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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

INTEGRATING CHRISTIAN FAITH AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: HOW DO PEOPLE DO IT?

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2008
February, 2008
Orlando, FL**

Introduction

In August of 2005 I began my professional journey as a social worker when I entered the University of South Carolina to pursue my Master of Social Work degree. Having come from both a small Christian high school and a small Christian college, entering a large public university was quite a change. I quickly learned that many people did not understand or accept my faith in Jesus Christ. In an atmosphere where I felt that many people were skeptical of Christian social workers, I found myself trying to reconcile my calling to be a Christ-follower and my calling to be a social worker. After several months of feeling very alone, I began to realize that it was my responsibility to figure out how to reconcile my faith and my profession. I embarked on a journey of self-examination, self-discovery, encouragement, and empowerment which has culminated in this paper.

In embarking on my journey of reconciling my faith and my profession, there were two main things I felt I needed. The first was to find out whether my faith really was compatible with the profession of social work. In this respect I felt that I needed to understand how to defend my place as a Christian in the social work world. It was important for me to have a well-informed understanding of the history of Christians in social work, the reasons for Christian oppression in social work today, and the compatibility of Christian values and social work values. In response to this need, I conducted a search of relevant literature regarding Christianity and social work.

The second thing I felt that I needed was to hear from other Christian social workers. I wanted to hear their stories of acceptance and oppression. I wanted to hear how they integrated their faith and their practice. I wanted to find a network of people who share both my faith and my profession. I wanted to learn from those who have gone on before me and who have been successful in following Christ through social work. More than anything I wanted confirmation that I am not alone. To accomplish this I set out to find Christian social workers throughout the country. I received feedback from numerous social workers, some of which will be discussed later in this paper.

I met Sarah one Sunday at church. She was sitting with two of my social work friends from my program. Sarah had graduated a year earlier from the same program and she agreed to meet with me for an interview. A week later we went to lunch and had a wonderful conversation. Sarah told me that just a week earlier, before she met me and my friends at church, she seriously did not know if there were other Christian social workers out there. The reality of four social workers sitting on the same pew in a church service baffled her and at the same time excited her. I shared that I had felt isolated as well, at least until I began searching for Christian social workers to aid in this project. I have been overjoyed with the response I received from Christians

willing to contribute, because I now know for certain that I am not alone in the world as a Christian in the field of social work.

Literature Review

Christian Roots in Social Work

Pioneering social work began in the mid-nineteenth century in response to industrialization and its effects on society. It was religious settlement workers who began, financed, and staffed these first programs to marginalized inner-city populations (Kreutziger, 1998). Kreutziger posits that the Methodist Episcopal Church (which is now the United Methodist Church) was a front-runner in this early work.

Russel (2006) also identifies this rich history between Christianity and social work by citing Lowenberg (1988), Marty (1980) and Siporin (1986). Russel states:

Spirituality and religion were not foreign concepts in the early years of the profession. The first sponsors of social service programs were religious institutions, and there is evidence that the people who were the early leaders of the settlement house movement and the charity organizations shared a sense of spiritual mission. (p.43).

Not only was early social work practice spiritually grounded, but early social work education recognized the value of spirituality as well. The earliest Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) curriculum standards included issues of spirituality, but those requirements were removed in the 1970s (Russel, 2006).

Hugen (1998) argues that social work originated because of the influence and values of Judeo-Christian traditions as people translated their understanding of their faith into social action. The sense of moral responsibility felt by social work pioneers spurred them into action. Even Jane Addams recognized the vital role Christianity played in the settlement house

movement (Ressler, 1998). According to Huguen, it was not until the 20th century that the profession of social work began secularizing and replacing Judeo-Christian values with the values of natural rights, utilitarianism, and humanistic ideology. Huguen states: “Dealing with human need apart from religious motives and methods is actually a very recent development in the history of charity and philanthropy” (p.92). Sherwood (1998) states that the Christian worldview provides the solid foundation that social workers today often take for granted.

Edward Devine, a leader in the Charity Organization Society and director of one of the first schools of social work, wrote a book in 1939 titled *When Social Work Was Young*. In his book he lists numerous founding mothers and fathers of social work, and he states that they were devoted to the Biblical concepts of doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly (Micah 6:8). According to Huguen (1998), Devine ends his book by stating that “social work finds its power, value, and purpose from the biblical Sermon on the Mount” (p.99).

