

## PRAYER CORNER

During the 2011 Annual Convention in Pittsburgh there was a Practitioner's Forum to explore how NACSW would better serve practitioners. During the discussion, a student spoke up saying that she had heard a good deal about ethically integrating our Christian faith with our social work practice, but she asked if this could be taught? It was a great question and one that we "older hands" might well consider.



Denis Costello

I'm sure that there are integration seminars in the schools of social work and I would hope that Christian schools would include students' faith as a key element. At the same time, I think that ethically integrating faith and practice is an ongoing feature of our Christian spirituality.

As a manager in a faith-based, family service agency, one of the concerns I have is how to support staff that work with very troubled clients, often with very traumatic stories. I know that we must encourage the well-identified practices of self-care that can reduce the risk of compassion fatigue

or burnout. As a Christian in social work, I know that my spirituality motivates and sustains me. It often is all that gives meaning to much of what I do. At the same time, I wonder whether it is possible to have a spirituality that makes taxing work more nourishing.

I think that one entry point to making our work nourishing is a realization that every meeting has the potential to be a moment of grace. According to Thomas Merton, every event and every moment plants something in our soul (Merton, 1961). Sometimes what is said may be poignant and evoke feelings of deep sadness and compassion. Other times, I may find myself experiencing negative feelings such as distaste, anger or even boredom. I need to be aware of my feelings and alert for possible outcomes such as rescuing the victim or judging the client.

For me, awareness is only a first step if the encounter is to be a nourishing moment of grace. The next step is to hold the person in silent, interior prayer. While listening, I will place us both in the Father's hands. This helps remind me that what is happening is God's work and the client's work; I am only an "earthen vessel" (2Cor.4:7). Given my driven, perfectionist nature, this helps slow me down! I become able to sit with the person and let them find their way.

Of course, such practices do not mean

that I don't get hooked in a different direction regularly. Indeed, I find myself needing to hold the person in prayer precisely because I find myself in a negative stance towards the other. Good spiritual practices do not make us invulnerable to our sinful side, but they do give us a way of addressing that side. This addressing can take place during the meeting, but often I find that such negative reactions need to be brought to prayer later and even discussed with a soul friend.

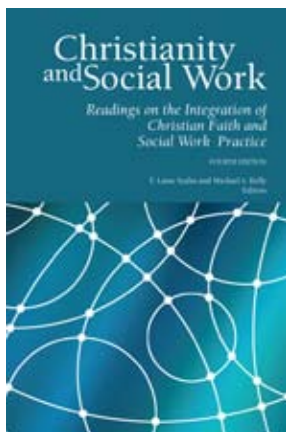
I offer this as just one practice that has helped me integrate my Christian faith with my social work practice. I look forward to hearing what others have done in their journey of integration. As a wise colleague pointed out, "Given our human nature, and our hubris, we all will overstretch ourselves from time to time. None of us will be immune to some form of burnout, compassion fatigue or simple exhaustion." Our Christian faith does not insure us to the suffering we witness as social workers, but it gives us a way to make it a moment of grace. I think that in sharing our journey with each other we may teach and learn from each other how to better integrate our faith and our practice.

### Reference

Merton, T. (1961) *New seeds of contemplation*. New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Company.

## NACSW's Newest Publication

NACSW is pleased to announce that the 4th edition of its best-selling textbook, *Christianity and Social Work: Readings on the Integration of Christian Faith and Social Work Practice*, will soon be available in both on-line and hard copy versions. Edited by NACSW members Laine Scales and Michael Kelly, the 4th edition of *Christianity and Social Work* contains 6 brand new chapters, including a new chapter on issues regarding sexual orientation, Evidence Based Practice (EBP), and ethical issues related to the integration of faith and practice, as well as an enhanced section on the role of Christianity in social welfare history.



The first edition of *Christianity and Social Work* was published in 1998 in recognition that one of the developments in social work in the second half of the 20th century has been the marked decline in the impact of the Christian religion in the teaching and practice of professional social work. The secularization of the social work profession - along with the notion that religion in both an ideological and institutional sense has little or no part in forming or informing the world of social work - has been extensive.

As a result, many social workers in the 21st century want to know what role Christian faith plays in the social work

profession. The purpose of this book through all 4 editions has been to help respond to this question. The 4th edition of *Christianity and Social Work* is intended for a variety of audiences, including social work practitioners, educators, and students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The book is organized so that it can be used as training or reference materials for practitioners, or as a textbook or supplemental reading in a social work class. Readings address a breadth of curriculum areas and responds to the revised Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) as outlined by the Council on Social Work Education. Chapters feature topics relevant to social welfare history, human behavior and the social environment, social policy, and practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

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