



## Faith Integration: Student Perspectives on Spirituality and Social Work in a Christian Master of Social Work (MSW) Program

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### ABSTRACT

The role of spirituality has become increasingly important in the field of social work, especially when considering a holistic approach. Religion and spirituality are used to guide beliefs and actions and give meaning and purpose to life. This research, situated at an Evangelical Christian University, explored why it is critical for practitioners to be spiritually equipped when working with those in need and their perceptions of the importance of faith to practice and identity. This study identified seven themes: how spirituality assists practitioners in dealing with information and events in the social work field and the importance of spirituality in providing strength, hope, guidance, self-preservation, a positive example for clients, and an opportunity to share the love of God. This research contributes to the future of social work education.

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### INTRODUCTION

Social work emphasizes care for the whole person, including consideration and respect for spiritual and religious beliefs and practices.<sup>1</sup> Spirituality is broadly defined as "the quality that involves deep feelings and beliefs of a religious nature, rather than the physical parts of life."<sup>2</sup> Darrel and Rich argue that under the influence of post-modern thought, the definition of faith and spirituality for social work has also come to encompass metaphysical beliefs that include "all people, all nations, all beings, and the planet itself."<sup>3</sup> Considering these broad definitions and expansive views of spirituality, questions arise regarding the role of spirituality in social work, such as the importance of spirituality in social

<sup>1</sup> National Association of Social Workers. "Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers." Washington D.C. (2021) Retrieved from <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>; Hope Haslam Straughan, "Spiritual Development," *Christians in Social Work: Readings on the Integration of Christian Faith & Social Work Practice*, 2002, 145–66; Mackauly Lucia Parada, "Integrating Religion/Spirituality into Professional Social Work Practice," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 41, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 351–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2022.2102102>.

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. Definition of the term Spiritually.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Darrell and Thelma Rich, "Faith and Field: The Ethical Inclusion of Spirituality within the Pedagogy of Social Work," *Field Educator* 7, no. 1 (2017), 5.

work practice, the impact of spirituality in the life of the practitioner, the relationship between these factors for the field of social work, and the role of spiritual assessment in practice, treatment interventions, and ethical decision making. As most people in the United States believe in the existence of God and value spirituality, these are important questions that social workers must answer and not merely avoid out of fear of venturing into religious territory.<sup>4</sup>

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the commissioning body for social work accreditation and educational policy and recognizes the significance of spirituality and religion in social work practice.<sup>5</sup> The CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) emphasize the importance of diversity in not only the practice of social workers but also the curriculum of those seeking a social work degree.<sup>6</sup> Diversity, according to CSWE, includes factors such as "age, caste, class, colour, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, generational status, immigration status, legal status, marital status, political ideology, race, nationality, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status."<sup>7</sup> Program faculty and administrators must also "model anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice and respect for diversity and difference."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, upon completing a social work degree, students must be able to, "demonstrate cultural humility by applying critical reflection, self-awareness, and self-regulation to manage the influence of bias, power, privilege, and values in working with clients and constituencies."<sup>9</sup> Religion and spirituality are recognized as key areas of diversity and identity in social work education, representing important values and worldview perspectives which social workers must engage with cultural humility and self-awareness to manage personal bias. Indeed, it is vital that social work education include curriculum and conversations that explore the role of faith and faith integration in practice.<sup>10</sup>

Christian social workers, particularly, value their Religion, Faith and Spirituality(RFS)<sup>11</sup> as inseparable from their professional identities.<sup>12</sup> Understanding RFS and its proper role and place in social work are therefore vital for Christian social workers as they seek to stay true to their faith tradition while responding to the broad spiritual needs and perspectives of those they serve. The qualitative data reviewed in this article describes seven themes reported by students in an assignment on RFS in an MSW program at a Christian University regarding the importance and benefits of Christian spirituality in social work practice. This qualitative data review provides insights into student perceptions and beliefs that can benefit educators in considering approaches to address spirituality and integrate faith in social work education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Importance of Faith, Spirituality, and Religion in Social Work Practice*

From its beginnings, RFS has inspired social work, blending religious and spiritual values with social interventions.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, religious assumptions that were inherent in the views of early social workers

<sup>4</sup> Amitai Shenhav, David G. Rand, and Joshua D. Greene, "Divine Intuition: Cognitive Style Influences Belief in God.," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 141, no. 3 (August 2012): 423, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025391>.

