

## SPIRITUALLY SENSITIVE SOCIAL WORK: A MISSING LINK IN ZIMBABWE

Mabvurira, Vincent<sup>a</sup> and Nyanguru, Andrew<sup>b</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the prominence of spirituality in social work practice. It maintains that spirituality is a very critical aspect of social work and the two must never be detached. It is also the authors' contention that the centrality of spirituality in social work is not a well taught and well researched area in Zimbabwe. Just like many other people the world over, Zimbabweans have rich spiritual assets that social workers must exploit in the helping process. There are high chances that social workers in Zimbabwe might not be conversant with the relevance of spiritual aspects in the helping process. The paper argues that social work clients in Zimbabwe might be losing out due to an academic amnesia that is around spirituality. Social workers in Zimbabwe are, therefore, encouraged to research on spirituality and social work. Similarly, academics are encouraged to incorporate topics on spirituality in the social work curriculum.*

**KEY TERMS:** spirituality, social work, education, religion, Zimbabwe, Africa.

<sup>a</sup> Department of Social Work, Bindura University of Science Education, Contacts: vinmabvurira@gmail.com, P. Bag 1020 Bindura, Zimbabwe.

<sup>b</sup> School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe. Contacts: P. Bag 66022 Kopje, Harare, Zimbabwe.

## INTRODUCTION

Popular interest in spirituality has experienced a rapid growth in recent years. Spirituality as a subject has of late occupied human services professions both in training and in practice. This has been prompted by the discovery of the centrality of spirituality in human life. According to Gratton (1995), to be human means to be spiritual. He argued that human beings have longings and aspirations that can be honoured only when a person's spiritual capacity is taken seriously. Several studies including Bibby (2002) have shown that more people than those who attend places of worship believe in a supernatural being. McKernan (2005) is of the view that many clients in social work have spiritual beliefs of importance to them. He further argued that during times of crisis, human beings turn to human service professions like social work, psychology, counselling and psychiatry and as a result, social workers are being challenged to honour the spiritual issues woven in the concerns brought by clients. Client's spiritual beliefs and experiences offer very useful resources in the client-worker relationship. According to Mckernan (2005) we cannot ignore the potential richness that spirituality can add to current social work practice. Asher (2001) suggests that the root reason for the need to integrate spirituality and social work may be that our modern society has demands that for many are psychologically and emotionally overwhelming.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Though spirituality has been present in social work in some form since the beginning of the profession, within social work education it has been neglected. Spirituality and religion have played an important part in the human psyche for thousands of years; these important dimensions of the human experience were ignored by social workers for most of the twentieth century (Canda, 1989) especially in Africa where social work practice has not been indigenized.

Spirituality is soulful living but social work has largely become disconnected from its spiritual roots (Canda, 1997). There are calls for a return to spirituality in social work together with a recognition that we need to avoid the past mistakes of partisan religiosity. Many social work departments the world over are offering courses on spirituality but this has not been the case in Zimbabwe. Such courses may cover issues to do with resilience, spiritually sensitive practice and the role of religious organisations in social work practice. In the developed world, many social work licensing boards are supporting spiritually-sensitive approaches to continuing education and practice but African boards are lagging behind. Asher (2001) is of the view that the greatest concern about making religion and spirituality an integral part of social work is the possibility that some practitioners will impose their beliefs on the people with whom they are working, both beneficiaries and colleagues. Quite common are statements

such as “*Glory be to Jesus.....*” during the helping process. Such statements can be detrimental where a client subscribes to other religions and not Christianity. This is problematic in countries like Zimbabwe where most people assume that everyone is a Christian. Even if most people are Christians as purported, our levels of commitment to our supreme beings also vary. So it is always important to assess the spirituality of the client before imposing our own spirituality on clients.

