



# An Exploratory Study on Integrating the Christian Faith in an Online Master of Social Work (MSW) Program Curriculum

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## ABSTRACT

Social work curricula frequently lack the inclusion of Religion, Faith and Spirituality (RFS). While faith and religious beliefs are often connected with professional calling, values, and practice, the integration of faith and social work practice is uncommon. This research explored the experiences of students in a Master of Social Work (MSW) program that integrated Christian faith throughout the curriculum and its effects on their spiritual understanding, development, and identity. A qualitative study of student responses was completed to gain insight into the impact of the curriculum on students' spiritual growth, understanding, and views regarding the ethical integration of Christian faith and practice. The research findings confirmed the value of faith integration in social work education and helped inform the development of more effective curricula in faith-based settings. The results of this study may benefit other evangelical Christian universities seeking to increase students' personal growth in faith as well as competencies and ethical practices as social workers.

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## INTRODUCTION

As contexts for service delivery in social work become increasingly pluralistic, Christian social workers face frequent challenges in integrating their understanding of faith and practice. Recent literature indicates that effective training methods regarding the integration of religion and spirituality in social work curricula are generally lacking.<sup>1</sup> Further, social work programs that address religion, faith, and spirituality (RFS) typically do not include the integration of personal faith and practice directly but emphasize broad approaches that focus on spiritual or religious traditions explored in the context of diversity.<sup>2</sup> As a result, social work students are left to independently determine how best to ethically integrate faith into their professional identity and practice. Evangelical Christian universities who seek to remain true to their deeply held religious beliefs and faith-based missions by including more direct approaches to RFS and integration in their programs must balance a

<sup>1</sup> Rick Chamiec-Case, "The Contribution of Virtue Ethics to a Richer Understanding of Social Work Competencies," *Social Work and Christianity* 40, no. 3 (2013): 251; Altaf Husain and Michael E Sherr, "Introduction: Religion and Spirituality in Competency-Based Social Work Practice," *Social Work & Christianity* 42, no. 1 (2015); 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>; Kathy Lynn Morales, *An Instrument Validation for a Three-Dimensional Worldview Survey among Undergraduate Christian University Students Using Principal Components Analysis* (Liberty University, 2013); David R Paine, "Psychology, Faith, and Training: Humility and Mature Alterity for Graduate Study," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 36, no. 2 (2017): 110; 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>; Evan Senreich, "An Inclusive Definition of Spirituality for Social Work Education and Practice," *Journal of Social Work Education* 49, no. 4 (October 13, 2013): 548–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2013.812460>.

<sup>2</sup> Moffatt and Oxhandler, "Religion and Spirituality in Master of Social Work Education: Past, Present, and Future Considerations."

curriculum that trains students in ethical practice and required competencies while helping students to develop personally in their faith and understanding of its impact on identity and practice. Social work programs in Evangelical Christian universities seeking to accomplish this dual emphasis face additional challenges when programs are delivered online.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand online MSW students' perceptions of their spiritual growth and development, personally and professionally in response to weekly faith-based devotional content and other assignments in the curriculum at an evangelical Christian university. The research question for this study is: What are the perceptions of students completing an online MSW program informed by a Christian Worldview regarding its impact on their spiritual growth and development? This research addresses the problem of a lack of training for MSW students regarding the role of faith, identity, and personal spiritual growth in integrating faith and practice. In this study, the researchers seek to understand the experiences of MSW students regarding the impact of faith-based aspects of the curriculum on their personal and professional views of faith and integration of faith and identity and professional practice to inform further changes to curriculum design and pedagogy. The results of this study may benefit other evangelical Christian universities seeking to increase students' personal growth in faith as well as competencies and ethical practice as social workers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) support the integration of spirituality in social work education curricula as an important aspect of diversity.<sup>3</sup> The importance of issues of spirituality and faith for social workers is based on a growing body of empirical evidence recognizing the vital role of RFS in practice while acknowledging a lack of training and consistency in approaches to faith and integration in the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Spirituality is increasingly recognized as important and necessary to a holistic intervention approach and an aspect of practice that not only affects the work that is done with clients but one that has significant implications for social work students and their professional development. Indeed, recent literature identifies the potential for moral and ethical dilemmas in social work, especially among those with strong religious faith and conservative beliefs that should be addressed in social work education.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the concerns identified above, there is little existing research evaluating the integration of spirituality and faith development into broader graduate-level social work curricula and qualitative studies evaluating the impact of attending a Masters in Social Work (MSW) program informed by a Christian worldview and its impact on the spiritual growth and development of social work students are lacking. A few studies have considered how spiritual integration, application, and familiarity with religion or faith improve social work students' ability to relate to others and further their cultural awareness.<sup>6</sup> Rosenbohm specifically reports that students with faith traditions have a more positive view of religion and spirituality in practice than students from non-faith-based traditions.<sup>7</sup> This seems to have empirical support indicating the further need to incorporate faith and spirituality into non-faith-based universities and education programs to encourage a more holistic educational experience for students.<sup>8</sup> Further, an article by Otto and Harrington argues that universities have the responsibility to create an environment allowing for spiritual discussions which challenge ideas, and belief systems.<sup>9</sup> Wallace also conducted a qualitative study exploring how students struggle with identity and

