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Reverse mission
A model for international social work education and transformative intra-national practice

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The number of social work educational programs offering international courses, practicum experiences and other opportunities to study abroad is rapidly growing. Trend data suggest increased activity in international practice will continue (Hokenstad et al., 1992). But just what is international social work, and what should it be in the 21st century?

Several definitions of and approaches to international social work appear in the professional literature. George Warren first used the term in 1943 to describe professional social work practice in agencies engaged in international activities (Friedlander, 1955). More recently, Barker (1995: 194) described international social work as ‘a term loosely applied to 1) international organizations using social work methods and personnel, 2) social work cooperation between countries, and 3) transfer between countries of methods or knowledge about social work’. Hokenstad et al. (1992) define international social work as professional social work practice in different parts of the world. They emphasize the different roles that social workers perform, the practice methods they use and the

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challenges they face in foreign countries, especially in developing ones. Healy (2001: 7) defines international social work more broadly as ‘international action by the social work profession and its members. International action has four dimensions: international related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice, and international policy development and advocacy’. This definition seems preferable because it is most inclusive of diverse dimensions of social work practice in a global era and allows for new and emerging conceptualizations of international social work.

In order to develop a fuller understanding of international social work, advance the work that needs to be done on issues transcending national borders, and provide new meaning and direction to older (especially North American) approaches, the authors borrow the concept of reverse mission from religion-based educational endeavors and explore its utility for global social work education and practice. We provide definitions and models of reverse mission drawn from the theological education literature, share our experiences with models of this approach and illustrate the value of trans-disciplinary learning from religious studies to social work. We discuss why we believe reverse mission has the potential to transform not only the way educators in highly industrialized countries prepare social work students for practice in a shrinking world, but also practitioners’ agendas for social change. Lastly, we advocate for more international content and experiences, specifically for transformative, intra-national practice.

Definitions and models of reverse mission

Reverse mission is a concept that may best be understood by first examining the terms mission and missionary, and then ‘reversing’ their traditional meaning. Wordsmyth.net (2002), an online dictionary, defines mission as: ‘1) a group of people sent to a foreign location to establish relations and conduct trade or do diplomatic or religious work; 2) the purpose guiding such a group of people; [and] 4) a particular task or self imposed duty, often religious and performed with great conviction.’ Similarly, it defines missionary as ‘1) a person, often a member of a church or religious order, who is sent to a foreign country to teach, heal, or serve; [and] 2) a person desiring to convert others to a principle or set of beliefs.’ Mission in reverse, then, can be understood as an alternative approach to what is generally, widely and historically thought to be mission work.
The concept comes from the ecumenical efforts of global mission education for North Americans and Shalom ministries with poor, oppressed and culturally diverse peoples in urban centers. Instead of teaching, preaching and trying to convert people in or of another country or community, reverse mission emphasizes learning from indigenous people and their leaders, raising missionaries’ and sojourners’ levels of consciousness and advocating for changes in one’s home country that can have an impact on poverty and injustice in the world.

Today one finds a variety of forms of reverse mission. Both the Maryknoll Fathers and the Jesuits have instituted programs for informing citizens from industrialized countries about the injustices suffered by developing ones (Smith, 1979). A similar reverse mission project encourages US and Canadian missionaries, working in Central America and Mexico, to influence relatives and policymakers back home. It aims to open their ears and eyes to ‘the silenced cry of so many of their brothers and sisters who suffer the evils of an ever-increasing state of poverty and injustice’ (Smutko, 1997: 118). This model of reverse mission emphasizes raising the critical consciousness of North Americans and advocating (within the US and Canada) for social and economic justice for oppressed populations of the world (Barbour, 1984; Gittins, 1993). Another model of reverse mission highlights conversion of the messenger or missioner and ‘equipping equippers cross-culturally for appropriate globalization of theological education’ (Stevens and Stelck, 1993: 31).

