

Lay Counselling Within The Local Church

Lay counseling accomplishes many things: it involves members in the work of the church, it provides a fulfilling ministry for lay persons, it takes a load off the pastor. It also solves people's problems.

Gary R. Collins

"This is a significant and influential church." The associate pastor who sat across the table from me was not telling me anything new. He was on the staff of a large growing church known all over the country for its evangelistic outreach, its community penetration, and the powerful preaching of its senior pastor. Along with its successes, however, the church faced a serious problem which was producing staff frustration and fatigue.

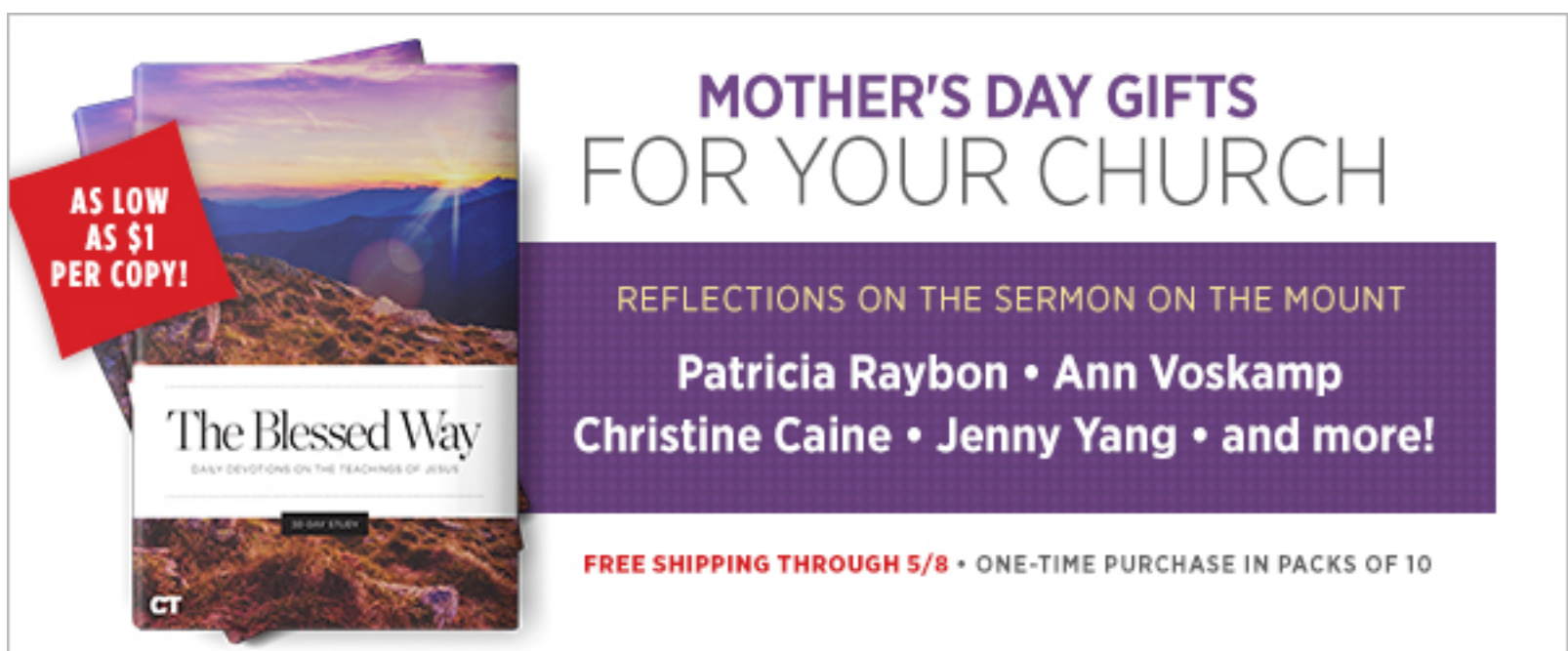
"We don't have enough programs of continuing care for many of the people who come through our doors. The preaching is excellent, and we have a full program of discipleship and Christian education; but how do we help single parents, the divorced or widowed, and those who are struggling financially or grappling with emotional problems? How do we meet the unique needs of teens, or help adults cope with marital tensions, drinking, mid-life crises, or spiritual dryness?

