For me, making time each day for quiet reading and deliberate reflection is part of my vocation. Although making time each day for Scripture is essential for any authentic relationship with Jesus Christ, I also consider that time as part of my responsibility as a Christian educator. There is no substitute for integrating faith and learning that comes from a faculty member's authentic relationship with God, and students can tell when it's not authentic. Let me share two examples of what I consider IFL "practices" that are only possible when students experience natural integration.

When preparing assignments or curriculum modules in advance, communicating a genuine sense of wonder is critical to engaging students' hearts and minds in learning the material. Whenever I assign Scripture readings along with other course material or give an assignment that involves synthesizing information from social work texts with Scripture or other theological material, I ask students to approach the assignment in two ways. I ask students to approach Scripture as God's living inerrant word and not just any other assigned reading. I also ask students to pray that God would give them eyes to see and ears to hear so they will approach the assignment with amenable hearts willing to be instructed, transformed, inspired, encouraged, and challenged. I believe that the only way I can stand in front of students and encourage them in such an unswerving and fervent manner is that I approach Scripture in the same way.

Another powerful example of natural integration that resonates with students is when instructors tie in a passage of Scripture they read recently as relevant to class discussion. Students we interviewed identified these unprompted faith integration experiences as the most salient indicator of faculty who effectively integrate faith and learning in the classroom. Students shared how they remember these unplanned, but relevant, connections to Scripture, even after the course is completed. During the interviews, we were taken aback by how vividly students described these examples. Students cited exact Scripture verses and talked about what they learned from faculty one or two years removed as if they were sitting in the class again. By the time we finished our research, I was convinced that unplanned authentic connections drawn by faculty are the faith integration experiences students remember most in their field placements and later on in their professional practice. I am still convinced. I also believe that what makes these spontaneous, yet relevant, faith integration experiences so significant for students is that they occur as faculty are continuing to integrate faith and the curriculum for themselves.

Integrate Faith across the Curriculum

Most students attending Christian colleges or universities expect faculty to intentionally integrate faith throughout the social work program. For Christian educators, developing expertise in areas of the curriculum and devoting time for studying God's word each day has to merge together to influence our teaching. After years of reading and thinking about Plantinga's article (even as I look at it as I write this sentence), the distinctiveness of Christian scholarship and, in this case, the Christian educator in social work, is the intentionality and disciplined praxis of constantly weaving together what we study and what we believe with what we teach. Let me share three approaches that resonated most with the students we interviewed. The approaches are not content-specific to the material of specific courses or assignments; rather they are practices that faculty can use across the curriculum. Readers interested in curriculum modules for integrating faith and learning with specific courses can access modules developed by faculty on a variety of topics at NACSW's website (http://www.nacsw.org).

Personal faith integration experiences. Without question, one of the most poignant integration experiences for students occurs when faculty incorporate their own practice and learning experiences into course discussions. In general,

faculty narratives can help students apply abstract concepts in practice. The purpose of sharing personal faith integration experiences (PFIEs) is a little different. The PFIEs faculty share with students are less about the application or mastery of concepts and more about the continuing commitment to weave together social work knowledge, values, and skills with their beliefs into a unified whole. The stories students described as salient integration experiences occurred when faculty gave transparent personal accounts of when and how their beliefs guided their work, caused them to struggle with concepts, and were a source of encouragement when confronted with circuitous practice experiences.

Incorporating PFIEs as an effective teaching strategy involves a lot of preparation, a commitment to continuous transformation, and a willingness to be vulnerable and not have all the answers in front of students. Students need to experience the narratives faculty share as examples of natural integration that are spontaneous and authentic as well as relevant to what they are learning. Stated differently, PFIEs cannot come across as scripted to students. Nevertheless, the content and the timing of PFIEs have to "fit" seamlessly with the material faculty plan to teach. Creating this seamless, spontaneous/relevant balance requires a unique approach and attitude about preparation.

