

Institute for Christian Education
Education Department of Seventh-Day Adventists

TEACHING SOCIAL WORK –A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

by

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Contents

Contents	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Social Work with disabled individuals & life-world oriented thinking	5
3. Social Work with ex-convicts and homeless individuals & constructivistic thinking	8
4. Working with emotionally disturbed children and youth & systemic thinking	11
5. Working with asylum seekers & solution-oriented thinking	14
6. Working with boarding school residents & holistic thinking	15
7. Working with students & qualitative research oriented thinking	18
8. Summary and prospects	19

1. Introduction

Friedensau Adventist University is an educational institution of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDA) in Germany. It is a private University which offers academic degrees in Theology and Social Sciences. My responsibilities focus on training social education workers and social workers. Being a social education worker myself, while teaching at the University, I am confronted with a variety of claims and wishes which I would like to discuss in this paper.

Most of the students decided on a social profession because they feel a responsibility to help their fellow human beings and improve the world they live in. They would like to obtain an education which is practice-oriented and which provides them with the necessary skills to successfully fulfill their future tasks. At the same time students have decided to study at a University which focuses more on theory; and in doing so they show an interest in scientific discourse on civil, social and psychological phenomena. The practical and the academic interests of the students are not always compatible. Therefore it requires patience and additional effort on the part of the teachers to balance the theoretical and practical aspects.

We specifically decided to call this course of study "Christian Social Work". Throughout this course of study Christian viewpoints and values can be further developed and most importantly integrated into everyday life within the Church and the society at large. In doing so, basic Christian values will also be made a part of the course of study, in addition to the conventional theories in social work. This can be seen most clearly in discussions in the classroom situation on Christian values and different world views. The varied attitudes of the social worker to humans and the conception of God are reflected in their services. Social work cannot be value-free and is often forced to take a stand. It does not operate in a social and personal vacuum, but rather social work is based on personal values and beliefs which usually result in being on the side of the weak and underprivileged sections of society.

For students, it is a challenge to find their way through this web of theoretical, practical and belief-based expectations and wishes and to continue in it as part of an ongoing personality development. For a teacher, it is just as challenging to repeatedly reflect, to examine and to formulate the premises and approaches in changing contexts. I would like to deal with this complex issue and demonstrate on the basis of my own personal experience and judgment, how these differing and sometimes contradicting components can be integrated.

At the beginning of each chapter I will describe a field of social work practice which has been part of my professional experience. During these times I not only applied my knowledge and expertise but I also learned a lot and gained new experiences which widened my professional options. After the description of my practical work experiences and the "discoveries" I made, I will attempt to explain with examples the related theoretical-scientific background. The tensions between personal-value orientations and theoretical approaches will be reflected continuously as an opportunity for the possibility of integration of these practical and theoretical components with a Christian worldview and biblical foundational values. I will end this paper with a comprehensive summary and some suggestions for the future.

The inductive approach used in this presentation cannot portray all aspects and interrelated issues. It will only demonstrate with examples a small part of the possibilities of the theoretical, practical and spiritual levels related to social work at a Christian University.

2. Social Work with disabled individuals & "life-world"* oriented thinking

In the eighties in Berlin a research process on a transport service was initiated for the physically disabled. This service was to be built up, tested and established as a permanent service. During the trial phase a counseling office and an institution for "social service" were being considered because the psychological and social needs of disabled individuals were also to be met. The task of practically realizing this special institutional offer within the transport service was given to me. Besides my practical work commitments, I had an opportunity during this survey to communicate with the affected group, their relatives and the representatives of relevant organizations.

After completing my studies in the field of pedagogic and social education this was my first job and so it left many lasting impressions on my work experience. The experiences involved not only the handling of research assignments and the management of funds, but also the different experiences of acceptance and discrimination that disabled people live through. It is amazing how the world-view of human beings begins to shake when they are confronted with seemingly small physical restrictions and how they become unable to care for themselves and become dependent on others. On the other hand, it is even more amazing how individuals with an almost complete paralysis continue to fight to keep their independence or only accept the help of others in order to be able to improve the life quality of other individuals who are worse off. The dilemma that I faced in these encounters was to assure these disabled individuals that I appreciate and value them and that a trusting relationship should be developed between us where they received all the essential assistance from me without hampering their self-help capacity.

