

NACSW and My Professional Identity

“NACSW is where I get my professional identity.” I heard this from a NACSW member

who attended NACSW’s Convention 2014 in Annapolis in the fall. He went on to say that although he was not able to attend every annual convention, and didn’t fully engage with NACSW’s social and print media, nevertheless, NACSW was the professional group with which he most fully identified. The other professional associations to which he could have belonged did not attract him, did not speak to his values, and failed to connect with him at a core level.



Denis Costello

This comment, made in a group discussion at NACSW’s annual meeting, has stayed with me in the subsequent months. It stayed with me as I was questioned by funders to identify the ways a Christian agency might be different from its secular counterpart. On a more personal level, the comment has prompted my own reflection on what it means to be a Christian in social work. I have reflected on

my relationship with NACSW in terms of how my personal and professional identity has been shaped through membership in our association.

I think that all of us have been blessed over the years by the many people who have inspired us, mentored us, encouraged us, challenged us, and called on us to grow into a Christian identity that is wholesome, both for ourselves and for the people around us. These are the people that the late Carlyle Marney called our “balcony people.” In opposition to our “basement people,” who drag us down with self-doubt and self-questioning, our “balcony people” inspire us to growth, courage and initiative. They are the “great cloud of witnesses” that Paul speaks of in Hebrews 12:1. They encourage us to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles” and prompt us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

If we look around our church congregations, I believe that we will find balcony people in the pews right beside us. I think of an elderly couple in my own church whose faithfulness and cheerfulness overcome the challenges of aging and the harsh Canadian winters. I think of the single mother who brings her three-year old to church, even when he can get restless at times. If we take the time to look around, there are many who are our balcony people, even if they don’t know that they are.

One place where I find my balcony people is within NACSW. Even though we sometimes have our differences, I am inspired and encouraged by the many people I meet in our association. I’m always cheered up by the young people who come to our convention with their energy and enthusiasm; my colleagues on the Board, the many members who volunteer for various roles within the association; those who sacrifice their time and talent to present or to blog, even on difficult topics; and all the many members who make our association strong with their prayer and commitment. Together they are a silent but vitally important cloud of witnesses.

So, while NACSW’s mission is to equip our members to ethically integrate Christian faith and social work practice, I think we offer something additional as well. In a world where many voices are competing to be heard, NACSW offers members a forum where each of us can work out our unique, Christian professional identity. We are a diverse group, as our discussions and sometimes even our debates make clear. Yet in the midst of our diversity, over time and with grace-filled reflection, members can find rich support and nurture for forming a strong, enduring professional identity as Christians in social work. For me, this has been one of greatest gifts I have received from membership in NACSW.

Conrad Inducted into the NASW Social Pioneers Program

NACSW is proud to announce that NACSW’s recent Board president, Sister Ann Patrick Conrad, has been inducted into the NASW’s prestigious Social Work Pioneers program, which recognizes “social workers who have blazed trails, challenged concepts and grown to become great mentors” and as such, have been recognized as “role models for future generations of social workers” (NASW News, 2015).

Sister Ann recently retired after decades of service at the National Catholic School of Social Service at The Catholic University of America (CUA). She served in a variety of capacities at CUA, including dean and chair of the MSW Program.

Sister Ann was NACSW’s first Alan Keith-Lucas lecturer in 1997 at our annual convention in New Mexico. She was an early leader introducing topics about religion and spirituality into the professional social work literature, and has been considered to be a leading authority on social work ethics social justice, and human rights within the profession. Ann served on NACSW’s Board of Directors from 2011 – 2013, the last two years as the President of the Board.

Reference: *NASW News* (2015 March, 2015. Vol. 6, No. 3).

