

Adding Virtue to Faith: Strategies for Developing Character in Christian Social Work Students

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This article explores the relationship between a sense of calling, connectedness to God, and engagement in practices that nurture the virtues required to act upon that calling. It proposes that preparing Christians to effectively integrate faith with social work practice requires intentional pedagogical strategies to facilitate students' exploration of individual callings, the espousal of spiritual disciplines that foster virtue, and the cultivation of a community that supports spiritually integrated practice.

...His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue... for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue... For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (II Pet. 1: 5-8, NKJV)

IN A POSTMODERN WORLD, VIRTUE IS AN IDEAL THAT SEEMS ELUSIVE, EVEN among those of us who identify ourselves as followers of Christ. Like underwater divers who have lost the sense of what is up and what is down, we are in a world cut loose from its moorings, adrift in an ocean of siren voices. Alasdair MacIntyre relates our moral malaise to a past “catastrophe so great that moral inquiry was nearly obliterated from our culture” (as cited in Kallenberg, 2003, p. 7). He claims that by emphasizing individual autonomy and ignoring the formative role of community, modern ethical discourse has been pillaged of any sense of context within which to make sense of what is “good” or what Greek, Jewish, and Christian traditions

refer to as “virtue.” How then do we begin a discourse regarding what it means to be virtuous in a profession characterized by complexity and challenging ethical conundrums? Furthermore, how can Christian educators be intentional in the pedagogical strategies utilized to prepare future social work practitioners to develop virtues consistent with professional ethical guidelines as well as the call of God on their lives to service?

In this article, I will argue that the Judeo-Christian concept of “calling” provides an anchor for the intentional cultivation of virtues necessary for the faithful performance of the responsibilities relevant to one’s vocation. I propose that preparing Christians to effectively integrate faith with social work practice must go beyond a preoccupation with the avoidance of doing harm to a model of practice that cultivates a sense of collaboration with God. While some of these ideas can be applied in secular settings where religious and spiritual diversity is a given, my prime directive is to address the opportunities and responsibilities to foster virtue that are accessible, but underutilized, in social work programs within faith-based universities.

Calling to Social Work Practice

The concept of calling is one that resonates deeply with many social work practitioners, as evidenced by various publications, both faith-based and secular, with allusions to the “call” to social work (Freeman, 2007; Graham, 2008; Hugen, 2012; LeCroy, 2002). Recently popularized in secular literature, the calling model often frames an altruistic pull toward service rather than self-interest, or an inner sense of “good fit” between one’s work and passion. However, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the common Hebrew term most frequently translated “called” means “accosting a person met,” addressing by name, and “causing to come” (Strong, 2007, 7121). This definition implies an interruption in a person’s trajectory by someone *other* than the self, who directs the called one by name toward a predetermined purpose. For example, God calls Abram to leave his country and come to a foreign land in order that God might make of him a great nation (Gen.12). In another account, while Moses tends sheep, God calls to him from a burning bush, “Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people...out of Egypt” (Ex 3:10, NKJV). The biblical narrative is replete with such stories, and lest we think this is an Old Testament pattern, Paul is *literally* accosted on the road to Damascus, blinded, and thrown from his horse with instructions to “Go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9: 6, NKJV).

Although not all believers would describe their vocational calling in terms of a dramatic personal experience, a common theme is that the call is perceived as something that originates beyond the self and occurs as a matter of discovery (Freeman, 2007; Hugen, 2002; Johnson, 2002). Whether the call is experienced as a defining moment or a process, subtle

or sublime, in solitude or community, what makes the call compelling is its “otherness.” Johnson (2002) explains, “We don’t possess the call, the call possesses us” (p. 115).

A poignant depiction of this phenomenon occurs in Tolkien’s *The Two Towers*, the second book of the trilogy, *Lord of the Rings* (1994). Overwhelmed by the challenges ahead of them, and yet compelled to go on, Sam muses to Frodo:

I used to think that they [adventures] were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folks seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t...I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into? (p. 362).

How we “land” in the tale is not nearly as important as the ability to recognize that we have become a part of a story that is bigger than our own. According to Stanley Hauerwas (1981), it is the embeddedness of our own stories within the “bigger story” that provides the rationale for virtue and sustains our faith traditions.

