

## Finding the Common Ground

Regardless of worldview, social work professionals share a number of common values, such as those found in the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017). Social workers uphold the value of dignity and worth of human beings as well as the right to self-determination. All social workers likely would affirm “the notion that freedom and human flourishing are found in the context of supportive relationships that guide and protect the decision-making capabilities of individuals” (Wolfer, et al., 2018, p. 27). Relationship is the vehicle through which all help is given.

Social workers agree on the need for compassion and understanding when serving clients and adhere to the ethical principles, such as service, justice, primacy of the helping relationship, competence, and integrity (NASW, 2017). Social workers strive to embody traits of warmth, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard and value prohibitions against exploiting or discriminating against clients, such as on the basis of race, age, sexuality, or gender.

The pervasive acceptance of and adherence to these core values is generally ascribed to the origins of the social work profession. Social work developed largely in the Christian church and the synagogue until the last quarter of the nineteenth cen-

lary. This Judeo-Christian tradition stresses justice and mercy, which are key principles of the social work profession.

When examining the common ground between social workers coming from different worldviews, it becomes apparent that despite holding to the same principles and values, each may mean something different to the same principles and values, each and worth of a person may mean something different to a social worker who is a secular humanist than to a Christian. To the humanist, this principle emphasizes humanity's autonomy and the ability of people to overcome their problems and those of society by their own efforts. To the Christian, however, people possess dignity and worth, not because of their strength to overcome but, in a way, because of their weakness (Psalm 34:17-19).

How can the values of dignity and worth and justice be seen from a Christian perspective?

In the Christian view, human beings have worth because they are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and received the breath of God (Genesis 2:7). Humans further have dignity and worth because Christ died for humankind, to secure a hope and a future, thus demonstrating the value that humanity holds. This value is real, not just a social construct or a pragmatic guide. As a result, this view can impact how one approaches people in need and the challenges they face.

Social workers are to also uphold the value of justice. This includes the need to transform systems of oppression, fight for fair, equitable, and humane treatment, and the need for human intervention to bring about justice. Christians would agree with these views and yet take them further. Doing justice is a mandate of faith and a way Christians demonstrate Christ-likeness or discipleship. Justice is linked to mercy in the face of brokenness (Micah 6:8).

There is a strength, a power even, understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding

need to show mercy. When you experience mercy... you begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us. (Stevenson, 2014, p. 290)

It is these subtle or not so subtle interpretations of principles that may find a Christian coming from a different viewpoint when entering the profession. It may feel like a difficult bridge to gap between views, even when both social workers are holding to the same values. As a social worker who is a Christian, there is a power that goes beyond yourself. There is a different foundation upon which your values and practice rest.

A further challenge to finding common ground has to do with stereotyped views of what it means to be a Christian. A social worker who is Christian may be looked upon with suspicion by colleagues because of their beliefs. Society holds the assumption that Christians bring certain biases, and therefore judgments, toward people. Sometimes Christians are judgmental and so we must be mindful of this potential vulnerability. But non-Christians also share this problem—it is impossible to avoid being influenced by our assumptions and culture. A non-judgmental stance can be hard to achieve because of what we have experienced or been taught through our upbringing. As Christians, we are called to emulate Christ in our treatment of people and we need to hold onto this as we practice social work.

Another dynamic that may occur is when there is closer correspondence in values between a Christian and non-Christian social worker than between two Christians. This has to do with the way Christians may interpret their beliefs and put them into practice. As a result, two Christians may come to opposite conclusions. In these cases, it might be hard for some Christians to uphold social work values around justice, equity, or acceptance, since these relate to issues Christians can be divided on such as welfare, abortion, and sexuality. We are not called in social work to condemn anyone. We are called to see people made in God's image and value them. In the end, it is

important to remember social work holds a number of values with which Christians can agree.

Humanistic values, for example, though they may be good, have no authority behind them beyond the prevailing culture. As social conditions and thoughts change, so do the values society espouses. The fact that Christians start with an entirely different concept of what the universe is like, what its purpose is, and the part human beings play in it, cannot help but have implications for how and why we offer help. What these concepts are, and how they are related to more specific Christian beliefs, will be explored in subsequent chapters. Of course, not all Christians are united in the implications they draw from their beliefs, and this, too, will be explored.

Christian values do have roots, which can be found in the Bible, in the ethic which Jesus taught, and in the authority of the Church. When cultural values change, they do so often so subtly it can be hard to notice. Christians have a guide to use as a plumb-line. For example, in the case of a search for self-fulfillment, the Bible is a useful guide and reminder that the meek will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). Even more fundamentally, the gospel of John affirms Jesus came to live among us and is "full of grace and truth" (NRSV 1952/1989, John 1:14). This makes it all the more important to study Biblical beliefs and explore their implications for the practice of social work.

### References

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