Religious Oppression in Social Work

The *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (NASW, 1999) states: “Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to...religion” (p.9, 1.05c). Yet, as Hodge (2002) notes, “Few, if any, articles have explored the oppression of religious populations” (p.402). Hodge goes on to examine a number of studies that have shown evidences of Evangelical Christians being denied entry into psychology programs more often than secular students, and professionals in both physical and social sciences discriminating against Evangelical Christians. In a 1999 study by Ressler and Hodge, quantitative results indicated widespread systematic oppression of Evangelical Christians throughout the field of social work, and disproportionately heavy reports of oppression in academic settings (Hodge, 2002). Ressler (1998) states that there is significant

tension in the profession for those who are both spiritual and religious. He also states that, based on a study he conducted in 1997, 67% of social workers who identify themselves as both spiritual and religious report having experienced prejudice or discrimination within the profession.

In an article titled “Faith in the Closet: Reflections of a Secular Academic,” non-religious University of Pennsylvania social work professor Ram A. Cnaan states: “...religious social work students and practitioners often face unintended as well as intended hostility” (p.19). He goes on to cite Hodge (2002, 2003) by stating “Many scholars have noted that the field of social work is unfriendly if not outright hostile toward religion, especially toward people who are overtly proud of their religiosity” (p.19). In addition to examining the profession’s view of religious social work students and practitioners, Cnaan goes further to examine the response of religious people to this hostility. He states:

Social work students and practitioners learn early on that their religious beliefs are stigmatized by those in the profession surrounding them. This stigma leads to the silencing of any talk of religion or spirituality in their practice, thus hindering the full potential of the practitioner-client relationship. It is commonly the case that religious students and practitioners decide to pursue careers in social work due to their religious beliefs; they come to the profession with the desire to live out their faith through social service. However, once they enter social work schools or the profession, the stigma forces them to pretend that they are not religious or they are made to feel as if they need to “prove themselves” to be fair practitioners and academics (pp.22-23).

The most intriguing aspect of this analysis is that it was given by someone who himself claims to not be religious. This shows that the perception of hostility toward religious social workers is not

just a construct in the minds of those who are religious, but is also being observed by those who are not religiously stigmatized themselves.

Sherwood (1998) makes the observation that *every person*, whether Christian or not, or whether social worker or not, operates from some type of worldview. He states: “Everyone operates on the basis of some worldview or faith-based understanding of the universe and persons – examined, or unexamined, implicit or explicit, simplistic or sophisticated” (p.107). If Sherwood is accurate, each individual’s worldview informs his or her practice as a social worker. It simply is not true that Christians are the only social work professionals who have values. Each social worker probably has some values that are compatible with the profession of social work, and other values that seem not as compatible. But this compatibility or incompatibility of values does not necessarily have to center on religious issues. Why then does it seem that Christian students and professionals are singled out?

Compatibility of Christianity and Social Work

Despite the rich history of the integration of Christian faith and social action, it seems that today some people from both the secular and Christian camps believe that Christianity and social work are incompatible. Johnston (1998) states: “People in both worlds want to build walls that separate and divide rather than bridges that connect and support” (p.72). Johnston points out, however, that both Christianity and social work are historically inclusive, not exclusive. While he recognizes that there are tensions between the two, “there are many areas where theology and social work are very much in agreement” (p.72).

Hugen (1998b) identifies four principles that have guided Christians in their motivation to help the poor and less fortunate. These principles include justice, love, self-fulfillment, and responsibility. Sometimes two additional principles are added, including the belief that actions

should produce some sort of good, and the belief that order is needed in society. These motivations do not seem that different from the social work principles of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 1999).

Ressler (1998) goes through each of the six core values and principles of social work (NASW, 1999) and compares them to similar Christian values and principles. The social work value of “Service” is also an extremely important Christian value. Ressler cites Matthew 20:26-28 as a key passage supporting Christian service. In this passage Jesus Christ states that even He came to serve and not to be served.

The second social work principle mentioned, “Social Justice,” also has Biblical roots. Ressler (1998) cites Micah 6:8 to support the Christian view of justice. Micah states that the Lord requires us “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (New International Version).