McIntosh (2004) beautifully describes calling as a lifelong dialogue in which God calls and we respond, moving us “toward a listening, responding, choosing, delighting personhood” (p. 150). This dialogue, however, does not exist in a vacuum. Growth in discernment and confidence to follow occurs in the context of a community that mediates, nurtures, confirms, and strengthens the individual believer in pursuing the call (Johnson, 2002; McIntosh, 2004). Although this process traditionally occurs in the context of the church, Christian educators also have an important role to play in helping Christian social work students explore their callings, understand their roles as co-laborers with God, and make sense of what it means to “be salt” in a secular profession. A significant challenge, however, is the uneasy relationship that has existed between professional social work practice, spirituality, and religion.

Spirituality and Social Work Practice

Over the last two decades the social work profession has embraced the need to expand the role of spirituality and religion in social work practice and education; however, the primary focus of existing literature is on developing culturally competent strategies for assessing and working with religiously affiliated clients and preparing students for ethical and culturally

sensitive practice. In contrast, publications addressing the spirituality of the social worker are rare. For the most part those that do address spirituality suggest eastern religious practices such as meditation and mindfulness to support the practitioner's reflectiveness, connectedness with their own spirituality, and as a strategy for self-care (Birnbaum, 2008; Derezotes, 2006; Hick, 2009; Hick, 2008; Lynn, 2010; Turner, 2009; Weaver, 2005). In comparison, I could locate only two articles from a Christian perspective that encouraged engaging in spiritual practices to foster the connectedness of the social worker with God (Collins, 2005; Staral, 2002).

Although there are notable exceptions (see Scales & Kelly, 2012), discussions regarding spiritually integrated practice from a Christian perspective are dominated by a focus on tensions between Christian and secular worldviews, and concerns regarding the violation of clients' rights to self-determination (Clark, 1994; Hodge, 2002; Hodge & Wolfer, 2008; Ressler, 2002; Sanger, 2010; Sherr, Singletary, & Rogers, 2009; Sherwood, 2012; Stewart, 2009; Unruh & Sider, 2002). While these are valid concerns which must be addressed, the frequent emphasis on "avoiding harm" rather than "doing good" when practicing from a faith perspective leads many social work educators to focus primarily on students' self-awareness and commitment to professional values. But is this all there is to faith integration? If faith-based social work programs only prepare students to adhere to professional values, competently use the skills and knowledge of practice, and to avoid giving offense, will we not be guilty of "having a form of godliness, but denying its power" (2 Tim 3:5)? Paul's admonition to the Galatians as translated in the Message is even more emphatic: "only crazy people would think they could complete by their own efforts what was begun by God. If you weren't smart enough or strong enough to begin it, how do you suppose you could perfect it?" (Gal. 3:3, The Message)

In my current role as a social work educator, I often see students struggling to understand the relationship between their calling and their perception that serving clients well requires a bifurcation of their professional and spiritual selves. While most understand the need to avoid imposing their personal beliefs and values on clients, they express confusion regarding how to follow a spiritual calling while adhering to professional mandates. Some end by concluding that we must somehow compartmentalize our spirituality in much the same way we appropriately compartmentalize our sexuality—it has no business in the work world. Recently, I was troubled when a graduate who I had invited to speak to the Intro to Social Work students regarding her work at a local hospital, declared that as compared to her previous work in a faith-based setting she had only her social work knowledge and skills to rely on. Because she could not directly share her faith with her clients, she had come to believe that she was on her own in facing daily challenges and grappling with clients' issues. While our graduates consistently report that they feel well-prepared when they enter

the work force or graduate school, this and similar experiences led me to question whether we were doing enough to prepare them to carry out their work in response to their calling and in dependence on the God who is the author and finisher of their faith.

Students choose to attend Christian colleges and universities with the expectation that they will provide a distinctively Christian education as well as a “safe haven” in which to nurture and develop the calling of God on their lives (Holmes, 1987; Sherr, Huff, & Curran, 2007). If “callings” may be likened to seed in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13: 3-9), then what responsibility do faith-based programs have to nurture that seed so that it bears fruit to God rather than meeting the fate of seed that remains barren because it is planted in hostile environments? Social work programs within Christian colleges and universities must seriously consider their responsibility not only to prepare students for competent and ethical practice but also to carry their faith and sense of calling as a sacred trust that empowers their work with clients, and informs their practice.

