

BUILDING THE CHURCH AS A CARING COMMUNITY: AN APPROACH THROUGH PERSONAL GROWTH TRAINING

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In this article I would like to consider an approach to building the church as a caring Christian community. I shall do this by introducing the results of a program at the Japan Lutheran Theological College which we feel is an effort at building Christian community. My image of the caring community as I write this article is a two-fold one: it is first of all the church, specifically the local congregation, and secondly a community much broader, more informal, and more amorphous than an individual church, that is, any Christian community in which participants live in a caring relationship.

I have a genuine concern that our local congregations in Japan – and anywhere for that matter – be not just learning communities but also caring communities. The learning of doctrine and Biblical content is too often emphasized at the expense of creating a caring and loving community, although it is the latter which the Bible itself pictures as the true nature of the Body of Christ. Is there any program or pattern which might provide a clue for ways to build this caring community? I shall attempt here to suggest that a program we have been carrying out at the Lutheran Theological College (Mitaka, Tokyo) for nearly five years now can provide some stimulus and insights toward this end. In this article I shall first introduce the program, then present a summary of evaluative comments from a cross section of participants, and finally review these findings to see whether the approach we are looking at here is indeed relevant to our efforts to build the church – as a caring community.

EDUCATION FOR PERSONAL GROWTH AND COUNSELING

In 1982 the Personal Growth and Counseling Center was established as a *kenkyusho* (study institute) of the Japan Lutheran Theological College in Mitaka. Our purpose was to promote the Christian ministry of healing in the broadest sense. We have done this through a three-fold program of counseling, education and research. The counseling activity has sought to give guidance and healing to individuals and families suffering any and all kinds of distress. In this article, however, we will concentrate only on the educational program of the Center. This consists of five levels of education and training in personal growth, human relations and counseling skills. We are concerned here about the response to the first three levels of basic, intermediate and advanced courses open to the public. Nearly all the participants in these courses have been Christian adults, mostly lay people, of all denominations, including Roman Catholic and various independent evangelical churches. Since 1982 until the present these courses have been attended by nearly 1000 people.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is the curriculum and methodology (both are important) of these courses? Curriculum content is not directly doctrinal or Biblical; it is rather person centered and problem centered. Specifically, the basic course consists mainly of lectures on a variety of contemporary problems with which most people are vitally concerned. Topics include marital relationships, child raising, sexuality, aging, emotional disorders, personality development, grief and death, as well as orientation to the fundamentals of counseling.

An important part of every session of the basic course is the period of dialogue and interchange which follows each lecture. This interchange consists of brief case studies or problem situations which are discussed in small groups of three to six persons. Thus the material of each lecture is always applied to the participants' own situations, so they can ask. "What does this mean for me? How can this theory be applied in my own family and work relationships?"

In the intermediate course, group work is emphasized. In permanent groups of about ten persons concrete cases of problems and counseling situations are examined in depth. Working in small groups offers the opportunity for all members to express themselves, and for each member to offer feedback of his/her reactions to the problem under discussion. Thus a place is created for very concrete and personal self examination.

In the advanced course we focus on various specialized approaches to and methods of self-understanding and therapeutic counseling. For instance, there are sessions on Gestalt Therapy, Psychodrama, Transactional Analysis, Family Therapy, and various forms of personal growth training through group exercises. In these sessions there is ample opportunity for practice and integration of theory by each participant.

POINTS OF UNIQUENESS

Looking at this curriculum and procedure, we might summarize the approach of the educational program of the Personal Growth and Counseling Center in the following statements:

1. We attempt to avoid as much as possible the pattern of one-way communication in which an authoritative teacher makes ponderous statements to submissive listeners, and instead emphasize experiential learning in which every member participates in the learning process.
2. We provide as much opportunity as possible for expression and feedback. That is, we provide a place where the intention of the speaker can be checked out against the perception of the listener. We discover that there is often an unfortunately wide gap between these two which makes for tangled relationships and much misunderstanding.
3. We train as well as teach. When feedback shows that the listener's perception does not match the speaker's intent, we give a chance to redo the transaction in a way that does produce the desired result.
4. We start with people's problems, with their felt needs, and work with the questions people are asking. We try to avoid the sterile method of giving

academic answers to questions which nobody is asking (!)