Third and fourth are the principles of “Dignity and Worth of the Person” and “Importance of Human Relationships.” Ressler (1998) notes that the Christian symbol of the cross is the ultimate reminder of God’s unconditional love. Closely related to Christ’s love for mankind is His command for us to love one another unconditionally (Luke 6:27).

The fifth and sixth social work values are “Integrity” and “Competence.” Ressler (1998) draws parallels between the value of “Integrity” and the command in Ephesians 1:4 for Christians to “be holy.” He appeals to the command in 1 Timothy 5:4 to be beyond reproach as a parallel to these social work values as well.

Increasing Interest in Reintegration

Several authors have noticed a recent increase in interest in the field of social work when it comes to issues of faith and practice. According to Russel (2006), religious content has increased in both social work literature and education over the past fifteen years. Ressler (1998) states: “After decades of neglect, the topic of spirituality has become increasingly popular in social work in recent years” (p.169). Ressler also notes that more people seem to be recognizing how important religion is to both colleagues and clients.

The reality that religion and spirituality are extremely important to a large portion of the American public is a reality social workers need to be able to face in order to provide the best possible services to clients. If spirituality is important to a majority of Americans, social workers need to be comfortable and competent to address spiritual issues. Russel (2006) identifies just how important religion and spirituality may be for the American population:

National opinion polls reveal that 96% believe in God or a higher power (*Pew Religion and Public Life Survey*, 2005); 89% report a belief in heaven, and 85% believe that they will personally go to heaven (ABC News, 2006); 55% report believing in spiritual healing (Gallup Poll, 2005); and 74% believe that the Devil or Satan exists (*Princeton Survey Research*, 2004). (p.49).

Interview Method

In addition to a review of the extant literature on integrating Christian faith and social work practice, a major component of my journey involved interviewing numerous Christian social workers who are practicing in the field throughout the nation. I developed a questionnaire of fifteen open-ended questions. The purpose of the questions was to elicit information and encourage discussion on what it is like to be a Christian in the field of social work, as well as how Christian social workers actively integrate their faith and practice.

I sent a request for interview subjects via three internet listservs – the University of South Carolina social work student listserv, the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) general listserv, and the NACSW ethics listserv. I received names of several other subjects through friends, colleagues, and professors. I conducted two in-person interviews, five phone interviews, and received five written questionnaires.

I grouped similar questions together and identified nine categories of experiences and responses that represent the bulk of the feedback received through the interviews. I will identify these categories below. I will also recount common themes in the testimonies of subjects, as well as other meaningful individual accounts. Some subjects wished to remain anonymous, so those subjects will sometimes be referenced or quoted without identifying their names.

Interview Results

Questions Regarding the Choice to be a Social Worker

Three questions from the questionnaire can be grouped together under this category. The first question is “What made you choose the profession of social work?” The second question is “How does your faith play into your decision to be a social worker?” The third question is two-fold, and reads “Would you consider social work your calling? How do you feel that God is using you as a Christian social worker?” Responses to these questions are grouped together because most interview subjects felt that they were interconnected, and respondents provided overlapping responses to all three questions.

Interview subjects reported a variety of reasons for entering the field of social work, some being religious in nature, and some having little or nothing to do with the subject’s Christian beliefs. A few entered the field as a deliberate way to answer God’s calling on their lives. One subject stated that she could not separate spiritual needs from physical needs, and

social work seemed like a practical way to be a minister and meet both types of needs (L. Gardner, personal communication, 3-7-07). Another subject stated that her Christian faith affects her whole life, and her career is a part of that (anonymous, personal communication, March 2007).

For a majority of subjects the initial ties between their faith and their chosen profession of social work were not quite as obvious. For these subjects, perhaps their faith played more of an informal role in their decision to pursue social work as opposed to a formal role. One subject stated that social work was a “side door” to ministry after he and his wife were prevented from entering the foreign mission field (L. Erb, personal communication, 3-12-07). Dr. Diana Garland, dean of the Baylor University School of Social Work, stated that she did not initially understand the possibility of integrating her Christian faith and social work practice (personal communication, 3-19-07). Now she is a leading voice in the field of Christian social work practitioners and educators. Another subject came into the profession gradually due to numerous life experiences starting in childhood and continuing through college (anonymous, personal communication, 2-28-07).

Still other subjects reported that Christian faith had nothing to do with their decisions to become social workers. Dr. Gene Carnicom reported that he was an atheist at the time he decided to become a social worker. His motivation for entering the profession of social work was to “change the world” through social action (personal communication, 3-7-07).

