

Faith and Integration Part Two

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Part two of the Faith and Integration paper will consist of two main topics: an interview with a Christian social worker, and my personal current and future integration of faith and social work. In the interview, issues such as experiences on integrating faith and social work, challenges of integration, and principals used to guide integration and practice are discussed. During the second topic of the paper, current and future integration, issues such as the contribution of belief systems in my decision to become a social worker, correlations between social work and Christian missions, and my future integration of faith and social work will be covered.

Interview

I Interviewed Ashley Pelham for this interview. She is a recent graduate from Southern Adventist University with her Masters of Social Work (MSW) and is planning to sit for her licensure soon. She is working in Elder Services at an agency called Partnership for Families, Children, and Adults.

Experiences. As a Christian social worker, Ashley feels like she is in a unique position because Christians are viewed as more conservative, while social work is stereotypically a liberal profession. She stated that even if her co-workers or clients have different viewpoints than her, it will not change the way she is going to work with them because that is not the Biblical perspective (Pelham, A., Personal Communication, October 25, 2017). Jesus worked with everybody despite their views.

Ashley noted that integrating faith into social work practices can be both easy and difficult. For her, the easiest way to integrate faith is when her clients have asked her to pray for them. However, she said she will never ask a client if they would like to pray, because she feels

as though that would be pushing her beliefs, which would not be appropriate. She noted that, as a professional social worker, it is an ethical issue to force religion onto others. That is a fact that has made integration more difficult, because she is always careful not to make others feel like she is being forceful with her religion. A passive way in which Ashley has integrated her faith into her career is through her personal prayers. She said that she prays to be “the hands and feet of Jesus” (Pelham, 2017). She also said that she can pray for wisdom and guidance when she does not know how to handle a situation.

Principals. Ashley said that she always refers to Tennessee Commission on Aging and Disability (TCAD) and Partnership policies to guide her integration and practice. The agency at which she works, Partnership, is not a Christian agency, so there are certain policies that state that she is not allowed to be bold with her religion at the workplace (Pelham, 2017). She also said that she refers to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. She looks at Biblical examples and at the way Jesus handled situations. Overall, it is a combination of principals that Ashley uses to guide her integration of faith, including agency policies, Biblical teachings, and the NASW Code of Ethics.

Current and Future Integration of Social Work

Belief System/Worldviews. The belief system that I tend to focus on is the idea of service. One of my personal values is service and, because of that, I believe in volunteering my time and energy to help people who are vulnerable. Growing up as an Adventist Christian, service was always highly valued. In my years of Adventist schooling, service opportunities were always encouraged, and sometimes required. I participated in afterschool activities that also encouraged and integrated service into their curriculum. I believe that, as a result of this lifelong

integration of service, I chose the social work profession because of its unique opportunities to serve others.

Correlation of Social Work and Christian Principles. The first correlation that I find between the mission of social work and Christian principles is found in the preamble of the NASW Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics states, “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (2017).” When I compare this section of the Code of Ethics to Isaiah 1:17 from the New King James Version (NKJV) Bible, the correlation is clear. Isaiah 1:17 says, “Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow.” Both of these texts tell me that it is my responsibility as both a Christian and a Social worker to advocate for oppressed and vulnerable individuals in society.

The second correlation that I have made between social work principles and Christianity is seen in a core value of the Code of Ethics, dignity and worth of the person. Dignity and worth of the person means that social workers respect the inherent dignity in others and treat each person in a caring way, mindful of differences and diversity (National Association for Social Workers, 2017). I think Jesus described this ethical principle best when he said, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind’. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40, NKJV).” This verse makes it clear that each person should be treated with respect and dignity. This principle is even more evident when looking at the way Jesus lived His life.

The third correlation I see that connects social work and Christian principles is directly seen in Jesus' interactions with those around him. In social work, we are taught to respect others despite their beliefs, actions, or backgrounds. Jesus Himself demonstrated this principle many times. An example of Jesus' demonstration of this principle is found in Luke chapter 5. Luke 5:30-31 says, "And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, 'Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.'"

Social Work, Volunteer, and other Experiences. Based on my experience in the social work program, volunteer, and other experiences, I anticipate many challenges with integrating my faith into my profession. It is never my desire to overwhelm others with my faith. I believe that it is neither ethical nor professional to force my religion onto others. Maintaining a balance between integration and avoiding forcefulness will be a difficult challenge. Another potential challenge I anticipate is desiring to share faith-based encouragement, but being prohibited from doing so. If I am not in a religious agency, it is likely that there will be regulations prohibiting me from mentioning my faith to clients. This may feel disheartening when I feel as though I could offer Biblical encouragement. Some of the opportunities that I see for integrating my faith into social work practice include prayer and example. I anticipate being able to pray with clients, but only if they approach me and ask. I also will have the opportunity to integrate my religion through my actions and lifestyle like Jesus did. I do not need to say that I am a Christian to be able to convey Christian principles.

Thus far, it has been easy to integrate my faith into social work practice throughout my experience in the School of Social Work. This is because it is a Christian program with activities built-in that encourage spiritual thinking. However, I realize that this is not a practical example

of the level of difficulty that it will be to incorporate my faith into social work practice. Therefore, it is in my best interest that I plan for the anticipated challenges mentioned above. In preparation of these challenges, I will formulate practical methods of integration to help me combine my faith with my career.

Methods of Integration. Throughout my practicum placement this year, I have had many opportunities to witness the integration of faith in social work practice through my field instructor. She and I have discussed ways in which she integrates her faith, such as prayer. Based on her good example, I will integrate my faith with my role of a social worker by praying and through my lifestyle. I will pray for my clients when necessary. I will also pray for wisdom and guidance when I do not know what to do. I can also pray to exemplify the character of God in my daily life. If I am in a social work position that requires a lot of driving, I can stay spiritually connected by praying on the way to and from my appointments. If I have an office, I can decorate it with items that remind me of my faith, such as pictures and Bible verses. Each day, I will attempt to show God's character to those that I meet through my role as a Christian social worker. I will live by the verse in Ecclesiastes 9:10a, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might..."

Development of Spirituality. In the self-care plan that I made this semester, I included a section on spiritual self-care strategies. I plan to update this section of my self-care plan frequently to avoid burnout. I will continue to develop new strategies within my plan that will reinforce my spirituality as a protective factor against burnout. Additionally, I will involve myself in volunteer service opportunities that provide me with opportunities to practice my faith. These opportunities may include vacation Bible school events, mission trips, and or church

projects. Through these plans and opportunities, I will be able to grow my faith and protect myself from burnout.

References

National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Washington, DC. NSAW Press.