

# **Examining the Role and Practice of Social Work Within the Catholic Church**

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## INTRODUCTION

“The healing ministry of Jesus is total and comprehensive in scope; it is directed to the health and well-being of the whole person – in all its dimensions (physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, and social). Thus, the healing and health ministry of the church encompasses the entire range of possible human afflictions; her ministry seeks nothing less than the total liberation and well-being of the human person.” (Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005: 3)

A significant issue that has been of ongoing concern for Catholics, particularly in the developed world, is the decline of priests. LaReau (2004) described the Catholic Church as being in a state of crisis as the number of priests, both diocesan and religious, has steadily declined since the 1970s through death, retirement and resignation. However, LaReau found that as the number of parishes without resident priests has increased, Catholics have responded with surprisingly creative solutions. Unfortunately, during this crisis there has also

been devolution of social services in the general community and an increasing privatization of helping resources resulting in even more people of all faiths turning to their churches and religious institutions to fill the gaps in services and to address their unmet psychosocial needs. Thus, is there a place for the profession of social work to become more directly involved with the Catholic Church to benefit both the church and its parishioners?

The teachings and instructions of what Catholics are called to do are embodied in the Catholic Social Teachings. These teachings provide a framework in how Christians who follow the Catholic path should serve humanity and advocate for justice at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. Social work holds to similar values and principles of Catholicism in that they both believe in the intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual and in advocating for a just society for the benefit of all. The Social Work Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice also provide social workers with a framework in how to serve humanity, both individually and collectively, at the micro, mezzo and macro levels as highlighted in Table 1 (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994; Office for Social Justice, 2005).

Table 1: Comparison of Catholic Social Teachings and Social Work Ethics

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Catholic Social Teachings</b> <b>Office for Social Justice (2005)</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Canadian Association of Social Workers</b> <b>Code of Ethics (1994)</b></p>
<p>1) <i>Dignity of the Human Person</i>: belief in the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all Catholic Social Teachings.</p>	<p>1) <i>Philosophy</i> social workers believe in the intrinsic worth and dignity of every human being and are committed to the values of acceptance, self-determination, and respect of individuality.</p>
<p>2) <i>Common Good and Community</i>: human dignity can only be realized and protected in the context of relationships with the wider community.</p>	<p>2) <i>Philosophy</i>: [social workers] believe in the obligation of all people, individually and collectively, to provide resources, services and opportunities for the overall benefit on humanity.</p>
<p>3) <i>Option for the Poor</i>: The moral test of society is how it treats its poor. We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor</p>	<p>3) 10.2: a social worker shall advocate for the equal access of all persons to resources, services and opportunities</p>
<p>4) <i>Rights and Responsibilities</i>: human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met.</p>	<p>4) 10: a social worker shall advocate change a) in the best interest of the client, and b) for the overall benefit of society, the environment and the global community.</p>
<p>5) <i>Role of Government and Subsidiarity</i>: the state has a positive moral function. It is an instrument to promote human dignity, protect human rights, and build the common good.</p>	<p>5) 10.3: a social worker shall avocate for the equal access of all persons to resources, services and opportunities. 10.6 A social worker shall promote social justice</p>