5. This also means that we emphasize psychological as well as theological approaches in understanding the human predicament. Psychology is seen as a useful adjunct to assist theology and philosophy is seeking solutions to human problems.

THE PARTICIPANTS SPEAK

Now I would like to look at what for me is the heart of this modest piece of research, namely, the evaluative comments made at the end of each course by the participants. An evaluation questionnaire is given to each participant at the end of each course, which they are asked to fill in and return unsigned. What follows is a cross section sampling of their responses to questions asking whether the course was helpful to their personal growth and to their religious faith, and if so, in what way. Although only 50 responses were used as the basis for the following summary, most of these statements were echoed several times, and seem to be representative of the entire body of participants. This does not claim to be an accurate statistical report of all the data. The responses fall rather naturally into several categories, so I have organized them around four major points: increased self-understanding, improved human relationships, the experience of being healed and being a healer, and deepened Christian faith. Indented sentences are all quotations from the questionnaires, written in free English translation from the original Japanese. Dots between sentences indicate the quotations are from different persons.

Increased Self-understanding

Many participants responded with statements such as the following which indicate that through the courses they had come to greater self awareness and a more realistic and honest appraisal of themselves:

I was enabled to look at myself objectively and see myself as others see me. . . This was a chance to look at myself with complete honesty as an individual standing before God. . . I'm beginning to find the answer to the

question, "Who am I? . . . I discovered where I'm going in life.

This increased awareness often involved an awareness of inadequacy:

I used to blame others for my problems, but I have become aware that all my problems come from within me, and that blaming others is only a rationalization. . . I've come to see the imperfections in everyone, including myself.

At the same time there was also a willingness to accept the reality of one's own situation, being enabled to do this by knowing God's acceptance and love:

I have learned to accept myself for what I am rather than deny my reality. . . I believe God wants us to value ourselves as his good creation, and this has helped me to move in the direction of self-acceptance, and from there to acceptance of others. . . I used to belittle and hate myself, but now I see that I too have value as one created in God's goodness.

Improved Human Relations

A second category of comments from participants can be grouped around the theme of improved human relations. It appears that the courses had value to nearly all the participants in this area. First of all, people were enabled to analyze their manner of relating to people more objectively than they had previously been able to do, as evidenced by the following comments:

I've learned both the theory and practice of good human relationships. . . I've learned how to relate to others. . . As I learned to know myself better, I desired to come closer to others, and I found that they readily respond to me. . . I realize now that I tended to interfere with others and wrongly interpret their feelings.

Another way of talking about improved human relations is to talk about the discovery of love in its concrete forms:

How wonderful human relationships can be! The task of my life from now on is to discover the concrete meaning of love in my life. . . I've come to see the broad dimensions of love. . . I discovered the reason for my indifference to people has been my lack of love. . . An attitude of caring has come alive in

me through this scientific approach to human suffering and pain. . . It used to be very difficult for me to forgive, but it has become easier as I see we are all the creation of God. . . I've been able to overcome my hang-ups with certain people I didn't like.

Some participants commented that their family relationships had noticeably improved through the course work:

Our family relationships are improving because I have learned to listen to what others are really saying. . . The happiness within our family has been deepened. . . I've come to see my family as more loveable.

The Experience of Being Healed and Being a Healer

We teach that the art of healing in a broad emotional/spiritual sense is the art of listening. Most participants comment that their sensitivity to others has been increased as they have learned to listen better. Typical comments are:

My ministry has become more effective as I've learned to listen to my people . . . I've learned what it means to walk in someone else's shoes by carefully listening to them. . . I've come to see the basic importance of being a good listener.