Social Work Programs as Communities of Practice

Recent literature that explores the formative nature of social practices suggests that educational programs can become powerful shapers of desirable habits and dispositions. According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) the key to transformative learning is cultivating “communities of practice” which are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on a regular basis” (p. 4). Rather than simply sharing information, these communities of practice powerfully shape behavior through informal learning that takes place as people tell stories, coach, model, and provide opportunities for apprenticeship. The emphasis of social work education on the development of competencies and practice behaviors helps to facilitate the three elements identified by Wenger as essential to the development of a community of practice:

1. Students and professors have identified a shared domain of interest, i.e., social work practice from a Christian perspective.
2. To that end, they build community by “engage[ing] in joint activities and discussions, helping each other and sharing vital information” (Wenger, 2006, p. 2).
3. Finally, the social work program provides members opportunities to practice. Through active and collaborative learning in the classroom, service learning, practicum experience and field seminar, students and their professors become a community of practitioners who develop a “shared repertoire of resources” (p. 3) which facilitate professional and spiritual growth.

Although few would disagree that a well-functioning social work program provides a community of practice that fosters professional development, spirituality is typically thought to be the domain of the church or, within academia, of those who provide religious instruction. The New Testament provides clear support for the notion that churches have the primary responsibility to nourish the spiritual life of the believer; however, social work programs in faith-based schools can serve as extensions of the church and are uniquely poised to prepare students for the distinctive niche that they will fill in the world.

Because the local church may not be sensitive to the issues that confront believers who are enjoined to a professional set of ethics in addition to moral obligations as disciples of Christ, fellow believers who share a similar call can help one another understand what it means to “work out [their] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2: 12). Consequently, in addition to its academic objectives to prepare competent social work practitioners, the social work program in a Christian setting has a responsibility to stimulate the discovery of students’ individual callings and to facilitate their preparation by functioning as a community of believers, i.e., as an extension of the church. Within a Christian education, academic preparedness should be paired with the development of habits, rituals, and liturgies that facilitate spiritually integrated practice, authenticity, and connectedness with God (Holmes, 1987; Smith, 2009).

Spiritually Integrated Social Work Practice

Recently, the profession has provided some models for spiritually integrated social work practice that make room for a program of education that fosters the spirituality of the social worker and acknowledges the centrality of spirituality to human experience. Dezerotes (2006) provides a broad-based model for spiritually integrated social work practice, with spirituality as the foundation for change. According to Dezerotes, “in spiritually oriented social work, the practitioner sees herself as a healer, but understands that the deepest healing happens on a spiritual level, and that she is most effective as she partners with Creative Spirit in the helping process” (p. 9). While many practitioners would not claim to see themselves as “healers,” the idea of partnership with the numinous in the process of bringing healing to the hurting is certainly consistent with a biblical worldview (Ps. 34:18; Ps. 147:3; Is. 40:1; Lk. 4:18). Assuming that this is a valid practice model, how do we prepare students to collaborate with what Dezerotes calls “Creative Spirit?” (p. 9).

Secondly, how do we cultivate the moral character necessary for graduates not only to use spirituality with what Roeder (2002) calls an “honorable spirit” as they discriminate between the appropriate and inappropriate use of spirituality but also to act ethically on behalf of clients, colleagues, and

society? Although the majority of teaching on ethics is focused on rational decision making models, there is little support for the idea that social workers rely on decision making models when faced with ethical dilemmas. Over the last three decades, numerous studies have concluded that social work practitioners rarely support their clinical decisions with empirical evidence or theory (Gambrell, 1990; Hudson, 1990; Osmond & O'Connor, 2006; Rosen, Proctor, Morrow-Howell and Staudt, 1995). Instead, social workers tend to make decisions intuitively. Osmo and Landau (2006) found that 30% of participants did not justify their ethical choices at all. This is not unique to social workers. According to Wells (2004), "The vast majority of the things people do in life they do, not because they decide to do them, but because of the kinds of people they are. They do them by habit rather than by choice" (p. 17). This is supported by recent studies that suggest that the majority of human behavior is determined by habituation (Duhigg, 2012). Habits enable us to deal with the complexity of human existence without having to engage in continuous decision making regarding our courses of action. How then do we cultivate the types of "habits of being" that prepare graduates to add virtue to faith as they follow their callings to social work practice?