<sup>5</sup> Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). "2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Masters Social Work Programs" (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.cswe.org/accreditation/standards/2022-epas/>

<sup>6</sup> Council on Social Work Education, 9 explains further.

<sup>7</sup> Council on Social Work Education, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Council on Social Work Education, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Council on Social Work Education, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Straughan. "Spiritual Development." Information suggesting the role of faith and faith integration.

<sup>11</sup> Kelli M. Larsen, "How Spiritual Are Social Workers? An Exploration of Social Work Practitioners' Personal Spiritual Beliefs, Attitudes, and Practices," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 30, no. 1 (February 23, 2011): 17–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2011.542713>.

<sup>12</sup> Holly K. Oxhandler, Rick R Chamiec-Case, and Terry A. Wolfer, "A Pilot Study to Develop and Validate the Social Worker's Integration of Their Faith – Christian (SWIF-C) Scale," *Social Work & Christianity* 46, no. 2 (April 20, 2019): 57–78, <https://doi.org/10.34043/swc.v46i2.67>.

<sup>13</sup> Darrell and Rich, "Faith and Field: The Ethical Inclusion of Spirituality within the Pedagogy of Social Work"; Janet Groen, Diana Coholic, and John R Graham, *Spirituality in Social Work and Education: Theory, Practice, and*

regarding the nature of truth,<sup>14</sup> natural laws, and the universe's design supported the importance of scientific inquiry that led to a more professional and research-based approach to practice.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, as a result, the profession shifted from a more religiously oriented charity-driven movement to emphasizing science and secular thought and finally embracing a wider view of spirituality.<sup>16</sup> In the last two decades of the 20th century in particular, interest in spirituality in society has increased as evidenced by events such as the development of religious and spiritually oriented social work organizations and journals, emphasis on new spiritually focused conferences and interventions, and the inclusion of religion and spirituality in the CSWE accreditation standards.<sup>17</sup> Despite more than a century of shifts and changes as described, the philosophical assumptions and values of social work, including its code of ethics,<sup>18</sup> remain rooted primarily in religious Judeo-Christian values.

The religious and spiritual foundations of the social work profession and its code provide a helpful foundation for social workers, given the dominance of RFS among world populations and their importance to clients' needs, cultures, and worldviews.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the social work code of ethics calls for social workers to incorporate RFS into practice as an essential aspect of addressing diversity.<sup>20</sup> Data from the Pew Research Center in 2015 further demonstrates the significance of RFS in the general population with findings that 84% of individuals in the world acknowledge a religious affiliation, that 77% of US adults report religion to be at least somewhat important in their lives and that 53% state

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*Pedagogies* (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2013); Helen Harris et al., "Ethical Integration of Faith and Practice in Social Work Field Education: A Multi-Year Exploration in One Program," *Religions* 8, no. 9 (September 1, 2017): 177, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8090177>; H. K. Oxhandler and K. I. Pargament, "Social Work Practitioners' Integration of Clients' Religion and Spirituality in Practice: A Literature Review," *Social Work* 59, no. 3 (July 1, 2014): 271–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swu018>; T Laine Scales and Michael S Kelly, "'To Give Christ to the Neighborhood': A Corrective Look at the Settlement Movement and Early Christian Social Workers," *Social Work and Christianity* 38, no. 3 (2011): 356.

<sup>14</sup> Darrell and Rich, "Faith and Field: The Ethical Inclusion of Spirituality within the Pedagogy of Social Work."