Planning course syllabi, organizing assignments, and preparing content for class sessions are just part of the teaching preparation needed for using PFIEs. How faculty approach the material they are teaching is just as important. In essence, teaching must become "Faithful Teaching" in the same spirit as Wolterstorff (2004) describes faithful scholarship. Remember from chapter one that faithful scholarship is defined as involving a responsible and critical balance of empirical data, theory, and beliefs. I believe that faithful teaching involves an authentic desire for ongoing learning informed by fresh materials, time spent daily in God's Word, and a belief in continuous transformation—transformation that occurs when teaching materials, God's word, and faculty/student interactions weave together. In addition, faithful teaching involves genuine humility that allows faculty members to share PFIEs that reveal that we don't always have the answers; rather, we continue to be transformed by what we continue to learn. Let me share two examples.

Teaching an HBSE course, I scheduled a curriculum unit toward the end of the semester to cover material on abuse and neglect. The class met on Thursday afternoons for three hours each week. I organized the class to spend most of the semester (8 sessions) covering the stages of the life course and then used

the remaining sessions (6 sessions) to focus on special topics. I followed the curriculum unit on abuse and neglect with a module on gender, sexism, and sexual orientation, then finished the semester with a module on the influence of race and ethnicity on the life course. The curriculum unit on abuse and neglect occurred over two class sessions. The first session focused on assessment, prevention, and intervention approaches with victims. The next session focused on assessment, prevention, and intervention with offenders.

During the second session of the curriculum unit, as we were discussing the key areas of assessment with potential sexual offenders, a male student with a dismayed expression on his face asked, "How can anyone do this?" His question sparked comments from other students expressing their own apprehensions. After hearing comments from a few more students, I tried to summarize their concerns. It seemed that a number of students in class, when attempting to visualize conducting assessments with potential sexual offenders, questioned their ability to be genuine and empathetic. At that point, I decided to share a personal faith integration experience.

I began by validating the essence of the concerns students shared. I shared how I, too, struggled, and continue to struggle sometimes, with specific application of core social work principles and practices with people that do things that I find repugnant or detestable. Then I took a few minutes to share an experience that shaped how I approach social work practice with people that cause such harm.

I disclosed that while working at a public community mental health center, one of my primary responsibilities was to conduct assessments with teenage boys suspected of sexual assault with young children. At the time I was torn and confused as to how to make sense of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of the young men, recognizing the central importance of a trusting relationship in the helping process, and remaining committed to their well-being, all while having a personal struggle knowing what they might have done. I also shared my concern that as I developed trusting relationships with these young men, and they felt comfortable talking, they could eventually share something that required me to call the detective at the police department assigned to deal with such cases.

Confronted with the need to conduct these assessments on a weekly basis, I shared with students how I turned to social work literature, to Scripture, and to prayer for guidance. A journal article and a particular passage of Scripture

influenced how I approached the assessments. Kuhlmann (1998) articulated the concept of human intermediacy that framed how I thought about the young men. Human intermediacy refers to the Christian worldview of humanity located between God as creator and the rest of creation. The concept conveys the idea that God created humanity in His own image and likeness to be His representative to rule over the rest of creation.

Kuhlmann goes on to posit two implications for social work practice when humanity is understood from the perspective of a Christian worldview. I shared with students that I found the implications especially relevant to doing the assessments. First, human intermediacy anchors the basis of inherent dignity and worth of all people, even those young men, as having special importance, being of particular worth in the eyes of God. In Kuhlmann's words, "only humanity received the life-giving breath of God, only humanity was created in the image of God" (p. 63). Second, as unique creations of God that exist between Him and the rest of creation, humanity is dependent ultimately on God for existence and well-being. All people are under the authority of and accountable to God. Again as Kuhlmann states, "Social workers are sinners who are entrusted with knowledge and skill to help clients who are also sinners" (p.66). As I explained to students, reading the article helped me view these young men and myself as more alike than different.

I also shared how a passage of Scripture helped me overcome my initial apprehensions. As I was doing the first few assessments, I kept thinking about the verses at end of the fourth chapter of 1John, scripture I read just a few months before I began working at the mental health center. I shared verses 16-21 with the students:

> God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Then I told students that doing the assessments with the young men became an opportunity for me to experience the reach of God's love, the basis for all of our inherent dignity and worth, and the mercy God extends to all humanity because of His love. From that experience at the mental health center, as well as other experiences, I told students that for me, being a Christian in social work meant recognizing my own dependency on God to remove my sins, my own dependency on His mercy, and to approach people with the same love he extends to me, even potential clients deemed by the rest of society as unlovable. I ended the PFIE as I usually do, by qualifying the following: 1) that students have to come to their own understanding of how they will approach the difficult circumstances they will experience as social workers; 2) that my perspective and approach continues to evolve as God continues to transform me with His word; 3) that I encourage them to contemplate what it means for them to be Christians in social work; and 4) that I am always available to talk with and support them as they seek to weave together their faith with their practice.