These educational courses are called "Counseling Courses", so of course there is an attempt to teach basic counseling skills along with personal growth. In our view these two elements are contiguous with each other. While advanced skills in counseling are the aim of the final two courses of the series of five levels of the Center's educational program, there is some basic training in the first three levels, with which we are concerned here. Some have said:

I am now able to help the emotionally and mentally disturbed people around me, because my way of relating to people has changed. . . Studying counseling has helped me to understand the neurotic and depressed people in my family and neighborhood. . . I am less naive now about thinking that I can solve people's problems easily.

We believe that the basis for being a "healer" is to have the experience of being "healed," in the sense of being comforted, encouraged, renewed in hope and a

sense of well-being and wholeness. This kind of healing does in fact spread from emotions and spirit to mind and body, as psychosomatic medical practitioners also claim. Has there been healing experience?

I was able to open myself and talk about a major problem of mine within my small group, and that brought real healing to me. . . I have experienced what it means to receive and to give positive stroking. . . I felt warmly received and at home in my group; I wish our church groups were like that.

Deepened Christian Faith

A final category of responses from those taking the courses is one which indicates a deepening of their faith. In some cases the references are oblique, but I believe they are significant statements indicating deeper knowledge of God's work and a closer relationship to God:

I feel I have been exposed as one standing before God, but at the same time I can now accept myself for what I truly am. . . It used to be hard for me to forgive others, but it has become easier as I see both myself and others as God's children. . . As I thought about human growth I realized the importance of faith. . . A change in my relationship to God has begun. . . When I came to see myself as I truly am, I experienced the grace of God in a new way. . . I was made aware of the ugly hatred in the recesses of my heart, and then realized that the Cross of Jesus Christ was for just such a person as me. . . My religious experience has been too much an "ought" experience, but now I am finding a freedom in faith.

For some the Bible itself has taken on fresh meaning:

I have come to read the Bible with fresh interest as I see how Jesus approached the people around him. . . I have come to see that Jesus often dealt with people like a counselor.

The courses were of help to other people in a variety of significant ways:

I have come to see that the love of God is at the root of both psychology and medicine, and also the basis of family life. . . I've come to reconsider my place and function in the church. . . As faith has come to be more concrete in my life, and as I have gained more self-awareness, I have a new assurance of

my calling to become a minister.

ON BUILDING A CARING COMMUNITY

Now we return to the question with which we started: Is there something to be learned about building the church as a caring community from what we have seen in this program of the Personal Growth and Counseling Center? That depends, of course, on what we envision a caring community to be. For myself, I see it as the kind of community 1) where people are healed and being healed, in the sense described above, 2) where human relationships are constructive, and 3) where people are growing in honest perception of themselves 4) as they grow in awareness of and fellowship with their Maker. I feel fairly sure that most readers will generally concur with these values and ideals for the caring community. But, and this is the crux of the matter, you will recognize that these four items are exactly the topics about which we found participants in these courses to be making positive comments, although they were simply asked the general question of what, if any, relevance the courses had on their personal growth and faith.

METHODOLOGY IS IMPORTANT

But the whole point of this description and survey is not to stick a feather in our hat at the Lutheran Theological College, but rather to invite you to think about the content and method of the program which had called forth this kind of response. It is not a program of doctrinal teaching, Bible study, or preaching *per se*. This growth in love and faith came about through the content and methods mentioned above, namely, through lectures (either directly or indirectly from a Christian perspective) on topics which addressed people's everyday life problems and felt needs, and through small group interaction where each individual had the chance for self expression and the chance to receive feedback and training. The lectures and training methods made ample use of current psychological insights, which were adapted to a Christian perspective where that

was feasible.

In this Japanese context where local congregations are so small, and where church growth is too often almost nill, it seems to this writer that a program similar in approach to that described here could be a way to reach people where they are and to let the Gospel of love build the church as a caring community in a powerful way. To preach, sing and pray at 10:30 Sunday morning is not the only way to carry out Christian ministry! Surely God wants to touch many more of his people with his healing love, which works through communities of mutual care.