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<sup>3</sup> National Association of Social Workers, "Read the Code of Ethics," 2021, <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>.

<sup>4</sup> Chamiec-Case, "The Contribution of Virtue Ethics to a Richer Understanding of Social Work Competencies"; Husain and Sherr, "Introduction: Religion and Spirituality in Competency-Based Social Work Practice."; Morales, *An Instrument Validation for a Three-Dimensional Worldview Survey among Undergraduate Christian University Students Using Principal Components Analysis*; Shaynah Neshama-Bannister, "Worldview Diagnostic Scale: Educational Instrument for Enhanced Pedagogy on Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education," *International Research in Higher Education* 2, no. 1 (November 2, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.5430/irhe.v2n1p4>; Schonfeld et al., "Qualitative Differences between Two Methods of Ethics Education: Focus Group Results."

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Begun et al., "Exploring U.S. Social Work Students' Sexual Attitudes and Abortion Viewpoints," *The Journal of Sex Research* 54, no. 6 (July 24, 2017): 752–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1186586>.

<sup>6</sup> Man Wai Alice Lun, "A Qualitative Study of Students' Perception of Spirituality and Religion," *Social Work and Christianity* 42, no. 2 (2015): 178; Clifford James Michael Rosenbohm, *Perceptions and Experiences of BSW Students with Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education and Practice* (Case Western Reserve University, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Rosenbohm, *Perceptions and Experiences of BSW Students with Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education and Practice*.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Thomas Adams, *Analyzing Millennial Student Perceptions of Spiritual Development While Attending Religious Colleges in the United States* (Liberty University, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Otto and Michael Harrington, "Spiritual Formation Within Christian Higher Education," *Christian Higher Education* 15, no. 5 (October 19, 2016): 252–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2016.1208594>.

integration of faith and spirituality within a secular or non-religious university.<sup>10</sup> Though the study used 18 undergraduate students, it provides some support for creating a learning environment that fosters acceptance and openness to spiritual matters. As emphasized, the authors found no MSW programs in their review of the recent literature that integrated faith development into the broader curriculum to consistently offer opportunities for students to engage in spiritual learning, discussion, and specific application to practice, which is necessary for developing sensitivity, empathy, and cultural awareness.<sup>11</sup>

Recent literature also confirms that many social work students recognize the importance of spirituality in their lives and its role in motivating their pursuit of social work and therefore both support and find value in exploring its application to practice.<sup>12</sup> Allowing students, a safe place to learn about, explore and discuss spiritual matters through stimulating discussions also helps students to grow spiritually and in integrity, appreciation for diversity, compassion, identity, and character formation.<sup>13</sup> A study by Hyatt found the professor's role to be essential in guiding discussions surrounding the spiritual and character development of students in online courses containing devotional or faith-based content.<sup>14</sup> This indicates the particularly key role of faculty in creating an atmosphere that encourages critical thought on spiritual matters. A study by Rothenbach and Associates also found that there are benefits to providing space for students to share about connectedness and growth to make meaning of both spiritual and existential experiences.<sup>15</sup> This allows students to better articulate a worldview and have a stronger sense of identity. Finally, a qualitative study by Lam found three themes essential to the spiritual formation of students including content interaction, learners' engagement, and life integration, and emphasized the importance of good course content, meaningful discussion posts, purposeful scriptures or devotional content, relational and intellectual elements, and how the content applies to one's spiritual life.<sup>16</sup> Adams confirmed that colleges that were intentional in their integration of faith and spirituality produced students who were less compartmentalized in their approach to faith and more intentional in its application.<sup>17</sup> The conclusion of this review provides evidence for further elaboration on the impact of integrating spirituality into the curriculum of MSW programs and the impact that a faith-based MSW program can specifically have on the spiritual and professional development of students in this context. This qualitative study addresses this gap in research by providing insights into the perceived benefits of integrating a Christian worldview along with intentional engagement and discussions on spirituality throughout the MSW curriculum.

