CONCEPTUAL ARTICLES
Towards the Integration of Faith, Love, and Praxis
Social Justice Through the Lens of the Cross
The Role of the Contemporary Christian Church in the Rural American South: Philosophical Approaches to Operationalizing Religion in Research

RESEARCH ARTICLES
God and Guns: Faith as a Resource for Healing from a School Shooting
“My Life Has Been Just Like a Big Expectation”
Let the Church Say….: One Congregation’s Views on How Churches Can Improve Mental Health Beliefs, Practices and Behaviors among Black Americans

BOOK REVIEWS
Review of Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban
Review of Why I am a Social Worker: 25 Christians Tell Their Stories
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_Social Work & Christianity_ (SWC) is a refereed journal published quarterly in March, June, September, and December by the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) to support and encourage the growth of social workers in the ethical integration of Christian faith and professional practice. SWC welcomes articles, shorter contributions, book reviews, and letters which deal with issues related to the integration of faith and professional social work practice and other professional concerns which have relevance to Christianity.

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• Reviews should be about 600–800 words in length.
• Reviews should include an overview of the book's main points, especially those pertaining to Christians in social work.
• In addition to a descriptive summary of the book's content, reviews should provide some assessment, critique, and analysis of the book's strengths and weaknesses, and its contribution to the field of social work practice, especially to specific audiences such as subfields of social work practice, students, academics, administrators, and church leaders.
• Reviews should adhere to general guidelines for formatting and writing escribed in the general Instructions for Authors.

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The purpose of the Letters to the Editor section in Social Work & Christianity is to provide creative space for dialogue about complicated topics for Christians in social work. Our hope is that submissions in this form allow for the healthy exchange of ideas and perspectives. The Letters to the Editor section is grounded in our Christian values of humility, mutual respect, and generosity of spirit, as well as our professional values of critical thinking and integrity.

Letters to the Editor should be no more than 500–1,000 words in length and invite conversation as it offers the opportunity for readers to observe an open and civil exchange of ideas and perspectives. Letters which are a response to articles previously published in Social Work & Christianity will be shared with the article author(s), who will have the opportunity to respond to the letter. Such Letters to the Editor are encouraged to ask clarifying questions in a spirit of curiosity (as opposed to a spirit of confrontation), model careful listening, and seek common ground where possible as it shares alternative points of view for readers' consideration. Letters to the Editor which include personal attacks or denigration of individuals or organizations will not be considered.
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There are different gifts but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 1 Cor 12:4-7 (NAB).

Social work is a profession that impacts all levels of human interaction. Many social workers deal with individuals, empowering clients to move forward when lives appear to be chaotic. Others work to assist groups who may have experienced isolation and discrimination. Still others spend their days trying to understand the macro structures that impact both individuals and groups. All social workers work to help others understand the world in which we live.

Christian social workers have the added responsibility to attempt to understand how God views the work that is being done at all levels of practice. This means, for example, we must not only entertain whether a practice is helpful, but is it just (Micah 6:8)? Does an intervention align with God’s command that we love our neighbors as God has loved us (John 13: 34-35)?

This issue of Social Work & Christianity provides readers with articles which reflect the breadth of our profession. Three conceptual articles provide macro-level information for us to consider how we might frame the work we do for others. The other three articles focus on the ways in which social workers can enhance their work with clients with specific concerns and needs.

The authors represent all levels of practice, (BSW through PhD), and reside both here in the United States and abroad. It is my prayer that those who read this issue will be strengthened and encouraged by the articles in
this issue. As Paul writes, *Through [Christ] the whole body grows, and with proper functioning of the members firmly joined together by each supporting ligament, builds itself up in love* (Eph:4:15-16).

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**Keywords**: Christian unity, Christian diversity, levels of practice
Towards the Integration of Faith, Love, and Praxis

Monica Y. E. Chi

Many non-faith-based social work educators and researchers have a poor understanding of what might motivate Christians in social work and whether Christian motivations have any place in social work. On the other hand, Christians have difficulty articulating actions inspired by their faith in ways that others can comprehend despite feeling misunderstood. The focus of this article is to present the framework of faith-inspired praxis of love and lay the groundwork for intergroup dialogue. The framework draws from the works of Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jean Vanier, and Mary Jo Leddy. These five notable leaders in Christian spirituality and public initiatives discuss their conceptualization of faith, love, and praxis. Practice and research implications of this framework for social work are discussed.

Tension exists between Christian and secular social workers. Several social work publications have pointed out that social work educators and researchers misunderstand what motivates Christian students, doubt Christian motives, and question whether faith has any place in social work (Hodge, 2002; Kaufman, 2003; Thyer & Myers, 2009). Unsurprisingly, Christian students also complain that their faith motivations in entering the field are misunderstood.

This article addresses these concerns and presents a framework of faith-inspired praxis of love as a starting point to facilitate communication, expand understanding, and build relationships. To do so, it provides an expanded discussion on the core concepts of faith, love, and praxis. More detailed consideration of the framework is available elsewhere (Chi, 2018a). The aim of this article is to provide a conceptual foundation for Christians in social work that facilitates engagement with those outside of the faith.
Further, the framework provides the foundation for principled social work practice that is compatible with important elements of the non-faith-based motivation of the profession.

**Background**

As an educator teaching in secular social work institutions, the author has met students who feel uncomfortable identifying themselves as Christians in classrooms even though their faith is very important to their identity and their decision to enter social work. Others have written about Christian students being ridiculed or verbally attacked by fellow students, and sometimes by faculty, after expressing opinions on controversial social issues such as abortion rights, medical assistance in dying, or their views of sexuality, gender roles, and marriage (Canda, 2003; Hodge, 2002; Thyer & Myers, 2009). Religious students report feeling uncomfortable with social work’s emphasis on liberal humanistic values which may at times contradict their religious perspectives (de Jong, 2018; Stacey, 2013; Streets, 1997; Thyer & Myers, 2009).

This tension that Christian students experience in secular social work institutions has been highlighted in Hodge’s scholarship (2002; 2005; 2006a; 2006b). In his perhaps most controversial article, “Does social work oppress evangelical Christians? A ‘new class’ analysis of society and social work,” Hodge (2002) writes that social workers have become part of the “new class,” which produces and distributes knowledge based on a progressive, liberal, and relativistic framework. He notes this “new class” is different from many working- and middle-class service users, including evangelical Christians, who tend to be conservative in their political inclination or in their deeply held spiritual convictions. Social work, as a “new class” profession, Hodge argues, has come to unfairly marginalize evangelical Christians in their practice and in the classrooms.

The argument triggered a heated debate in the social work community, with several affirming that religious discrimination within social work is an ongoing problem (Kaufman, 2003; Thyer & Myers, 2009). One social worker noted, “I have been offended in a variety of settings, including professional conferences, by references to [e]vangelicals that would not be tolerated if they were directed to other minority groups” (Kaufman, 2003, p. 273). While the author disagrees that evangelical Christians can be compared to a minority group, especially in certain parts of the U.S., the tension is worth noting.

Many others, however, criticized Hodge for pitting “new class” members of the social work community against evangelical Christians (Canda, 2003), questioned the theoretical integrity of the concept of the “new class” (Bennett, 2003; Fell, 2004; Liechty, 2003; Reamer, 2003); and
denied that social work systemically oppresses Christians (Bennett, 2003; Melillo, 2003; Tower, 2003). Still others counter-argued that much damage had been caused by those who use fundamentalist/orthodox religious beliefs to justify their violence (Melillo, 2003, p. 275) and proselytizing activities (Bennett, 2003). Hodge’s assertions of discrimination against evangelical Christians is not conclusive (Bolen & Dessel, 2013), but the academic debate has shed useful light on the tensions that exist in social work.

In response to the controversy stirred by Hodge’s arguments, several authors have highlighted the need to move beyond “stalemate” to a dialogue that facilitates “productive problem-solving” (Melcher, 2008). For example, Dessel et al. (2012) suggest that intergroup dialogue between conservative Christians and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people can enhance intergroup understanding and relationships, reduce bias, improve communication skills, establish common ground, and facilitate collaboration (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, & Zuñiga, 2009).

While Hodge (2002) highlighted the tensions in social work close to two decades ago, there are signs that indicate some Christian students, particularly from conservative backgrounds, continue to experience challenges connected to their faith (de Jong, 2018; Stacey, 2013). This is important to note given that the gap between conservative Christians and non-Christians, or liberal Christians, is widening in the United States (Bean, 2014). Propelled by the politics of fear, compared to non-Christians, Christians are increasingly associated with othering attitudes towards immigrants, refugees, and Muslims (Disney, 2017; Haberman, 2018). While several notable voices are trying to disentangle their faith from the politics of fear (Griswold, 2019; Keller, 2017; Wehner, 2019), many are criticizing evangelical Christian leaders and their congregations for being blinded by political tribalism (Farron, 2019; Gerson, 2018; Sullivan, 2018). In this polarizing political climate, there is a pressing need to engage in a constructive intergroup dialogue between Christians and non-Christians, especially among those in the field of social work.

This article contributes to this important dialogue between Christian social workers, who feel misunderstood in their call to put their faith in action, and secular members of the social work community, who may be suspicious of such motivations. Written from a Christian perspective, the framework of faith-inspired praxis of love is presented as a tool to facilitate a common ground of understanding. By focusing on love as the prime motivation for caring for others, the framework highlights how Christians can engage in principled social work practice that is compatible with important elements of the profession.

To do so, I present the framework by drawing on the ideas of faith, love, and praxis from five notable figures well-known in social work: Jane Addams (1860-1935), Dorothy Day (1897-1980), Martin Luther King, Jr.
(1929-1968), Jean Vanier (1928-2019), and Mary Jo Leddy (1949-). I refer to these figures as “doers” because of their emphasis on putting their faith into action in everyday life. By providing an analysis of these five doers’ articulations of faith, love, and praxis, this article offers a language for those who are motivated by their faith to engage in caring work. At the same time, this article is also for social workers—scholars, researchers, students, practitioners—who do not affiliate with any formal religion, but who wish to understand better what motivates many Christians in doing good work and, in turn, creates a more welcoming space for faith-based members of the social work community.

**Faith-Inspired Praxis of Love**

The framework was developed from a content analysis based on the writings of the five notable figures in Christian spirituality. These doers are also recognized leaders in North America for their work in establishing public initiatives and large-scale social reforms. Although they would not identify themselves as social workers, the profession has considered them exemplary role models for an alternative vision of social change (Chaiklin, 2011; Forster, McColl, & Fardella, 2007; Hamington, 2007; Johnson, 2004; Malekoff & Papell, 2012; Nussbaum, 1984; Shafer Lundblad, 1995; Walsh, 2011). Despite the doers’ public affirmation of Christian influence in their work, many in social work find the doers’ voice and work inspirational and have found their initiatives compatible with important elements of secular motivation of the profession (Forster, McColl, & Fardella, 2007; Hamington, 2007; Johnson, 2004; Nussbaum, 1984; Walsh, 2011).

The framework’s core concepts are faith, love, and praxis; they answer the question of what the faith-inspired praxis of love is. Faith provided the doers with a sense of purpose and meaning in the spiritual sense, and, simultaneously, a deep sense of responsibility for how they lived their lives. The doers viewed people as bound to one another, and they felt an obligation to love others even if that was a costly choice. Because of their faith, they also worked to align themselves with the highest of human ideals that their religion taught. Praxis is the process through which faith, together with a love for others, is put into action in the world. Praxis led the doers to engage with those around them in ways that nurtured relationships and changed communities and societies for the better. In this framework, faith and praxis are meaningless without love.

It is worth pointing out the parameter around religion. While the focus of this article rests on a Christian understanding of faith, praxis, and love, I acknowledge the significant contribution other doers from different belief systems have made, and are making, in the
understanding of praxis of love. For example, Mahatma Gandhi played an instrumental role in influencing King’s understanding of nonviolence as an expression of love. It is also important to note that inspiration for other-regarding love could be drawn from sources other than religion, such as art. Music, literature, and paintings have long provided humans avenues of inspiration throughout civilization. Beauty has the power to move us intensely and transform the heart, below and above the level of rationality. Hence, it is important to note that good works are not solely the purview of Christians. That said, this article will focus on presenting the framework of faith-inspired praxis of love to support Christian social workers in communicating a shared value with non-Christian colleagues.

Methodology

Identifying “Doers”

Given the large pool of exemplary doers from which to choose, the author employed the following criteria to select the doers included in this study: (a) a significant Christian faith orientation; (b) a life in the 19th century or later; (c) a prolific written legacy; (d) wide respect from Christians and non-Christians alike; and (e) a life devoted to creating positive social change. The selected five are Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jean Vanier, and Mary Jo Leddy.

The five doers who are the focus of this study were identified by the author as notable figures who have contributed much to our understanding of caring work. For example, Addams was the co-founder of Hull House and a leader of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom; King was a leader of the civil rights movement in America; Day was the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement; Vanier was the founder of L’Arche, a community-based home whereby individuals with and without intellectual disability live together to support each other; and Leddy is the founder of Romero House, a refugee welcoming community in which those seeking asylum in Canada are supported by members of the local community during their transition.

The doers were selected from various time periods, ranging from the mid-19th century, when urbanization and industrialization in North America brought about new and significant challenges to human relationships, to the present day. This range allowed for a breadth of ideas and examples. Some doers, such as Day, King, Vanier, and Leddy, were and are more public in their affirmation of faith, while others, most notably Addams, expressed her faith more privately. But each of the doers, at his or her core, was driven by a commitment to live out Christian faith through love of humanity.
Content Analysis

To develop the framework, the author adopted a conventional content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki & Wellman, 2002; Mayring, 2000) that included systematically engaging with the writings of the doers to identify, abstract, and analyze major themes found across their work. Conventional content analysis is appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Literature authored by the doers, including edited collections of their writings and speeches, served as primary sources of data. Close attention was paid to building a comprehensive list of the doers’ writings. The full list of writings included in the analysis is available elsewhere (Chi, 2018b). Primary sources of data were supplemented with secondary sources (e.g., biographies, websites, newspaper articles, movies, and documentaries about the doers) whenever an idea needed further clarification. Also, the author kept an analytical journal that consisted of subjective reflections made while engaging with the data; the journal entries later provided a source of interpretive data that supported the author’s sense-making (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). What is presented in the following section is the author’s synthesis of faith, love, and praxis abstracted from the primary and secondary sources of data as well as the author’s interpretive data.

With regards to the presentation of the material, it is important to note that some doers will be more prominent in certain dimensions than others. This is because the emphasis was on developing a comprehensive framework that captured the key ideas of praxis represented across all the five doers’ work, rather than focusing on what each of the five doers said or did with regards to a dimension.

Foundational Concepts

Faith

The doers had a holistic understanding of Christianity. That is, Christianity was an integral way of life for the doers that involved the interior and exterior as well as individual and collective dimensions of religion and spirituality. See Table 1 for an illustration of the Integral Model of Christianity adapted from Ken Wilber’s Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World (2006).
Table 1. Integral Model of Christianity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• personal values and meanings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• emotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• perceptions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• personal relationship with God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• spiritual experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• shared values and meanings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• codes and language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• community life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• relationships</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• group identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ethics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interior</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• measurable actions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• observable actions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• rituals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• said prayers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intersubjective</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• church institutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• rules and laws</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• religious clothing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• religious celebrations</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The subjective realm of Christianity is the personal experience of spirituality, which may involve an inner transformation or spiritual transcendence. The objective realm of Christianity involves the overt religious practices performed in private, for example, praying the rosary alone or meditating on the Holy Scriptures. The interobjective realm involves the collective practices in the life of the church expressed through formalized laws, teachings, and celebrations. For example, participation in the Holy Communion during service or mass is an activity that is done collectively with other fellow believers according to the teachings passed down within the church. Lastly, the intersubjective realm refers to the meanings, values, and identity shared between the believers. For instance, identifying oneself as a Catholic can also be associated with espousing a set of shared values including a pro-life stance on the issue of abortion.

The doers did not prioritize the inner experiences over the outer, nor did they consider self-transcendental experiences of spirituality superior to collective practices. Christianity, to the doers, involved a process of inner spiritual transformation as well as a public participation in the life of the church. In this article, I use the term “faith” as an integration of the four expressions of Christianity adopted by the doers.

Faith is an important concept for understanding the framework of faith-inspired praxis of love for three reasons. First, faith provided the doers with a great sense of meaning and purpose in life, despite the challenges they faced. Their lives had transcendental meaning beyond the here and now. Even if standing up for controversial issues hurt their popularity, and fighting for social justice meant enduring hardships, their struggles had meaning that
went beyond their immediate circumstances. The following excerpt from Day’s journal describes the daily struggles she regularly experienced in her involvement with the Catholic Worker movement and how her spirituality sustained her during those moments. She wrote,

Yesterday was so desperately hard. I [had] to come down here [to Staten Island] last night… to hold myself together. Cannot sleep. Nerves and fatigue. [I feel like] an empty cistern. I must rest here quietly spending hours in the chapel—beyond a sound of human voices. (Forest, 2011, p. 219)

Similarly, King (1963/1986) wrote about the sustaining power of faith that gives the spirit strength and sustenance to carry on in life. He stated,

A positive religious faith does not offer an illusion that we shall be exempt from pain and suffering, nor does it imbue us with the idea that life is a drama of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Rather, it instills us with the inner equilibrium needed to face strains, burdens, and fears that inevitably come, and assures us that the universe is trustworthy and that God is concerned…. Religion endows us with the conviction that we are not alone in this vast, uncertain universe. Beneath and above the shifting sands of time, the uncertainties that darken our days, and the vicissitudes that cloud our nights is a wise and loving God…. Any man who finds this cosmic sustenance can walk the highways of life without the fatigue of pessimism and the weight of morbid fears. (King, 1963/1986, pp. 515-516)

In addition to the day-to-day challenges that came with their leadership roles, the doers took risks to stand up for what they believed. Publicly taking a pacifist stance when patriotic pro-war rhetoric was popular meant that Addams, Day, and King had to endure severe backlash from long-time supporters. This backlash came in the form of public ridicule, reduced donations, and, ultimately, alienation. Fighting for justice eventually cost King his life. However, these challenges did not stop the doers from continuing what they felt called to do. Yet, the doers were also human. Motivated to follow the path of love, they shared their vulnerability with those around them which, in turn, helped with authentic dialogue. While they demonstrated a capacity for unfaltering commitment to the people they were called to love, they also faced dark periods of doubt and searching (Garrow, 1986). But they did not stop. As Nietzsche (1889) famously said, “If we have our own why in life, we shall get along with almost any how” (para. 12). In this sense, faith was the “why” that sustained the doers.
Secondly, faith served as the foundation for self-transcendence, which was derived from the belief that life was a gift, and therefore, as recipients of that gift, the doers had a sense of responsibility to share the goodness that they had received. They felt obligated to care for the wellbeing of others. For example, Leddy (2015) states that gratitude starts with the “awareness that we are inhabitants of a world that we have not manufactured” (p. 274). She continues, “Gratitude is the most foundational religious attitude… and the consequent sense of responsibility is the sure religious foundation of a common good” (Leddy, 2015, p. 275). Individuals who recognize the immensity of the gift freely received have a responsibility to pay forward—not grudgingly, but with gratitude.

While faith was a deeply personal commitment, the doers also understood it as a collective experience. Faith was not only a means to self-actualization; it was a summoning to a life of sharing that is lived alongside brothers and sisters. Reflecting on her conversion experience soon after the birth of her daughter, Tamar, Dorothy Day (1952/1997) wrote,

> I had heard many say that they wanted to worship God in their own way and did not need a Church in which to praise Him, nor a body of people with whom to associate themselves. But I did not agree to this. My whole experience as a radical, my whole makeup, led me to want to associate with others, with the masses, in loving and praising God. (p. 139)

The notion of faith as a public expression of belonging to something greater than the self is also found in Addams’ account. Reflecting on her experience of baptism and joining the Presbyterian Church at the age of twenty-five, Addams (1910/2008) noted,

> While I was not conscious of any emotional “conversion,” I took upon myself the outward expressions of the religious life with all humility and sincerity. It was doubtless true that I was “Weary of myself and sick of asking what I am and what I ought to be… I was conscious of no change from my childish acceptance of the teachings of the Gospels, but at this moment something persuasive within made me long for an outward symbol of fellowship, some bond of peace, some blessed spot where unity of spirit might claim right of way over all differences. (p. 33)

> While Addams (1910/2008) was not naïve to the vulnerabilities of the church to abuse the authority bestowed upon it, she also recognized its capacity to be a “cathedral of humanity, capacious enough to house a fellowship of common purpose, beautiful enough to persuade men to hold fast to the vision of human solidarity” (p. 35). Such ideal of universal
fellowship inspired by her faith served to give strong impetus in establishing Hull House four years following the rite of baptism.

Thirdly, faith offered a body of wisdom and tradition that provided the doers with a sense of what was good, just, and beautiful in the world. It allowed them to join or create a counterculture by determining a concrete set of ideals. They believed that all humans reflected the image of God, and, hence, humanity was interconnected beyond man-made categories of race, political positions, or nationhood. While history can attest to how religion could also divide people along these categories, the doers saw the divisions as arbitrary. They perceived human life as a sacred gift, which no one had the right to claim otherwise. In Vanier’s (1998/2008) words,

> [A]ll humans are sacred, whatever their culture, race, or religion, whatever their capacities or incapacities and whatever their weaknesses or strengths may be. Each of us has an instrument to bring to the vast orchestra of humanity, and each of us needs to become all that we might be. (p. 14)

Similarly, faith provided King with a firm conviction that all human beings are made equal and it is right and just to fight for this ideal. In his well-known speech, delivered at the March on Washington, D. C. for Civil Rights in 1963, he described the vision:

> So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood…. I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character…. And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last”. (King, 1963/1986, pp. 219-220)

King’s American dream was sustained by the vision that his faith provided—the belief that human beings were children created equal in the image and likeness of God, and this is the source of human dignity and the reason why each and every person was beautiful and precious (Burrow, 2014). Biblical imageries and Christian values were deeply embedded in his writings and provided the strategic framework King and the Southern
Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) adopted during the civil rights movement (Burrow, 2014). In response to his popularity in American mainstream media, King (1998) stated, “They seem to forget that before I was a civil rights leader, I answered a call, and when God speaks, who can but prophesy” (p. 337). Faith, therefore, not only provided the doers with a sense of purpose in life and a responsibility to others; it also instilled in them a vision for a better human condition that kept them pushing for change.

Although not all contemporary Christian social workers can be compared to the five doers presented in this framework, the synthesis of the doers’ understanding of faith helps articulate how faith served as a positive motivation to engage in praxis. The doers provide an example of how faith can point towards a life that is dedicated to social justice and advocacy for social change. The motivation of Christians in social work practice may be different from their secular counterparts; however, the two groups can encounter each other around the visions that they share and engage in principled social work to accomplish the shared goals.

As described in this section, the faith of the doers was not limited to individual dimensions of spirituality only, but it provided the doers with a life-long call to loving others. The next section highlights love as a core concept in the framework of faith-inspired praxis of love.

Love

Love lies at the heart of the doers’ praxis. Loving means more to them than just having a sentimental affection; it is a choice and a lifelong commitment. Loving requires concrete action and continuous dedication in daily life—it calls upon one to go on loving even when that love is not returned, or when circumstances make it difficult to do so. Loving, then, fundamentally involves accepting others for who they are, just as they are. Love, as the doers understand it, is a binding force between human beings, and it is this interdependence and need to care for one another that makes our humanity special.

Day, King, and Vanier referred to this type of love as agape. In King’s (1957/1986) words:

Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men (sic.) Biblical theologians would say it is the love of God working in the minds of men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. And when you come to love on this level you begin to love men not because they are likeable, not because they do things that attract us, but because God loves them and here we love the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. (p. 13)
Defining the concept of love academically, and especially agape love, is a rather challenging task. Theologian Paul Tillich (1951) described this challenge: “I have given no definition of love. This is impossible, because there is no higher principle by which it could be defined. It is life itself in its actual unity” (p. 160).

Despite the vastness of the concept, Sorokin’s (1954) five dimensions of love are helpful in exploring the type of love that the doers pursued. The first dimension, intensity, ranges from low to high. Low-intensity love would be teaching or preaching about love without acting and high-intensity love involves the full pouring out of oneself. The doers loved with high intensity as they were committed to a life of companionship with their community members and neighbors. They believed that love without action was empty—an idea that will be developed and demonstrated under praxis.

Extensity, the second dimension of love, is the “degree of extension” (“Extensity,” n.d., para. 1) which could range from the love of oneself to the love of all mankind, all living creatures, and the whole universe. While focused on interpersonal relationships, the doers were open to loving all types of people. Addams made Hull House accessible to all her neighbors—young, old, newcomers, established immigrants, those with and without means. Leddy continues to welcome refugees from around the world to Romero House. The doers’ love also extended to those who were in opposition to them. In The Trumpet of Conscience, a book based on King’s (1967/2010) CBC Massey Lectures, he stated:

Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good, and so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. (pp. 76–77)

The third dimension of love is duration. Duration can range from the shortest possible moment, to years, to an entire lifespan of an individual or of a group. The five doers had a lifelong commitment to their communities and neighborhoods. Addams lived at Hull House for the last 45 years of her life, and Day lived as a member of the Catholic Worker community for the last 50 years of her life until she passed away in 1980 at Maryhouse, one of the settlement houses she helped to establish. King served as a fervent advocate and spiritual leader to African Americans, not only in the south but across the nation until his death in 1968. Vanier lived at the Trosly-Breuil
L’Arche community starting from 1964 until he passed away in 2019. Leddy is nearing her 30th year with the Romero House community.