<p>6) <i>Economic Justice</i>: the economy must serve people, not the other way around. All workers have a right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, and to safe working conditions. No one is allowed to amass excessive wealth when others lack the basic necessities of life.</p>	<p>6) 10:2: a social worker shall advocate for the equal distribution of resources to all persons.</p>
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<p>7) <i>Stewardship of God’s Creation</i>: the goods of the earth are gifts from God, and they are intended by God for the benefit of everyone.</p>	<p>7) 10.4: a social worker shall advocate for a clean and healthy environment and shall advocate the development of environmental strategies consistent with social work principles.</p>
<p style="background-color: black; color: black;"> </p>	<p style="background-color: black; color: black;"> </p>
<p>8) <i>Promotion of Peace and Disarmament</i>: peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent on the right order among human beings.</p>	<p>8) 10.6: a social worker shall promote social justice.</p>
<p style="background-color: black; color: black;"> </p>	<p style="background-color: black; color: black;"> </p>
<p>9) <i>Participation</i>: it is a fundamental demand of justice and a requirement for the human dignity that all people be assured a minimum level of participation in the community.</p>	<p>9) <i>Philosophy</i>: the profession of social work is founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals. 10.3: a social worker shall advocate for the equal access of all persons to resources, services and opportunities.</p>
<p style="background-color: black; color: black;"> </p>	<p style="background-color: black; color: black;"> </p>
<p>10) <i>Global Solidarity and Development</i>: our responsibility to each other crosses national, racial, economic, and ideological differences.</p>	<p>10) <i>Philosophy</i>: the culture of individuals, families, groups, communities and nations has to be respected without prejudice. 1.2: a social worker in the practice of social work shall not discriminate against any person on the basis of race, ethnic background, language, religion, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, age, abilities, socio-economic status, political affiliation or national ancestry.</p>
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However, there is very little in the literature pertaining to the connection of the role and practice of social work within a religious institution that provides a framework for applying the practice of social work within the structure of the Catholic Church. Cnaan (1999) has discussed the devolution of social services in the United States and the importance of social work and religion to work together for the provision of services to those in need. He states that '[a] close review of Social Work Abstracts failed to identify a single source that dealt with the religious-based social service organization as a service provider and/or a partner for social work' (p. 51). He goes on further to say that '[w]hile there may be articles dealing with a specific religion, such as the Jewish approach to parental care or the Christian approach to abortion, the role of the religious community as a whole in social service provision has clearly been ignored in social work articles' (p. 53-54).

Sherwood's (2003) examination of the church as a context for social work practice indicated that there is a place for combining religious practice and social work. Sherwood even discussed the type of practitioner best suited for this type of work. He stated that a social worker would need to have an excellent understanding of social work values, beliefs and ethics, be able to resolve issues and dilemmas of confidentiality between the two interacting systems and must also have a good fit with the congregation's mission and identity. However, he did not provide a framework or a model for the practice of social work in this setting.

It is also interesting to note that despite the current Bush administration's increased emphasis on faith-based social services in the United States, particularly, in the area of addiction, that more has not emerged on how these two systems can be or should be successfully integrated. Thus, given the needs of both Catholic parishes and parishioners the question arising is can and should there be a greater social work presence within the Catholic Church?

## METHODOLOGY

Due to the lack of literature pertaining to social work practice in religious-based institutions, an exploratory research study using key informant interviews was undertaken to assess the views of those already working or volunteering on a pastoral team. Purposive and snowball non-probability sampling were used in gathering participants for the study with eight individuals from Southwestern Ontario initially selected, six of whom who participated in the study. Another participant was obtained by referral through an initial interview while an additional two persons were selected from a website directory, one of whom was interviewed.

A letter of introduction explaining the intent of the research and the process was mailed to potential participants requesting their participation. A follow up telephone call was made within two weeks, asking if the letter had been received and if they would be interested in volunteering for the study. Once an individual verbally agreed to participate, an information package was mailed containing a

letter detailing the study in greater depth, a copy of the questions that they would be asked during the course of the interview and two copies of the consent form, one to return prior to the interview and one to keep for their reference. The questionnaire was forwarded in advance to reduce the time participants needed to spend reflecting on the questions and to maximize the time allotted to discussing the issues. Participants included lay, volunteer and professional persons involved with the Catholic Church along with two clergy. To maintain confidentiality participants were informed in the letter that all identifying information would be removed. To maintain the anonymity of participants, direct quotes were identified by each participant's assigned number alone.

Data was collected by one interviewer, through face-to-face interviews using a structured, open-ended questionnaire (Appendix 1) which the participants received in advance of the scheduled interview. The interviews were tape recorded with hand written notes taken to highlight both key points and issues to return to later in the interview for either further elaboration or clarification. The taped interviews were later transcribed and content analysis used to search for both common themes and also for unique responses that either challenged or supported the question of should there be a greater social work presence directly within parishes.

