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The Competent Lay Christian Counselor

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With the increasing popularity of Christian lay counseling programs come questions and concerns about ethical sensitivity to issues of competence. Ten guidelines are proposed for assessing the competence of lay Christian counselors: (1) are they not living in blatant sin, (2) are they and their families spiritually and emotionally healthy, (3) do they understand and use Scripture wisely, (4) do they represent themselves accurately, (5) do they refer when appropriate, (6) do they practice within their level of training, (7) do they request help for their own problems, (8) do they maintain current awareness of pertinent new developments, (9) do they use care when speaking in public, and (10) are they sensitive to human diversity. Implications for the emotional and mental health of the church are discussed.

Although the main concept behind the lay counseling movement—the priesthood of all believers—has been applied for centuries, lay care and counseling programs and materials (e.g., Arnold & Fohl, 1988; Backus, 1987; Baldwin, 1988; Haugk, 1984; Lim & Lim, 1988; Sturkie & Bear, 1989; Tan, 1991a) have never been more popular (Tan, 1987a). At least three factors have contributed to the popularity of Christian lay counseling ministries. First, those seeking help often prefer counselors with religious values. In a survey of Florida residents randomly selected from telephone listings, a greater number of respondents preferred help from a pastor than from a psychologist, social worker, or psychiatrist (Quackenbos, Privette, & Klentz, 1985). Similarly, in an analog study with middle-aged adults, participants found religiously-sensitive counselors more trustworthy, likable and approachable than agnostic or atheistic counselors (McMinn, 1991). Second, it appears that lay counselors are effective (Toh, 1994; Toh, Tan, Osburn, & Faber, 1994), perhaps as effective as professionals in treating many disorders. After reviewing the paraprofessional outcome literature, Christensen and Jacobson (1994) report:

The research summarized in this article suggests that the psychology that is given away (or at least sold much less expensively) through paraprofessional, self-administered and mutual-support group treatment may be as effective for some problems as the professional psychology that is sold. (p. 13)

This hints at the third factor contributing to the popularity of Christian lay counseling—expense. Many people need mental health services but cannot afford them. As managed health care mandates shorten the length of psychotherapeutic interventions, more and more people will be turning to paraprofessionals for their long-term therapy needs. Many others have no mental health insurance benefits at all and must seek paraprofessional help for both short- and long-term interventions. Christensen and Jacobson (1994) conclude, "... if psychology is not given away, most people in need will not get it, because they cannot afford it" (p. 13).

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With the increasing need for and popularity of Christian lay counseling come many questions and concerns. Is one approach to lay counseling superior to other approaches? What are the legal issues that yet need to be addressed? What ethical standards are appropriate for lay counselors? These questions need to be researched, and the results considered seriously, before the enthusiasm of these programs, perhaps growing more quickly than they are soundly, exceeds their capacity for effectiveness (Collins, 1987).

One thread running through the above concerns is an ethical concept of competence. Competent therapists recognize their strengths and areas of preparation as well as their weaknesses and areas in which they lack preparation (Keith-Spiegel & Koocher, 1985). A trusting therapeutic alliance is based on the assumption that the counselor is competent (Becker, 1987).

The question of competence for Christian lay counselors is complicated for at least two reasons. First, paraprofessionals lack much of the academic and practical preparation their professional counterparts receive, and are perceived as incompetent by many who would like to protect the economic viability of their professions. How can we instill a sensitivity to competence among paraprofessionals who are accustomed to being labeled incompetent? Second, Christian counselors live in two worlds—the worlds of Christian faith and of counseling—and must be competent in both worlds. We cannot turn to professional mental health organizations for standards of competence regarding Christian commitment. The standards offered here are meant as a starting point to initiate a discussion of competence for Christian lay counselors.

Ten Guidelines for Competence

In *Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times* (1987), Donald Bloesch calls for a return to obedience, saying that an ethical system based on love (such as many “situational” ethical systems propose) fails to account for the full biblical picture. Obedience to God must be the primary reason for our actions, with love understood as the motivation for the obedience.