As can be seen, the motivations of Christians to enter the field of social work are numerous and diverse. Some entered the field of social work deliberately because of their Christian faith. Some entered the field as Christians, but not directly because of their faith. Still others entered the field despite a lack of Christian faith. However, regardless of each individual’s

initial reasons for entering the profession, and regardless of what part (if any) their Christian beliefs played in that initial decision, every single subject showed no hesitation in stating that they now feel social work to be not only a vocational calling, but a spiritual calling as well.

Question Regarding Experiences of Discrimination

Discrimination from within the social work profession. One question on the questionnaire deals with experiences of discrimination of Christian social workers. The question reads: “Have you ever felt attacked or discriminated against as a Christian in the field of social work?” Responses to this question ranged from extremely affirmative to completely negative, with varying degrees of discrimination felt by different individuals. From the sample of twelve subjects, three reported not experiencing any discrimination, five reported experiencing light to moderate discrimination, and four reported severe discrimination.

Of the subjects who reported light to moderate discrimination, instances ranged from being denied the services of a chaplain to being patronized by colleagues. Several subjects reported condescending attitudes from fellow professionals within the field, as well as being stigmatized and considered naïve (L. Gardner, personal communication, 3-7-07). One subject reported feeling inwardly squelched although she was not outwardly discriminated against. She especially felt the pressure to suppress her thoughts in the educational setting of her MSW program (S. Luadzers, personal communication, 2-25-07). Dr. Diana Garland, who has a very favorable view of the field of social work’s acceptance of her Christian values and stance, also reported feeling discrimination from the profession as a student in the 1970s. A theme did seem to emerge around the idea that the divide between the compatibility of Christianity and social work seems greater among educational programs than it does in the professional world.

As was mentioned earlier, four subjects reported experiencing extreme discrimination from the field of social work because of their Christian beliefs. One subject was harassed in the workplace and eventually terminated from her job in the field because of her Christian faith (anonymous, personal communication, March 2007). Another subject reported feeling stifled and frustrated that people seem to pick arguments with her because of her faith. The worst instance of discrimination was when she was given a low grade on a paper in her MSW program because she wrote about her faith (anonymous; personal communication, 3-2-07). When asked this same question, another social worker stated “Absolutely!” She went on to talk about an experience in which a Muslim man was extremely hostile toward her because of her Christian faith. She has also experienced hostility toward speaking about Christianity in the university setting. This same subject requested that her name not be disclosed in this paper for fear that it would cause more hostility toward her if co-workers knew she had contributed (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07).

Dr. Leonard Erb, a professor at Roberts Wesleyan College in New York, stated “I could write a book” when asked if he had ever experienced discrimination as a Christian in the field of social work. In two separate instances, United Way withdrew funding from organizations where he worked because of his organization’s religious ties. Early in his career a United Way worker came to his agency for a site visit, observed a staff member leading devotions, and promptly withdrew funding from the agency. From there, Dr. Erb went to work for the Salvation Army. This time the United Way liaison was anti-Christian, and the agency received a huge funding cut because of the Salvation Army’s religious ties.

In 1995 Dr. Erb began the work of starting a MSW program at Roberts Wesleyan College, a Christian College in Rochester, New York. He reported experiencing unbelievable

religious discrimination from the two major academic institutions in the area (both of which were secular institutions). The two institutions signed a petition, which they sent to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), stating their opposition to Roberts Wesleyan being allowed to house an MSW program because of their religious viewpoints. Erb stated that at that time, CSWE knowingly discriminated against Christians and made it extremely hard for Roberts Wesleyan to begin its program. When the program was finally approved, Erb and his colleagues experienced much discrimination in the field with agencies not allowing Roberts Wesleyan students to apply for field placements because of the college's Christian affiliation (L. Erb, personal communication, 3-12-07).

Support from the social work profession. I am grateful to Dr. Diana Garland for pointing out that this question is somewhat biased because I asked how subjects have been oppressed as Christians in the field of social work, but I did not ask how subjects have felt supported as Christians in the field of social work. Perhaps I did not think to ask this question because I have never personally felt that the profession as a whole supported my Christian identity. But I now know that others have felt supported by the profession and it would be unfair of me to not mention that support. Dr. Garland stated that she feels an openness and invitation from the profession for Christians to provide spiritual direction (personal communication, 3-19-07).