## METHODOLOGY

To complete this qualitative study, data was collected from spiritual growth reflection papers submitted by students after completing at least nine months of the MSW program. Prompts in the reflection paper assignment asked students to identify whether they experienced growth in their knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith and in what way, what changes, if any, they believe have occurred in their relationship with God, what they had learnt about their role, responsibility and calling to the social work profession, and their understanding of their identity as Christian social workers. To assess data related to these questions, a generic qualitative analysis methodology was used. Generic qualitative inquiry and the use of individual narratives are useful in understanding human experiences and perceptions.<sup>18</sup> Qualitative research is also useful for studying

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Wallace, *How Do Christian Students' Academic, Emotional, Spiritual, and Social Experiences Impact Their Spiritual Identity and Development at a Secular Institution: A Grounded Theory Approach* (Azusa Pacific University, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Christson Adedoyin et al., "Integration of Faith and Spirituality in Social Work Education," *Social Work & Christianity* 48, no. 3 (August 2, 2021): 288–307, <https://doi.org/10.34043/swc.v48i3.233>.

<sup>12</sup> Chamiec-Case, "The Contribution of Virtue Ethics to a Richer Understanding of Social Work Competencies"; 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>.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Wm Radecke, *What Does This Mean for Us? Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of the Impact of a Cross-Cultural Service-Learning Course on Their Spiritual Formation* (ProQuest, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Roger Hyatt, "Spiritual and Character Development in Online Education at Brigham Young University" (Brigham Young University, 2020), <http://hdl.lib.byu.edu/1877/etd11513>.

<sup>15</sup> A Rothenbach et al., "Spiritual Exchange in Pluralistic Contexts: Sharing Narratives across Worldview Differences," *The Journal of College and University Student Housing* 41, no. 1 (2014): 192–205.

<sup>16</sup> Ee Lin Lam, "Spiritual Formation in the Online Learning Community of a Bible College" (Regent University, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Adams, *Analyzing Millennial Student Perceptions of Spiritual Development While Attending Religious Colleges in the United States*.

<sup>18</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>; Sharon M Ravitch and Nicole Mittenfelner Carl, *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological* (Sage Publications, 2019); Herbert J Rubin and Irene S Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Sage, 2011); 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>.

ethical issues in social work with some scholars calling for additional use of qualitative research to explore issues of faith integration and values in practice.<sup>19</sup>

Data for this study was collected from assigned reflection papers regarding spiritual growth from adult MSW students at an evangelical Christian university. A random sampling strategy was appropriate for this research to capture a variety of responses from students. To protect confidentiality, student identities and demographic information were not included in the study and each paper was reviewed anonymously. Data was collected for this study by identifying all the students (55) completing the required spiritual growth reflection paper assignment in a specific MSW course during 2021. The MSW online program for the university includes three enrollment dates per year offering 8-week courses to be taken in lock-step sequence resulting in 5 sections of each course being offered during that calendar year. One course from each section was randomly selected for inclusion in the study resulting in a sample of thirty reflection papers. In a 2022 review regarding sample sizes for review in qualitative research, Hennink and Keiser found that saturation typically occurred between 9 and 17 interviews or 4 to 8 focus group discussions.<sup>20</sup> Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi also found that code saturation was typically reached at 9 interviews while meaningful saturation, or “a richly textured understanding of issues,” occurred between 16 and 24 interviews.<sup>21</sup> This study aimed to achieve saturation by including a sample size that exceeded these standards, representing 54% of the students completing the assignment during the period selected.