Based on Bloesch’s disquisition, it becomes clear that any guidelines governing the ethical behavior of lay counselors must begin with obedience to the Word of God. We must not, however, believe our work is complete once we have determined our doctrinal stance on important theological issues. Doctrine establishes an essential foundation, but the building of a competent counseling paradigm for the lay counselor is not established by doctrine alone (Crabb, 1987; Worthington, 1994). Specific counseling techniques and theories give Christian lay counselors the tools to exercise obedience.

Although the Bible nowhere directly addresses the issue of competence as it applies to lay counselors, it does offer a listing of qualifications expected of elders and deacons. If one applies the concept of the priesthood of all believers to lay counselors (Larson, 1989), and one understands the work of a lay counselor as being that of a recognized representative of the church (Becker, 1987), ministering to members and non-members alike, then it is not going too far to suggest that lay counselors should meet the same qualifications.

Paul describes the qualifications necessary of an elder when he directs Titus to appoint

someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. For

a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it. (Titus 1:6-9)

These qualifications can be summarized in the first three of the following ten guidelines for competence.

1. Lay Christian counselors are not living in blatant sin.

A lay counselor is to be "blameless." Although all of us, including counselors, are broken and fallen people, counselors must not be living defiantly in blatant sin. This requirement serves to protect the reputation of the church, but it also represents a command of God on a personal level. Those who knowingly disobey clear statements from God regarding how they are to live cannot expect to have God's power of the Holy Spirit to aid in the healing of their clients. "What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Romans 6:15).

2. Lay Christian counselors, and their families, are spiritually and emotionally healthy.

Paul instructs that a minister "must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way—for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:4-5). In this regard, Scripture appears to hold Christian leaders to a higher standard than professional organizations expect of their members. Personal conduct of a professional counselor, including family life, is usually regarded as unrelated to the counselor's professional role. This boundary between counseling roles and personal roles is much less clear for Christian lay counselors than for professionals. Lay counselors living in dysfunctional families invite questions as to their ability to help restore order to the lives of their clients.

We are not suggesting that parents are fully responsible for the conduct of their children. Many extra-familial influences and events affect children at various ages. Neither are we suggesting that a lay counselor's family be flawless. Just as a person can be in good health without being in perfect health, a functional family unit can struggle with problems and difficulties in the context of healthy relationships. The critical question is not whether family difficulties arise, but how they are handled when they occur.

3. Lay Christian counselors understand and use Scripture wisely.

The first two guidelines require Christian lay counselors to show evidence of their faith through their lifestyle. This third guideline calls for an ability to articulate the reasons for their faith and their lifestyle. Whether it be in the form of an interview with the church's pastor and/or board, a formal exam testing one's knowledge of Scripture and theology, or the successful completion of a chosen curriculum, lay counselors clearly identify and describe their beliefs when given the opportunity to do so. The Christian faith is not a random collection of beliefs (despite what may sometimes be its outward appearance) and an understanding of how various beliefs hold together to form a practical faith system is important for those wishing to serve as lay counselors.

An adequate understanding of theology provides a necessary foundation for spiritually-oriented counseling interventions. Having confidence in a theological foundation allows lay counselors to consider important spiritual factors in counseling such as the power of the Holy Spirit (Tan, 1991b) and the use of spiritual disciplines (Oden, 1984).

Competent lay Christian counselors must not only embrace the competency guidelines of their faith community, but must also hold to essential ethical guidelines set forth by counseling communities. Every major professional counseling organization has a code of ethics to which its members are expected to adhere (American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, 1991; American Counseling Association, 1988; American Psychological Association, 1992; National Association of Social Workers, 1993). The largest of these organizations is the American Psychological Association (APA), but the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) are also formidable credentialing agencies. Should the codes which apply to the professional members of these organizations also be applied to non-professional lay counselors?

In a survey of the ethical sensitivity of 900 Christian counselors, McMinn and Meek (1994) found a much lower return rate among nonprofessionals than among professionals. Many lay counselors returned the survey unanswered, reporting that it did not apply because they were nonprofessional counselors. These counselors appear to be misunderstanding their obligation to maintain high ethical standards. Becker (1987) advises lay counselors, "to act in accordance with the highest standards of counselors in the community, and to study and follow the ethical guidelines and practices of professionals as a means of avoiding potential liability" (p. 80).