Discrimination from within the Christian church. It would also be a mistake for me to assume that the profession of social work is the only institution that discriminates against Christians who are social workers. Several subjects reported feeling discriminated against by the Christian church for choosing the profession of social work. Dr. Garland taught social work at a seminary for many years until the seminary decided that social work did not belong within the church and eliminated the entire program (personal communication, 3-19-07). Another subject

reported experiencing considerable hostility within the church toward psychoanalysis, which is the subject's preferred method of therapy (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07).

Questions Regarding Christian Values and Social Work Values

Two questions deal with Christian values, social work values, the collision of the two, and how Christian practitioners handle discrepancies. The first question reads: "Do you ever feel like your Christian values and social work values collide? If so, how do you handle those situations?" The second question reads, "Are there ever any situations that you cannot or will not handle because of your faith? If so, how do you go about referring your clients because of your personal faith issues?"

Five subjects reported never experiencing a collision between their Christian values and their social work values. Two subjects reported little conflict or remained neutral. Five subjects reported experiencing or feeling some level of conflict between their Christian values and social work values. Of those who reported some conflict, several stated that there was a greater conflict in school than there has been in the "real world" of social work practice. One subject noted that in school she was taught that "people are inherently good." This conflicts with her understanding of Christian belief that all people are inherently sinful. However, even this discrepancy was only an issue in the classroom and has not affected her practice (anonymous, personal communication, 3-1-07).

Several subjects did express specific conflicts they have experienced in their practices. The most common situation in which interview subjects reported feeling a collision of values involves the issue of abortion. One subject reported working in a setting where he was required to make referrals for abortions. While he did not like this part of his job, he did make the referrals (G. Carnicom, personal communication, 3-7-07). Several other subjects stated that they

would have a hard time dealing with clients who wanted an abortion (S. Luadzers, personal communication, 2-25-07; L. Erb, personal communication, 3-12-07). Luadzers also stated that the major conflict for her between social work and Christianity is that while Christianity teaches us to love everyone, social work teaches that we must *accept* everyone and their behaviors. As a Christian, she feels that she cannot accept something with which God does not agree. However, she also realizes that it is not her place to judge others or to push her beliefs on them. She believes that she must love everyone and not judge them, but she does not have to *accept* their behaviors or the choices they make (S. Luadzers, personal communication, 2-25-07).

In regards to the question of whether there are situations that Christian social workers cannot or will not handle because of their faith, many of the interview subjects stated that there were no such situations. Luadzers stated that almost every social worker has a population that he or she does not feel comfortable working with, so it is not fair for the profession to target Christians (or other religious practitioners) as being biased or prejudiced. For Luadzers, the populations she does not feel comfortable working with are sexual predators and individuals who have committed violent crimes against others. However, she is not opposed to dealing with these populations because of her Christian faith, but because of other life experiences (personal communication, 2-25-07). Several subjects stated that they would have trouble counseling women who want abortions. One subject stated that the only time she would not be comfortable providing services was if her client was a professed Satanist (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07). Gardner stated that she might have trouble working with chauvinists and racists (personal communication, 3-7-07).

Questions Dealing with Choice of Social Work Setting

Two items in the questionnaire deal with the subjects' choices of vocational setting. The first question reads: "If working in a secular setting, why did you choose the position you currently have? Has it been hard working as a Christian social worker in a secular setting?" The second question reads: "If working in a faith-based (Christian) setting, why did you choose to work in such a setting? Do you regret your decision?"

Of the twelve interview subjects, four reported working in a faith-based setting, five reported working in a secular setting, two reported working in both settings, and one reported working in a setting that does not define itself as either faith-based or secular. Of those who reported working in a faith-based setting, two ended up in faith-based settings directly because they felt a call to provide leadership to the church and to serve the church through social work (L. Gardner, personal communication, 3-7-07; D. Garland, personal communication, 3-19-07). One subject reported ending up in a faith-based setting because it just happened that way (L. Erb, personal communication, 3-12-07). The only regret mentioned to working in a faith-based setting was the more intense workload (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07).

Of the five subjects who reported working in a secular setting, one felt specifically called to serve as a Christian in a secular setting. The other four subjects ended up in secular positions because it fit well either with their specific areas of interest or their needs as an employee. Two subjects did state that they found it difficult working as a Christian social worker in a secular setting.