To interpret the data, each reflection paper was analyzed using descriptive coding techniques and directed content analysis to capture themes.<sup>22</sup> Each author of this paper separately reviewed 15 papers during the first phase of analysis using NVivo qualitative analysis software to help 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 reflection paper using the final list of codes to identify repeating concepts. Upon completion of the second analysis, the authors compared notes and consolidated concepts into a set of final themes. Overall, this process allowed for both independent and joint efforts of analysis, increasing insights and the trustworthiness of the data.

## FINDINGS

Throughout this study, the researchers sought to understand the perceptions of adult students in an online MSW program at an Evangelical Christian university in the Midwest regarding the impact of devotion and faith-oriented content on their personal faith experience, growth, and professional identity. The four themes expressed by students regarding the impact of the curriculum on their spiritual growth and development that emerged were identified as an increased sense of moral and ethical clarity regarding their responsibility for self and towards others, an increased or strengthened faith or relationship with God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit, an increased sense of calling from God or resolve of their calling to social work as a profession and an increased understanding or clarification of their views of integrating faith and practice. In addition to the four main themes identified, an unexpected finding surfaced regarding the impact of trauma, loss, or suffering on students’ relationship with God and spiritual growth. Given the Christian context of this study, these may represent important issues to specifically address in seeking to help students grow spiritually in their Christian faith.

The data collected resulted in a richer understanding of the views and perspectives of students regarding their experiences of faith both personally and in the MSW program and the impact of the curriculum on their personal and professional development. Below is a concise table summarizing the findings from the study on the impact of devotion and faith-oriented content on adult students’ perceptions in an online MSW program at an Evangelical Christian university in the Midwest:

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<sup>19</sup> Burcu Hatiboğlu, Özge Sanem Özateş Gelmez, and Çağrı 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>.

<sup>20</sup> Monique Hennink and Bonnie N. Kaiser, “Sample Sizes for Saturation in Qualitative Research: A Systematic Review of Empirical Tests,” *Social Science & Medicine* 292 (January 2022): 114523, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>.

<sup>21</sup> Monique M. Hennink, Bonnie N. Kaiser, and Vincent C. Marconi, “Code Saturation Versus Meaning Saturation,” *Qualitative Health Research* 27, no. 4 (March 26, 2017): 591, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316665344>.

<sup>22</sup> Chowdhury, “Coding, Sorting”; Given, “The SAGE”; Gläser and Laudel, “Life With and Without”; Zhang and Wildemuth, “Qualitative Analysis.”

**Table 1. Student Reflections on Faith, Practice, and Identity**

Theme	Key Findings
Theme 1: An increased sense of moral and ethical clarity and responsibility for self and towards others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students experienced an increased appreciation for upholding professional ethics and demonstrating personal faith.</li> <li>- They developed a stronger moral responsibility towards others in modeling godliness and compassion in their practice.</li> <li>- Their faith provided a framework for social work practice, and they understood the connection of holiness to their life and work.</li> <li>- They appreciated different perspectives and ways of thinking as their understanding and clarity regarding the Christian faith increased.</li> <li>- Increased awareness and clarity regarding their own ethical and moral convictions personally and professionally.</li> <li>- Greater understanding of managing these convictions in relation to others and social work practice.</li> </ul>
Theme 2: An increased or strengthened faith or relationship with God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students reported an increased understanding of their relationship with or experience of God.</li> <li>- They spent more time in prayer and gained more knowledge about God.</li> <li>- Their trust and faith in God grew.</li> <li>- They became more open and receptive to a relationship with God.</li> <li>- Students also experienced an increased awareness of the Holy Spirit and a deeper understanding of the Trinity.</li> </ul>
Theme 3: An increased sense of calling from God or resolve of their calling to social work as a profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students gained a greater understanding of how their faith guides them as professionals.</li> <li>- They experienced increased clarity of their professional identity and purpose.</li> <li>- Faith played a role in providing resilience for their social work practice.</li> <li>- Students saw their social work profession as a calling from God and felt a sense of purpose in serving others through their work.</li> </ul>
Theme 4: An increased understanding or clarification of their views of integrating faith and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students recognized the importance of ethically integrating their faith and social work practice.</li> <li>- They expressed their desire to demonstrate love and faith to others through their actions.</li> <li>- Students understood the significance of forgiveness and avoiding judgment towards others.</li> <li>- They gained increased knowledge of their faith and how to apply it in their professional life.</li> </ul>