The CCIDD experience

One model of reverse mission is the Cuernavaca Center for Intercultural Dialog on Development (CCIDD), founded in 1977 by the lay missionary Raymond E. Plankey in conjunction with Mexico’s Roman Catholic bishop, Serio Mendez Arceo. It is based on Plankey’s (no date: 1–2) experiences in Chile (1962–73) while part of ‘probably the first collective ecumenical effort at reverse mission by American missionaries in a foreign country’. The CCIDD model builds on the early work of Paulo Freire and the See-Reflect-Act model of liberation education and conscientization developed by the Base Christian Communities of Latin America. It emphasizes experiential learning by:

1. seeing with eyes made new through encounters with the poor and marginalized populations;
2. reflecting on or thinking about how people are made poor, why
opportunity persists, and how US domestic and international policies
affect Mexico and other countries;
3. acting, in one’s own context or home country, as allies of the poor
and in solidarity with those who struggle for justice;
4. evaluating the direct and indirect (global) effects of local actions
to improve social conditions; and
5. celebrating small successes and persistent movement toward
social transformation and liberation.

Today, CCIDD is what Plankey describes as a unique center
where people can bring together an understanding of social, eco-
nomic and political realities in a dimension of Christian faith. It is
also a program offered as part of a Saint Louis University School
of Social Service course entitled ‘Experiencing community among
the poor of Mexico’. Introduced in 1992 and involving approxi-
mately 20 participants and two instructors each summer, this
course has engaged over 120 students and alumni since its inception
in an intensive two-week program at CCIDD. Student and faculty
participants visit and dialogue with the poorest of the poor and
the people who work to empower them. A dialogical form of educa-
tion is employed, as the participants are encouraged to ask the
people themselves about their lives and experiences. As students
and faculty listen with preferential attention to the voices of the
poor, they learn about the political, social and economic dynamics
of Mexico and Latin America and the role of the US in the
impoverishment and oppression of indigenous peoples. They ‘listen
to their voices, their narratives, and their constructions of reality’,
and in abandoning the role of elitist experts they ‘enter into a colla-
brorative search for meaning’ with the people (Hartman, 1992: 483).

Participants from the US who come with the preconceived view
that their country can do no wrong experience an uncomfortable
awakening as they learn the role their country has played in main-
taining poverty and oppression in other countries. Often the
reaction of those who are witnessing extreme poverty for the first
time is that of guilt. The CCIDD program attempts to substitute a
more constructive feeling of ‘com-passion’ (commitment to justice
with passion) for the less constructive guilt response. The overall
impact of the program is quite powerful. Many participants report
that they found this to be a ‘life altering’ and ‘transforming’ experi-
ence, leading them to become involved in social justice activities at
home. Some returning CCIDD participants, for example, have
actively participated in ongoing social actions to close the School of Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia; others have joined United Students Against Sweatshops campaigns; and still others have advocated for federal and state welfare policies that treat immigrants fairly.

Thus, the CCIDD program engages participants in reverse mission as it generates new experiences, critical insights and understandings for liberating internationally-based domestic practice, advocacy and professional exchange. As a result of all three authors’ individual participation in the CCIDD program, each came away from his or her experiences in Cuernavaca believing in the merits of reverse mission and pursuing some kind of a personal mission to transform some aspect of international social work education and practice. Evidence of such endeavors is our work on the further development of international social work courses, the establishment of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the US and abroad, and the dynamic interactions and exchanges we cultivate and maintain with professional and non-professional educators, organizers and social justice practitioners beyond our borders.

**Shalom ministries**

Barbour (1984) describes Shalom ministries, which were founded in Chicago, Illinois and nearby Gary, Indiana, as involvement in ministry and mission that seeks justice and shalom in the city. She presents reverse mission as a key concept involved in this effort.

The mission-in-reverse approach teaches that the minister can and should learn from the people ministered to, including and perhaps especially, from the poor and marginalized people. By taking his people seriously, by listening to them and indeed learning from them, personal relationships are developed and the dignity of people is enhanced. Such presence to people is seen as necessarily allowing them to be the leaders in the relationship. The people are the ‘teachers’ and the minister/missionary is the ‘reacher’. (1984: 304)

Barbour suggests that another way of describing and understanding the idea of mission in reverse is as a dialogic model of ministry and service as expressed in Paulo Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. When mission is seen as dialogical, it means that missionaries as sojourners to the inner city or another country become persons immersed in the world of others. It is with people that questions are asked, basic human values are affirmed or challenged, and
oppressive and progressive policies and structures are discerned in context.

The other key concepts inherent in Shalom ministries interact with and reinforce reverse mission efforts.