During this time I learned how valuable each individual is - independent of their health condition or how badly they were handicapped. I realized that life is always searching for new ways to articulate

* For the concept of "Life-world" or "Lebenswelt", refer to: Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaft und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, 1954, The Hague; English version by: David Carr (Trans.), *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 1970, Evanston.

itself and grow. To make this happen one has to accept one's own personal situation, the responsibility for oneself and for the fellow human beings regardless of such categories as "sick" and "healthy".

For me it was important to realize that handicapped individuals not only required assistance to manage their daily affairs. But they also required attentive and responsible listeners. Furthermore they require advocacy and sensitive people who are able to empathize with the experience of being handicapped, who are aware of the mechanisms of social exclusion and discrimination and who take appropriate remedial action.

Topics of importance in the framework of advocacy, beside the above mentioned practical needs, were the deeper meaning of service and the issue of one's own value. There were encouraging and meaningful conversations and very often I was the one who was helped instead of being the helper. Through experiencing how seriously handicapped people lived in nearly hopeless situations I was encouraged to look at the potentials and prospects life offered. Of course there were also individuals who let themselves go and gave up hope and who desperately lamented their fate. They needed help and comfort and a mixture of practical support and growing challenges in order to mobilize and develop the capabilities for self-help. In this framework the offer to increase mobility through a transport service was an important support item.

I was made aware again and again that these disabled individuals lived in their own world run by different laws, concepts and strategies for survival. How can this world be discovered and how can one be a part of it? How can we communicate and encounter each other while maintaining a high regard for one another? By empathizing with disabled persons and better understanding them in the life-world, without any prejudice and presuppositions, I started to think like them, made decisions according to their perspective and acted the way that they would have.

This happened in different ways. In the course of my work I visited many individuals with different types of restrictions and disabilities. In this immediate encounter I got to know and value them in their social environment, in their domestic conditions and in their everyday life. Another opportunity

for understanding was provided through personal exchanges with colleagues who were disabled. These professional exchanges also helped me to understand a lot about the life-world of disabled persons. In addition, self-help groups for disabled individuals were an important opportunity to obtain information and exchange views. In these groups we not only discussed the problems and issues of discrimination but also looked for alternatives, formulated claims and demands, wrote applications and developed creative ways of integration. These experiences were complemented by researching professional literature and the development of suitable concepts and reports on the work with disabled individuals in general and the need to improve the conditions of transport for such individuals in Berlin.

It was important for me to reflect on my own prejudices, assumptions and stock of knowledge. In concrete encounters with these individuals I experienced personal changes in my views and understanding and realized that I was going through an important process.

This basic position of holding each other in high esteem and reflecting one's own contributions and prejudices (based on an unbiased perception and meaningful communication) have become standard in social science which in turn favors qualitative research and has been an important component in getting to know the life-worlds as an insider. This particular method of understanding is reflected in the School of Phenomenology which implies a closer examination of individual life-worlds through empathy. It was only much later that I discovered the important theoretical elaborations and formulations of this approach.

Associated with a special type of observation are far-reaching philosophical, scientific and theoretical reflections. These are documented in a paradigm shift from object orientation to subject orientation. In addition life-worlds are understood as networks and structures which give priority to human relationships over the mere application of methods. The elaboration on the different meaning producing and structuring activities of the individual are equally important.

In my opinion the most significant attempt at understanding persons and producing meaningful relationships was practiced by Jesus when He became man. Through this act He not only experienced the

life-world of humans but He also connected it closely to the divine world. He was and is the supreme bridge builder between the worlds - and He did it at a very great price.

Even at His birth He stood between the worlds. He was celebrated, hunted, sought after and praised - according to the basic attitude of people. This happened throughout His life and led finally to His death. This happened in spite of the fact that He always labored to be the mediator between the divine and the human.

