

Integrating Faith and Social Work: The “So What?” Question

Often when I speak to friends and colleagues about NACSW – especially to people outside of the faith community

– I am asked the “so what?” question: why does NACSW spend so much time and effort exploring the connection between faith and social work? Often underneath this question is

the assumption that faith is something one practices on Sunday mornings, and social work is something one practices between Monday through Friday - and never the twain shall meet. But whenever and for whatever reason this “so what” question comes up, it reminds me why bringing faith and social work has been so important to me – at least important enough to commit almost 20 years to working for NACSW! In this column, I would like to offer 5 reasons that resonate for me in response to this “so what” question.

Reason One: First of all, many Christians in social work share the conviction that the thoughtful, sensitive integration of faith and social work offers the potential of generating a rich *synergy* that can add considerable value to both our work *and* our faith. Synergy in this context refers to: “two or more things working together in order to create something that is bigger or greater than the sum of their individual efforts” (“Synergy”, 2014b). From this perspective, a key benefit of the integration of faith and social work is that it has the potential to contribute to outcomes (that is, the accomplishment of valued goals for clients and communities, as well as growth in faith and faithfulness for social workers) that are potentially greater than the sum of what can be achieved through just social work or faith on their own.

Reason Two: For many Christians in social work, their faith is a powerful asset that provides motivation, sustenance, and resilience, and strengthens their ability to cope with the many challenges and stress associated with being a social worker. Put another way, for many people of faith,



Rick Chamiec-Case

integration involves tapping the resources of their faith to be the best social workers they can be – resources that can be especially valuable when the going gets tough, as it often does in social work.

Reason Three: Many Christians in social work believe that the content of their faith provides perspective and unique insight (for example, about the human condition) that is not part of their social work training, but which can be extremely helpful when applied thoughtfully to social work practice: <Christians> believe that in the person of Jesus, in the text of the Bible, and in the historical experience of the Church God has revealed important truths that would otherwise be largely hidden from view” (Jacobson & Jacobson, 2004, p. 28)

The same can be said about social work, which provides perspective and unique insight which can be extremely helpful in supporting Christians’ efforts to understand and live out their faith (for example, when seeing up close the pain and marginalization of our clients enables us to understand faith’s compelling call to serve the “least of these” (Matthew 25) in a deeper and more powerful way).

Reason Four: There has been a growing recognition within the social work profession in recent years regarding the importance of spiritually sensitive practice, which includes a commitment to competently assessing and incorporating (when indicated) clients’ spiritual beliefs and values in our practice. In a recent study, Oxhandler et al. found that one of only two variables significantly related with social workers addressing clients’ spirituality and religion in clinical social work practice is the intrinsic religiosity of social workers themselves (H. K. Oxhandler, Parrish, Torres, & Achenbaum, In press). In Oxhandler’s study, the degree to which one’s religious or spiritual beliefs carry over into all areas of the social worker’s life (including professional practice) had the highest correlation with the integration of clients’ religion/spirituality in practice. This finding confirms social workers’ intrinsic religiosity as a critical predictor for the integration of clients’ religion/spirituality in practice, a crucial component of spiritually sensitive social work practice.

Reason Five: Finally, for many Christians in social work, faith forms a core

part of their identities, and as such is not something that can simply be “checked at the door” when they practice social work. Attempts to bracket their faith as they engage in social work often feel forced and stilted, and potentially contribute to social workers feeling inauthentic and/or leading to an unsatisfying and counter-productive disconnect between their personal and professional selves:

... if we have any hope of becoming psychologically healthy human beings, we must integrate every aspect of our lives around a core identity that stands at the center of our self-understanding. It simply will not do for one dimension of my life to run in one direction while other dimensions of my life run in radically different directions (Hughes, 2005, p. xv). . . . I must find some way to integrate these . . . core dimensions that define who I am at the most basic levels of my life” (Hughes, 2005, p. 97)

Bottom line, Christians in social work - like all persons regardless of their worldviews –cannot avoid seeking integrity, authenticity, wholeness and continuity between their overall body of core beliefs on the one hand, and their actions on the other (Wolterstorff, 1984). As such, the question is not *whether* the faith of Christians in social work interacts with their social work practice, but rather how *thoughtfully, competently, and ethically* Christians in social work handle these interactions.

So these are some of the most important reasons why integrating faith and social work has meant a lot to me through the years. What about for you? I’d love to hear some of your reasons why *you* are interested in bringing faith and social work together!

