

Jesus the Social Worker?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the projected growth rate for the field of social work between the years of 2014-2024 is 12%, compared to the 7% average growth rate for all occupations in the U.S. (US Department of Labor, 2014). I have been a PA licensed social worker for twenty years and encountered many people having misconceptions about the field of social work. Some of my Christian friends have a hard time understanding how a Christian can be a social worker given their “liberal” ideologies. This article hopes to address two issues:

1. What do social workers do?
2. Is the social work profession compatible with Christian faith?

What do Social Workers Do?

Social workers must obtain a bachelor’s degree (BSW) for entry-level positions. A Master’s degree in social work (MSW) is required for social workers to practice in a clinical setting. Most states have licensure requirements that MSW practitioners must fulfill prior to conducting clinical work. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) explained that one of the main purposes of a social worker is to restore and enhance the functioning of individuals (micro), families and groups (mezzo), and communities (macro) (NASW, n.d.). A social worker’s training involves an understanding of human behavior on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Social work education in assessment, intervention, and advocacy is essential in meeting the stated goal of restoring and enhancing the functioning of individuals, families, and communities.

The rich and diverse training within social work education provides social workers the necessary foundation to address the various needs in our society. Some of the issues social workers address include: addiction, child welfare, disability, mental health, relationship tension, grief and loss, racial and economic injustice, community development, human trafficking...etc. This is certainly not an exhaustive list and many social workers serve in creative ways to improve the well-being of individuals and communities.

Is the social work profession compatible with Christian Faith?

Social Work's Mission & Jesus' Mission

In Luke Chapter 4, Luke gave the account of Jesus reading from Isaiah 61:1-2. Jesus the Messiah, the anointed one, proclaimed the following mission through the Isaiah passage in Luke 4: 16-19 (NIV):

- proclaim the good news to the poor
- bind up the brokenhearted
- proclaim the freedom for the captives
- release from darkness the prisoners
- comfort all who mourn

“The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, 1996, p.1). Jesus’ public ministry was filled with examples of his concern for all people, especially the marginalized in society (sociologically and economically). He cared about the lepers, the tax collectors, the

Samaritan woman, the blind beggar, and the children. A social worker's mission compliments Jesus' proclamation in Luke 4.

Social Work's Core Values and Jesus' Mission

Social work professionals conduct practices guided by the profession's six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. The following discussion explains each of the social work core values and its compatibility to Jesus's mission.

1. Service

Social work scholar Barsky (2010) explained that the value of service is fulfilled by a "social worker [subjugating] their personal desires in order to focus on the needs, interest, and wishes of the people they serve" (p.21). There is very little doubt that Jesus was committed to put others first as demonstrated in His death on the cross. Jesus explained His upside down kingdom to His disciples in Matthew 20:26-28 (NIV): "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." It is so important for us to put others first that Jesus implored us to "love our neighbor as ourselves" after the first commandment to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37-38, NIV).

2. Social Justice

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, NIV). The social justice principle encourages social workers to challenge social injustice, pursue social change, educate others on various forms of societal oppression, and to remove obstacles to accessing resources (NASW, 1996). There are many conflicting viewpoints on how social justice should be carried out in our society. However, being compassionate to those in need is not about a political view point. It is about emulating Jesus’ love and compassion: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28, NIV).

3. Dignity and Worth of the Person

NASW (1996) explained this ethical principle in this way: “Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity” (p.5). Our creative God not only created the beautiful world, He also created mankind in his own image. “Male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NIV). Each of us reflects the glory of our creator. As C.S. Lewis (1949) expressed in the *Weight of Glory*: “There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal” (p.46). Jesus placed the value of our worth above Him by sacrificing Himself for us.

4. Importance of Human Relationships

Social workers are encouraged to seek partnership with those they serve in order to create change. The NASW (2014) Code of Ethics affirms the importance of relationships in cultivating change. Our God is a relational God and the Bible has given us guidelines for our relationships with God himself, our spouse, our fellow brothers and sisters, and even with our enemies. God cares about relationships and so do social workers.

5. Integrity

Jesus remains deeply in love with us even when we are undeserving of His love. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8, NIV). Jesus is dependable and trustworthy. The social work practice must be undergirded by a social worker’s trustworthiness in order to be effective. For example, the core value of service will have little meaning if it is not carried out with honesty and integrity. “In social work, where the character of the agent has long been understood as inseparable from the professional act or intervention performed, the virtues refocus attention on the character of the practitioner and the professional use of self” (Adams, 2013, p.300).

6. Competency

This principle is closely tied to the principle of integrity. Social work is a complex profession as we often provide various levels of care. It is vital for social workers to conduct honest reflection and self-examination to explore areas that need improvement. Barsky (2010) explained the value of competency as the “knowledge, skills, and self-awareness required to perform social work tasks in an effective manner” (p.25). The NASW (2014) Code of Ethics holds the expectation that social workers should pursue the development of professional knowledge and skills to enhance competency. We are given a variety of gifts to serve God and we can honor God by being excellent at what we do in our profession. “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters” (Colossians 3:23, NIV).

Closing Thoughts

I often encourage social work students to pray and listen for God’s calling in their lives. Social work is a demanding profession and it is important to enter the field with a clear calling

from God to maintain the passion to serve. As discussed above, the social work profession's mission to serve and care for the marginalized does not contradict Jesus's mission. Being a social worker for twenty years has provided me with ample opportunities to practice my faith through my profession. Social work is not a stage for me to broadcast my political ideology. It is a platform for me to shout out Jesus' love in action.

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