Both of the subjects who reported working in both secular and faith-based settings began their careers in secular settings, and later moved into faith-based social work. One of the subjects especially enjoyed the switch to a faith-based setting because now she feels that she has the freedom to be who she is. As the leader of her organization, she has the freedom to set the

standards and values of the organization. She is careful, however, to preserve the free will and personal choice of clients (anonymous, personal communication, 3-1-07).

The subject who reported working in a neutral (or undefined) setting has a private practice. While she does work predominately with Christians, she does not market herself as a “Christian social worker.” She provides a neutral setting for Christians and non-Christians alike to be themselves and to share their concerns (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07).

Questions Regarding Greatest Challenges and Greatest Joys

Two items in the questionnaire deal with challenging and rewarding experiences of Christian social workers. The first question reads: “What is your greatest challenge as a Christian in the field of social work?” The second question reads: “What is your greatest joy as a Christian in the field of social work?”

Some notable challenges include: maintaining healthy boundaries and taking care of self (L. Gardner, personal communication, 3-7-07), dealing with skeptical Christians (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07), dealing with a broken criminal justice system that does not see a potential for redemption (G. Carnicom, personal communication), maintaining patience and learning not to judge (anonymous, personal communication, March 2007), experiencing prejudice against Christians (S. Luadzars, personal communication, 2-25-07), finding acceptance within the Church (anonymous, personal communication, 2-28-07), and navigating race (L. Erb, personal communication, 3-12-07). Some notable experiences of joy include: seeing the profession recognize the church as a fitting context for practice (D. Garland, personal communication, 3-19-07), being able to share personal experiences of faith and grace when invited by clients to do so (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07), being able to take the burdens of the field to God (anonymous, personal communication, March 2007), being able to

“let things go” and realize we are in the world and not of it (S. Luadzars, personal communication, 2-25-07), learning from people who face horrific life challenges (anonymous, personal communication, March 2007), seeing people become free and use their gifts and talents (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07), and using unique gifts and calling to flesh out faith (L. Gardner, personal communication, 3-7-07).

Question Dealing With Sharing Faith in the Workplace

One item in the questionnaire deals with sharing faith in the workplace. The question reads: “Have you ever been able to use your faith to lead someone in your workplace to Christ (either client or co-worker)?” Seven subjects reported that they had never led anyone to profess faith in Christ in the workplace. Of these subjects most of them stated that they strive to live lives that will point people to Christ, but they do not use the workplace for personal evangelism. One subject stated, “I don’t look for opportunities to proclaim the gospel, and certainly not with clients. If invited into a discussion, I will share” (anonymous, personal communication, 2-28-07). Four subjects reported having had the chance to lead people in the workplace to Christ. Two subjects reported having led co-workers to Christ. Two subjects were non-specific. One of the subjects reported having led clients to faith in Christ in the past, but in retrospect feels like it was not appropriate because of the authority the counselor holds over the client. However, none of the subjects who had shared their faith in the workplace felt that they forced the decision to follow Christ upon others.

Questions Regarding Education and Professional Membership

While most of the items in the questionnaire lend themselves to subjective responses and reports of personal experiences, two items on the questionnaire are more objective. However, these items still leave room for explanation. The first question reads: “Explain your educational

background.” The second questions reads: “Are you a member of any professional associations? Which ones, and why did you choose those particular associations?”

I will not recount every educational degree reported, but will instead note common degrees as well as unique degrees held by individuals currently working as Christians in the field of social work. While coming from a diverse set of undergraduate programs including, but not limited to human development and family studies, communications, sociology, religion, psychology, social welfare, and education, each subject either held or is in the process of obtaining a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree or a Master of Science in Social Work (MSSW) degree. In addition many subjects either possessed additional master’s degrees or doctorate degrees, including but not limited to Master of Divinity, Master of Religious Education, marriage and family therapy, anthropology, and clinical-community psychology.

Christians in the field of social work are also members of numerous and diverse professional organizations. Ten of twelve subjects reported being members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Some reasons given for being a part of NASW include, but are not limited to provision of professional identity, provision of a corporate professional voice, access to the *Social Work* journal, insurance for private practice, and continuing education units.