It should be noted that not all professional ethics principles apply equally well to lay counselors and professional therapists. For example, those involved in peer or friendship counseling relationships are not able to maintain the same boundaries that would be expected in a professional counseling relationship (Tan, 1991a). A long-term solution may require a specific ethics code for lay counselors. In the meantime it will be important that lay counselors adhere to professional ethics codes to the greatest extent possible. The remaining seven guidelines for competence are derived from professional codes.

4. Lay Christian counselors represent themselves accurately.

In the interest of the client's welfare, competent Christian lay counselors represent their qualifications fairly and accurately. They correct any misunderstandings clients may have about their qualifications. Those who have college and advanced degrees in non-counseling fields do not represent their degrees as evidence of competence.

A growing trend in professional counseling is to provide potential clients with detailed information about the anticipated treatment and to obtain written informed consent prior to beginning therapy (Somberg, Stone, & Claiborn, 1993; Sullivan, Martin, & Handelsman, 1993). Christian lay counselors would do well to use a procedure such as this, including information about their lay counseling training program, theological preparation, and the type of counseling they practice.

5. Lay Christian counselors refer when appropriate.

Describing responsibilities pertaining to the counseling relationship, the ACA's *Ethical Standards* (1988) states that

if the member determines an inability to be of professional assistance to the client, the member must either avoid initiating the counseling relationship or immediately terminate that relationship. In either event, the member must suggest appropriate alternatives. (p. 2)

The AAMFT's *Code of Ethics* (1991) also addresses the issue of referral, noting that "marriage and family therapists assist persons in obtaining other therapeutic services if the therapist is unable or unwilling, for appropriate reasons, to provide professional help" (pp. 2-3).

Lay counselors should be able to recognize when a situation calls for a response which exceeds what they are able to produce, and to request more intensive supervision or assist their clients in obtaining the therapeutic services they need from someone with more apropos areas of competence.

6. Lay Christian counselors do not practice beyond their level of training.

Because some counseling interventions have negative effects, competent Christian lay counselors practice only within their areas of training. The ACA's *Ethical Standards* (1988) states that "members recognize their boundaries of competence and provide only those services and use only those techniques for which they are qualified by training or experience" (p. 1). The APA's (1992) standards are similar:

[Psychologists] recognize the boundaries of their particular competencies and the limitations of their expertise. They provide only those services and use only those techniques for which they are qualified by education, training, or experience. (p. 1599)

Lay counselors should not attempt to perform testing or use counseling techniques for which they have not been adequately trained or which are unnecessary given the client's current problem. The first principle of the Hippocratic oath says, "Do no harm," and competent lay counselors recognize that trying to do more for a client than what is requested can often lead to unwanted and harmful results.

7. Lay Christian counselors request help for their own problems.

The AAMFT's *Code of Ethics* (1991) further states that therapists seek professional assistance for personal problems that could impair their work. If personal problems arise which could impair their work, competent lay counselors request the assistance they need from another counselor.

Among psychologists, personal distress commonly precedes unethical relationships with clients (Pope & Bouhoutsos, 1986). McMinn and Meek (1994) found that Christian nonprofessionals are generally less cautious about multiple-role relationships in counseling than Christian professionals. This, in itself, is not alarming because it may reflect legitimate role expectations of lay counselors who do peer or friendship counseling. Lay counselors facing significant personal distress, however, may be at increased risk for seeking personal gratification from their counseling interactions. Christian lay counselors need keen sensitivity to their levels of personal distress in order to prevent exploitative relationships.

8. Lay Christian counselors maintain current awareness of pertinent new developments.

Because lay counselors are by definition nonprofessionals (presumably spending the majority of their time in unrelated activities), it is unrealistic to impose a rigid continuing education standard. Keeping current with contemporary developments, how-

ever, can help lay counselors in their work. This dilemma is perhaps best addressed by requiring lay counselors' supervisors to remain current in the field, and to continuously update their supervisees in those areas relevant to their supervisees' caseloads. By maintaining clinical responsibility, supervisors can ensure that lay counselors under their direction do not practice based on obsolete concepts or standards.

Another alternative that may become more readily available in the future is continuing education designed specifically for Christian lay counselors, such as that offered by Cincinnati-based Equipping Ministries International (see Sweeten, 1987). By systematically addressing those issues most often encountered in a given lay counseling program, counselors can maintain (or gain) competence in a variety of counseling areas.

