

Integrative Paper

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Purpose and Meaning of Life

As someone who follows Jesus, I find a professional career within the social work field easily integrated within each other. My calling in life relates directly to serving those who are vulnerable and under-resourced. My purpose and meaning in life first and purpose comes from being loved and being able to love Jesus and through him know the love of the Father. When I was in high school I started to know that my life would take shape in some kind of service to people. I knew that my end goal was not going to make a lot of money and when I was exploring different options for college, social work stood out as an obvious choice for me. I wanted to find purpose and meaning in life through loving God by loving others and I wanted to incorporate this fully into my professional life as well. When I was a senior in college, God continued to direct me in this direction but through an invitation to join in cross-cultural mission work among people groups that have not yet heard the gospel and had the opportunity to be transformed. My purpose in pursuing social work has been through the lens of meeting both spiritual and physical needs since that experience of God calling me into intentional mission work.

Integration of Faith in Social Work Practice

My faith is the foundation for everything in my life. I make it a priority that all my life decisions flow from a place of following Jesus and discerning how I can live a life of love. My faith comes before my social work practice, as it would if I were in any other profession. I am extremely grateful for an opportunity to grow professionally and academically within a field where the values resonate on a core level with the core aspects of a Christian life. To expound on this – the core values of the social work profession are service, social justice, integrity, competence, dignity and worth of each person, and the importance of human relationships. Each of these core values is compatible with the Christian life because Jesus came to earth as a

servant, specifically to die for the sins of the world. There was a night when Jesus washed his disciples' feet. This was a sacred but lowly moment of humility as Jesus took the lowest place and served his closest followers. Culturally speaking this task should have been completed by servants, not the most honored one, not the teacher. Then Jesus told his disciples, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15, *The Holy Bible*, 2007). Since I became a follower of Jesus, I have been trying to figure out how to obey Jesus' words. It's not an easy thing because my selfish motives and my short patience and kindness run out very quickly. In taking time to reflect this semester on the integration of social work and my personal faith in Jesus, I have been reminded of my life story and the commitment I made to serving people when I was in high school. The social work profession is an outlet of my commitment to follow Jesus with my whole life.

Relationship Between Christianity and Social Work

The movement of modern day social work that began in the 1800s along with the growth of industrialization and large scale urbanization. Social work at the roots was primarily characterized by Christians stepping up to battle issues of poverty, social justice issues, and disease. There was a strong sense of morality being in the driver's seat when it came to the motivations for working towards societal betterment. In the 20th century when social work was fully realized and recognized as a profession, many of the key players were faith-filled people whose faith in God was a huge reason why they devoted their life to social justice and helping the most vulnerable and under-served groups of people within the community. Social work has expanded and grown immensely up to the present and permeates so many different aspects of our communities. Social workers are present in correctional facilities, hospitals, schools, mental

health clinics, government offices, and many more places. While the Christian contribution to social work was instrumental at the beginning, social work as a profession has grown in alignment with liberal or leftist political ideology and therefore in a lot of ways separated from its Christian roots. Social work has retained its core values which resonate deeply with followers of Jesus, however in its growth within the government and society it has become secular in essence.

This shift in the pulse of the social work profession doesn't cause internal tension for me, but it could for some. I don't have strong political affiliations because of my convictions as a believer that I can be active in my civic duties while refraining from strong political alliances. One of the reasons that I find my faith and the increasing secular social work profession compatible is because of the NASW Code of Ethics. The ethical principles outlined within the Code of Ethics are derived from the core values of the profession. The integrity of each social worker is a huge aspect of the quality and standard of the profession. As a believer it feels like an honor and a privilege to be able to uphold and live out the core values and ethics of the social work profession in both my professional roles and my personal life.

The NASW Code of Ethics outlines the ethical principles that flow from the core values of the profession as it relates to all levels of social work practice. In practice with individuals, families, groups, and communities social workers are obligated to operate under the ethical principles which dictate how social workers should make decisions all forms of work and in the case of dilemmas. The Code of Ethics applies to social workers' various levels of responsibility as well – to clients, colleagues, practice settings, as professionals, and to the profession. From the selected list of scripture, I will compare and contrast James 2:14-17 with the Code of Ethics. This letter in the New Testament was written specifically for followers of Jesus so that they could

