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ETHICAL INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: EVANGELISM

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Christians in social work wonder how evangelism relates to their practice of social work; clients often fear that social workers will impose their beliefs on clients. This article explores the ethical application of Christian and social work values, ethics, and practice principles to working with clients in ways which maintain integrity for both clients and social workers. All social workers, Christian or not, have to develop competence in the handling of their own beliefs and values while working ethically and respectfully with clients. The article explores use and limits of the Code of Ethics (and the Bible), using the concept of a "Principle/Practice Pyramid" and arguing that ethical judgments will always be required because legitimate values sometimes come into conflict. Particular issues such as self-determination, informed consent, agency auspice, social work role, and client expectations are explored. Addressing spiritual and religious issues with clients is an appropriate dimension of competent, holistic practice, but engaging in direct evangelism in a professional relationship is almost never ethical because it usually involves the risk of exploitation of a vulnerable relationship without the integrity of informed consent.

AS I SAT DOWN TO WRITE THIS, I COULDN'T HELP BUT THINK OF the old adage, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Probably right. However, it seemed like it might be useful, at least as a conversation starter, to take a stab at trying to apply Christian and social work values, ethics, and practice principles to some of the controversial issues that seem to raise questions for most of us. This time the focus is the relationship between professional social work practice and evangelism.

I need to warn you from the beginning, on the other hand (my naturally cautious side coming out), that I do not propose to state the definitive Christian position on anything. What I do propose

to do is to try to think through the application of Christian and social work values and practice principles to working with clients regarding evangelism in ways which maintain integrity for both our clients and ourselves.

Not Just an Issue for Christians

The first point I want to make is that this matter of trying to figure out how to have integrity and competence in the handling of our own beliefs and values as we work respectfully and ethically with clients is not just an issue for Christians. Every single one of us comes our work profoundly influenced by assumptions, beliefs, values, and commitments which we hold in part on faith. That is part of what it means to be a human being. Our reason and our science can only take us so far, but they can never take us to the bottom line of values and meaning. "Facts," to the degree that we can ever really discern them, never answer the "so what" question. Values are never derivable from facts alone.

The first level of self-disclosure and informed consent that every social worker owes is critical personal self-awareness. This can be spiritual, religious, ideological, or theoretical—any "meta-narrative" that we use to make sense out of our experience of life. "Hello, my name is David and I'm a Christian." Or, "I'm a Buddhist," "I'm an agnostic," "I'm an atheist," "I'm a logical positivist," "I'm a behaviorist," "I'm a post-modernist." Or a Punk or a Goth or a Democrat or a Republican, for that matter. I'm not saying that we should greet our clients this way, but I am saying that we need to be aware of our beliefs and be self-critical in regard to how they affect our work.

What are my fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and values? How do they affect my practice? The way I interact with my clients? My selection of theories and interpretation of facts? It is not simply a matter of what I believe, but how I believe it, how I handle my beliefs, which in itself comes back around to the nature of my value commitments.

Lawrence Ressler frequently tells the story of his MSW class at Temple University with Jeffrey Galper, who announced at the beginning of the semester, "I am a Marxist, and I teach from a Marxist perspective." I hope this meant that he had achieved this critical personal self-awareness and that his self-disclosure was in the service of facilitating informed consent on the part of his students. The proof of the social work practice pudding, of course, would be in his conscientiousness in not imposing this view on his students,

his willingness to permit or even facilitate disagreement. Of course, the more deeply held the beliefs and the greater the disagreement, the more difficult it is to support self-determination. This is true even when self-determination is one of the core values believed in.

So—integrating faith and practice is not just a Christian thing. It is a human thing. Those who don't understand this basic truth are the ones who may pose the greatest risk of all of "imposing their beliefs on others," precisely because they may think that they are not susceptible to the problem (Sherwood, 2000). However, the rest of my comments are going to be addressed primarily to Christians in social work, even though I think the basic principles will apply to those who are not Christians. Many of us may feel tempted to "evangelize" in more way than one.

Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues with Clients is Not (Necessarily or Normally) Evangelism

"Talking about God" with clients is not necessarily or normally evangelism. This is an important distinction. For too long social workers (secular and otherwise) have tended to "solve" the problem of evangelism by avoiding spirituality and religion and offering a blanket condemnation—"Thou shalt not discuss spiritual and religious issues with clients." If you do, it is automatically presumed that you are "imposing your own values on clients." This happens in spite of overwhelming evidence that issues of meaning and purpose are central in the lives of clients, that spirituality and religion have great importance to many people, and that religiously-based groups, congregations, and organizations are vital sources of support for people (as well as barriers, at times).

Well, sometimes social workers do impose their values (religious, political, or otherwise) on clients and it is an ethical violation when they do. I would stress that it is a violation of Christian ethics as well as social work ethics. But deliberately avoiding spiritual and religious issues is professional incompetence. The presumption has often been that spiritual and religious issues should simply be referred to chaplains or other clergy. In what other important area of life would social workers condone such a policy of withdrawal and referral? How can we say we deal with the whole person-in-environment while ignoring one of the most important dimensions of people's lives (for good or ill)? Or how can we

claim competence in dealing with diversity while ignoring or misunderstanding such a fundamental kind of diversity (Sherwood, 1998)?

The short answer is that we can't and shouldn't ignore spiritual and religious issues. The key is that we must do it from a client-focused and client-led perspective. This normally means that we may not ethically engage in evangelism with our clients. Exceptions would typically be when we are practicing in a faith-based context with a clearly identified Christian identity and with clients who clearly express informed consent. Even then, it is not transparently obvious that evangelism would be appropriate. I hope I can make it clear why I say this.

Proclamation versus Demonstration of the Gospel

A perhaps simplistic but none-the-less useful distinction is this: It is always ethical and appropriate to demonstrate the gospel to our clients, but it is seldom ethical to proclaim the gospel to them in our professional role as social workers.

The Bible describes evangelism in the sense of demonstrating or living out the gospel as the calling of every Christian. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:1-2). "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help" (I John 3:16-17).

The profession of social work provides us all with unique opportunities to demonstrate the gospel of Christ—to give to our clients the grace-filled gift of knowing what it feels like to be treated with love and justice, what it feels like to experience caring, grace, forgiveness, trustworthiness, honesty, and fairness, what it feels like to be treated with respect and dignity as a person with God-given value. Often our clients have few opportunities in their lives to be in a respectful, non-exploitive relationship. The power of this experience can be transforming. It can be a form of "pre-evangelism," preparing the soil for the good seed of the gospel proclaimed.

We do not all have the same part to play in God's work in a person's life. The New Testament frequently talks about varieties of gifts among the various parts of the body, and evangelism is one of them (Romans 12:3-8, I Corinthians 12:4-31, Ephesians 4:11-16). "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom

you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (I Corinthians 3:5-6). As Alan Keith-Lucas has said (1985, p. 28):

Paul said that faith was the gift of the Spirit, which is true, but what we can do as social workers—and we do have a wonderful opportunity to do so—is to show such love and forgivingness that a confused and desperate person can understand the Spirit's message when it comes.

A consideration of the Parable of the Sower may be helpful here. The seed only grows to maturity when there is good ground to receive it. But stony or even shallow ground can be converted to good ground by the addition of nutrients (love) or ploughing (facing reality) or breaking up of clots (getting rid of blocks) and perhaps what social workers can do for the most part is to be tillers of the ground, rather than the Sower, who must in the long run be God Himself. It is true that certain men and women, powerful preachers or prophets, may act, as it were, for God as sowers, but even they have for the most part audiences that have some readiness to listen.

On the other hand, explicit evangelism of clients (proclamation) in professional social work is almost always unethical. Why? What are the values and ethical principles involved?

