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STARTING AND MAINTAINING A LAY COUNSELING PROGRAM AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

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INTRODUCTION

During recent years, strong programs of community mental health have been developed utilizing a combination of professionals and trained lay volunteers. Bellak has called this development the third major revolution in the history of psychiatry (Heilig, 1968). Its success has demonstrated that a trained and caring lay person can exert a personal and positive force for emotional well-being among his/her community. Indeed, given

- the great need and demand for services,
- the availability of excellent gospel-compatible counseling techniques, and
- limited professional resources,

the development of structured lay counseling programs seems inevitable. Lay counseling is nothing new among Mormons, of course. Bishops, stake presidents, quorum leaders, Relief Society presidents, and even home teachers have been engaged in various forms of counseling for years. The Church's Welfare Services Program supports properly functioning local counseling, as suggested in the following quote from the *Ensign* (1983):

When an emotionally troubled individual cannot find a solution to problems by himself or through the help of the family, he may go to the bishop to receive the help he needs. If a bishop does not have the skills necessary to help those in severe emotional distress, he may call upon people within his ward or stake boundaries who have the

necessary skills. . . . The support members provide one another in the Church also helps meet the emotional needs of individuals and helps to prevent many problems which might otherwise occur.

This paper describes one LDS-sponsored lay counseling program and suggests steps for implementing similar programs in other local jurisdictions.

THE ROLE OF THE LAY COUNSELOR

Janet Moursund (1985), in a new book *The process of counseling and therapy*, describes counseling as a process where two people come together to try to understand one another and accomplish something beneficial for one or both of them. Serving in this context, the lay Mormon counselor not only becomes a valuable resource for local leaders but also a friend, a minister, a source of information, a shoulder to lean on, a sounding board, a mirror, an official observer, and, occasionally, an advisor. The lay counselor, working with local leaders (and under the direction of professionals) assists in finding and providing services for those in need. Avoiding the role of judge or parent, he or she provides a model for communication and teaches communication skills to the client. Where sin is involved, the lay counselor gently assists in the repentance process. Knowing personal limitations, he or she relies on prayer, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, pure knowledge (D&C 121:41-43), and other principles of the gospel.

THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL

Many LDS and LDS-compatible professional counselors and psychotherapists render paid and volunteer service at the

local level. A lay counseling program can add structure and effectiveness to this activity, supplementing the talents and skills of the professional while at the same time removing part of the volunteer load from his/her shoulders. The professional, when involved in a Mormon lay counseling program, becomes an assessor, a reviewer, a guidance counselor, an advisor, and a paid or unpaid resource. He or she may direct the course of therapy, review progress, and provide assistance (or take over therapy) if the requirements of the client become too complicated for the bishop or lay counselor.

HISTORY OF THE PROGRAM IN THE SALT LAKE WINDER STAKE

In 1981, under the direction of the Millcreek Regional Representative, and through the auspices of the LDS Social Services, a lay counseling program was

established in the Salt Lake Winder Stake, among others. Much of the credit must be given to Chuck Woodworth of LDS Social Services who organized and trained many of the stake resource couples. The program's objectives were to provide —

- additional counseling resources for bishops,
- an intermediate step between local priesthood leaders and the Social Services Department, and
- a focus for helping-resources at the local level.

A couple was called to serve in the program. They subsequently received training and education in counseling, crisis intervention, group facilitating, communication, and resource gathering. The services, programs, and activities shown in Table 1 have been instituted in the stake since the programs inception.

**Table 1. Lay Counseling Program Content
Salt Lake Winder Stake, In place or Planned (Denoted "P")**

- Crisis Line
- Bishops Assistance (Assisting bishops on a case-by-case basis)
- Couple Communication Training Program
- Parenting Training (P)
- Counseling Program (one on one, couples, families, handicapped, etc.)
- Referral System (referring clients to professionals)
- Establishing and maintaining resource lists
- Friendship Program (using local resources to provide a friend or regular contact, as needed)
- Chronically Troubled Assistance Program (helps bishops with persons suffering chronic and permanent mental health problems)
- Designated Safe Houses Program (temporary and overnight shelter for abused women, children, etc.)
- Young People Assistance (helping youth in trouble: pregnancies, drugs, alcohol, parental problems, runaways)
- Indian Student Placement (assisting students and foster parents)
- Excommunicants Program (counseling those excommunicated or disfellowshipped.)
- Group Resources (P) (group experiences for compatible groups: Young Adults, single women, single parents, families)
- Stake Resource Night (P)

As in all helping programs, there have been successes as well as failures. J. Everett West, Salt Lake Winder stake president, has been fully supportive. To him must go much of the credit for the success of the program. Ward bishops have expressed approval and appreciation widely, but some have also felt hesitation. Clients have expressed satisfaction with services received, but there have been exceptions. Measurable accomplishments include—

- Over 50 couples have participated in a structured couple communication course (Miller, et al.)
- Some 60 individuals have received counseling or assistance, ranging from a single phone call to weekly meetings with an individual over a twelve month period.]
- A number of people have been referred to professionals or clinics for appropriate assistance.
- A crisis line was established and has been used on a number of occasions.
- A Bishop's Discussion Program was established which includes scheduled discussions on the topics listed in Table 2. (See below)
- Crisis intervention classes have been sponsored for ward Relief Societies.

