North American Association of Christians in Social Work
A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work

PO Box 121
Botsford, CT 06404
www.nacsw.org
888.426.4712

BUILDING ON THE SPIRIT OF SOCIAL WORK

By: Wendy Bilgen, MSSA

Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2011
October, 2011
Pittsburgh, PA

Introduction

Religious leader and social justice advocate Jim Wallis (2010) has said "The two great hungers in the world today are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice…the connection between the two is what the world is waiting for." Increasing economic globalization and inequality, exclusion and dislocation, religious persecution and war, and the precariousness of basic human rights around the world are just a short list of current concerns facing the human family. Finn and Jacobsen (2003) contend that a "new... paradigm is needed to confront these challenges, tensions, and contradictions and to address human concerns that transcend national, geographic, and cultural borders and domains of practice" (p. 54).

While this is indeed a tall order, through this paper it is proposed that an intentional building on the existing spirituality in the social work profession may help stimulate this connection Wallis speaks of, that is a paradigm that joins spirituality and justice social justice. Unique components of social work suggest it is already a profession rich in spiritual capital linked with a primary aim of working toward social justice. Social workers are poised to take the lead in social justice initiative of all kinds. This paper will focus on inter-faith social justice initiatives, suggesting these kinds of efforts are key to building the kind of new paradigm the world is waiting for .

Spirituality and social work

With social work history clearly showing the profession was built on religious foundations, many social workers are still asking, 'are we spiritual or secular?' (Bower, 1975; Hugen, 2007). Particularly in cross cultural setting, such as Turkey where I have worked for the past thirteen years, the spiritually rich context from which social work began is often lost.

While many view modern social work as springing from a secular, Eurocentric world view, a close look at the motivation for early social work shows strikingly prevalent spiritual foundations (Otters, 2009). Faith based social justice initiatives have been an integral part of the social fabric of nearly all civilizations for many years (Dessel, Rogge & Garlington, 2006). Acts of charity and good works with the aim of improving the welfare of society are mandates that compel a response from believers of many faith backgrounds (Vanderwoerd, 2007).

Historically the needs of people in community were largely met through religious institutions such as the church, mosque, and synagogue. The poor, according to a Judeo-Christian worldview, are seen as entitled to care primarily because they are bearers of God's image. In the Islamic view, giving regularly to the poor is one of the five pillars of the Muslim's relgious faith in action. Other faith traditions teach followers in various ways to care for others, show compassion to the suffering and work toward the alleviation of social ills. The important role of faith based outreach activities to impact social justice and social welfare is well supported through research (Ebaugh, Chafetz, & Pipes, 2006). It is from this faith rich perspective that many choose social work as a profession. This is true of Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and the list could continue to include every faith perspective.

What has not been clearly established through research is how well faith-based organizations are able to work with those of *other* faiths toward specific social welfare goals. Faith-based social welfare groups tend to operate in exclusion to each other and usually within their own faith perspective. Those groups which use the term *inter-faith* organizations are primarily networking or referral agencies that attempt to link people with faith-based services that match their own religious preference (Ebaugh, Chafetz, & Pipes, 2006). The other type of organizations known as *inter-faith* (as opposed to simply *faith based*) have a specific goal of

bringing groups together for dialogue toward resolution of conflict issues with the aim of peacemaking and occasional multi-issue collaboration (Dessel, Rogge & Garlington, 2006). Much of the inter-faith activity has been time or event limited and focuses on various forms of *dialogue* events intended to build inter-faith relationships (Kratz-Mays, 2008).

Spirituality as an energizer inter-faith initiatives

The social work profession can learn much for the about re-introducing spirituality as a source of motivation for inter-faith work through the rapidly emerging Spirit at Work/Faith at Work (SAW/FAW) movement initiated in the business sector (Benefiel, 2005; Fry, 2003; Miller, 2003). While many authors within the movement speak of spirituality and faith as a motivator for doing good in the world through work, the concepts of spirituality vary. Benefiel (2005) describes spirituality as the "intellectual, emotional, and relational depth of human character, as well as the continuing capability and yearning for personal development" (p.9) . She and other authors, are quick to add that spirituality and religion are not necessarily the same (Benefiel, 2005; Fry, 2003; Miller, 2007). Rather religion is conceptualized as an external social construct that grows out of a sense of spirituality. This is particularly important in social work circles as the idea of pushing religion onto others when in a helping relationship is repugnant to many and goes against social work practice ethics (Canda & Furman, 1999). A more inviting and universal way of speaking of spirituality at work is to couch it in terms of positive traits such as integrity, honesty and humility, compassion, justice, respect, and the list goes on (Reaves, 2005; Fry, 2003). Fry (2003) offers a useful way of looking at spirituality by adding the dimensions of spiritual survival through a sense of calling and belonging to community.