**Purity**, the fourth dimension, ranges from love motivated by a utilitarian or hedonistic purpose to love motivated by love itself, love that exists for the sake of the other. Although the doers received worldwide recognition for their work, given the extent of personal sacrifice they had to make for their cause, one can fairly assume that they were not motivated by fame or money. In fact, Addams had a comfortable upbringing as the daughter of a prominent businessman and politician, John H. Addams and Sarah Weber Addams, but she had to endure opposition from her family to continue the work as the leader of Hull House. Likewise, Vanier, as the son of Canada’s respected Governor General, Major-General Georges Vanier and Pauline Vanier, and with an academic post at the University of Toronto, was on a career trajectory that would have promised him economic security and recognition as a scholar. In choosing a life lived alongside members of the L’Arche community, which he referred to as “school of love” (Vanier, 2012, p. 9), he asserted that he had gained something much more valuable:

> Before I [started living in L’Arche], my life had been governed chiefly by my head and by a sense of duty. I had created inner barriers to protect myself from my fears and vulnerability. In L’Arche, I began to learn to live from the heart… My heart has been opened and my understanding has grown. I have learned a great deal about the human heart and its need for, but also its fear of, relationships of love and communion with others. (p. 9)

**Adequacy** is the fifth and final dimension of Sorokin’s (1954) framework of love. When the objective consequences of one’s actions are in accordance with one’s subjective goals, one’s love is considered to be adequate. Inadequate love is unwise or misled, whereas adequate love is wise, informed, and edifying. Addams understood the complexity of adequate loving. In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, she noted,

> The Hebrew prophet made three requirements from those who would join the great forward-moving procession led by Jehovah. “To love mercy” and at the same time “to do justly” is the difficult task; to fulfil the first requirement alone is to fall into the error of indiscriminate giving with all its disastrous results; to fulfil the second solely is to obtain the stern policy of withholding, and it results in such a dreary lack of sympathy and understanding that the establishment of justice is impossible. It may be that the combination of the two can never be attained save as we fulfil still the third requirement—“to walk humbly with God,” which may
mean to walk for many dreary miles beside the lowliest of His creatures, not even in that peace of mind which the company of the humble is popularly supposed to afford, but rather with the pangs and throes to which the poor human understanding is subjected whenever it attempts to comprehend the meaning of life. (Addams, 1902/2009, p. 33)

To Addams, walking with God was one and the same with walking alongside those who have been created in God's image and likeness. By walking with them in the journey called life, she sought to love in a manner that was adequate to the people she cared about. Drawing from his experience of companioning those with varying degrees of physical and intellectual disability, Vanier was also acutely aware of the challenges of inadequate love. He wrote,

Love is not about helping people to be the way that we want them to be or the way we think that they should be. It is unconditional. Love implies that we have the desire to help people to be fully themselves. (Vanier, 2015, p. 76)

And this desire to act out of love with no strings attached, Vanier added, is much more profound than doing things for them.

To love someone is to show to them their beauty, their worth and their importance; it is to understand them, understand their cries and their body language; it is to rejoice in their presence, spend time in their company and communicate with them. To love is to live a heart-to-heart relationship with another, giving to and receiving from each other. (Vanier, 2001, p. 19)

As demonstrated, the type of love that the doers strived for, *agape*, can be characterized as the highest form of love across Sorokin's five dimensions. The doers loved with their entire beings, and, thus, came to embody the idea of *agape* as a way of life.

Love, unfortunately, is not part of today's day-to-day lexicon of social work practice (Morley & Ife, 2002). A rare time the word is used in professional literature is in the footnote of a sexual misconduct guideline in the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, 2018), or when making reference to working with clients' “loved” ones. Yet, social work is one of the few regulated professions that publicly declare to uphold “service to others above self-interest,” “social justice,” “inherent dignity and worth of the person,” and “the central importance of human relationships” as important ethical principles that guide practice (National Association of Social Workers,
INTEGRATION OF FAITH, LOVE, AND PRAXIS

Though the language may be different, these are principles based on a generalized love of humanity, which may be compatible with the secular formulations of social work (Morley & Ife, 2002).

The love that the doers demonstrate is one that feels and does. Emphasizing concrete actions to enhance the lived reality of others through meaningful and positive interpersonal relationships is an approach that Christians can share with secular social workers. The following section, praxis, provides a more detailed description of the process of combining faith with love.

Praxis

Praxis, broadly defined, is the process of combining faith with love, which results in action. King (1958) described the importance of praxis in religion when he stated, “any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried” (p. 91).

In Strength to Love, King (1963) reaffirmed his belief that “the gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his soul but also his body, not only his spiritual well-being but also his material well-being” (p. 150). Putting his faith in action was of primary concern for King, who was a minister and had earned a doctorate in systematic theology. He wanted his faith to be active and alive in the world, rather than to be limited to the church and academia. Similarly, Addams (1910/2008) stated:

That Christianity has to be revealed and embodied in the line of social progress is a corollary to the simple proposition, that man’s (sic) action is found in his social relationships in the way in which he connects with his fellows; that his motives for action are the zeal and affection with which he regards his fellows. (p. 85)

Both King and Addams understood that faith without action was meaningless. Likewise, Day believed that it was not enough to only write or speak about labor rights. In addition to writing for the Catholic Worker, Peter Maurin and Day opened up Houses of Hospitality where individuals that were unemployed during the 1930s Great Depression could come and enjoy company, shelter, and a hot meal. Maurin and Day, the two founding editors of the Catholic Worker, outlined the paper’s purpose in the inaugural issue of May 1933:

For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight.
For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain.

For those who are walking the streets in the all but futile search for work.

For those who think that there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight – this little paper is addressed.

It is printed to call their attention to the fact that the Catholic Church has a social program—to let them know that there are men of God who are working not only for their spiritual, but for their material welfare. (Day, 1933, paras. 2-6)

Maurin and Day believed that it was important to live a life of integrity whereby the consequences of their actions corresponded with their intent to love those they sought to assist. However, Day rejected the notion of charity work or the type of acting for others out of religious duty. She explained in her words,

I felt that charity was a word to choke over. Who wanted charity? And it was not just human pride but a strong sense of man's dignity and worth, and what was due to him in justice, that made me resent rather than feel proud of so mighty a sum of catholic institutions. It seemed all too often that the charities were hardly better than government agencies, heavy with bureaucracy and lacking a human touch. How I longed to make a synthesis reconciling body and soul, this world and the next. (Forest, 2011, p. 85)

In the above quotation, one can sense that Day's understanding of praxis of love was much more profound than the classic model of religious charity; she was concerned for the welfare of the whole person and had a deep desire for mutual relationship with them. Faith in action did not mean doing for others, nor doing for the self as a form of spiritual actualization, but it meant being in a mutual relationship and healing together.

Likewise, Leddy (2011) also expresses her rejection of religious charity and highlights that praxis of love must be different from professional service that is removed from the everyday experience of those in suffering:

There are many courses and articles on ministry in the church, and they are important. However, they also tend to rely heavily on a professional model of training and competence. The minister can become the consultant, the
facilitator, the organizer, the counselor. These can be valuable forms of service, but if they are removed from the cry of suffering people, they can miss the point and purpose of it all. (p. 132)

Then, praxis of love involves more than sharing the resources one has or providing services to someone in need; it involves two or more people who are willing to be vulnerable and have a heart-to-heart encounter. An encounter, as Vanier (2013) described it,

is not an exercise in power. Nor is it a demonstration of generosity through which we seek to ‘do good to’ the other. It demands real humility and deep vulnerability. To be present to the other, to listen to and regard him or her with respect and attention, allows us to receive in our turn. This is a communion of hearts, a reciprocal gift, freely given. (p. 33)

The doers engaged in faith-inspired praxis of love in their own ways. For Addams, Vanier, and Leddy, this primarily meant nurturing relationships and building inclusive communities. For Day and King, this meant mobilizing protests, writing for newspapers, and picketing. Each was called to engage in praxis in diverse ways, but the common thread found in their work is their commitment to put their faith in action because they were motivated to love those around them. The call to love their community members and neighbors was much more than a job, charity, or professional service. To the doers, it was a life-long commitment and a way of life.

These examples of the doers’ praxis explain how Christian social workers can concretely live out their faith through loving relationships with those around them. Though their source of inspiration may be different, the former and the latter are both led to seek justice. Few social workers would disagree that social work needs to go beyond individualist approaches and integrate personal with political, and theory with action. The praxis exemplified in the works of the doers indicates that Christian and secular social workers can converge around approaches and issues that resonate with both groups for the benefit of the people each serves.

**Discussion**

This article provided an expanded discussion on faith, love, and praxis, the three core concepts found in the faith-inspired praxis of love framework. The article drew from the writings of Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jean Vanier, and Mary Jo Leddy, five doers who were inspired by their Christian faith to engage in a praxis of love. It highlighted the doers’ understanding of the core concepts along with examples of how they lived out their praxis of love.
This article speaks to Christians in social work who are inspired by their faith to engage in the caring work of the profession. This article also seeks to speak to those in the field who are not faith-based, but who wish to understand the motivations of those in the field who are serious about their faith. Readers may question whether the framework of praxis of love is compatible with professional social work practice. After all, the doers presented in this article were not enthusiastic about the professional model of helping. They sought more radical ways to connect with those they cared about. In social work education, however, considerable training involves facilitating the students’ development of a professional identity and in cultivating professional expertise required by the bureaucratic and operationalized settings of social work (Ife, 1997).

Despite these seemingly divergent approaches to interpersonal relationships and practice, there is also a dimension to faith-inspired praxis of love that is compatible with important elements of secular practice. For example, the formulations of social work grounded in postmodern critical theory seeks to liberate people from various systems of oppression including “oppressive discourses of professional ‘expertise’” framed as rational, quasi-scientific professional activity (Morley & Ife, 2002, p. 69). In like manner, the doers rejected aspects of religious charity whereby one is given a hand-out because they preferred for both parties to be mutually supported and healed through the relationship. They were primarily concerned with loving and accepting the other as their whole beings without any ulterior motives such as self-righteousness or religious proselytization. According to Leddy (2011), to try to convert the residents of Romero House when they are seeking asylum is to recreate the cycle of hostility. Instead, the Romero House staff and interns emphasize hospitality through acts of generosity, openness, and acceptance.

The doers also rejected aspects of professionalized service for similar reasons. The responsibility of caring was not delegated to the professional experts to fix. They preferred approaches to relationship- and community-building that emphasized cooperation and drawing on people’s diverse strengths. Recognizing how alienating the experience of being a “client” can be, the doers sought ways to recognize people’s whole humanity and integrate them into communities as active members. For example, Addams and her friend Ellen Gates Starr opened up Hull House to their neighbors, who were predominantly recently arrived immigrants, to share everything that the house had to offer. In that house, people with and without means worked together cooperatively to engage in community projects related to art, education, or neighborhood sanitation. The diversity found among members became the community’s strength and served as the fuel for their numerous social projects. As highlighted previously, to Addams (1902/2009), caring for a neighbor in need was not about doing charitable
work for the person, or about imposing a set of “dogmatic rules for conduct” (Addams, p. 32), rather, it was about “march[ing] with her fellows” (p. 33).

These are just a couple of illustrations of how aspects of faith-inspired praxis of love can be compatible with important elements of non-faith-based motivation of the profession. At a time when we see tensions between Christians and secular social workers about the former’s motivations, this framework has the potential for supporting Christians to better express shared values with non-Christian colleagues.

For social workers who are not motivated by a religion, this framework can also be valuable in widening their perspective on alternative approaches to helping relationships. Various helping disciplines such as medicine (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Vaillant, 2013) and psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) have welcomed the integration of more holistic approaches that draw from eastern spirituality such as mindfulness. The framework of faith-inspired praxis of love is one approach that draws from Christianity and takes into consideration the relational dynamic between the “helper” and those that he or she seeks to support. There is tremendous healing and restorative force in love (Bodhi, 2005; Feldman, 2005; Hopkins, 2001; Kuan, 2008; Salzberg, 1995; Sanharakshita, 2004; Sheng-Yen, 2001; Suzuki, 2011) and this framework demonstrates that one way to approach that love is through the religious and spiritual capacities.

With regards to future research, further study is needed on how the framework fits or does not fit with the contemporary realities where faith-based praxis of love is being practiced. The development of the framework was grounded in the works of the five doers who are well recognized in the context of North America. Addams, Day, King, and Vanier have passed, while Leddy is still active in her praxis. Studies involving individuals who may not be as well-known as the five doers, but who are nonetheless engaged in faith-inspired praxis of love in contemporary settings, will render new insights about the value of the framework. Other additional questions that can guide future reflections and research include: How can the framework of faith-inspired praxis of love be used in the classroom settings and in the field to facilitate inclusive dialogues between Christians and those who do not affiliate with religion/spirituality? How can the framework help explain the praxis of current Christian social workers who are practicing in contemporary settings? What inspirations for other-regarding love, agape, may exist besides faith? How can secular social workers and faith-based social workers work together to engage in praxis of love in principled ways? The framework presented in this article provides the groundwork to consider these questions in the future.
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Social Justice Through the Lens of the Cross: A Case for a Biblical Foundation of Social Work

Allison Pryor Kasch

As a core value of the profession of social work, advocating for social justice is a key aspect of what it means to be a social worker. Before accepting the necessity of social justice, however, it is important to address its foundation within the secular context of social work. Questioning the “why” behind social justice calls for a deeper understanding of this core value and of social work. The Inside-Out apologetic approach is one method that can be used to explore the foundation of social justice. Using the Inside-Out approach, this article seeks to demonstrate how a secular grounding of social work provides a weaker foundation required to make claims on the necessity of social justice. A biblical foundation, however, offers a stronger grounding to support the importance of social justice and the values and mission of social work.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) grounds social work upon the six core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2017). Although these values further the mission of social work, social workers must assess the foundation for the values, as it is valuable to understand what grounds the profession of social work. This article will focus on the value of social justice and its foundation within a secular context. To best serve society, the profession of social work needs a foundation that adequately supports its claims, and this article aims to demonstrate that the secular basis of social work neglects to offer such a foundation. When addressed critically, the profession of social work quickly loses its structure within a secular context. Therefore, social work needs a different foundation; it needs a grounding that asserts the necessity of social justice. It needs a biblical foundation.
Understanding Inside-Out

To analyze what secular social justice claims, why its foundation is weak, and how Christianity strengthens social justice, the Inside-Out approach is an effective model to utilize. Inside-Out is a framework that can be used in a variety of situations but is most easily applied in conversations regarding Christianity and a differing viewpoint. A person using this model seeks to first understand the opposing perspective before offering a case for Christianity.

Concerning the issue of social justice and its foundation, instead of merely representing a Christian understanding of social justice, Inside-Out first aims to comprehend the contrasting framework (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Inside-Out, then, identifies points where Christianity and social work overlap, thus affirming aspects of secular social work. Areas of disagreement, however, signify points which the gospel must challenge (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Showing inconsistencies within secular social work allows for other frameworks, specifically Christianity, to be plausible. These first steps are a part of working “Inside” one’s framework and approaching discourse in this way allows for humility and honesty to be at the center of conversations (Chatraw & Allen, 2018).

Inside-Out, however, continues by working outside one’s framework. The “Outside” stages point to the gospel, as the method shows places where the opposing viewpoint has borrowed from the Christian narrative (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Working outside social work’s secular framework shows how Christianity offers a better foundation for social justice and how the gospel strengthens the profession of social work. Inside-Out aims to understand a differing worldview, find aspects to affirm and others to challenge, and point to the gospel (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Using this method with the value of social justice aims to show the weaknesses within secular social work and how the gospel ultimately strengthens social justice.

Inside

Understanding What Social Work Values

As one of the six core values of social work, social justice holds significant weight within the profession (NASW, 2017). The NASW (2017) has written a Code of Ethics and defines the key aspects of social justice. Social workers should promote the well-being of individuals and communities and advocate for equal access and opportunity of employment, resources, and other services people need to meet basic human needs (NASW, 2017). Furthermore, social workers should strive to increase opportunities for

Although the Code of Ethics describes social justice in terms of how social workers should promote it, The Social Work Dictionary explains what the focus of social justice is in practice (Barker, 2003). The definition of social justice is the following: “An ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits” (Barker, 2003, p. 29). This explanation is explicit in its focus on distributive practices as it advocates for equal distribution of resources and opportunities (Hoefer, 2012). Furthermore, both The Code of Ethics and The Social Work Dictionary’s descriptions of social justice emphasize the well-being of individuals and allocating services to those in need.

These conclusions regarding social justice are further influenced by beliefs about human rights. Wolterstorff (2008) explains that human rights are freedoms an individual has not by goodness but simply by being human. Presently, the advocacy of human rights includes descriptions such as the protection of individuals from abuse and oppression (Ignatieff, 2001). Human rights advocacy has spread globally, as is seen through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly (Ignatieff, 2001). Although there are numerous individuals and groups fighting for these rights, people have different theories about what human rights should be (Ignatieff, 2001). The United Nations’ declaration has a Western view of human rights, as the writing frequently includes words such as “empowerment” and “freedom,” which have individualistic connotations (as cited in Ignatieff, 2001, p. 73). As the advancement of human rights is deeply influenced by the Western world, the promotion of human rights and justice by the profession of social work is rooted in Western ideals which focus on freedom and individualism.

John Rawls (1971), well-known moral philosopher, defines justice as “the first virtue of social institutions” (p. 3). Social justice is ultimately about not viewing one individual over another, but it explores the rights and duties within society and allocates them among individuals and institutions, with the goal of enhancing the lives of all people (Rawls, 1971). Social justice recognizes the uniqueness of different societies and the impact culture has on the interpretation of justice (Poe, 2012b). With the goal of unity and consistency, social justice develops responsibilities for all members of society (Volf, 1996). Longing for right relationships among individuals and communities, social workers pursue justice (Poe, 2012b).
Affirming Social Work

Affirming Social Justice. Although there are differing motivations for social justice, significant points of overlap exist between secular social work and a biblical understanding of justice. The root of social justice is the notion that it is undesired for people to suffer, and social workers should prevent suffering whenever attainable (Keith-Lucas, 1985). Christianity functions similarly, as it fights back against suffering and is intentional about serving the poor and oppressed (See Deut. 14:28-29; Job 29:12-17). Christians and secular social workers alike can agree that they desire to see an end to suffering in the world (Keller, 2016).

Furthermore, when addressing the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics, Christianity can affirm the ways in which social workers are to bring about social justice. Social workers advocate for the well-being of society and individuals within society (NASW, 2017), and while a concrete definition of well-being is needed, Christians desire for flourishing among all aspects of society. Moreover, Christianity can affirm that it is necessary to further opportunities specifically for the poor, oppressed, marginalized, etc. and to ensure access of resources (NASW, 2017; see Is. 10:1-3; Deut. 10:18). Regarding those in need, social justice asks much of individuals and society but so does Christ, as he modeled what it looks like to love those in need (See Lk. 4:16-19, 14:10-15, 18:22; Jn. 14:10-12). Justice is not easy; it demands the sharing of the goods people own and making personal sacrifices for others (Keith-Lucas, 1989).

Affirming the Dignity and Worth of the Person. As another core value of social work, the NASW (2017) asserts the dignity and worth of the person and fights for human rights. Social workers recognize and protect basic human rights, “including the rights to freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, healthcare, and education” (Sherr & Jones, 2014, p. 61). Christianity can uphold the dignity and worth of the person as it relates to every person being made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). The profession of social work argues for presence of human rights as they protect the powerless. Likewise, Christians are called to protect the defenseless. Although this article cannot specifically address the dignity and worth of the person and various perspectives on the matter in more detail, Christians and secular social workers alike support the fundamental importance of human rights.

Affirming Community Responsibility. A critical aspect of social justice is understanding the interdependency among humans. When part of society suffers, all of society is impacted (Keith-Lucas, 1989). Recognizing the need for one another is a key part of social work and the promotion of justice, and Christianity also recognizes how communities need each other. Galatians 6:2 reminds Christians to “bear one another’s burdens, and so
fulfill the law of Christ” (ESV). Ultimately, social justice advocacy is rooted in love for humanity, and for Christians, this represents a reflection of God’s love for his creation (Keith-Lucas, 1989). As Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) wrote in “Letters from a Birmingham Jail,” “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King, 1963, p. 767). Christians and social workers alike understand the weight of injustice and are fighting back against it.

Where Social Work Leads: Recognizing Inconsistencies

Although social work and Christianity agree on some concepts regarding justice and human rights, one must consider where social work’s foundation leads. The NASW’s (2017) Code of Ethics references the intrinsic value of every individual and the responsibility of social workers to combat injustices, but the NASW neglects to provide reasons as to what gives social work the authority to speak on these values and how they justify the standards (Sherwood, 2012). The Western world is dedicated to justice, but Charles Taylor (1989) rightly asks, “What sources can support our far-reaching moral commitments?” (p. 515). Furthermore, it is a Western misconstruction to claim that everyone has the same views on human rights and justice, for these values are far from indisputable (Taylor, 1999). Within a single culture, everyone must hold the same views regarding justice for the values to impact society; justice depends on the relationships between individuals (Poe, 2012b). The issue for secular social work is distinguishing what standard should be used to determine social justice and human rights; it is not enough to say these values exist without identifying why (Poe, 2012b).

Without the presence of a moral being, social workers can only claim that rights and justice have historically been shown to protect people from abuse and violence (Ignatieff, 2001). This statement, however, is merely rooted in historical evidence, which does not result in moral obligation (Ignatieff, 2001). This is the “is-ought” dilemma (Sherwood, 2012, p. 91). Without a source of authority, “is” does not result in “ought” (Sherwood, 2012). Facts, such as historical evidence, do not simply result in moral obligations (Sherwood, 2012). Human rights are thus built upon the fear of what humanity can do if left unattended.

Secular social work often tries to establish the necessity of human rights and social justice in the sanctity of human beings (Ignatieff, 2001). However, by denying the existence of a creator, humanity only exists by chance (Sherwood, 2012). If people are not created by God, how, then, does humanity have intrinsic value, what gives people these rights, and why should social workers advocate for justice? Moreover, focusing on the character of human nature does not support the claim of inherent worth, for people consistently fail, disappoint, and betray (Taylor, 2007). While
individuals may exhibit goodness in some respects, it is not the same as providing support for intrinsic worth (Ignatieff, 2001). It is difficult to ground human rights without the presence of a transcendent entity.

To make statements about human rights, there must be a deep understanding of human dignity, but without the existence of a moral being, sufficient grounding is impossible (Wolterstorff, 2008). Individuals, however, can certainly believe in the presence of inherent human dignity even when they cannot provide adequate support for this claim (Wolterstorff, 2013). The United Nations’ statements about human rights are deeply rooted in the dignity of human beings, even though they assume these rights without explaining their existence (Wolterstorff, 2013).

Most secular reasonings for human rights are rooted in human dignity based on human capacity (Wolterstorff, 2013). When human capacity is foundational, however, those who do not exhibit enough capacity may be viewed as undeserving: (e.g. infants, the elderly, severely disabled individuals, etc.). Some cultures may value people who exhibit these diversities while others may not. Human capacity, then, is insufficient grounding; there must be a better way.

Moral judgments and obligations assert objective values, even when reasoning for them is weak (Mackie, 1977). Modern-day thought is deeply embedded with objective moral claims, though the fact that people claim objectivity does not simply validate the existence of human rights (Mackie, 1977). From a secular perspective, there can be no objective moral obligations; people can only describe their feeling of justice (Mackie, 1977). The issue, then, arises of whose idea of justice is “right,” and what happens when two people have very strong, yet very different, views of justice (Volf, 1996). The profession of social work must address this issue if there is any way to assert right and wrong actions based on their current secular foundation. If there is no way to decide between right and wrong actions, society becomes relativistic and the ambitions of social workers become useless.

Without the existence of a moral being, morality quickly becomes subjective, while it aims to be objective (Keller, 2016). Relative morality is unlivable, for as Timothy Keller (2016) writes, “If there is no truth, on what basis can the weak say to the strong that what they are doing is wrong?” (p. 202). The profession of social work is, thus, unable to advocate for the oppressed or marginalized; social work loses its impact within a relativistic society. Whatever advantages exist from the lack of a moral being, seeing unwarranted acts of violence outweighs these benefits (Hunter, 2000). Social work needs objective moral claims to function, but without a moral being, the profession must address how to ground their values.

There must be something more than mere cultural perspectives on rights and justice (Sherwood, 2012). Abuse, oppression, and neglect must
be morally wrong; this cannot just be the viewpoint of Western social work (Sherwood, 2012). Sherwood (2012) writes, “It may often be hard to believe in God, but I find it even harder to believe in the alternatives, especially when it comes to values” (p. 99). It is valuable that social workers are holding onto the dignity and worth of individuals, but social work’s weak foundation should not be overlooked (Sherwood, 2012).

Outside

How Social Work Borrows from Christianity

The profession of social work displays faith, even though it may not acknowledge its beliefs. In many ways, all helping professions have a religious foundation because serving others is not an instinctual aspect of humanity, and every global religion emphasizes aiding those in need (Keith-Lucas, 1994). Non-religious people can still help others even without a religious foundation, and they sometimes serve more effectively than the religious individuals (Keith-Lucas, 1994). The real question, however, is: who has a stronger reasoning for providing the help?

As previously argued, human rights and justice must ultimately be rooted in the idea of a god (Stackhouse, 1998). Before explaining the importance of human rights, one must maintain a theological framework (Stackhouse, 1998). C.S. Lewis (1944), in The Abolition of Man, contends that once people, whether religious or nonreligious, shift descriptive reflections into moral obligations they are acting through faith. Constructing moral claims based on observations involves “…basic assumptions (or faith) about the nature of the universe and human beings” (Sherwood, 2012, p. 90). Secular social work neglects to address the presence of faith in their claims.

In some ways, social work developed out of the Christian framework. Many social workers believe human rights emerged out of the Enlightenment, but these rights developed through medieval Christendom (Wolterstorff, 2008). Furthermore, the Church’s mission concerning justice had a significant impact on how the present-day profession of social work views justice (Poe, 2012b). Often considered the “mother” of social work, Jane Addams and her work in the Hull-House settlement was rooted in her Christian faith (Schultz, 2015). Because of Addams’ dedication to serving through the love of Christ, she founded the profession of social work, and current social workers must not disregard the profession’s religious roots (Schultz, 2015).

