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**SOCIAL WORK AND ADVENTIST EDUCATION:  
STRANGE BEDFELLOWS OR KINDRED SPIRITS?**

by

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## **Social Work Values and Adventist Higher Education: Strange Bedfellows or Kindred Spirits?**

### *Introduction*

Although social work has been viewed as being based upon secular, humanistic principles, it actually originated under the inspiration of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition of its philanthropic founders. Johnson (1941) describes the church as the "mother of social work." Social work has historically concerned itself with help for the unemployed, the poor, the ill, persons with disabilities, and orphans.

By the latter half of the 1800s, there were a number of private relief agencies established to assist the needy. The Charity Organization Society soon caught on, and it was a forerunner of social casework and family counseling approaches. Concurrent with this movement was the establishment of settlement houses in the United States patterned after Toynbee Hall in England. Many settlement house workers were daughters of ministers who sought to improve living conditions. It is important to note that these two movements—charity organizations and settlement houses—were prevalent at the same time Adventism was founded by a group of young people who were also social activists for the disenfranchised in society.

Like social work, Adventism has a legacy of providing for the needy, unemployed and ailing, yet in the early years of Adventism, social work was alienated from Adventist ideals. Social work was seen as a suspicious “cousin” of psychology, an area which at the time was seen as antithetical to religion. When I became a social worker in the 1970s, social work was still looked upon with curiosity and suspicion in the Adventist church. Currently, however, this skepticism seems to have disappeared as families now seek social workers out even during church service for resources to help with planning for an aging parent, troubled marriages, misbehaving children and other social challenges.

Adventism and social work. How are these two entities related?

Are they kindred spirits or strange bedfellows? These questions suggest some tension or confusion about the role of social work in our Adventist mission as we educate future leaders. This paper, then, provides a beginning for examining social work and its impact in Adventist higher education. First, a history of social work and Adventism is discussed. Next, a comparison of the values of social work and Adventism follows. Finally, examples from our universities describe how social work departments promote community activism within their institutions.

### Historical Perspective of Social Work

Social work is of recent origin as a profession. In 1998, social work

celebrated its centennial year. The first social work agencies developed in the early 1800s. The women who visited homes were known as "Friendly Visitors" who felt poverty was attributed to defects in moral character. The agencies were private, created by clergy and religious groups. The "do-gooders" of that day met basic needs such as food and shelter and tried to cure personal difficulties with religious admonitions. It was felt that improving people's morality would improve their lives. Because many of the programs established to help the unemployed, poor and ill at the time were uncoordinated and overlapping, two women began shaping another approach to social work known as the "Person-in Environment."

The first was Mary Richmond , a gifted woman who established the basic principles of social casework and began her career with the Charity Organization Society in 1888 (Specht, 1994). The second was Jane Addams who originated settlement houses in America. Addams' faith, Bullis (1997) relates, offered her religious inspiration and a focus for her service with the poor. Based on her experience and observation of the poverty and illness as a negative impact of industrialization, Miss Addams and other women of the era placed their emphasis on "environmental reform." Most of the settlement house workers, daughters of ministers, tried to show residents how to live moral lives. They also "sought to improve housing, health and living conditions; find jobs, teach English, hygiene and

occupational skills and change environment through cooperative efforts" (Zastrow, 1999, p.4). In addition, they also drafted legislation and worked to influence social policy.

This era of social work was characterized by the assumption that by changing neighborhoods, communities would improve, and better communities would then improve individual functioning. Hence, a better society could be developed. In the second half of the 19th century, then, social workers were prominent in advocating reform in labor, housing, relief, sanitation and health care. They noted how factors such as poor housing and neighborhoods, working conditions, family situations and diet could adversely affect health and mental health.

An ambivalent relationship characterized social work's alliance with the religious community in its early years. At times social workers collaborated with faith-based organizations, and at other times, particularly when social work was heavily focused on political movements, social workers regarded religion with disinterest. A true break between social work and its spiritual roots occurred in the 1920s when social work embraced Freudian psychology and minimized community- focused values for an individualized approach to social problems. The Depression of the 1930s and the enactment of the Social Security Act in 1935 brought about an extensive expansion of public social services and

opportunities for social work jobs (Zastrow, 1997).