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith (2009) provides an articulate argument for moving from a view of education as primarily the dissemination of knowledge and skills, toward a perspective that supports the inclusion of formative practices. Smith, who describes human beings as desiring animals and "embodied actors," rather than "thinking things," contends that it is what we *love* rather than what we *think* that ultimately defines who we become (*italics added*). Our vision of human flourishing is formed by practices and habits that are grounded in affect, as they aim at actualizing our image of ultimate good. Based on research on automaticity, he suggests that practices and rituals, regardless of our intentionality, pair internal responses with external events, and eventually become part of unconscious dispositions that guide behavior. Smith identifies those rituals which are formative and instill a particular view of human flourishing as liturgies. He argues that a distinctly Christian education constitutes a "counter pedagogy" as it intentionally encourages practices of Christian worship to undermine the secular liturgies that pull our desires away from the God and towards alternate views of the ultimate good.

Christian Disciplines as Preparation for Co-Laboring

Cultivating Christian disciplines in the context of a community of practice can provide students with the tools they will need on the life-long journey to effectively integrate their faith with social work practice. While alternately called disciplines, practices, habits, rituals, or liturgies, Christian activities that seek to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit and bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ have been recognized as a staple in the

life of the believer from antiquity (Greenman & Kalantzis, 2010; McIntosh, 2004; Willard, 1988). Christian disciplines work through the principle of indirection: by creating simple habits that are accessible we create space for the inaccessible. For example, while we cannot through direct efforts make ourselves more attuned to God's purposes in our work with clients, we can create space for that to happen by engaging in "reflection." Similarly, developing a habit of volunteering to serve at a homeless shelter is likely to make us better servants. Although by no means exhaustive, I will explore a few of the Christian practices that can readily be encouraged in academic settings to encourage both vertical and horizontal relationships. Contemplative practices such as silence, solitude, and meditation in addition to Sabbath-keeping and charitable reading can be instrumental in beginning and sustaining a collaborative partnership with God as we seek to fulfill His call on our lives. Secondly, based on their fit with an educational model, service or volunteerism, and participation in Christian community are commended as practices that will foster the connectedness of Christian students with others.

Identification with the Calling

A pivotal starting place for developing students' commitment to practices that nurture moral excellence and the ability to co-labor with God is the exploration of students' individual callings and their goodness of fit with a career in social work practice. Because a career in social work will be demanding, stressful, and offer limited external rewards, identification with a calling is crucial to students' ability to persist in the face of frustration and to maintain a focus on "being" rather than "doing" (Trulear, 2007). Using the calling model of social work practice, students can be encouraged to explore the ways in which they have experienced God's call to service (Hugen, 2012). While some students may be able to pinpoint a moment in time in which they experienced a clear sense that God was directing their future, others will need guidance to recognize the signposts along the way. Many experience calling as a sense of "burden" for a vulnerable population or social problem. Trulear (2007) describes the call as "a pristine prodding—an unspoiled urge" which "disturbed our spirit and drove our attention to situations that required divinely led human interventions, and humanly requested divine intervention" (p. 319).

Engaging in reading assignments that explain the concept of calling, followed by reflection on personal experiences, values, and passions can initiate this process. For example, the fourth edition of *Christianity and Social Work: Readings on the integration of Christian faith and social work practice* (Scales and Kelly, 2012) includes two chapters which explore the concept of calling—one describes the model and how it fits with social work practice (Hugen, 2012), while the other explores the experience from the

perspective of Christian students in both secular and Christian educational settings (Scales, Harris, Myers, & Singletary, 2012). Small group discussions with other students to reflect on these readings often generate a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement as they discern the voice of God in their own lives and that of their colleagues, and imagine a future in which He will use their unique life experiences to touch others.

Early in the social work curriculum, I require students to write a personal mission statement that integrates their personal, family, church, vocational, and community commitments. Using Franklin Covey's material (1989), I encourage them to develop a summary statement that captures the essence of their call or life's purpose and the legacy they would like to leave behind. Once completed, I urge them to consult the mission statement on a weekly basis as they make decisions regarding how they will spend time and make commitments. The mission statement becomes a guide for the sort of persons they want to "be" rather than a task list for what they hope to accomplish. I encourage the periodic revision of mission statements as students gain new insights regarding God's call on their lives. By revisiting this concept periodically, students learn to frame their service in terms of calling rather than personal satisfaction or fulfillment.

Nurturing Connectedness with God through Spiritual Practices

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart (Matt. 11:28).

The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learned that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens me morning by morning. He awakens my ear to hear as the learned (Isaiah 50:4).