**Unexpected Findings**

Although not prominent, another theme reflected by multiple student responses in the study was that of the impact of trauma, loss, or suffering on their spiritual growth and relationship with God. It is significant that despite the struggles identified, the students enrolled and stayed active in a program emphasizing the Christian faith. Several students honestly indicated the impact of specific events and experiences on their faith development as indicated in the following comments:

*“I have long been at odds with God for the problems and troubles I have faced. I have felt abandoned or hated by him, that I was being punished.”*

*“I have been wavering with my faith in God for years now. My adulthood has been more difficult than my childhood, and I did not think that was possible. Traumatic events that transpired caused me to question my faith in God.”*

*“My anger and disbelief grew stronger due to an attempted murder in our family resulting in severe disability and suicide in our family along with other losses. I was angry at God for letting this happen to someone I loved.”*

Other traumas and losses were mentioned by various students; however, the above statements offer examples of significant losses and tragedies faced by adult students attending the online MSW program. Anecdotally, it is also not uncommon for the authors and faculty who work with students online to encounter individuals in the classroom who express struggles with mental health, caring for sick family members or children with disabilities, financial stressors, family deaths, personal illnesses, and more. Recognizing the impact of personal losses and suffering on faith development and understanding of faith and professional identity and practice may be important to explore more fully in future studies and how faith-based social work curricula can better address these issues.

## DISCUSSION

The relevance of this study's findings for contemporary social work education should be discussed. The findings of this study provide insights into the importance of incorporating spirituality into MSW higher education programs. Students in the study carefully reflected on and described how the integration of spirituality throughout the program prepared, transformed, and provided the confidence to further their development as professional social workers. This qualitative study allowed the researchers to identify patterns and themes that emerged through carefully analyzing student reflections. The findings reinforce the need to examine further the role of spirituality in personal, spiritual, and professional practice arenas.

The study's first finding demonstrates how the inclusion of RFS can enhance the acquisition of or strengthen the moral and ethical character of the students. Social work programs seek to develop students with high ethical standards that translate into fair and equitable engagement with diverse clients. This is also achieved through developing and maintaining humble qualities and characteristics. Students in the study expressed the need to approach others with humility by being non-judgmental, compassionate, empathetic, and by being inclusive of others. In practice, this translates into being self-aware and able to identify personal biases while using high ethical standards when engaging with clients. In this study, students were better able to see the connections between their experiences and their perspectives on God's plan while relating better to the diversity of their clients. These findings align with other research demonstrating how faith integration can lead to positive behaviors, ethical conduct, and improved quality of relationships with others.<sup>23</sup> The inclusion of spirituality throughout the MSW program left students feeling they received a well-rounded education and were well-prepared to work with diverse clients and not as intimidated about incorporating faith and spirituality into practice.<sup>24</sup>

Second, students found that integrating Christianity helped them grow in their knowledge and faith in Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. For some students, they were better able to connect to their own spiritual needs and explore them for the first time. For others, they grew in their faith as evidenced by more frequent prayer, devotion in worship, and reading the Bible. A study by Lam found that discussions and engagement with the professor and their peers led to greater knowledge and growth regarding faith development.<sup>25</sup> In the current study, active engagement in discussions allowed students to better identify with the concept of holiness (being set apart for God) and how this translates into true devotion towards God and the importance of honoring Him through their personal and professional lives. Through a greater connection with God, students experienced a deeper and more fulfilling relationship with the trinity (God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus), leading them to feel like they were part of something greater than themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Third, students overwhelmingly identified a greater sense of purpose, identity, and calling to social work. Considering an existential perspective, students have free will to choose and to act. When considering this through the lens of a Christian Theistic worldview, students found direction and meaning and were able to gain a holistic view of how they fit into this world. The students gained a better understanding of how their vocation is intertwined with God's purpose and His calling for their lives.<sup>27</sup> Students indicated that they had a greater sense of passion for social work after completing the program. They also found that emphasizing faith and devotion to God gave them a greater understanding of efficacy, resilience, inner strength, and peace while pursuing their MSW.<sup>28</sup> Students felt better prepared to overcome obstacles and were more determined to rely

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<sup>23</sup> Radecke, "What Does this Mean for Us?"; Von Dougherty, "Equipping Select Students"; Wallace, "How Christian Students'."

