Christian Psychologists: Serving Christ and His Kingdom

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Christian psychologists (Bouma-Prediger, 1990; Canning, Pozzi, McNeil, & McMinn, 1999) have cast the vision of a Christian psychology built upon what they call "faith-praxis" integration, in which they see the work of the professional psychologist as Christian calling or ministry. Conceptualizing Christian psychology within this context implies that professional work will be characterized by what Canning et al. (1999) call Kingdom work, which is described as "those endeavors that are biblically directed, teleological focused, Holy Spirit inspired and surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ" (p. 13). From this perspective, a Christian psychologist does not necessarily possess a unique therapeutic technique or theory through which she provides direct service, but she does possess a unique purpose and motivation which guides and informs her work. If a Christian psychologist embraces Faith-praxis integration and teleologically focused Kingdom work, it seems that it would force him to examine his professional identity and activities in order to ensure that they are consistent with a Kingdom mentality.

Having established the purpose-driven thrust of a faith-praxis orientation, it becomes obvious that the nature of the work a Christian psychologist performs is of the utmost importance. Accordingly, Canning et al. (1999) assert that Kingdom work should include an emphasis on serving the marginalized and underserved members of our society. In addition to an emphasis on the specific population a professional serves, I believe it is vital to recognize the importance of edifying the Church in an attempt to make the entire body of Christ better equipped to realize His Kingdom on this earth. By helping the Church grow stronger (spiritually, emotionally, and even organizationally) at a local level, professional psychologists can empower people, both corporately and

individually, to be "salt and light." Accordingly, my hope is that Christian professionals who take seriously the Kingdom mandate and who ascribe to faith-praxis integration would consider devoting at least a portion of their professional activities to work within the local church.

How can professional psychologists fulfill their calling to the local church? The traditional, and most intuitive, manner in which a Christian psychologist could place himself in service to the local church is through direct service of psychotherapy. While my intention is not to minimize the validity of individual counseling and therapy, I do believe there are often creative (and possibly more effective) ways in which a professional could be involved in Kingdom work and fulfill his or her calling to the local church. Recently, there has been a surge of excellent literature which discusses general attitudes, strategies, and examples of how psychologists can serve the church (Chaddock & McMinn, 1999; Edwards, Lim, McMinn, & Dominguez, 1999; McMinn, Chaddock, Edwards, Lim, & Campell, 1998), but there have been few "case studies", so to speak, that outline what particular psychologists are currently doing for the Kingdom. In order to facilitate further work by psychologists within the context of the local church, I believe it would be helpful to look directly at the experience of those professionals who are currently "in the trenches". The remainder of this paper is dedicated to exploring specific examples of how psychologists are currently placing themselves in the service of the Church, and therefore fulfilling their calling for Christ and His Kingdom.

Psychologist as Independent Service Provider

One way in which a psychologist can place herself in the service of the church is to provide creative services to local congregations that would enhance both the spiritual

walk of individual church members and the religious community at large. These activities would place the psychologist within the context of the church, but he would operate independently using his unique expertise and training to create and implement an intervention. There seems to be innumerable ways in which a professional could approach this objective. Some examples might include setting up a systematic structure for small group bible studies, designing and implementing support groups, and making didactic presentations on mental health issues to specific groups in the church. The following is an example of how one professional psychologist assumed this type of role within the local church.

Robert Watson, Psy.D., a Christian psychologist in private practice, is currently consulting with a large church in the mid-west to aid in personnel selection. The church employs a very large staff (several hundred), and uses Watson's expertise (a) to screen for the presence of psychopathology in potential employees and (b) to identify the relative personality strengths and weaknesses of applicants in the final stages of the selection process. Watson (R. Watson, personal communication, September 4, 1999) outlined the following steps which he completes for each potential church employee. First, he receives the results from both a MMPI-2 and a MCMI-III that were completed by the applicant during an interview with human resources at the church. He then interprets the results of the tests by looking for any information that might indicate evidence of psychological disorder. Next, he assesses the relative personality strengths and weaknesses of the candidate. Watson then makes comments on how the candidate's personality might interact with the unique demands and requirements of the position for which he or she is being considered. Last, he makes recommendations to the manager

who will be responsible for supervising the potential candidate in his or her ministry position. In these recommendations to the supervisor, Watson attempts to give specific feedback about the candidate's personality characteristics that might give the manager insight into how to effectively train and empower the potential staff member. In short, Watson is using knowledge gained through psychological theory and technique to ensure that ministers are plugged into the staff positions in which they can be most effective. It seems likely that the results of Watson's service to the church could have remarkable effects upon both the efficiency of the personnel selection process and the quality of the entire ministry of the church.