**Table 2. Bishops Discussion Program, Topics
(Salt Lake Winder Stake Program Content)**

Session	Topic
1	Introduction to Stake Program
2	How People Communicate
3	Crisis Intervention
4	Interviewing Techniques
5	The Role of the Gospel in Solving Emotional Problems
6	Counseling Married Couples
7	Counseling Children
8	Counseling Families
9	Available Services: LDS, CSC, etc.
10	Counseling Those Who Have Sinned
11	Counseling Those Who Have Loss of Belief or Faith
12	Encouraging Behavior Modifications
13	Church Calls and Releases —Avoiding Problems
14	Encouraging Better Stewardship
15	Death and Dying
16	How to Get Through to Difficult People
17	Restoring Self-Esteem
18	Dealing with Feelings of Helplessness
19	LDSSS: Unwed Mothers Program
20	LDSSS: Single Parents
21	LDSSS: Indian Placement
22	LDSSS: Adoption
23	LDSSS: Unwed Parents
24	Learning and Teaching in Groups
25	More on Groups
26	On Intimacy
27	Family Dynamics
28	Helping People to Set and Meet Goals
29	Child and Spouse Abuse
30	Developing a Helping Relationship

Each one-hour session consists of:

- 10 minutes - Review, tuning in, communication skills
- 10 minutes - Introduction to Topic
- 30 minutes - Discussion, Role Playing/Practice/Exercises
- 10 minutes - Wrap-up, Review, Questions

As of April 1985, the Winder Stake program has plans to implement a stake Resource Night which will consolidate some existing programs to a single day and allow for the development of planned new services: resource/discussion groups for singles and single parents, parenting classes, and counseling training for stake resource people.

It should be noted that all program services are completely voluntary for recipients. This is not a church program *requiring* member support. Although bishops may call a couple to take the couple-communication class, most couples participate because they elect to. Even participation in the Bishop's Discussion Program is optional. However, participation in all programs has been strong—overwhelming at times.

STARTING A NEW PROGRAM

To initiate a program at the local level, one must obtain priesthood approval and support. It is imperative that the stake president be contacted first. If the stake president elects not to support a lay counseling program, the program simply cannot be implemented. If the stake president is willing and able, a long-range development plan should be outlined which will meet local needs. A lay counseling program might plan to meet the following goals—

- aid and enhance existing counseling provided by bishops and stake presidents,
- provide additional helping resources at the stake and ward level, and
- take advantage of professional services in a structured manner.

Such a stake program, tailored to local needs and resources, will consume two to three years in initial development efforts, if not more. Table 3 (page 67) presents steps that might be followed in implementing a program. Achieving success in all these activities may take many years. For this reason, individuals called to assist in the program might be prepared to offer years of service.

As with all new and comprehensive programs, problems will arise. Table 4

(page 67) summarizes typical problems likely to be encountered. Professional involvement and direction will help minimize problems. Other remedies are time, prayer, study, education, persistence, and patience.

STAFFING

The selection and call of a program staff are critical to the success of the program. Personal qualities which seem important in this program include

- faithfulness to the principles of the gospel,
- commitment to the program and local leaders,
- an interest in people,
- a caring, sensitive, and understanding attitude about people's problems,
- a willingness and ability to participate in personal analysis,
- the desire to study and learn,
- flexibility and open-mindedness, and
- time availability.

The administrator of the program might be the high councilor in charge of welfare services. A former bishop might be a logical choice. A practicing psychotherapist might also be considered, although this could be asking too much of a person who works all day in the field. The priesthood or sex of the leader seems immaterial because the program is a *local support function* to the priesthood, not an official Church priesthood program.

Professional assistance and guidance is obviously required. This help might come from such sources as local LDS professionals, the LDS Social Services Office, and community mental health volunteer service organizations.

To assist the program administrator, a number of stake welfare resource people should also be called. These people assist as the need arises, e.g., providing friendship to those suffering a problem, assisting in group discussions, providing temporary living space, assisting in crisis intervention, assisting in training programs, helping families involved in the Indian student study program, and lay counseling.

Table 3. Program Development Steps

- Contact stake president.
- Outline a tentative plan.
- Involve the local representative of Church Social Service.
- Introduce proposed program to stake leaders.
- Introduce proposed program to bishops.
- Involve local LDS or LDS-compatible professionals.
- Revise plans to reflect comments of stake leaders, bishops, professionals.
- Call a program administrator.
- Complete plan; establish goals, timetables, etc.
- Call resource couples, as needed and available.
- Locate and tap into community resources; generate catalog of services available.
- Provide training e.g.,
 - Community training resources
 - Community mental health activities
 - University and college courses
 - Church Social Services
 - Terrance Olson & Lanier Britsch, *Counseling*, vols 1, 2 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book), two of the best resource texts available for this type of program.
 - Other texts and reading material
- Establish local-need activities.
- Provide mechanism for program review and critique.
- Establish reporting methods.
- Establish service programs, e.g.,
 - Establish and maintain crisis line.
 - Establish counseling programs.
 - Establish bishop's training program.
 - Find and establish safe houses for abused spouses, children.
- Establish a Resource Night program, e.g.,
 - counseling
 - training
 - couple communication
 - parenting
 - counseling training
 - groups
- Establish or use available communication resources, e.g., stake Relief Society and quorum networks.
- Find funding sources, if required.

Table 4. Typical Birthing Problems

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| — Overcoming inertia | — Finding time |
| — Stigma on "counseling" | — Obtaining training |
| — Interfacing with leaders | — Discouragement |
| — Finding resources | — Occasional failures |

Training and education of those called should be immediate and on-going. Most communities have appropriate training programs available through county mental health agencies, community service centers, universities and colleges, and hospitals. The Church Social Services, for example, provides training when asked.

SUMMARY

This is a local program that can assist priesthood leaders. It represents one approach to applying Christ's admonition to love and care for one another. It provides an opportunity for members to minister to each other's needs. It offers a way for professionals to be involved at the local level without being overwhelmed. It supplies a good method for introducing gospel-compatible counseling techniques into the LDS community and it gives local

leaders the opportunity to manage and control such activities.

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