

Building bridges

– the importance of counselling and personal development in spiritual growth

Linda Watkinson explores the place of counselling and personal development within church and faith community settings

I read Dawn Allison's article 'Counselling in the Church of England'¹ with interest, as it resonated with my observations of the place of counselling and personal development within church and faith community settings. As a result of her research, she concluded, there are many challenges, contradictions and complexities in providing church-based counselling and was left with many questions for which there are no easy answers.

As a counsellor who trained and works in a 'secular' context, and who is also part of a church community, I could see the benefits of providing accessible counselling for church members but was very aware of the challenges Dawn Allison speaks of. It was to address these challenges and complexities, that I and two colleagues set up Focus Barbury Counselling Service, a 'not for profit' organisation, to provide affordable counselling to both the local churches and the communities they are part of, regardless of whether or not individuals within those communities are affiliated in any way to the church. We also provide education and support for leadership and pastoral workers within local church and faith communities, hoping to build bridges, to dispel some of the myths around 'secular' counselling and to facilitate an

understanding of how counselling and personal development can facilitate spiritual development.

We wanted to provide an affordable, professional counselling service that church members could access for themselves, knowing that the counsellor would be open to discussing their faith journey alongside any problems they may bring. It was equally important for us, as a service, based on Christian principles of compassion and respect for individuals in our community, regardless of faith, gender, ethnic origin or life choices, that our counsellors were also available to those not affiliated to any particular faith community. We make it clear in our literature that issues of faith and belief will not be discussed unless specifically requested.

Whilst I approach this article as an individual familiar with the Christian church and pastoral organisations and represent a charity² which provides counselling and education to both the church and community, I think it would be valuable and very interesting to hear the experience of counsellors who belong to other faith backgrounds and how or whether counselling/personal development has a role in the spiritual journey of their community?

Much has been written about the place of spirituality in counselling but I would like to explore how counselling, personal development and supervision might contribute towards the spiritual/faith journey. I can only start with my own experience. As I trained to be a counsellor, through the personal development groups I attended, I began to understand my 'self' more fully, and how I related to others and they to me; it opened up very challenging questions, which I was able to work through, and this in turn helped me to understand more about my spiritual or faith journey. I began to feel more grounded in my faith and more able to live with uncertainty, and to trust my own interpretations. The difference was the facilitated space, either individually or in group.

My own experience of church has been that there can be little time or space to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the teaching received, to consider what it really means? How can I truly relate to the teaching and the changes it speaks of? What does it mean to live life abundantly or to experience freedom? And, just as pertinently, how do I, or can I, challenge the things I might experience in church, which do not accord with my own understanding or interpretation of my Christian faith? Of course, I write of my own experience and recognise that others' expectations of faith may be different. It is clear from Fowler's stages of faith³ that individuals and church communities have very different expectations and interpretations of how they experience the faith journey. Whilst he emphasises that no one stage is better than another, it can be challenging and uncomfortable for an individual if they find themselves in transition from one stage to another and 'out of step' with the stage at which their church community operates. In both my own experience as a church

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member and in my work, I have become aware that there are individuals who require an environment in which they feel safe to ask difficult questions, a space to explore openly and an opportunity to re-evaluate and question their faith alongside others who feel the same or can empathise. In a sense there is nothing new about the importance of pondering the self. Perhaps as long ago as the 5th century St Augustine may have been expressing something of his frustration that faith communities were not as open to understanding the self as he would have liked, when he said, 'Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering!'

I believe counsellors who are open to working with issues of faith and spirituality have a very important role to play in working alongside pastoral workers. We have much richness to bring to one another.

Perhaps another important aspect to consider when looking at faith communities is that they very often attract individuals who are searching for some sort of meaning in life, questioning why they are here, who they are, and having a desire to know more about something beyond their finite humanity and to explore the possibility of the existence of God/a creator, or maybe searching for 'healing', either knowingly or not. Of course, there are many reasons why individuals go to church and clearly not everyone is going to be open to the kind of 'soul searching' that can effectively, but often painfully, help individuals to explore the questions above. For those who search for more, who want more than a set of rules to live by or are willing to live with uncertainty, church can be a disappointing place, full of promise but somehow not delivering. The questions individuals come with are huge and varied and the received way of doing church is often not conducive to seeking answers from within. The teaching is largely didactic and there can be a real pressure 'to do faith the right way'. Faith communities can be large and unwieldy creations and despite the good intentions of the leadership, can leave individuals floundering and not quite knowing how to move on. What does it mean when we are told to forgive, to let go, to hand over guilt, to leave the past behind? What does it really mean when we are told to forget self and put others' needs before our own? The pastoral systems within churches are set up to work alongside such individuals; but once again, my experience is that there is often little training and support



for these workers and no concept of providing a space for them to consider and reflect on the effects of supporting and facilitating others. The load in terms of time and emotional energy is often high and pastoral workers are often not protected by the professional and ethical boundaries that counsellors work within. In this area, too, I believe counsellors are well placed to provide effective and safe support and education, and it is something that Focus is increasingly engaged with.

Other considerations which Dawn Allison¹ also touched on in her research, are the confusion in churches about what counselling is, differing levels of training, poor understanding of an ethical framework, difficulties around boundaries and speculation and suspicion between a secular and Christian approach to counselling. For all these reasons I would suggest that it is very difficult to provide a counselling service within a specific church, and it is to avoid these difficulties that Focus was established. It is staffed by fully trained and accredited counsellors who are in agreement with the Christian principles we espouse and who are equally comfortable working with individuals of faith or none. We operate out of a centre not connected to any particular church, which affords a high level of confidentiality and ensures that appropriate boundaries can be observed. In addition to providing an affordable counselling service to the whole community, we aim to provide education, training and

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support to the pastoral work of the church, not to replace the unique nature of each community's approach, but to help them provide a safe, accessible and considered pastoral approach, which, when appropriate, we can underpin with 'professional' counselling. Our vision is to provide a 'bridge' for both secular and faith-based counselling and to build, over time, a trusting relationship between them, where each of our approaches can be both respected and enhanced by the other.

Biography

Linda Watkinson is a BACP senior accredited counsellor, who until recently worked at the University of Warwick with both individuals and groups. She also founded and co-manages Focus Banbury Counselling Service, a charity which provides affordable counselling along with support and education for pastoral organisations within the community.



References

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- 3 Fowler J. *Stages of faith*. New York: Harper and Row; 1980.
- 4 St Augustine. Source: think exist.com http://thinkexist.com/quotation/men_go_abroad_to_wonder_at_the_heights_of/219256.html