Are social workers spiritual?

With these understanding of spirituality abounding, it is no wonder the revived interest is spreading. Spirituality is being regarded as a resource, even as a “tool kit” for leaders of social justice efforts (Stanzcak, 2006, p. 142). Engaged spirituality (spirituality in action) describes the energy present in any social, religious or professional group that may help explain why the groups engage in the activities they choose (Stanzcak, 2006). It is clear that this energy is present in social work activists who have been motivated by spirituality present in many faith backgrounds .

By definition social work is to be distinguished by its “concern for social justice and human rights” (International Federation of Social Workers, 2002). It is often a response to a spiritual understanding of justice and good works that brings about the underlying motivation to be concerned for others, to look beyond the self and be motivated to serve (Dent, Higgins and Wharff, 2005). When speaking about social work students Otter (2009) suggests that many are looking for the presence of energy, intelligence, or motivation that is not born of culture, or intellect alone but of spirit:

> "Students today come to social work looking for meaning, for something that is bigger than themselves, for a spiritual if not a religious insight. Even for those who profess no creedal belief in God or a Higher Power, there is something about helping others that lifts us out of ourselves into the larger social structure" (Otters, 2009, p. 12)

Social work is a profession that can be considered fundamentally a "spiritual profession, one that sets its reason for existence and its highest priorities on service." (Canda & Furman, as cited in Otters, 2009) A spiritual desire compelling one to do good brings the realm of the spiritual into every day life, enabling a connection between occupation and engagement in the sacred (Miller, 2007). The heart of social work envelops this idea in its philosophically oriented statement of purpose as well as in practice standards (Reamer, 1993). It would follow then that social work professionals who carry out fundamentally spiritual activities, are spiritual.

Starting with what is there-Spiritual Capital

As has been previously established, social work has been distinguished over the years by its concern for social justice and human rights (IFSW, 2002). The idea of a "concern" being the distinguishing mark of professional activity can be called a spiritual root. This concern is what invigorated the first social reform workers to take action to improve the lives of those who were suffering all around them. Methods may change and adapt to environmental situations of all kinds. But an inner, transcendent, spiritual motivation based on concern, remains as a spark, a root, a place to begin.

It is what can be called the spiritual capital, necessary to engage in true social and economic innovation. Spiritual capital has been called:

> . . . what a community or an organization believes in, what a community or an organization exists for, what it aspires to, what it takes responsibility for . . . . Spiritual capital is the bedrock of an organization or a society. By nurturing and sustaining the core purpose of our whole human enterprise, spiritual capital is the glue that binds us together. It provides us with a moral and a motivational framework, an ethos, a spirit. It sustains, underpins, and enriches both material capital and social capital (Zohar & Marshall. 2004, p. 82)

Much like the concept of material or social capital, spiritual capital is understood to have a real value that can enhance with growth and be seen in specific outcomes. And like the differention between religion and spirituality, there is a distinction between religious capital and spiritual capital. Religious capital might be seen in how affiliated on is to a religious group, organization or even set of doctrine (Finke, 2003). Outcomes of spiritual capital would seen in abundance and growth of spiritually based characteristics. Thus success in building spiritual capital might be seen in increased integrity, compassion, concern, tolerance, and other motivating qualities that might spur people into action on behalf of others.

From what has been presented thus far, it can be said that social work as a profession contains within its core purpose some element of spiritual capital, that is the root or core spiritual material, to enable it to become an enterprise that truly can address the social injustices in a variety of faith and cultural contexts.

Building Spiritual Capital through Inter-faith Initiatives

The bulk of research surrounding the concept of spiritual capital has thus far been limited to its impact on economic development (Zohar & Marshall, 2004) Finding common ground in spiritual belief systems on which to build socially and economically sustainable enterprise is a necessary and worthy goal. Finding common ground on which to build inter-faith social justice initiatives through the development of spiritual capital is a means to achieve that goal. It is a vision that aligns well with social work values as well as the value base of many faith perspectives (Kriger &Seng, 2005). Inter-faith based, spiritually rich social justice initiatives could be catalyzed by social workers as they seek to build initiatives on spiritually rich common ground. As Christian social work leaders take the bit of spiritual capital present in them and join it to the spiritual capital present within the diverse faith systems of social workers around them, the spiritual soil can be prepared for inter-faith social justice initiatives to a place to grow. It may be a beginning to satisfying the world's two great hungers, spirituality and social justice.