The role of an independent service provider poses specific challenges to the psychologist working within the context of the church. First, if the professional is to be truly effective, and sensitive to the particular needs of a particular church, then he will have to become a student of that churches' distinctive vision, community, and organizational structure. Watson reported that his work has required him to become very familiar with the entire organizational structure of the church as well as with particular ministries and leaders. Second, while the independent service provider might not work directly with members of the clergy, she does work in cooperation with church leaders in order to help them fulfill the mission of the church. This makes it necessary for psychologists to spend additional time building a solid relationship with church leaders, in addition to time spent working on the project.

Psychologist as Collaborator

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in the literature about collaboration between psychologists and clergy (Chaddock & McMinn, 1999; Edwards et al. 1999;

McMinn et al.1998). While the work that has been described thus far in this paper could be referred to as collaboration, it is best to think of it as unidirectional with a psychologist providing services to enhance the church, and particularly the effectiveness of a church staff. However, many researchers (Edwards et al. 1999; Tyler, Pargament, & Gatz, 1983) are attempting to conceptualize collaboration between psychologists and other professionals as bi-directional, or as a joint venture involving two or more individuals with particular resources and areas of expertise. Bi-directional collaboration implies a deep respect of the competencies and expertise of the leaders of the local church, and demands their involvement and input in every step of an intervention.

The Center for Church Psychology Collaboration

The Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration at Wheaton College approaches psychologist-clergy collaboration from a bi-directional perspective and exists for the explicit purpose of placing psychology at the service of the Church. One facet of the Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration is to provide doctoral students the opportunity to work in the service of the local church by placing them in a consulting role "with and within a local congregation" (Ellens & McMinn, 2000). Brent Ellens, M.A., is currently a doctoral student clerk with the Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration, and his work with a local congregation will be highlighted as an exemplar of bi-directional collaboration between psychologists and members of the clergy. Ellens is presently collaborating with the pastoral staff of a conservative evangelical church. The services Ellens offers through the Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration consist of broad-based activities, and include consultation with youth pastors, needs and resources assessment, training of lay helpers, and preventive interventions.

In consultation with the youth pastors, Ellens is developing a manual for volunteer youth leaders which covers such topics as physical and sexual abuse, drug abuse, and family and peer conflict. The manual is designed to facilitate the training of youth leaders, and also to serve as a continuing resource for leaders to use in their ongoing work with the young people of the church.

In the needs and resources assessment, Ellens is working with the pastoral staff of the church to determine the current direction of the church and to cast a vision for the future. The assessment includes an initial brief quantitative questionnaire mailed to all members of the church. Through responses to this initial questionnaire, members of the congregation willing to participate in further qualitative research are identified. These parishioners are then invited to participate in either a focus group or an in-person interview, or to complete an open ended qualitative survey questionnaire.

The lay counselor training was conducted in concert with the director of member care, who is a licensed psychologist. Ellens met with 12 future lay counselors (all selected from the congregation at large by the director of member care) for several months for up to two hours per week. During their meetings, such topics as basic empathy, conflict management, family and systemic issues, dealing with grief and loss, and stress and trauma were covered in a didactic format. After the training, lay counselors meet with church members who are experiencing emotional or spiritual crisis. However, the lay counselors meet with parishioners only after the parishioners have had a brief contact with the pastor and have been screened by the director of member care. It should be noted that when the director of member care deems a case to be too serious to be addressed by lay counselors, she refers that parishioner to a professional.

The preventive intervention consisted of a premarital counseling group that was held in the church facilities and consisted of several engaged couples from the congregation. The group met weekly for an eight week period and covered topics such as finances, conflict management, and sexuality. While there were some didactic presentations, the group primarily involved discussion and interaction between couples. Each pre-marital couple was also paired with an older couple who could mentor the pre-marital couple by meeting with them on a semi-regular basis. These mentor couples also received training and resource materials.

Special Challenges

There seems to be special challenges specific to bi-directional collaboration. The most important one to note is keeping a truly collaborative spirit when working with clergy, rather than merely uncovering what they want and expect of the service and then following through without the input or expertise of the clergy. The Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration has devised a strategy called the Multimethod Church Assessment Process (MCAP) to help professionals working in collaboration with clergy avoid this tendency (Dominguez & McMinn, 2000). The MCAP is based on the foundation of consistent and frequent contact with the clergy members in order to ensure that the end product is customized to the particular context and informed by the clergy's unique insights and expertise. It should be noted that frequent contact with members of the clergy for the purpose of gaining their imput and feedback is the essential ingredient of any bi-directional collaborative effort. In fact, if a psychologist doesn’t utilize the clergy members expertise when designing or implementing an intervention, he is probably working as an independent service provider.