By being human Jesus revealed a different image of God. We as human beings are not merely objects for God at his disposal. He perceives us as valuable subjects with whom He wants to come into contact with and He perceives us not only as His creation but also as His children and friends. It is not possible to exemplify subject orientation in a better way than this.

Jesus did not want to remove the law but he clarified that love and relations qualified by love hold a priority over methods and the law.

3. Social Work with ex-convicts and homeless individuals & constructivistic thinking

In a group of former convicts and homeless individuals who shared a flat on a therapeutic basis, I encountered the fate of many individuals who were searching for a new beginning. In their problematic biographies they had often attempted to put their lives in order, without any success. Living on the street or spending years in jails left scars on these people and they had varied forms of addiction.

Along with different approaches of assistance, like individual counseling, group counseling, work therapy or handling everyday tasks, I realized again and again how it was possible for individuals to discover, tackle and achieve a higher level of order and life quality. It is surprising how many potentials exist where one can find hope in hopeless situations and start a new life.

In recent times there has been a discussion in the natural sciences about the potential of matter to organize itself on higher levels of complexity by going through chaotic processes. This understanding required farsighted researchers who were able to break out of old patterns of thought. Suddenly the second thermodynamic proposition, which has also been used as evidence for creation, was not considered valid anymore. A paradigm shift regarding irrefutable natural laws seems to take place which needs to be discussed without giving priority or superiority to a certain school of thought about the origin of the world. Discoveries in natural sciences changed the perception of researchers in science as a whole with far reaching philosophical ramifications which included the chaos theory and different concepts of constructivism.

The point of origin of this discourse was the basic understanding that the added energy that is required to expand chaos against limiting structures and systems can help to transform chaos into a higher order of organization. The results of this scientific discovery are reflected in different disciplines. In addition to this there are new and unusual value concepts which question the conventional strategies to solve problems. This may cause some disturbances and uncertainties in the beginning because we have learned to concentrate our view on problems and we are used to doing things in habituated patterns, rather than being innovative and testing something new. The human image and the optimism of the counselor supports the latent potentials of the client and opens up horizons to find his or her own way to make meaningful decisions and to realize them in a responsible way.

I perceive a parallel in the dealings of Jesus with the persons of His time and in His relationship to people today. In many events, conversations and parables Jesus turned the ideas of the people of His time upside down. Not only when the last are to be first, but also when He healed the sick on a Sabbath, when He did not condemn individuals to death or when He forgave people their sins. He had a "disturbing" influence on people at all times. He created chaos in order to give people the opportunity to achieve a higher order of existence. He entrusted these fallen individuals with His message and His tasks, which they had to carry out in His place.

The first part of the book is devoted to a general introduction to the study of the history of the world. The author discusses the various factors that have influenced the development of human civilization, including geography, climate, and technology. He also examines the role of religion and philosophy in shaping the cultural and intellectual life of different societies. The second part of the book is a detailed study of the history of the world from the beginning of time to the present. The author covers the major events and movements of world history, from the rise of ancient civilizations to the modern world. He also discusses the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the nation-state system. The third part of the book is a study of the history of the world from the perspective of the individual. The author examines the lives of great men and women of history, and discusses their contributions to the world. He also discusses the role of the individual in the history of the world.

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The book is written in a clear and concise style, and is suitable for students of history and general readers alike. The author's use of examples and illustrations makes the book an engaging and informative read. The book is a valuable contribution to the study of the history of the world, and is highly recommended.

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Another interesting aspect we encounter in the formulation of Jesus is that He is the truth. Thus people can meet the truth as humans meet each other and get to know each other but always with the potential of exploring new horizons. Because of the fact that our image of God will always be limited by factors of time and space, our concept of truth needs to be broadened continuously. Any image of God may amount to a distorted image. Our idea of God must not be limited to static systems of perception and unchanging idol-like appearances but must open up with a strong future orientation to infinite growth potentials.