Values and Practice: The Principle/Practice Pyramid

Christian and social work values largely agree at the level of principles. However, we may disagree on both the foundational assumptions/worldviews which support the principles, the rules/strategies for prioritizing the values principles when they conflict, and the practice implications of the value principles.

It helps me to conceptualize these relationships in the form of a "Principle/Practice Pyramid." The base of the pyramid is formed by our fundamental worldview and faith-based assumptions (religious or not) about the nature of the world, what it means to be a person, the nature of values, and the nature of knowledge.

On top of and growing out of this foundation sits our core values or principles. As a Christian I understand these to be the "exceptionless absolutes" of love and justice. The social work

Code of Ethics might say (and Christians would agree) that this includes service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

On top of and growing out of this “principle” layer are the moral rules which guide the application of the principles to various domains of life. These are “deontological” parameters which suggest what we ought to do. Biblical examples would be the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and other Biblical teachings which help us to understand what love and justice require in various spheres of life. In the social work Code of Ethics, these would be the specific standards relating to responsibilities to clients, colleagues, practice settings, as professionals, the profession, and the broader society. These rules can guide us, but they can never provide us with absolute prescriptions for what we should do on the case level.

At the top of the pyramid sit the specific cases in which we are required to use the principles and rules to make professional judgments in the messiness of real life and practice. It is here that we will find ourselves in the most likelihood of conscientious disagreement with each other, even when we start with the same values, principles, and rules. The short answer for why this is true is that we are fallen (subject to the distortions of our selfishness, fear, and pride) and finite (limited in what we can know and predict). And even more vexing, our principles and rules start coming into conflict with each other on this level. It is here that we have to resolve ethical dilemmas in which any actual action we can take is going to advance some of our values (and the rules that go with them) at the expense of some of our other values (and the rules that go with them).

**The Use and Limits of the Code of Ethics (and the Bible):
Ethical Judgments Are Required Because Legitimate Values
Come into Conflict**

Ethical analysis and decision making is required when we encounter an ethical problem and at the case level we cannot maximize all values simultaneously. In my paradigm, the definition of an ethical problem or dilemma is that we have more than one legitimate moral obligation that have come into some degree of tension in the case that we find ourselves dealing with.

For example, I believe in client self-determination (one legitimate moral obligation) and I believe in the protection of human life (another legitimate moral obligation). Most of the time these

values do not come into conflict. However, now I have a client who is threatening to kill his wife. I now have an ethical problem in which any action I take will compromise one or more of my moral obligations. Values and ethical principles can and do come into conflict on the case level.

It is important to realize from the beginning what the Bible and Code of Ethics can do for us and what they cannot. They can give us critical guidance and direction, but they can never give us prescriptive formulas which will tell us exactly what to do in every case, precisely because in the particular instance not all of the values can be fully achieved and not all of the rules can be completely followed. The Code of Ethics (1999, pp. 1, 2-3) says it very well:

Core values, and the principles that flow from them, must be balanced within the context and complexity of the human experience. . . The Code offers a set of values, principles, and standards to guide decision making and conduct when ethical issues arise. It does not provide a set of rules that prescribe how social workers should act in all situations. Specific applications of the Code must take into account the context in which it is being considered and the possibility of conflicts among the Code's values, principles, and standards.

Sometimes one of these biblical rules or Code of Ethics standards may have to give way to another in order for us to come as close to love and justice as the situation allows. At the case level, we are always going to have to take responsibility for making judgments that prioritize our values and approximate the good we seek as closely as we can.

Ethics and Evangelism

So, what are some of the core values and ethical principles from the Bible and the Code of Ethics that relate to evangelism with clients? I'll try to list a few and give some comments, although several of them overlap and interact with each other. And I would say that they all fall under the Biblical absolutes of love and justice.