The third week of a practice course with communities and organizations, students arrived ready to ask questions about their assigned reading. Students read a chapter that covered one particular decision-making process used to engage in organizational change. As part of their reading assignment, students were required to develop two thoughtful questions from each chapter for class discussion. The weekly discussion questions accounted for 20% of their grade. Students emailed a copy of the questions to me the day before and they brought a copy to class. The questions served to engage students in the content, to provide step-off points for material I needed to cover, and to encourage students to keep up on their reading each week.

The night before class, I reviewed the questions and noticed that most of the 12 students were skeptical about the differences they could make intervening at the macro level of practice. The decision-making process presented in the chapter guided students to assess the reality of the macro environment, to assess the costs to individual clients, and to assess the personal and professional risks involved as part of deciding how to proceed. Sure enough, when I asked for a volunteer to the read the first question for class discussion, a part-time student, who worked as an habilitation specialist at a local agency, raised her hand in the back of the class and asked, "What is the point of risking my job for something that is likely not to change?" Looking around the classroom, knowing that most of the students asked a similar question, I decided to share a PFIE.

I began by paraphrasing and reframing the question around two main points. It seemed students were concerned with taking on personal and professional risks when they were unsure of how to define effectiveness, especially if they determined the possibility of success was low. I told them it all depends on what they value and how they envision effectiveness. Students need to decide what they value and what they consider "risk" when advocating for organizational and community change. In the same way, students need to decide what, or who, determines effectiveness. Next, I shared the following personal experience as an example.

When I met my wife for lunch one day, she brought a copy of the local newspaper and asked me to read the article on the front page. The article focused on illegal immigration and the tactics of a local political leader that defended his collaboration with a person affiliated with a known white supremacist group that shared his views on immigration. I found the article disheartening and felt as if I needed to respond. Then I told the students how I arrived at a decision to write two editorials that created significant personal and professional turmoil and may or may not have been effective—depending on how they envisioned effectiveness.

Before responding, I spent the next three days reflecting on the article. I told students about the conversation I had with my wife to assess risk, the consultation I sought from the department chair to gain his support, and the amount of time I spent praying and reading God's word.

As a husband and a father of three children, I shared how assessment of risk involves discussions with my wife about the core values that guide the decisions we make about our family and the decisions we make about our professional lives. I explained that for me, personal and professional decisions coincided as my wife and I consult one another to consider how our professional decisions impact our personal lives and how our personal decisions impact our professional lives. We discussed what could happen if I submitted the editorials, and, although we were a bit apprehensive, together we decided that it was important to respond.

The next day I talked with my department chair to let him know that I was planning to write a few opinion-editorial articles. He had read the article in the local newspaper as well and understood why I found it so demoralizing. Though he recognized that writing to the paper might cause a stir on campus, he offered his support and gave me his blessing to move forward.

Meanwhile, I thought long and hard about effectiveness. I told students how I prayed continuously asking God to help me discern what I was trying to accomplish by writing the editorials. I recognized that my comments would likely have little, if any, influence on changing how our community addressed illegal immigration. Still, I thought it was important to respond to the dehumanizing words in the article. In the midst of praying, I shared how I kept thinking about the book of Jeremiah, where I had been reading in Scripture. I thought about his life, his ministry, and his "effectiveness."

By every earthly standard, Jeremiah was a complete failure. No one ever listened to him. Wherever he went, wherever God sent him to speak, he was scorned. At points in his life, he even despised his own role as God's prophet. Jeremiah bemoaned to God in chapter 20:

> O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived;
> you overpowered me and prevailed.
> I am ridiculed all day long;
> everyone mocks me.
> Whenever I speak, I cry out
> proclaiming violence and destruction.
> So the word of the LORD has brought me
> insult and reproach all day long.
> But if I say, "I will not mention him
> or speak any more in his name,"
> his word is in my heart like a fire,
> a fire shut up in my bones.
> I am weary of holding it in;
> indeed, I cannot. (7-9)

Nevertheless, Jeremiah *was* effective. Though he felt miserable, though he had endured endless ridicule, he *was* effective from God's perspective because he remained actively faithful and obedient. He surrendered his personal comfort and sacrificed his status among men and women every time he proclaimed God's word. Thinking about Jeremiah, I tempered my expectations to calling attention to the dehumanizing language used in the article and reminding readers to value the inherent dignity and worth of all people. I described to students how, staring at the computer, I took a sip of water, read through my comments one last time, and then clicked the mouse button to submit the editorials.