A critical aspect of spiritually integrated practice is preparing students to be attuned to God's direction in the details of their day-to-day practice and in their work with clients. While learning to hear God's voice is a pervasive theme throughout the bible, deep-seated misgivings within academia of that which is not empirically grounded makes this an unlikely topic for professional preparedness in most programs. Nevertheless, within the profession, constructivists have long argued that "knowing" goes beyond that which is clearly measurable or tangible. Recent publications in the professional literature are indicative of an epistemological shift from post-positivism to the acknowledgement of a meta-physical reality (Birnbbaum, 2008; Graham & Shier, 2009; Hick, 2009; Horton-Parker & Fawcett, 2010; Sherman & Siporin, 2008). In a recent textbook, *Spiritually Oriented Social Work Practice*, Derezotes (2006) encourages practitioners to be attuned with the Spirit in the here and now in order to increase their professional effectiveness. He suggests that this work begins "when the individual learns

how to listen to 'Creative Spirit' through the language of the heart..." (p. 71). While finding a common language to describe spiritual experience is daunting, the model of partnership he suggests is congruent with the Christian model for co-laboring with God.

How do practitioners learn to listen to that inner voice of the Spirit and begin to grow in confidence that they accurately perceive the voice and will of God? According to McIntosh (2004), the practice of discernment provides a centering point for Christian thinking about what we know as truth and how we come to know it. Rogers (1997) defines discernment as the "intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations" (p. 107). Consequently, those practices that facilitate the development of the gift of discernment are at the heart of learning to co-labor with God.

McIntosh proposes a model for discernment in which the discerning life springs from a contemplative mode, extends in a practical mode, and returns to the contemplative. McIntosh describes movement toward contemplation as an apprenticeship of the mind to the divine teaching. In light of this, the disciplines related to contemplative practice are vital for nurturing attunement with God. These include silence, solitude, and meditation. It may also include the prayerful reading of scripture and in eastern traditions, the practice of "mindfulness."

Contemplative Practice and Charitable Reading

Recently, a number of social work publications have encouraged the use of "mindfulness" and meditation in social work practice, and the training of social work students in these practices, providing an avenue for introducing these ideas to students in secular settings (Birnbaum, 2008; Derezotes, 2006; Hick, 2009; Lynn, 2010; Sherman & Siporin, 2008; Turner, 2009; Weaver, 2005). Although "mindfulness" has its origin in Buddhism and Confucianism, it has been likened to the Christian practice of contemplation advocated by Thomas Merton and others (Sherman & Siporin, 2008). While mindfulness requires participants to focus on their breathing in order to become aware of their consciousness and learn the art of simply "being," contemplative practice within the Christian tradition has as its focus the realization of our connection to God. Merton (1971a) claimed that it was the "highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life" (p. 1).

Based on recent research showing positive outcomes using mindfulness-based treatment strategies, Sherman and Siporin (2008) suggest including mindfulness meditation training in the social work curriculum using lecture, demonstration, student role play, and case discussion. Birnbaum (2008) initiated a mindfulness group with social work students in order to help them deal with stress by increasing students' self-awareness and experience of emotional support. Findings indicated that students experienced

greater self-awareness, self-regulation, and gained insights regarding their professional self-concept. Given openness to these strategies, Christian educators in secular settings can encourage students to engage in various forms of contemplative practice such as meditation and mindfulness.

Students in faith-based programs can be introduced to meditation and contemplative practice through a slim Christian classic by Brother Lawrence (1982), *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In the same way that proponents of mindfulness advocate its practice throughout the day, Brother Lawrence suggested maintaining continuous awareness of the presence of God while completing mundane tasks. According to Brother Lawrence,

All we have to do is recognize God as being intimately present within us. Then we may speak directly to Him every time we need to ask for help, to know His will in moments of uncertainty, and to do whatever He wants us to do in a way that pleases Him (p. 19).

Simple and direct, this text could serve as a reference for reading, discussion, and reflection on initiating the process of “practicing God’s presence.” Readings from Thomas Merton’s various works (Merton, 1971a, b, 1998; Merton & Shannon, 2003) could also be incorporated into such an exercise. I recently used Laubach’s (2007) *Letters by a Modern Mystic* as a weekly devotional to encourage students to consider what attunement with God in the midst of service might look like. Laubach recounts his personal spiritual journey in experimenting with living in moment by moment conscious contact with God.

Because some of Laubach’s accounts stretch the imagination of the modern reader, Smith and Shortt’s (2007) insights regarding reading for spiritual growth, as well as Alan Jacob’s (2001) work on charitable reading, provide direction for preparing students to read the materials with humility, and an openness to engaging in the practice rather than simply reading for information. In his unique work, Jacobs suggests that reading as a Christian should be characterized by the law of love. Incorporating the principles of charitable reading into the social work curriculum prepares students not only to be prepared to engage readings on a deeper level, but also creates the habit of greater openness to the perspectives of others. This may be key to preparing students to work charitably with clients whose spiritual experiences do not fit with their own.