1. The Great Commission

Well, what Christians call the "Great Commission" is certainly one of these core values, the reason we are exploring this issue in

the first place. While the imperative “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) was given to Jesus’ original disciples, the New Testament makes it quite clear that bearing testimony to the good news about Jesus’ healing and saving work on behalf of humankind is in some sense the responsibility of all of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ. And if the gospel of Christ is true, what could be more important for people to hear? This value is real for us and explains why we struggle with the question of evangelism in our professional roles.

2. My Calling and Role

Remember our discussion above about demonstration and proclamation? While it is true that not only evangelists bear witness to the gospel, it is also true that our particular calling and role in a given situation has a great impact on what it is appropriate for us to do. If you are convinced that your calling from God is evangelism in the sense of direct proclamation, then you should be an evangelist and not a social worker (or a nurse, or a car salesman, or a loan officer). Under what auspice are you working? What are the functions associated with your role? My father-in-law for many years demonstrated the grace and love of Christ in his role as a bank teller at the Potter’s Bank and Trust in East Liverpool, Ohio, including taking money out of his own pocket to make sure that certain poor customers were able to get at least a little cash at the end of the month. But he could not, and did not, use his position to hand them tracts with the cash. As a social worker you may at times find it appropriate to share your faith directly, but most of the time you won’t.

3. Self-Determination

From the first chapter of Genesis on, the Bible presents a picture of human beings endowed with the gift and responsibility of choice with consequences. We are presented with the paradox and mystery (on our level of understanding) of God’s sovereignty and our freedom. God is depicted as calling us, but not coercing us, warning us, but not protecting us. Conscience and commitment cannot be compelled, even though external behavior might be. Self-determination is also a standard of the Code of Ethics (1999, p. 7), growing out of the principle of the inherent dignity and worth of the person. If ever a social work value stood on a theological foundation it is belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every person. While I may have my perceptions of what might be

best for my clients, I have no right to compel or manipulate them to that end. I do have a responsibility to help facilitate their ability to exercise their self-determination, including the exploration of available alternatives and their possible consequences, so that their choices are as informed as possible. God grants us the fearful dignity of self-determination; we can hardly try to deny it to our clients, explicitly or implicitly.

4. Informed Consent

A fundamental component of informed choice is informed consent, another standard of the Code of Ethics (1999, pp. 7-8). Informed consent essentially means that people should know what they are getting into and agree to it. This principle interacts intimately with the next one—integrity. Informed consent is one of the key determinants of whether or not evangelism with clients is ethical. Related concepts are agency auspice and client expectations. Why are clients coming to your agency or to you? What expectations do they have? Is there anything upfront that would lead them to understand that the sharing of your religious beliefs or evangelism would be a likely part of their experience with your agency or you? I have found that even in explicitly faith-based agencies there surprisingly few times when direct evangelism is the appropriate focus or outcome of interaction with clients. Christian clients struggle with the same kinds of issues as other clients. Sometimes we can help them sort through how their beliefs are resources or barriers for them. But sometimes religious clients want to use “religious talk” to avoid coming to grips with their issues. There would be almost no cases in a public or secular private agency when direct evangelism an appropriate focus or outcome of interaction with clients.

5. Integrity

Honesty and integrity are core Biblical and social work values. A number of “rules” derive from this value, such as truth-telling, trustworthiness, and keeping agreements. Some of the standards in the Code of Ethics deriving from this principle come under the general heading of “Conflicts of Interest” (1999, pp. 9-10). These rules are particularly relevant to the question of engaging in evangelism with clients. These rules say that “Social workers should be alert to and avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgment” (1999, p.

9). They speak to the importance of setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries and being careful of dual or multiple relationships with clients. Of particular relevance to the issue of evangelism is the standard that says "Social workers should not take unfair advantage of any professional relationship or exploit others to further their personal, religious, political, or business interests" (1999, p. 9).

So, What about Evangelism?