1. Work with grassroots, neighborhood faith-based or Christian communities that emerge when diverse people meet, is pursued as an alternative to involvement in the larger, more traditional institutional structures or church hierarchy.

2. Contextualization emphasizes learning the historical and cultural context of a people and integrating such knowledge, values and skills in one’s interactions with people.

3. Bridge building calls for reconciliation. Seeking understanding, mutuality and community between members of diverse cultures and religions is key. It involves reaching out to the poor, alienated and marginalized, relocating into their communities and/or inviting them into a church or community where they are welcomed.

Not unexpectedly, similar ideas and approaches to those guiding Shalom ministries (reverse mission, community-based faith meetings, contextualization and bridge-building) surface in the social work literature on church and/or faith-based community organizing. Evans (1992), for example, articulates a decidedly reverse-mission approach to the community as she relates liberation theology and empowerment theory to social work practice with the oppressed. Similarly, Manning and Blake (1996) identify assets for faith-based community development in African American communities that are often easily discovered when organizers employ reverse-mission strategies in their practice.

When a social work student intern or practitioner works in any disadvantaged urban area in an industrialized country, it is quite common to be faced with a population that struggles with many problems. Often these include high unemployment and limited legitimate work opportunities, substance abuse, AIDS, deteriorating housing and homelessness, households headed by single mothers, inadequate transportation services, and overcrowded and inferior schools. These factors, coupled with the general sense of apathy regarding the ability to change the political system or other requisite institutions (i.e. medical, educational, state and federal agencies), can make a social work student or practitioner feel overwhelmed or
even useless. We find, however, that reverse-mission approaches in devastated urban communities seem to magnify the hope, resiliency and small successes of those struggling to improve their lives and social conditions, so that students and even seasoned practitioners are more likely to feel inspired than overwhelmed or useless. Moreover, mission in reverse may provide spiritual or faith-based motivation and engage people in a consciousness-raising process that both help to prevent burnout. These expected benefits of reverse mission come not only from the Shalom ministries approach in inner cities but also when students and faculty adopt this approach in international social work education and practice.

Modeling reverse mission in Ghana

A sojourn in any developing country in the global South can prove to be a very rewarding, motivating and educational experience. BSW and MSW social work students from St Louis University take advantage of both class and practicum experiences available in Ghana, West Africa. When social work students arrive in Ghana, they are faced with some development issues that are similar to those of poor, at-risk communities in the US. Planned experiences ensure that students encounter new problems as well. These include a population of youth that represents the majority of the homeless (i.e. street children), a community filled with natural resources that seem to provide it no benefits and difficulties related to a family system in which one-third of the relationships involve multiple wives (National Population Council, 1994). Students also learn about the denial of or limited access to viable services (health, education, etc.) due to income and the devastating impact of AIDS in Ghana.

Through experiences with three distinct NGOs, students are introduced to the concept of reverse mission, as well as the importance of encouraging and stimulating the development of skilled practitioners in the host country. These organizations are briefly described in the section that follows.

The Centre for Community Studies, Action and Development

The Centre for Community Studies, Action and Development (CENCOSAD) was established in 1977 as a people-centered,
action-research NGO to promote strategies for empowering communities of individuals to realize their own development through an integrated approach of self-organization, participatory action-research and evaluation training, networking and resource mobilization. The CENCOSAD model is derived from these five basic principles:

1. people for development and development for people;
2. the creation and maintenance of community;
3. the creation, re-creation, control and utilization of knowledge and skills;
4. local initiative and local control; and
5. bridge-building and linkages (Sarpei, 2000).

The CENCOSAD model, conceived and chaired by Ghanaians, fully realizes that human development is the result of the interaction of people. No one group of people develops fully in isolation. They seek to build bridges for exchanging ideas, information, knowledge, skills and resources. This is done in a way that does not allow one group to subjugate another or hinder the full empowerment and liberation of a community. Students are welcome to come in and work as partners assisting a community to reach its self-determined development goals and objectives, employing indigenous development strategies and methods that are culturally appropriate, acceptable and credible.