Scripture Reading as “Pedagogy of Desire”

Dallas Willard (1997) contends that contemporary Christians’ tendency to dismiss obedience to the teachings of Christ as impractical and irrelevant to daily living, is the single most telling cause for the weakened impact of Christianity in the modern world. Reading scriptures as

a formative rather than informative practice, may serve as an antidote to this modern reality. While bible study and reading is a common staple of Christian living, reading scriptures meditatively is intended to school the heart rather than the mind. Christopher Hall (2010) uses the metaphor of percolation to describe how reading or listening to scriptures slowly, while pondering and reflecting on them allows the words to seep into our souls in a way that begets living into them. This metaphor dovetails with Smith's (2009) description of pedagogies of desire, or practices that shape our desires, dispositions, and identities.

Introducing students to the art of *Lectio Divina*, the ancient Benedictine practice of praying the Scriptures with an ear to hear God's voice in the here and now, can be a starting place for scripture reading as a means of union with God. According to Hall (2010), this process immerses us in the story, reorienting and reforming us. The goal of *Lectio Divina* is the "reshaping of our thoughts and actions through an imitation of Christ grounded in an intense, responsive, receptive reading" (Hall, p.147).

While *Lectio Divina* can be practiced in solitude, it can also be practiced in community, and therefore can be adapted for practice in the classroom. While one student reads a scripture passage slowly and meditatively through twice, other students listen carefully for any phrase or segment that speaks especially to them and then meditate on the phrases for one or two minutes. A second participant then reads the same passage, followed by two or three minutes of silence, during which all are encouraged to reflect on how the content touches their life that day. Students can then share simply without elaboration what they are hearing. A third and final reading of the passage by a new reader is followed by two or three minutes of silence for further reflection and application. Those who are comfortable with sharing what they have "heard" then reflect aloud on what they believe God is calling them to do that day or week. Allowing a few minutes for each person to pray for the person to their right in light of what they have shared completes the process.

Solitude and Silence

Of particular import in developing the ability to "hear" the Spirit are the twin disciplines of solitude and of silence. Throughout the gospels, Jesus sought solitude for seasons of prayer and communion with His Father. Jesus taught, "A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). Therefore, if He who was given the Spirit without measure (John 3:34) did not take his connectedness with God for granted, how much more do we with feet of clay require time alone with God to challenge our self-reliance, recharge our batteries, and connect with our source of Life and Light? While seasons of solitude may be brief or extended, contemporary students, who rarely find

occasion to be alone or to disconnect from the constant barrage of social media, can be encouraged to intentionally incorporate times of solitude into their life of worship. This can range from setting small increments of time for solitude on a daily basis to engaging in weekend retreats, for the more practiced.

A closely related discipline is that of silence. Willard describes this discipline as closing “off our souls from ‘sounds’ whether those sounds be noise, music, or words” (1988, p. 163). In an age characterized by continuous distraction, constant connections via technology, and unremitting information overload, silence has the power to upend our sense of balance and control as few things can. Millennials, in particular, are noted for their voracious appetite for electronically mediated connections, having at their disposal a constant flow of information and virtual interaction via cell phones, PDAs, the internet, and social networking programs. Maggie Jackson (2008), in a penetrating expose of our attention deficit oriented society, foresees the coming of a dark age predicated on the loss of attention and the attendant relational deficits characteristic of the current generation. Nicholas Carr (2010) corroborates Jackson’s account by addressing the way the use of technology is literally changing the structure of our brains and inhibiting our ability to sustain attention and reflection. This is especially concerning for future “helpers” whose prime directive is “attending.”

Intentionally retreating from the noise of contemporary life provides a rare occasion for restoring connection with the self and with God. Students can be asked to enter into brief voluntary periods of solitude and silence—disconnecting cell phones, MP3s, computers, and the like. Connecting this challenge with reflective writing can help students explore the unanticipated hurdles and surprises that such an exercise is likely to present.

Christian educators in secular settings can encourage students to engage in the various forms of contemplative practice most in keeping with their own traditions. Those in faith-based settings can provide instruction in the use of spiritual disciplines related to opening oneself to conscious contact with God through the disciplines of solitude, silence, and meditation.

