

Integration of Faith and Practice: Part II

Ilsia Bonilla

Department of Social Work, Southern Adventist University

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Professor Kristie Wilder

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Introduction

As a Christian, it is important to understand what it means to integrate faith into practice in the field of social work. Throughout my time in undergrad, I have found ways to combine my Christian and social work values and express them in a professional way. I was able to contact one of my connections in Long Island, NY to give me more insight on their experience as a Christian social worker.

Interview Summary

For this interview I was able to speak to a social worker at an agency called Family Service League in Huntington, NY. Bianca Mack is an MSW and specializes in child and family social work. Her position at Family Service League requires her to case manage various clients who have a history of homelessness. I asked Ms. Mack to describe her experience being a social worker and a Christian. I understand that there will be times where my faith will be challenged in this field, so I wanted to know her perspective on integrating her Christian background and the social work profession.

Ms. Mack first explained how she looks at her job as a ministry. Being a social worker allows her to get in direct contact to the most vulnerable population in society that have real life issues. She went on and expressed how she feels like the Lord has placed her in this position to show clients the love of Christ and uses this as a tool to console clients. In Ms. Mack's agency there is a casual and laid-back atmosphere, so she is able to incorporate her Christian values to the job. She mentioned how her Christian values help motivate her to assist clients as Jesus would help others with love and care. Ms. Mack emphasized how she does not want to look at her clients as another case number. She wants to help her clients and address them as an individual who is seeking guidance.

There are some challenges and advantages to having a Christian background. Ms. Mack finds herself relating to the client's struggles and is able to put herself in their shoes. She expressed how she has been in situations where agencies would not listen to her specific needs and just assess her like any other client. So, she knows how it feels to be denied services. Ms. Mack tries her best to do everything she can to help a client. But sometimes she struggles with setting a boundary of how much she can do for a client. She looks up to Jesus's character and knows that Jesus risked everything to die on the cross for us. Ms. Mack likes to reflect those characteristics and do the best she can to advocate for her clients. If she finds herself struggling to break out of her professional role, she prays about it in private and asks the Lord for guidance.

Ms. Mack continued to explain how she has crosses and framed scriptures in her office and sometimes it sparks conversation among her clients. She never directly discloses that she is a Christian or imposes her faith but if a client opens that opportunity she will engage in that conversation. Once the client brings up that they have a connection with spirituality Ms. Mack is able to use that information to provide encouraging feedback. But if she is meeting with clients that have no religious affiliation, she still provides the same level of care excluding direct conversation of Christianity. She believes that her Christian and social work values are very similar, so the level of assistance is never questioned throughout her diverse clientele.

Social Work Journey

Worldview

There are many reasons why I entered the field of social work. I have my own perspective on what it means to be a Christian and after recognizing that social work is for me, I realized that I am on the right track to engage in a bigger ministry within my community. It takes one experience to truly change someone's life. A few years ago, I had a social worker guiding

me through one of my toughest times. She was able to not only direct me to the right resources, but she was also there to listen and empathize with me. This positive experience changed my life and I am looking to pay it forward with my future clients.

Social Work and Christian Values

Social workers have important values embedded into the profession's standards that it is the closest thing to what I believe is to be a working Christian. There are three main social work values in the NASW Code of Ethics that correlate with the Christian faith principles. These values include dignity and worth of a person, service, and social justice.

Dignity and worth of a person can easily be related to many examples the Bible has to offer. This social work value means that we see clients for what they truly are and that is an individual who needs help addressing their needs. Despite the cultural and economic differences, we are all human and deserve to have access to the same resources (NASW, 2021). The Bible gives an example in John 13:16 "Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, John 13:16). This verse clearly states that under God's watch we are all equal and deserve the same love and care.