Eight of twelve subjects reported being a member of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW). Seeing as how many of the interview subjects were recruited through NACSW listservs, this number is not surprising. Some reasons explaining why Christian social workers chose to join NACSW include, but are not limited to the *need* to have fellowship with other Christians in the field, networking in prayer, camaraderie of those who

share the struggle of integrating faith and practice, and support that makes NACSW “feel like home” (L. Gardner, personal communication, 3-7-07).

In additions to NASW and NACSW, interview subjects are also members of numerous professional organizations based on their personal areas of interest and practice. Subjects reported being members of other organizations including the Association of Certified Fundraising Professionals (AFP), the National Association of Evangelicals, the American Association of Christian Counselors, the National Committee of Psychoanalysis, the Pennsylvania Society for Clinical Social Work, the American Psychological Association, the South Carolina Gerontological Society, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the American Public Health Association (APHA), the American Anthropological Association (AAA), and the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation.

Question Regarding Christ’s View of Social Work

One item on the questionnaire reads: “What do you think would be Christ’s view of social work today?” This question evoked a wide range of responses, as it was interpreted different ways by different subjects. Some thought Christ would have a favorable view of social work today. Others thought quite the opposite.

Of those who thought Christ would approve of social work today, one subject stated that he thought Christ would approve of the belief in the “dignity and worth of each person, including the most marginalized among us” (anonymous, personal communication, 2-28-07). Dr. Erb believes that social work fits right in with Christ’s compassion for the outcasts of His day (L. Erb, personal communication, 3-12-07). Another subject believes that Christ would agree with the holistic view of social work (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07). Yet another

stated that Christ would view social work as a way to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) (anonymous, personal communication, March 2007).

Six subjects reported believing Christ would have some type of negative response to social work today. Carnicom stated: “He would confront some behaviors that are accepted by the profession today, especially women’s ‘right to choose’” (G. Carnicom, personal communication, 3-7-07). Another subject believes that Christ judges Christian social workers individually, but as a profession we are “in as much trouble as anyone else” (anonymous, personal communication, 3-1-07). One subject stated that Christ would probably be disappointed that the field has strayed away from its origins as far as larger issues of social justice are concerned (anonymous, personal communication, 2-28-07). Another subject stated: “I think He would wonder why we do not recognize the power we have and act with more courage to show mercy, love, and justice” (anonymous, personal communication, March 2007). Luadzers believes Christ would be “put out” and “frustrated” because the field of social work says it loves and helps, but it really just judges. She stated: “No one is addressing faith. If we can ask them about sex, why can’t we ask them about faith? Social workers are not covering the gamut. We say we’re systems oriented, but we leave out a major system” (personal communication, 2-25-07). Gardner stated that Christ would probably laugh and say “Good try. You haven’t gotten it, but that’s ok.” She also stressed that Christ would encourage Christians to view the Code of Ethics and other guidelines of the profession as just that – *guidelines* – and not the gospel (personal communication, 3-7-07).

Question Dealing With Information Not Covered Elsewhere

The last item in the questionnaire asks if there is anything else subjects wish to share that has not already been covered. The question reads: “Do you have any other comments,

experiences, or thoughts that would aid me in writing a paper on integrating Christian faith and social work practice?” Seven subjects responded with some type of additional comment. Some of the comments were suggestions of other sources to consult or encouragement in my endeavor. Others gave practical advice or added ideas for further consideration. Below are a few of those comments.

Several subjects expounded upon their beliefs that social workers should not use their position as a platform to try to convert people. One subject stated: “. . .he [Jesus] lived a life that had people following him. When people asked ‘What must I do to be saved’ he told them and some walked off and didn’t respond. He let them go” (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07). Another subject reiterated that it is important for Christians not to impose their views, but it is okay to simply tell others about Christ. She also stated that Christians in the field must be careful not to misuse spiritual authority (anonymous, personal communication, 3-2-07).

Dr. Garland encouraged me to point out the openness of the profession and to be cautious not to portray a purely negative view of the profession’s reaction to Christians in the field (personal communication, 3-19-07). Closely related to this advice, another subject encouraged me to pray before I wrote, to pray when I reviewed what I had written, and stated: “May the words of your paper and the meditations of your heart be acceptable in His sight” (anonymous, personal communication, March 2007). I did pray before I wrote, and I hope the content of this paper speaks to the words Christ would want all of us to take to heart and act upon where necessary.