"We've tried to meet these needs head on, and since we started our counseling center, we're probably better equipped than most churches. We even have a radio and television outreach which helps many people. But the needs are almost overwhelming, and we don't know how to gear up to meet them."

He waited for me to respond, and for a brief moment my mind raced in several directions looking for words that would help both of us focus our conversation toward the solution he was seeking. Some of my seminary colleagues and pastor friends would have replied that personal needs are best met from the pulpit. "Preach the Word," they urge, "and the problems will take care of themselves."

To some extent this is true. In this age of self-help books and popular seminars, we sometimes forget that proclamation of the gospel and the practical teaching of Scripture is the basis for helping people cope with life. Jesus was a preacher, as were the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles.

These spiritual giants were not content to stay behind a pulpit, however. They met people individually and discussed problems personally. By his life and teaching, Jesus emphasized face-to-face contact, and he encouraged mutual caring among his followers. The writers of the Epistles used the words "one another" almost sixty times, usually in the form of admonitions to care, encourage, edify, teach, confront, and support. James defines "pure and undefiled religion" in terms of both holy living ("keeping oneself unstained by the world") and compassionate service such as caring for needy widows and orphans.



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People-helping is taught in the Scriptures, it is required of all believers (not

just pastors); it is urgently needed in all congregations, whatever their size, as people struggle with today's stress, confusion, and anxiety. Recognizing this need and the biblical mandate to meet it is the first step toward developing a congregation of "people helpers." Only then can we look at some practical, procedural questions.

What Is Lay Counseling?

Counseling involves a caring relationship in which one person seeks to help another deal more effectively with the stresses of life. There can be a number of counseling goals:

- ¥ clarify problems

- ¥ explore and express feelings

- ¥ cope with stress

- ¥ find freedom from spiritual, psychological, and interpersonal conflicts

- ¥ develop self-acceptance and God-awareness

- ¥ confront counselees with their sinful and self-defeating thoughts and/or actions, and help them find a new or renewed willingness to live in accordance with biblical teaching.

Counseling also enables counselees to reach their fullest potential and to become involved in growth as disciples and disciplers for Jesus Christ. The process is summarized not so much by the Greek word *noutheteo*, which means to admonish, warn, and rebuke, but by the word *parakaleo*, which means to comfort, support, and encourage, as well as to exhort and admonish.

Counseling is often seen as a foreboding process involving couches, complicated terminology, and foreign-accented therapists with mind-reading

skills. Such a stereotype is collapsing quickly, as it should. Although counseling often involves face-to-face discussions between sensitive, skilled professionals and their paying clients, the term "counseling" has come to mean much more. It may include, for example, the teaching and learning of skills, an involvement in activities which reduce personal and community pressures, or joining a group of people who work together to solve their problems. Counseling may occur in an office or clinic, but it also takes place in restaurants, shopping centers, homes, work settings, and churches. As defined in this broad way, counseling is "caring" or "people helping," and thus is an activity which should involve all Christians who are concerned about one another. Of course there are specialists as in all other fields-individuals whose training and expertise enable them to deal skillfully with the in-depth conflicts of those who need help. But most problems do not need a specialist's involvement, and this is where lay counseling becomes very important.



Are lay counselors effective? According to an impressive body of empirical research, the answer is Yes! Lay people can and do help, often as capably as professionals. Regretfully, almost none of this research has been brought to bear on the church. Nevertheless, many congregations are developing and emphasizing lay counseling programs. Let me draw on the conclusions of psychological research, share some of my own observations in developing and using a lay counselor training program, and summarize conclusions which have come from an informal telephone survey of several churches which are

involved in lay counseling.

Who Does Lay Counseling?

Psychologist Lawrence Crabb, one of the pioneers in this field, has proposed that lay counseling should take place on three levels. Level I is counseling by encouragement. It involves all believers of a local church, and its objective is to teach them how to be more sensitive and caring. An example of this might be the covenant groups in the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. As described by the pastor, Louis Evans, Jr., in his book *Caring Love*, these groups are composed of believers who care for, support, help, encourage, and give account to one another.