<sup>15</sup> David Royse, Bruce A Thyer, and Deborah K Padgett, *Program Evaluation: An Introduction to an Evidence-Based Approach* (Cengage Learning, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Nigel Elliott, "Faith, Ethics and Social Work: Framework for an Introductory Lecture," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 11, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 92–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2017.1287633>; Groen, Coholic, and Graham, *Spirituality in Social Work and Education*; Harris et al., "Ethical Integration of Faith and Practice in Social Work Field Education"; David R. Hodge, "Do Conceptualizations of Spirituality and Religion Affect Perceptions of Compliance with the Ethical Standards That Address Religion?," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 25, no. 2 (November 28, 2006): 1–18, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J377v25n02\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1300/J377v25n02_01); Royse, Thyer, and Padgett, *Program Evaluation*; Leslie Leighninger, "The History of Social Work and Social Welfare," *Comprehensive Handbook of Social Work and Social Welfare* 1 (2008); Scales and Kelly, "To Give Christ to the Neighborhood"; Chris Stewart, "The Inevitable Conflict Between Religious and Social Work Values," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 28, no. 1–2 (February 27, 2009): 35–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426430802643315>.

<sup>17</sup> Darrell and Rich, "Faith and Field: The Ethical Inclusion of Spirituality within the Pedagogy of Social Work."

<sup>18</sup> National Association of Social Workers. "Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers."

<sup>19</sup> Adam Dinham, "Religion and Belief in Health and Social Care: The Case for Religious Literacy," *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare* 11, no. 2 (May 14, 2018): 83–90, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHRH-09-2017-0052>; D. R. Hodge, "Spirituality and Religion among the General Public: Implications for Social Work Discourse," *Social Work* 60, no. 3 (July 1, 2015): 219–27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swv021>; Kelsey M. Moffatt and Holly K. Oxhandler, "Religion and Spirituality in Master of Social Work Education: Past, Present, and Future Considerations," *Journal of Social Work Education* 54, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 543–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2018.1434443>; Alexandru Neagoe et al., "'Values Focused Social Work Practice' Master's Degree—a Model of Pedagogical Good Practice.," *Social Work Review/Revista de Asistentia Sociala*, no. 1 (2018); Holly K. Oxhandler, "Social Work Field Instructors' Integration of Religion and Spirituality in Clinical Practice," *Journal of Social Work Education* 53, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 449–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1269706>; Holly K Oxhandler and Traber D Giardina, "Social Workers' Perceived Barriers to and Sources of Support for Integrating Clients' Religion and Spirituality in Practice," *Social Work* 62, no. 4 (October 2017): 323–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swx036>.

<sup>20</sup> The codes of ethics as defined in Harris et al., "Ethical integration of faith and practice in social work field education: A multi-year exploration in one program."; Moffatt and Oxhandler, "Religion and spirituality in master of social work education: Past, present, and future considerations."; NASW, 2021.

that it was very important.<sup>21</sup> Pew Research data also indicates that 36% of adults attend weekly religious or spiritual services and that 55% of adults engage daily in prayer.<sup>22</sup> These data support the need for social workers to actively assess and seek to understand the importance of RFS as they engage with clients.

Recent literature also emphasizes the importance of RFS in the lives of social work clients, including clients' desires for social workers to include RFS in their care and evidence that including RFS can improve outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Because RFS is interwoven with a client's culture, worldview, and beliefs, many clients want social workers to initiate spiritual conversations.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, incorporating RFS into social work practice can increase rapport and be a key component of assessment and treatment planning.<sup>25</sup> According to Straughan, addressing the spiritual needs of clients is part of a holistic treatment approach.<sup>26</sup> The spiritual aspect of a person also changes as one develops through different life stages, which must be considered. To meet clients' needs, Guadalupe explains that social workers must first develop their spiritual competency, including developing individual "awareness of his/her spirituality and belief systems." The spiritual development of the social worker, then, becomes vital. According to Canda, "Self-inquiry must be a disciplined and consistent process of personal and professional growth. Social workers should examine their beliefs, motivations, values, and activities and consider the impact of these factors upon the client's spirituality."<sup>27</sup> Actively developing one's spirituality through self-reflection, inquiry, and development supports CSWE standards regarding social workers' need for self-awareness to practice competently.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Importance of Spirituality and Faith for Social Workers***

