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Christian Civility

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Christian Civility

Abstract

"Every day people are faced with difficult choices about their lives and many times we are called to walk alongside them as they try to navigate these decisions. Sometimes, when decisions and situations are very difficult and complicated the person will seek the help of a social worker, someone who has been professionally trained to help. How are we to best help in these situations?"

Posting about how Christian social workers should respond when they disagree with the life decisions their clients are making from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/christian-civility/>

Keywords

In All Things, Christian, civility, Richard Mouw

Disciplines

Christianity | Social Work

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Christian Civility

 [all in allthings.org/christian-civility/](https://allthings.org/christian-civility/)

Erin Olson

A woman in an abusive relationship decides to return to the relationship. After being raised in the church, a loved one feels disillusioned with religion and leaves the church altogether. A young couple facing an unplanned pregnancy decides to terminate the pregnancy. Every day people are faced with difficult choices about their lives and many times we are called to walk alongside them as they try to navigate these decisions. Sometimes, when decisions and situations are very difficult and complicated the person will seek the help of a social worker, someone who has been professionally trained to help. But as Christian social workers, how are we to best help in these situations? How are we as people to dialogue with our loved ones when they are considering making choices that we feel are wrong for them or downright sinful?

In my *Human Behavior and the Social Environment* class this semester, we have been reading Richard Mouw's book *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*. We have been talking about how we as Christian social workers should respond when we disagree with the life decisions our clients are making, but we also apply these same ideas to how we should respond to these disagreements in any interpersonal relationship. Our clients, our friends, our family members will all, from time to time, make decisions that we don't agree with, that we wouldn't choose for ourselves. These same people may also have opinions that differ significantly from our own.

Every relationship is a sacred space, a gift from God and as social workers, we enter into that space with our clients. Because we have a degree and are armed with knowledge, we are inherently placed in a position of power with people who are often very vulnerable. Our clients come to us abused, broken, disheartened, and often hopeless. Because we are often in that position of power, clients often want us to tell them what we think they should do. They want their social worker to give them advice and, in some situations, to make their decisions for them. But this goes against another key social work principle—self-determination.

The social work profession is guided by a code of ethics which was written and updated by the [National Association of Social Workers \(NASW\)](#). At the foundation of this code is what the NASW calls the core values or principles of the profession. These include the values of social justice, service, dignity and worth of human beings, integrity, competence, and the importance of human relationships. It is this last value that I think can, together with Mouw's ideas about civility, help us as Christians and social workers traverse the waters of these areas of disagreement.

The code of ethics says this about the importance of human relationships: "Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities." This emphasizes the role of relationship in the change process. A strong relationship based on trust and respect is the foundation for change. It takes time and energy to build this relationship. This is the same with any interpersonal relationship. If we want someone to hear us, to listen to us as we speak into their lives, we must first have a solid relationship with that person. A gentle message of disagreement or even conviction will be received much more positively from a person whom we trust and love rather than someone who we feel has no place to pass judgment or give

input to our circumstances.

Richard Mouw has three suggestions for navigating these waters of disagreement—**empathy, teachability, and curiosity**. Empathy requires us to “reduce the psychological distance between ourselves and others.”¹ Empathy is a core skill of the social work profession and although I believe many people are naturally more empathetic than others, I also believe it is a skill that can be taught and improved. Mouw says “when we break out of the bonds of self-centeredness, entering into the experiences of other people, we come closer to fulfilling God’s purposes for human beings.”²

Mouw also encourages us to be **curious as we are in dialogue with those who are in our lives**. He says “we ought to want to become familiar with the experiences of people who are different from us simply out of a desire to understand the length and breadth of what it means to be human.”³ I often find that those who are called to social work have a natural curiosity about people. We want to know what makes them tick, we want to hear their stories, and try to better understand how they’ve become the person/people that they are today. We need to stop making assumptions about people and who they are and be interested in hearing their story and their experiences.

Lastly, **we are asked to be teachable**. Mouw says that “to be empathic and curious in our relations with other people is to want to learn about them.”⁴ This goes beyond just learning about them and involves actually learning from them. We can even learn something from people whose fundamental worldviews are significantly different than our own. This does not mean that we give up our own worldviews, but that by listening and being teachable we might actually better understand our own beliefs and understandings of the world by being open to hearing how someone else’s viewpoint might be different. The Bible is full of instances where people were surprised by the teachers God sent their way. It wasn’t always believers in Jesus who influenced and impacted the people of the Old and New Testament. We too should be looking for lessons God is teaching us through our interactions with both believers and non-believers.

As we enter that sacred space of our relationships, may we remember to use empathy while also being curious and teachable. In a recent Facebook post, Eugene Cho, pastor of Quest Church in Seattle, wrote “Don’t be lazy and make assumptions about people. Ask about their story. Then listen. Really listen. Be humble. Be teachable. Be human. Be a good neighbor.”

Dig Deeper

March is Social Work Awareness Month. Here are more articles that focus on the discipline of social work: [“In the era of mean tweets...and much, much worse,”](#) Abby Foreman opens a discussion on what it means “to engage civilly in a world that has accepted incivility as par for the course.”

Tara Boer shares insights and encouragement for [Those Who Know a Hurting Child](#) and advice for ways we can [Serve Families in Broken Situations](#).

Chelsea Maxwell shares some important insights and wisdom on how to have civility in the classroom: [Classroom Civility](#).

Footnotes

1. Mouw, Richard. *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove: IVP,

2010) 58. [↩](#)

2. Mouw, 59. [↩](#)

3. Mouw, 59. [↩](#)

4. Mouw, 61. [↩](#)