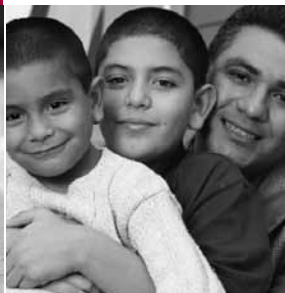


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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

NACW is pleased to announce that this issue focusing on “Virtues and Character in Social Work Practice” represents a special double issue of *Social Work & Christianity* (SWC). Approximately double the length of a regular issue of *Social Work & Christianity*, this special issue is being published as SWC Volume 41, Numbers 2 and 3 (counting as both the Summer and Fall issues for this year). The next issue of *Social Work and Christianity* that will be published after this special double issue will be SWC Volume 41, Number 4, published in December, 2014.

VIRTUES AND CHARACTER IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Preparing Christians for Social Work: Forming Character and Fostering Virtue

Terry A. Wolfer & Cheryl Brandsen

A virtue perspective offers a fresh and provocative contribution for the social work profession. In particular, it provides a helpful counterpoint to an emphasis in social work education on competency-based education and practice.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2010, CALVIN COLLEGE, WITH SUPPORT FROM THE North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW), hosted a social work seminar for social work educators on character and virtue formation. The participants represented various branches of Christianity—Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Episcopalian, Mennonite, and Reformed—to name just a few, as well as both secular and faith-based universities, colleges, and practice settings.

Framing Questions

The seminar's theme emerged from questions asked by Miroslav Volf (1996) in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. In this book, Volf explored the question of “what kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with others” (p. 21). Although Volf recognized the importance of “social arrangements” in structuring society, he bracketed such a discussion to focus instead on “fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, and on shaping a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive” (p. 21).

Volf is not a social worker nor was his book written primarily to social workers, yet his questions about forming particular kinds of selves is certainly pertinent to the social work profession. Social workers do spend much of their time thinking about social arrangements—about the kind of policies and programs that will help people flourish and further justice—and this is critically important work. But it is also important to think about what kind of people social workers need to be, at their core, to work effectively with people often very different from themselves and to effectively shape social arrangements. Further, it is important to think about how best to nurture such professionals, particularly in an era where competency-based social work education may leave a void in terms of professional formation.

Consequently, the summer seminar focused on ideas related to forming the character and virtues of Christians who are social workers. Each participant came to the seminar having read a common set of readings related to understanding the virtue tradition in philosophy and theology, social work's engagement with a virtue framework, and pedagogical practices for virtue formation.

In addition, each participant came to the seminar with a working paper that addressed questions such as these:

- What character traits and virtues ought Christian educators to nurture in social work students and practitioners, to properly prepare them to engage with and serve their clients and communities? What sorts of dispositions, commitments, and practices do educators aim to instill in students and practitioners?
- What resources do Christian educators draw from to shape a vision for the type of social worker they hope to cultivate? What is the role of the church in the character and virtue formation of Christian social workers?
- What educative practices (i.e., pedagogical, curricular, continuing education) best contribute to forming social work students and practitioners with the necessary character traits and virtues?

Consultants

Because we recognized the expertise of the participants was primarily in social work and because any attempts at thinking in cross-disciplinary ways, particularly with respect to intersections with theology and philosophy, moved the participants into less-familiar intellectual territory, we invited two consultants to participate. Dr. Ruth Groenhout, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, helped the group work more deeply with the philosophical resources of a virtue framework in thinking about formation (Groenhout, 1997, 2004). Dr. Mark Thiessen Nation, professor of theology at Eastern Mennonite University, helped the group work with the theological resources of the Christian tradition in terms of virtues and practices (Murphy, Kallenberg, & Nation, 1977/2003). The Philosophical work of Alasdair MacIntyre in reviving the virtue tradition in ethics framed many of the group's discussions (MacIntyre, 2001, 2007; Murphy, Kallenberg, & Nation, 1991/2003) as did the theological work of Stanley Hauerwas on virtue (Hauerwas, Berkman, & Cartwright, 2001; Hauerwas & Wells, 2004; Wells, 1998/2004). Drs. Groenhout and Thiessen Nation effectively helped participants navigate these ideas and appropriate them for social work education.

Articles Growing out of the Seminar

Because each participant came to the seminar with a working paper, the majority of the seminar week was spent reviewing and sharpening each other's work, with an eye toward revision and publication. By the end of the seminar, we agreed that the virtue approach was fresh and provocative and offered a significant contribution to the profession. In particular, as social work moves toward prioritizing competency-based education and practice, little attention has been paid to holistic development of practitioners. A virtue perspective helps fill such a gap. Eventually we came to a common organizational "template" for future revisions, and the articles in this collection reflect this organizational structure.

The first article in this collection, "Introducing a Virtue Perspective for Social Work and Helping," works toward orienting readers to a virtue framework and makes an argument for why such a perspective is useful for social work. It provides a theoretical context for the articles that follow. Subsequent articles discuss individual virtues. The final article, "Adding Virtue to Faith," focuses on some specifically Christian strategies for developing character in Christian social work students.

The virtues discussed in this collection—charity, faith, generosity, gratefulness, and justice—are not the only virtues germane to social work formation and practice. There are many other virtues worth mining for their intellectual and formative capacities. The particular virtues discussed

here are simply ones that reflect the interests of the authors. Further, they also reflect the authors' unique professional and theological identities. We hope that readers will be motivated to think about virtues generative to their own professional and theological development, to explore them, and eventually to write about and share them with the profession.

Our Thanks

The writers of these papers wish to thank the seminar group for thoughtful and challenging remarks that helped shape and sharpen these articles. As well, we wish to thank Ruth Groenhout and Mark Thiessen Nation for their willingness to work with us, read and respond to our papers, and live with us, if only for a few days, in a social work landscape. The seminar group is also indebted to the *North American Association for Christians in Social Work* and to the *Summer Seminars in Christian Scholarship* program at Calvin College for their financial and in-kind support. We especially thank the Calvin College Social Work Department for underwriting most of the costs through a generous gift donated to the department by the late Dr. Theodore R. and Jeanne Deur. ❖

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Editor's Note: 2010 Calvin College Seminar on Virtue and Character Participants: Paul Adams, Cheryl Brandsen, Rebecca Christine Burwell, Rick R. Chamiec-Case, Denis Malachy Costello, Linda Plitt Donaldson, Ruth Groenhout, Mackenzi Anne Huyser, Joseph Kuilema, Marleen Milner, Mark Thiessen Nation, Jill Comerford Schreiber, Samantha Fitzgerald Vo, and Terry A. Wolfer