RFS is equally important in the lives of many social workers as it is in the lives of their clients.<sup>29</sup> For example, Larsen found in a sample survey of 225 NASW members that 81.8% of respondents reported belief in "God" or some other "higher power," 58.9% identified as religious, and 93.7% as spiritual.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, 57.8% of those surveyed also reported affiliating with a Christian organization and 17.3% with other religious organizations.<sup>31</sup> Most social workers (70%) in a 2,100 NASW member survey by Larsen and Rinkel also reported believing in God or a higher power. In the same study by Larsen and Rinkel, most social workers also reported that RFS helped shape the framework for their beliefs and

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<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center. "America's changing religious landscape: Christians decline sharply as share of population; unaffiliated and other faiths continue to grow." (2015) Retrieved from <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

<sup>22</sup> Pew Research Center, "America's changing religious landscape..."

<sup>23</sup> Kevin A. Harris, Brooke E. Randolph, and Timothy D. Gordon, "What Do Clients Want? Assessing Spiritual Needs in Counseling: A Literature Review.," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 3, no. 4 (2016): 250–75, <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000108>; Neagoe et al., "Values Focused Social Work Practice' Master's Degree-a Model of Pedagogical Good Practice.," Oxhandler and Giardina, "Social Workers' Perceived Barriers to and Sources of Support for Integrating Clients' Religion and Spirituality in Practice"; Holly K Oxhandler, James W Ellor, and Matthew S Stanford, "Client Attitudes toward Integrating Religion and Spirituality in Mental Health Treatment: Scale Development and Client Responses," *Social Work* 63, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 337–46, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swy041>; Oxhandler and Pargament, "Social Work Practitioners' Integration of Clients' Religion and Spirituality in Practice"; Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, and Wolfer, "A Pilot Study to Develop and Validate the Social Worker's Integration."

<sup>24</sup> Moffatt and Oxhandler, "Religion and Spirituality in Master of Social Work Education."

<sup>25</sup> Darrell and Rich, "Faith and Field: The Ethical Inclusion of Spirituality within the Pedagogy of Social Work."

<sup>26</sup> Straughan. "Spiritual Development."

<sup>27</sup> Straughan. "Spiritual Development." 218.

<sup>28</sup> Straughan. "Spiritual Development." 218.

<sup>29</sup> Rick Chamiec-Case, "Models for Ethically Integrating Christian Faith and Social Work," *Christianity And Social Work*, 2020, 165; Groen, Coholic, and Graham, *Spirituality in Social Work and Education*; Michaela Rinkel et al., "Effects of Social Work Practice on Practitioners' Spirituality," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 37, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 331–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2018.1512388>.

<sup>30</sup> Larsen, "How Spiritual Are Social Workers?"

<sup>31</sup> Larsen, "How Spiritual Are Social Workers?"

actions.<sup>32</sup> Many social workers also admit to pursuing work in the field due to their RFS and a desire for RFS to be included in their education as an aspect of diversity<sup>33</sup> and frequently seek more training in RFS and integration of faith and practice after completing their education as demonstrated by a survey of licensed US social workers, indicating that 46% sought continuing education in this area.<sup>34</sup> Recent literature also indicates 82% of students believe diversity training should include (RFS)<sup>35</sup> yet only 35% feel ready to do so.<sup>36</sup> These data highlight the relevance and importance of RFS for many social workers both personally and for practice.

### ***Impact of Social Work on Spiritual Development***

Further, Rinkel et al. report that over 40% of social work practitioners indicate their practice influences their spiritual and religious development significantly or very significantly, while 28% report little to no impact on their spiritual/religious development.<sup>37</sup> Learning about different beliefs is one way the social work profession is a source for a practitioner's spiritual development. Learning about others' beliefs and experiences encourages the practitioner to research and study more. Specific treatment settings such as hospice or addiction treatment centers can also serve as a source of spiritual development due to the focus on spirituality in these environments. However, reflection on one's social work practice and spirituality in all areas of practice is important and can impact spiritual development. For social workers of faith, Oxhandler et al. argued that just as RFS is a core component of a client's worldviews and identity, so it is for social workers and that "As a result, attempting to bracket their faith at work may feel forced, inauthentic, and/or lead to an unsatisfying and unproductive disconnect between their personal and professional selves."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, RFS are intractable aspects of individuals, their worldviews, and their decision-making process, whether they are clients or social workers and must be acknowledged and developed as such.