Moreover, the following biblical ideologies helped establish the foundation of social work (Poe, 2012a). By declaring the intrinsic worth of all individuals, the NASW (2017) asserted the dignity and worth of the person as a core value of the profession, but this ideal is taken from the
biblical implication that all people are made in the image of God (Poe, 2012a, Gen. 1:26). Social work maintains that work is an important aspect of human life, and in Genesis, God instructs people to work and be fruitful as he declares the cultural mandate (Poe, 2012a; Gen. 1:28). Likewise, the profession of social work emphasizes that individuals steward their resources, and biblical authors continually remind people that everything one has is a gift from God and should be used wisely (Poe, 2012a; Ps. 24:1-2; Deut. 8:17). Additionally, social work upholds the importance of relationships as another core value, and the Bible further expresses that humans were made for relationship with others and with God (NASW, 2017; Gen. 2:18; Heb. 10:24-25). Lastly, social workers aim to recognize the strengths within every individual, and in Romans, Paul addresses how people have been given different giftings (Rom. 12:3-8). Although modern-day social workers may argue that the profession’s values were created through the Enlightenment, it is this author’s contention that Christian ethics provided the original foundation.

The values on which social work stands are important for individuals and society, but social workers should consider if the profession can support these values without the basis of religion. D. Elton Trueblood (1944), a Quaker philosopher addressing human rights, called the present condition a “cut-flower” generation, for just as a flower only survives so long after being cut from its roots, the presence of human rights and justice can only survive a short time while rejecting the foundation of these values in God. The profession of social work may be able to argue for rights and justice currently, but these values must ultimately be rooted in God for them to have lasting significance in the world.

**Christianity Offers a Stronger Foundation**

Oftentimes, secular individuals misunderstand the Christian notion of social justice, as though Christians will always act in loving and just ways simply because they are Christian (Sherwood, 2012). This assumption is a wrong interpretation of what it means to be a Christian and fight for justice; believing in Christ does not negate the presence of sin in one’s life. Instead, the gospel gives individuals a foundation on which to build values, such as social justice and human rights (Sherwood, 2012). It provides a lasting context that will stand the test of time, as it does not waver through cultural phases (Sherwood, 2012). Currently, the NASW’s values of rights and justice are those of the majority within the West, though versions of these values may vary from person to person, but this raises the question regarding what will happen if the majority ceases to believe in human rights. If the Western world no longer declares the importance of rights and justice, these values will not survive.
**Grounding Social Justice and Human Rights.** With a biblical foundation, however, the dignity and worth of a person is rooted in God creating people in God’s own image (Gen. 1:26). While the profession of social work also asserts the worth of every individual, this belief can be understood as merely a cultural preference, instead of an unchangeable moral truth (Sherwood, 2012). All too often, social work justifies its values on the idea that “everybody knows it,” but this assumption is a fragile foundation in comparison to what the biblical perspective provides (Sherwood, 2012). The Civil Rights Movement exposed the truth that simply because the majority holds to a belief does not make it morally good. In a sermon on July 4, 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke on the issue of segregation and argued that the issue of human rights—which was ignored at the time—was more important than what the majority White culture asserted; “there are no gradations in the image of God” (King, 1965). Ascribing the importance of human rights in what the majority believes is a weak foundation.

Values must be rooted in something beyond science or culture (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). There needs to be a sense of what something was created for in order for moral accounts to produce obligation, and the biblical narrative provides this explanation of what humanity was made for (MacIntyre, 1981). The best and simplest framework for asserting moral truths is grounded in looking to the personal God who designed all things and gave the world meaning and purpose (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). People feel a sense of right and wrong because God designed humans with a consciousness of morality (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). As Chatraw and Allen (2018) write, “Our propensity as human beings to evaluate the desires and motives of ourselves and others is both unique to us and universal among us” (p. 171). Knowing humanity can formulate moral judgments should point people to the existence of God (Chatraw & Allen, 2018).

**Restoration of Relationships.** Much of the conversation surrounding social justice is about resource distribution and fairness, but a Christian understanding focuses beyond resources and onto the restoration of relationships (Poe, 2012b). Just principles should aim to develop loving relationships among people, for as individuals embrace the “other,” justice becomes more than fairness (Poe, 2012b). Justice cannot prevail unless people make the conscious decision to embrace others (Volf, 1996). For individuals to agree on what justice holds, people must desire to embrace others and pursue unity, and the gospel provides a framework for why justice requires embrace (Volf, 1996).

Just as God embraces humanity even at its weakest moments, so should individuals unite with one another and fight for restored relationships. Upon reflecting on how God acts, it is evident that love shapes justice, and love requires sacrifice (Volf, 1996). Furthermore, the sacrifices needed to produce justice will not ensue without encountering the immense love of.
Christ, because the love people must have for one another to produce true justice is unattainable by mankind (Critchley, 2012; Keller, 2016). Simon Critchley (2012) argues that progress towards justice only occurs alongside belief in God and his love. As Jesus instructed during the Last Supper, Christians are to love others as Christ has loved them (Jn. 13:34). Because of the presence of sin in the world, just aspirations easily become unjust, but if people want true justice, they must desire love (Volf, 1996). Having a grasp of the love of God gives people a framework for social justice, its importance, and the obligation to embrace others.

How the Bible Addresses Social Justice.

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the theme of justice is evident; there are examples of God caring for the needs of the poor and a command for people to aid those facing adversity. Wolterstorff (2008) states that justice is a “pervasive and inextricable theme” of the Bible (p. 66). If God created all people, then treating every person with dignity and respect honors God (Poe, 2012a). Understanding what God has commanded regarding the care for individuals gives social workers a sense of what social justice should entail.

Defining Biblical Social Justice.

Two key words embody what biblical social justice must look like: mishpat and tzadeqah (Keller, 2010). These Hebrew words, when used together, translate as social justice, but in order to fully understand what social justice means within the biblical context, it is necessary to address what mishpat and tzadeqah mean individually (Keller, 2010). Mishpat appears in verses such as Proverbs 31:8, Deuteronomy 27:19, and Jeremiah 22:3, and the word stresses action, such as providing people with the rights they deserve (Keller, 2010). Focused on serving others with equity instead of favoritism, mishpat relates to the treatment of the poor, fatherless, immigrant, etc. (Keller, 2010). As what mishpat expresses, Christian social workers should do justice and promote equity for others.

Tzadeqah, on the other hand, is about righteousness within relationships (Keller, 2010). There is a sense of involvement in helping the poor, instead of simply giving people what they need. Tzadeqah entails a dedication to those in poverty and a striving to form relationships with them (Keller, 2010). An embodiment of tzadeqah is seen in Job, as it is written, “I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy…” (Job 29:12-17, ESV). Commitment to justice and to the poor are significant aspects of tzadeqah.

Together mishpat and tzadeqah create an image of service, love, and devotion. Jeremiah 9:24 writes, “…I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord” (ESV). This is what Christian social justice is about.
Although promoting social justice includes resource distribution, there are deeper convictions that call for a commitment to the poor.

**Regarding the distribution of resources.** Since current conversations surrounding social justice largely concern resource distribution, it is important to address how the Bible speaks to this issue. Throughout the Old Testament, God expected equitable distribution of resources, specifically pertaining to the harvests and leaving some crops in the fields for the poor to glean (Poe, 2012a; Lev. 19:9-10; Ruth 2). This perspective of resource distribution for the poor is different from the modern-day perception of many social workers. The biblical model allows the poor to experience dignity and empowerment as they are responsible for gleaning their food, although the food is still a gift. Individuals who were able to work were presumed to do so, but the laws put in place were set to show compassion (Poe, 2012a). While the welfare model does not always ask for something in return for food or other necessities, the biblical model cares for individuals through justice, equity, and dignity (Poe, 2012a).

**Regarding the treatment of the poor.** What a secular social worker might point out, however, is how this biblical model only seems to account for the poor who are able to work for their needs. There are the poor who are unable to work at all, and Christian social workers must address this issue. Deuteronomy 14:28-29 discusses helping those who cannot provide anything in exchange for food, as it calls those who have abundance to attend to the needs of the poor, stranger, orphan, etc., without asking for anything in return. Furthermore, in Exodus, the Israelites are reminded that just as they were once travelers, they should treat strangers with kindness and hospitality, and in the New Testament, Hebrews addresses generosity towards strangers in a similar manner (Ex. 22:21; Heb. 13:2). In James chapters 2 and 5, the warning for the rich to not neglect the poor or show partiality highlights God's value of the poor and equitable distribution of resources (Jam. 2:1-17, 5:1-6; Poe, 2012a). Moreover, the prophets rebuked those who lacked mercy and justice and encouraged those who walked righteous to continue in their good work (Amos. 4:1-3; Ez. 18:5-9; Zech. 7:8-14; Poe, 2012a). God clearly understands the complexities regarding helping those in need and will avenge against their mistreatment (Ps. 9:8-16, 10:17-18; Keller, 2016; Poe, 2012a). Social workers, now, have a stronger conviction and framework for advocating for the poor once they understand how God values those in need.

**Understanding the Grand Narrative**

As we consider social justice from a biblical perspective, several important concepts should be considered. There is the awe of knowing God's goodness through appreciating his creation, and the recognition of
the grace of God through his redemption (Keller, 2010). How one utilizes these two concepts and answers the questions that arise may frame a biblical understanding of justice.

The Bible is a story of justice and mercy (Poe, 2012b). When God created the world, God created humans in God's own image, which gave every person infinite worth and dignity (Gen. 1:26-27; Keller, 2010). However, the people God created broke their relationship with him, and this rebellion has impacted all aspects of the world (Gen. 3; Poe, 2012b). The effects of this broken relationship are seen through the injustices within the world; glancing at human history delivers countless instances of the brokenness within individuals and the world (Poe, 2012b). However, God sent his son, Jesus, to die on the cross as a perfect atonement for all sin, and Jesus conquered death by rising from the dead on the third day (Jn. 11:25; Matt. 28:5-6). Whoever believes in God and repents from his sin will have eternal life in heaven, for Christ paid the ultimate sacrifice (Jn. 3:16-17). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection created a way for justice to be restored throughout all relationships and the world (Poe, 2012b). The biblical narrative presents a beautiful and perfect story of how God brings forth justice and mercy. Appreciating this story provides a way to understand a framework for justice and its eternal significance.

Who is God?

Belief in God provides a solid foundation for asserting the necessity and eternal significance of justice, for a strong understanding of justice is rooted in confidence in God. Christian theologians hold three general claims regarding God and justice: (1) “God is all-knowing,” (2) “God is perfectly just,” and (3) “God is not a tribal deity”—he transcends culture (Volf, 1996, p. 197). Therefore, what God asserts regarding justice will be just for all the world, regardless of what specific individuals may perceive as justice (Volf, 1996). “If God is the God of all peoples, the justice of God must be the justice for all peoples” (Volf, 1996, p. 197). This divine justice is necessary before peace can ensue (Volf, 1996).

Divine justice requires divine judgment (Keller, 2016). By believing in God's final judgment, Christians have hope that one day there will be peace. This confidence allows Christians to refuse to rely on violence in bringing about peace and gives the reassurance that God will make all things right (Keller, 2016). This image is one of restoration, and social workers can rest in knowing their work is not in vain. The just work that social workers begin here on earth will be brought into fulfillment through God restoring all things after the final judgment. The hope of eternal life is only possible because of God's incredible love, as he sacrificed his son to make a way for people to be forgiven (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Understanding God's love for humanity spurs on social workers to love and serve those in need.
Who is Jesus?

In looking at the life and ministry of Jesus, he showed a continual commitment to the poor and can be a model for present-day social workers. Jesus repeatedly stood beside the downtrodden instead of with the wealthy, and in his eternal kingdom there will be no poor or needy (Wolterstorff, 1983). In Luke 4, Jesus declared he had fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the proclamation of good news and freedom to the oppressed (Lk. 4:16-21). Jesus embodied a picture of wholeness within communities, and he fought back against unjust leaders and laws to bring about justice and compassion (Poe, 2012b).

As Jesus ignored cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences, his life was one of inclusion and embrace (Keller, 2016). Sometimes the Christian message appears to lead to exclusion, but when looking at who Jesus was, his life was anything but exclusionary (Keller, 2016). He cared for those who no one wanted to recognize; Jesus saw each individual as being made in the image of God and deserving of dignity and love (Poe, 2012a; see Matt 25:40). This is who social workers are called to be. Even when it is difficult, social workers are to care for the forgotten, and Christ is the perfect model of what it means to love others.

Necessity of the Cross

Looking at who God is, God’s desire for relationship with humanity, and God’s commitment to justice, the cross becomes a necessity. By sacrificing Jesus on the cross, God proclaimed that sin and evil would not be ignored; there must be judgment (Keller, 2016). However, God showed mercy by bearing the weight of sin on himself and accepted the judgment through his son, Jesus Christ (Keller, 2016). Love shaped justice, and love must continue to shape justice today (Volf, 1996).

God conquered evil not by neglecting to recognize it but by enduring the penalty himself (Stott, 1986). Humanity can only be redeemed through the cross, and Christ’s sacrifice shows how both God’s mercy and justice were satisfied (Stott, 1986). This framework is the model for how social work should be done today; it must encompass both mercy and justice. However, by understanding the cross, God shows that he is the only one who can bring about true and ultimate justice (Keller, 2016). Christian social workers cannot bring about some utopian paradise, but understanding the weight of Christ’s sacrifice gives meaning to suffering and a hope that one day justice will be fully restored (Keller, 2016; Chatraw & Allen, 2018).

There is eternal significance in humanity’s work towards peace and justice, and even when fighting against injustice is difficult, one can have hope that God will ultimately avenge the evil in the world (Chatraw & Allen,
Having an understanding of the cross and God's ultimate judgment can give social workers a drive to keep fighting, a sense that their work is significant, and a hope that God will bring about justice. Furthermore, recognizing the weight of the cross means social workers must neither ignore injustice nor merely punish it; social work must be filled with both mercy and justice (Stott, 1986).

Understanding the biblical narrative explains why people have a sense of right and wrong; there is a God who has set moral law in place that exists outside individual and cultural scales of justice (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). People experience a desire to pursue justice in the world because God has placed a longing for peace in the hearts of individuals (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Pursuing justice and peace is a way in which humanity displays God's nature and advocating for human rights and social justice points to God and his desire for the world (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). The biblical narrative shows a God who is a deliverer, a redeemer, and one who cares deeply about justice (Wolterstorff, 2013). Understanding the cross provides hope for the Christian: there is hope for deliverance from injustice within this world and hope for a restored world which is freed from all evilness forever (Wolterstorff, 2013). To have a world of true justice, it must be a world of freedom and love, and while this is not possible in the present day, God's transcendent justice will bring about such a world (Volf, 1996).

**Challenges for Christianity**

Although the biblical narrative offers a strong foundation for understanding justice, there are challenges for Christianity. First, the Christian tradition is far from perfect regarding justice and human rights (Poe, 2012b). Christians have been involved in significant acts of injustice such as justifying slavery for religious purposes, segregation within churches, etc., and this history must be addressed. Furthermore, even though the church has had a substantial role in helping the poor, they have not always treated the poor with compassion and justice (Poe, 2012a). How, then, can Christianity say their God fights for justice when they, themselves, have a history of injustice? Is Christianity a hypocritical religion?

While Christians have an objective standard to assess justice, they do not have the ability of achieving such justice, for all people are broken and sinful (Poe, 2012b). Furthermore, Christians disagree on what the nature of justice is because their understanding is limited and influenced by culture and tradition (Volf, 1996). God's understanding of justice, however, is perfect and true; thus, there is a distinction between the Christian's idea of God's justice and what God's justice is (Volf, 1996).

Christians, then, may agree on some values such as justice and human rights, but how these values are put into practice will vary (Sherwood,
Christian stances may not always differ from what the majority culture believes, nor should one assume that a Christian’s perspective is always biblical. Christians should bind together with others as they fight for common goals (Sherwood, 2012). All in all, a Christian understanding, specifically regarding social justice, should be approached with humility, as they do not hold the whole picture as God does (Sherwood, 2012).

Furthermore, Christians do not need complete control of a social justice system for social justice to be significant. Christian and secular social workers should work together in advocating and intervening for the needs of their clients. Although Christians may have a deeper foundation for why they do what they do, secular social workers continue to positively impact the lives of many, and their work should not be diminished. Instead of having “Christian” social work and “secular” social work, people from all different backgrounds and viewpoints should bind together in the fight for social justice.

**Christian Social Justice**

Christian social justice and social work offers hope (Wolterstorff, 2013). This hope is not merely a desire for injustice to end, but it is looking towards the future and seeing a picture of a world completely vindicated of evil (Wolterstorff, 2013). This hope shapes how Christian social workers fight for the poor and understanding that each person is created in the image of God gives social workers a stronger motivation for serving with love and compassion. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin (1960) writes, “We are not to consider what men deserve of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love” (p. 696). An act of injustice against another person is a grievance against God (Wolterstorff, 1983). When Christians view others as being children of God, there is a stronger foundation for justice—a foundation defined by love and embrace (Volf, 1996). God has created humanity for community with one another and with God; thus, justice should be formed through community (Volf, 1996, see Rev. 21:3-5).

**Understanding Shalom**

Social work through the lens of the cross also gives deeper hope for the hurting. Christ endured pain and suffering, but Christ’s death and resurrection defeated evil and death (Volf, 1996). True justice will bring about shalom, and shalom will arise when all relationships are filled with peace (Wolterstorff, 1983, see Is. 11:6-8). Shalom is what is to come when God brings about ultimate justice in the world; shalom requires justice (Wolterstorff, 1983). This peace is more than the absence of violence,
however, for a country may be at peace with other nations while still experiencing deep poverty (Wolterstorff, 1983). Living in shalom means that relationships with God, others, and the world are made right; there will be a delight in serving God and in being in community with others (Wolterstorff, 1983).

Shalom involves right relationships, and although some aspects of our current world are ethical and just, all injustice must be vanquished before shalom is brought to fulfillment (Wolterstorff, 1983). Thus, Christ helped bring about shalom by dying on the cross and defeating sin and death (Wolterstorff, 1983). However, individuals can also partake in bringing about shalom as people strive for justice and the restoration of relationships: “Shalom is both God’s cause in the world and our human calling” (Wolterstorff, 1983, p. 72). Although God is the one who will ultimately bring about the gift of shalom, Christians are called to struggle and fight for shalom, instead of simply waiting for God to perfect it (Wolterstorff, 1983, see Is. 58:6-7).

This work towards shalom is the aim of Christian social work. Christians must fight back against the injustices within the world and care for the poor (Poe, 2012b). Even the seemingly small steps towards peace and justice have eternal significance, for they help bring about shalom. Knowing what is to come, Christian social workers have a stronger conviction for caring for those in need; their work is not in vain.

**Conclusion**

When looking at what Christianity and secular social work fight for, there are clear areas of agreement. Both assert the importance of social justice and the value of human rights. What grounds these rights, however, is a point of divergence between the two viewpoints. In analyzing its foundation, the profession of social work neglects to provide a moral obligation for justice and rights, as it claims all people have dignity and worth without providing a strong reason as to why. Secular social work’s arguments, although having good intentions, are fragile as they depend on cultural arguments which change through time; these arguments fail to possess moral obligation and are refuted easily. The values of social justice and human rights are good for individuals and society, but there must be a better way to ground these values.

Christianity upholds the values of justice and rights while also providing a solid foundation for why they matter. As God created all people in his image, every person is given dignity and respect, and God commands Christians to fight for the poor and the oppressed because he loves every person. Moreover, God values justice, so much so, that he was willing to sacrifice his son to pay the price of humanity’s sin, in order that
anyone who believes in God can spend eternity with him. This is God’s commitment to justice and to humanity as he did not ignore evil but confronted and overcame it. God will one day have a final judgment and rid the world of all evilness, and he will bring about a world of peace in all relationships—shalom.

An understanding of the biblical narrative changes things for social workers. Christian social workers experience a stronger conviction for helping those in need; every person is a child of God. As Christian social workers reflect upon what God has done through Christ and what he will do in the future, there is eternal value in serving the poor and oppressed. Social work matters within a Christian framework in a way in which the secular profession of social work fails to experience. Secular and Christian social work may look similar in practice, but there is a richer meaning behind why Christian social workers do what they do. There a gratitude for what God has done and is doing here on earth. The fight for biblical social justice must continue in this world as we long for the perfected community of shalom.

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The Role of the Contemporary Christian Church in the Rural American South: Philosophical Approaches to Operationalizing Religion in Research

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The contemporary Christian Church plays many roles in the community and in the lives of individuals and families living there: Church as a political tool, Church as an instrument for community stability and change, Church as an oppressor and source of rejection, and Church as a source of protection. Literature commonly approaches Christianity and involvement in the contemporary Christian Church from a positivist paradigm which assumes Christianity and church-involvement are rooted solely in commitment to faith. Exploring Christianity in a rural context requires researchers to consider alternative philosophical paradigms when operationalizing religion, such as church-involvement as a source of community or social exclusion through a post-positivist paradigm or church-involvement as a source of authority through Foucault's postmodernist paradigm. Shifts in the operationalization of religion in rural research and implications of such must be considered in the field of social work.

Christian churches have long served a central social as well as religious function in rural communities in the southern United States. Rural communities tend to develop and use unique social structures to compensate for the scarcity of formal resources and supports. Given these overlapping functions of religious organization in the rural South, particular attention should be paid to the unique roles of...
the Christian Church in the rural South, including the role of religious institutions in supporting or ostracizing rural families, both in their everyday lives and at points of crisis.

Christianity (“the Church”) as an institution has been researched largely through a philosophical lens presuming absolute truth. Often, this philosophical orientation toward the institutional Church aligns with a traditional religious understanding of the Christian Church. In contrast, the Church is understood in academic social work as filling multifaceted roles in the community: Church as a political tool, Church as an instrument for community stability and change, Church as an oppressor and source of rejection, and Church as a source of protection. An exploration of these context-dependent roles may address ambiguity between individual faith and collective community ideals, which can present in terms of differential experiences of the Church as supportive or ostracizing. This should be explored amongst rural community members and populations who have been ostracized by the contemporary Christian Church in the American South on the basis of identity (e.g. LGBTQ individuals, substance use-affected families, system-involved families).

Understanding the Church outside of the positivist belief that the world operates on general laws and more specifically on the theological axiom that there exists an absolute truth provides an opportunity to understand the Church as a structure of justice or a structure of tyranny. The philosophical underpinnings of research (e.g. post-positivist, critical/emancipatory) drive the purpose of the study, the types of questions asked, and the outcomes. For these reasons, it is essential to fully explore and critically assess the philosophy underlying how we seek to understand the Church and its congregants.

Given the structure of rural communities and their reliance on social capital and social networks that accrue from their participation in the Church, researchers must also consider the multi-faceted social benefits of church involvement and Christian precepts from the perspective of alternative paradigms. This paper will critically interrogate the philosophical paradigms at play in understanding the relationships among rurality, Christianity, and community, which may improve the operationalization of religion in research with rural communities in the southern United States. Furthermore, this paper offers new paradigmatic directions for operationalizing religion in a way that reflects its nuanced role in the lives of rural community members.

Discussing the philosophy of religion is often taboo, creating panic for communities who rely on the steadfast consistency of faith in their lives. This paper does not intend to undermine Christianity or the impact of faith on people’s lives but rather seeks to explore how the structure of the Church takes different forms and plays varying roles in the lives of southern
rural families. This paper rejects the single story of southern Christians as intolerant, exclusive, and oppressive and instead explores this feature with other facets of the Church. The authors emphasize the Church as taking many forms, some more comforting than others, and implore the reader to consider all aspects of this institution. This is not intended to be an attack on the Church, but rather a deeper exploration into what faith and community mean to individuals and their families in southern rural communities.

**Literature Review**

Rural communities in the southern United States are deeply rooted in religious tradition (Flora & Flora, 2007), tout high rates of religiosity (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2010), and experience the prominence of White Evangelical churches and their impact (Bracey, 2016). It is imperative to consider the role the contemporary Christian Church plays in these communities, considering its prominence and the influence of the White Evangelical Church on the moral worldview and social environment of congregants (Edgell, 2012) and, consequently in small rural communities, those living in the community who may not belong to the congregation.

**Operationalizing Religion as Faith**

Literature on the contemporary Christian Church operates overwhelmingly from a positivist paradigm assuming absolute truth. The roles of the Christian Church have expanded and contracted over time; however, all roles and research on such acknowledge and derive from the innate power of the Christian Church and the authority of Christ. There is a singular absolute truth upon which all these context-dependent roles are built: There is a Creator who has instructed how individuals are to conduct their lives, outlined in the sacred scripture. Varying interpretations of the scripture may explain the flux in manifestations resulting in different roles of this absolute truth, but all are manifestations of the same absolute truth.

**Church as a Political Tool**

The Church has served in the role of a political tool differently across history. The Church, particularly in the southern United States, has been related to politics since Reconstruction (Cunningham, 2015). The Church in the southern United States became organized in the 1920s in the fight for prohibition (Locke, 2017), and religion and Conservative politics became synonymous with religious leaders taking the role of political activists. There was a resurgence of religious politics in the 1980s when Evangelical
Christians took up causes such as abortion and organized to become a powerhouse in American politics (Wilcox, 2000).

The Church's political strategy varied. One facet of it was the use of religious language in the political sphere. Words rooted in Christianity, such as faith and salvation, have been used politically by defining them exclusively as Conservative concepts and not entertaining alternate definitions (Parsons, 2014). For example, faith became synonymous with Conservative views and family values (Wilcox, 2000). This created an illusion that faith and progressive politics were inherently in conflict, giving Conservative politicians a strong grip on Christian voters by positioning the GOP as the Christian party (Wilcox, 2000). Consequently, these words have become synonymous with Conservative politics by leaning into the authority of the Church.

Evangelical Christians, growing in strength and numbers in the Bible Belt with the rise of evangelists such as Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, have taken up many causes in politics in recent history (Carpenter, 1980; Wacker, 2015; Williams, 2010). The Church organized quickly and powerfully with efforts picking up speed in the mid-1980s, becoming effective in the political system and embedded in the GOP. By engaging politically and recruiting all Christians to align their political beliefs with the Church by positioning the GOP as the Christian party, religion has impacted public policy in several ways. Conservative, Church-approved judges have been given lifetime appointments to the court, most notably under George W. Bush (Rosenberg, Breslau, & Hirsh, 2006) and most recently under Donald J. Trump. This increases the chances of Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court case that gave women the right to choose whether or not to have an abortion, being overturned. This aligns with the Evangelical Church's belief that abortion is in conflict with the Bible and Christian values. This belief is rooted in many verses in the scripture (e.g. Psalm 139:13, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.”) that do not explicitly condemn abortion but have been interpreted and used by Evangelical activists to mean as much. The Church has tried to overturn abortion rights since the 20th century by seeking to overturn Roe v. Wade or pass the Human Life Amendment which declares fetuses to be human beings at conception, thus making abortion synonymous with murder (Rosenberg et al., 2006). The Church has not been successful at fully and formally outlawing abortion, but it has successfully helped pass and consistently renew the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits the use of federal funds to conduct most abortions (Solinger, 2013).