The social work value of service focuses on helping people in need and addressing problems faced in society (NASW, 2021). In connection to Christianity, the bible states in Matthew 10:8 "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and throw out demons. You received without having to pay. Therefore, give without demanding payment" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Matt. 10:8). To me this verse means that we have received many blessings from God and he never asked for anything in return as he gives us the freedom of choice. But this verse explains that because we are so fortunate, we should pay it

forward to those who cannot support themselves. Giving back will do us and the community we are in a service to improve our lives.

Social justice is extremely relevant in the field of social work. The NASW defines this value as “pursuing social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (NASW, 2021). To promote social change social workers must challenge society and advocate for those who do not have a strong voice and are not heard. Proverbs 31:8-9 it states “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Prov. 31:8-9). As you can see, the teachings of the Bible do not exclude anyone who is overlooked in society. It encourages readers to go out and serve others and help change the circumstances of those who are oppressed and marginalized.

Overall, I believe that the Bible has a strong connection with social work values. There are many prime examples throughout the Bible that can motivate social workers to continue to advocate for the vulnerable population.

Reflection

Similar to Ms. Mack, I think prayer is a good tool to use as I continue to meet clients and build my career. I am currently almost finished with my first semester of my senior year of my BSW. This is a time where I need to gather as much information I can to solidify my foundational skills needed to be successful. I can see how entering this profession can challenge my personal beliefs. For example, there will be times where I may have a client who has a history of neglecting their child. I am aware that individuals who put their children at risk of harm makes me uncomfortable. But this does not mean that I should reject assisting them. Going back to my Christian values, I can redirect myself to how Jesus would never reject people. But

rather use it as an opportunity to change their path for the better and introduce them to the word of God. Although, due to professional boundaries, I may not be able to directly impose my religious beliefs, I can still practice the idea of changing someone's life for the better. Changing my mindset towards these situations will be difficult but I am willing to put the work towards putting these actions into practice.

I am a liberal Christian and still in the process of getting to know Christ. Due to my past experiences, I am able to stay open-minded when encountering diverse clients. For my field practicum, I have been placed at the Chattanooga Regional Homeless Coalition. My role is to work the helpline, so this means that I have direct contact with clients. Most of the time I am the first person the client speaks to when reaching out for help. My reaction towards their situation sets the tone for their experience on receiving assistance for their needs. These calls have introduced me to heartbreaking situations and violent cries for help. From what I have gathered, I know that Jesus wants us to come to Him as we are. He does not care if we are broken or have lived a sinful dark path. He truly cares for us and was willing to die for us on the cross. I like to reflect on God's character and accept clients that have made mistakes in the past and want to be better people. God would never reject us, and I admire that from Him. As a future social worker, I will carry that throughout my entire career.

Future Improvement/Conclusion

The social work profession has been known to have high burn-out rates due to high caseloads or from daily encounters that lead to secondhand trauma. From the moment I entered the social work program, I have realized that there is a strong need for social change. Many injustices and tragic events were highlighted and brought to my attention. I found myself becoming overwhelmed and anxious to get change to happen as soon as possible. This way of

thinking led me to slowly neglect some of my needs and add stress to my personal life. But in reality, change happens with yourself. Acknowledging our own biases and finding out why we feel that way can truly start a chain reaction that will help us engage with those in our community. I can grow spiritually and professionally by keeping in contact with other professionals who share the same Christian values. For example, I will be keeping in contact with Ms. Mack because she may have advice or the experience to help me through situations she can relate to. I can also build resilience by incorporating prayer and worship into my daily routine. I find myself only seeking God in times of despair, but he has always been by my side even when I do not acknowledge his presence. Building a stronger relationship with Him can help me become confident in my spirituality in connection to social work.

Overall, the integration of faith and practice can be a positive thing if used correctly. But not having a religious background does not necessarily mean that the level of care will be less than. I would like to make the point that faith may enhance the motivation and resilience a social worker may have when assisting clients. As I finish up my senior year, I will make it my mission to continuously look back on Jesus's character and express that through my social work career.

References

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