### ***Spirituality Social Worker Resilience***

Research conducted by Graham and Shier also found a relationship between the practitioner's subjective well-being (SWB) and spiritually-centered processes.<sup>39</sup> Graham and Shier reported that "for the practitioners in this study, the aspect of spirituality linked to the act of making sense of past and present experiences was a contributing factor for enhancing their overall well-being. This act of making sense has been incorporated in how they make sense of their personal experiences (which is also necessary to become objective practitioners) and their experiences at work and in their professional practice." This research highlights the importance of social workers' use of spirituality to help understand and explain experiences which are vital for social workers to maintain perspective and balance as they work with difficult issues.

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<sup>32</sup> Kelli M. Larsen and Michaela Rinkel, "What Does Religion and Spirituality Mean to a Racially Diverse Group of Social Work Practitioners?," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 35, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 200–221, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2016.1185990>.

<sup>33</sup> Elliott, "Faith, Ethics and Social Work: Framework for an Introductory Lecture."

<sup>34</sup> Moffatt and Oxhandler, "Religion and Spirituality in Master of Social Work Education: Past, Present, and Future Considerations"; Oxhandler and Giardina, "Social Workers' Perceived Barriers to and Sources of Support for Integrating Clients' Religion and Spirituality in Practice"; H. K. Oxhandler et al., "The Integration of Clients' Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Practice: A National Survey," *Social Work* 60, no. 3 (July 1, 2015): 228–37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swv018>.

<sup>35</sup> Dorothy L. Graff, "A Study Of Baccalaureate Social Work Students' Beliefs About The Inclusion Of Religious And Spiritual Content In Social Work," *Journal of Social Work Education* 43, no. 2 (April 16, 2007): 243–56, <https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2007.200500526>.

<sup>36</sup> Oxhandler and Pargament, "Social Work Practitioners' Integration of Clients' Religion and Spirituality in Practice."

<sup>37</sup> Rinkel et al., "Effects of Social Work Practice on Practitioners' Spirituality."

<sup>38</sup> Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, and Wolfer, "A Pilot Study to Develop and Validate the Social Worker's Integration of Their Faith – Christian (SWIF-C) Scale."

<sup>39</sup> John R. Graham and Micheal L. Shier, "Making Sense of Their World: Aspects of Spirituality and Subjective Well-Being of Practicing Social Workers," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 30, no. 3 (July 2011): 253–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2011.587386>.

### **Importance of Spirituality in Guiding Actions**

Larsen and Rinkel found that social workers use religion and spirituality to cope and guide their beliefs and actions.<sup>40</sup> Participants in the study also used religion and spirituality (more so spirituality) to give meaning and purpose to life.<sup>41</sup> Larsen and Rinkel also found that "respondents look to their own religion and/or spirituality to explain life's meaning, its joys and sorrows, and to cope with difficulties in practice." Religion and spirituality also provided an important connection to others. According to the study, spirituality provides a connection to others, the faith community, higher power, the universe, and nature. This study also noted that some participants expressed the need for religion and spirituality to work in the social work field. While only a few (9) participants believed that practitioners should separate religion and spirituality from their work, some believed that their religion and spirituality assisted them in being a helper and healers.

