



North American Association of Christians in Social Work

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## NACSW Unity in Diversity Statement

*This statement on unity and diversity has recently been developed by the NACSW board as a way to reaffirm NACSW's longstanding policy of being a place where Christians in social work hold Christ at the center and from there engage one another from the diversity and depth of our various theological and denominational traditions, learning from and challenging one another.*

For more than 60 years, the North American Association of Christians in Social Workers has sought to equip its members to integrate Christian faith and professional social work practice. At the core of this mission is the conviction that our witness as Christians in what is often characterized as a secular profession is stronger and more vibrant when it comes from a place of unity.

This unity is first and foremost a gift. It is a gift from our Creator made possible by the grace of our Savior and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. As the psalmist (133: 1) says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"

When our association is at its very best, we are living into Dr. King's vision of the "beloved community." We hope that you will experience this deep sense of community, a foretaste of the ultimate flourishing, the *shalom*, of the Kingdom of God. We hope that as we walk hand in hand in this mission, all around us will know we are Christians by our love.

At NACSW we celebrate our unity by engaging with one another from the depth of our theological and denominational traditions. We want more than a mere Christianity. The collective wisdom of our various traditions is also a gift, and a gift we offer to one another. We come from many faith traditions, but each of these traditions reveals something of the character of the Triune God to us, each of these traditions is part of the body of Christ. As social workers we affirm and delight in the unique strengths embodied in our faith communities. We understand that we learn the most from one another when we enter conversation as whole selves.

This unity, however, is both a gift and an earnest calling from our Lord. We lament the collective failings of our traditions to live out the unity Christ has called us to. We acknowledge that sometimes Christians have pursued unity through assimilation and domination. The call to unity must never be separated from the call for truth and the call for justice. In situations of oppression, unity without truth and repentance is not unity. The call for unity can ring hollow because of the pain of both present and past betrayal.

It is one such dark moment of pain and betrayal that we find Christ calling for unity. On the night he was arrested, before Judas betrayed his teacher and friend, before Peter struck out in anger with his sword and denied his Lord, Jesus prayed for unity.

The prayer is the culmination of his “high priestly prayer,” recorded in the book of John. Jesus knows that the end of his earthly ministry is near and that his time is short. In Chapter 15:15 Jesus tells his disciples that, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you,” and commands them (15:12) “Love each other as I have loved you,” and then again to (15:17) “Love each other.” In Chapter 16, as dusk falls over the Kidron Valley, which he will shortly cross into the garden of Gethsemane, he prays for his disciples. Then there is this passage (17: 20-23):

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Unity is no easy task. We live in an increasingly fractured and contentious world, where the demands of our various tribal identities for purity within the group and opposition to those outside the group are loud and persistent. Political parties, religions, denominations, ethnic groups, sexual identities, and professions clamor to tell us who we are and who we are against. At NACSW we believe that in the midst of this it is all the more important to remember that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and that ultimately those from every nation, tribe, people, and language will stand before the throne and before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).

So, at NACSW we pursue the unity of the body of Christ through worship and prayer, but we also pursue it through hard conversations about topics on which people of good faith disagree adamantly. We do not shy away from conversations about politics, sexual orientation, immigration, gender identity and expression, the Black Lives Matter movement, abortion, or decisions at the end of life. We are, after all, both Christians and social workers. We listen, we affirm, we recognize the dignity and worth in all people, we empathize and seek to truly understand even when we do not and cannot agree. We love one another.

While a 24-hour news cycle and the echo chambers of social media may have amplified the voices of disunity, the church has always struggled to live into the calling Jesus gives us to unity. There were early debates about food, ethnic discrimination in welfare, circumcision, and many other issues. Paul participated in many of these debates (and not always with kind words; see his debate with Cephas/Peter in Galatians 2 and his anger at all of the church in Galatia in the next chapter). Yet he writes to the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 4: 2-6):

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

We believe that our organization is better when it holds Christ at the center, the very core of our work, then when we create a perimeter of beliefs, a wall inside which are the good and over which we will not cross. At NACSW we are not bound together by political party, denomination, ethnicity, language, or even our profession. We pursue conversation, not necessarily consensus. Ultimately, we are bound together by Christ. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:16, "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." We invite you to be a part of this work as we seek to integrate Christian faith and professional social work practice.