The Church has not only opposed abortion, but also birth control and other forms of reproductive health care. Christian Conservatives organized against the approval of emergency contraception (i.e., Plan B), effectively delaying its approval (Rosenberg et al., 2006). The Church has also supported and fostered the development of sexual education that asserts
Abstinence as the only form of birth control. This has further contributed to intolerance in the church community, associating shame and guilt with premarital sex and unwed pregnancies (see “Church as an Oppressor and Source of Rejection”; Hoffman, 2019). Again, these political efforts align closely with the religious beliefs of many Evangelical Christians.

Religious motivation for political activism at the individual level of Christian people has been under-researched. Supporting these causes appears to have been, for many Christians, a way of asserting their faith on a larger scale (e.g., Williams, 2010). It appears that it was a form of obedience to what they believed to be the absolute truth. Many Christians have referenced verses that assert the importance and sacredness of children, interpreting these verses as instructions from God that abortion is against the Bible (Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5; Psalm 127:3-5; Genesis 1:27). It is important to remember that the Bible has been interpreted in many different ways across history. The many interpretations may change the way in which Christianity is practiced and expressed and the role of religiosity in the lives of those who practice religion. This needs to be researched more in-depth in order to understand the Christian people, how they operationalize their faith and its influence on politics, and how the Church’s role as a political tool has impacted their lives, with particular consideration for scriptures, whose implicit interpretations are fervently obeyed, such as those that many use to justify anti-abortion efforts perpetuated by the Church.

Progressive Christian churches have become involved in social justice issues locally and nationally, with some working in deeply Conservative regions of the Bible Belt and providing an alternative to traditional Christianity (McLaren, 2017). This diverges from the efforts of the Evangelical Christian Church that comprises much of the Bible Belt but should not be ignored because of its growing presence in the region. This role of the Church aligns with the teachings of Christianity that implore Christians to love their neighbors, care for others, defend those who are oppressed or treated unjustly, and look after those who are vulnerable (Mark 12:31; 1 Peter 3:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 Corinthians 10:24; Galatians 6:2; Galatians 5:14; Hebrews 13:1-2; Matthew 7:12; Romans 14:13; Isaiah 1:17; James 1:27). Matthew 25:35-40, (New International Version) states:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit
“you?” The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

This verse, along with other verses of a similar sentiment, can be interpreted to instruct Christians to care for those in need without judgment or hesitation (Romans 2:1) as a duty of their faith and commitment to God. This may motivate social justice involvement of the Church and Christian communities. Though these motivations for social justice involvement have been under-researched on the individual level, it may be that Christians feel they are being instructed to engage in social activism because of the sacred scripture. This role of the Church as a political tool may impact families by either dictating how they vote and what they support or isolating and ostracizing them when their beliefs do not align with the Church’s political assertions.

The contemporary Christian Church has been effective as a political tool because the Church is seen as the interpreter of the absolute truth or has at least been treated as such historically. This paradigm makes it easy for the Church to promote their political agenda, whether progressive or conservative, as Christians feel an urgency to align their political beliefs with that of the Christian Church - to be obedient to the absolute truth. Congregants’ moral worldview and subsequent political activity are pre-established by the Church (Adler, Hoegeman, & West, 2014). Even the Church’s basic effort to engage politically relates to the acknowledgment of the absolute truth: Christ has told them how to live in order to be righteous and to restore others’ lives from sin to righteousness (Galatians 6:1), so they advocate for policies that fulfill this mission.

**Church as an Instrument for Community Stability and Change**

The contemporary Christian Church is an indelible force in its immediate community. Churches in the United States contribute substantially to caring for vulnerable populations in the community (Cnaan & Newman, 2010). Churches have promoted preventive measures in substance use, with successful implementation in White rural and suburban church communities (Johnson, Noe, Collins, Strader, & Bucholtz, 2000). The power and authority of the Church has also been leveraged to address physical wellness and implement interventions for diet and exercise in the rural southern United States (Kegler et al., 2012). These efforts comprising this role of the Church align closely with the teachings of Christianity that assert that the body is the temple of Christ and should be cared for accordingly (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 1 Corinthians 10:31). Though this motivation for the role of the Church as a vessel for community change has not yet been researched, it may be that Christians feel a responsibility
to help implement these interventions as they encourage the treatment of the body as a temple. This role of the Church is pertinent as it may be fostering even more influence of the Church on community members by utilizing the authority of the institution to change community member actions and beliefs.

Christian congregations are an integral source of support for Americans living in poverty (Cnaan & Newman, 2010), becoming an oftentimes primary source of care for impoverished community members. This care for the poor is consistent with scripture that encourages Christians to love and serve those in need (e.g., 1 John 3:11; John 13:34; Leviticus 19:18; 1 Peter 4:8; Romans 13:8; 1 John 3:18; 1 Corinthians 16:14; Ephesians 4:2-3; 1 Peter 3:8-9; Hebrews 6:10; Galatians 5:13; Matthew 23:11; Mark 10:45; 1 Peter 4:10; Romans 12:9-13). In rural areas, this is maximized by the persistent poverty plaguing many of these communities and the lack of adequate resources to alleviate issues of social distress (Flora & Flora, 2007). This requires lay social services, often provided by the Church. Belcher & Tice (2011) examined Christian charity and the provision of social services and argued that this role is closely linked to the issue of evangelism and maintaining order. This has a host of implications for rural communities and the role of the Church, including maintaining social order and adhering to scripture through deeds in the community. It can be argued, then, that the role of the Church in the community is closely tied to the central belief system of the Church and its congregants.

The Church’s role in the immediate community is further aligned with this absolute truth, as the Bible instructs Christians to do good work to further the Kingdom of God (Galatians 6:9-10; Ephesians 2:10; James 2:17-18; Hebrews 13:16; Titus 2:7). Literature on the contemporary Christian Church echoes this motivation implicitly in research on the Church as a change-agent in the community and as a source of care for the poor, especially with the intention of evangelism through service. Existing research, and the most prevalent operationalization of religion and the Church in research, is rooted in the positivistic assumption that asserts that the role of the Church in the community is innately tied to their mission and service to God.

**Church as an Oppressor and Source of Rejection**

The Church can be oppressive to individuals in the community that may not align with the Church’s beliefs but, because of how pervasive the Church is in the Bible Belt, are impacted nonetheless by the role of religion in their lives. Traditional Christian beliefs hinge on the authority of the Church and the sacred scriptures and establish implicit and explicit expected roles for individuals in the family and community (Stroope, 2011). This restrains
individual autonomy, which may lead to feelings of oppression for individuals whose behaviors or feelings do not match that which is explicitly condoned in the sacred scripture or by the leaders of the Church or for those whose behaviors or feelings do match that which is explicitly condemned in the sacred scripture or by the leaders of the Church.

In the rural U.S. South, it is not simply an issue of not attending church if you feel isolated or oppressed as a result. Church is everywhere - Church is so deeply woven in the fabric of everyday life in these communities that it becomes impossible to live a life absent of its influence or to divorce the concept of your hometown from that of the Church (Barton, 2010). This has long-term mental health implications for those who feel oppressed by the Church, excluding them from their own community (Barton, 2010). These feelings of isolation and oppression can be found in research on varying population types considered “deviant” in the traditional religious context. Consistent with previously discussed roles of religion, the role of the Church as an oppressor and source of rejection is rooted in interpretations of the sacred scripture that people and communities are instructed to live their lives in a certain way. Beliefs based on Biblical scripture interpretations that posit that homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22) and premarital sexual activity (Ephesians 5:3) are sins or that mental illness is a manifestation of sin (Ponnudurai, 2013) contribute to the oppression experienced by people who identify with these groups and exist within the religious context of the southern United States and its rural communities. These are examples and this does not serve as an exhaustive list of populations that may feel oppressed and rejected by the Church.

The Church and Sexual/Gender Minorities.

Literature on individuals who identify as sexual/gender minorities living in the Bible Belt shows the conflict between religion and identifying with a group often condemned by religious groups, which can have mental health implications (Barton, 2010). White Evangelical churches have mobilized and engaged in anti-gay discourse in recent years, often with a vote to ban same-sex marriage on the docket (Adler et al., 2014). Importantly, this engagement in anti-gay discourse has primarily occurred when there was a social threat to traditional marital values (pro-gay movement and votes; Adler et al., 2014). It is important to consider the role and impact this activity has on members of the LGBTQ population living in these communities, who may also be engaged in the church community. This contributes to feelings of worthlessness and shame, along with symptoms of depression and anxiety, experienced because of the role of the Church as an oppressive institution that condemns those whose identities, lives, and lived experiences do not align with their community’s interpretation of sacred scripture.
The Church and Sexual and Reproductive Decisions.

The Church's stance on sex, contraception, and abortion has impacted people in the Church by fostering shame and guilt associated with premarital sexual activities and unwed pregnancies (Hoffman, 2019) as well as people's choices to prevent (Kellogg Spadt et al., 2014; Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Murray-Swank, 2007) or terminate pregnancy (Cockrill & Nack, 2013). This may have health and mental health implications for people currently experiencing these pressures and for those who have histories with these issues. The role of the Church as an oppressor could prevent people from seeking necessary reproductive health care and could cause them to feel condemned, stigmatized, and isolated by the very community to which they once belonged.

By age 20, 75% of Americans have had sex (Finer, 2007); even among Southern Baptist young adults, over 70% report having premarital sex (Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013). Additionally, as of 2016, 39.8% of all births in the United States were to unmarried women (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Drake, 2018). With teenage pregnancy rates ranging from 36% to 67%, 15 out of the 17 Southern states (including the District of Columbia; using the US Census Bureau definition of the South) have teenage pregnancy rates above the national average of 43% (Kost, Maddow-Zimet, & Arpaia, 2017). With the majority of young people engaging in sexual activity and with high rates of pregnancy outside of marriage, despite the Church's disapproval of these behaviors, many young people may find themselves feeling stigmatized in their church community or may choose to leave the Church in order to avoid negative reactions (Kinnaman, 2011).

The disconnection between the Church's expectations and Church members' behaviors may actually lead to increased rates of abortion, sexually transmitted infections, and unwed pregnancy, as young people may not be properly educated about sexuality, relationships, and pregnancy prevention. For example, the abstinence-only sex education programs that the Church and Conservative organizations advocate for are associated with increased teenage pregnancy rates (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011), likely because young people leave these programs without the necessary tools to protect themselves and to make informed sexual and reproductive decisions. The Church's opposition to certain sexual and reproductive decisions not only impacts the reproductive autonomy of individual women and families, but can also create stigma, health and mental health problems, and issues in the health of the overall church community, potentially even leading people to leave the Church.
The Church and Mental Illness

Historically, mental illness has been rejected in the Christian Church as either demon possession, something treatable by prayer, and/or as a result of sin or immorality (Covey, 2005; McCasland, 1970; Wesselmann & Graziano, 2010). These views vary by denomination (Wesselmann & Graziano, 2010). If mental illness is associated with immorality or possession, families of individuals living with mental illness may feel ashamed to go to the Church with this struggle. If mental illness is thought to be treatable by prayer, families may feel guilty for seeking medical attention for their family member’s mental illness. Because of this, families may not seek help from the Church for their family member. If the Church is the primary support in their rural community, this could be devastating to the family and lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion.

Rogers, Stanford, and Garland (2012) found that mental illness was prevalent among Protestant church members; however, affected congregants felt the church community ignored the devastation and distress of their families’ mental health crisis. Churches failing to address mental health issues may cause church members to feel isolated, hindering the benefits of church involvement. The impact of these views on individuals with mental illness and their families is under-researched in the context of the contemporary Christian Church. The Church’s historical emphasis on mental illness and its potential impact on the isolation and oppression of families dealing with mental illness mean that it is necessary to research how the contemporary Church views, speaks about, and deals with mental illness.

The Church plays the role of the oppressor because of the manifestation of the same absolute truth which is consistent across scholarship in the contemporary Christian Church. Research suggests that people experience feelings of oppression and isolation because their actions or beliefs do not align with those of the Christian Church. This implies, and may assert, in cases of small rural communities where social order is imminently enforced, that anything other than the absolute truth is inherently false. This positions the Church as a source of rejection for rural community members who have been ostracized from the local Christian community (e.g. LGBTQ individuals).

Church as a Source of Protection

For some, the Church may be a source of protection that provides a sense of belonging, stability, and comfort. When people have a sense of belonging, they experience healthier well-being (Krause & Wulff, 2005; Stroope, 2011). Belonging is a basic human need (Maslow, 1954) with powerful implications for a sense of identity, behavior, and health. People access
belonging by identifying and becoming engaged with a group (Stroope, 2011). The church community has served this role across history, providing a community for people with shared faith (Harris, 2013). Shared cultural beliefs foster belonging and build a sense of community (Ryle & Robinson, 2006). The literature has yet to fully explore this in the context of Christian congregations, but it may be especially pertinent for the church community in rural America, considering Americans frequent church more than most in the industrialized world (Norris & Inglehart, 2004).

Congregational scholars identify the primary functions of a church as worship, education, service, and fostering community through a sense of belonging (Ammerman, 2009). Community attachment related to belonging hinges on the social networks and connections made through belonging to a group (Putnam, 2000), such as a church congregation. Stroope (2011) found that people who espouse these traditional Christian beliefs are more likely to have a sense of belonging than people who do not hold as much value in the Bible and community of the Church, emphasizing the role of the Church as a source of protection.

In a recent article about progressive churches in the Bible Belt, McLaren (2017) found that differences in belief systems exist within churches and may cause some tension. These churches provide a sense of belonging to progressive Christians living in Conservative locales and offer the chance to build bridges between varying belief systems; however, ministers of these churches acknowledge the hard work of building community when there is not a single shared set of values (McLaren, 2017). This may impact the role of the Church as a source of protection.

In conflict with the assertion that the church community augments well-being, there is evidence that religious support itself does not impact life satisfaction (Freeze, 2017). Perceived social support, however, does impact life satisfaction (Freeze, 2017), which may be a by-product of belonging to a church congregation. This may be especially pertinent in rural communities where social support is seen as an essential function of the Church.

The Church’s role as a source of protection means it provides essential community and a sense of belonging. This emphasizes the importance of the church family and its positive implications for families invested in and engaging with the Church. This has been researched as a primary function of the Church in Black communities but is under-researched in White communities. Considering the expansion and power of the Evangelical Church in White communities, it is necessary to research the role of the Church as a source of protection in order to understand the positive attributes of religion with different populations in the rural southern United States.

Literature on the role of the Christian Church as a source of protection begins to diverge from the positivist paradigm by suggesting the belongingness and community created by the Church is valued by
church-goers; however, it is not divorced from the absolute truth, as the Bible instructs Christians to find a body of believers, worship together, and encourage one another (e.g. Colossians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 14:26, Hebrews 10:25, Matthew 18:20).

**A Shift from the Operationalization of Religion as Faith**

The majority of scholarship on the contemporary Christian Church operates from a positivist paradigmatic assumption, with slight divergence from this in researching the value of the church family. This has powerful implications for social work researchers in their operationalization of religion and religious involvement as it pertains to southern rural community members and the Christian Church. When social work researchers operationalize religion from a positivist paradigm, they risk minimizing the role of religion in the lives of rural community members by treating congregants’ potential issues with the absolute authority of the Church as a lack of commitment to faith.

**Operationalizing Religion as Community and Social Exclusion**

It may be more accurate to operationalize religion and the role of the Christian Church within the post-positivist paradigm. The post-positivist paradigm is committed to reflecting reality with research (Diesing, 1992), like positivism, but allows room for error within reality, such as religiosity not fully capturing religion as it serves its various purposes for individuals in southern rural communities. It may be true that the Church’s role is associated with the absolute truth of Christ and the sacred scripture; however, there may be other truths present in the way that church-involvement is valued and experienced in the lives of individuals and families. It is important to consider the contemporary Christian Church as it is a source of community and social exclusion rather than simply a source of faith. Discussion of the church family lends to the argument to operationalize religion as it pertains to the contemporary Christian Church as a community-centric construct rather than a faith-centric construct. Church-involvement may be strictly a social community that provides critical support for community members in crisis or merely in their everyday lives; however, church-involvement may also serve in the role of the hub for faith and conviction, resulting in a different meaning in the lives of church-goers. This takes the form of faith whereas the former takes the form of belongingness and community. Both may be true for community members, depending on context and personal need, which means social work researchers must consider them separately. We cannot assume, as researchers, that when rural southerners say they go to church it means they are invested in their faith. In the same vein, the Church
that provides community for some may be a source of social exclusion for others, regardless of their relationship to faith.

If a community member feels ostracized from their community because of the authority of the Church and a misalignment with their own lived experiences (e.g. LGBTQ individuals, sexually active unmarried individuals), it hinders what is often a source of social capital in rural communities. This begs the question of how the Church’s authority can perpetuate the opposite of community — social exclusion. Social exclusion involves stigma, isolation, and othering of an individual (Flora & Flora, 2007). This is common in rural communities where individuals are often closely interconnected.

For example, let us consider the role of the Church as it cares for impoverished rural community members. traditional Protestant values equate hard-work and self-sufficiency with righteousness, which positions the Church uniquely in addressing issues of poverty (Belcher & Tice, 2011). Belcher & Tice (2011) assert that, although contemporary Christian churches offer services for the poor, such as food pantries, these are intended to be temporary and to aid in the Christian witness. In southern rural communities, where persistent poverty is rampant and often coupled with generational poverty (Flora & Flora, 2007), this begs the question of how people living in poverty are received by the Church and how they perceive the Church’s role in their life and community. If church becomes a place of judgment for rural Southerners living in poverty, it is uncertain how this impacts their overall wellness and their relationship with the Church. If religion is operationalized strictly as faith, researchers miss the opportunity to understand religion as a source of judgment and social exclusion for rural peoples.

Researching the role of the contemporary Christian Church within a post-positivist paradigm benefits the individuals living in southern rural communities and scholarship conducted in these areas. If religion and church-involvement are only researched under the assumption of an absolute truth, social work research and practice will falsely assume that individuals value Church as a source of faith and faith alone or reject Church as a rejection of faith and faith alone. This minimizes the issues of community and social exclusion that motivate or hinder church-involvement alongside or instead of faith.

Operationalizing Religion as a Source of Authority

Religion sociologists have framed religion in the context of power and its impact on the political and social environment (Edgell, 2012); however, the impact of this power and the Church’s authoritarian role in small, rural communities has scarcely been considered in rural social work. The issue
of power and authority is best explored and understood within Foucault's postmodern paradigm (Best & Kellner, 1991). This assumption implies that individuals and families cannot even make a choice about church-involvement because they are either pulled in or pushed out by structures of power arising from the authority of the Church and the prevalence and esteem of it in the rural American South.

The use of the postmodern paradigm in scholarship allows for a more accurate assessment of the exertion of social control from the contemporary Christian Church on rural community members. For example, let us consider the role of the Church in politics. Is preaching politics from the pulpit or engaging the Church in political action against same-sex marriage, abortion, etc. a way to control congregants to vote a certain way when it becomes entangled with their belief system? Furthermore, let us consider the role of the Church as an oppressor and source of rejection. Church members who may be otherwise invested in their faith can find themselves rejected by and pushed out of the Church when they engage in behaviors that the Church does not approve of. For example, unmarried people who become pregnant may choose to leave their Church communities due to ostracization, shame, or fear of judgment. In this way, the Church can serve as rejector and oppressor, discouraging members who disobey Church doctrine from continuing to invest in their faith and Church communities. Social control stemming from the authority of the church can also operate positively. Rural families who are not invested in their faith but feel the urge to belong to the prominent church community may attend to raise their children in church and engage with the community as they feel is expected. This contributes to a sense of belonging and can positively affect the community by creating a central gathering place for rural community members.

A postmodern operationalization of church-involvement allows us to consider authority within individual church communities. Do some Christian communities only ordain White males? Do some Christian communities minimize or emphasize the role of women? Are there other power structures at play in the community that perpetuate the hierarchy and power structures that maintain the status quo but silence minority voices? These issues have major implications for individuals in southern rural communities, including the inclusion/exclusion and oppression perpetuated by the Church.

It is important that social work research consider the contentious, harmonious, or complicated relationship that rural Southerners may have with the contemporary Christian Church. Research questions and operationalization rooted in Foucault's postmodernism lend opportunity to the exposure of the power structures of the Church within the context of the community. For example, research questions may consider what
would happen if an individual or family needed help but could not access the support of the Church because their need involved a value or behavior that does not align with the values of the Church (e.g. parents finding out their teenage daughter is pregnant, a congregant choosing to have an abortion). Under this paradigm, religion and church-involvement are better operationalized as a figure of authority in order to best explore how the power and authority of the Church pull in or push out community members regardless of their faith.

Conclusion

Social work researchers are charged with the task of critically evaluating the philosophical paradigms from which they define the operationalization of research terms. In the current literature, religion and the issue of church-involvement are considered narrowly and are often intertwined. This compromises a more nuanced understanding of religion in the lives of rural individuals and families and potentially leaves critical voices out of the conversation. By deconstructing the standard narrative around rural Christianity, and seeking to understand its inherent complexity, social work researchers can develop a more in-depth understanding of the specific strengths and challenges of church involvement for rural community members. The lens researchers use defines the questions asked and the outcomes found; therefore, in order to develop accurate and comprehensive research, it is essential to critically examine what is driving the lens and why.

Whether designing research or implementing evidence-based practice, different approaches to rural populations may require a different lens for research. It is imperative to devote time in the research design to carefully develop this lens so that the findings from the research can fully reflect the nuance and meaning of the community. Social work research informs practice, so this intentionality in research design is essential to ensure the most effective and least harmful practice in rural communities. For instance, a social worker may emphasize the sense of community that the church provides rather than assume alignment with faith or belief if research has been conducted in a manner that allows these dimensions to be considered in nuanced ways and disentangled conceptually. Christianity plays a different role in rural areas when considered from a post-positivist paradigmatic assumption. It is important, and encouraged, to consider and apply these alternative philosophical paradigms to better understand and capture the religious experiences and their meaningfulness for rural individuals and families and to guide better-tailored practice through social work professionals.
References


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God and Guns: Faith as a Resource for Healing from a School Shooting

Bree Alexander

Responses to school shootings nationwide have been varied. While prevention and intervention have been a primary focus for many public schools, healing through faith has been less communicated in the public. Many survivors and stakeholders have publicly ridiculed overtly spiritual responses to school shootings that minimize action needed to address the issue, citing that policy change and improved safety precautions in schools are the primary ways in which change will occur. However, school shooting history suggests that healing from trauma should also be a main priority afterwards. This study explores the role of faith and religion with trauma intervention in the aftermath of school shootings. The article uses case study data to discuss the methods by which faith can be a resource for healing from trauma after school shootings.
school shooting is the integration of faith in the healing process, which the author will explore further.

**Response to School Shootings**

What is often limited in reports of gun violence, is the longer-term trauma response in the aftermath of a school shooting once the initial shock has passed; the crisis intervention teams have moved on to the next crisis, and the schools and their surrounding communities are left to adjust to a new normal. This year, on the 20th anniversary of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, some survivors discussed the importance of long-term mental health resources and reducing the stigma of mental illness, since this prevents some from seeking services (Shapiro, 2019). Frank DeAngelis, Principal of Columbine High School at the time of the shooting, noted the discouragement he received regarding disclosing that he saw a therapist following the incident due to risk of appearing unfit (Shapiro, 2019). As a result of similar experiences, many school shooting survivors navigate the healing process on their own, which can increase risk of mental health symptoms and maladaptive behaviors. In fact, recent reports highlighting multiple suicides of school shooting survivors all in the same week remind us that trauma continues long after a school shooting has taken place and in many cases is not being addressed adequately (Yan & Park, 2019). Research indicates the healing process following a traumatic event can vary depending on the event, but often includes resilience, an increase in positive views of new possibilities, personal strength and spiritual change (Bruns, 2014). In fact, faith, defined as a strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, as a resource for healing is a method that is gaining more attention in trauma literature, and more people report using faith to cope with traumatic life experiences (Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013). Faith has also been reported as a protective factor in the prevention of violence in youth and adolescents (Windham, Hooper, & Hudson, 2005; Maxina, 2007).

**Faith as a Response to School Shootings**

Relationship with God, interactional parts of one’s being, and cultural influences are all related to the way a person responds to a traumatic incident and their ability to recover long-term (Branton, 2006; Brennan & Bally, 2007; Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006; Giordano & Engebretson, 2006; Goetz & Caron, 2005; Vis & Battistone, 2014; Westerman, 2008). When presented with trauma and loss, many use a form of faith functioning to cope or search for understanding of the event through faith-based assumptions (Daniel, 2012). Trauma, grief, and loss can threaten one’s beliefs about good and evil, the nature of God, and one’s place in the
world, but these experiences also have the potential to produce significant psychological and spiritual growth (Daniel, 2012). Responses regarding the incorporation of faith in managing trauma after a school shooting have been recorded by various news and media outlets. For example, many survivors of the 2018 Santa Fe High School shooting cited their faith and the power of prayer as a healing agent following the shooting (Yee & Harmon, 2018). One survivor stated, “For my family, prayer is a great source of strength and comfort; a peace washes over you when you know you don’t have the strength, and someone can intercede for you” (Yee & Harmon, 2018).

Others have expressed ambivalent views regarding faith as a response to school shootings. While many acknowledge the positive role faith plays in healing, they also express frustration with the media’s sole mention of prayer and faith as a resolution for grief and trauma symptoms. They caution the public from being inundated with mere words of faith and opting for more of a faith praxis approach (i.e., the process by which a person’s faith couples with love to transform communities and societies for the better) in addition to more practical responses like change in gun control laws and school safety measures. Some prominent examples of this come from the 2018 Parkland, Florida shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in which many people spoke out to dismiss the phrase “thoughts and prayers” that were offered by several prominent figures including the President of the United States (Mazza, 2018). They demanded that the government do something more tangible to alleviate their pain and fear of future shooting incidents (Mazza, 2018). Such sentiments align with teachings in James 2:14, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has not deeds? Can such faith save them?” Thus, the call for active faith and the need for trauma intervention reveals a unique opportunity for the integration of both to help school shooting survivors heal.