9. Lay Christian counselors use care when speaking in public.

Competent lay counselors are aware of the power associated with the term "counselor" regardless of its context, and of the danger of abusing this power, and take special care when speaking in public while in the role of a lay counselor. This includes being sensitive to the confidentiality of the counseling relationship when speaking to individuals and groups. It also includes not giving advice in an overly generalized way that overlooks the complexity of individual situations.

10. Lay Christian counselors are sensitive to human diversity.

The ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (1992) mandate that "psychologists are cognizant of the fact that the competencies required in serving, teaching, and/or studying groups of people vary with the distinctive characteristics of those groups" (p. 1599). Lay counselors can rarely invest the time to master an understanding of all ethnic, religious, and gender groups, but they need to recognize the importance of a multicultural worldview in every counseling relationship. Though initially trained to address only a relatively small variety of these different groups of persons, lay counselors increase their level of competence in multicultural awareness through experience and responsible supervision (Prater, 1987).

Discussion

Various outcome studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of lay counselors at a level comparable to professionals, though methodological shortcomings hamper the interpretation of some of these findings (Berman & Norton, 1985; Durlak, 1979, 1981; Hattie, Sharpley, & Rogers, 1984; Nietzel & Fisher, 1981; Tan, 1987b). If we conclude, as Christensen and Jacobson (1994) do, that paraprofessionals can be effective mental health service deliverers, then we need to consider mechanisms of ethical restraint and regulation among Christian paraprofessionals.

A concern for lay counselor competence requires immediate attention in three areas. First, ethical standards for Christian lay counselors are lacking and need to be developed in the near future. A CD-ROM *psychLIT* search failed to offer a single article devoted to lay counseling and ethics. The Christian Association for Psychological Studies (1992) has an ethics code, and The American Association for Christian Counseling is currently developing one. Neither of these ethical codes will affect Christian lay counselors, however, unless the organizations behind them successfully move beyond professional concerns and penetrate the lay counseling movement. Once in place, a code of ethics makes clear what the standards and expectations of its members are, and would permit lay counselors to more clearly

assess their qualifications and limitations. Until such a standard is widely adopted, lay counselors will be without a yardstick in their attempts to measure their level of competence (Needham, 1986). Tan (1990) notes: "Modified ethical codes specific to lay counseling need to be developed and published. A particular focus should be on legal and ethical aspects of *supervision* of lay Christian counselors" (p. 64).

Some writers have voiced a fear that setting even minimal standards of competence for lay counselors might, once implemented, shut out truly competent but noncertified counselors from practicing where they could be legitimately helpful. This fear, however, seems unjustified. It is true that those who appear competent to counsel but are not so certified would not be permitted to serve in a formal lay counseling program, but such persons could still serve within the church through other formats. Setting minimal standards of competence should not hamper those who are gifted to counsel and willing to invest themselves in training.

Second, sensitivity to competence requires an awareness of the therapeutic effects of Christian lay counseling. Walters (1987) found that only two out of 17 lay counseling programs surveyed in 1985 were conducting client evaluations of their programs (Walters, 1987). More, and better, outcome studies are necessary before distinctively Christian lay counseling programs can legitimize their existence.

Third, there is a need for more systematic networking of lay counselors throughout the country. Although various training programs have been designed and implemented (Tan, in press), and although these programs have much in common, there is little communication among them and, consequently, little organization on the national level. Most programs function independently of others. While this flexibility needs to be retained, failing to develop a national agenda may lead to confusion on many fronts. Theologians and pastors fear the infiltration of their churches by humanistic psychology (Collins, 1980); psychologists fear the disintegration of competence within their field (Richard, 1987); the public fears deceptive and misplaced proselytizing; politicians fear programs run amuck. Astute attention to such issues on a widespread level will help prevent these problems.

If the Church's task to love our neighbors as ourselves is to include concern for our neighbor's mental health, then lay counseling programs represent an ideal method for carrying out this mandate (Bufford & Buckler, 1987), especially when those programs show respect for matters of competence. This article is not intended as a definitive work on lay counselor competence. Rather, we hope it provides impetus for continuing the important discussions on ethical standards for Christian paraprofessionals.

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