Level II, counseling by exhortation, is more selective. It is implemented by a group of mature believers who learn helping skills through a 35- to 40-hour training program.

At Level III, counseling by enlightenment, a few selected Christians in each local church are given in-depth training for a 6- to 12-month period, and are taught to handle the deeper, more stubborn problems which don't yield to encouragement or exhortation.

Although this three-level approach is not accepted by everyone, it emphasizes the widely-held view that all church members should care and help others, but only a selected few should be trained as lay counselors. In Romans 12:8 we read that *paraklesis* is a spiritual gift. Such gifts are distributed throughout the body of Christ, as God wills, and are used for the purpose of edifying the church. Not all members of the body have this gift of "coming alongside to help." But many do, and these people must form the basis of a lay counseling program.

In considering who should do the counseling, it is important to recognize that within any congregation there will be some members who have no special counseling gift or training, but whose personal experiences enable them to

help others in special ways. Widows, for example, can often help other widows, and divorced persons frequently can help those whose marriages are breaking up. Recently a teen-ager in our church lost her hand in an accident. Within a short time, another family in the congregation called to say that their son had experienced a similar tragedy several months previously. Soon one family was helping another through the sharing of a common experience.



But for those who show evidence of being gifted in "coming alongside to help," I would suggest the development of a formal lay counseling program as an effective way to meet the overwhelming needs of many congregations. Such a program can be successful if four key ingredients are given careful consideration:

¥ pastoral support

¥ careful selection of counselors

¥ effective training

¥ development of programs for using trained counselors

Let's consider each of these in turn.

What Is the Pastor's Role?

The pastor's encouragement, support (especially from the pulpit), and willingness to allow trained lay persons to counsel are all important if the program is to succeed. For a variety of reasons, some pastors are reluctant to let lay people counsel, and others seem to be threatened by any prospect of lay counselors who might be more effective than they or their staff members. In churches where the pastor believes that all problems can be resolved by exhortation, or is convinced that the church should avoid any appearance of being a therapeutic community, lay counseling programs are likely to flounder and eventually die. In each of the successful programs encountered in the telephone survey, the pastor was enthusiastic and clearly supportive.

How Are Lay Counselors Selected?

Churches will find a variety of selection techniques ranging from open invitation (where anyone who so desires becomes involved) to selection through a process of interviews and tests. Whatever method is chosen, careful selection is a key to lay counseling effectiveness.

Many people may want to be involved when a lay counselor program is first announced. In one church the pastor announced the formation of a training class for lay counselors and set up 20 chairs for the first meeting. At the announced time 140 people appeared-almost half the congregation.

To keep classes small and to be more carefully selective, some churches give training by invitation only. This can create resentment among those who want to participate but are not invited. Often many (not all) of these persons are individuals with problems of their own. They come to the class subconsciously seeking solutions for their own needs, or intent upon helping others as a means of sublimating their own struggles. The following approach is suggested for recruiting the right people:



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1. Carefully design or choose a program for training lay counselors.
2. Get appropriate approval to start the program and make its existence known.
3. Publicly emphasize the importance of caring, but stress that counseling is a gift which many believers may not possess; that a rigorous training program is required before the potential lay counselor will become active in the church counseling ministry; and that completion of the program will not necessarily make one a qualified lay counselor. It is important to discourage casual involvement in the program.
4. Announce that there will be a selection procedure to enter the program. This may cause some resistance and criticism, but it helps prevent insensitive, immature, and otherwise unsuitable people from entering the program. If you are careful not to "put down" anyone, most people will see the value in some initial screening. Criticism will be reduced (and some personal needs will be met) if you conduct a prior class on the ministry of caring and the discovery of spiritual gifts. This class could be open to everyone, followed by a more in-depth class open only to those who successfully complete the selection screening.

Screening might involve:

¥ a brief written statement acknowledging the applicant's adherence to the church's doctrinal positions, plus a testimony of personal Christian experience.

Some churches ask applicants to respond to the questions used in James Kennedy's Evangelism Explosion program. Also helpful is a statement of the applicant's reasons for wanting to be in a lay counseling program.