*Gender and Economic Reforms in Africa*

The Third World Network-Africa and the North–South Initiative have coordinated wonderful efforts to build the capacity of African women’s groups via the Gender and Economic Reforms in Africa (GERA) Program. It has helped to launch new voices in the policy debates regarding privatization, trade, export processing zones and financial institutions in Africa. Students in Ghana have opportunities to talk directly to women advocates, researchers and workers involved in the struggle to help women find and speak their voices. GERA discovered that North–South partnerships between women help to remove such local hindrances as time, financial resources, non-functional entities and the lack of representation that often limit public participation in the development process by poor communities and marginalized groups (Tsikata and Kerr, 2000).
The Accra Foundation for Intercultural Communication and Awareness

The Accra Foundation for Intercultural Communication and Awareness (AFRICA) serves as a host to students immersed in international class and practicum experiences. It is a US-based non-profit corporation and a recognized foreign-based NGO in Ghana. It is comprised solely of volunteers who seek to stimulate communication and exposure between people from around the world, hoping that enlightenment and awareness will motivate all to become active participants in the struggle to build a just and equitable global society. AFRICA raises resources and donates them to Ghanaian NGOs and institutions. It believes in local initiative and local control to coordinate local development efforts. AFRICA also emphasizes the importance of those from the global North, realizing that their lifestyle is often made possible due to the exploitation of the global South. The organization believes it is essential that social work students, practitioners and educators from the US understand, reflect and act upon this reality once they return home from their Ghanaian experience, which will prepare them to be more effective social workers, locally as well as globally.

Table 1 presents a summary comparison of the traditional model of Christian mission with models of reverse mission in terms of five key characteristics: the model’s goal or desired outcome, system targeted for change, partners in the change effort or action system, scope of concerns and roles for change agents. It highlights how the models are different and/or similar.

Reverse mission for international social work?

Reverse mission is decidedly a useful way to reconceptualize international social work education for BSW and MSW students and provide a new vision of culturally competent practice in a global era. Its application to international social work education would mean a shift in the knowledge, values and skills that we emphasize and what we do with what we learn.

Several authors identify certain shifts or changes that are necessary if US social workers are to be responsive to peoples’ needs in a global economy. Hartman (1990), for example, suggests we move away from a long tradition of intellectual isolationism. Lusk and Stoesz (1994: 102) assert that if American social work is to be useful in an international context, it will need ‘to discard the
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<td>Goal/desired outcome</td>
<td>Increased acceptance and following of Christianity</td>
<td>A view of the world from the perspective of the poor and marginalized; heightened awareness of ways US policies block liberation and of challenges for global justice; engagement in dialogue and work in solidarity with those who struggle for justice; involvement in local efforts for social transformation at home and in the world</td>
<td>A sense of community among people of diverse races, religions, socio-economic classes, and cultures within needy urban areas and between those who have left the city and those who live there now; relocation to and reinvestment in the inner-city, and reconciliation with socially excluded persons</td>
<td>Heightened awareness of own bias, prejudices and role of the US, IMF and World Bank in developing countries; influence development of US foreign/domestic policies that affect peoples of other countries; end professional imperialism; foster mutual international exchanges and use of innovations from other nations to improve one’s practice</td>
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**System targeted for change**

Non-Christians, people involved in indigenous spirituality or religions of developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America

North American Christians; religious, social justice, cultural, academic groups from the US and Canada

Disconnected residents of inner city communities and persons of faith who have left the city for the suburbs

Social work students, educators, and practitioners from the US and other highly industrialized nations

**Partners in change effort/action system**

Members of the clergy – priests, ministers, nuns, religious brothers, people who work in mission territories established by such organizations as the Catholic Foreign Service Society of America, the Congregations of Missions, the World Council of Churches, and the Evangelical Foreign Mission Association

Members of poor families and squatter settlements; Base Christian Communities; local leaders in labor, politics and religion; community organizers, historians, leaders of food and health co-operatives, women’s self-help organizations, subsistence farmers; exiles and activists from Latin America

Grass-roots ecumenical-faith communities that emerge in cross-cultural relationships; lay members of church congregations

Members, staff and volunteers of US-based and international NGOs, persons active in social development projects; social work faculty students, and practitioners of the host country; the International Federation of Social Workers; the International Association of Schools of Social Work