The editorials sparked several responses. The newspaper printed short response articles. A few agreed with my comments, but two of them reacted harshly, recommending my termination from the university. I then met with the President of the University who let me know that he, too, received phone calls asking for my termination. Nevertheless, he assured me that my position was not in jeopardy. Even more alarming was the anonymous hate letter sent to my home that threatened my life and told me to take my family and leave the state of Idaho and never return. The newspaper printed my picture and city of residence with the articles. Someone must have looked up my address in the phone book to write me at home. I told the class I felt scared and nervous for the safety of my family.

Amidst the negative reactions, an unexpected conversation with a cashier at the drive-thru of a local restaurant convinced me the editorials were important. She must have seen my picture in the paper. As I drove my car to the window to pick up my lunch, the cashier, a young Hispanic woman, looked at me and said I looked familiar. She paused momentarily then asked, "Didn't you write the articles on immigration?" I smiled, shook my head, and answered, "Yes, I did." She then proceeded to thank me for writing the articles. She told me that she and her friends talked the night before about how the articles gave them hope that at least some people in the community really cared about them. After thanking the cashier for her kind feedback, I told the class how I drove back to the office, pulled into a parking spot, and prayed silently for a few minutes before getting out of the car. I ended the PFIE by asking students to decide if they thought the editorials were an effective intervention. I asked them to decide if they thought it was worth the personal and professional risk. Before moving onto the rest of the discussion questions, we transitioned to talking about discerning what they value, how they will determine risk, and how they will define effectiveness.

Guided contemplation with scripture infusion. Completing assignments that incorporate Scripture resonates with students. Just as students remembered the authentic PFIEs faculty shared, the students we interviewed described detailed accounts of assignments where they had opportunities to bring passages of Scripture explicitly into the learning process. Moreover, though students were from different schools, representing different denominations, they described a common theme that made the assignments so influential. The way faculty members framed the assignments seemed to relate directly to the salience of the integration experiences for the students.

Meaningful scripture infusion hinges on how faculty members frame the assignments. Even in Christian colleges and universities, students often bring diverse life experiences to the classroom, including different religious beliefs. Some students may even consider themselves agnostic or atheistic. I encourage faculty members to be flexible by meeting with students outside of class to offer options for completing the assignments, including synthesizing readings from their religious traditions.

When infusing scripture into course assignments, the parameters need to provide students opportunities to contemplate how class material, scripture, and their life experiences inform how they practice as social workers. Students also need the chance to re-think or refine what they know. Assignments that are directive but open-ended, while reflective and cyclical, encourage students to explore what they know as they learn the specific material needed for a course. Components of assignments that encourage guided contemplation with scripture include:

- Assigned course reading(s)
- Either assigned scripture passages or instructions to incorporate scripture to complete the assignment
- An assigned paper that includes:
  - Instructions asking students to describe specific concepts from course readings
  - Open-ended reflection questions that encourage contemplation of assigned reading and scripture
  - Broad evaluation questions that encourage students to think about the implications for their vocational development and practice as social workers
- Interactive class discussions that allow students to learn from each other and the instructor
- Opportunity to cycle back through the assignment by reading the material again and incorporating new learning from the class discussion into a revised version of the paper

Let me share two examples.

When I teach research methods for social work, I give students an assignment called, "Getting to Know Your Epistemological Lens." The assignment involves reading portions of Scripture, a chapter from a textbook, and writing

a brief paper. Students read a chapter from the textbook that introduces them to four epistemological paradigms that undergird various research methods. They also use a concordance and read portions of scripture on words such as, "Knowing, Knowledge, and Wisdom." Then they write a brief paper addressing the following instructions:

1) Provide a summary of each of the four epistemological paradigms.
2) Drawing from the chapter and portions of scripture, describe your epistemological paradigm. In other words, describe how you come to know things.
3) Describe how your paradigm can influence your practice as a social worker.