¥ a letter of recommendation from two or three people who know the applicant well. At Faith Presbyterian Church in Aurora, Colorado, applicants are asked to submit a letter from their spouse, closest in-town friend, closest non-Christian friend, and others.

¥ an interview during which the class leader and another church leader try to assess the spiritual maturity, stability, and motivation of the applicant.

¥ a psychological test or two. Many churches use the Taylor/Johnson Temperament Analysis (TJTA), although research has demonstrated that a test known as the 16PF is the best predictor of counseling effectiveness. Such tests have to be obtained and interpreted by a trained psychologist or other competent person.



Some readers may resist this as being too rigorous and time-consuming; but subsequent experience is likely to demonstrate the importance of choosing

counselors carefully!

How Are Lay Counselors Trained?

Several programs have been developed for the training of lay counselors. Table 1 in this article summarizes several programs which are available, and Table 2 lists books which would be helpful to a training program. In some congregations there may be access to a competent professional who can "custom design" a training program which will carefully-match the needs of the congregation to the desire for trained lay counselors. Many non-professional instructors will adapt some of the materials in Tables 1 and 2 to make them more relevant to the unique needs of the individual church. Obviously, any training program will be more effective when the teacher has some familiarity with professional counseling techniques and counselor training, although such background information is not absolutely necessary.

It is helpful to divide training into three phases: pretraining, training, and post-training.

The pretraining phase involves selection of materials, announcement of the program, and selection of the participants. If you decide to do an initial course on caring and the discovery of spiritual gifts, you might want to lead the class in a discussion of my book *The Joy of Caring*, Stedman's *Body Life*, or Yohn's *Discover Your Spiritual Gift and Use It*.

In the training phase, there must be opportunity for students to learn by listening to lectures, reading, observing, and experience. Most programs involve at least 40 to 50 hours of training (some of which may be completed at home) spread over a period of several months. It is best to keep the training groups small (12 to 15), to meet regularly, to use at least some printed materials, to be flexible, to allow time for students to share of themselves and to express their own needs and insecurities, to discuss complex problem issues such as depression or homosexuality, and to involve students in "role plays"-brief periods of practice counseling in which class

members divide into pairs, counsel each other about some real or assumed problem, and then discuss the practice counseling with the class which has been observing. If a professional cannot teach and comment on the role plays, it might be helpful to secure the services of a professional who could serve as a consultant.

Ideally, the training should include:

- ¥ basic biblical knowledge, especially that which relates to personal problems, helping people, and the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

- ¥ knowledge of counseling skills and the opportunity to practice these skills.

- ¥ some understanding of such common problems as discouragement, anxiety, excessive stress, or spiritual dryness.

- ¥ an awareness of both the ethics and the dangers in counseling.

- ¥ a knowledge of the importance and techniques of referral.

The best programs are committed to increasing a student's sensitivity and helping skills, are based on scriptural principles, are alert to the established findings of modern psychology, and are committed to giving participants support and practical help.

All of this could seem overwhelming to the beginner, but much of this information is provided in the published programs listed in Table 1.

The post-training phase is a follow-up time of further learning, discussion of cases, and encouragement. When post-training is not implemented, lay counseling programs sometimes have difficulty surviving, although trainees may continue to apply the training to themselves or informally to others.

Lawrence Crabb's three-part training program (encouragement, exhortation, enlightenment) at Spanish River Presbyterian Church in Boca Raton, Florida,

involves an approach somewhat similar to what we have proposed. Another one is the creative program developed at Elmbrook Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin.

The Elmbrook program grew out of a need. The pastor's wife, Jill Briscoe, teaches a large, women's Bible study which attracts people from all Over the Milwaukee area. When the women first began approaching her for counseling help, she referred them to professionals; but she soon concluded that most of the problems did not require such intensive and expensive intervention. Slowly, therefore, a three-year lay counselor training program developed under the guidance of psychologist David Hubbard.

After taking the "Discover your spiritual gifts" class, women either volunteer or are invited to take a counselor training program, Bible study leaders stay alert to find potential class members who are spiritually mature and who appear to have counselor potential.