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<td>Scope of concerns</td>
<td>Religious conversion of non-Christians, changing ‘natives’ primitive and uncivilized way of life, poverty, illiteracy, hunger, disease, and ‘underdeveloped’ natural resources</td>
<td>Race and gender issues, global economics, international debt, free trade, NAFTA, human rights, repression of political dissent and organized resistance, foreign aid, liberation theology, immigration policies, amnesty</td>
<td>Urban sprawl, gentrification, poverty, poor housing, inter-racial conflicts, recent immigrants, absentee landlords, high crime rates, AIDS epidemic, lead poisoning, high school dropouts, drug abuse, redlining</td>
<td>Third-world debt crises, AIDS epidemic, many poor families with parents absent due to distant employment, large number of homeless youth, illiteracy, poor health care and housing, high unemployment, environmental impoverishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles for change agents</td>
<td>Teacher, preacher, itinerant missionary, evangelist, church ambassador, religious adviser</td>
<td>Participant-observer, listener, learner, witness, community liaison, facilitator, advocate, ally</td>
<td>Mediator, community organizer, advocate, human relations/outreach worker, facilitator</td>
<td>Participant-observer, advocate, collaborator, policy analyst, facilitator, social activist, ally</td>
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myopia of a predominately clinical world view’. Midgley (1990) suggests that because social work in the industrialized world is increasingly practiced in an environment of rapidly declining resources, developed countries have much to learn from those who work in conditions of severe resource constraint and who have formulated creative solutions to problems encountered in the developing world that are in many ways not unlike those encountered in many inner cities, mountain hollows and reservations throughout the US. He and others encourage us to develop new strategies of meeting human needs based on the experiences and expertise of developing countries. One illustration of such international exchange and borrowing is the case of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh helping poor women with credit for self-employment, and the transfer of this innovation in micro-lending into social work practice with poor women of urban Chicago, Illinois and rural Pine Bluff, Arkansas in the US (Jansen and Pippard, 1998).

Similarly, other authors (Krajewski-Jaime et al., 1996) suggest that international experiences may help US social work students and practitioners move from cultural ethnocentrism (which uses the dominant culture and its values as the single standard against which the merits of other groups are gauged) to ethno-relativism (the ability to respect cultural differences and empathetically shift to another cultural world view). They advocate the use of international internships for baccalaureate social work students to build intercultural sensitivity and improve competence for practice with increasingly culturally diverse populations of the US. Their aim is to reverse students’ (not clients’) tendencies toward ethnocentric denial, defensiveness and minimization, in order to heighten their acceptance, adaptation and integration within the cultural context.

Some changes have also begun in the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) curriculum requirements, with the goal of better preparing social work students in the US for practice in an interdependent world. CSWE, which periodically issues curriculum policy statements specifying requirements for accreditation, had no international content requirement in its 1992 Curriculum Policy Statement (CPS). The most recent Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) document (effective 1 July, 2002) corrects this. The new EPAS not only state that ‘the profession works to effect social and economic justice worldwide’, but also mandate that all social work ‘programs integrate social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of
oppression’ (CSWE, 2003). Toward that end, a reverse-mission approach to international social work education integrates such resources as Prigoff’s (2000) economics text for social workers about the social outcomes of economic globalization with strategies for community action, and Poole’s (1999) article that makes the connection between NAFTA, American health and Mexican health. There is a need to infuse more content of this nature and more literature from authors of the global South into the social work curriculum of the global North. Additionally, this approach helps students make links between their own behavior and the impoverishment and exploitation of others. For example, understanding the connection between the $13 billion Americans spend annually on chocolate and child slavery on cocoa plantations in developing countries sensitizes students to the bitter taste of injustice. It also motivates them to pressure industry to end child labor, co-operate with fair-trade agreements and buy only from suppliers who pay just wages.

A reverse-mission approach to international social work education and practice stresses learning from people in and of other countries (especially global South countries) and confronting our own cultural biases and prejudices. Such learning helps to reduce the threat of professional imperialism, geocentric bias and elitist notions of service (e.g. North Americans ‘giving’ knowledge or ‘helping’ those in ‘underdeveloped’ countries). A value base for practice consistent with reverse mission places greater emphasis on human rights and more broadly integrates the values of people of diverse cultures. In addition, knowledge of social work practice in other countries provides a basis for critical reflection that expands and enriches our own practice at home as informed participants in international policy debates and as advocates for just and innovative solutions to social problems. Reverse mission also helps remind those who advocate for international social work education and experiences that we are ultimately most effective when we think globally and act locally to foster social and economic justice throughout the world.

Acknowledgement

References