Case in Turkey: Building an inter-faith organization on common ground

Every seed needs the right soil in which to grow. It has been suggested that working the soil of spiritual common ground can create the conditions for social justice initiatives to grow. Can commonalities discovered between Christian and Muslim groups in Turkey become enough

of a foundation to build an inter-faith social justice initiative? What would such an endeavor look like? There is already much known about shared beliefs that Christians and Muslims have in relation to good works in society and car for the vulnerable. From a place of shared values a common group identity based on shared commitment to a social cause can coalesce into a sustainable force within a social justice initiative (Schein, 2003). By building a foundation based on shared commitment to core spiritual values, an inter-faith structure can be built. The following are suggested spiritual components that would need to be present to serve as the starting point for an inter-faith social justice initiative:

A Shared vision

From the shared belief that all humanity springs from a "God-centered existence and scripture focused lifestyle" (Kratz Mays, 2008) the Christian and Muslim can build a shared vision. From that shared initial vision Dunbar and Starbuck (2006) suggest an alignment or congruence between an organization's goals and purposeful organizational design is able to take place. The vision, mission and goals of Christian and Muslim social justice initiative sound strikingly similar. This can be seen within the mission document of two Turkish social justice agencies, Kim se Yok Mu?(KSYM) and Friends of Kardelen (FoK). Both described themselves as organizations with the purpose of alleviating suffering in the human experience through focused aid and empowerment of the vulnerable. KSYM is an Islamic affiliated organization and FoK is a distinctly Christian organization.

With a purposeful acknowledgement that Christian and Muslim social impact groups are interested in the same social justice outcomes, spiritual capital between the two can be built. Collective goals can be joined within an imaginative structure that will lead those involved to find space for expression of their individual purpose within an organizational structure built on

common spiritual capital toward social justice goals. The kinds of goals and activities that are common to Christian and Muslim social workers are many.

Benevolent acts of service

Acts of charity and good works with the aim of improving the welfare of society are Biblical mandates that compel a Christian and Muslim response. As people of the book, both the Christian and Muslim are guided by scripture that leads toward compassionate care for those in need (Samuel, 2007). One does not have to read much into either book (the Holy Bible or Koran) to find scriptural mandates for active works on behalf of the poor and needy.

A typical scriptural reference, found in the book of Ephesians 2:10 reads, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (NASB, 1995). Among the "good works" that Christians are directed to do are those activities directly aimed at relieving suffering in society. This includes outreach to the oppressed, poor, hungry, those in prison and even refugees in the land through giving food, clothing, shelter and offering support emotionally and physically wherever a need exists.

Many Christians believe this kind of activity is an act of worship and a direct loving response that is a natural expression of their relationship to Jesus Christ. The biblical scriptures that compel this desire and activity are many. Some Christians even consider social concern and social welfare activities to be God's work delegated to Christians (Bower, 1975). While the kinds of activities spoken of in scriptures may read like the activities of a faith based social action NGO (non-governmental organization), many Christians view these activities as a natural response to scripture.

Likewise for the Muslim faith based social action is rooted in the practice of Islam. The foundation of Muslim life are the so called Five Pillars of Islam: faith or belief in God and the

finality of the prophet hood of Muhammad, worship respecting the five daily prayers, *almsgiving and concern for those who are in need,* self-purification through fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are able to do it (Samuel, 2007).

A *holistic* approach

The holistic nature of the person in environment is an aspect that is shared by the Christian and Muslim faith tradition. The concept of *Tawhid* in the Islamic faith is a close concept to the Judeo-Christian concept of *Shalom* or *peace and wholeness* (Samuel, 2007). Tawhid, much like the concept of Shalom, "points to a harmonious and integrated relation among the various components of human experience: physical, social, subjective and spiritual" (p. 3). Likewise the Christian concept of shalom addresses four areas of our lives - spiritual, emotional, physical, and material and speaks of wholeness or completeness in each area (Fikkert, 2003). Clearly, both Christians and Muslims approach holistic ministry with similar core beliefs. Both religious traditions view holistic action in the world as key to empowering people and communities (Samuel, 2007; Lee, 2001). The notion of building *tawhid* or *shalom,* and thus strength and wholeness into communities is a shared ideal of Christian and Muslim religious practitioners.

