

# ❧ Social Work for Social Justice: Ten Principles ❧

<p><b>Human Dignity</b>  <i>Dignity of the human person is the ethical foundation of a moral society. The measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.</i> Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals. Social workers treat each person in a caring, respectful manner mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities and social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems. Social workers act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person or group on any basis.</p>	<p><b>Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers</b>  <i>In a marketplace where profit often takes precedence over the dignity and rights of workers, it is important to recognize that the economy must serve the people, not the other way around. If the dignity of work is to be protected, the basic rights of workers must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property and to economic initiative.</i> Social workers challenge injustice related to unemployment, workers' rights and inhumane labor practices. Social workers engage in organized action, including the formation of and participation in labor unions, to improve services to clients and working conditions.</p>
<p><b>Community and the Common Good</b>  All individuals by virtue of their human nature have social needs. Human relationships enable people to meet their needs and provide an important vehicle for change. <i>The family, in all its diverse forms, is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened. The way in which society is organized – in education, economics, politics, government – directly affects human dignity and the common good.</i> Social workers promote the general welfare and development of individuals, families and communities. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people at all levels to promote the well being of all.</p>	<p><b>Solidarity</b>  <i>We are our brother's and sister's keeper. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences.</i> An ethic of care acknowledging our interdependence belongs in every aspect of human experience including the family, community, society and global dimensions. 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 and seek to strengthen relationships among people to promote well being at all levels.</p>
<p><b>Rights and Responsibilities</b>  People have a right and a responsibility to participate in society and to work together toward the common good. <i>Human dignity is protected and healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met.</i> Accordingly, every person has a fundamental <i>right to things necessary for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are responsibilities to family, community and society.</i> Social workers, mindful of individual differences and diversity, respect and promote the right of all individuals to self-determination and personal growth and development. Social workers provide education and advocacy to protect human rights and end oppression. Social workers empower individuals/groups to function as effectively as possible.</p>	<p><b>Stewardship</b>  <i>It is incumbent upon us to recognize and protect the value of all people and all resources on our planet. While rights to personal property are recognized, these rights are not unconditional and are secondary to the best interest of the common good especially in relation to the right of all individuals to meet their basic needs.</i> Stewardship of resources is important at all levels/settings: family, community, agency, community and society. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation for all people. Social workers promote the general welfare of people and their environments.</p>
<p><b>Priority for the Poor and Vulnerable</b>  <i>A basic moral test of any community or society is the way in which the most vulnerable members are faring. In a society characterized by deepening divisions between rich and poor, the needs of those most at risk should be considered a priority.</i> Social workers advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and to promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice. Social workers pursue change with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups to: address poverty, unemployment, discrimination and other forms of social injustice; expand choice and opportunity; and promote social justice.</p>	<p><b>Governance/Principle of Subsidiarity</b>  <i>Governance structures in all levels/settings have an imperative to promote human dignity, protect human rights, and build the common good. While the principle of subsidiarity calls for the functions of government to be performed at the lowest level possible in order to insure for self-determination and empowerment, higher levels of government have the responsibility to provide leadership and set policy in the best interest of the common good.</i> Social workers engage in social and political action in order to promote equality, challenge injustice, expand opportunity and empower individuals, families and groups to participate in governance structures at all levels.</p>
<p><b>Participation</b>  <i>All people have a right to participate in the economic, political and cultural life of society. Social justice and human dignity require that all people be assured a minimum level of participation in the community. It is the ultimate injustice for a person or a group to be excluded unfairly.</i> Social workers strive to ensure access to equal opportunity and meaningful participation for all. Social workers empower individuals and groups to influence social policies and institutions and promote social justice. Social workers advocate for change to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources and opportunities required to meet basic needs and develop fully.</p>	<p><b>Promotion of Peace</b>  In light of the human dignity and worth of all and the ethical imperatives of solidarity and stewardship, we are called to promote peace and non-violence at all levels – within families, communities, society and globally. <i>Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon the respect and cooperation between peoples and nations.</i> Social workers promote peace and the general welfare of society from local to global levels.</p>

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*“The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.*

*Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. “Clients” is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals’ “needs and social problems.”*

(Preamble, NASW Code of Ethics, 1999)

*Social work practice at all levels strives towards social justice.*

## *Social work practice:*

- direct service
- community organizing
- supervision
- consultation
- administration
- advocacy
- social and political action
- policy development and implementation
- education
- research and evaluation

## *At all levels:*

- with individuals, families and groups -- at the micro level
- organizations and communities -- at the meso level
- society and the global community -- at the macro level

*Strives toward social justice through these principles which are articulated by numerous faith traditions:*

- Human dignity
- Community and the common good
- Rights and responsibilities
- Priority for the poor and vulnerable
- Participation
- Dignity of work and the rights of workers
- Solidarity
- Stewardship
- Governance/subsidiarity
- Promotion of peace

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*Social justice means loving people so much that  
I work to change structures that violate their dignity.*

Peter Henriot S.J.