Biblical authors display images of God which offer many parallels to the above-mentioned models of thinking. So God is always ready to forgive us and start a new. Above all He offers to be our Father as a basis for contact between the human and the Divine. This is an idea which is able to move things even today. If we accept this idea and pursue it, it would lead to a new quality in the lives of people living together harmoniously, to a new way of resolving conflicts and balancing diversity.

4. Working with emotionally disturbed children and youth & systemic thinking

Eight years of my professional life were I spent in building up and managing a pedagogical day-care center for emotionally disturbed children and youth. Besides coordinating responsibilities, I was involved in specialized educational and psychological services. These services not only cover the work directly connected with children and the leadership and supervision of meetings with colleagues but also the work with the families of the entrusted children and youth.

For this I completed additional training in systemic partner and family therapy for three years. Different therapeutic approaches and techniques were learned. Introspection and experiencing oneself

were important components of this qualification, which was solution-oriented and meant for short term therapies.

The domestic conditions of most of the children and youth in our institution were full of deficits. Very often it was not the children who were unable to cope with the irregular features and peculiarities in their existence; but the surroundings they lived were the cause of the prevailing disturbances and needed to be changed. The systemic approach is a valuable way for all involved to tackle this many-sided problem.

In social education, systemic thinking plays an increasingly important role. The understanding of the totality of life-worlds which clash or overlap and mutually influence, is a helpful device that is applicable not only with reference to the families where the children came from and newly founded families or foster families, but also applies to intra-personal processes, decisions and developments in order to understand the human being and his values as a whole. Furthermore all micro- and macro-structures in society like the neighborhoods, schools, education and occupational training, society, political systems, international interdependence etc., are covered by the systemic approach and play a useful and helpful role for interventions in counseling and therapy.

Within this approach it was possible for me to make the intra-psychic processes transparent and offer healing assistance and integrating aspects for the whole personality. In the immediate social environment suggestions could be communicated to deal with a person other than just a patient or a client. Accordingly the role of an affected person in the social structure could be modified and the competence in a group expanded. As a result of this the spectrum of options to deal with difficulties widened and methods made more sense in the context and became more efficient. In meetings where colleagues studied individual cases it helped us to move above the intra-personal relations and immediate contexts and to discuss and integrate the social forces, developments and needs in wider reflections and therapeutic strategies.

The strongest and most meaningful impact within the systemic and structuring approaches were the values that a counselor displayed toward the one who searched for help. Real help and healing require a special quality of loving relationships which hold the other in high esteem. According to my estimation this is the most important stipulation of this approach. We are aware that loving relationships cannot be ordered from above but they can be desired, learned and exercised. In our work with children, their parents and the persons they knew within their contact field, the healing power of loving and caring relationships could be repeatedly verified.

There is another important personal dimension to be mentioned: the systemic approach has helped me to understand God's interventions in the Bible better. He accepts humans as we are and wherever we stand in our family and social environment. The way He communicated with humans - whether it was directly or through His prophets or the parables of Jesus Christ - it was always framed in the personal situation. Furthermore, the Bible constantly emphasizes the value of partnerships, the family and the systemic interconnectedness of the individual in social contexts. God's actions and interventions are all based on love. He encounters the people He created with an immeasurable acceptance and holds them in highest esteem. This does not mean that He accepts and endorses everything but His guidance and admonishment is always full of love and is aimed at helping us - even though we are unable to realize it at times. He makes the first step toward each one of us and always shows His readiness to build bridges for improved relationships. He offers us His Fatherhood and friendship. To fulfill His love He holds back nothing. He showed His love by giving His life for His creation.

5. Working with asylum seekers & solution-oriented thinking

Almost everyday children and youth have fled war torn countries and seek asylum in German airports and seaports. In six years of my work experience I met about forty young people in this particular situation. I could be a partner and help them through a small period of their life. The Youth Welfare Department requested the "Schulzentrum Marienhöhe" (an Adventist high school with boarding facilities in Darmstadt) to offer asylum seeking youth a special integration program. Twenty asylum seekers were to find a new home in two groups and an education at our institution. The program was certainly an advantage to these young refugees. They could find some peace and an opportunity for new orientation. These refugees aged 11 to 15 came to Germany without parents and without any other person to whom they could relate. The German Youth Welfare Departments established a reception system.