In recent years, as part of the requirements for an Integrating Faith in Social Work Practice class, I have begun to require students to adopt a spiritual discipline for the semester that is new to them and journal regarding their experience. This semester a student who had previously been on mission trips where she experienced increased sensitivity to God and others while disconnected from her American addiction to incessant activity and technology-mediated connections chose to disconnect and engage in silence and solitude. She reflected on her experience:

My mind. Always racing. Always running ahead of the pace of life that is necessary for me to live in the moment. When is lunch? What am I doing tonight? What could I be doing

right now? In the coolness of the wind I hear those words again. Stop. Just be. Is it possible to live a life of schedule and routine and to stop and just be? Or do I have to go to another continent to have a minute of solitude? Stillness. Simplicity. Silence. Peace. How God? I ask. How do I live a life of stillness and peace in a society of noise and busyness?

Sabbath Keeping

Be still and know that I am God (Ps. 46:10).

Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest (Mt. 11:28).

A major biblical ritual that modern Christians have largely abandoned is that of Sabbath keeping; however, the observance of Sabbath has important ramifications as a self-care strategy to deal with social workers' job-related stress, fatigue, and burnout (Collins, 2005). The high emotional cost of caring paid by those in the helping professions, has led to the coining of the term "compassion fatigue" to describe the burnout that is often experienced by those who work in environments characterized by crises and emotionally troubling situations (Adams, Figley, & Boscarino, 2008; Bride & Figley, 2007; Fahy, 2007; Radey & Figley, 2007).

In *The Rest of God*, Buchanan (2006) provides an excellent rationale for the keeping of Sabbath as an antidote to the overwhelming busyness, anxiety, and compulsive activity of contemporary society. Using Sabbath metaphorically as an attitude more than a given day, he speaks persuasively of our urgent need for rest in order have a proper perspective on our humanity, our work, and our relationship to self, to God, and to others. Keeping Sabbath, i.e., a period of cessation of work, if framed as a gift rather than a duty, can do much to nourish a grateful connection to God and to restore connections with critical relationships that are often neglected because of our obsession with work. From a calling perspective, encouraging students to incorporate Sabbath as a spiritual practice puts the responsibility for the fulfillment of the call back on God, allowing social workers to rest in his sovereignty and ability to fill in the gaps. Presenting Sabbath keeping to students as a challenge and strategy for self-care and spiritual development will prepare them to develop a right perspective regarding work and worship.

A student who chose to adopt Sabbath keeping for the semester reflected

I have realized that it is more selfless to take time and rest than it is to try to fill it with completing a list of tasks....I know things will continue to be busy, but I better under-

stand the importance of stepping back and taking a break. I know the world will continue on with or without my work for one day so I might as well take the time I need to rest and rejuvenate in order to give the world my best the other six days of the week.

Nurturing Connections with Others

While the previously discussed practices are focused on nurturing our connections with God, other Christian disciplines strengthen the believers' commitment to and responsibility for serving and edifying others. Old and New Testament Scripture directs God's people to engage in practices such as hospitality, almsgiving, visiting the sick, and maintaining fellowship with other believers. For examples, see Matthew 25: 34-43; Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13: 16; Matt. 6: 2-4; and Heb. 10:25. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on two important disciplines, which encompass our responsibility to the world around us and to the community of faith.

Service

A vital aspect of developing a community of practice is working together outside the classroom. Volunteerism and service learning opportunities, which allow students to serve others and to practice the Christian virtues of compassion, humility, and service, are excellent pedagogical tools to help prepare students to co-labor with God. Preparing students for the experience by encouraging them to pray together for God's presence and for their availability to His Spirit can foster an attitude of expectancy and wonder. Likewise, encouraging an attitude of practicing God's presence while they play with children, paint walls, gather trash, or serve meals may change their perspective and transform otherwise mundane activities into acts of worship.

Key scriptures for meditation prior to service are those in which Jesus indicated that to serve the least esteemed person, was in fact, to give service to Him. In Matthew 18: 5, he says, "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me." Again, in Matthew 25:31-46, He claimed that those who fed, clothed, or visited the "least of these" had actually served Him. Reframing service learning opportunities in terms of service to Christ can transform the experience of seemingly insignificant tasks to opportunities for grace to flow.