This brief literature review highlights the significance of spirituality in the social work field. Recent literature has focused on how spirituality impacts social work practitioners, with data emphasizing its importance. However, social work educators must also consider the perspectives and experiences of students. Specifically, students in a Master of Social Work (MSW) program at a private Evangelical Christian University might have different perspectives and experiences than other universities or disciplines, which faculty should be aware of when addressing RFS. Learning about the different perspectives students bring to RFS in different educational settings, such as in Christian Universities, will allow faculty to know the issues to address and ways to approach integrating faith within courses.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study aimed to increase understanding of MSW students' perceptions of the importance of their spirituality to their identities and practice as social workers. The research question for this study was, "What are the perceptions of students completing an MSW program informed by a Christian Worldview regarding the importance of their spirituality to their identities and practice as social workers"? This research addresses the problem of a lack of understanding of the personal experiences of social workers and MSW students regarding the role of faith, identity, and personal spiritual growth in their practice identity.<sup>42</sup> Data for this research was gathered through an online learning management system at a large Evangelical Christian University. The students were all adults completing a Master of Social Work program. A devotional assignment in an advanced MSW course provided qualitative data regarding students' views of the importance of spirituality into their identities and practice as social workers. The open-ended question in the devotional assignment stated: Why is it critical for social work practitioners to be spiritually strong to help lift fallen humanity? Students submitted written responses to the question in a Dropbox assignment format. The class containing this devotional question was taught eight times over one year, resulting in 73 student responses. Each response was confidentially extracted and placed in a separate document, including all responses for review. The authors used the master document to code data using generic qualitative coding techniques, identifying seven categories or themes.<sup>43</sup> Previous research has called for using qualitative methods to explore

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<sup>40</sup> Larsen and Rinkel, "What does religion and spirituality mean to a racially diverse group of social work practitioners?."

<sup>41</sup> Larsen and Rinkel, "What does religion and spirituality mean to a racially diverse group of social work practitioners?."

<sup>42</sup> Oxhandler, Chamiec-Case, and Wolfer, "A Pilot Study to Develop and Validate the Social Worker's Integration of Their Faith – Christian (SWIF-C) Scale."

<sup>43</sup> Andrea Flores and Carrie James, "Morality and Ethics behind the Screen: Young People's Perspectives on Digital Life," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 6 (September 21, 2013): 834–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812462842>; Lisa Given, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909>; Sharon M Ravitch and Nicole Mittenfelner Carl, *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological* (Sage Publications, 2019); Berit Margrethe Sandvik and Brendan McCormack, "Being Person-Centred in Qualitative Interviews: Reflections on a Process," *International Practice Development Journal* 8, no. 2 (November 15, 2018): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.82.008>.

issues of faith integration in practice.<sup>44</sup> To interpret the data, each response was analyzed using descriptive coding techniques and directed content analysis to identify themes.<sup>45</sup> Both authors of this paper reviewed all responses during the first phase of analysis to identify keywords and phrases and capture initial coding. After each author completed an initial analysis and identification of codes, the authors compared codes and reduced them to a single set. A second independent review was then completed of each assignment using the final list of codes to identify repeating concepts. Upon completing the second analysis, the authors compared notes and consolidated concepts into a set of final themes allowing for independent and joint analysis to increase insight and trustworthiness.

## FINDINGS

Students presented a variety of reasons regarding the importance of their spirituality to their identities and practice as social workers in lifting a fallen world. A dominant theme emerging from the review was that spirituality assists the practitioner in dealing with the information and events one faces in the social work field and that RFS provides strength, hope, guidance, self-development, self-care, and an opportunity to share the love of God with others. The following is a summary of the seven themes identified in the data.

### *Facing Difficult Experiences*

The main theme identified by students in response to the question was that social work practitioners deal with many issues that create strong emotions. Students stated that due to the overwhelming, sad, and sometimes traumatic stories and issues that practitioners must hear and address, social work practice places significant stress on an individual. For example, one student discussed how spirituality assisted in dealing with overdosed clients. Practitioners must stay spiritually strong to face and address such tragedies. As the student stated, "If we are not strong spiritually, we will allow these negative or upsetting things to consume us spiritually and emotionally." Students believed that spirituality was a key component in dealing with such occurrences.

### *Strength and Self-care*

A second main theme captured in students' responses was that spirituality is a source of strength. God provides the strength needed to administer services that clients require. A student specifically mentioned prayer, "I know that if I did not pray, I would be mentally drained every day. God has to help me be able to help my families/clients, and in doing so, I have to stay connected spiritually." Another student stated, "There is no way that we can carry such heavy loads in our human strength." Some students reported believing that spirituality is a form of self-care. Some students also noted that being strong spiritually can assist in reducing burnout and improving performance.

