Ministry for a new age: Church-based counseling centers

(A work in progress)
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Background interest

This research project has arisen from four areas of current interest.

First there is concern to provide an apologetic in the face of current, widely reported atheistic thinking. Writers like Mc Grath (2007) and Pulkinghorn (2000) have spoken convincingly from the scientific discipline in response to writers such as Richard Dawkins (2006). My interest takes a more pragmatic line, in that I wish to identify the Church in action for social justice and community welfare. This report adds Australian data to the considerable research already completed in regard to the importance of religion and spirituality in areas of health, education and human welfare (Koenig: 2002, Mountain: 2004, Pargament: 1999, 2006)

Secondly the research arises from an interest in the concept of evolutionary social change. Kegan (1994) writes of the two polarities of human evolution, the first is the security of being part of a group and the second is the need for individual self-expression. In our current society he sees this evolutionary model as one in which individuality has gone too an extreme and we are struggling to find the next step.
 Many writers along with Kegan have proposed that our secular, materialistic society is traveling on a dangerous road (Costello: 1999, Tacey: 2003) The excessive individuality is bringing with it personal loneliness and anxiety as well as communal environmental degradation. Awareness of ourselves as interdependent is once more rising. Like the pendulum on a clock we swing from asserting our individuality and then moving into the need of belonging to the group. The rising interest in counseling and psychotherapy is a sign of this swing. There is now a growing awareness that we need others to help us in the journey of life. We need additional understanding and a raised level of consciousness to help us cope with the complexity of demands and choices before us in this post- modern western culture.

Thirdly, from my position as School chaplain over the last 9 years I am persuaded that the acts of loving service from Christian groups is the most powerful form of showing Christ to the world. It has been my experience that students will often turn away from formalized worship. But engagement in such things at the 40-hour famine of World Vision, provide a real experience of sharing in the life of Jesus. Our students are active learners so the presentation of spiritual exercises or activities related to social justice grab their attention. It is my belief that the missional church is a tangible sign that God's love is at work and will be the way into faith in the future for our young critical thinkers.

Finally, it is my hope that this research will be used as a way to empower and inspire individual Churches who are looking for mission. From my home church in Brighton Beach our Church Council has been prayerfully considering the kind of mission appropriate to our local community. During the 1960's our church established a kindergarten as a community service, then during the 1980's we supported the building and administration of nursing home facilities in the local area. During the

last 10 years we have been sponsoring and supporting two high quality child care centers. As these social welfare services have now been privatized, once again our local church is asking the question "How can we serve our community as Christ's people?" This research gives many possibilities for local churches, helping them to hear God's voice regarding a mission to their community.

Variety of the sample

For this research, ten counselling centres have been investigated, all in the city and metropolitan area of Melbourne (Australia). There is one centre in the CBD, three centers in the inner city, one centre in the outer suburban area and five centers in the suburban area. The centers have their origins within a variety of parish churches: Catholic, Anglican, UCA, Independent Pentecostal, Baptist, Churches of Christ, and Salvation Army.

Research method

There is a triangulation of data collection involving: observation, semi structure interview with the director of each centre and a questionnaire to be completed by the counselors at each centre. The data is analyzed qualitatively using the method of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss; 1967, Glaser; 1998).

Definition of terms

In order to clarify the research topic a working definitions of key terms is used. "Church-based services" relates to those services arising from a particular local church and governed by a board with a major representation of people calling themselves Christian from that denomination.
"Counselling" refers to "A process where interventions are used to bring about change by improving the social or interpersonal functioning of a client in order to decrease emotional and psychological symptoms of maladaptive behaviour" (Sexton; 2003, p.588). Counselling, through this definition, can encompass much more than traditional "talk therapy". Creative and physical activities, as well as play therapy are part of the intervention used to decrease maladaptive behaviour.
For the most part the counselling services associated to the various local churches are self-funded. The exception is found in the three inner city centres, although still governed and grounded in the Christian denomination, government funding has been obtained because of the extreme difficulties presenting in the client base. In one centre all clients have a diagnosed mental illness, and at the other two centres clients present with multiple chronic problems often of a generational nature related to low socio economic status.