<sup>24</sup> Radecke, *What Does This Mean for Us? Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of the Impact of a Cross-Cultural Service-Learning Course on Their Spiritual Formation*.

<sup>25</sup> Lam, "Spiritual Formation in the Online Learning Community of a Bible College."

<sup>26</sup> Lam, "Spiritual Formation in the Online Learning Community of a Bible College."

<sup>27</sup> Rockenbach et al., "Spiritual Exchange in Pluralistic Contexts: Sharing Narratives across Worldview Differences."

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Sloan-Power, "Diversity Education and Spirituality: An Empirical Reflecting Approach for MSW Students," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 32, no. 4 (October 2013): 330–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2013.839222>.

on their faith when facing challenges in the future. Non-religious students also frequently reported that they found the devotional content to be empowering and uplifting. This supports prior research indicating that social work students feel more confident and prepared when integrating spirituality into the curriculum.

Fourth, students were better able to integrate their faith with the profession of social work. Students conveyed greater comfort in integrating personal faith with clients or discussing religious matters.<sup>29</sup> This integration was expressed through greater use of prayer for both their clients and their challenges. It also included empowering clients, loving others, appreciating differences, having compassion and empathy for others, and guiding clients in discovering who they are and their purpose in this world.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, living out one's faith is reflected through ethical behaviors and one's demeanor toward others. Students conveyed a strong desire to make their faith in Jesus a priority in everything they do, especially in how they approach and treat their clients.

Finally, several students expressed great inner conflict from previous traumatic experiences, leaving them with feelings of frustration, anger, and doubt in God. This greatly impacted their spiritual journey, creating a tangential crisis of faith. Tragedy, losses, and other unforeseen circumstances left these students searching for purpose and meaning in life. For these students, their spiritual journey continues as they seek to reconcile the evil they experienced with believing in a God who loves and cares for them. Knowing that some students struggle with spiritual matters and may have traumas associated with these areas of life should prompt MSW programs to explore this further. Students need to feel comfortable with the spiritual if they are to take on a holistic view of treatment. But to do this, they must confront their traumas and the consequential negative views towards religion or spirituality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this qualitative study provide additional support regarding the impact and importance of including RFS in social work curricula. Specifically, the results of the study indicate the experiences of students to be largely positive regarding the integration of faith in the curriculum and its impact on their sense of calling, identity and ability to navigate issues of faith in social work practice. Because this study is known by the authors to be the first of its kind exploring the experiences of students in an MSW program that integrates RFS throughout the curriculum from a Christian worldview, additional studies are needed to support these findings. It is recommended that additional research be completed at evangelical Christian universities to explore similar areas of impact. Further, it is recommended that additional studies be completed regarding the inclusion of RFS across curricula at secular universities to determine the experiences of students from other faith traditions or non-religious worldviews.

## CONCLUSION

Spirituality in practice is an important consideration for MSW programs seeking to train social workers to be holistic practitioners. Students need and want to learn more about spiritual matters and how to better integrate faith and spirituality into social work practice. Also, educators want to build solid foundations for students to promote cultural humility, understanding, and the inherent value of each life and their experiences. Further, faculty at Christian Universities desire to train social work students who are ethical practitioners and feel confident working with diverse clients while honoring their religious beliefs and/or worldviews. A social work curriculum that explores, addresses, and encourages critical thinking regarding applying spiritual beliefs and ideas to professional identity and practice is a vital tool in this endeavor. This exploratory study highlights the importance of the overall explicit curriculum in preparing students to engage with their spiritual nature and those of their clients. Results of the study demonstrate that by integrating faith-based content throughout the curriculum, students were able to deepen their faith, explore their spiritual selves and grow in their professional identity as social workers of faith. Many students indicated that by developing a stronger faith in God, they could find greater strength, hope, purpose, and conviction in their calling to serve and love others. This study provides evidence supporting the efficacy of integrating faith and spirituality in an MSW program by exploring student perceptions of its benefits on both a personal and professional level.

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