**Theoretical Framework**

After experiencing a traumatic event like a school shooting, previously held beliefs are challenged and thoughts of mortality become more prominent and thus, a greater desire to engage with fundamental existential and faith-related issues arises (Tedeschi & Riffle, 2016). LeMothe (1999) suggests that if a person holds religious beliefs including a supernatural power that is supposed to provide security or safety, these beliefs are inevitably challenged by traumatic experiences. However, this does not automatically lead to abandonment of one’s faith. Viktor Frankl, holocaust survivor and founder of Logotherapy, suggests that the primary motivational force of a traumatized individual is finding meaning in life (Frankl, 1988). Frankl’s three main tenets of meaning include: 1.) Freedom of will (i.e., one has the freedom to find meaning in personal experiences), 2.) Will to meaning
(i.e., one's motivation to find meaning in life) and 3.) Meaning of life (i.e., one's understanding that life has meaning under all circumstances) (Dezelic, 2014). This can only be achieved by the movement through feelings such as grief, depression, and anxiety (often experienced following a trauma like a school shooting) to a sense of purpose or serving something greater, often a faith tradition for many people. This draws on a fundamental feature of the human spirit, which is

the capacity to change, redirect oneself, or take on a new outlook on life by which one can address the realities of pain, suffering, and death with a sense of empowerment, responsibility, and courage to face and change the future (Morgan, 2010, p.110).

Since trauma response is directly related to one's experience of the traumatic event, faith has the potential to be instrumental in the meaning-making process (Altmaier, 2013). When reflecting on the monstrosities inflicted upon children in concentration camps in Germany, Irving Greenberg argued that “no statement theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children” (Greenberg, 1977, p.34). This suggests that “theology that does not make sense in the presence of burning children is not adequate theology” (Theuring, 2014, p.549). This suggests that religion can offer us something more in the midst of suffering. Faith often offers answers to important questions that relate to trauma such as, why has this happened to me? How is this event relevant to my present and future? “[T]he integration of faith and meaning is present in the content of religious belief and the process of spirituality” (Altmaier, 2013, p. 109). In other words, the integration of faith-based coping strategies helps in understanding the role of religion in processing the aftermath of a traumatic experience (Altmaier, 2013). Religious coping strategies can include the redefining of the experience as a part of God's will, seeking control through prayer with God, and finding comfort in engaging in religious activities with like-minded individuals (Altmaier, 2013). These strategies are linked to better adjustment and improved physical health when they allow the individual to create post-traumatic cognitions that are beneficial (Altmaier, 2013). In contrast, faith practices linked to poorer outcomes after experiencing trauma involve a view of God as “punitive or distant, or assigning personal blame” (Altmaier, 2013, p. 110).

**Integrating a Faith Perspective in Trauma Intervention**

The varying responses of those grieving the loss of people killed or injured in school shootings have remained just that, varied. While some individuals feel led to express their grief through their faith, others may
push it away completely. The literature suggests that there is a relationship between the role of faith and the trauma healing process. Specifically, a correlation between Christian-based intervention strategies and decreased risk of post-traumatic symptoms have been identified (Vis & Battititone, 2014). For example, students who have a positive relationship with God can experience positive effects in their ability to recover from adversity and trauma (Ball, Armistead & Austin, 2003; Vis & Battititone, 2014). Other benefits of faith-based trauma intervention include decreased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and memory loss (Brennan & Bally, 2007; Westerman, 2008). Faith-based trauma intervention can include enhancing a positive relationship with God through journal writing and self-reflection, developing safety plans based on spiritual literature to enhance acceptance of the unknown and responsibility for personal decisions, seeking support from God during times of stress through prayer, and using expressive arts and verbal processing to discuss how the incident affects relationship with God, explore the role God plays in recovery, and/or develop meaning of experiences (Vis & Battistone, 2014).

Social workers have an ethical obligation to understand this relationship and utilize it effectively in practice. The following retrospective case study discusses the integration of faith as a resource for healing through trauma after a school shooting. To keep identities confidential, names were changed, and other identifying information collected during the interview portion of the study was omitted. The research is also supplemented with publicly available information and background information about the shooting. Using the theoretical framework of Viktor Frankl's existential theory, the incident is explored and connected to one's capacity for faith concepts and meaning-making. Reflecting on application to school shootings, the research findings synthesize the role of faith in the healing process following a school shooting and how it relates to social work practice.

**Surviving Columbine: Kate’s Story**

As a teenager preparing to embark on new adventures in college, Kate unexpectedly became a survivor of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, one of the deadliest and most highly publicized mass school shootings in U.S. history until 2018. Her memories of hiding under a lunch table, running to a safer location inside the school amid gunshots, and warning other students of the danger in the process are still engraved in the back of her mind. Now in her mid-thirties and just a few months prior to the 20th anniversary of the Columbine High shooting, Kate agreed to be interviewed to discuss how her Mennonite-Christian faith played a role in her healing process since Columbine. Kate discusses the effects the shooting had on her emotional well-being and how she managed to find
peace with the help of her faith. As she recalled the events of that day, Kate notes the questions she now asks herself about faith, the unknown factors that contributed to her actions that day, and how she has chosen to move forward with her life. Kate is currently working as a public-school teacher in the U.S. where she has had the opportunity to fulfill the lifelong goal of teaching students for the past 16 years.

**Method**

Using a retrospective case study design approach, the author collected data via two semi-structured telephone interviews to better understand Kate’s experience of the public-school shooting and the role her faith played in coping in the aftermath. The instrument included 31 open-ended questions designed to collect data from the participant specific to her experiences and perceptions (See Appendix A). Interviews included one, 60-minute initial interview and one, 30-minute follow-up interview which were tape recorded for transcription and data analysis. The author obtained approval for interviews from Baylor University’s institutional review board (IRB) and consent was obtained verbally via telephone. Interview questions encouraged Kate to discuss various strategies used to manage any trauma-related symptoms following the school shooting, including faith-based strategies. Interviews were transcribed by the author for analysis. Data were grouped into various clusters of ideas or wording to determine common themes (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, content analysis methods were used to analyze data from news articles and reports used to express feelings and thoughts of survivors in the aftermath of the Columbine shooting to triangulate data obtained in interviews.

**Results**

When asked about her initial reaction in the aftermath of the shooting, Kate commented that she felt a significant level of distress in the beginning of the grieving process. Although never formally diagnosed with a mental health disorder until a few years after the shooting, making her experience more complicated, Kate identified feelings including fear, depression, and guilt. Specifically, when discussing guilt, survivor’s guilt was strongly indicated as Kate mentioned the many deaths that occurred on the day of the incident and how this could have easily been her. When questioned about how she managed to overcome some of the lingering emotions after the shooting incident, Kate cited her faith as a contributing factor, stating that she never once felt a desire to renounce her beliefs in the face of the tragedy, but instead leaned in closer and found comfort. Further research using content analysis from news reports and online reflections of survivors
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during the time of the school shooting confirmed community involvement from faith-based organizations following the shooting which appeared to assist survivors in healing. This aligns with Kate’s recollection of her persistent faith in the aftermath of the shooting.

Three overarching themes emerged from the interview data. The first theme was sense of support. This theme included three subthemes which were familial support, community support and spiritual support. The second overarching theme that emerged from the data was sense of self/identity. Sense of self and identity included one subtheme, faith practices. Lastly, the third overarching theme was sense of God. This theme includes one subtheme which is benevolent God (i.e., loving, forgiving, protecting, etc.) versus authoritarian God (i.e., controlling, demanding, punishing, etc.). An outline of the various themes from the interview data is displayed to contextualize how faith is intermingled in coping methods following a school shooting (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

![Thematic flow chart of data and information received during interviewing process. Chart indicates correlated sub-themes across three major overarching themes.](image)

**Sense of Support**

The first overarching theme began to emerge when the participant discussed positive and negative effects of using faith as a resource for coping and how that seemed to help her manage stress or distress in the aftermath of the school shooting. There was a strong emphasis placed on the perception of support in many areas of life, particularly support from family members, the surrounding community, and the church. These themes were consistent with previous literature on the relationship between perception of social support and trauma recovery (Salloum & Overstreet, 2012; La Greca et al., 2010; La Greca et al., 1996; Moore & Varela, 2010; Vis & Battistone, 2014). That is, perception of trauma is significantly influenced by exposure to support, or lack thereof, from family, community and church (Vis &
Battistone, 2014). Additionally, perceived support is inversely correlated with PTSD symptoms (i.e., high levels of perceived support suggest lower levels of PTSD symptoms) (Lee, 2013).

**Familial Support.** At several points throughout the interview Kate referenced her family and the important role they played in her processing of the shooting. Kate recalled a conversation that she had with her father: “One of the main tenets of [my faith] is peace and not violence…reconciliation, and I think my experiences have made me gravitate toward that. My dad and I have had a lot of conversations over the years about it.”

It also appeared that despite the several years that had passed since the shooting; Kate is still able to identify ways in which she receives familial support that are directly related to her experiencing a school shooting. When discussing some of the long-term impacts of the incident on her personal relationships she stated that:

My dad still admits to this day that when he can’t get a hold of us, he still worries a little bit. I mean, it makes me remember and be grateful for the people that I do have. As far as the students, we were about to leave anyhow, but my class was pretty close as far as a big class could be. I think it just solidified it when we had our reunion. It just felt different than it would’ve been if it was just a regular reunion because we were grateful for all of the people that were there even if we weren’t really close in school. So, we bonded after that in a strange way.

Reflections suggest that not only did the bond with family members become grounded in a deep sense of gratitude, but the bond with fellow survivors deepened to a family-like connection.

**Community Support.** The surrounding community's support of survivors can be critical to the healing process. Many systems within the community are influenced by the occurrence of a school shooting such as neighborhoods, families, local businesses, etc. When discussing Kate’s sense of support, community support emerged as a subtheme and was emphasized as something that can benefit survivors.

As far as after things happen, I think there are groups of survivors who have been supportive of each other and I have friends who have started a faith support group and that helps students and other people. I think it’s important for anyone who has experienced a shooting to have access to counseling and for churches to continue to support people if they have members of their community. I think it’s also helpful to have remembrance days. I know I have friends
who always remember me on the anniversary of the shooting and just check in on me and see how the day is going.

It was clear during the interview that community support can be both formal and informal and is effective in both forms for survivors of school shootings. For example, a candlelight vigil sponsored by the city or the entire local community can be just as effective as a group of friends getting together to have open discussion about the event and their feelings related to it. In each scenario, healing can be fostered through remembrance, discussion, and a sense of community.

**Spiritual Support.** When discussing in what ways Kate received spiritual support to foster healing and management of distress following the shooting, she was unable to identify many formal resources that were offered either by the school or a community agency. However, the interviewee recalled one spiritual experience that appeared to be impactful for her and her healing process.

As far as the school is concerned, I can't remember. I know our local church offered space and we all went there one day, but I don’t know who set that up. I think with my church family, at the time, and my youth group, it was helpful to be there and be supported… They had the local animal shelter bring puppies for us to hold. This is still one of the memories that stands out the most to me from those first few days after the shooting: puppy hugs. It felt safe and comforting to hold a puppy and it was healing to see fellow students of all types hugging puppies together.

Despite the sense of support received from her local church and religious-affiliated organizations, Kate made it clear that not all forms of spiritual support were helpful. For example, “cliché” advice, such as “you’re alive because God has a purpose for you,” was destructive to her view of God and triggered feelings of anger and confusion. She stated:

I do think it was not helpful for me to hear [things like that]. I just thought I will live a life hopefully that’s faithful, but that didn’t compute for me because, well, those people died either for no reason or because that was what was supposed to happen. I don’t think that my faith works like that. That’s been an ongoing question though for me over the years, like what was that? I didn’t know what to make of that.

**Sense of Self and Identity**

The second overarching theme that emerged from the interview data was the Sense of Self and Identity. Literature suggests that traumatic events
such as school shootings challenge previously held beliefs about oneself, the world, and God which may trigger faith crises, identity issues and/or search for meaning (Altmaier, 2013; Frankl, 1988; LeMothe, 1999; Tedeschi & Riffle, 2016). This theme occurred during times of self-reflection when the interviewee discussed existential issues and faith questions that were triggered by the school shooting.

I wouldn't say that I struggled [with my faith], I just think over the years it's still a hard thing to understand, like the afterlife, and an unknown being that I don't see. It's like really, these are the things that I say I believe and these things sound crazy, but so does daily life in general. So, the whole metaphysical thoughts, and I don't even know what a human is exactly…it's this essence of a person and all of a sudden they're gone, they're not there anymore, but what were we? So, I think it's more of a philosophical question.

Faith Practices

Faith in trauma intervention literature is identified as a protective factor and is associated with lower risk of developing trauma symptoms and higher levels of resilience (Vis & Battistone, 2014). In discussing some of these issues, the interviewee shared some of the specific faith practices that were helpful in alleviating the issues of questioning of self and struggling with identity following a traumatic experience. Some of the things that were identified as helpful were attending church on Sundays, reading the Bible, being involved in small groups and volunteering with the church. She made it clear that there were questions right away that were related to existentialism and identity; however, to seek answers Kate sought out relationships with her “church family.”

I went from high school to a small Christian school where I had classes in Bible for the first time and was trying to figure out what it meant to live more daily what I believed. I think those things helped immediately.

Sense of God

The third and final overarching theme from the interview data was the Sense of God. A positive relationship with God can influence ability to recover from adversity or trauma (Ball et al., 2003; Vis & Battistone, 2014). Specifically, if one perceives God as warm, loving, and supportive, it enhances a secure attachment and thus, increases self-esteem and self-worth (Sim & Yow, 2011; Vis & Battistone, 2014). Perception of God seemed to be a critical factor in the interviews which informed the interviewee's
response to the shooting, methods of coping, and overall meaning-making process in the aftermath of the shooting.

**Benevolent God vs. Authoritarian God**

The concept of a benevolent versus authoritarian God was deeply immersed in the interviewee’s meaning-making process following the shooting. In this conceptualization, the authoritarian God is one that is judgmental and punitive while the Benevolent God is one that demonstrates non-judgment and is loving (Johnson & Cohen, 2016). Specifically, the interviewee identified her faith and view of God following the shooting as one that embodied mercy and grace, not one that penalizes or punishes.

As far as faith crisis, I didn't feel like because I endured this it meant that God doesn't care about me because, I mean, life is pretty random it seems. Sometimes I questioned that, like why are there things in the world like this? But I just didn't feel like God picked me out. The way that I was able to hold to that was that I also didn't hold that God necessarily spared me. I mean, maybe God did, but I don't want to claim that because then that means that God didn't spare the people who did die. I don't think that I just immediately put God as the direct agent in it [shooting]. Some people, I think they felt that, oh God saved this person, that's wonderful! And I'm like, doesn't that mean that God didn't save this other person? So, that would have been hard to maintain and hold an idea of God if He really were doing that. I think that's just been something that I've processed and thought about over the years. What does that mean? And about God's involvement in our everyday life. I don't know if I have a perfect theological answer to it yet, but I don't think that God is out for our demise.

**Discussion**

**Faith as a Resource for Healing and Meaning-Making**

While there is quite a bit of literature available related to public school shootings in the U.S., there is a gap in the literature regarding trauma intervention in the aftermath of school shootings. Many research studies focus on the prevention of school shootings and the risk factors for occurrence of these tragic events, and not how individuals are managing to cope with trauma symptoms in the aftermath. This is particularly true when faith is integrated into coping and the healing process. The overall findings of
this study suggest that, when present in one's life, faith is intertwined with coping following a trauma like a public-school shooting. Similar to Frankl’s thoughts on finding meaning in life after a traumatic event, faith has the ability to help a traumatized individual navigate through the healing process and toward meaning. Metaphorically speaking, if the healing process is a long winding road, faith is a vehicle that expedites one’s transition from trauma (i.e., point A) to meaning (i.e., point B). Additionally, one’s sense of support, sense of self and identity, and sense of God are ultimately great indicators of the way in which he or she may choose to cope with trauma symptoms in the aftermath of a school shooting. These themes demonstrate that the process of healing and managing trauma after a school shooting is a collective effort and may likely be easier for those who experience a strong sense of support, sense of self and identity, and sense of God.

The theme of **Sense of Support** shows how Kate utilized the resources that were not only offered to her, but also simply within her ability to obtain for herself. It highlights how her perception of the support she felt from her family, her community and her church, empowered her to make positive choices and steps toward her healing process and alleviating trauma-related symptoms, which is a response consistent with trauma literature (Salloum & Overstreet, 2012; La Greca, et al., 2010; La Greca et al., 1996; Moore & Varela, 2010; Vis & Battistone, 2014). In contrast, those who do not find positive outlooks on their lives or meaning after trauma—like perceived family and community support—are likely to experience depression and meaninglessness in life, potentially exacerbating trauma symptoms (Frankl, 1988). Kate noted this may have been the experience for the parents of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris who were ostracized by some groups not willing to mourn with them or show support due to anger about the shooting, herself included. Kate notes that this was a complicated, emotional time and is apologetic about her initial reaction and that these parents mostly suffered alone.

The **Sense of Self and Identity** theme appeared to aid Kate in understanding who she was and how her faith contributed to that. Kate’s questioning of her identity following the school shooting challenged her to re-assess her faith, which aligns with Frankl’s existential theoretical framework and meaning-making, and trauma literature related to identity (Altmaier, 2013; Frankl, 1988; LeMothe, 1999; Tedeschi & Riffle, 2016). Kate’s reassessment of her own identity was also closely tied to her view of God. The **Sense of God** theme emerged due to how it appeared to guide Kate’s methods of coping and growth following the school shooting. Kate expressed a positive, but authoritarian view of God citing that she never felt like God was punitive and only out to punish, but did feel more guilt and rule-controlled prior to the shooting. This view shifted after her school shooting experience to a more benevolent view of God. Trauma literature suggests that this type of percep-
tion of God is linked to increased self-esteem and self-worth, which could allow for improved trauma recovery (Sim & Yow, 2011; Vis & Battistone, 2014). According to Frankl’s (1988) existential theory, such experiences can also facilitate movement through feelings of grief, depression, and anxiety.

Although Kate did confirm that she was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after the shooting, she also indicated that her symptoms declined over time. While discussing mental health treatment, Kate shared that she received treatment for several years to alleviate her symptoms following the shooting and although the severity of the symptoms significantly decreased, there are still occasional indicators of residual trauma including some hypervigilance when hearing fire alarms as this was a distinctive sound heard during the shooting incident for an extended period.

Integration of Faith and Evidence-Based Treatment

Kate’s combined use of clinical treatment and her own faith-based coping appeared to be an effective strategy for her healing process. Reflections on how she integrated faith-based and evidenced-based coping indicated that in this particular case, it was not difficult to blend the two. The evidenced-based intervention included the use of therapeutic techniques such as thought stopping techniques, deep breathing and relaxation skills to manage symptoms. The faith-based lens encouraged the use of religious practices such as prayer, church attendance, Bible studies, youth groups, individual worship, and spiritual reflection to manage symptoms and philosophical/existential questioning that occurred after the shooting. The use of both of these approaches seems to offer a unique and effective way of coping with trauma.

Social Work Application

The discussion of this topic offers some unique approaches for clinical social work practice, school social work practice, and the integration of faith in practice with clients. It has been argued that the integration of faith into social work practice can offer a more holistic care, while others argue that this could be a hindrance to the client’s right to self-determination (Hohn, McCoy, Ivey, Ude, & Praetorius, 2017). While this discussion can contribute significantly to the practice of school social work, there are some limits due to the separation of church and state in the United States. However, it can be equally as relevant to the practice of clinical social work outside of the school campus, particularly when a traumatic incident has been endured.

As school shootings continue to occur, the mass trauma treatment of all individuals affected by the shooting is too great a task for social workers and for counselors on staff at a public school. Inevitably, additional
trauma counselors are brought into the school for support, or students and faculty members are pointed in the direction of outside resources for treatment. This makes the integration of faith in trauma treatment more of a possibility. Since traumatic incidents often trigger existential dilemmas and questioning of life (Frankl, 1988), it seems natural that the clinical treatment of an individual who experienced a public-school shooting would include some form of faith-related exploration. The question of whether this type of social work practice will impact a client’s life positively and holistically or be inappropriate to their treatment would rely on the social worker’s ability to assess the client’s perception of the role of faith in their own treatment. In these instances, it seems most appropriate to use the social work adage “start where the client is.” The client’s input is invaluable to the clinical treatment process and when considering the integration of faith into practice, it is likely to be necessary. Many clinical social workers and social work practices today include religious questioning in the initial assessment to help gauge a client’s perception on integrating faith into practice. This practice is supported by the ecological perspective which notes the significance of addressing a person’s spiritual culture, especially when he or she is coping with the effects of a traumatic event (Branton, 2006; Loser, Klein, Hill & Dollahite, 2008; Vis & Battistone, 2014) Many agencies also offer Christian counseling to help with this and there are other faith traditions that offer support and help in the face of tragedy as well. According to Hohn et al. (2017), “the nature of integration of faith should vary considerably, depending on the competent assessment of the client’s needs and appropriate respect for client self-determination” (p. 18).

Implications

Implications for emerging themes suggest that the integration of faith with overcoming school shootings was a critical healing strategy for Kate. Her willingness and ability to express her faith in ways that encouraged growth and healing offered what appeared to be an expedient decline in trauma symptoms for her personally. Kate shared that the integration of her faith was helpful in her conceptualization of the shooting incident which was in turn helpful for the meaning-making process and allowed her to move forward. In a sense, the faith component of healing from trauma seems to offer the individual peace with the unknown. Theological frameworks offer an individual validation in the concept that human ability to know God and his ways is imperfect much like Isaiah 55:8 states, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.”

A significant implication for future research posits that policymakers, school districts, and social workers should consider that the integration of faith in coping following a school shooting could potentially protect from
development of significant mental health disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) or decline in the initial symptoms of the respective disorders (Hays & Aranda, 2016). One study on faith integration in mental health interventions found that when using faith-focused interventions with trauma survivors, a decrease in depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms resulted (Hays & Aranda, 2016). Furthermore, the results persisted over time, indicating initial decline in symptoms remained this way for long periods of time (Hays & Aranda, 2016). Thus, faith as a resource for healing should be considered following public-school shootings. Students and faculty members who have experienced school shootings should be offered access to this, if desired.

This is also an important discussion for social work education as the integration of faith and social work has become salient in social work education and practice, and there are varying issues and possibilities related to its use (Knitter, 2010). The influences of a client's faith practices and the faith practices of the social work practitioner are relevant to the discussion of coping with trauma after a school shooting because each can affect the way one views life. Currently, social work education programs encourage the use of cultural competency and reflection to ensure that future social work practitioners are aware of biases, including faith traditions, which may influence the work with clients. This should be a regular practice and tool used in social work education to help prepare social work students for working with clients dealing with trauma. This can also be beneficial for the responsible practice of ethical considerations in the future. Kezar (2013) encourages the use of ethical fitness, ethical decision-making viewed similarly to physical fitness by encouraging routine use rather than in crisis situations when social workers are more likely to make unethical decisions. The integration of faith in trauma treatment may trigger ethical tensions between personal identity and values and professional practice. Hays & Aranda (2016) posit that though the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics promotes social justice and social change with clients, it is open to interpretation for clients with diverse religious or spiritual backgrounds, or lack thereof. When taking this approach to faith integration in social work and mental health practice, clients are likely to reach new levels of self-reflection and clinical milestones that lead to long-lasting healing from traumatic events. Such therapeutic gains are helpful in addressing loss, which is an inevitable part of trauma and a major focus in the integration of faith and practice.

Future research should consider how social workers and mental health practitioners ethically approach managing trauma with the integration of faith. Additionally, further qualitative research with students is warranted to understand the impact that various faith traditions, in addition to Christianity, have on survivors of school shootings and their abilities to cope
in the aftermath of the shooting and how this might affect the prevention and/or reduction of trauma symptoms. Limitations for this research include inability to generalize case study data to the general population of school shooting survivors. Additionally, the retrospective nature of data collection makes it vulnerable to recall bias.

## Conclusion

Overall, level of perceived support, sense of self, and sense of God were identified as primary connections between faith and trauma intervention in the aftermath of school shootings for Kate. Through the relationships with other survivors, community support from faith-based organizations and personal relationship with God, Kate was able to use her faith to make sense of one of the most difficult times of her life and move toward healing. Research reinforces that social support and a sense of community in the aftermath of a school shooting is crucial in combating symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the incident (Stebbins, Tingey, Verdi, Erickson, & McGuire, 2019). Furthermore, the data showed that a consistent sense of connection to a higher power through acts of faith such as prayer, attending church, and attending youth groups appears to help one process the various feelings that are experienced in the aftermath of a school shooting over time. A crucial part of this finding is that the practice of faith traditions appears to foster Frankl’s (1988) meaning-making process after a school shooting which subsequently allows an individual to understand the incident better and find peace with whatever meaning he or she has made. Overall, seeking finite answers to infinite questions inevitably triggered by trauma seems to create further resistance or friction in the healing process. However, when considering faith, one has the potential to be offered peace in the unknown or misunderstandings of the complexities of this world. In the case of healing from school shootings, one is likely to deduce that evidenced-based practice and faith can be integrated for the effective and conscientious healing of a traumatized individual.

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## References


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**Appendix A**

**Interview Script**

**Demographic Questions**

1. Tell me about yourself… for example, age, gender, employment status.
2. Tell me about your current work. What do/did you find enjoyable about your job? Describe a typical day for you.
3. What led you to this field of work?
4. What are/were some of your duties there?

**Main Questions**

5. Please share with me about the day of the shooting that occurred at your school. How did your day begin? How did you know about the event? Describe what you saw, heard, experienced? Describe what others have told you or you have learned through the news since then? When and how did you know the actual attack and danger were over?
6. Describe the days immediately after the shooting? What responsibilities did you have? Who did you interact with? What was hardest for you? What was helpful to you? How would you
describe your reaction to the event in the days immediately following? What did you need? Did you get what you needed? From whom? Can you say more about that?