The main reason that evangelism in the context of a professional social work relationship is normally unethical is that it almost always involves the risk of exploitation of a vulnerable relationship. It usually involves taking advantage of our professional role and relationship with our clients. It lacks the integrity of informed consent. And even when there seems to be a certain consent or even request from the client to go through the evangelistic door, it is the social worker's responsibility to be the boundary keeper. I am not saying that there can never be a legitimate open door under any circumstance, but I am saying that the social worker, acting in the professional capacity, bears a heavy weight of responsibility to avoid taking advantage of the client's vulnerability.

I think most Christians have little difficulty understanding the analogous rule in the Code of Ethics which says that "Social workers should under no circumstances engage in sexual activities or sexual contact with current clients, whether such contact is consensual or forced" (1999, p. 13). We also understand that it is the social worker's responsibility, not the client's, to maintain these boundaries. I hope no one is offended by my comparison of sexual exploitation to evangelism. Clearly there are significant differences. I believe in evangelism and I do not believe in sexual exploitation. However, we also need to understand the way in which evangelism in the context of a professional relationship does have some significant likeness to sexual exploitation, or any other taking advantage of the professional role.

For example, evangelizing a client coming to a public Rape Crisis Center would be unethical and, I would say, un-Christian. She is in a physically and emotionally vulnerable situation, there is nothing about the sign on the door that would lead you to believe that her coming is even giving implied consent to evangelism, and she is trusting you for specific kinds of help. The nature of your role and relationship means that you have a special re-

sponsibility not to exploit that role. What you can most certainly do with her is to give her the opportunity to experience what it is like to receive “grace,” love and justice; what it is like to experience respect, caring, support, trustworthiness, honesty; what it is like to not be taken advantage of.

It would also probably be going much too far to ask her, “Are you a Christian?” Even if she said no, and you quietly moved on, the question would hang in the air, coming from a representative of the Rape Crisis Center to a person in a state of vulnerability who had a very particular reason for coming to this agency. How would she react to that? How would it affect her response?

However, it might be quite competent and ethical professional practice to use a more appropriate probe which could be stated in “non-religious” terms—“This must be hard. Is there anything in your life that helps you get through things like this?” Then if she mentions something about her spiritual or religious beliefs, you are in a position to make a better judgment about how you might help her, even perhaps including engaging spiritual and religious resources. That could be good “spiritually-sensitive” social work practice (Sherwood, 1998).

Even then, you would be faced with the necessity of using good assessment skills, discernment, and judgment. For example, you would think that praying with clients in Christian agencies would be obviously the right thing to do. However, some clients are “religious” manipulators, and consciously or unconsciously use the appearance of spirituality to avoid dealing with hard issues. When a client says, “Let’s just pray about that,” or “I think we just have to trust the Lord,” you have to try to discern whether doing that is helpful or their way of avoiding dealing with their anger, fear, abusive behavior, or whatever else they may need to face.

No Prescriptions, but Guidance

You will have probably noticed that I have avoided words such as “never” or “always” in what I have said. This is quite deliberate, and goes back to my earlier comments about what ethical principles and rules can do for us and what they can’t. They can give us meaningful guidance but they can’t give us simple formulas to prescribe our response to every situation. Although I might have come close to it, I have not argued that evangelism is never compatible with our professional role as social workers. I have

tried to suggest ethical considerations as we try to make our best judgments about how we relate to our clients.

Morally and practically, a sense of certainty is highly attractive. Who doesn't want to be sure that they are "right" and that they are doing the right thing? But that level of certainty is often not available to us as human beings. And yet we do have to decide and act. These judgments always require prioritizing our values based on the best understanding we can achieve at the time regarding the relevant values involved and the potential consequences of the choices available to us.

Ultimately, how we respond in these hard cases has more to do with the moral virtue or character that we have developed, by God's grace and through God's Spirit, than it does with the specific facts and theories we have learned. Lord, help us to be people who hunger and thirst for your "more excellent way" (I Corinthians 12:31). ❖

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