During the first year of training, these class members meet biweekly for two hours to study doctrine, practice role plays, and share with one another in open, caring fellowship. During the second year, a variation of the "people helper" program is used (see Table 1), including more role plays. Periodically (four or five times each year) an outside resource person will conduct a onesession, special seminar on such subjects as self-image, alcoholism, or understanding teenage problems. During this year a few of the class members are given counselees; but throughout training, students are told that they may not be given counselees even if they complete the training.

At the end of two years, the "graduates" are available to talk with women who want counseling following the Bible study. The counselors meet together weekly for a session with psychologist Hubbard, who gives some instruction, but mostly guidance, as cases are discussed confidentially and anonymously.

How Are Lay Counselors Used?

Lay counselor training is used in three ways. First, the counselors are helped themselves. Professional counselors sometimes talk about the "helper-therapy principle"-a belief that the people who get the most benefit from counseling are the counselors. This has been found repeatedly in lay counselor programs. People appear to mature spiritually and psychologically as a result of the training, even though such training may never be used to help others.

Helping people informally is a second outgrowth of training. Family members, neighbors, work associates, fellow church members, and others appear to benefit from the informal help given by lay counselors, although it is difficult to determine the extent and effectiveness of such informal helping.

Third, there are the more formal church-related programs. Some of these are highly organized; others are not. As examples, consider the following:

- A midwestern church broadcasts the morning service and invites listeners to call in to discuss personal or spiritual matters with trained lay counselors who answer the phones on Sunday afternoons. A similar outreach is used in Christian television.

- A church in southern California has a training program for singles, who in turn are available to counsel with other never-married and formerly-married church members.

- Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis is large, and strives to keep track of all members. Trained laypeople, working under the direction of the church's professional counseling service, have been involved in calling on "disenchanted members." The goal is not to manipulate people back into active membership, but to listen, care, and express a willingness to help. Lay counselors also visit church members who are in the hospital.

- A church in the west has a "reach out" program started by one of the lay counselors. The purpose is to find overburdened mothers in the church and

community and reach out to them with encouragement, practical caring, and counseling help.

-Christ Church in Oak Brook, Illinois, has a counseling service staffed entirely by lay persons. A couple of newspaper articles in major papers alerted the community to the availability of free counseling help. Now when people call the church to request counseling, they are asked to leave a telephone number and are called back by the lay counseling coordinator who assigns callers to trained lay counselors from the church.

-A more comprehensive approach is that of The People's Church in Montreal. From seven to ten o'clock, two evenings a week, several lay counselors are available at the church to meet people personally or to talk with them by telephone. Initially publicized at the church, the service has come to be known by area pastors and church people, some of whom come to the lay counseling service because they are too embarrassed to approach their own church leadership. At a recent psychological convention, Siang-Yang Tan, their pastor of lay counseling, summarized four goals of this lay counseling community service:

1. Friendship and fellowship on a one-to-one basis for those who are lonely and need someone to talk to.
2. Counseling and supportive help for those who may be facing some life crisis or emotional/ spiritual problem.
3. Guidance and growth experiences for those who may be searching for practical ways to grow spiritually and mature psychologically.
4. Referrals to professionals or appropriate agencies for those who may need or seek further help.

Such lay counseling is not limited to church settings. Mission organizations and parachurch groups such as Youth for Christ, Young Life, Navigators,

Youth Guidance of Pittsburgh, and others have developed their own training programs or used published programs to train staff members and lay persons in counseling skills. At times, the church can work together with these organizations both in training and in lay counseling.

What Problems Might Be Encountered?

Counseling is emotionally draining work. It involves helping people at times of crisis, and often it is time-consuming and schedule-disrupting. Therefore, in launching a lay counseling ministry several problems can be anticipated. These include the following:

¥ In some places laws regulate the licensing of counseling centers. Although these laws often exclude churches or employees of religious organizations, they sometimes restrict use of the term "counseling," or raise requirements concerning malpractice. It would be wise to secure legal advice about whether lay persons in your area could be sued for malpractice or for harming counselees through the giving of unsound advice or guidance.