Psychologist as Church Staff Member

Dr. Ron Ercoli graduated from a Psy.D. program with the intention of following what he called the traditional and respectable path of private practice (R. Ercoli, personal communication, April 1, 2000). However, soon after his internship year, he found himself on staff at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, IL. Willow Creek is an enormous church with over 20,000 attending weekend services. The size of the church is essential to understanding Ercoli's job description because the number of people requiring care at the Willow Creek is possibly 10 times more than the number of people requiring care at the typical “mega-church” (around 2000 attenders). The majority of Ercoli’s time is split between two main responsibilities: the child protection program and staff coaching. As the director of the child protection program , Ercoli ensures that the children of Willow Creek are safe by screening leaders in the children's ministry to make certain they have no history of harming children. In the event that the children's ministry does receive a complaint from someone about a leader, he follows through by investigating the matter and calling the state Department of Child and Family Services if necessary.

Ercoli is also a "staff coach," a position which gives him the opportunity to encourage and equip the lay counselors of the church, as well as to meet with the leaders of the lay counseling ministry on a weekly basis. Training for the lay counselors is done once a month, with Ercoli either presenting on such topics as suicide, chemical dependence, personality disorders, and coping with spiritual crisis or arranging for a professional psychologist from the community to do so.

In addition to these two main responsibilities, Ercoli also coordinates the counseling referral network, which is a list of local therapists (psychologists, social workers, and masters level therapists) to whom the lay counselors can refer parishioners when their problems are severe enough to warrant professional help. Rather than merely compiling a list of therapists, Ercoli maintains contact with each therapist and ensures that they are getting the necessary continuing education credits and are maintaining licensure. He also handles any complaints about a therapist made by parishioners.

In addition to these activities, Ercoli spends about 10% of his time consulting with church elders and other staff members. These church leaders have access to Ercoli on a need-to-see basis, and utilize his expertise to help them deal with parishioners who are experiencing emotional difficulties or even more severe psychopathology. Another 10% of Ercoli's time is spent in direct pastoral care of parishioners. Usually, he provides this direct care on a short term basis when a lay counselor is not available to see the parishioner.

There are some special challenges for psychologists working on a church staff. As a staff member of a local church, even a licensed psychologist is considered a "minister" by both the congregation and the other members of the staff. This makes for considerable role confusion and for unique ethical dilemmas. Ercoli reported that assuming the dual roles of a psychologist and church staff member has indeed created distinctive challenges for him at Willow Creek. For instance, he noted that when he sees a parishioner he or she will often preface a remark with, "I'm going to tell you something that I don't want you to tell anyone else". Ercoli states that he is immediately reminded of his ethical responsibility as a psychologist to report things like child abuse and homicidal

thought and intent. However, he said he also wants to be an agent of reconciliation and to promote the parishioner's spiritual growth through the confession of sin. To make matters more difficult, in the state of Illinois Ercoli has the clergy penitent privilege, which releases him from responsibility as a mandated reporter. It should be noted that Ercoli, in the interest of truth and justice, has resolved the dilemma mentioned above by refusing the clergy penitent privilege and affirming his status as a mandated reporter to those parishioners he meets within the context of pastoral care. Nonetheless, the dual role of psychologist and church staff member is confusing and obviously poses unique challenges.

Conclusion

Obviously, the extent to which each professional mentioned in this paper is involved in the local church is very different. The independent service provider (Watson) is primarily a private practitioner, but he does consult periodically with the human resources department of a local church. The Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration demands a substantial weekly commitment from Ellens and requires more frequent and regular contact with the clergy of the local congregation in which he works. The church staff member (Ercoli) is immersed full time in the ministry of Willow Creek Community Church. However, although there are major differences in the nature and quantity of their professional work, each of these psychologists has put himself in the service of the church and is therefore engaging in what can only be described as Kingdom work. The purpose of the paper was not to highlight any particular approach to Kingdom work, or to deify the efforts of any particular psychologist. It was only to provide a snapshot into the work of professionals who are currently serving the church in order to incite others to follow

suit and to look for opportunities to help the Church grow stronger spiritually, emotionally, and even organizationally. My hope is that the entire community of Christian psychologists (in this country and beyond) will embrace the notion of Christian psychology as Christian calling and begin to serve the Church through professional activities that are formulated and implemented first and foremost for Christ and His Kingdom.

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