An empowerment approach

Strengthening of communities is specific shared value. While a 'strengths based approach' is often associated to social work practice, the value has been widely adopted in interdisciplinary settings (Lee, 2001). The strengths based perspective is one that is increasingly being articulated by both Christian and Muslim religious workers. Al-Krenawi (2000) in his work with the Arab world has openly called for more empowering approaches to become "more consciously adapted, in theory and method" in religious Muslim cultures. Empowerment

approaches are also being more commonly pursued in a broad range of Christian micro-finance and community development agencies (Fikkert, 2003).

The growing consensus in social work is that empowerment of communities is a valid and desirable aim. How this concept becomes operational in each context is somewhat less clear. But the common ground of viewing people as full of possibility, resilience, and innate resources is broadly accepted (Lee, 2001; Parameshwar, 2005; AlKrenawi, 2000). As a relevant global approach to community work it is viewed as "an approach that helps people to empower themselves and, ultimately, their communities" (Lee, 2001, p. 31). An inter-faith strengths based option would approach community issues from the perspective that deficiencies may be present but capacity is built by coming together. The strengths of self and others would be celebrated as diverse perspectives become more and more regarded as aspects that add strength and value and not to be feared as divisive.

A suggested model for building on common ground

One structure that has great promise for success in Turkey is the S-4 model of Inter-faith community development suggested by Backues (2009). Based on his work in Indonesia, Backues (2009) suggests an inter-faith development agency as "vehicle of choice for holistic involvement and witness". He describes what he has termed the S-4 model that is structured in such a way so that "anyone who possesses a desire to strive for the betterment of poor populations, irrespective of the religious vision or grand world view the person embraces" would feel welcome (p. 74). The activities were based on the understanding that Christian and Muslim participants were, first, "committed to focus attention and programs upon the marginalized and neglected, secondly, they "intentionally viewed attempts at empowerment as acts of worship" (p. 75). Leadership and governance is an interfaith shared experience as well as the expertise offered within the specific full range of programs including "primary health care, microfinance, agricultural, extension,

local community advocacy, handicrafts import and export, and afterschool educational programs" (p. 75). He describes rich experiences where inter-faith dialogue naturally flowed from working side by side on the social cause. This kept diverse people working together toward common goals even when their motivations for doing so may have been different. This shared commitment was enough to keep these diverse groups motivated, trusting each other, and building lasting relationships that could help sustain the organization into the future (Brower, Lester, Korsgaard, Dineen, 2009; Zohar & Marshall, 2004). Zohar and Marshall (2004) write convincingly of the power of shared spiritually based vision to sustain very diverse communities of believers of all faiths. Backues (2009) was able to create a structure with the S-4 model that gives tangible evidence to that claim while also supporting the importance of compassionate outreach, holistic engagement, empowering interventions.

Conclusions and Implications

While evangelization is not necessarily a goal of Christian social workers involved in an inter-faith endeavor, an organization structured according to the S-4 model allows space for sharing of spiritual beliefs in a non-threatening way (Backues, 2009). Alford and Naughton (2001) suggest this as a solid rationale for Christians to consider interfaith endeavors. As we base our work on an authentic appreciation for diversity as well as a celebration of common God inspired goals, we create God honoring opportunities to share our love and commitment to Him. They further assert that a "true and vital…tradition must be constantly developing through engagement with other traditions, the fruits of other cultures" (p. 9).

The S-4 model is a viable option that has great promise of providing the organizational home to develop an inter-faith tradition in Turkey. Creating a new interfaith tradition through development of a vital inter-faith organization in Turkey is a tall order. Underlying societal fears

exist that Muslims are solely interested in Islamization and Christians in Christianization. This has given energy to opponents of both Christian and Islamic endeavors in officially secular Turkey. The fear of losing one's distinct religious identity often prevents people from entering into relationship with diverse others (Alfort & Naughton, 2001); this is a strong Turkish reality.

Skilled leadership will be required in commencing dialogue around the idea of a Turkey based S-4 model as there is thick history that keeps these groups apart. The social worker as servant leader, one committed to the work of developing and articulating this shared vision is a worthwhile starting point. Howe and Heim (2008) advise against forcing a vision such as this and instead urge leaders to look for opportunities "around the edges" (p. 47) that will naturally occur as we authentically share our heart with others. Further research into the possibilities for inter-faith engagement in Turkey will undoubtedly begin this way, with gentle beginnings that invite the power of common ground to spring forth into powerful displays of wholeness in our communities around the globe.

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