



Letting Go With God

More clients now seek counseling therapy that also affirms faith

By Pat O'Brien

Talking to someone you trust in times of trouble is a time-honored way to sort out problems. But when it comes to professional help, more people are seeking counselors who can discuss issues in context of religious beliefs.

Interest is rising at theological schools and counseling centers throughout the country, including the Inland area.

When Riverside resident Aleta Rodriguez and her husband made an appointment for counseling, she had a specific request.

“It didn’t matter to me whether they were male or female, just that they were Christian. I made this choice because I wanted someone who saw our issues from a Christian perspective,” she said by e-mail.

This type of counseling is sometimes called faith-based, and it can have widely different approaches.

Pastoral counselors, for instance, have graduate degrees in religion or theology as well as psychology. Their mission is to provide ethically sound counseling while respecting spiritual diversity.

Christian counseling may be by someone with a degree in psychology or family therapy. Or it may be a person trained in counseling but not licensed, and it can be bound to the doctrines of a specific religion.

The American Association of Christian Counselors Web site includes a statement of faith and vision that proclaims the Bible as the inerrant Word of God and final authority, as well as recognizing Christian counseling as a process of sanctification.

Jewish Family Service of the Desert in Palm Springs offers counseling that is not based on religion but is open to discussion about faith, according to Executive Director Dan Bass.

“We serve people of all faiths,” Bass said.

Doug Ronsheim, executive director of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors in Virginia, said graduate programs in pastoral counseling are increasing throughout the United States.

The association has 3,000 members in North America who are certified mental health professionals with graduate degrees in religion or theology. The largest number of new members are students.

Programs at Claremont School of Theology have adapted to keep up with demand, according to Kathleen Greider, professor of pastoral care and counseling.

“There definitely has been an increase in mental health professionals who want to provide care in the area of spiritual life,” she said. “Our practice is to be of spiritual support and guidance to people of whatever religious persuasion.”

Confirming the Belief System

The pastoral counseling movement began more than half a century ago as clergy realized that they might find the maturing field of clinical psychology useful.

Siroj Sorajjakool came from Bangkok to California a decade ago to get a degree from Claremont in pastoral counseling.

Now a professor of religion, psychology and counseling at Loma Linda University, Sorajjakool was a Seventh-day Adventist pastor in Thailand. He has served as chaplain for Loma Linda’s Behavioral Medicine Center and worked with the Christian Counseling Service of Redlands.

“Trauma often leads people to question the meaning of life,” he said. “You want to go where someone confirms some kind of belief system. We believe in the sacredness of people’s lives. We move deeper into how they feel with their soul.”

“We are growing,” said Christa McNerney, executive director of Redlands Christian Counseling Service, which has 12 counselors on staff. “In the past three years, we have doubled the number of hours we are doing.”

The counseling center began as a place where pastors from five churches would refer parishioners. Now 16 churches are affiliated. Client issues can be anything from grief to abuse.

“They might need support over a long period of time. They might need medication,” McNerney said, “They might blame themselves because they think if they were really trusting in God they wouldn’t be depressed.”

Sharon Graff, pastor of Redlands United Church of Christ, has sent people to McNerney’s center and gone herself.

“I have personally benefited from the counseling center at times in my life when I needed a couple of sessions to work something through,” she said.

Sometimes, she said, counseling can shift perception of a dilemma and give people a sense of hope, new options and possibilities.

Linda Bronson, of Menifee, saw many therapists, secular and Christian, as she dealt with sexual abuse she suffered as a child. She thinks pastors should not have to deal with such issues.

“It’s like asking a paramedic to do surgery.” She said. She now runs the nonprofit Recovery Assistants Foundation in Santa Ana, which offers counseling referral.

New Master’s Program

California Baptist University in Riverside launched a master’s program this semester that will train counselors in a different way than the long-standing program offered in clinical psychology, with an option of concentration in Christian behavioral science.

The new program offers a master’s of arts in counseling ministry. The graduates will not be state-licensed therapists but will work as church-based counselors. Among models used are peer-run 12-step programs.

“It’s a biblical understanding of what the church is and how the church can be a healing community. The Bible has a lot to say about relationships and how to address those,” said Nathan Lewis, psychology professor and director of the new program.

Lewis said counselors will be trained to recognize mental or emotional problems that might require licensed psychologists and would refer them.

While only a dozen people are enrolled in the new program, the master’s degree program in clinical psychology is at capacity with about 120 students, according to Lewis.

“We are in the process of hiring new faculty because it’s growing so much,” he said.