Physical Facilities

There are three purpose built facilities in the research sample; the government has funded one of these, the other two are self funded initiatives of the local church community. Most of the centers are using older, existing facilities, such as small houses adjoining the church. All have needed substantial modifications. All centers have a reception area with many leaflets advertising various forms of help available in the wider community. There are toilets, a waiting area and specially soundproofed counseling rooms. Six of the centers have a library. Office/reception areas have a secure filing system for confidentiality. Of the ten centers, eight have a security system with call alarms for the protection of the staff.

Historical formation of each centre

The directors of all of these centers considered that a sense of ministerial overload was a primary motivation in the formation of the centre. It was seen in all centers, that the minister was a necessary part of organizational change into this form of mission. Two centers traced their initial vision to an influential lay leader who worked with the minister. All centers recognized the importance of volunteer work by lay people in the initial formation of the service. The volunteer component has been an ongoing feature of each centre.

Mission statements of church-based counseling services -Key words

Analyzing the formal mission statements from each centre some key words and concepts have been identified. All centers saw their service to be related to **support and encouraging** of others. Expressions relating to **healing, wholeness, freedom, empowerment and growth** for clients were similarly common in most mission statements. Half of the mission statements referred to **Jesus Christ or Christian** motivation as an identifying feature of the service. Mission documents also mentioned **professional standards of practice and low cost** as a feature in one third of the centers.

The director of each centre in the interview used similar key words. The concept of existing for the service of others and having a client–centered approach were prominent. It was of interest to note that the need for professional standards was a common theme in all of the interviews. There was much discussion regarding training, professional supervision and quality control measures. Although Christian faith and compassion were mentioned all directors were concerned to stress that counseling was a service of care not an opportunity for evangelism. Another common theme in the interview was the importance of the affordability of the service. Each centre recognized the limitations of the services in the community and were pleased to proclaim that the Church-based service provided low or means–tested fees and could help those who could not find help elsewhere.

Celebration of best practice

The directors of each centre were asked to identify aspects of the service that they would identify and celebrate if giving a media interview. The most common expression from each centre related to the service giving- health, growth, change, recovery, new skills, support and meeting needs for a wide range of people. About half of the directors said that Christian compassion and dedication were an important aspect of their centre. A similar number reported that the low cost and professional standing of the centre should be recognized. Linked to the professional nature of the service, was a sense of pride that a wide range of help was available because of the different backgrounds of the counselors involved at the centre.

For further consideration …….

At this interim stage of research three aspects of the church-based services are emerging that demand further investigation:

Prayer ministry

It was reported that all services made a distinction between the Pastoral Care given to the Church community and the counseling offered as a professional community. But associated with the regular counseling service, three of the centers offered "Prayer Ministry". Prayer ministry is seen as an aspect of intercession and was linked to

counseling at these centers, it was not actively suggested to clients but the facility was there for those who wished to take part. As an adjunct to counseling this is a new form of Christian ministry, related to the traditions of intercessory prayer and prayer for discernment. It is a feature deserving research attention Aspects could be seen to relate to the intuitive companioning of creative arts therapy and it has a strong interdisciplinary link to the theological understanding of the particular church.

Psycho-educational programs

Secondly, the counseling links related to psycho-educational programs is another field deserving attention. These educational programs are being conducted at many of the churches where counseling is available. It seems that the education program can lead into counseling or counseling lead into the education groups. Psycho-educational programs that were available included: re-making marriage, male sexuality, courage for kids, women's issues, coaching for small business managers, resisting the drug culture, coping with grief and loss and body image.

Counseling and mental illness

Finally mention should be made of a further area needing greater research- the high incidence of mental illness and its impact on counseling. This was seen in the CBD and Inner City centers where counseling needed to be presented in various ways to accommodate to the mental health of the clients.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, this research is incomplete. The data from two more centers are still to be added and further analysis undertaken. It is anticipated that the research will be completed by the end of 2008 and a more detailed report will be published.

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