Based on theories of symbolic interaction, Forte (1997) argues that engaging in volunteerism promotes altruism and communal bonding. In order to achieve these outcomes, however, Forte contends that the volunteer experience should meet certain criteria. Based on Mead's theory that communities develop humane democratic values as they work together

to address common problems (1964, as cited by Forte, 1997), the activity must create norms or expectations for pro-social behavior. Secondly, it must encourage role-taking or “sympathetic identification with the other.” Finally, the experience must lead to psychosocial transformations that encourage a change in their view of themselves and an ongoing commitment to engage in volunteerism or other community building activities. This occurs as students develop a sense of the importance of volunteerism as members of a community and of the congruence between their general self-image and the volunteer role.

To test this theory, Forte (1997) intentionally fostered these conditions in a service learning project that involved social work students in serving the homeless. At the end of the semester, he found students had higher levels of altruism, higher perceived community expectations, higher network expectations, greater role-taking range, greater empathic concern, higher personal expectations, higher image/role identity correspondence, higher role-person merger, more planned volunteer hours, and greater probability of volunteering in the future. These promising results indicate that providing structured opportunities for community service can do a great deal to foster virtue and spiritual growth in students. The same results may not be possible from internship opportunities, which although unpaid, are required for graduation, and perceived as preparation for professional practice, rather than the voluntary giving of one’s time to benefit the community.

Participation in Community

According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954), “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ” (p. 21), meaning that our relationships to each other are mediated through the person of Christ. Rather than placing demands and expectations on other believers to fulfill one’s needs, we relate to one another as if we were relating to Christ. Bonhoeffer separates the individual’s wish dream for ideal community from the divine *reality* of community. Assigning the small book, *Life Together* (1954a), as a basis for understanding the believers’ role in the church can prepare students to deal with the inevitable disillusionment that will come in their dealings with other believers. Often, those who have experienced a call on their lives are offended when other believers are not as enthusiastic about the specific burden they feel for a particular people group or do not recognize the call on their lives. Initial idealism can be tempered by submitting their call to a local body of believers in reverence to Christ. This text can also provide a Christian context for promoting individual self-determination, as he discourages assuming that we must influence others to meet our ideal.

In the spirit of the Christian disciplines, I have begun to frame small group activities in the context of participation in community. In a society characterized by rampant individualism and consumerism, students tend

to see their participation in education as a solo enterprise with little tolerance for the needs of others. Encouraging students “to serve one another in love” (Gal 5:13, NIV) proves to be both a test and an opportunity for spiritual growth. In the practice course that focuses on groups, I assign groups for the semester and frame the experience in terms of their Christian responsibility to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2, NKJV) and “look out not only for your own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4, NKJV). While I encounter a great deal of resistance at the beginning of the semester as students worry about the impact on grades, by the end of the term, the vast majority of students are grateful for the opportunities they have had to interact with others they would not otherwise have interacted with and to make room for each other’s strengths and idiosyncrasies. Many of them say that in spite of the fact that they are in a Christian university, they had never considered that their participation in group activities had anything to do with their Christian service. Promoting group activities which encourage accountability for one another and discourage a “Survival” mentality becomes a formative experience that encourages the development of “communities of practice” in which students learn from one another.

Conclusion

Christians who enter social work programs in response to a “call” to serve God and humanity through professional social work practice can understand themselves as co-laborers with God to accomplish His redemptive purposes. Learning to grow into that role requires the intentional fostering of requisite virtues such as discernment, humility, compassion, and brotherly love. Such spiritual formation is a life-long journey involving an ongoing commitment to reflection, self-awareness, and efforts to connect with the source of our faith to find strength, wisdom, and joy for the work of serving others. Equally important is a commitment to character development through service and the development of community, which I have only briefly addressed. My primary focus was on those practices that may serve to increase students’ preparedness for collaboration with the God who called them to accomplish His purposes on earth. Although these suggestions are by no means exhaustive, they present a basic structure for what may reasonably be incorporated into the curriculum of a social work program within a faith-based setting. Because the majority of social work programs in Christian settings are baccalaureate programs, these suggestions are best adapted to the undergraduate level, where they can be integrated throughout the curriculum and culminated in a discrete course on the integration of faith and practice. Ethical decision making with a focus on negotiating the tensions inherent in faith-based practice in secular settings or professional practice in ministry settings should be

addressed in an upper division course based on the foundation of spiritual growth and development. Creating a community of practice based on mutual support and encouragement in the Christian disciplines will foster students' connectedness with God, thus growing in virtue (2 Pet. 1:5-8), bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and performing His will as they learn to co-labor with God. ❖

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