According to Baskin (2002) social work practice cannot be whole without including the spiritual dimension. If practitioners ignore it, then they are not fully responding to their “clients”. Ideally, social work practice focuses on client strengths. Spirituality is the most powerful source of strength because everyone who chooses to go easily with life operates on some form of faith. A spiritual value or belief can be a powerful resource in a client’s life that can be used in problem solving, coping and recovering from trauma (*ibid*).

Relevance of spirituality in social work has been hard hit by academic amnesia in Zimbabwe and probably Africa in general. If there is any information to this effect it may not be easily accessible for academic use. Furthermore, social work curricula in most Zimbabwean universities both at undergraduate and post graduate levels do not cover anything on spirituality. The Council of Social Workers of Zimbabwe (social work licensing board) does not directly mandate social workers to be spiritually sensitive. It is

therefore the writers' argument that social workers in Zimbabwe might be shortchanging their clients as they are not equipped to handle issues to do with spirituality.

## **WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?**

Rarely do social scientists agree on the definitions of certain terms and the word spirituality is no exception. Defining and operationalising spirituality depends largely upon which of the many theoretical frameworks one uses (Roby and Maisty, 2010). Spirituality does not mean the rubrics and doctrine of any organized religion, nor the value system of a culture. The term religion has been severally used interchangeably with the term spirituality but this has been misleading (Morales, Sheafor and Scott, 2010). Many scholars, for example, Paloutzian and Park (2005) have defined the terms simultaneously as that which refers broadly to human activity that is related to the sacred. However a number of social scientists have managed to separate the two terms. Unlike with religion, the proper definition of spirituality should not specify a particular belief but rather focuses on the action of seeking and experience. It addresses the bridge joining our particular experience with "the larger purposes of everyday life" (McKernan, 2005). Canda (1997) has defined spirituality as the patterning of spiritual beliefs and practices into social institutions with community support and traditions maintained over time.

According to Wilde, spirituality is “a person’s individual relationship with the universe and however he or she conceives of that. It may include his or her definition of a higher power, God, the spiritual source.” Spirituality is the ultimate concern or the holy unconditional and absolute force which comes from the depth of being, giving meaning to human existence beyond mere pleasure and containing answers to existential problems (Tillich, 1987). Spirituality is the perception of unity or oneness with everything and acting on this oneness (Moffett, 1994).

### **SPIRITUAL ISSUES IN ZIMBABWE**

Spirituality is a central issue among the lives of most Africans, for example, according to Mbiti (1971) within Africa there has traditionally been no division between the sacred and the profane nor between the spiritual and the material areas of living. All elements, whether animate or inanimate, are believed to be dependent on each other and all life is considered one (Mbiti, 1975). Traditional the concept of communalism has been central among Africans. Another scholar, Sengor (1966) argued that Africans perceive the universe as a network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God, who is the source of all life forces. It is God who vitalizes and devitalizes all other beings and all other life forces.

The Shona spiritual world views have a tripartite cosmology in which the physical, spiritual and the dead (underworld) are in

communion (Machingura, 2011). Most African people, Zimbabweans included have, a lot of existential questions:

*What does it mean to say I can die any time?*

*Why unfortunate things like sickness are happening to me and not the next person?*

*Who will look after my children if I die?*

*What is the meaning of life?*

The Shona and the Ndebele people are always in touch with the spiritual world and it becomes very sensible and secure to continue with this link even in church, in case of an attack by evil spirits. The aspect of being in touch with the spiritual world is something linear and centrally important in the Shona/Ndebele world view before one's birth, during one's life, at death and after death. The Shona interpretation of life is guided by their understanding of the spirit world and one cannot imagine a situation where one can claim to be irreligious or atheistic as proudly done by some people in the Western world (*ibid*).

Among the traditional Shona and Ndebele religions, God, or the Supreme Being, is seen as the creator and sustainer of the cosmos in much the same manner as within Christianity. The Shona word for God is *Mwari* and the Ndebele word is *uMlimu* and this God is believed to be active in the everyday lives of people. Traditionally, the Shona and the Ndebele, people communicated with God through the *vadzimu* (Shona), or *amadhlozi* (Ndebele). These are the ancestors. According to Moyo (1988) the *vadzimu* are believed to

constitute an invisible community within the community of the living, always around their descendants, caring for them and participating in their joys and sorrows.