Next, students bring their papers to class where I have them engage in two layers of interactive discussion. I divide students into small groups where they share their papers, ask questions, and provide feedback. Then I bring students back together to facilitate a discussion for the whole class. The purpose of the discussion is to highlight areas of consensus, list unanswered questions, and ask students to share what they learned from the assignment. At the end, I inform students that I decided to extend the due date for the paper to the following week. I frame the extension as an opportunity for further guided contemplation. I encourage them to use the extra time to take what they learned from others, read the chapter and the portions of Scripture again, and revise the paper. Some students make changes, some turn in the same paper. Either way, I provide students the chance to cycle back and incorporate new learning from the class discussion.

In social work practice with communities and organizations, I include a course module focused on exploring their leadership skills. The module includes reading a chapter from their textbook, portions of Scripture, and then writing a brief paper. Students read a chapter from their textbook that describes different leadership traits. They also read the book of Acts. As they read, I encourage them to pay special attention to Peter and Paul as leaders. Students then write a brief paper that includes the following instructions:

1) Provide a summary of the leadership traits mentioned in the text.
2) Describe the leadership characteristics of Peter and Paul.
3) Synthesizing the readings, describe important things you need to remember as an effective leader.

When the papers are due, students bring them to class where we engage in discussion. The purpose of the discussion is to help students mull over their own understanding of effective leadership informed by a synthesis from the text and from Scripture. At the end the discussion, students again have the option to take what they learned from others, reread the chapter and the book of Acts, and revise the paper.

Truth in the Context of Appreciating Complexity and Diversity. I find the last integration approach the hardest to articulate and describe in writing. I am not a theologian so will refrain from trying to define what I mean by truth. I also recognize such a word has loaded philosophical and theological connotations. Here I use the word simply to describe one side of a dialectical balance that exists when trying to integrate faith and social work. Let me explain.

A majority of students that study social work at Christian colleges and universities come to class assuming they share similar core religious beliefs with faculty. They also assume that faculty members are steadfast in upholding and living by their core religious beliefs because those beliefs represent "truth" and are non-negotiable. At the same time, however, students want faculty who will teach them to practice as culturally competent social workers. They want faculty to prepare them for the multifaceted challenges and the multifaceted theoretical and practice approaches necessary for effective social work. They also want faculty to help them work competently with people from diverse races, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds. Taken together, teaching students to appreciate and wrestle with the dialectic balance, meaning the truth about certain core beliefs and the truth about the importance of appreciating the diversities and complexities of social work practice, is a salient integration approach that resonates with students. A few quotes from students are a good way to conclude the chapter and illustrate the powerful experiences of appreciating the dialectical balance of integrating faith and social work practice.

> It's a sense you get in the classroom that your professors are coming from a religious background and they are always there to talk with you about your religion and your clients' religion. My professors have really helped me accept people as they are.

> I know my professors share certain beliefs, so you get a foundation, but the foundation isn't forced on you. The professors are willing to talk about what you believe and where you're coming

from and to discuss with you the different worldviews and not just the Christian worldview.

I really appreciated that my professors are approaching life with the same perspective that I have, so when we have values discussions and ethical issues are raised, they can help me look at it because they know where I'm coming from and what my worldview is so it's a safe environment to mull over issues and really just think about what we believe. The professors do such a good job of bringing up questions that really challeng my thoughts and beliefs.

Action Steps

- Begin preparing to use PFIEs—it is difficult to start using PFIE's in class. You can't plan to use PFIE's directly. Instead, consider changing how you prepare for courses next semester. Use the preparation as an opportunity for personal transformation and learning, not simply a time to think about teaching. Re-read the texts you plan to use, look for new materials, and think about assignments. Make sure you also spend time in prayer and reading Scripture each day.
- Consider adding a guided contemplation assignment into one of your courses next semester. Use the steps listed in the chapter to create the assignment.