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<sup>44</sup> Burcu Hatiboğlu, Özge Sanem Özateş Gelmez, and Çağıl Öngen, "Value Conflict Resolution Strategies of Social Work Students in Turkey," *Journal of Social Work* 19, no. 1 (January 28, 2019): 142–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017318757174>; Cheryl A. Hyde, "Ethical Dilemmas in Human Service Management: Identifying and Resolving the Challenges," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 6, no. 4 (December 2012): 351–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2011.615753>; Toby Schonfeld et al., "Qualitative Differences between Two Methods of Ethics Education: Focus Group Results," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 9, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 240–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2015.1023737>; Stephanie Valutis, Deborah Rubin, and Melissa Bell, "Value Conflicts and Value Priorities: It's Not Just about Religion," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 33, no. 2 (2014): 163–77.

<sup>45</sup> Muhammad Faisal Chowdhury, "Coding, Sorting and Sifting of Qualitative Data Analysis: Debates and Discussion," *Quality & Quantity* 49, no. 3 (May 3, 2015): 1135–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-014-0039-2>; Given, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*; J Glaser and Grit Laudel, "Life With and Without Coding: Two Methods of Early-Stage Data Analysis in Theory-Guided Qualitative Research.," 2011; Y Zhang and B M Wildemuth, "Qualitative Analysis of Content," *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*, 308. (2009): 319-330.

### ***Hope***

A third theme students reported was that clients will need "light and hope" and that one must be spiritually strong to reflect such qualities. One student discussed that spirituality provides guidance and that having a strong faith assists with the wisdom one can impart to clients. A student explained that being spiritually strong provides hope for oneself and to clients being served. Another student remarked that social workers must stay spiritually strong to not lose hope. The student explained that it is harder to be pulled down if one is strong. The need for a sense of hope is vital to the experiences of a social worker. A social worker needs to maintain a sense of hope through clients and self-experiences.

### ***Self-preservation***

The fourth theme expressed by some students referenced the phrase, "cannot pour from an empty cup," and commented that one must be able to give. Another student said that "only the strong survive," explaining that the strong must help the weak, and it is much more difficult to help when one is weak. A student discussed that being spiritually strong assists one in being a leader and assists with teaching others to be passionate. Some students expressed the need to help themselves before assisting others, with which spirituality can assist. One student explained, "If we do not have a strong foundation, we may fall." These students believed that spirituality assists in the strength needed to serve clients.

### ***Guidance***

The fifth theme some students stated is that one must be spiritually strong to be able to do the work God has planned for them. A student stated, "Being spiritually strong allows us to let God take the lead and guide us in helping others who have experienced these situations." Another student explained, "In my life if I do not put God first and develop myself spiritually, I will struggle to know ways to help my clients." Also explained by students was that spirituality could provide the direction one needs to impact clients. A student articulated that if one is not spiritually strong, then distractions occur, and Satan can keep one from doing God's will. Evidently, students believed spirituality assisted in understanding God's will in their life and profession.

### ***Example***

The sixth item reflected in students' responses was that being spiritually strong provides a good example for clients. In regards to the clients that one serves, a student stated, "It will help them to have an example of what a person should be like as a strong spiritual child of God." Some students stated that one must model what is acceptable to God. Within this concept, these behaviors allow one to be a witness. A student remarked that it is one's role to demonstrate the love of God and being spiritually strong allows this.

### ***Faith/Calling***

Finally, a seventh theme reported by students was that being spiritually strong was needed as a way to fulfil a calling or as an act of faith. A student stated, "We are called to heal the broken. We can only do that by having a strong relationship with God and fulfilling his word." Another student also discussed the calling to spread the gospel (directly or indirectly), and one needs to be spiritually strong to do this. One student stated, "If God is relying on us to make a difference, then we have to rely on him." Another student commented, "I also think it is important to know your beliefs and stay rooted in your faith as clients come from different walks of life and can sway your opinions and beliefs if you are not rooted in your spirituality." These students suggested that being spiritually strong was connected to one's faith.



## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the themes articulated by students in the assignment are supported by the literature reviewed in this article, including the importance of spirituality in interventions, resilience, guidance, and well-being. However, unique aspects of the importance and place of Christian spirituality are evident in student responses, including direct references to a desire to do the will of God, stay strong against the devil, and model strong Christian faith to others to give them hope. Throughout the responses, it is evident that students integrate their Christian identity with their professional identity and see social work as part of their spiritual calling, not merely a job.