## RESULTS

The duties of the participants included:

- a. administration;
- b. advocating for justice around issues such as housing, daycare and trafficking;
- c. preparation of individuals for the sacraments;
- d. connecting people with resources and educating around issues of physical health;
- e. providing support and workshops around team development and transitions;
- f. programs for the youth;
- g. sacramental ministry;
- h. spiritual direction; and,
- i. ministering to all the people that come for assistance.

When discussing the impact the priest shortage had on the participants' ministry, two were uncertain as they were new to the ministry, one felt that it had a positive impact because it pushed parishioners to do more while five felt it had a substantial negative impact upon their ministry.

“The shortage of priests impacts because the number of sacraments is not decreasing but the number of priests is decreasing. The number of people coming to mass on Sundays is the same, but there are fewer priests to celebrate the Eucharist and preside over the liturgy. We have just as many masses, but the workload of the priests has increased. The people in the pews don't really recognize that because they show up on



Sunday and they still get the same service that they received 20 years ago, but the work behind the scenes to prepare those liturgies has greatly increased. I have a hand in that, so just from a sacramental standpoint, not that I celebrate sacraments, but helping to prepare people to celebrate those certainly takes a lot of my time.” (6)

“There has been a rather huge significant collapse of personnel but not of ministry. So the same work needs to be accomplished despite less people.” (4)

All participants felt that there would be changes in how parishes would be structured in the future, though there were differences in how they felt that this would come about.

“Some day we will have a pastoral minister, a deacon, hopefully a nurse, perhaps a social worker, perhaps a psychologist. Down the road the way they train priests may be different because perhaps the role of the priest will be much different than the way it is today, then the expectations will be for those other professionals to pick up some of those other pieces.” (3)

“Certainly we’re going to be clustered, so there will be a large grouping or clustering of parishes with perhaps one or two priests with three or four parishes and also having the support team working that way as well.” (5)

When it came to viewing individual parishioners from a holistic biopsychosocial-spiritual perspective and identifying additional needs in services that are being met fully or not at all, the participants' responses were even more disparate. Among the areas identified were bereavement and loss, spiritual direction, youth programming, parenting support, elder care along with the need for more professional roles.

“...proper training of the people that go out to see individuals, for the safety of the visitors that go out, to respect the confidentiality of the parishioners, and to meet their needs at a level when society is so much wiser than it used to be in the past.” (3)

“...sections for parents so that parents could be educated on some of the sacramental preparation and some of the developmental issues from a spiritual perspective.” (2)

“If we claim, which we do, that the fullness of following Jesus is to be fully human and be fully aware of our physical needs and our psychosocial needs and our spiritual needs, it seems to me that we need to provide room at the table for specialists in all areas of human development.” (6)

In discussing terms of services at the community level that were not being met fully or at all, one participant felt that provincial cutbacks created needs in the areas of health care, education and social assistance were necessitating parishes to do more than they previously had . Three participants felt there was more need for community specialists especially in matters of the aging and the remaining participants identified family life, youth, aging and bereavement support as all critical areas that were presently under serviced.

“One of the areas [of] need [is] some sort of mediator between parents and children to discuss the real issues of life, to encourage them to be family.”

(2)

“One of the areas where we’re falling short in the church is a comprehensive, holistic approach to family life in all its forms. I would like to see us in the Catholic Church doing more to support families at a parish level, be it a traditional kind of nuclear family, a same-sex partnership, a single mom, single dad, the divorced and remarried.” (6)

When asked about their own counselling education and training one participant indicated having received no formal education or training but did have 29 years of work related experience. The remaining seven had some basic education but felt that they too had gained most of their knowledge through work related experience and on the job training. Two participants stated that their training was

more focused on the spiritual dimension. When asked about education on understanding human behavior, three participants had taken one or two post-secondary psychology courses and one had some knowledge through reading.