¥ Some church leaders, including pastors, are unwilling to involve lay counselors in the church's ministry. "I'm too busy to make referrals," "I have no time to supervise," "The church members insist on seeing the pastor," or "These issues are too complicated for lay people" are among the reasons given for not using lay helpers. Each of these reasons has some validity, but each may also be an excuse, or mask a desire to retain control of counseling. Lay counseling will only be accepted by the congregation when church leaders enthusiastically support a lay counseling program, refer counselees to lay persons, and encourage church members to give and receive help from one another.

¥ Lay counselor training programs often attract people whose own problems could interfere with effective helping. Included are the rescuers, who have a need to control other people's lives; the pushovers, who have a serious desire to help, but who are unable to resist the manipulative demands of counselees;

and the super-enthusiasts, who cannot accept rejection or failure, so they quit whenever they encounter counselees who are not quickly getting better. A careful selection screening can help to discourage such people from lay counseling involvement.

¥ Most people are threatened by role plays and often will spend role-play time "getting organized," discussing counseling techniques, or in other ways avoiding their session for practice. It helps if the leader acknowledges that role plays bother almost everyone, especially at the beginning. Stress the crucial importance of this part of training. Trainees who refuse to participate should not be permitted to remain in the program.

¥ Some instructors are unwilling to permit individual differences in lay counselors and assume that the approach being taught is the only valid approach. Instructors must be alert to such dangers and try to avoid casting all trainees into the teacher's own image.

¥ Some lay counselors are unable to handle the drain of counseling others and are unwilling to admit that the load is too heavy. On-going supervision of lay counselors, preferably by a professional, can help the counselors both to deal with their own tensions and to withdraw gracefully and without embarrassment if the emotional strain is too great.

¥ Some lay counselors may become overly involved with counselees both personally and, at times, sexually. Post-training supervision can help to prevent this, and so can training programs which emphasize the dangers of intimacy in counseling, the possibility of counselee manipulation, and the importance of referral.

The director of a counseling center in Colorado recently shared his biggest problem in launching a lay counseling program in his church. "I failed to make enough time available for supervision and follow-up. Training and supervising lay persons has been one of the most exciting and fulfilling ministries that I have ever had, but we can't just train people and turn them

loose to influence the lives of others. Lay counselors need guidance."

This comment leads to one additional problem with lay counseling ministries: a lack of time for supervision and guidance of the counselors. As with so many other activities, doing the counseling ourselves sometimes is easier than finding the time and trying to muster the effort needed to train others and to oversee the program-especially if problems arise. I have seen this attitude in large churches, but the temptation to forget lay involvement and do it ourselves is especially apparent in one-pastor churches where there is no staff person who can take responsibility for yet another new ministry.

Several solutions to this problem might be possible. An efficient lay counseling coordinator might be recruited to serve as a "clearing house" person who assigns counselors to counselees, and monitors possible problems which should be referred to the pastor or to a lay counseling oversight committee. (People involved in such activities must be able to keep confidences.)

A professional Christian counselor in the community might be hired to supervise lay counselors. This might cost \$40 or \$50 for each supervisory session, but sometimes the counselors themselves are willing to absorb this expense. If no professional is available, do not overlook the possibility of supervision which could come from a psychiatrically alert physician or nurse, a school guidance counselor, or a local vocational guidance counselor. If none of these people is available, there can be value in a group of three to four lay persons forming a counseling committee that pools its understanding, and gives direction and encouragement to the individual counselors. Whenever possible, however, try to find some professional input. This can help lay counselors avoid problems, and to work much more efficiently in their counseling.

Several years ago, Columbia University Press published a book entitled *The Non-professional Revolution in Mental Health*. Lay people, it was argued, are becoming more and more involved in "people helping." This surely is a

healthy trend, especially as lay counseling moves into the local church and becomes the responsibility of church members as well as Christian leaders. Such caring is not only part of a trend; it is a biblical requirement commanded by the Lord and taught by the Spirit-inspired biblical writers. They instructed us to reach out in love to help the needy and to bear one another's burdens. Lay counseling in the local church is an important move in this direction. -

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