Student perspectives such as those identified in the themes discussed in this research are vital to consider when educating future social workers. Many students take their faith seriously and so should social work educators to assist them in shaping a professional identity. First, educators must be aware of the significant role and influence faith plays in students' lives, help them address spirituality within courses, and assist students in leaning on and learning about spirituality. All social workers, regardless of their religious background, have core beliefs driving their faith and helping students explore these and their implications is vital to professional and reflective practice. Their implications are honestly vital to professional practice and reflective practice. As indicated, spirituality impacts social workers' approach to clients and personal resiliency and character and is an important component of the practice to address. Second, students must understand the importance of spirituality in the lives of those they serve and how to navigate the diversity of thought and belief while maintaining a commitment to their own faith or tradition. Because social work is a values-driven profession with a well-defined code of ethics, it is vital that students consider how their spiritual beliefs align with or affect their view of the ethical code. Students need to understand how their faith complements or potentially contradicts any ethical standards and how they will navigate potential value conflicts in practice. Educators should directly explore issues of spirituality such as these to prepare students for ethical issues in the field. Finally, spirituality affects practice behaviors and choice of treatment interventions. Because spirituality reflects significant core beliefs of students and clients, their choice of interventions and theory will be affected. Social work educators should help students understand their beliefs' underlying assumptions and how they may support or clash with different theoretical frameworks. To practice ethically, students should be aware of their preferred theories of change as influenced by their RFS and how these may affect providing informed choices to clients with whom they work. The themes identified in this study provide a helpful starting place for educators to consider in creating assignments and facilitating discussion regarding spirituality and ethical practice in the field.

## SUMMARY

Both the general population and social workers, in particular, value spirituality and belief in God. Also, values drive the profession of social work and a code of ethics representing beliefs about people, relationships, and justice largely rooted in a Judeo-Christian heritage and mission.<sup>46</sup> Recent literature confirms the importance and integration of spirituality in practice for many social workers, including its usefulness for support, well-being, guidance, and resilience.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, many social workers affirm the importance of spirituality to their professional identity.<sup>48</sup> Through a review of student responses to an assignment in the MSW curriculum, this study identified several key themes regarding the value of spirituality for students at an Evangelical Christian University. Key themes included the significance of spirituality in responding to difficult experiences as a social worker, the importance of spirituality

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<sup>46</sup> Scales and Kelly, "'To Give Christ to the Neighborhood': A Corrective Look at the Settlement Movement and Early Christian Social Workers."

<sup>47</sup> Eileen A Dombo and Cathleen Gray, "Engaging Spirituality in Addressing Vicarious Trauma in Clinical Social Workers: A Self-Care Model," *Social Work and Christianity* 40, no. 1 (2013): 89; Larsen, "How Spiritual Are Social Workers?"; Larsen and Rinkel, "What Does Religion and Spirituality Mean to a Racially Diverse Group of Social Work Practitioners?"; Graham and Shier, "Making Sense of Their World"

<sup>48</sup> Rinkel et al., "Effects of Social Work Practice on Practitioners' Spirituality."

in self-care, and the role of spirituality in providing a sense of hope for clients and the future. The study also identified key themes for students in seeing spirituality as a source of personal strength and guidance in their work, as well as its significance in helping them to be an example to clients and others. Finally, students expressed the importance of spirituality in giving them a sense of calling and purpose to their work, helping them to have a sense of mission.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the MSW students in the program viewed spirituality as integral to their identity and ways of being as social workers. Indeed, the emphasis of the themes identified is primarily on the importance of spirituality in the personal life of the practitioner. Although some students alluded to the role of spirituality in providing guidance and wisdom to their work with clients, little is revealed regarding the influence that spirituality and related values may have on personal practice approaches, choice of interventions or theories in working with clients or constituencies, or potential value conflicts. Additional research is needed to increase understanding of student views of the role of spirituality and specific religious beliefs regarding ethical decision making and preferred interventions with clients.

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