7. As you think about the event and the persons who were involved, who and/or what do you believe was most affected by this event? Describe the impact on them. As you think about others who might not have been directly involved, are there others who were affected? How were you involved with them in the days and weeks afterward?

8. What has been the longer-term impact on the school? On you? How have you managed that?

9. Who did you interact with who you felt was significantly affected by the event over the months and years since then?
   a. How would you describe their responses?
   b. Are you aware of things that helped? Didn't help? Made it worse?

10. What is your experience and understanding of how the event affected the students; individually? as a whole?

11. What is your experience and understanding of how the event affected faculty? Individually? as a whole?

12. What is your experience and understanding of how the event affected parents/families? Individually? as a whole?

13. What is your experience and understanding of how the event affected other community members? Individually? as a whole?

14. As you reflect back over the years since then, how do you believe you were impacted by the event? What is different about yourself? Your life? As a consequence.

15. How has your faith played a role in your ability to cope with the shooting?

16. What specific changes, if any, have you noticed, or did you notice in your ability to get along with others as a result of the event? In what ways has the event impacted your relationships?

17. Did you experience any positive or negative effects from using faith practices to cope?

18. Was focusing on your faith an immediate reaction for you after the shooting?

19. Did you experience any changes in your faith at all after the shooting?

20. What was your school's plan, both immediate and long-term, for response to school shootings?

21. Were there any spiritual resources provided by the school that were helpful for you? If yes, what were they? If no, what would
have been helpful for you?

22. As you experienced this (refer to answer above), how well did this work for you?
   a. Discuss your assessment of effectiveness/comprehensiveness.
   b. What do you understand resilience building to be?
      How have you seen that happen?
      Discuss what part of your school’s response to the school shooting were specific to resilience building?

23. How does this (the above answer) compare to what you know about other schools’ response to these types of events?

24. What do you believe are some ways schools can use faith to intervene/respond after a school shooting?

25. What are your thoughts on public schools engaging in any type of intervention (e.g., counseling services, community support, spiritual support, etc.) following these types of events?

26. What barriers may/would prevent you or your school from implementing intervention following a school shooting?

27. What incentives may encourage you or your school to implement intervention following a school shooting?

28. Who or what persons do you feel should be involved in administering/facilitating trauma intervention following a school shooting?

29. Research has suggested that re-establishing faith in schools would help in decreasing school shootings? What are your thoughts on this?

30. What else would you like for me to understand both about what happened and about lessons learned for the future, particularly with respect to helping survivors?

31. What else should I have asked you today?

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Keywords: school shootings, faith, religion, school violence, trauma, trauma intervention
“My Life Has Been Just Like a Big Expectation”: A Retrospective Reflection of Role Expectations and Mental Health Concerns of Adult Children of Seventh-day Adventist Pastors

Rene Drumm, David A. Sedlacek, & Alina M. Baltazar

This study examines the family and social expectations of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) clergy children, their mental and emotional health concerns, and the relationship between expectations and emotional health. The study used data triangulation from an online survey (N=120) and four focus groups to answer the research questions. The greatest source of concern came from clergy children’s perceptions about how the people in their parent’s congregation thought they should behave. In addition, results show that the majority of the respondents expressed some level of concern about anxiety/depression or their emotional health. The findings reveal a statistically significant relationship between the expectations that clergy children recalled and the mental and emotional concerns they experienced. Clergy children who were expected to attend more church services, reported more concerns about their mental and emotional health. These findings provide a call to action for Christian social workers, particularly those engaged in congregational social work.

Social Work has a long and rich history of engaging in congregational social work (Garland & Yancey, 2014). Christians who are social workers maintain a great interest in the pastorate from several perspectives: as parishioners seeking religious guidance; as resources for social and mental health information and referral (Bledsoe, Setterlund,
Adams, & Connolly, 2013); and/or as ministers engaging in congregational social work (Yancey & Garland, 2014). Because of this interconnectivity of congregational ministry and social work, it is in the best interest of social workers to invest in the health and welfare of clergy and their families.

For decades, researchers have examined the roles, expectations, and the stresses particular to clergy families. The majority of studies have focused on the pastors (Morris & Blanton, 1994; Morris & Blanton, 1995; Lee & Iverson Gilbert, 2003; Yoon, 2011; Cattich, 2012; Heck, Drumm, McBride, & Sedlacek, 2017) or the pastor spouses (Finch, 1980; Morris & Blanton 1995; Lee, 2007; Yoon, 2011; Cattich, 2012; Drumm, Cooper, Seifert, McBride, & Sedlacek, 2017). Scant recent research literature is available on the children in pastors’ families or pastors’ kids (PKs).

For example, scholars have studied the role expectations of pastors and their spouses. Research indicates that pastors experience boundary-related stress (Hill, Darling & Raimondi, 2003), stress related to having children in the home (Darling, McWey, & Hill, 2006), stress related to burnout (Miner, 2007), and stress connected to job demands, lack of social support, and financial stress (Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003; Heck, Drumm, McBride, and Sedlacek, 2017). Cattich (2012) conducted a qualitative study of pastors and their spouses that identified three pathways to cope with the job demands. The families either sacrificed family time, made the family a priority over ministry, or tried to meet the needs of the ministry and family equally.

Although less is written about the role expectations of pastor spouses, one study notes that pastor spouses experience high levels of stress related to their pastor spouse role (Drumm, Cooper, Seifert, McBride, & Sedlacek, 2017). However, this role may be changing. One study indicates that a number of social forces may be challenging the traditional role of the clergy spouse as an unpaid ministry partner (Murphy-Geiss, 2011). With the increase of female clergy, as well as higher educational and income levels of clergy spouses, this trend may be waning.

Even fewer studies were found that examined social role expectations for clergy children. However, a qualitative study conducted some years ago (Lee, 1992) noted several expectations of clergy children. Clergy children were expected to be: (1) exceptional students of the Bible, (2) role models in their grooming and appearance, and (3) leaders in worship and ministry. Lee notes that these expectations can be burdensome and difficult to manage, however, the extent to which these expectations create stress for preachers’ kids (PKs) remains unknown.

In another study examining the expectations of clergy children and later commitment to religion, Anderson (1998) noted a small, but significant relationship between having experienced fewer expectations as clergy children and staying committed to religion in adulthood. When clergy children reported that more was expected from them than non-clergy
children, the participants were less likely to remain strongly committed to their childhood religion. However, the study’s focus was on commitment to religion later in life and the factors that contributed to commitment rather than role expectations of the clergy children and how those expectations related to their mental or emotional health.

Similarly, a subset of 10 participants from a larger quantitative study of PKs described family and societal expectations that negatively impacted their sense of self (Dancy, 2017). Participants recalled the assumptions or stereotypes that others held toward them such as having greater knowledge of the Bible, knowing everything that was happening at the church, or having perfect or extremely poor behavior.

The stereotype that PKs behave on extremes of good and bad had been documented earlier in a case study of a clergy family (Allman, 2007). Looking back, the adult children recalled the stereotypical expectation that they would be either rebellious hellions or be perfect role models. Although this study is limited in scope and generalizability, the stereotypes identified in the case study are typically associated with PKs anecdotally. Researchers have attempted to document the stereotypes mentioned above on a broader scale by testing for bias among college students (Strange & Shepherd, 2001). However, the authors’ hypothesis that positive and negative stereotypes existed for PKs was only partially supported by the data (Strange & Shepherd, 2001). Thus, role expectations of PKs are still largely unknown.

**Mental and Emotional Health**

Traditionally, mental health refers to a person’s ability to process information while emotional health focuses on the capacity to express feelings based upon the information processed. However, for this study, these terms are used interchangeably.

In terms of mental and emotional health, our review of the literature notes similar mental/emotional challenges for pastors and their spouses. For example, researchers found that the longer a pastor worked, the higher levels of burnout they experienced, which corresponded to higher levels of depression and anxiety (Jacobson, Rothschild, Mirza, & Shapiro, 2013). Depression and anxiety have also been linked to social isolation, work stress, and feelings of inadequacy (Proeschold-Bell, Miles, Toth, Adams, Smith & Toole, 2013).

In addition to work-related stressors, both clergy and their spouses experienced similar effects of family life stress in several domains including family boundaries and enmeshment (Morris & Blanton, 1998). Besides these general family stressors, it appears that the mere presence of children living in the home is associated with poorer levels of emotional health among clergy and their spouses (Wells, 2013).
Our review of the literature found no studies examining mental or emotional health among clergy children specifically. Instead, researchers report findings regarding individual and family stress. One study examining clergy children stress retrospectively found that PKs reported higher levels of individual and family stress when compared to non-clergy children (Wilson, 2010; Wilson & Darling, 2016). In addition, PKs reported a lower sense of being able to handle the stress they experienced as teens and a lower levels of subjective well being in their teen years than non-clergy children (Wilson, 2010; Wilson & Darling, 2016).

With just a handful of studies relating to clergy children’s role expectations and their mental and emotional health, a clear gap exists in the research literature. This study addresses this lack by reporting on the role expectations, mental and emotional health concerns, and the intersection of role expectations and mental/emotional health concerns among a sample of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) clergy children.

Methods

Study conception and background

This analysis utilized data from a study on clergy family stress within the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in the U.S. and Canada. The SDA church is considered a conservative, evangelical Protestant religion (Dudley, McBride, & Hernandez, 1997). The study includes three types of respondents: (a) clergy, (b) clergy spouses, and (c) adult children of clergy. Researchers gathered data from the three respondent groups through online quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups. For this analysis, we focus exclusively on the results from the clergy children using both the quantitative survey and qualitative focus group data and examine the relationship between emotional health and social and family expectations.

Research questions

The research questions for this study are:

1. What are the family and social expectations that clergy children experience?

2. What are the emotional health concerns of clergy children?

3. What is the relationship between the social and family expectations of clergy children and their emotional health?
Research approach and instrumentation

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate clergy family stress through quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups. Triangulation allowed researchers to gain a richer interpretation of the survey results through the narratives offered by the focus group participants.

The quantitative survey instrument, *The Adult Child of Clergy Family Survey*, consisted of 109 questions including demographics. To measure known stressors of clergy children, we used 40 items from the *Stressors of Clergy Children Inventory* (Ostrander, Henry, & Hendrix, 1990). In addition, we measured stressors related to our specific population group using questions developed by the research team called the *Personal Challenge Checklist*.

To facilitate the discussions for the focus groups, the research team developed a moderator guide. The moderator guide included 26 open-ended questions pertaining to social expectations, social support, spiritual challenges, stress and conflict management, and financial stress. The focus group participants were asked to recall these areas of functioning retrospectively and reflect on their experiences as clergy children from their current vantage points as young adults.

Sampling and data collection

Prior to collecting data, the research team received permission to conduct the study from Southern Adventist University and Andrews University’s Human Subjects Review Boards and followed standard guidelines to protect research participants.

The survey sample was administered through two Universities affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In one university, the research team sent an email message with a SurveyMonkey link to all students, asking those who were pastors’ children to respond by taking the survey. In the second university, researchers emailed the survey link to individuals identified by the university’s administration as receiving a denominational tuition supplement. A tuition supplement is offered to children of denominational employees (could include children of pastors, educators, or others employed by the SDA Church), allowing for a more targeted sampling strategy. Following the invitation to participate, a campus leader made a personal appeal to complete the survey. The invitation to participate was followed by a personal appeal to complete the survey by a campus leader who was an adult child of a pastor. This approach yielded 120 responses.

Researchers recruited focus group participants using purposive and snowball sampling. We contacted adult children of pastors who were known by the researchers and asked them to invite other pastors’ children
to participate. One site posted signs on campus bulletin boards to recruit participants. The inclusion criteria included self-identification as a child of a Seventh-day Adventist pastor and being 18 years of age or older.

Qualitative study participants were offered a $10 gift card to honor their participation and acknowledge their contribution to this research endeavor. The data collection occurred on four different Adventist-affiliated University campuses. The four focus groups consisted of four to ten participants each and lasted from 45 to 90 minutes to facilitate an in-depth discussion of the topics.

Variables and data analysis—Survey data

The raw data were downloaded into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2016, version 24) from SurveyMonkey for analysis.

To examine family and social expectations, we used four items from the “Stressors of Clergy Children Inventory.” The question stems begin with the lead-in, “Think back to when you lived with your parents. At that time, how concerned were you about the following?” The Likert-scale answer categories ranged from “Was not concerned” to “Was very, very concerned.” The four items focusing on family and social expectations were:

1. How the people in my clergy parent’s congregation thought I should behave
2. How our town/neighborhood people thought ministers’ children should behave
3. The amount of time I was expected to work at church-singing, cleaning, etc.
4. The number of services I was expected to attend

To answer research question one, we calculated frequencies and percentages on the items above. The results indicate the level of concern respondents held towards each expectation.

For research question two, we created a scale to measure the respondents’ emotional health using one item from the Personal Challenge Checklist and one item from Stressors of Clergy Children Inventory. The question from the Personal Challenge Checklist asked, “To what extent are depression and/or anxiety a personal struggle for you?” The Likert-scale answer categories ranged from “No challenge” to “Great challenge.” The question from the Stressors of Clergy Children Inventory asked, “Think back to when you lived with your parents. At that time, how concerned were you about your emotional/mental health?” The Likert-scale answer categories ranged from “Was not concerned” to “Was very, very concerned.” The scale had values ranging from 1 (low challenge/concern) to 5 (high challenge/
concern). The scale’s Cronbach’s alpha score was $\alpha = .74$.

To understand the relationship between the social and family expectations of clergy children and their emotional health, we used stepwise regression analysis. The social and family expectations were entered as independent variables along with the demographic variables of age, gender, and ethnicity.

Data analysis—Focus group data

The focus groups were audio taped to allow for verbatim transcription. The first step in organizing the raw data was to transcribe the recorded focus groups. The research team members then reviewed the transcriptions for completeness and accuracy.

Initial analysis was accomplished by coding participants’ themes throughout the data. The analysis team used the classic constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), facilitated with qualitative software, QDA Miner. As the analysis progressed, researchers examined specific instances of the codes to clarify similarities and differences between the researchers’ use of these codes. This procedure helped to increase inter-coder reliability. Researchers addressed the issues of credibility and trustworthiness of the data by using peer debriefing and conducting negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As these data are reported, it may be helpful to clarify that the unit of analysis resides on the focus group level rather than the individual level. The verbatim transcripts note what was said either by a participant or the facilitator, but the data cannot distinguish among individual focus group participants. Therefore, the supporting quotations from participants will be identified by a focus group number, such as FG 2.

Limitations

This study was conducted on a sample of Seventh-day Adventist PKs who were young adults at the time of the study. The participants looked back at their memories of expectations and emotions from their childhood retrospectively. Memories can be malleable and unstable. In addition, individuals tend to underreport mental health challenges and therefore, these challenges should be kept in mind as the data are interpreted.

The data were collected at two Adventist universities. As such, there is a high probability that the participants still embrace at least to some degree Adventist beliefs and engage in Adventist practices such as Sabbath-keeping, service, and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, this study cannot be generalized to Adventist PKs who attend public universities or to those who have left the church.
Another limitation is that these results cannot be generalized to PKs of other faith traditions, although other studies of PKs in conservative faith traditions have yielded similar results (Dancy, 2017; Wilson, 2010; Wilson & Darling, 2016).

**Results**

**Family and Social Expectations of Clergy Children**

The first research question asks, “What are the family and social expectations that clergy children experience?” To answer this question, we use a combination of quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group data. As indicated above, the survey presented four items related to family and social expectations for research question one. Table 1 displays the frequencies and percentages for family and social expectations.

Table 1. Family and Social Expectation Concerns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item N=120</th>
<th>Not concerned</th>
<th>A little or somewhat concerned</th>
<th>Quite concerned or very, very concerned</th>
<th>Does not apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Think back to when you lived with your parents. At that time, how concerned were you about the following?”</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the people in my clergy parent’s congregation thought I should behave</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of services I was expected to attend</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How our town/neighborhood people thought ministers’ children should behave</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority (79%) of respondents recalled concerns about how people in their clergy parent’s congregations thought they should behave. Of these, over one-third reported being either quite or very, very concerned about this issue.

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents remembered being concerned about the number of services they were expected to attend (65%) and how their town/neighborhood people thought ministers’ children should behave.
(62%). Just a little over half (56%) of the respondents noted concerns about
the amount of time they were expected to work at the church—singing,
cleaning, etc.

The quantitative findings reveal a picture of young adults, looking
back at their childhoods and recalling a number of concerns about family
and social expectations. Only a minority of respondents recalled having no
concerns about the expectations they experienced as children.

The qualitative findings support these quantitative results and provide
further insights into the expectations that participants experienced in
their everyday lives. The focus group participants described themes of
expectations: (1) Having behavior that is either very good or very bad;
(2) Participating in church activities; and (3) Dressing in prescribed ways.

**Having behavior that is either very good or very bad.**

Participants recalled hearing expectations that they would likely
exhibit behavior that was either very good or very bad. Participants did not
sense that people expected them to simply have “normal” or age-appropriate
behavior. Instead, the voiced expectation was that clergy children would
either behave badly or should have exemplary behavior. The following
quotes from participants offer insights about messages they received about
behavioral expectations

That's what everybody has always said to me. Preachers' kids are all the way at one end of the spectrum or all the way at the other. (FG 2)

It's either way. I mean everyone that you'll meet is going to either think that you're crazy and wild or you're going to church every week, reading your Bible, doing your Bible studies, and helping the sick, and going on mission trips. (FG 2)

[People expect] that you are to be better or holier than everybody else, you know? It is like, "You can't do this." Or, "I saw you do this the other day. You shouldn't be doing that." But if someone else does it, it is like, "Oh, it's okay," you know? (FG 3)

**Participating actively at church.**

Participating actively at church was a major expectation of clergy
children in this sample. These expectations were conveyed by family
members, church members, and teachers. The quotes below describe
participants’ recollections about these expectations.
With my father, we [were] expected to be leaders in church, starting at a young age. (FG 1)

They always want you to participate in everything that is happening up front. Kind of like, if you can read, you should probably be doing the Scripture reading, because you are the pastor’s child. (FG 3)

Like Sabbath School--I remember when I was like 8-years-old whenever the teacher would ask a question to the class the other kids wouldn’t know the answer. But I’m the one that always got looked at like, ”You don’t know the answer to this? But you’re the pastor’s kid.” (FG 1)

**Dressing in prescribed ways.**

Female participants, in particular, recalled expectations about acceptable attire. The expectations centered on avoiding short or tight dresses, wearing pants to church, and getting their ears pierced. These quotes from participants illustrate expectations surrounding dress.

I got my ears pierced and my mom was freaking out but my dad is like, ”It’s her ear.” It is kind of like, ”Let her do what she wants it is her ear.” My mom says, ”Well, what are they going to say at church?” He said, ”Well I’ll tell them that it is her ear.” It is not like he agrees with it, but he is just like, ”It’s your life.” (FG 3)

You have expectations of everything--socially, academically, spiritually, just everything. Like with the dress code, I’m a tomboy. I don’t like dresses. I don’t like skirts, but my dad was on the whole thing of ”You can’t wear pants to church.” (FG 1)

There was one time I remember [my sister] Susi was wearing a dress to church and apparently one of the church members didn’t like it and told dad about it and so like…the dress was a little too short… (FG 1)

**Emotional Health Challenges and Concerns of Clergy Children**

The second research question asked, “What are the emotional health challenges and concerns of clergy children?” Again, both quantitative and qualitative data are used to answer this question. The survey results reveal that a majority of respondents (60%) confirm having at least some challenge
with depression and/or anxiety. Conversely, only 8% of the respondents claim any level of concern about severe mental illness.

Examining clergy children's concerns about their overall emotional/mental health, a little more than half of the sample (54%) report some level of concern. Table 2 shows the percentages on mental and emotional challenges and concerns. Almost one third, (29%) shared that their concerns ranged from somewhat concerned, to very, very concerned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>NO CHALLENGE</th>
<th>SOME CHALLENGE</th>
<th>MODERATE CHALLENGE</th>
<th>GREAT CHALLENGE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression and/or Anxiety</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe mental illness</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My emotional/mental health</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Mental and Emotional Health Challenges and Concerns**

Positive coping techniques

The focus group discussion guide did not ask directly about participants' individual emotional health concerns; however, participants shared information about coping strategies that they used to deal with their stress. These coping strategies provided insights into the participants' emotional health concerns. Participants revealed both positive and potentially harmful or negative coping strategies. Positive coping strategies included getting counseling, taking medication, getting regular exercise, and connecting with other clergy children. The following quotes from participants illustrate the coping mechanisms used to handle emotions.

I'm not sure like whether my depression is really stemming from being within a pastoral family or not but I suffer really bad from depression and anxiety and stuff like that and it's taken me a long time to like realize those things, so I've started taking, like, medication in order to, to counteract those things. (FG 1)
I have a very positive view of counseling. I go to therapy and it changed my life completely. (FG 2)

Even if I’ve been consistently depressed or been feeling anxiety or something, if I wake up every morning and I go running two miles...that next day when I wake up it’s not as hard to get out of bed. (FG 2)

One way I have coped with stress was I had a lot of friends who were PKs, friends I grew up here with before my dad became a pastor. I had a lot of friends and so we would call each other and we would turn our stresses into calling. So we would laugh at each other’s families and like, ”Your dad is yelling at you for ironing clothes on the Sabbath?” We would laugh at it like we are laughing now... So that is the way we dealt with stress, we just turned it into comedy. (FG 2)

**Negative coping techniques**

The participants also revealed potentially harmful or negative strategies to cope with depression, anxiety, and stress. Participants shared information about their propensity towards addiction, substance use, and pornography addiction to deal with stress and anxiety. The following quotes from participants illustrate these negative coping strategies.

I think because we don’t have anybody to turn to, because we don’t have a person to turn to, we could easily turn to a “thing” that could lead to an addiction. It is just how people cope with things. If they can’t talk about it, they’ll find some other area to express or relieve themselves. (FG 2)

In the past, if I was stressed or had anxiety, I would go smoke, I’d drink. I mean in some way it just makes me relax. It’s not to forget but it’s just to relax and...self-medicate. (FG 1)

I struggled with stress management a lot as a PK. While my dad was having a Board meeting or Business meeting, we were over [to a church member's] house and I found adult magazines. And I personally struggled with pornography for years until lately, very recently, very recently was I able to get out of his grips as an adult. I had no one to talk to and coming from a Latin background we don’t talk to psychologists because there is nothing wrong with you. (FG 4)
Emotional Health and Expectations of Clergy Children

The final research question was “What is the relationship between emotional health and the social and family expectations experienced in their role as children of clergy?” The answer to this question lies primarily with the quantitative data; however, the focus group data offers insights into how emotional health concerns relate to the expectations the participants experienced.

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to understand the relationship between clergy children’s emotional health concerns and the types of expectations they reported experiencing. Demographic factors of gender, age, and ethnicity were also entered into the model.

The regression results reveal that females (.000) and those who were expected to attend more services (.001), experienced the greatest concerns about their emotional health. Age, ethnicity, congregational or community expectations, or the amount of work the clergy child was expected to do at the church were not significant predictors of emotional health concerns.

Table 3. Stepwise Multiple Regression of Emotional Health and Social and Family Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Regression Estimator (B)</th>
<th>Standard Error of B</th>
<th>Standard value of β</th>
<th>t-statistic</th>
<th>P of t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>.733</td>
<td>.192</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td>3.812</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of services I was expected to attend</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.309</td>
<td>3.434</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ R^2 = .221 \]

\[ \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .205 \]

F value for model = 13.624

High expectations

While the focus group data do not provide direct connections between the type of expectations clergy children experienced and their mental health concerns, participants did offer insights into how the expectations impinge on self-esteem and emotional health. A frequently identified theme was the high expectations experienced by clergy children.
For one participant, the expectations felt confusing and changed frequently.

It was like being signed up for a job that I never applied for and then having the rules [change] every time I walked in, saying, "OK you got to do this, you got to do that." I didn’t want to be there in the first place! (FG 2)

Another participant elaborated on the theme of having the expectations change and progress. The implication was that no matter how much the participants wanted to meet the expectations, they kept changing, which felt overwhelming.

I think an expectation is involvement. Since your dad is the pastor, the members should be in all of the church’s activities…you go in the children’s choir, you participate in Vacation Bible School, you open the church, you grow a little bit and you get in Pathfinders, you are a Junior usher, then you are a Deacon, you are doing everything. You are in the AY Society, about to be AY Leader, since the pastor is the leader of the church, you are expected to be involved in activities so you can be the next leader of the church. (FG 2).

So I can’t even live a life, I can’t scratch my nose without scratching it in the wrong way. Like you know, I couldn’t live, and I just hate being a pastor’s kid. (FG 1)

Shame and Guilt

Finally, participants expressed shame and guilt when they failed to meet the expectations that they detected.

I can barely remember but it’s a memory of when I was in third grade and my teacher screaming to, like, my mom and my dad, saying like, “He should be better than this. He’s a pastor’s kid,” which only makes you feel worse because then you say, "Well then, I should be here but clearly I’m not there, so I’m just worse. I’m an inferior specimen of PK.” (FG 2).

Sometimes, I don’t know if it is as extreme for everybody, but sometimes there is a sense of if I don’t meet these expectations of people, like they are all going to go to hell because of me. (FG 1)
Discussion

This study retrospectively examined the family and social expectations of SDA clergy children, their mental and emotional health concerns, and the relationship between expectations and emotional health. Participants in this study reported a number of family and social expectations that SDA clergy children found concerning during their growing up years, but now reporting them as young adults. Because of the conservative and fundamentalist aspects of Adventism, children growing up in a Seventh-day Adventist pastoral family may face additional expectations compared to less conservative pastoral households. The greatest source of concern about expectations came from clergy children's perceptions of how the people in their clergy parent's congregation thought they should behave. Only a very small minority of respondents (20%) recalled having no concern about congregational expectations. To a lesser degree, clergy children in this sample expressed feeling concerned about the number of services they were expected to attend, about how their town/neighborhood people thought ministers' children should behave, and the amount of time they were expected to work at church. In addition, focus group data revealed that clergy children recalled the expectations of having behavior that is either very good or very bad, participating in church activities, and dressing in prescribed ways.