learn how to live a new kind of life. God's heart throughout the whole narrative of the Bible has included compassion and care for the poor and the vulnerable. It's not surprising that the letters that church leaders wrote to the first believers would include charges to remember the poor. In this passage, the primary message is about the relationship between the faith of the believer and the works that flow from the believer's life. I think this is extremely important in light of being a social worker and understanding the role of the Code of Ethics. For the social worker, our obligation is to follow the Code by knowing it and following it to the best of our ability. Most of the aspects of the Code, like preserving the confidentiality of clients and holding colleagues to ethical standards, hold some kind of morality to them which make it easy to align and not contradict scripture. The role of self-determination is probably the ethic in social work that poses the largest difference to the Christian life. As believers we know and live by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. We are called into a life of inner and outward transformation because we know that we are broken and in need of this transformation that Jesus offers from the Father's hand. The passage in James emphasizes this point because it teaches us that we are not saved by our good works, but by the faith that produces those works.

For social workers, it's completely possible to live out the Code of Ethics and yet miss out on the Christian life. However from my perspective I see that for the Christian who has the opportunity to learn and live by the Code of Ethics, they are potentially able to live more fully into the life of following Jesus because so many different aspects of caring for individuals, families, and communities is laid out. To highlight one other verse that shows the great blessing that is found in doing good we can read Acts 20:35, "In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (*The Holy Bible*, 2007). I believe

that whether or not a social worker is a believer or not, the principle remains true – that there is a greater blessing in giving than in receiving. Maybe this type of blessing and fulfillment from generosity and altruism is one of the mysterious ways that God draws people to himself even before they have reached for him.

From this class I gained a deeper understanding of the complexities that are involved with resolving ethical dilemmas in various situations in social work practice. One of the plans that I have in approaching resolutions is to always be aware of who is available if I need help in the decision making process. With all that can be at stake during a dilemma, it is crucial that I am not making hasty decisions on my own. A social worker with integrity seeks advice from their supervisor or an ethical advisory counsel in order to move forward with a decision. Another plan that I have for myself in approaching resolutions in dilemmas is to continue to spend time learning and knowing the Code of Ethics on a deeper level. I think it's important to absorb the Code and make it a part of my mental process, not just a resource that I can turn to when I'm in crisis decision making mode. In order to do this well I will need to read and reread it and continue to engage in practice scenarios where I can grow in learning what to do in difficult situations.

Competent, Compassionate Catalysts in Christ

The discovery of compassion through Henri Nouwen during this semester was my favorite part of this class. I feel like his writing on God as the God of compassion changed my heart and made me truly long to be more Christlike. Jesus gave his life away and suffered with others and it's not at all the natural thing to say, but I want to be willing to do that as well. In learning about compassion this semester I have grown in my understanding of compassion as a privilege. Without Jesus, suffering with people is not worth it and incredibly hard to the point of

being unsustainable. However, *with Jesus*, everything changes and I can move towards people in their places of greatest need and actually find *rest* when I am with them in their suffering. To me this new understanding changes everything because now I can rest with God and abide with Christ in my serving role. Of course I still need to find refreshment and stillness and rest apart from work, but now service to the most difficult or hurting person can be with God's compassion and not my own because He is working through me. This understanding of compassion has a huge impact on my life as a social worker and also my personal relationship with Jesus. As a believer who is also a social worker, I now can live out of a place of deep calling to be like Jesus and that can motivate me each and every day in my engagement and intervention work with individuals, families, groups, and communities!

Self Discovery & Questions

Throughout this semester and course I have learned how aligned my faith and my social work practice is. I am deeply thankful for the time to process the profession's values and ethics through a Christian lens because I believe it will stay with me and benefit my longevity in the field. The service professions can be easy places to burn out and become overwhelmed and tired of dealing with difficult situations and challenging clients, very often accumulating second hand trauma. I have learned that I need to be connected to Jesus and reliant on his strength if I'm going to make it in the social work profession. Maybe others can stick it out based on a personal commitment to better their communities, but I will only continue to serve if I can do it out a deep and steady love for Jesus. He has loved me and given everything to bring me to him and I want to give back to him for all that he has done. He asks his followers to go and love others and in this way we love him. My questions that emerge from this course are as follows:

What are the opportunities beyond this class, as a professional Christian social worker to be sharpened and sustained in my faith and professional practice by other Christian social workers committed to both the profession and to the gospel?

How can I be part of sharing my faith with other social workers who may be on the edge of burn out and actually introduce the gospel and Jesus' compassion to them? Are there opportunities for this that I haven't noticed yet?

References

The Holy Bible (English Standard Version). (2007). Crossway.