There are many religions followed in Zimbabwe but the Judeo-Christian religion is the largest. Major Christian churches include the Roman Catholic Church and protestant churches like the Anglican, Methodist, Dutch Reformed Church and many others. A few years into colonialism, Zimbabwe has witnessed the mushrooming of indigenous Apostolic churches and such churches include among others *Johane Masowe Chishanu*, *Vadzidzi*, *Mudzimu Unoera*, *Johane Wekutanga*, *Nguwo Tsvuku* and *Johane Marange*. Of late Zimbabwe has also witnessed the growth of Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe which are characterized by tongue speaking, prophesy and gospel of prosperity. The Apostolic sect is one of the fastest growing sects in Zimbabwe (Dodo, 2012). To just see how strong spirituality and religion is in Zimbabwe, there is need to look at a few cases. Members of quite a number of these Apostolic sects are so committed to their spirituality. They can receive material items like stones (*nhombo*) as a remedy to their ailments. Members also thrive through scotching heat, cold nights and heavy rains on open space as they are not allowed to worship under a roof. They believe that during heavy rains they become rain, cold weather they will become cold, scotching heat they will become heat. Even newly born babies are exposed to these conditions without any fear of sickness. A number of people with life threatening illnesses have

also resorted to modern day prophets for faith healing. These include people who are HIV positive, cancerous etc. Some are even prepared to stop medication upon recommendation from a man of God. This goes against treatment plans of most modern medications for example the DOT treatment for tuberculosis and antiretroviral therapy for HIV where one is supposed to take drugs continually.

Religion can foster a spirituality that serves as a bastion of strength, providing emotional consolation, inspiration, guidance, structure, and security; however, clients frequently don't discuss their beliefs in therapy for fear of being judged—an ill-informed psychiatric worker might dismiss religiosity as part of mental illness, or avoid it altogether. But a client's spiritual values are important to proper diagnosis, since diagnosis cannot be based exclusively on objective scientific facts; the line between a spiritual or psychotic experience can become blurred (Gotterer, 2001)

## **WHY SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL WORK?**

It is possible to see how spirituality is more “bendable” to the values and practices of social work (McKernan, 2005). Because spirituality is at the centre of existence for many people and its reach is so broad, it is ideally suited to be integrated into responsible and respectful approaches to therapeutic intervention with clients (Weinstein, 2008). Social workers and other helping professionals should understand the function of spirituality in their client's lives.

The combination of spirituality and social work has implications in the areas of trauma, end-of-life issues, ageing, illness, cultural competence, addiction treatment, ethics, relationships, forgiveness, chronic mental illness, the meaning of life, and attempting to answer the age old question, “Why is this happening?” (Weinstein, 2008).

Conway (2005) asserts that there is a natural integration between spirituality and social work. Social work as a profession traces its origins to the religious and philanthropic motivation that formed the Charity Society Organisations in England. The tradition of the church strongly teaches that we should care for one another while at the same time social work advocates for the improvement of the welfare of disadvantaged members of the society.

Spirituality inspires a sense of mutual responsibility. The spiritually sensitive social worker is in harmony with the many stages and types of changes in human existence and is not close minded or confused by conflicting ideas. He or she realizes that one must take responsibility for the effects of one’s actions (Canda, 1989). Awareness of spirituality helps social workers construct spiritual cosmologies and spiritual anthropologies. Social work is historically and philosophically connected to spirituality. Philosophically, social work and spirituality promote a common interest and self-respect and they are natural allies. The science of social work alone may not be sufficient to address the multiple dimensions of the individual-mind, body and soul conceptions. Spiritual sensitivity fosters an

ethic of mutual benefit and social justice rather than selfish one sided-gain. The spiritually sensitive social worker is socially active and lives and acts in harmony with the processes of social change (Canda, 1997). Excluding spirituality from social work practice leaves clients caught between secular and spiritual outlooks, a dichotomy that stems from the mental health field's attempt to gain legitimacy by allying itself with science. This neglect of the spiritual dimension deprives clients of a full spectrum of treatment (Gotterer, 2001).