References

- Hughes, R. T. (2005). *The vocation of a Christian scholar: How Christian faith can sustain the life of the mind* (Revised Edition ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Jacobson, D., & Jacobson, R. (2004). *Scholarship and Christian faith: Enlarging the conversation*. New York: Oxford.
- Oxhandler, H. K., Parrish, D. E., Torres, L. T., & Achenbaum, W. A. (In press). The

continued on page 6

Where Our True Citizenship Lies

“...they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”
Heb. 11:16

My husband and I just purchased a lovely house in Georgia, right outside of Atlanta. Our summer has been filled with the emotional roller coaster of a hot real estate market and the fury of preparing to move.

Many things go along with a home purchase, but the driving force for us was the knowledge that we would soon live and be in the place we’d hoped for – the place I decorated a thousand times in my mind, the place where we imagined hosting family dinners and church gatherings, the place where we pray our family will grow and thrive.

In looking toward that future place, we soon began to release our emotional attachment to our previous home. We had certain plans for projects, but now that we knew we would not be there much longer, we began to shift the focus of our time and energies. In packing up, we started re-evaluating our need for certain items, keeping only the things we decided should permanently belong in the new house.

God has blessed us with a wonderful family, church and community. We had so much encouragement and support in the six week long process that seemed (to us) to last forever. On moving day and the few days after we had many people show up to help, offer meals and enthusiastically congratulate us on our new home.

On a quiet evening (before cable and internet were up and running again), I sat still in our new living room. I wanted to fully appreciate the feeling of being home, this place I’ve looked forward to, dreamed about, hope for. I felt such contentment and gratitude. Also in that moment at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, I began to imagine and have some small inkling of

appreciation for what it will be like to enter into our eternal home in heaven. Similarly there is the wait, the arrival, the welcome and the rest, but on a level that is so much deeper and ultimately satisfying.

In reflecting on this earthly journey we have just traveled, this process of leaving one home for another, loosing old ties for new ones, I’ve come to a place of remembering a couple of important kingdom principles. The first is that God uses the ordinary things, people and experiences, to teach us extraordinary truths (1 Cor. 1:26-29). The second is remembering that I am a sojourner, for now (Phil. 3:20).

As a Texas native, I can identify with being from a place where one always hopes to eventually return. Until then, I (maybe a little too much) talk like a Texan and cling to those cultural aspects of my identity that were shaped by growing up there.

So then, if I am living and believing like a sojourner, like an Abraham or a Moses, or a person in exile

like John, everything about me ought to reflect the culture and language of the place where my true citizenship lies. I will let go of temporary things and cling to those things (i.e. love, joy, peace, etc.) that belong in the place where I am going. A glint of what that promised homecoming will be like is what helps me sojourn on for now.

Dear Lord, We praise you for the glorious inheritance we are promised through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our living hope! We thank you that even on this earth, we can be home in the presence of your Spirit until we make it that glorious place you’ve prepared for us. As we sojourn together in service, help us remember where our true citizenship lies. Move us to loosen ties to the temporary with renewed affection for all things eternal. Amen.



Shaina Blair

I wanted to fully appreciate the feeling of being home, this place I’ve looked forward to, dreamed about, hoped for.

Audio Conference

continued from page 1

also a member of the CSWE Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity. Mary Anne Poe is the Associate Dean of the School of Social Work at Union University where she has taught since 1996. She is also the Director of the Center for Just and Caring Communities at Union. Mary Anne is a licensed advanced practice social worker (LAPSW), and has served on the editorial board for *Social Work and Christianity* for many years.

Audio conference webinars have been designed so that any person or group can participate simply by calling a telephone number provided by NACSW from any telephone in the US or Canada. In addition, interested participants may simultaneously log on to these sessions from their computers or mobile devices to follow the presenter’s PowerPoint presentation on-line, and engage in interactive chat during the session.

For additional information (including session learning objectives), and/or to register on-line, go to NACSW’s website at <http://www.nacsw.org>, or you can contact the NACSW office tollfree at 888-426-4712 to register on the phone.

Current NACSW members and staff working for NACSW organizational members may participate in this audio conference and earn CEUs at no cost. Friends of NACSW may participate in this session for just \$26 (or \$16 for fulltime students). Participants are eligible to earn 1.25 continuing education contact hours approved by the Association of Social Work Boards by receiving a score of 80% or better on a short twelve-question quiz based on the material covered in the conference.

We hope you are able to join us on November 30th for this important audio conference webinar – we encourage you to register today!

Executive Director

continued from page 3

integration of clients’ religion/spirituality in social work practice: A national survey. *Social Work*. Synergy. (2014b). 2014, from <http://www.yourdictionary.com/synergy> Wolterstorff, N. (1984). Integration of faith and science: The very idea. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 3(2), 12-19.