Several factors contributed to the questionable image of social work throughout American history. First of all, due to its affiliation with the psychoanalytic movement, there was much professional competition between members of the clergy and secular social workers. Secondly, the philosophy of the United States in relation to separation of church and state led many social workers to be cautious about conducting spiritual assessments with clients. Finally, on a philosophical note, social work and religion/spirituality concerns were seen as totally distinct from each other.

As we moved into the era of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the National Association of Social Workers promoted an emphasis on improving social conditions. As people began to apply a Civil Rights perspective to the Feminist and Gay Rights movements in recent years, social work continued their distancing from a spiritual focus and adopted a secular approach to social problems.

#### Historical Perspective of Adventism

Like social work, Adventism has a historical commitment to social mission. In a recent report on the role of social mission in the Seventh-day Adventist church, Monte Sahlin, Regional Vice President of Adventist Disaster Relief Agency in North America stated, "We believe as a religion that issues of religion cannot be separated from the health of the family, neighborhood, or any aspects of human life" (qtd. in

Wilcox, 1997, p. 12 ).

Another similarity is that the founders of Adventism have a history of social action. In the late 1800s, for example, Joseph Bates, was a leading activist in both the temperance and abolitionist movements, major social causes of the time. James White was a member of the Christian Community Denomination, the first American denomination to ordain women as clergy. John Byington, first General Conference President of Seventh-day Adventists, ran a station on the Underground Railroad on his farm in upstate New York. Sojourner Truth, an activist who saved thousands of slaves as a great danger to herself, became a Seventh-day Adventist in her old age. A final example of social activism in the early Adventist church was Edson White's *Morningstar* ship endeavor to evangelize freed slaves (Wilcox, 1997). These are several parallels in political eras that impacted both the discipline of social work and the Adventist church.

In the 1920s, Adventists veered off in another direction from social action towards evangelism. Sahlin points out that as Adventists erased history from memory, they decided evangelism was more important than social action. The founders of Adventism such as Joseph Bates, James and Edson White, and John Byington would have labeled this heresy as this shift away from social activism was not the original intent.

During the Civil Rights fight for social justice the Protestant denominations supported defacto discrimination. Adventists went along. Religious leaders put forth the strong view of social work as being a humanistic endeavor. For some, social work was viewed as creating problems by fighting for a more equitable society. Despite this view of social work as a humanistic endeavor, Adventists, in fact, were instrumental in social action movements during America's controversial eras such as the emancipation of slaves.

#### Comparison of Social Work Values with Adventist Values

How are social work and Adventist values alike ? Adventism and social work both began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The purposes of social work and Adventism have both concerned themselves with improving people's environment and, at least early in the development of social work, people's relationship to God. (Recall the first Friendly Visitors were from church sponsored agencies.) Barry Locke (1998) sees social work's societal goal as the promotion of social justice. The mission of Adventism is seen as being compassionate to the "poor, hurting, and victims of injustice" (Sahlin, Gavin, Washington, et. al, 1994).

Examining three core values of the social work profession provides a comparison of three core values of Adventism.



<i><b>Social Work Values</b></i>	<i><b>Adventist Values</b></i>
<b>Respect for Human Dignity</b>	<b>Dignity and Worth of Individual</b>
<b>Social Justice</b>	<b>Promoting social justice</b>
<b>Wholeness (the bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective)</b>	<b>Commitment to Wholeness of the individual</b>

How do social work and Adventism, then, compare? Just as a major tenet of the Adventist church is to respect individuals, so it is that social work's primary values include respect for the dignity and worth of individuals. Just as Adventists emphasize a wholeness perspective, social work has a bio-psycho-social-spiritual thrust. First, when a social worker sees a new client, the social worker takes into consideration all four areas of a person's life—the physical, social, psychological, and spiritual. The spiritual dimension is not left out by professional social workers, be they religiously-affiliated or not. Second, in the Journal of Adventist Education, Adventist education values for the 21<sup>st</sup> century outline four areas of a student's life to consider. These values also include a focus on the same four areas: physical, social, emotional, and spiritual. Both social work and Adventism promote social justice through fair treatment for everyone.