## Philosophy Statement

The *NASW Code of Ethics* identifies the profession's core values as service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence. The Code goes on to discuss numerous specific ethical principles and standards in the context of the service function. It provides, however, far less detail related to the justice function. The Code states that

“social workers challenge social injustice” as follows:

*Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, service and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision-making for all people.*

(Ethical Principles, NASW Code of Ethics, 1999)

Out of its firm commitment to social justice and by virtue of the Catholic mission of our sponsors, the College of St. Catherine and the University of St. Thomas, the School of Social Work recognizes Catholic Social Teaching as a rich resource to inform and further specify social justice goals of social work education and practice. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) represents a tradition of social ethics which has derived from multiple sources, including scripture, papal encyclicals, episcopal statements and writings of theologians. Catholic Social Teaching, which addresses the challenges of economic and political life and global harmony, defines standards that universally apply to all human beings and provide guidance as to how people should interact and treat one another within the economic and political spheres of our communities and world. As such, these social teachings provide direction on how to live out the Judeo Christian mandate ‘love one another.’ Thus, Catholic Social Teaching is relevant to all people, not just Catholics. While all faith traditions make a contribution to social justice, the words of Brian Rusche, Executive Director of Minnesota's Joint Religious Legislative Coalition (JRLC) articulate the gift rendered by Catholic Social Teaching:

*Catholic Social Teaching is the most systematic and thorough attempt by a religious faith to articulate its positions on social policy. For JRLC's interfaith work, it provides a first lens to look at nearly every social justice issue and seriously influences all our position statements.*

*Catholic Social Teaching is a gift to the world and people of all faiths.*

Through careful analysis and extensive discussion, the social work faculty has examined the convergence between the NASW Code of Ethics and Catholic Social Teaching. This exercise has led to the development of *Social Work for Social Justice: Ten Principles*. The integration of these principles into the curriculum recognizes and acknowledges the universality of these principles across numerous other faith traditions. As social work educators, we are bound by the NASW Code of Ethics and therefore responsible to teach our students to become professionals dedicated to service and justice. *Social Work for Social Justice: Ten Principles* provides a framework for strengthening the way in which we educate for justice and prepare students for competent and ethical social work practice dedicated to both service and justice.



## Finding Common Ground...

*as we work together to build a program and a profession which more strongly articulate a commitment to social justice ...*

1. We will recognize that no single voice/view has a monopoly on the truth. We will remind ourselves that solutions to our challenges will emerge from dialogue that embraces diverse perspectives.
2. We will not envision ourselves or anyone as 'having all the answers.' No one person/group will judge itself alone to be possessed of enlightenment or spurn others as wrong or misguided.
3. We will test all ideas/proposals for their truth, value and potential impact on our program, on our students and on the clients they will serve. This is our responsibility as ethical social work educators.
4. We will presume that those with whom we disagree are acting with good intentions. We will extend civility, courtesy and genuine effort to understand their concerns. We will not diminish nor trivialize their ideas or concerns with labels, abstractions or blanket terms (such as she/he 'just doesn't get it', 'is a sellout', 'has been led astray', 'is misguided', etc). Instead, we will embrace the complexity of the realities we face and examine their various and multiple dimensions.
5. We will put the best possible construction on differing positions, addressing their strongest points rather than seizing upon the most vulnerable aspect in order to discredit them. We will detect the valid insights and legitimate worries that may underlie even questionable arguments.
6. We will be cautious in ascribing motives. We will not impugn another's motives, loyalties, opinions or comprehension. We will not rush to interpret disagreements as conflicts of starkly opposing principles rather than as differences in degree or in prudential judgment about the relevant facts.
7. We will embrace the realities of our institutional cultures, not by simple defiance nor by naïve acquiescence, but acknowledging both their valid achievement and real dangers.

Adapted from *Called to be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril*. Published by the National Pastoral Life Center, New York, NY.