CHAPTER 7
FINAL THOUGHTS

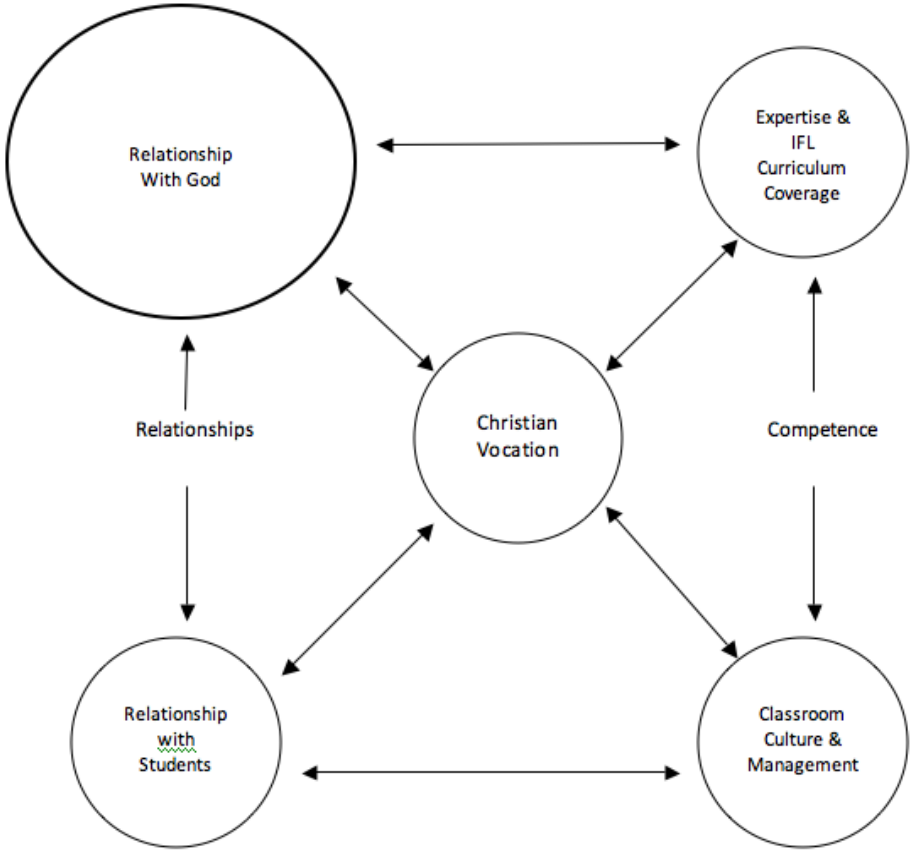
Having set forth a focused look at each of the four categories of the Christian Vocation Framework (CVF), I want to end by reemphasizing the main premise of the book: *Becoming a Christian educator in social work is a high calling where every facet of life is relevant*. Our relationship with God lived out with family, with colleagues, with students, and with our work as teachers and scholars all matter. Seven overlapping commitments convey the essence of our vocation further. In becoming Christian educators in social work, our vocation involves making a genuine commitment to:

1) Developing and maintaining a thorough knowledge of Scripture;
2) Living an active and consistent Christian life;
3) Spending time and energy getting to know students;
4) Supporting students while expecting academic excellence and challenging beliefs;
5) Having expertise and experience in the curriculum areas of social work education;
6) Providing specific integration of faith and learning (IFL) experiences with curriculum material; and
7) Developing a classroom environment where students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.

The CVF describes how the seven commitments fit together. It also serves as a guide for conscious reflection about the purpose of our work and the way we spend our time as Christian educators. What I hope has become obvious by now is that the framework points back toward the realization that our vocation is all-inclusive. Instead of four parts that contribute separately to becoming a Christian educator, the CVF conveys the all-encompassing character or quality

of the vocation. Take a look at the framework again in figure 2. Stare at it for a few minutes.

Figure 2: The Christian Vocation Framework



Notice that the circle "Christian vocation" is in the center because it connects and is connected to all four categories. Also notice that the circles at the corners reinforce the center circle. Finally, notice that each of the four circles at the corners is connected to every other circle.