Discussion

Social Work and the Christian Church

After collecting and synthesizing both the literature and the experiences of those interviewed there are several themes or ideas that I believe are important to briefly mention. Of central importance is the need for both the field of social work *and* the Christian church to accept Christian social workers. It is extremely sad that a profession that claims to champion the oppressed seems to many to be actively oppressing a group of people based on their religious preference.

However, it is equally sad that many Christian social workers also perceive experiences of discrimination from the church because of their chosen profession. Several of the interview subjects reported feeling more discrimination from the church as a result of choosing social work as a profession than they experienced from the profession of social work for being a part of the Christian church. Christian social workers need to advocate for themselves, both within the profession and within the church.

Perhaps many Christians who are also social workers have come to view their profession and their faith as separate trains traveling on parallel tracks that should never meet. Perhaps we do this because we fear there would be a nasty collision if our dual identities ever met. But what if instead of a nasty collision we could achieve a healthy, symbiotic merger that would make a major impact in the world around us? Would that not be worthy of our advocacy? Social work and Christianity both have much to offer our hurting world. The founding members of social work understood this. While there is a time, place, and a need for Christian social workers to argue for our place in this profession, there is also a need for us to *show* both the profession and the church the valuable asset we are to the hurting people around us.

Varying Experiences of Discrimination

The second thing I noticed, especially throughout the interviews, was how experiences of discrimination and support varied widely. Some subjects reported experiencing intense harassment and discrimination within the field of social work based on their profession of faith in Christ. Others, however, reported not only never experiencing discrimination from the field, but instead experiencing acceptance and support. This seems to show that neither oppression nor support can be assumed in any given employment setting. The *perception* of oppression is a reality in some placement settings, just as the *perception* of support is a reality in others.

Using the Workplace as a Platform for Evangelism

Based on my own personal experiences of discrimination because of my Christian faith, I believe one fear of non-Christians in the field is that Christians will use the workplace as a platform for personal evangelism. However, this does not seem to be the case with most Christian social workers I have met. Of those I interviewed for this project, no one was aware of ever forcing their Christian beliefs on others. To the contrary, several subjects expressed direct opposition to using the workplace as a platform for evangelism. One subject stated:

I tend to resolve any conflicts by reminding myself that I come into contact with clients as a result of their need for services and not for the purpose of evangelizing. As a social worker, I prefer a demonstration of the gospel rather than a proclamation of the gospel. (I credit David Sherwood for making that distinction). (anonymous, personal communication, 2-28-07).

The only instances in which interview subjects reported openly sharing the gospel message were when invited to do so by colleagues or clients.

Conclusion

Tangenberg (2006) cites a secondary qualitative analysis by Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller, and Argyris (1989) in which one research subject beautifully summed up how the integration of Christian faith and Social Work practice can not only be functional, but can serve to provide services that are perhaps the most excellent in the field. The subject, a social worker supervising a transitional house for formerly homeless families, stated:

I think we [Christians] recognize that we've been saved by grace and it's only by God's mercy that we can even hope to come to Him. So we look at other people as having problems and situations in their lives but not as being different or being less than we are. We accept it not as something that we have to do as a part of our job but that we're just commanded by the very faith that we live by to respond to people's need. And I think that although a lot of social workers have compassion and empathy, I think it adds a dimension of that as we think about how we've been loved and we've been forgiven then we also translate that into our social work ministry (p. 170).

This is the journey I have been traveling – a journey to reconcile my Christian identity and my social work identity. I have learned that my Christian heritage and my relationship with Christ compel me to do the work of a social worker. I have learned that the roots of my profession are grounded in Christian ideals and actions. I have learned that numerous Christian social workers integrate their faith and practice everyday. I have learned that I am not alone as a Christian in the field of social work.

Through Social Work I have seen the heart of Jesus Christ. I will never again believe that I have to choose between my faith in Jesus and my chosen profession as a social worker. I have come to understand that if I want to truly follow Jesus and to live like He lived, I *must* care for

the poor, feed the hungry, love orphans and widows, and be a voice for those who do not have a voice. Jesus *lived* Social Work, and if I want to truly follow after Him, my heart must beat with His heart. I know that the integration of my personal faith and practice will look different at different times throughout my career. The important thing is that I know it *can* be done, and *is* being done, and I am excited to join the ranks of Christians who are making a difference in the world through social work.

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