There were different reasons why it was not possible for most of these youngsters to deal with their past in detail. Very often their memories were burdened with heavy experiences of loss, death, persecution, fear and betrayal. The priority was therefore to structure the present and to build up the future. A new beginning creates a positive environment to realize possibilities, potentials and resources and to create aims in life so that a new passage in life can be started. We were able to motivate the youth under our care to such an extent that all of them finally found places to stay and work or facilities where they could continue their education and training.

In this work with young asylum seekers I realized how helpful aim-directed and solution-oriented approaches to counseling can be. In many cases it is very discouraging and depressing when people are only past oriented, reflecting on what has been and what has gone wrong, dwelling on mistakes they made and problems they had. Instead it would be more important and motivating to deal with the prospects for the future. When I only reflect on what I do not want to happen and how terrible things are

and how unhappy I have felt - then I will not be able to take the first step. Only when I know where I want to go, will I be able to start with my journey. Starting from the realization of my abilities and potentials I can discover new options for which I am able to mobilize resources in order to build up something new and meaningful.

Many institutions have adopted and integrated these solution-oriented approaches in the recent past. This approach is helpful because the clients are regarded in high esteem and are neither forced to speak about their past nor is it imposed on them what they are to do in the future. As a counselor I may accompany the client on the way to discover resources, abilities and future prospects, as I am convinced that they are able to go in any chosen way in a responsible and self-reliant manner.

God invites us also to venture toward a new beginning. He is ready to forgive and forget the past. He wants to bury any unwanted experience in the deepest part of the sea and He lets us look into the future. He does not want to control us like a puppet on strings but He trusts in our willingness to learn from Him and to decide independently and to act responsibly. This is only possible because He encourages us and He wants to show us all the possibilities He has already provided for us and He wants to continue to accompany us as our guide. Meaningful tasks await us and a great future full of hope lies ahead of us. At the time when others are still brooding over the functioning of a lock - He is the key to open all locked doors and widen the horizons for a life with Him.

6. Working with boarding school residents & holistic thinking

While working with asylum seeking youth I was also Dean of Students in the boarding school at the Adventist educational center in Darmstadt. Young students from different states and regions of

1. The first part of the document is a letter from the author to the editor of the journal. The letter discusses the author's interest in the topic and the reasons for writing the paper. It also mentions the author's affiliation and contact information.

The second part of the document is the abstract of the paper. It provides a brief summary of the main findings and conclusions of the study.

2. The abstract is followed by the introduction of the paper. The introduction sets the context for the study and outlines the research objectives. It also discusses the significance of the research and the methods used to collect and analyze the data.

3. The main body of the paper consists of several sections. The first section is the literature review, which discusses the existing research on the topic. The second section is the methodology, which describes the research design and the data collection process. The third section is the results, which presents the findings of the study. The fourth section is the discussion, which interprets the results and discusses their implications. The fifth section is the conclusion, which summarizes the main findings and provides recommendations for future research.

The final part of the document is the references, which lists the sources used in the paper.

4. The references are followed by the appendix, which contains additional information related to the study. This may include raw data, detailed calculations, or other supporting materials.

Germany come together at this high school and it was not an easy task to meet the many varied human needs and integrate the different dimensions of existence.

A boarding school is not only a place where you have a bed and where you get your food. It is a home for students for a number of years, a place where you feel safe and comfortable, a place where you can experience friendships and conduct conversations which provide orientation, guidance and meaning. Particularly young students in their formative years need a comforting atmosphere which offers support for the different levels of existence and still allows freedom and openness which facilitate the development of self-reliance and responsibility.