These data reveal a picture of children growing up in a fishbowl with people watching them from every conceivable angle—people watching them at home, in church, and in their neighborhoods. And these expectations invaded every possible aspect of their lives, from how much time they spent cleaning the church to what they wore or shared on social media. The experience of living in a fishbowl is particularly intense since members of the Seventh-day Adventist church are expected to live their life according to biblical principles in their personal and social life with the pastoral family being expected to be the role model. This includes appropriate choice of entertainment, expectations of modest dress without adornment, and caring for the body by avoiding alcohol and harmful substances (Adventist, 2018). These participants present a snapshot of living life on a stage where others expected the best or the worst behavior possible.

In addition to experiencing family and social expectations, clergy children in this sample shared their mental and emotional concerns from their growing up years. More than half of the respondents expressed some level of concern about anxiety/depression (60%) or their emotional health (54%). The focus group data provided insights into the ways in which clergy children coped in positive and negative ways. The positive coping strategies included getting counseling, taking medication, getting regular exercise, and connecting with other clergy children. The negative coping behaviors included alcohol abuse, drug use, and pornography addiction.
While this study’s design did not include a comparison group, national figures on college student anxiety and depression reveal figures that are somewhat lower than the percentages in this study. For example, about half of college students report experiencing depression and/or anxiety that affected functioning in the past 12 months, compared to 60% of the participants in this study (American College Health Association, 2018). While having concerns about depression, anxiety, and one’s mental health does not equate with actually having a diagnosable condition, the data suggest that these participants experienced a sense of precariousness regarding their mental and emotional health. Participants reported widespread addictive behaviors which they connected with the pressures and expectations associated with their social roles.

The findings also revealed a significant relationship between the expectations that clergy children recalled and the mental and emotional concerns they experienced. Clergy children who were expected to attend more church services also reported having more concerns about their mental and emotional health. This was especially true for the female participants. While cross-sectional data cannot indicate causation, the focus group participants made some comments that indicate a connection between expectations and emotional health. The following quote from a focus group participant illustrates how he/she experienced expectations and emotional health and coping.

One thing is just being taken off the pedestal that people place us on. I feel like if I was just treated normally like every other kid, I would have been fine. Sure I would have had my ups and downs, but so does every kid. I think I would have coped with that better. (FG 3)

How should Christian social workers respond to these findings? First, the data presented here provide evidence that one worthy goal is for congregations to treat clergy children like “every other kid.” Christian social workers can act as the conduit through which church members may become educated about appropriate messages about clergy children. For example, church members should not set up a separate and unrealistic standard of behavior for clergy children since pressures to perform may be the seeds of a performance orientation (Sedlacek & Sedlacek, 2018). Performance orientated people perceive love and acceptance as being tied to their performance rather than their being, thus contributing to increased anxiety and depression.

Second, Christian social workers can become more aware of the overall wellbeing of the clergy families in their communities. One focus group participant recalled a difficult time the family went through and how some families supported the clergy family during that time.
I can remember being really depressed and feeling very isolated when my dad went through a very difficult time and I always appreciated there were some key families or some key people in the church that I could tell really cared for my family and for me. (FG 3)

If Christian social workers become intentional about supporting clergy families and encourage others to do so, it may lessen the isolation, depression, and anxiety experienced by clergy children. Likewise reminding church members that the pastor’s kids are just like other kids, may right-size expectations.

Finally, Christian social workers can play a role in educating and encouraging clergy members to set boundaries with congregations about their children. In this study, one wise pastor, who participated in the pastor focus group, attempted to allay his spouse’s anxiety over their daughter’s pierced ear by saying, “Well I’ll tell them that it is her ear.” He doesn’t necessarily agree with his daughter’s choice, but he has decided, “It’s your life.” Congregational leaders who set these types of boundaries will protect their families better and set a healthier tone in the larger church family.

References


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**Keywords:** Congregational social work; pastors' kids, clergy children, mental health, emotional health, social role expectations
Let the Church Say…: One Congregation’s Views on How the Black Church Can Address Mental Health with Black Americans

Rosalyn Denise Campbell & Madison Rose Winchester

African Americans have historically turned to the Black Church in times of trouble and/or need, including when experiencing mental health problems. The purpose of this study was to better understand what the helping relationship between the Black Church and African Americans around mental health.

Surveys were administered online to members of a Midwestern church and included questions about respondents’ mental health and service use histories and thoughts about church-based mental health services. A thematic analysis was performed on qualitative responses from 393 participants explaining why they supported a church-based counseling center. Findings suggest that the Black Church is seen as being well-positioned to address the unmet mental health needs of Black Americans, reduce mental health stigma in Black and/or Christian communities, and deliver culturally appropriate, community-based mental health services to these groups.

The Black Church has been considered the most important institution in the African American community, both throughout history and today (Gaines, 2010; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McKinney, 1971). When it was formed in the late 1700s, the Black Church not only provided African Americans a safe space to worship away from the control of whites and to cope with the conditions of slavery and discrimination, but it also became a center of spiritual and social life (Adkison-Bradley, et al.,
Since the inception of the Black Church, preachers were looked to for guidance, not only for religious or spiritual matters but in all aspects of life (McKinney, 1971). Because African Americans were shut out of many traditional medical and/or social services or these services were not designed to appreciate or understand their needs, the Black Church has funded and provided social services for their communities, addressing issues like homelessness and parenting (Hankerson, Svob, & Jones, 2018; Harrison, Wubbenhorst, Waits, & Hurt, 2006; Scott, 2003).

Given that the Black Church is seen as the place, often first, that African Americans turn in times of trouble or when in need of counsel, it no surprise that African Americans would seek out the Black Church if they were experiencing mental, emotional, and/or behavioral health issues (Hankerson, Svob, & Jones, 2018; Mattis, et al., 2007; Taylor, et al., 2000). When examining the literature on African Americans, mental health, and help-seeking, research indicates that African Americans have a greater burden of untreated mental health problems than any other racial group (Cook et al. 2014; Dempsey, Butler, & Gaither, 2016). They are also less likely to seek professional counseling support than other racial or ethnic groups (Ayalon & Young, 2005; Woodward, 2011), and often turn to churches and spiritual leaders to meet their mental health needs (Adkison-Bradley, et al., 2005; Allen, Davey, & Davey, 2010; Avent & Cashwell, 2015; Jackson, 2015; Molock, et al., 2008, as cited in Hankerson, et al., 2015; Veroff, Duvan, & Kulka, 1981, as cited in Taylor, et al., 2000). When exploring reasons why this may be the case, one finds that African Americans often face many barriers accessing traditional counseling services, including insufficient numbers of diverse clinicians, stigma within the African American community about mental health issues, and the development of cultural mistrust of White society because of historical and present abuses (Allen, Davey, & Davey, 2010; Avent & Cashwell, 2015; Dempsey, Butler, & Gaither, 2016; Hays, 2015; Sue & Sue, 2013). The history of church support, free services, and familiar and culturally similar providers may also influence church members to seek out the Black Church for their mental health needs (Dempsey; Butler, & Gaither, 2016).

Research investigating the helping relationship between the Black Church and African Americans has been limited. Recent research has tested the feasibility of administering depression screenings within the church in conjunction with clergy members (Hankerson et al., 2015), interviewed church leaders about their own usage of external mental health services (Okunrounmu, Allen-Wilson, Davey, & Davey, 2016), identified the perceptions that licensed professional counselors hold about pastoral counseling (Jackson, 2015), surveyed African American Christians on their attitudes toward religious-help-seeking (Hardy, 2012), evaluated the capacity of black
churches to respond to members’ mental health needs (Hays, 2015), and used an integrative model to develop a research partnership with a local church (Allen, Davey, & Davey, 2010). Importantly, much current research points to the need for collaboration between churches and trained mental health professionals (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2005; Allen, Davey, & Davey, 2010; Avent & Cashwell, 2015; Dempsey, Butler, & Gaither, 2016; Ennis, W. R., Ennis, W., Durodoye, Ennis-Cole, & Bolden, 2004; Hankerson, Svob, & Jones, 2018; Hardy, 2012; Hankerson et al., 2015; Okunrounmu et al., 2016; Queener & Martin, 2001; Taylor et al., 2000; Young, Griffith, & Williams, 2003).

The goal of this research is to add to the extant literature on the helping relationship between the Black Church and African Americans with mental health problems and to further explore the Black Church as a service-delivery institution. The current study did this by exploring the viability of the Black church as a community-based mental health center by highlighting church members’ thoughts about mental health, mental illness, and the church’s role in addressing such issues. To achieve this aim, this manuscript draws upon data collected to examine respondents’ thoughts on the expansion of one African American church’s counseling ministry to a fully operating counseling center to service church and community members. While the findings are part of a larger study to inform one church’s design and development plans, those presented here can provide insight into how church-attending African Americans view mental health and illness, help-seeking and service use as well as the role of the church in improving mental health and behavioral health, service engagement, and service delivery.

**Method**

The data used for this study were extracted from a larger, three-phase study designed to inform a large, African American-serving church that desired to expand its current mental health counseling program into a fully operating counseling center. The first phase interviewed members of the current counseling staff about the mental health needs of the congregants. The second phase involved a focus group with current church pastors and ministers about the mental health needs of church members as well as the church’s desire and ability to meet the needs of its members. The third and final phase used an online-administered survey designed by the lead author to gather the opinions of church members about the expansion plans. This survey also included questions about church members’ mental health and service use histories. It is from this University of Georgia Institutional Review Board-approved phase (#00002360) that the data is drawn.

Over a period of a month, church members were invited via church announcements and encouragement from counseling ministry team members.
to complete a primarily close-ended survey that asked church members about their mental health histories, help-seeking behaviors, mental health service use, and thoughts about their church’s desire to build a counseling center. The data for this manuscript came from the qualitative responses supporting a single question of the survey: [The church] wants to expand the counseling services it offers church members and others in the [name omitted] community by building an actual mental health counseling center. Do you think the church should expand its counseling services? Out of 529 respondents, approximately 89% (469) believed the church should expand its counseling services while 10% (54) were unsure. Only 6, or 1%, of respondents did not think that the church should expand the services. Three hundred ninety-three respondents in favor of the expansion provided qualitative statements to support their affirmative responses. It is from these 393 respondents that the study information is drawn.

**Study Participants**

Almost all of the 393 respondents provided demographic information (see Table 1). As this is a largely African American-serving church, approximately 95% of participants identified as African American. The majority of participants were also female (91%) and heterosexual (96%). The group was educationally diverse with the vast majority reporting at least some college: 30% reporting an associate’s degree or some college education, 27% reporting a bachelor’s degree, 29% reporting a master’s or professional degree (beyond the master’s), and almost 5% reporting a doctorate-level or medical degree as their highest level of education completed. The majority of participants (220 or about 57%) were between the ages of 25 and 44, with the modal age group being 35-39. Twenty-one participants (5%) were under the age of 24, 137 (35%) were between the ages of 45 and 64, and 11 (3%) were 65 or older. Almost half of the participants (48%) identified as single or not partnered while 24% were married to a same-sex or different-sex partner. About 14% of participants were divorced and about 11% were partnered to (in a relationship with) someone of the same or different sex. The church identifies as “non-denominational.”

**Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category</th>
<th>Demographic Characteristics*</th>
<th>Count**</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Black/African American/African/Person of African Descent</td>
<td>371/389</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White/Caucasian/European/Person of European Descent</td>
<td>4/389</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Gender Identity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Number</strong></td>
<td><strong>Percentage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>355/390</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34/390</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>&lt; 1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Sexual Identity</strong></th>
<th><strong>Number</strong></th>
<th><strong>Percentage</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual/Straight</td>
<td>373/389</td>
<td>96%</td>
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<td>Gay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1/389</td>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>8/389</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>1/389</td>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Gender Loving</td>
<td>3/389</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Don't Know/I'm Not Sure</td>
<td>1/389</td>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Highest Level of Education Completed</strong></th>
<th><strong>Number</strong></th>
<th><strong>Percentage</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less Than High School</td>
<td>8/390</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Age</strong></th>
<th><strong>Number</strong></th>
<th><strong>Percentage</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 – 24</td>
<td>21/389</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 – 34</td>
<td>98/389</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 – 44</td>
<td>122/389</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 – 54</td>
<td>87/389</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 – 64</td>
<td>50/389</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 or older</td>
<td>11/389</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
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<th><strong>Current Relationship Status</strong></th>
<th><strong>Number</strong></th>
<th><strong>Percentage</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single/Not-Partnered</td>
<td>187/390</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>56/390</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>3/390</td>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>92/390</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>41/390</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10/390</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Don't Know/I'm Not Sure</td>
<td>1/390</td>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only characteristics with a response are included.

**Not all participants provided complete demographic information.
Data Analysis

Although the qualitative responses were drawn from a single survey question from the questionnaire, many contained rich information about mental health, service delivery, treatment preferences, and the role of the church in all of the above. The investigator and her research assistant each performed a thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), on the data to draw out themes that contextualized church members’ overwhelming support of the counseling center expansion. First, they each familiarized themselves with the data in order to formulate some ideas and thoughts about the data, reading through the reasons why each of the 393 respondents supported the expansion of services. Then, they each generated initial codes. A meeting was convened to discuss the codes each had generated. They both found that most of the respondents’ primary reason for supporting the expansion was because they felt it would be “helpful,” “beneficial,” or was “needed,” with some respondents listing that as their support statement while others providing more substantive explanations. The research partners then talked about how they would continue the thematic analysis by highlighting, categorizing, and drawing connections between the reasons why and/or how the respondents believed the center would help, benefit, or meet the needs of the community. So, each sorted through the codes, searching for and then constructing themes. Another meeting was scheduled to review the themes. The investigator’s and assistant’s findings were highly congruent and little discussion was needed to reconcile themes. They defined and refined themes by discussing how to best articulate each theme and selecting which quotes best illustrated final themes. The lead investigator took on the final step in Braun & Clarke’s thematic analysis approach: writing the results section, essentially constructing the manuscript so that it presented the themes in a way that could be best understood by the reader.

Results

A thematic analysis was performed on the 393 responses from participants who believed the church should expand its counseling services and provided a qualitative response to support their belief. Based on this analysis, we found that respondents believed that their church was uniquely positioned to 1) (ful)fill the unmet mental health needs of its members and the surrounding community; 2) address the stigma around mental health and illness that exists among many Black Americans, Christians, and Black Christians; and 3) understand and respond to the culturally-based treatment preferences of Black Christians. The researchers selected quotes that best represented these themes. Spelling and grammatical errors were corrected to improve clarity and the readability of thoughts, but only if doing so did not compromise the integrity of respondents’ thoughts.
(Ful)fill Unmet Mental Health Needs

Many respondents believed that a church counseling center could help fill the existing gap in availability of quality mental health services in their community, many times left by the closing of mental health centers in their city.

Our community is in need of mental health services, especially since most of the mental health institutions were shut down. The individuals who were serviced in the institutions are now within our communities, and they still need support. Services are needed to help people in our communities get past the stigmatism/hush-hush nature behind seeking out counseling and psychiatric services. Please offer more support to our communities.

State cuts have decimated mental health services in addition to other resources that have made already stressed people worse. Our churches and organizations need to fill the gap for members of the community.

Many people are suffering from mental health issues and with the mental health facilities closing, support is needed. Sometimes just offering an ear to listen is valuable but to be able to get treatment and service is tremendous. [Our church] could save LIVES! Thank you!

Respondents also believed that the church could address the unique needs of Black communities, namely the mental health problems (i.e., depression, anxiety, trauma) created by community violence and poverty as well as interpersonal and historical/societal abuses.

Yes, I do believe it would be useful. I currently work at two agencies that address mental health and the need for services is in GREAT demand. Our young adults are affected by many things and don’t really have a lot of services offered to them to help address some of these issues. The services in [our state] have been greatly diminished and if there were other entities that help to identity and address mental health, we could help heal our communities.

I believe mental illness is one of the biggest problems in inner city African American neighborhoods and is a big contributor to the problems that plague these communities, especially violence and crime.
I think this is an excellent idea. I believe that the AA community as a whole is suffering from depression/problems/issues that date as far back as slavery as it’s been passed down from generation to generation. We suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), emotional and physical abuse among other things and we don’t even know why. We have so many angry and frustrated people in our community. Also, so many of our people feel helpless and don’t see a way out of their situation.

**Address Stigma and Lack of Knowledge Around Mental Health and Illness**

In addition to addressing unmet needs, many respondents felt that the church could address the stigma around mental health and illness in Black communities and Christian churches and destigmatize the notion of needing and/or seeking help.

There are many people in the community who suffer in silence due to stigmas associated with mental health issues or obtaining counseling. Historically, people in the African-American community have been discouraged from talking about mental health issues, seeking help. African-American women are taught to be strong, bide our time and pray to get through any challenges. The community needs to be empowered to seek help and have help available in the community.

I believe that the community and church members would benefit from the church expanding its services. I believe there are a lot of people who struggle with mental health issues, including church members. There has always been a stigma in the Black community that counseling is a bad thing. I think if the church expands their services that people would be more open to receiving the help they need.

It’s an issue that many of God’s children sweep under the rug! Some are suffering with real mental issues but are ashamed and or feel that as a Christian you don’t need counseling; just pray about it! Yes, prayer does work, but there are some that need the help, support and guidance from those God has chosen and called to this area.

Some respondents believed that some people did not know that they needed help or knew how to get help for mental health problems, and the church could/should be that place.
Mental health issues affect millions of people daily, and they are unsure how and where to get help. Providing a center that can help people cope with their problems will be an asset to the church and community.

More people have mental health problems and they might not be aware of it. In the Black community, it can be frowned upon to have mental health problems, but a lot of mental health issues are hereditary, and people aren’t aware of that. That’s why we as a people must educate and continue to educate on mental health problems, signs and treatment.

Yes, I think the church should expand its services because there are many hurting people. And they either don't know where to go or can't afford it. When the church get involved to that extent, then the message will be the church cares about the total man! A real practical solution to an issue that's been going for many years.

Some respondents also indicated that churches can play a more active role by highlighting the importance of attending to one’s mental health and promoting wellness.

Mental Health is prevalent throughout the country, however, those of us who are in Church do not see the importance of counseling. It was never introduced to us in our home. [Having a counseling center] is necessary.

There are so many people with mental health issues that are not addressed because we (African Americans) will not seek help. Maybe once they see that the church is concerned about them, they will be more inclined to open up and address what is going on with them.

Understand and Respond to Culturally Based Treatment Preferences of Black Americans in General and Black Christians Specifically

Respondents believed that Black churches are uniquely positioned to not only understand the cultural landscape that Black Americans navigate but also respond appropriately to their specific mental health needs and attend to their treatment preferences.

I have found, being in the Mental Health Profession (LPC), that the community's overall view (myths) when it comes
to mental illnesses is misinformation and therefore hinders individuals and families from seeking assistance. At the same time, the community needs a place where professionals are culturally aware so they feel comfortable seeking help.

The city services are scarce and so many people are suffering. Culturally, African American people are not always willing to seek help in the areas of mental health. We need to be encouraged to do so and in a culturally comfortable context and setting.

People are hurting, angry, confused, and many are exhausted. It is very helpful to be able to have a SAFE place to go and pour yourself out. Recovering addicts have rooms around the world where they can go and have anonymity. The church which should be the safest place in the world has FINALLY realized that some people need professional help. Plus, now the stigma is being removed. As a people, we were ALL taught, “what goes on in this house stays in this house!” Truth is sometimes what has gone on in “THAT” house is the root cause of all our problems. Thank GOD our people are waking up, to receiving help in learning how to navigate through their emotions.

Other respondents also spoke to the idea of the church being a trusted, “safe” place/space to receive help for mental health problems, particularly for people of color.

Minorities suffer from stress/anxiety/ depression severely and they need a resource they can trust to gain the assistance they need.

There are probably people like me out there who don’t know where to turn to. Having a place within the church to go to, would give a person a sense of security and trust.

Since there is still a stigma regarding mental health, and particularly in the African American communities in general and even with other minorities, having a faith-based community mental health counseling center could be beneficial to these individuals, and their families and community members. It would also hopefully serve as a safe place, vs. places where members of the minority community may not trust otherwise to seek and receive mental health services.
Some respondents believed that the inherently religious nature of the church allows a counseling center to better understand the spiritual needs of Christians. The church could also, for some respondents, successfully and effectively link the professional/clinical and spiritual when delivering mental health services to Black Christians.

This is an excellent idea and much needed. I have always been against seeking counsel outside of the church. I think having counseling from spiritually educated people, coupled with education, will bring the balance needed. Sometimes, if you mention anything about a devil to non-Christian counselors, you will be sure to leave with a prescription. Please expand your services, especially with the state taking funding and letting these people out.

It's needed really badly in our communities. The need for Christ and need for counseling has needs to be available for the people. It would just be nice to know that there is professional help linked with the spiritual healing we have all been seeking.

I've met many African American Christians that believe that they don't need counseling, but rather just going to church and reading the Bible will fix their problem. I think that by [the church] expanding counseling services, they can see that faith and counseling can go hand-in-hand.

It's always been my dream to go to a mental health counseling center that is founded through a Christian church. I know that prayer works but I also know that therapy and counseling can work alongside the power of God.

Several respondents conveyed the idea of taking care of the whole person or approaching issues more comprehensively or holistically. Some respondents were clear in highlighting the church's ability to link the natural and the supernatural, or the physical and the spiritual, and how this could help people see how addressing mental health problems helps them become more complete and whole.

I believe it will help people achieve complete wholeness. The word of God begins the process of making us a new creation, but we all come to the Lord needing healing: spirit, soul, and body. No church I have attended before [this church] has offered to address mental illness. It will help.
Yes. I believe the members of [the church] and the people of the [surrounding] community would greatly benefit from a mental health counseling center. As a people, we don't take time to heal and recover from emotional pain. Time does not heal all emotional wounds. People are walking around in pain from things that happened to them 10, 20, and 30 years ago. A counseling center would help people get to the root of their internal issues and help them heal. God wants all his children healed, whole and free.

Some respondents believed that this wholeness and freedom could actually help people be able to more fully engage in maintaining their spiritual health.

Our community needs these services. As Christians, we think praying and going to church will answer all, but the Bible says first natural, then spiritual.

Mental health is an integral part of total health and impacts our presence in the world as well as our witness. In addition, God desires our wholeness.

Additional Notes

While 89% of the respondents were in favor of the expansion, it is worth noting that several respondents believed that the project should only be undertaken under certain conditions. Focusing on having a larger staff of counselors available to be able to meet with clients in both a timely and informed manner, both culturally and professionally, was very important to some respondents.

I have personally signed up for the counseling service and I have been placed on a wait list. I feel like if it gets expanded, the counselors can help more patients out and can get to them quicker.

I agree that the counseling services should be expanded but something must be done about that long waiting list. People are suffering, depressed, suicidal, emotionally disturbed, etc., and when they call the counseling center, they have to go through the formality of answering questions, filling out a form, and ultimately being put on a waiting list not to receive help until months later? Not good at all. By that time, the problem is either resolved or has become worse. We can't advertise a counseling center and when people call, they
can’t get help until months later. I would only recommend expansion if you staff the center with more counselors and attend to the needs presented in a timely manner. Being put on a waiting list to receive help is not acceptable.

Only if it is staffed by well-trained African American men and women who can relate to the church membership and the community members in the surrounding area who may seek help there.

For context, 23 out of the 54 respondents who stated that they were “not sure” or “didn’t know” if the church should expand its services did not give an explanation for their responses. Eleven of those who did provide an explanation stated that they did not know of, or enough about, the church’s existing services or the current need to answer more definitively. Seven respondents believed there was a need for the center, but each gave different caveats that they would want considered, many of which were mentioned in the section above. Five respondents were receptive to a center if the demand was there. Of the remaining respondents who were not sure or did not know, five responses could not be interpreted for meaning, two expressed not being comfortable speaking with someone in the church, and one person believed that God was the answer. Out of the six respondents who said that the church should not expand, three did not provide an explanation, one stated that they did not know enough about the church’s current services or current need to comment, one thought the project was too big to take on and did not want the focus taken away from the church, and one was concerned about confidentiality.

**Discussion and Implications**

The respondents in this study were overwhelmingly supportive of this church’s desire to expand its existing counseling ministry into a fully operational counseling center, as they saw attention to mental health issues as important, if not detrimental, to Black American and Christian communities. Their thoughts support and strengthen previous researchers’ findings about the viability of church-based mental health services and provide information that can be used to further explore the nuances of mental health in diverse Black communities, particularly religious ones. Respondents overwhelmingly believed that churches, including their own, were poised to understand and address the mental health needs in Black and Christian communities. Communicated most strongly was that the church can address the unmet mental health needs in Black communities where members face a greater burden of mental health problems (Cook et al., 2014). With the closing of mental health facilities, respondents argued
that the church almost has a responsibility to “fill the gap.” The sentiment around “filling the gap” or “standing in the gap” is often discussed in Black churches. To “stand in the gap” is to provide a bridge over, or fill, the empty places in a person that leave them incomplete and, therefore, unable to experience wholeness until that person is in a place to maintain their spiritual, physical, and/or mental wellness on their own. It would not be difficult for churches to fill this gap in services, especially with the push for, and potential funding to support, housing more social services within communities.

With their location within community, Black churches are physically positioned to deliver mental health services to African Americans, addressing structural barriers and other issues of accessibility that often prevent many African Americans from making use of available resources. Also, since churches provide counsel on matters of a religious and spiritual nature, their space is most likely already structured in a way that allows for private, confidential meetings. In terms of staff, churches could partner with existing agencies, private clinicians, or rely on the ministry work of licensed clinicians to provide a greater variety of services at a greater range of price points.

Respondents also believed that a Black church could better respond to the culturally based needs and treatment preferences of Black Christians. Beliefs that clinicians cannot be trusted or will not understand them are barriers that keep many African Americans out of traditional mental health services. Historically, the Black Church has operated as a safe haven for Black Americans and has tapped into the various needs of the community (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2005; Allen, Davey, & Davey, 2010; Gaines, 2010; McKinney, 1971). Respondents believed the church could draw on these strengths and traditions and transcend the social and culturally oriented barriers that challenge traditional clinicians. With the Black Church delivering services in a more culturally informed manner and providing a safe, trusted space for members of the community, respondents believe that more people will seek out services that can heal and make individuals, families, and communities whole. One could also conclude that churches may not be as challenged when building rapport or establishing trust because, often, they have already proven themselves as capable of understanding and addressing other needs of Black communities. They also have greater insight into the needs of their communities and the socio-cultural and historical factors that are intertwined in those issues. This fact makes them potentially better able to bring a solution-oriented perspective to the mental health issues that African Americans often seek.