An All or Nothing Calling to Vocational Purpose

Becoming a Christian educator in social work is an all or nothing calling. The call requires a desire and willingness to surrender ourselves completely to our relationship with God, our relationship with students, the culture we

develop in our classrooms, and the way we pursue our research, scholarship, and teaching. As a Messianic Jewish man searching to understand what was involved in Christian education, I learned from research and experience that I have to commit to growing in each area of the CVF simultaneously. There is no place to compartmentalize any area of my life as it pertains to living out my vocation. I believe the authentic quality students described as so important to integrating faith and learning in the classroom is really their way of saying that they want faculty who are fulfilling their vocational purpose as Christian educators in social work. The CVF offers a guide for helping faculty fulfill their vocational purpose; however, I believe fulfilling one's vocational purpose and benefiting from the framework is an all or nothing venture. In fact, I believe it is a venture that is impossible to fulfill apart from a genuine and active relationship with Christ and the accountability and support of other Christians in social work pursuing their vocational purpose. The North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) is important because it provides ongoing opportunities for support and accountability.

The Importance of NACSW

On the verge of beginning my first teaching position at Northwest Nazarene University, I organized and co-facilitated a workshop on integrating Christian faith and academic life. Looking back, I recognize how unprepared and unqualified I was to facilitate such a workshop. I was also naïve in that I held such an effortless and minuscule vision of Christian education in social work. Thank goodness my neophyte vision was smashed to pieces that day by a BSW student volunteering her time for the conference. My hope is that this book communicates what I have learned from the authenticity of her words and the voices of all the students that were willing to share their experiences along the way.

What happened to me at the 2003 convention is an example of why NACSW is important. Reflecting on what transpired, I have come to appreciate the specific group dynamics that occurred in the workshop that afternoon. A group of fifteen faculty members and one BSW student were sitting in a circle. We were from diverse religious, geographic, and family backgrounds. We also had different practice interests and were at different stages of careers. Nevertheless, our differences in background and professional stature were mitigated by our shared belief in Jesus Christ and a desire to integrate our faith with our practice. I believe our shared belief in Jesus Christ created an intimate level of

group cohesion that allowed for such authentic and vulnerable interactions—interactions that led to deep friendships, to years of research, and to this book. Now as a more experienced member of NACSW, even serving on the Board of Directors, I recognize that the dynamics of the workshop were a microcosm of the organizational culture that makes NACSW so important for all Christians in social work, not just educators.

NACSW consists of Christians in social work from diverse backgrounds unified by an overarching purpose. Members come from more than 60 denominations and practice in different settings with different populations. At the same time, members share a desire to integrate Christian faith and professional social work practice. The combination of a shared purpose within the context of great diversity creates an organizational culture that cultivates a balance of support and accountability.

When members of NACSW come together corporately or in smaller groups, the dynamics nearly always reinforce the culture of support and accountability. Through email exchanges, conference calls, chapter meetings, workshops, conventions, and even board of director's meetings, members affirm the unity found in our faith in Christ. Within our shared faith, out of an authentic desire to support one another's efforts to integrate faith and practice, we are held accountable by the multitude of specific perspectives and experiences that members bring to the association. Participating as an active member of NACSW helps me feel encouraged whenever I am overwhelmed by the weight of my vocational purpose. I feel encouraged because I know I belong to a community of practitioners and educators joining together to be a vital Christian presence to the profession. In the same way, I feel encouraged because I belong to a community that holds one another accountable to be a vital Christian presence to the profession. I invite you to join us.

REFERENCES

Burton, L. D., & Nwosu, C. C. (2003). Student perceptions of the integration of faith, learning, and practice in an education methods course. *Journal of Research on Christian Education, 12*(2), 101-135.

Cedarville University. (2007). *Accreditation Self-Study Report Spring 2007*. Retrieved August 10, 2008 from https://www.cedarville.edu/accreditation/selfstudy/document/CedarvilleUniversitySelfStudyReport.pdf

Conyers, A. J. (2004). The meaning of vocation, *Christian Reflection, 10,* 11-19.

Cooper, M. V. (1999). Faculty perspectives on the integration of faith and academic discipline in Southern Baptist higher education, *Religious Education, 94*(4), 380-396.

Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. (2009). *CCCU Mission*. Retrieved August 9, 2009, from http://www.cccu.org/about

Council on Social Work Education. (2008). *Education Policy and Accreditation Standards*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Fowler, J. W. (1996). *Faithful change: The personal and public challenges of post-modern life*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, Longman.

