

Congregational Social Work

Christian Perspectives

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Preface

This book was written backward. We began writing a book to report on a research project we designed to describe the field of congregational social work. As we wrote our findings, however, the manuscript grew into a much broader description of this field as we reflected backward on (1) what we have learned from our own professional experiences; (2) our understanding of the culture of congregations developed from living more than six decades grounded in congregational life; (3) what our students have taught us as they have practiced social work in congregational settings; and (4) what we have most recently learned in our field research.¹

Congregational social work has been around since the beginning of the social work profession, but very little ink has been used to describe or define it. We define congregational social work as providing social work services in and through a religious congregation, whether the employer is the congregation itself or a social service or denominational agency working in collaboration with congregations. Over a three-year period, with a generous grant from the Louisville Institute, we interviewed a convenience sample of 51 congregational social workers to develop a full-orbed description of congregational social work.

As we studied the stories these congregational social workers² told us about their work, we came to understand that congregational social work is a field of practice as diverse as the social work profession itself. The congregational social workers we interviewed serve people in poverty and people who are not. They work with young children and pregnant women; they work with older adults and families grieving the death of a member; and they work with individuals and families in all the stages between birth and death. They provide crisis intervention and counseling and prevention services; they lead support and educational groups; they train members in service; and they organize and lead community development programs in their congregations' neighborhoods and on the other side of the world. As congregational leaders, their work has taken them into the fields of health and mental health, child and family services, aging services, economic and social development, criminal justice, community development, and education. Moreover, we discovered that many of these social workers lead worship and Christian education, preach and teach Bible studies, and weave congregations into communities of support and care.

Their stories caused us to reflect on the 40 years of each of our own professional lives in which we have both worked in and consulted with congregations, religiously affiliated organizations, denominational agencies, and Christian schools of social work. As we learned about the work of these social workers, we developed new frames for seeing our own experiences. We had expected simply to tell their stories, and did not expect to have our understanding so dramatically altered as we studied the stories of 51 social workers finding their way into this field of practice and how they grew and changed as they served. As we listened, we felt the tug of connection to our own stories that surprised us.

We also began to reflect back onto other research we have conducted with congregations, on our experiences as denominational employees, as consultants with congregations, as well as teaching and supervising congregational social workers. We backed into writing a much broader book than we set out to write, based on our own experiences as well as our research.

Through the stories of these social workers as well as our own, this book will attempt to define how social work in the setting of a congregation is both like other settings where social workers serve as well as how congregations are unique settings for doing social work. We have shared our experiences with you, our understanding of what those experiences have taught us about working with congregations, and the meaning we have found in Christian scriptures for understanding our work. This book is a mix of reporting what *is*, that is, what we learned as the actual realities of social work practice from several of our research projects, with our own opinions of what *ought to be*, or our own distillation of what we have formed into principles for practice.

We interviewed social workers in a wide range of congregations from different traditions and worldviews. The social workers in these diverse settings have defined their practice in very different ways and probably would differ with one another—and with us—on any number of issues. We will try to express their voices as well as our own—and to be clear when those voices differ. We do not agree with how all these social workers have squared their work with best professional practices and the ethics of the profession, and no doubt, they would disagree with one another. You may disagree with us as well. We encourage you to read this book critically. We hope that you will use our work to craft a vision for what congregational social work can be in your faith tradition and community.

We set out to define this field across religions, hoping to interview social workers in not only Christian congregations but also those in other traditions as well. One social worker in a synagogue volunteered for the project. We have included what we learned from her. The remainder of the sample consisted of social workers in Christian congregations. As we steeped ourselves in their stories, we realized that it was enough of a challenge to describe congregational social work from a Christian perspective,

one where our own professional experiences have occurred. We found it important to ground our work in our understanding of the culture of Christian congregations and our knowledge of Christian history and texts. We trust others to determine far better than we can what we have done and said that is adaptable in other religious contexts.

We are grateful for the lives of C. Anne Davis, Alan Keith-Lucas, and David Sherwood. We were privileged to work with each of them, and to learn from them. They were our colleagues as well as courageous pioneers in defining social work from a Christian worldview. Their work provided the foundations for our understanding of the relationship of social work and Christian faith, and for our understanding of social work practice in a congregational setting. We continue to use their work to teach our students about the ethical integration of Christian faith and social work practice, and about the church as a context for social work practice. Anne and Keith have preceded us into the next life, and were no doubt welcomed as good and faithful servants; we miss them. David Sherwood continues to be our faithful friend, and we are grateful for the care and encouragement he gave us in reading and editing the manuscript.

We are grateful for our dear friends and colleagues Ellen Netting, Helen Harris, and Michael Kelly, who carefully read the manuscript from their differing perspectives, giving us the gift of their encouragement, insight, and critique.

Class after class of our students read drafts of early chapters as course readings and gave us their thoughts. We are particularly grateful to our graduate assistants: Laurel Cluthe, Adreanne Dugger, Jessica Fancher, Bethany Molinar, and Emily Mosher. They have helped with interviews, emails, telephone calls, setting up spreadsheets and maintaining data bases, doing literature reviews, helping create presentations, and indexing. Their collective work has been invaluable to us.

Terry Wolfer took on the arduous task of editing the final manuscript. Terry has been a dear friend for decades and a frequent research partner in several of the research studies described in the book. Several years ago, we enjoyed teaching a course in congregational social at Baylor University, partnered with Terry and a class he was teaching concurrently at University of South Carolina. Teaching and conducting research with Terry have been important contributions to this book, in addition to how we have benefited from his editing. Virtually every page is better because of his wise counsel and engagement with our ideas. At the same time, we sometimes stubbornly ignored his advice, so we bear responsibility for what we have written.

We are grateful to the Louisville Institute that provided us with financial support we needed for the research project that challenged us to write this book.

We are most profoundly grateful to the 51 social workers who shared their professional lives with us, and to the students who have taught us as they learned social work practice in congregational field placements.

Finally, our families have supported and encouraged us. I (Diana) want to thank David Garland, who has been my husband for 44 years and a frequent co-author. David is a New Testament scholar and dean of the George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor. I have benefited immeasurably from his deep biblical knowledge and insight, and I am grateful for how our lives and callings are woven together. We understand firsthand the meaning of the multiple roles that characterize congregational social work that Gaynor and I will describe later in this book—we are colleagues in the workplace, co-authors, consultants together in congregations, friends, co-parents and co-grandparents, and spouses who love one another deeply. Moreover, David is compassionate about the focus that writing a book requires and patient with the more-than-occasional crankiness writing evokes in me.

I (Gaynor) want to thank all of the people in my life (some may call them clients) who have been very patient and taught me, through person to person, person to family, and person to community interactions how to be a social work practitioner with a dual identity as a minister in the context of congregational social work. I am grateful to dear friends and colleagues, in social work and out, who have walked the paths of learning and experience with me. I am grateful for congregations and denominational agencies that have given me freedom to do social work in a congregational and agency context. Most of all, I am grateful to God, for parents who modeled for me what Christian service to, and with, others means.

Despite this wonderful host of friends and family, mentors, colleagues, and editors, responsibilities for the limitations and errors in our thought remain with us. We offer this book to you as a beginning effort. So much more needs to be done. But the time has come to share our thoughts and experiences with you, in the eager hope that you will respond and build upon our work and replace it with greater insight and best practices for congregational social work.

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January 2014