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Practitioner Interview Paper

I had the privilege of interviewing a social worker who served in the social work/social service field since 1986—though he didn't consider himself to be a practicing social worker until he received his MSW. Over the years, through his various experiences both personal and professional, he developed a philosophy of social work. He currently practices as the social work supervisor of Legal Aid Society, but his history is rich with many different facets and applications of social work.

His first social service job was in California as a Medicaid/Food Stamps worker. Eventually he moved on to working with the Westchester County Department of Social Services as a social service case worker. He then moved on to working on foster cases, then child protective service cases for 9 years, eventually serving 2 years in a multidisciplinary group working on cases of child sexual abuse.

In June 2003, he conferred his MSW degree to go beyond civil/public service and be involved in practice that influenced on a macro-level as opposed to case work and micro-level. Though his direct work isn't on a micro-level, he chose the Legal Aid Society because of all the advocacy and policy work the agency is involved in. Starting as a forensic social worker in criminal defense practice at the Legal Aid Society, he has now been promoted to Social Work Supervisor.

His philosophy of practice is largely influenced by his faith and his personal life experiences. He recalls the effect his father had on him. Growing up, his father was a high school teacher at a Juvenile Detention Center, a state school for boys; and he would bring these boys

home for the weekend, feeding them, spending time with them, and showing them experiences that involved being in a family. His parents were also foster parents, and showed a consistent example of the spirit of social work in their lives without actually practicing in the field, and their actions shaped the practitioner's desire to pursue social work.

The practitioner's family embodied the spirit of social work but also represented the humility of Christ which greatly influenced and impressed on him from a young age. Christianity was something constant and consistent in his life—he went to Pepperdine University, a Christian college, and chose to pursue undergraduate studies there because they provided option to double major in Sociology and Youth Student Administration; this is where he learned the inner workings of a nonprofit and it sparked interest to pursue the field on a deeper level.

During his time at Pepperdine, he met a Sociology faculty member who set up a tutoring program for sociology students to tutor kids in the juvenile detention facilities, this was in the hope they would qualify for GED's. The faculty member encouraged his students to view and apply sociology practice in a way that involved faith—Christianity isn't just between God and me, but *there is a second commandment* to love your neighbor as yourself. Similar opportunities were available during his time at Pepperdine University.

In similar interaction as his father and his sociology faculty, the social worker currently with criminal defense clients, clients who approach the agency with hopes of reducing their sentences. Coming from a background shaped by his faith in many aspects and realms of his life, the social worker described his integration of faith in social work practice as being contingent on client-centered practices. He explained that his understanding of his position and of best practice for his client involves recognizing that his clients are not there for him to share his faith. His clients are there because they need a tangible service or assistance, there's nothing that states or

suggests the Legal Aid Society is faith-based, which would present itself with other questions and dilemmas.

He's not open to interacting with his clients in a spiritual manner *unless* it benefits his client—what's best for his client, is what he's invested in. The only time he would potentially integrate his faith in a more overt way would be if he had clients who were incarcerated, then he would potentially ask them if they've taken advantage of chaplaincy services.

The social worker stated that everyone enters spaces with personal values, and more often than not, they are entering interfaith settings. It is higher priority for him to incorporate his clients' faith journeys in situations that are beneficial for them, not as an interjectory for him to integrate *his* personal faith. For example, if someone in his client's faith community could bear good witness or have a good word about his client, he would encourage integration of faith in those circumstances.

There is an instance the social worker recalls in regards to specifically having to navigate the nuances of social work and faith (Christianity). A 6-year-old child on his case passed away due to HIV/AIDS exposure and medical complications. The social worker was an MSW graduate student, working on this foster care case; having worked with the family for a number of years, he was familiar and greatly involved. As he was making funeral arrangements with the child's biological mother, when she asked if he would speak at the funeral. Though he said yes at the time, in hindsight, he stated he would've made a very different decision—he would not have participated. Looking back, he felt that it was inappropriate for him to have done so.

He shared his experience and wisdom humbly, recognizing that for social workers—especially new ones, there will be numerous situations for confrontations of faith and practice. He says:

“We’re living in a very perilous time, given the times we live in, Christians who are social work students—social work students who are Christians, need to have the mindset that we don’t need to be afraid to tackle issues of social justice. One’s faith is not a me and God proposition; personal relationship with God (it’s important) but if that’s all your faith is, you’ve got a lot of work to do because your faith is meant to be lived out.”

He describes that part of being a social worker navigating practice and Christianity is to represent the faith well by showing Christians aren’t all what you see in the media, not all Christians have rigid mindsets—and to become social workers that don’t have rigid mindsets.

Lastly, he encourages new social workers to never stop reading. He says:

“Keep reading. It goes along with being open. Read everything that you can get your hands on with issues of social justice and how you can integrate your faith (not in a political sense); we need to re-teach our history, that includes the history of the social work profession...Social work is strongly influenced by white supremacy—we can’t be afraid to tackle these issues.”

It wasn’t until the end of the interview the social worker revealed that he was a white social worker, and how he’s keenly aware of that identity. He wants every new social worker to challenge the way in which social work progressed—challenge the whitewashed history, challenge the way our society operates to support injustice and oppression. He described needing to soul search, still going through all of these realities, and how he will wrestle with them for the rest of his life, and he encourages every social work to do so in every sphere they’re in.