According to Bullis (1996) social work and spirituality are natural allies in personal and social healing. Bullis presents some primary rationales for addressing spirituality in clinical social work practice. Faith, according to Fowler (1981), helps one get in touch with the dynamic, patterned process by which people find life meaningful. Faith gives the passion, the commitment, and engagement for moving into the force field of life. It is a way of finding coherence and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up people's lives.

Social work and spirituality have to learn from each other. Spirituality offers social work experiences and insights on personal and community levels that promote social and personal transformations. The most effective practitioner is spiritually inclusive, which means that he/she is open to including spirituality in his/her practice assessments, methods, and evaluations. He/she is

open to continue using any existing intervention strategy he/she has learned, and he/she is also open to discovering what might happen when he/she invites the spiritual dimension into his/her work with her current practice strategies.

Once social workers begin to consider the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of their profession's beneficiaries, they have to begin having insights into how they can intervene more effectively. Thus the social work role relative to spirituality and religion may move from one that is largely passive to one that is proactive (Asher, 2001).

Thus, it should also not be a surprise that social work educators and researchers have begun to inquire about the spiritual needs and spirituality of social work students. Canda (1989) argued that religion significantly affects clients and that individuals possess spiritual needs that assist in providing an understanding of and purpose of life. He claimed that the poorly prepared social work student could be a danger to a client if a client's spiritual growth crisis or mystical experience were to be mistaken for psychopathology.

The continuities or discontinuities between our own spirituality and religiosity and that of our profession's beneficiaries will determine how much we can help them realize their full potential. In Sheridan, et al. (1994)'s study, the respondents expressed the belief that some

attention to spiritual issues in social work practice was appropriate and even desirable even though little specific education was being provided at that time. However, there was some unease as to how religious and spiritual issues would be handled in the actual practice of social work. Concerns were raised about the ability of new practitioners to separate their personal beliefs from those of their clients while the potential clash between fundamentalist beliefs and the ethical principle of client self-determination and support for diversity was also highlighted. Nonetheless, the majority of the study's participants supported the importance of including spirituality in the social work curricula.

According to Asher (2001) all other things being equal, more faith and hope result in: fewer hospitalization days, fewer days in jail or prison, more days in school, more days on the job, fewer suicides; and less spouse, child, and elderly abuse. But by cutting ourselves off from our spiritual roots and purpose, we have dehumanized ourselves and our clients. We create a living hell when we cut ourselves off from our souls and we deny the souls of our clients (Canda, 1997).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The social work profession has come to realize that we need an inclusive understanding of spirituality that respects its diverse

religious and nonreligious expressions. Therefore the writers' give the following recommendations:

- Social work educators in Zimbabwe should include a topic on spirituality in their undergraduate curricula;
- Social researchers should also assess how best the spiritual needs of people can best be integrated with other needs of clients;
- The Council of Social Workers of Zimbabwe should encourage spiritually sensitive social work practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper examined the relevance of spirituality in social work practice. It was noted that spirituality is a very crucial aspect which must not be neglected by social work practitioners. It is also the author's argument that though the subject is so important, social workers in Zimbabwe are not sensitized to recognize it and might therefore be short-changing their clients. This paper should form the basis for further research on the issue at hand especially in Zimbabwe.

