

should I go?

as a bar to employment in the government and private sector organisations. The judgement was pending as *Community Care* went to press. The CLC describes this as a “crucial case for Christian liberties”, warning that many Christians could be driven out of employment because of rulings requiring them to adhere to equal opportunities policy and support sexual conduct “that they believe is sinful”.

“Christian social workers who believe that the concept of marriage means a man and a woman are discriminated against,” William argues. “Human rights and equal opportunities legislation sound good in principle but it has created a hierarchy of rights where Christians are marginalised.”

Stuart Sorensen, a nurse and contributor to *Community Care*'s discussion forum Carespace, says personal religious practice should be left outside the workplace.

“Social workers are public servants, just as other publicly funded health and social care professionals are,” Sorensen says. “Presumably, then, the duty of care is to provide socially sanctioned interventions, not to pick and choose what is appropriate based upon the beliefs of a particular religion or religious leader.”

He also warns against “predatory” evangelism, adding: “Vulnerable people are more likely to clutch at straws when offered easy solutions as promised by many evangelical groups.”

SOCIAL WORKERS' REMIT

However, Sorensen says that it is within the remit of social workers and other caring professionals to help service users express their own religious beliefs. This is set out in legislation including The Children Act 1989, which states that local authorities have a duty to consider the religious persuasion of children under their care.

Peter Gilbert, professor of social work and spirituality at Staffordshire University, says conflict over religion in the workplace arises because of a lack of discussion and professional guidance within social work. “Although it has its roots in religious foundations, social work has been slow to address the issue of spirituality compared with other caring professions including nursing, psychiatry and occupational therapy,” he says.

Gilbert attributes this to a “suspicion” of religion during the early days of social work in the 1970s, when the ideas of Freud and



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Marx formed the basis of thinking.

Although he views spirituality as the “forgotten dimension” in social work, he says it is encouraging that research into this area is growing. But Gilbert believes social workers need to be able to judge when it is appropriate to express their beliefs. He emphasises the importance of context, arguing that it is reasonable for social workers to reveal personal beliefs and experiences if they are beneficial to the service user's situation.

“Social workers are not robots and should be able to express their beliefs if it helps them to step on to common ground with the people they are trying to help,” Gilbert says. “If someone said they were in a crisis and asked the social worker to light a candle and say a prayer for them, it would be appropriate to do so.”

CONDUCT AND PERSONAL BELIEFS

The General Social Care Council code of practice states that social workers are required to respect diversity, different cultures and values. They are also required to declare any issues “which might create conflicts of interest and ensure that they do not influence their judgement or practice”.

A GSCC spokeswoman adds: “It is important that, when carrying out their work, any personal value system or religious beliefs do not impact on the requirements on social workers to respect diversity, to promote equal opportunities, and to respect the dignity and privacy of people who use services.”

The Nursing and Midwifery code of conduct states that staff should respect people from different background and beliefs.

After the Caroline Petrie case, her employer, North Somerset Primary Care Trust, issued a statement clarifying that it was “not acceptable within the code to project personal beliefs unless invited to do so by patients and families”.

Gilbert says that, although the “emphasis falls on the service users’ right to spirituality”, social workers should also feel able to challenge their beliefs in some circumstances. “In some communities, a child's disability could be viewed as a punishment from God, for example,” he says.

Gilbert believes that strengthened guidance for social workers on expression of religious faith will be needed “at some stage” but not before full discussion with frontline staff.

With more cases like Petrie's waiting to hit the headlines, many believe this cannot come soon enough.

Your views on... religion at work

How you think religious belief and practice fit with social care practice?

● **adra:** “I don't think it's my job as a social worker to challenge the religious beliefs of service users. Religious freedom is an important right and I will always respect that freedom and that right as a social worker. Obviously there are exceptions, such as a religious practice that may put a child at risk. But, overall, it's not my place as a social worker to judge others' faiths.”

● **Shel:** “It baffled me at university why so many students who claimed to be Christians took up

social work careers, while seeming unable to accept some of the basic social work values.”

● **Surfer:** “For me, the ultimate basis for morality is the teaching of Jesus: ‘You should love your fellow human being as you love yourself.’ This is entirely consistent with social work values as practised in the UK. If you look at social work history you will find that most of the value base for social work has evolved from Christian values.”

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