It is certainly a sign of progress that students are no longer simply provided with goods and services and made passive recipient of supplies. The human being has to be understood as a totality, with different needs and potentials. Young people are very aware of their different mental and emotional conditions in their search for meaningful and satisfying experiences. To meet the special emotional needs of students in these formative years at a boarding school, it is an advantage to have well trained, mature and balanced colleagues. It is not only the physical and material needs of these young individuals that have to be satisfied but their mental, spiritual and social needs as well. Thus it is essential in developing a holistic view to make out one's own capacities and possibilities and apply them in a realistic and responsible manner.

It was of an advantage that we could increase our working staff. As representatives of an Adventist institution we felt obliged to communicate the holistic view of the human being in more than the verbal form by trying to practically realize it in our services toward the entrusted youth. This is very difficult and time consuming at times when the aims of education are not completed within the primary socialization of the parental home, but continue to be realized in the school and within the circle of peers. The task of shaping the youth into men and women who do not simply reproduce the thoughts and manners from others, but who are deeply founded in their own convictions and are able to defend the same is not an easy one and requires time and effort. But when I proclaim certain aims, then I also need

to offer the space which is required for their exercise and their practical realization. Finally the many questions and open-ended discussions need to be based on a self-critical attitude on behalf of the educator.

At this time a commission evaluated the institution and their recommendations were quite helpful. The evaluation commission realized the sense of our efforts and the needs on which they were based. As a result they recommended a better financial management favorable to our services. It is a pity that these recommendations were not put into practice. Consequently the standard of service intended and achieved has been brought down because of this cost saving measure. The justification given for this reduction was that in Adventist boarding schools the position of the Dean of students is usually shared by two individuals and that was supposed to be practical in all institutions. Yet, the practical realization of our Adventist image of the human being suffers if the material base is not provided for it. Is someone still concerned with our high aims of education?

Certainly our Adventist holistic perception of the human being and our educational concepts require a continuing discussion and modification. We should offer and make space for their practical realization. God created a human being as a totality and the importance of education, reflection and action are the main pillars on which we can and should continue to work even in view of the present spirit of the time and social developments. We are able to mutually enrich each other and sometimes we require a contradicting point in our argument. The call for higher values in education gets louder and it is an invitation to us to reflect on, develop and practice our value-guided concepts.

God works with us in our totality. In the Bible no dimension of our being is left out. God wants to encounter us in our completeness. He is our creator and therefore He knows us and our deepest needs. He wants us to be happy and He offers us everything we require in this life and in the life to come. He invites us to share our happiness with others and to pass it onto the next generation especially to our children. It is good to know that He takes time for each one of us because we are valuable to Him and He is ready to do and give His best.

7. Working with students & qualitative research oriented thinking

For the last three years I have been working at our University training social educationists and social workers. The practical experiences I gained in my former job-assignments are of an important and multilayered help in the teaching process. The teaching profession and the interaction with students are a new experience to me. It is not so much the know-how in counseling and therapy which is required but the ability to be flexible and to communicate subject matter in a way that is acceptable to the students and that fosters further discussion on critical issues. There are no solutions which are universally valid and applicable at all times and the wisdom of the wise has not been discovered as yet. The mutual exchange, reflection and new ways to act allow a reexamination of one's personal understanding of situations, images and concepts. In the same way it was necessary for me to occupy myself with the philosophical presuppositions and scientific theories of social work. Until then my services to clients were of a practical nature. It was enriching to have a good look at the scientific, philosophical and theoretical issues of the present time, to study and to work with them.

In an ongoing paradigm shift our personal meaning and relation-producing activities have become the focus of research in the social sciences in the form of qualitative social research. The reduction of research on the empirical falsification of hypotheses fails to recognize the diversity and the creativity of life and being. To think about the individual, with all his or her ramifications and wider perspectives with reference to details and development as a whole, opens up new horizons. To research these details and wider issues in a scientific way or in our everyday life together with students and with colleagues is a fulfilling experience.

The empowering and responsibility reinforcing approaches which holds the individual in high esteem appear very important to me. Our images and concepts of help may change toward self-help, toward the value of the other, who should become the center of our attention. Nobody is able to

perceive and know everything. Modesty appears to be appropriate and on this basis bridges can be built, bridges of relations in which help toward self-help can be offered and accepted.