“...I think I bring some life experience that I can share with those who have some concerns and I think I am able to do that and do it well. I don’t claim to have all the answers and if I don’t then I will go to the resource that has all the answers. I think that is important.” (1)

“...we are more of a referral resource as opposed to a counselling resource. We can be a bridge until they get to a counselling resource but it is discouraged to get involved unless it is a spiritual issue.” (5)

“Spiritually speaking, I feel very qualified to deal with spiritual directions and the role of God in their lives and that kind of thing, but for the other aspect, no.” (8)

When it came to evaluating the effectiveness of programs and/or ministry that participant’s parish was involved in each participant had a different approach.

“[The] parish had a pastoral plan which all parish work was seen through.” (8)

“Evaluation was done to help us highlight what we are doing and highlight areas of need but it is difficult to evaluate the spiritual aspect for some of it had to be a trust in God that what we are doing is about planting seeds.” (6)

Evaluation was done through the use of questionnaires for feedback on areas of improvement. (5)

When asked about the benefits and concerns regarding pastoral teams all eight respondents stated that there were substantial benefits to having such a team in place though three also voiced concerns about ongoing communication and accountability as well as with ethical issues that have arisen.

“It is critical. A priest is ordained with particular gifts and particular skills and particular responsibilities and I have never met a priest who doesn't have a gift to work from. Pastoral teams allow for an accountability of the entire people of God, the entire parish community. The parish team allows for creativity where two heads are better than one. Pastoral teams allow for a transparency [and] for the bringing together of many different perspectives. The need to have women on pastoral teams is critical. [There is a] need to have a variety of backgrounds. The spirituality of the parish [takes] on the spirituality of the pastor. How he prays is how he leads the people...That might not be where everyone is

at. We may not all have the same spirituality, so the idea of working from a pastoral team is critical in that the decision makers and the implementers are more able to reflect the entire people that they are responsible for. It is the diversity in perspectives that the pastoral team allows for and calls for that is critical.” (6)

Participants in general were very receptive and welcoming of the idea of including social work as part of the pastoral team. One person stated that the social work profession had a vital role to play in the community but that there was a lack of availability. Three participants had positive experiences working with social workers and one felt they could be good for a parish. Two participants had both negative and positive experiences with the social work profession while the last participant felt that in some ways there was too much emphasis on theory and there was more of a need to be more practical if they were to be part of a parish team.

“Sometimes I have seen the social work profession as short sighted, trying to deal with an individual problem, trying to help an individual fit into a system that maybe not ought to be fit in to. I know a friend of mine who just graduated. She is much more interested in the systems and kind of changing a system that can actually oppress an individual, rather than, let’s get this individual to measure up. I know there is a shift happening.”(7)

“They (social workers) are upbeat, positive, constructive, resourceful people. They seem to be able to wade through a lot of the details of a complicated social situation and get to the chase.” (2)

“I feel they perform a very vital essential role. Unfortunately, I think that availability is lacking. Often times people have a hard time knowing how to get into the system. Unless someone directs them in that direction, most people have no way to know how to access help.” (8)

“I think social workers are great people. I think everybody should be a social worker. It is a different skill set and I think one which is really required.” (4)

One respondent identified the roles or functions that social workers could fill within a pastoral team as limitless. Three felt that social workers would fill more of a primary counselling role and two participants felt the social worker would bring a good understanding of psychosocial development to the team. Two participants highlighted social workers ability to connect people to community services.

“The expertise of the people of social work bring are awareness of family life and of different benefits of different agencies in the city and different

helps and different supports that we may not be aware of. They bring a fresh perspective to the teams.” (6)

“If we had them, the people would make access to them because of the credibility and because the people want the guarantee that what they are being told is supported by the church.” (8)

When participants were asked if they could see themselves working with the social work profession and in what capacity, six participants stated they could see themselves working with the social work profession. In regards to what capacity they could see themselves working with the social work profession each had a different view of how they would do this. Due to poor weather conditions imposing a time constraint one did not answer this question.