As one narrows the broad focus of this paper from Adventism as a whole to Adventist education specifically, it is easy to see how social work can support Adventist values. Given that university students are in a developmental stage of life where social justice and social action are important values, role modeling such interests by educators can help instill a concern for others. Sometimes there is an uneasy alliance between social work and Adventism as both aim to improve societal conditions and occupy until Jesus comes, but the similarities in purpose reflect that they are indeed "kindred spirits," both committed to the enhancement and betterment of individual's lives.

I foresee continued collaboration between social work and Adventism within our universities and churches. Matt 28:19 and 20 say, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (New King James Version). This emphasis on getting the gospel to all nations is consistent with both the Adventist and social work focus. As a global church, we are realizing the importance of cultural sensitivity within our society as more refugees, immigrants, and persons with disabilities enroll in our institutions and become members of the SDA Church. The Adventist church and the social work field are increasingly multicultural, and the rich

diversity of students from around the world reflects this.

Since Seventh-day Adventists believe that the people of God are made up of “every nation, tribe, people and language “(Rev. 7:9), our mission is clear. As we serve a worldwide community, we aim to build respect for the “diversity of humanity as ordained by God” (Loma Linda University Graduate School Bulletin, 1998).

### Implications for Adventist Social Work Educators

There is a “goodness of fit” between social work values and Adventist values. Recently, there has been a return to spiritual roots for social work, and this connection has been noted on Adventist campuses. For example, 35 years ago there were no social work programs in Adventist higher education. As of 2000, there are now nine undergraduate BSW programs, three Master of Social Work programs, and one Ph.D. program. These programs consist of over 700 students currently. Walla Walla College reported 140 social work graduates just this past June. Another interesting fact is that most Adventist campuses have incorporated community service outreach as a way to help students put their “religion in action.” Pacific Union College describes social work as “practical theology,” suggesting a need to blend social work and spirituality in service to others.

Social work programs on Adventist college campuses are flourishing. Not only are there BSW programs at Walla Walla College, Atlantic Union College, La

Sierra University, Pacific Union College, Union College, Oakwood, Southwestern Adventist University, Andrews University and Southern Adventist University, Walla Walla College, Andrews University, and Loma Linda University offer MSW programs. Loma Linda University now offers a Ph.D in Social Policy and Research.

Social workers are new, integral members in Adventist teams in our behavioral health centers, social action clinics, hospitals, and schools. Our institutions emphasize community service programs and point out that faith should not be just the exclusive domain of religion classes, but part of the overall university experience.

Perhaps as we move our focus of helping to communities in need, we should consider improving upon the settlement house idea. That is, we may want to set up mission posts within our cities where young people can donate a year of service. This type of service made a profound impact in the early 1900s, and our graduates could impact their world in a positive way in 2000 and beyond. Allen F. Davis comments about the effect of helping on the helper: "Perhaps the most important contribution by the settlements to the movement for social justice was their effect on the many young men and women who spent a year or two at the settlement and had their minds changed and visions altered by the experience" (qtd. in Lucas, 1989, p.67).

There are many ways to infuse practical theology into the profession of social work. Social work and Adventism espouse values designed to foster within students a commitment and passion for social justice and social action. It is important to share with our colleagues from other disciplines social work's impact in Adventist higher education. I hope this discourse begins an ongoing dialogue among Adventist social work educators about the role of social work within Adventist education.

The Good Samaritan text, Luke 10, reminds us of our obligations to other humans. For the Christian, perhaps our neighbor is actually anyone who is in need. We help others because the Bible says we should. We also help because we are preparing for the soon return of Jesus, and in our outreach we help connect people with our God. Let the collaborations begin as we explore new ways to spread our witness through the Adventist message and social work skills.

As we near the end of earth's history, Jon Paulien, a Professor of New Testament Studies at Andrews University, points out that "those who are anticipating the near return of Jesus will be individuals who will be visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, clothing the naked, and feeding the hungry." This is social ministry and the Adventist message at their best.

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