## REFERENCES

- Asher, M.; 2001. *Spirituality and religion in social work practice. Social Work today*. Available from: <http://www.gatherthepeople.org/downloads/spirit-in-SW> (Accessed 20 June 2013).
- Baskin, C.; 2002. *Circles of Resistance: Spirituality in Social Work Practice, Education and Transformative Change*. Available from: [http://www.ucalgary.ca/currents/files/currents/v1n1\\_baskin.pdf](http://www.ucalgary.ca/currents/files/currents/v1n1_baskin.pdf) (Accessed 25 July 2013).
- Benningfield, M.; 1997. *Addressing spiritual/religious issues in therapy: Potential problems and complications*. Journal of Family Social Work, 2(4), 25-42.
- Berry, D. M. and York, K.; 2011. *Depression and religiosity and/or spirituality in college: A longitudinal survey of students in the USA*. Nursing and Health Sciences, 13, 76–83.
- Bibby, R.; 2002. *Restless Gods: The renaissance of religion in Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company.
- Bullis, R.; 1996. *Spirituality and social work practice*. Toronto: Taylor and Francis.
- Canda, E. R.; 1997. Spirituality In: Edwards, R. L. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social work* (19th ed., pp. 299-309). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Canda, E.; 1989. *Religious content in social work education: A comparative approach*. Journal of Social Work Education, 25 (1), 36-45.
- Canda, E. and Furman, L.; 1999. *Spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cascio, T.; 1999. Religion and spirituality: Diversity issues for the future. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, 7 (3), 129-145.

Dodo, O.; 2012. *Understanding apostolic church's path, methodology and beliefs: A case of the Johane Masowe Chishanu*. Unpublished book.

Fowler, J. W.; 1981. *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Gotterer, R.; 2001. *The spiritual dimension in clinical social work practice*. Journal of Scientific Study of Religion, 36, 549-564.

Graham, J. R. and Bradshaw, C.; 2000. *A forgiving state of heart: Narrative reflections on social work practice from a Christian perspective*. Social Work and Christianity, 27(1), 40-48.

Healy, M.; 2010. Spirituality & children. Available from:  
<http://growinghappykids.com> (Accessed 25 June 2013).

Kristeller, J., Johnson, T., and Sheets, V.; 2003. Structural validity of spiritual and religious dimensions in relation to alcohol use. Paper presented at the meeting of the Society of Behavioural Medicine.

Machingura, F.; 2011. The Shona concept of spirit possession (kusvikirwa) and the Pentecostal phenomenon of getting into the spirit (Kupinda mumweya). HR Volume 1 2010-2011.

McKernan, M.; 2005. *Exploring the spiritual dimensions of social work*. Critical Social Work, 6 (2), 40-48.

Mbiti, J. S.; 1971. The crisis of mission in Africa. Document. Uganda Church Press. Uganda.

Mbiti, J. S.; 1975. *The prayers of African religion*. SPCK: London.

Moyo, A.; 1988. *Religion and political thought in independent Zimbabwe*. In: Hallencreutz, C., Paloutzian, R. F. and Park, C. L.

(2005) *Handbook of psychology of religion and spirituality*. New York: Free Press.

Roby, J. L. and Maistry, M.; 2010. The spirituality of vulnerable children in South Africa: Implications for social development and welfare. *Journal of Social development in Africa*, 25(2), 11-40.

Setiloane, G. M.; 1980. *African theology: an introduction*. Skotaville: Skotaville publishers.

Sheridan, M., Bullis, R., Adcock, C., Berlin, S., and Miller, P.; 1992. Serving diverse religious client populations: Issues for social work education and practice. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 28, 190-203.

Tacey, D.; 2000. Spirituality as a response to cultural crisis. In: Erricker, J., Ota, C. and Erricker, C. (Eds) *Spiritual education: cultural, religious and social differences: New perspectives for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. East Sussex: Sussex Academic Press.

Tillich, P.; 1987. Religion and secular cultures. In Kline-Taylor, M. (Ed). *Theologian of the boundaries: selected writings*. London: Collins.

Weinstein, E.; 2008. Spirituality in Social Work — the Journey From Fringe to Mainstream. *Social Work Today*, 8 (2), 33-42.