God also encounters us in an individual way holding us in high esteem. He accepts us as we are and He receives us where we stand not only with reference to space, but also to our various levels of existence. God is interested in me as a person in a special way; He is interested in my state of being and in the ways I perceive things. He steps into dialogue with me and He wants to be on my side. On my personal search for meaning in life He wants to help and assist me to find the right answers and lasting conclusions which will lead me further and which will do me good. These answers will have Jesus Christ in the center and will be tailored for me with my individual spiritual needs. He wants to enter into a relationship with me as a friend, brother and father. Therefore, His message to me is a very personal one. He gives me the hope which I really need in my situation and which will carry me further. Perhaps His way of dealing with us, can influence us and He will be our example and our teacher.

8. Summary and prospects

In these examples I wanted to show that it is possible to connect practical experiences with new theoretical and philosophical thinking and personal images of God. None of these parts of a life can exist alone. One depends on the other and influences the whole. If I am willing to learn, it will be possible to discover further secrets of life and the freedom God wants to give us.

Scientific thinking, practical training, personal experiences and a foundation in Christian values do not exclude each other. On the contrary, it is to my opinion that they constitute a meaningful holistic dimension which is much needed in present society and which has to be promoted, developed and repeated in our Adventist educational institutions.

Several famous Christian and Seventh-Day Adventist scientists and also Ellen White tried to work successful in this sense. A famous example taken from the time in which Jesus lived is his mother Mary. The Bible tells us, that she "... kept all these things and pondered it in her heart". The hearts of all these persons trusted in God, pondered and combined different impressions and gave important impulses.

life-world of humans but He also connected it closely to the divine world. He was and is the supreme bridge builder between the worlds - and He did it at a very great price.

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Jesus did not want to remove the law but he clarified that love and relations qualified by love hold a priority over methods and the law.

3. Social Work with ex-convicts and homeless individuals & constructivistic thinking

In a group of former convicts and homeless individuals who shared a flat on a therapeutic basis, I encountered the fate of many individuals who were searching for a new beginning. In their problematic biographies they had often attempted to put their lives in order, without any success. Living on the street or spending years in jails left scars on these people and they had varied forms of addiction.

Along with different approaches of assistance, like individual counseling, group counseling, work therapy or handling everyday tasks, I realized again and again how it was possible for individuals to discover, tackle and achieve a higher level of order and life quality. It is surprising how many potentials exist where one can find hope in hopeless situations and start a new life.

For me it was very moving to realize how individuals began to let new realities come into their lives. It was exciting to observe how they opened up to new values and how they developed the courage to experience untried paths. Finally they were ready to take their lives into their own hands and to shape it responsibly. They required little external support, small initiatives and motivations in the framework of energizing self-healing forces, the development of group dynamics and a value-based change of orientation.

Of course there were always set backs and many chose wrong and deviant ways. But the majority of those who were under our care bore with us and made a new beginning in a better life style. Those who were too weak and made a small "chaos-deviation" were given further chances to improve themselves. It happened that we met "old acquaintances" who found their way back to us and opted for a new beginning - this time perhaps in a different way. Compared with the relapse rate back into crime which is about 90% for former prison inmates (most of the residents of the therapeutic community came from a prison) we could reduce the relapse rate to less than 50%.

Ex-convicts and the homeless have a mind of their own. Their perception of reality and their concepts of truth often contradict the perceptions, concepts and conventions of mainstream society. This often results in conflicts. At this point we had to create an awareness of the need to not only accept one's own code of reality, but also the reality codes of others. This implied decoding or revising one's understanding of the world.

This process is not one-sided. Society also had to revise certain conventions and obsolete views. Everybody perceives the world with his or her own eyes and designs reality accordingly. We are aware that this design is not reality itself but only an image of it and these images vary. We are always in danger of taking our perception as the only reality possible and keeping it treasured in a box as our primordial possession. The important question remains: what is truth? How can I encounter the truth and how can I perceive it?