Gustafson, L. T., Karns, G. L., & Surdyk, L. K. (2000). Teaching through the eyes of faith: An investigation of faith-learning integration in the business classroom. *Research on Christian Higher Education, 7,* 1-23.

Hardin, J., Sweeney, J., & Whitworth, J. (1999, February). *Integrating faith and learning in teacher education*. Paper presented at the extended annual meeting of the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education, Abilene, Texas.

Holmes, A. F. (1999). *The idea of a Christian college* (Rev. ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Hossler, E. (1995). The status of affective assessment programs among Christian College Coalition institutions. *Research on Christian Higher Education, 2,* 69-92.

Jones, J., Wolfer, T. A., Sherr, M. E., & Cecil, D. P. (2003, October). Integrating faith and academic life at public universities: Opening faculty/doctoral student dialogue. The North American Association of Christians in Social Work, Louisville, Kentucky.

Korniejczuk, R. I., & Kijai, J. (1994). Integrating faith and learning: Development of a stage model of teacher implementation. *Journal of Research on Christian Education, 3,* 79-102.

Kuhlmann, E., G. (1998). A little lower than God: A Christian understanding of human identity. *Social Work & Christianity, 25*(1), 49-71.

National Association of Social Workers. (1999). *Code of Ethics*. Washington, DC: Author.

Northwest Nazarene University. (2009). *Institutional Outcome*. Retrieved August 10, 2009, from http://www.nnu.edu/welcome/institutional-outcomes/

Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Plantinga, A. (1994). On Christian Scholarship. In Theodore Hesburgh (Ed.), *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University* (pp. 267-295). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Presnell, C. O. (1996). Assessing faith/learning integration among alumni at Taylor University. *Research on Christian Education, 3,* 1-32.

Sherr, M. E. (2008). *Social Work with Volunteers.* Chicago, IL: Lyceum Press.

Sherwood, D. A. (1999). Integrating Christian faith and social work: Reflections of a social work educator. *Social Work & Christianity, 26*(1), 1-8.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wilkinson, S. (2004). Focus group research. In D. Silverman (Ed.). *Qualitative research: Theory, method, and practice* (2nd ed.) (pp. 177-199). London: Sage.

Wolterstorff, N. (2004). *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian higher education*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael E. Sherr, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., is currently Associate Professor and Director of the Ph.D. Program in the School of Social Work at Baylor University. He has written on several areas including volunteerism, integration of faith and practice, social work education, and evaluation research. His work appears in top journals in both social work and Christian education. He is also the author of *Social Work with Volunteers* (Lyceum).

"*ON BECOMING A CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR IN SOCIAL WORK* does a most unusual thing. Rather than adopting the professor's standpoint on the "integration" of faith and social work education, it adopts the student's perspective, doing this not on the basis of speculation or anecdotal evidence but on the basis of careful research. And rather than asking the somewhat abstract question of whether the student judges that the instructor has "integrated" faith and learning, it asks the concrete question of whether the student discerns that teaching is for the instructor his or her Christian vocation, a guide and inspiration for students to engage in their own future social work as their Christian vocation. Sherr is passionate for what he sees as good and right without being denunciatory of those who hold conflicting views. His discussion is extraordinarily self revealing, a testimony of his love for students. I know of nothing like it."

— Nicholas Wolterstorff, PhD
Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology,
and Fellow of Berkeley College at Yale University

"PROFESSOR MICHAEL SHERR'S BOOK SHOULD BE ON THE DESK OR BOOKSHELF of every social work educator who wants to integrate the Christian faith with classroom teaching. This is a powerful book, not only because of its cogent conceptual design and the concrete recommendations it delineates, but, more importantly, because of its authenticity. Christian social work educators can learn much from Professor Sherr's spiritual and vocational journey as they continue their own journeys and seek to integrate faith, learning and practice in their classrooms."

— Frank B. Raymond III, PhD
Dean Emeritus and Distinguished Professor Emeritus
College of Social Work
University of South Carolina

Michael E. Sherr, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., is currently Associate Professor and Director of the Ph.D. Program in the School of Social Work at Baylor University. He has written on several areas including volunteerism, integration of faith and practice, social work education, and evaluation research. His work appears in top journals in both social work and Christian education. He is also the author of *Social Work with Volunteers* (Lyceum).

Dr. Sherr is married to Stacey and they have three children.