Respondents also spoke quite elaborately about the church’s being more involved in work to destigmatize mental health help-seeking and service use among Blacks in general and Black Christians in particular,
similar to findings of previous research (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2005; Hankerson & Weissman, 2012; Neely-Fairbanks, Rojas-Guyler, Nabors, & Banjo, 2018). They also believed that the church should be more active in mental health and wellness promotion and helping Black and Christian communities understand how important maintaining optimal mental health is in overall well-being and spiritual health. Because churches are seen as the heart of Black communities, the importance that they place on issues highly influences how seriously community members take those issues. If the church, with its ability to speak the language of the community, prioritizes mental health, then community members will place more emphasis on it, too, thereby shifting the narrative many Black Americans have about mental health in a more positive, healthy, healing direction.

**Limitations**

While this research raises important issues related to the Black Church's involvement in addressing the mental health needs of Black Americans, it is not without its limitations. First, the responses are collected from the congregants of a single church and of a single denomination. Therefore, the results cannot be considered generalizable. However, the results are consistent with previous findings that suggest the Black church should have a role in increasing mental health awareness (Neely-Fairbanks, et al., 2018). Future research would include additional churches of varying denominations and traditions. The final two limitations are also related to the sample selection: most of the sample had at least some college in terms of education and 91% of the respondents identify as women. Including respondents who have achieved less education (only a high school education or less) would make the findings more representative. The fact that this sample has achieved higher levels of education may be because the congregation is younger. While previous research shows that most Black church members and service attenders are indeed women (Taylor, Chatters, & Brown, 2014), the numbers in this study are not reflective of that research. Conclusively, men are not adequately represented in this study. This is of particular note when considering the gender identity of those who did not think that the church should expand (three of the six were male). While no statistically significant results or conclusions can be drawn from this, it does make one wonder how some of the nuances of the major findings (i.e. testimonials) may have varied. To make sure that we are also capturing a more representative voice on this topic, future research could oversample Black men or target churches with more diverse congregations. Conclusions about the makeup of churches and their thoughts on the role of the Black Church in educating congregants about mental health and potentially addressing those needs could then be drawn.
Conclusion

Although this study focused on the thoughts of a fairly homogenous group of members in one church, these findings provide important information in understanding how Black Americans, particularly Christians, view mental health, help-seeking, and service use. The findings of this study not only supported past studies on this topic, but also highlighted concepts like treatment preferences and church-based service delivery that are important for scholars and practitioners alike. Overall, the findings supported partnerships between churches and mental health practitioners and centers and encouraged faith leaders to focus more explicitly on mental health and well-being among its church and community members. Future research can expand upon this research with a larger, more diverse group of Black church and community members, thereby strengthening the support for community- and church-based mental health services.

References


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**Keywords:** The Black Church; mental health; community-based service delivery; stigma
The Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban

According to the United Nations, by 2050 almost 70% of the earth’s population will live in cities, with much of the urban growth occurring in Asian and African countries. In city planning and the social sciences, urbanization has been portrayed as both the cause and cure of critical global issues of crowding and poverty. In his book The Spiritual City, Philip Sheldrake explores both the influence and roles of Christians in urban development, challenging assumptions of Christians as private and disengaged, and calling for a reconsideration of faith in the city. Sheldrake’s book is fueled by critical questions: What are cities for? What makes a good city? What does it mean to express God’s love in a city? Recognizing the interrelatedness of functional, ethical and spiritual insights and questions regarding urban life, the author presents cities as ‘public arenas’, “characterized by the interaction of strangers,” (p. 1) and challenges the reader to reconsider the pursuit of the ‘common good’ as urban spiritual practice. In stark contrast to assumptions of Christians as inwardly-focused, Sheldrake provides a fascinating essay on the ways in which cities have been shaped and informed by Christian theology and practice, including the writing of St. Augustine, early monasticism and utopian thought, the concept of the city as sacred place during the Middle Ages, and the Protestant Reformation. His discussion of the symbolism of urban cathedrals as reflecting both divine and social orders is intriguing, as is his chapter on the city and the Protestant Reformation.

In the second part of this book, Sheldrake draws on writing from historical and contemporary sources of Christian theology, philosophers, town planners and social sciences to explore the implications of Christian theology for pressing topics of urban life including the importance of providing a sense of ‘place’, community, reconciliation and hospitality. He concludes with a chapter on the ‘urban virtues’ central to the ‘common good’, including mutuality, and solidarity, belonging. Sheldrake spends some time discussing the practice and value of Christian discernment, identifying this too as a communal process.

While the book is engaging on an academic level, I also gained new insight into my personal experiences of urban life, particularly through his discussion of the Eucharist as urban encounter. As a young man, I spent several years working in an inner-city community center, working with people from socioeconomic backgrounds very different from my own. This was a transitional and transformative time in my life, one which I
recalled when I read Sheldrake's discussion of the Eucharist. He writes “all those who participate in celebrations of the Eucharist are called upon to commit themselves to crossing the boundaries of fear, of prejudice, and of injustice in a prophetic embrace of other people” (p. 172). In fact, the entire chapter on ‘Reconciliation and Hospitality’ has reminded me that the experience of entering into a shared community across social divisions of gender, social class and race is a response to our calling as humans, to be the living presence of Christ in the world. Far from being the antithesis of spiritual community, my experience at the community center drew me into a much deeper sense of fellowship with others.

In his epilogue, Sheldrake writes “Christianity does not promote a protected subjectivity or a kind of spiritualized interiority as more authentically human;” instead, it “persistently reminds us that the quality of community and of our overall engagement with other people is central to being human” (p. 201). Urban Christians are called to love across social divisions of status and class, creating a real sense of attachment to the city and its inhabitants, in pursuit of a ‘common good’ which balances shared ideals and individual needs. Sheldrake proposes that the city be seen as a sacrament, even in its brokenness still revealing and pointing the way to eternity. This is a vision well worth remembering, particularly for Christians in social work who are engaged in the challenges of urban life and its impact on those most vulnerable. The author concludes by identifying the fragility and limitations of our human endeavors to bring about any kind of urban transformation. However, he also notes that “Christian tradition provokes us to commit ourselves unreservedly within the human city to the continually challenging and never-ending process of building community and of negotiating the common good” (p. 209).

The book is not without its limitations. At times I found I was slightly overwhelmed by Sheldrake's thorough review of urban theologians and philosophers. At other times, I wanted to read more about the author's own perspective on key urban issues. Sometimes the emphasis on the city as spiritual and transformative threatened to overshadow the harsh realities of urban life for many people. In spite of these limitations, this book should be in the hands of everyone and anyone who is concerned about the meaningful role of Christians and their faith in the city.

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**Why I am A Social Worker:**
**25 Christians Tell Their Stories**
*Diana S. Richmond Garland1 (2015) Botsford, CT: NACSW*

Recently, I was working on a blog post for our school highlighting what social workers do. I wrote about the diversity of the profession, which is one of the characteristics of social work I love most. We are a rich profession providing breadth and depth of service in so many ways in so many lives. After, I was thinking about my next writing project and noticed Diana’s *Why I am a Social Worker* still on my desk. I love Diana’s writing, and have for over 20 years. I love her passion, which is what brought me to Baylor. And, I love her commitment to the intersection of faith and practice, which is at the heart of this book. However, it’s not a theoretical exploration of that dynamic; it is a narrative one. It is the stories of how social workers live the intersection. And, in these stories of what 25 social workers do is the why of social work. The why is the heart of the meaning of social work. Her writing brought about a shift in my focus from what social workers do to what social work means.

In Diana’s own words, she says the purpose of the book is “to describe the path of Christians into social work…”, “to sample the breadth of social work as a profession…”, and “to serve as a resource for exploring the ethical integration of faith with professional practice” (p. 2). She gives proper homage to Rick Chamiec-Case, David Sherwood, and Alan-Keith Lucas who have explored similar themes, but again the stories Diana collects provide a new way of presenting the diversity of the profession in a way that makes a strong text either for an Introduction to Social Work course or mentoring conversations we may have with student advisees about why they might choose to study social work.

One related theme Diana explores is that of vocation. She writes with clarity and focus in stating how one’s work can be an expression of one’s faith and a response to one’s calling by God. We may naively think of course our work is our calling, our vocation, but she reminds us this has not always been the understanding of vocation. With greater nuance, she describes work as an opportunity to live out the image of God and to live the example of Christ in serving others and sometimes suffering for them.

She cites biblical examples of God calling religious leaders, political leaders, artists and shepherds. For each, their work is one part of their calling, but she reminds us that “all of life is to be lived following our bidding Christ” (p. 7). Calling is far more than the profession for which

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1 Diana Garland was past president of NACSW and the founding Dean of the School of Social Work at Baylor University until her untimely passing in 2015. See also Sherwood, 2015.
we prepare, but work is a part of the spirituality of everyday life by which we follow Christ’s call. Diana’s words paint a beautiful picture of what God is doing in our lives, in the lives of the 25 life stories she has collected, and what God was doing in her own life. Diana was a kind and faithful servant, who saw that part of life is our work, but our calling is so much more. She lived this by example in her marriage and in her parenting, in how she supervised the staff and faculty in her school, and how she worshiped and served in her church and community. “We walk our calling all our lives, with all the ups and downs and twists and turns, never finished until we finish this life” (p. 9). And as she finished her life, she was surely found to be faithful of walking her calling, and walking the talk she shared in what would be her final book.

Reviewed by Jon Singletary, PhD, MSW, MDiv, Dean & Diana R. Garland Endowed Chair of Child and Family Studies, Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, Baylor University. Email: Jon_Singletary@baylor.edu.

Reference


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Development on Purpose: Faith and Human Behavior in the Social Environment
(2019) by Lisa Hosack, MSW, Ph.D.

Development on Purpose provides both students and seasoned professionals with a coherent framework for considering human behavior in the social environment from a Christian perspective. It was developed to be a companion text for HBSE and related courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Courses in human behavior and the social environment raise important questions about the nature of persons and our multi-layered social world. The Christian faith offers compelling answers to these deep questions about human nature and our relationships with one another and the world by providing a defining purpose for human development.

Steeped within the Reformed tradition, Development on Purpose describes how this grand purpose informs our understanding of the trajectory of our lived experience and sustains our work on behalf of those at risk in the world. Check out the introductory chapter and video introducing you to this important new book for Christians in social work!

The first half of Development on Purpose outlines a purpose for human development, examining biological, psychological, and social theories through the lens of faith. This includes chapters on:

- Biblical Themes to Ground Us
- A Theological Model for Understanding Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE)
- The Perspectives of Social Work from the Lens of Faith
- The Biological Dimension
- The Psychological Dimension
- The Social Dimension

The second half of Development on Purpose then uses detailed case examples to illuminate the way that faith can relate to work with persons across the lifespan. This includes chapters on:

- Infancy: Early Growth toward God and Others
- Childhood: Playing and Learning (ages 3-12)
• Adolescence: Leaning into Identity (ages 13-18)
• Emerging Adulthood: Feeling In-Between
• Middle Adulthood: At the Intersection of Growth and Decline
• Older Adulthood: Finishing Well

In showing how a Christian understanding of people can inform the study of human behavior throughout the life course, Development on Purpose is an excellent companion text for Human Behavior in the Social Environment and related courses in faith-based social work programs. To support the use of this book in the classroom, NACSW is developing a collection of online teaching resources for your use. These free resources will include summaries of key concepts and terms found in Development on Purpose, discussion questions, suggested class activities and assignments, and an annotated bibliography.

Hear What Others Are Saying About Development on Purpose

Gaynor Yancey, Professor & Baylor Master Teacher at the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work & George W. Truett Theological Seminary, says that: “In Development on Purpose, Lisa Hosack does a great job of not only encouraging readers to be knowledgeable in the theories and practices of human development, but she also includes the added dimension of faith as a vital and necessary element for social workers to consider in our work with people in various stages of the life course. The author's purpose is not to replace one focus of practice (social work theories and skills) with theology. Rather, she is encouraging all Christians in the social work profession not to neglect the theological context of how we are made, in God's image, when we address various behaviors across the life course. This book will serve as a wonderful addition to the preparation of social work professionals. This work truly celebrates the link of social work with our Christian faith tradition! What a gift it is to all of us!”

Marleen Milner, Ph.D., MSSW, BSW, Professor of Social Work and BSW Program Director at Southeastern University, writes that: “In Development on Purpose, Lisa Hosack provides a long overdue faith-based perspective on critical social work theories on human development and the environment, highlighting the significance of spirituality in human flourishing. The author offers a systematic biblical critique of micro, mezzo, and macro social work theories, drawing on both social work and theological literature. Part 1 provides an excellent and coherent overview of commonly used social work theories with commentary on the agreement and tensions with a biblical worldview. Part 2 covers developmental theories across the life span. A significant strength of the text is the detailed case studies which will facilitate the application of the theoretical and biblical perspectives to assessments in the various life stages. This book will be a beneficial addition
to an HBSE course at the undergraduate or graduate level, or a course on the integration of spirituality and social work practice.”

Regina Chow Trammel, Ph.D., LCSW, Assistant Professor of Social Work at Azusa Pacific University, says that “Lisa Hosack’s *Development on Purpose: Faith and Human Behavior in the Social Environment* is an important contribution to the field of social work. She provides a comprehensive, clear, and sound integration of Christian theology with social work theory and practice concepts. This book is a needed resource for any social worker and easily used as a primary or supplemental text in any HBSE classroom. Lisa engages readers and primes them for deeper learning through the use of case studies, and discussion questions to apply the learning material in each chapter. This is a deep and rich text that I am looking forward to using in my classroom.”

Kristen Alford, Ph.D., MSW, MPH, Associate Professor of Social Work at Calvin University offers that “Dr. Lisa Hosack’s *Development on Purpose: Faith and Human Behavior in the Social Environment* provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of faith in human development and social work practice. The book allows students to fully investigate the interplay of faith and spirituality with biological, social, and psychological functioning. It also provides students with tools to critically evaluate social work and related theories and practices using a lens of Christian faith. *Development on Purpose* is a useful companion to other HBSE resources as it provides a foundation for understanding the role of faith, an oft-overlooked yet essential area of human flourishing.”

Helen Wilson Harris, Ed.D, LCSW, Associate Professor of Social Work at the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University, writes that: “Dr. Lisa Hosack has written a highly integrative companion textbook for Christians interested in a theological/faith perspective of human behavior and the social environment. *Development on Purpose* addresses in two parts both major theories and Old and New Testament scripture and themes specific to human behavior and social work practice. The author provides both a broad overview of human development theory from the various disciplines and application of theological and scriptural content to that theory and to case studies across developmental levels. The social worker seeking to apply relational theology to social work practice will find resonance the author's stated goal of social work to assist clients in human development and relationships including those with God, with themselves, and with all aspects of creation including other persons and the world.”

David Sherwood, Ph.D., LICSW, ACSW, Past Editor in Chief of Social Work & Christianity for 34 years, says: “Lisa Hosack's *Development on
Purpose: Faith and Human Behavior in the Social Environment provides Christian social work students, faculty, and practitioners with a helpful resource for thinking about the complexities of understanding and evaluating theoretical frameworks and their application in social work practice. Dr. Hosack acknowledges both the limitations and the importance of our models as we try to understand and help others. Using her Reformed Christian perspective, Dr. Hosack applies Biblical themes of relationality, fallenness and the need for redemption, embodiment, and agency to gain insight into human behavior in the social environment. This is an important complement to the literature in the field.

Scott Sanders, MSW, Ph.D., Professor of Social Work and Program Director at Cornerstone University, writes that “Development on Purpose is divided in two sections. The first introduces the reader to a biblical and theological understanding of human behavior in the social environment and then uses that lens to provide an overview of theoretical frameworks commonly used in HBSE study. The second walks the reader though the developmental lifespan, using case examples to highlight an integration of the theoretical foundations discussed in the previous section. A useful companion text, and I think, the first of its kind, for aspiring social workers studying human behavior in the social environment who also care deeply about the integration of that knowledge with a Christian worldview.”

About the Author

Lisa Hosack (MSW, University of Illinois-Chicago; Ph.D., Michigan State University) is an associate professor at Grove City College where she founded and directs the social work program. Prior to her teaching career, Dr. Hosack was a practitioner for over twenty years, working in child welfare and clinical social work in Chicago and Grand Rapids, MI. Additionally, she ran a college counseling center at small Christian college for six years. The sum of these experiences is a passion for reclaiming social work’s roots in Christianity. Her research and writing focuses on the intersection of theology, human development, and social work. She is married and the proud mother of three grown daughters.

Exam Copies and Ordering Information

Development on Purpose: Faith and Human Behavior in the Social Environment (IBSN # 978-0-9897581-5-4) is over 225 pages long, and has 12 chapters. Development on Purpose costs only $24.95 or only $19.99 for NACSW members (plus shipping).
The Challenge of Doing the Right Thing: Real Values, Limited Understanding, and Character-Driven Judgments


The Challenge of Doing the Right Thing: Real Values, Limited Understanding, and Character-Driven Judgments is a 450-page collection of 44 editorials and articles written by David Sherwood for Social Work & Christianity and for the North American Association of Christians in Social Work between 1981 and 2017 focused on integrating Christian faith, values, and ethics with competent professional social work practice. In this book, Dr. Sherwood argues that in ethical decision-making, decisions frequently involve making judgments that functionally prioritize legitimate values that are in tension with each other. He contends that the mission of NACSW and Social Work & Christianity has been to walk the difficult middle road—clearly committed to both Christian faith and competent social work practice, not presuming to have the final answers in either, and helping members and readers to come as close to faithfulness and competence as possible.

Spiritual Meditations for People Who Help Other People

James R. Dudley (2019). Botsford, CT: NACSW. $20.75 U.S., $16.60 for NACSW members or orders of 10 or more copies. Available as an eBook only. For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.

Spiritual Meditations for People Who Help Other People is written for social workers and others who devote their lives to helping other people. The 25 spiritual meditations in this book are designed to nurture and strengthen caregivers, focusing on ways that we can enhance our relationship with God. Finding God in times of stillness, experimenting with different forms of prayer, and growing our patience and gratitude are examples. The meditations also focus on our relationships with the people we help. These meditations help us view our clients and our services as sacred territory, urge us to celebrate our clients, help us love our adversaries, and encourage more openness to miracles. Spiritual Meditations contains more than 25 individual meditations.
CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIAL WORK: READINGS ON THE INTEGRATION OF CHRISTIAN FAITH & SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE (FIFTH EDITION)
T. Laine Scales and Michael S. Kelly (Editors). (2016). Botsford, CT: NACSW. $55.00 U.S., $42.99 for NACSW members or orders of 10 or more copies. For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.

At over 400 pages and with 19 chapters, this extensively-revised fifth edition of Christianity and Social Work includes six new chapters and six significantly revised chapters in response to requests by readers of previous editions including chapters on evidence based practice (EBP), congregational Social Work, military social work, working with clients from the LGBT community, human trafficking – and much more! The fifth edition of Christianity and Social Work is written for social workers whose motivations to enter the profession are informed by their Christian faith, and who desire to develop faithfully Christian approaches to helping. It addresses a breadth of curriculum areas such as social welfare history, human behavior and the social environment, social policy, and practice at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Christianity and Social Work is organized so that it can be used as a textbook or supplemental text in a social work class, or as a training or reference materials for practitioners and has an online companion volume of teaching tools entitled Instructor's Resources.

WHY I AM A SOCIAL WORKER: 25 CHRISTIANS TELL THEIR LIFE STORIES
Diana R. Garland. (2015). Botsford, CT: NACSW. $29.95 U.S., $23.95 for NACSW members or orders of 10 or more copies. For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.

Why I Am a Social Worker describes the rich diversity and nature of the profession of social work through the 25 stories of daily lives and professional journeys chosen to represent the different people, groups and human situations where social workers serve. Many social workers of faith express that they feel “called” to help people – sometimes a specific population of people such as abused children or people who live in poverty. Often they describe this calling as a way of living out their faith. Why I Am a Social
Worker serves as a resource for Christians in social work as they reflect on their sense of calling, and provides direction to guide them in this process. Why I Am a Social Worker addresses a range of critical questions such as:

- How do social workers describe the relationship of their faith and their work?
- What is their daily work-life like, with its challenges, frustrations, joys and triumphs?
- What was their path into social work, and more particularly, the kind of social work they chose?
- What roles do their religious beliefs and spiritual practices have in sustaining them for the work, and how has their work, in turn, shaped their religious and spiritual life?

Dr. David Sherwood, recently retired Editor-in-Chief of Social Work & Christianity, says about Why I Am a Social Worker that:

> I think this book will make a very important contribution. …The diversity of settings, populations, and roles illustrated by the personal stories of the social workers interviewed will bring the possibilities of social work to life in ways that standard introductory books can never do. The stories also have strong themes of integration of faith and practice that will both challenge and encourage students and seasoned practitioners alike.

**Virtue and Character in Social Work Practice**

Edited by Terry A. Wolfer and Cheryl Brandsen. (2015). Botsford, CT: NACSW. $23.75 U.S., $19.00 for NACSW members or orders of 10 or more copies). For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.

Virtues and Character in Social Work Practice offers a fresh contribution to the Christian social work literature with its emphasis on the key role of character traits and virtues in equipping Christians in social work to engage with and serve their clients and communities well. This book is for social work practitioners who, as social change agents, spend much of their time examining social structures and advocating for policies and programs to advance justice and increase opportunity.
**Congregational Social Work: Christian Perspectives**
Diana Garland and Gaynor Yancey. (2014). Botsford, CT: NACSW. $39.95 U.S., $31.95 for NACSW members or orders of 10 or more copies. For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.

*Congregational Social Work* offers a compelling account of the many ways social workers serve the church as leaders of congregational life, of ministry to neighborhoods locally and globally, and of advocacy for social justice. Based on the most comprehensive study to date on social work with congregations, *Congregational Social Work* shares illuminating stories and experiences from social workers engaged in powerful and effective work within and in support of congregations throughout the US.

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**Grappling with Faith: Decision Cases for Christians in Social Work**
Terry A. Wölf er and Mackenzi Huyser. (2010). $23.75 ($18.99 for NACSW members or for orders of 10 or more). For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.

*Grappling with Faith: Decision Cases for Christians in Social Work* presents fifteen cases specifically designed to challenge and stretch Christian social work students and practitioners. Using the case method of teaching and learning, *Grappling with Faith* highlights the ambiguities and dilemmas found in a wide variety of areas of social work practice, provoking active decision making and helping develop readers’ critical thinking skills. Each case provides a clear focal point for initiating stimulating, in-depth discussions for use in social work classroom or training settings. These discussions require that students use their knowledge of social work theory and research, their skills of analysis and problem solving, and their common sense and collective wisdom to identify and analyze problems, evaluate possible solutions, and decide what to do in these complex and difficult situations.
ON BECOMING A CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR IN SOCIAL WORK
Michael Sherr. (2010). $21.75 ($17.50 for NACSW members or for orders of 10 or more). For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.

On Becoming a Christian Educator is a compelling invitation for social workers of faith in higher education to explore what it means to be a Christian in social work education. By highlighting seven core commitments of Christian social work educators, it offers strategies for social work educators to connect their personal faith journeys to effective teaching practices with their students. Frank B. Raymond, Dean Emeritus at the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina suggests that “Professor Sherr’s book should be on the bookshelf of every social work educator who wants to integrate the Christian faith with classroom teaching. Christian social work educators can learn much from Professor Sherr’s spiritual and vocational journey as they continue their own journeys and seek to integrate faith, learning and practice in their classrooms.”

SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT: HELPING HANDBOOK FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS
David Hodge. (2003). Botsford CT: NACSW. $20.00 U.S. ($16.00 for NACSW members or orders of 10 or more). For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.

A growing consensus exists among helping professionals, accrediting organizations and clients regarding the importance of spiritual assessment. David Hodge's Spiritual Assessment: Helping Handbook for Helping Professionals, describes five complementary spiritual assessment instruments, along with an analysis of their strengths and limitations. The aim of this book is to familiarize readers with a repertoire of spiritual assessment tools to enable practitioners to select the most appropriate assessment instrument in given client/practitioner settings. By developing an assessment “toolbox” containing a variety of spiritual assessment tools, practitioners will become better equipped to provide services that address the individual needs of each of their clients.
GIVING AND TAKING HELP (REVISED EDITION)

Alan Keith-Lucas’ Giving and Taking Help, first published in 1972, has become a classic in the social work literature on the helping relationship. Giving and taking help is a uniquely clear, straightforward, sensible, and wise examination of what is involved in the helping process—the giving and taking of help. It reflects on perennial issues and themes yet is grounded in highly practice-based and pragmatic realities. It respects both the potential and limitations of social science in understanding the nature of persons and the helping process. It does not shy away from confronting issues of values, ethics, and world views. It is at the same time profoundly personal yet reaching the theoretical and generalizable. It has a point of view.

SO YOU WANT TO BE A SOCIAL WORKER: A PRIMER FOR THE CHRISTIAN STUDENT

So You Want to Be a Social Worker has proven itself to be an invaluable resource for both students and practitioners who are concerned about the responsible integration of their Christian faith and competent, ethical professional practice. It is a thoughtful, clear, and brief distillation of practice wisdom and responsible guidelines regarding perennial questions that arise, such as the nature of our roles, our ethical and spiritual responsibilities, the fallacy of “imposition of values,” the problem of sin, and the need for both courage and humility.
HEARTS STRANGELY WARMED: REFLECTIONS ON BIBLICAL PASSAGES RELEVANT TO SOCIAL WORK

Hearts Strangely Warmed: Reflections on Biblical Passages Relevant to Social Work is a collection of devotional readings or reflective essays on 42 scriptures pertinent to social work. The passages demonstrate the ways the Bible can be a source of hope, inspiration, and conviction to social workers.

THE POOR YOU HAVE WITH YOU ALWAYS: CONCEPTS OF AID TO THE POOR IN THE WESTERN WORLD FROM BIBLICAL TIMES TO THE PRESENT

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