“My work definitely overlaps with the social work profession. I see many people that have broken situations that social workers can assist with.” (6)

“In my present work, probably very peripherally.” (7)

“I could see myself working with the social worker whatever way I can help him or her.” (1)

“There is loads of work and you can only do so much of it yourself.” (3)



“I think as a referrer I guess.” (8)

“...because I would really like to see us as a church and as a pastoral team addressing issues really holistically, it would be important for me that the social worker be a person of faith.” (4)

“There is huge potential to change people’s lives for the better and I would welcome it and it would be great.” (2)

In regards to suggestions for funding social work within a parish the participants generated many ideas. Among those ideas were; rob a bank (said in jest), appeal to business, by parishioners, government funding, EAP, geared to income, and legacy funds.

“There may be the opportunity in some parishes, in some communities, to share a social worker where you have a social worker that was divided between two sites and the two sites then share the costs or [the] social worker may be located on one site but the client base comes from two or three or four sites. So you have one parish assuming the overhead costs for running the office but the salary and benefits being jointly shared.” (4)

When the participant was asked if they had any further comments three said no and five commented that the concept of social work is something they would like to see happen.

“I’m excited about this whole concept of doing this thesis. It is the call of the gospel and the church. It is how we incorporate our faith into our everyday life. And I think it is ground breaking to.” (6)

“I can only just scratch the surface. I am one person serving 2500 people. The more there are to share the load, the more diverse groups we can meet.” (3)

“I don’t think that this is a nice idea anymore. I think that this is something that needs to be done. The needs of our people are very great and it is not simply that we have enough clergy to do it, it’s that I don’t think [they] are the best people to do the job.” (4)

## DISCUSSION

“We are in an interesting time of development in which we are just beginning to learn what it means to join professional social work knowledge, values, and skills to the practice of faith manifested in local churches in community service or ministry’ (Sherwood, 2003: 11).

Society is constantly changing and adapting as it develops new technologies and gains new knowledge. Devolution of services is having largely, a negative impact on our social welfare programs and how we are able to and not able to deliver services to our clients. Our religious institutions are also feeling the brunt of these changes and none more than the Catholic Church but without sufficient resources and in some areas, skills and knowledge to respond adequately. The combination of social work knowledge, skills and values, along with its humanitarian and egalitarian beliefs appears to be an excellent partnership with Catholicism's values of social justice for all.

The results of this exploratory study indicate that there is support by those providing services within the Catholic Church to no longer have the provision of professional psychosocial supports remain at arms length but to incorporate this ministry directly into the parish. This is particularly relevant in that those currently working as part of parish teams have not historically been educated or trained in the areas that social workers are and the profession would fill an acknowledged gap to further strengthen the support and assistance provided to parishioners. Those currently engaging in social work like activities do not have the depth of training and rely on experience to assist those seeking them out for assistance. Interestingly, recent Canadian research has indicated that many social workers find the profession of social work a calling and are inspired to service in the field by their faith and spirituality (Csiernik & Adams, 2002; 2003).

This preliminary inquiry indicates that there is both a need and support for a closer association between the Catholic Church, its existing structures at the parish level and the profession of social work. Thus, the next step is to develop a model of delivery to combine the strengths of both in better serving the needs of parishioners particularly those who would not seek out, use or be able to access social work services in the general community.

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## Appendix 1

### The Role and Practice of Social Work Within the Catholic Church

#### Questionnaire

1. Could you describe the duties of your role as a (priest, deacon, parish nurse, lay minister) to individual parishioners, the community, and at a policy level?
2. How does the shortage of priests impact your ministry?
3. What are your perceptions of the way the parish will be structured in the future?
4. Viewing individual parishioners from a bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective, can you identify additional needs in services to parishioners that currently are not being met fully or at all?

5. What about at the community level? Can you identify additional needs in services that currently are not being met fully or at all?
6. a) Have you received training for counselling individuals in a therapeutic relationship or for understanding human behaviour?  
b) If so, what type of training have you received?  
c) If not, do you feel that this is an area that is needed?
7. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of programs and/or ministry that your parish is involved in?
8. What benefits/concerns do you see to having a pastoral team?
9. a) What are your perceptions of the social work profession?  
b) What role or function, if any, could social work play within a pastoral team?  
c) Can you see yourself working with the social work profession and in what capacity?
10. What suggestions do you have for funding a social worker within a parish?
11. Any additional thoughts or comments?