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How My Christian Faith Underpins My Counselling Practice

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Beginnings Training

The Christian based training I chose with Willows Counselling Organisation in Swindon was delivered with a Person-Centred core, drawing upon insights from CBT and Psychodynamic models as well as utilising many creative approaches. Its integrative nature has helped me develop my practice from the Christian roots that underlie everything else in my life, filtering through all my client work, from my first years in voluntary work with adult clients with Willows, my peripatetic work with Ticplus (formerly Teens In Crisis, a Christian based charity in Gloucestershire working with 9-19 year olds), to my current largely school-based self-employed work with Primary School aged children (5 to 11 years). The goal has always been to apply Proverbs 3 v 5-6: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your*



paths”... remembering that without Him all my efforts in my own strength will ultimately not lead to the best outcomes.

Additional specialised training to work with children and young people followed, when I completed a voluntary 6-month placement as a School Counsellor at a local Church of England Primary School in 2014. The school and its Governors value its Christian ethos and felt I was a good fit. I was invited to stay on in a paid, self-employed capacity, incorporating the counselling functions I had already established during my placement. It has been one of the biggest ‘leaps of faith’ in my life...so many decisions to make,

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opportunities, risks, challenges and pitfalls to navigate and negotiate!

Establishing Practice

I wanted to place my Christian faith at the heart of all that I do...including the name and logo I would use. I spent several weeks pondering how I could meaningfully honour God openly, and yet leave room for people to ask me questions by choosing something maybe not immediately obvious as to its meaning, yet able to be clearly and simply explained. Inspiration came on holiday: I was reading the passage in Matthew Chapter 5 v 13-16, exhorting us: *“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”*. As soon as I read these words, I just knew they encapsulated how I felt about my work with young clients, their school and their families. My Supervisor, who is also an accomplished artist, was intrigued by my attempts at drawing what I saw in my mind’s eye...and offered to try to capture the elements I described. I was delighted with the result (see picture) as I was sure I would be, given how well she knows and understands me. I know I can only be salt and light, and prepared to be visible, if I have Jesus at the centre of everything in my life, the power of the Holy Spirit at work in me and the love of our Father God motivating my thoughts and responses. These are represented in the logo by the cross, the dove and the warmth and light of the sun in the background respectively.

A Working Day

Ambience and Environment

Putting my Christian faith into practice in my work with children, begins as soon as I wake in the morning and prepare myself for the day...I *“put on the full Armour of God”* (from *Ephesians 6*), pick up my phone to open the Bible in an app, pray, read and pray again. I

ask God to speak to me through His Word, and by bringing people and situations to mind, to lift to Him in prayer – often, this will include client work, and as I integrate my spiritual and devotional life with my personal and professional responsibilities, I gradually begin to feel ready to face the day.

On days that I am working I will usually begin ‘holding’ my clients in my mind and thinking about how I will handle myself during the hours before and then throughout the day. This will include car parking on arrival (always tight), interactions with numerous members of staff and all the other children I come across as I go about the building. I am conscious that I am Jesus’ representative at every moment and any time is an opportunity for Him to minister His love, grace and kindness through the way I respond to everyday situations and challenges (for example if the room I normally use is not available, or I notice an upset child or thank a polite one holding the door open for me, or half my clients need to change their session time due to timetable changes or school trips and myriad other small details that can potentially grow into sticky dilemmas and flashpoints for tension.) It helps that many of those who also work at the school seem to have a similar approach and I have really appreciated that it is not just me making an effort to accommodate others...often they are working hard to support me to do my work in many unseen ways too.

People and Working Relationships (the Grown-ups)

Liaising with all the different layers of staff in and around the school, I speak equally respectfully of others, valuing the work that each does as being indispensable to the successful running of the school. This does not preclude honest discussions about what’s working and what isn’t...it just means not engaging in conversations that will ultimately be unfruitful or unhelpful. There are many corresponding Bible verses that remind me that I need to be continually vigilant of my own conduct in this area, especially Colossians 4 v 5-6: *“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone”*.

When meeting with parents I am often able to relate to the circumstances that have brought their child to see me, however I also recognise that there is much I can learn from them and their children, and from those whose experiences are outside my own. My own experiences of feeling a failure as a parent at times, and my challenges in facing my son's autism, form a bridge I can cross to meet other parents who feel isolated by their circumstances, judged and deeply misunderstood. Everyone collectively avoiding the temptation to blame themselves, other people or things for the problems and predicaments families face is more helpful for resolving/easing the situation and saves a lot of energy. Judicious signposting to other relevant services and sources of help is not to duck difficult issues...it's about finding the most relevant support for the situation, not doing everything myself to the detriment of my purpose. My previous work with adults at Willows helps me juggle and manage the necessary boundaries and limits of my availability for the parents themselves so I am more fully present for their children.

Client work

When working with my young clients I continually ask God to help me be fully available and present, to respond in the ways that would be most helpful...for His wisdom, guidance, timing and inspiration. I treat each child as uniquely valuable with intrinsic worth, and much to offer the world. My favourite occupations are 'talent spotting', opportune moments of psychoeducation or 'lifting the curtain' on the adult mind. The scriptural basis for these interventions is found in Romans 12 v 2: *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will"* and v 4-6: *"For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not have the same function, so in Christ, we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the other members. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us".* I trust the process of the work itself once the trusting relationship is established (often by about session 3 give or

take) and the innate self-wisdom usually present in even the youngest child. My job is to be curious and observant and appropriately responsive to what is expressed, including non-verbally or implicitly.

At 50 years old I am clearly no longer a child...however, having been one I can draw on many memories of misunderstandings of the adult world, real and perceived injustices, sorrows, yearnings as well as moments of lightness, fun, and time for creative freedom that often recede into our sub or unconscious mind, pushed there by adult needs and desires. I am encouraged and challenged by Jesus's words in Matthew 18 v 3-5: *"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me"* and verse 10-11: *"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven".* Children often are much more direct in stating their needs (if they are aware of what they are) and seeking answers than adults, and often have their priorities in much better order too! Jesus frequently asked people what they wanted Him to do for them, rather than tell them (although He already knew) what they needed. Each child is the expert on what their thoughts and feelings are about what is going on in them and their lives. My trust in their ability to be their own detective can be very therapeutic for them when personal autonomy is often necessarily restricted, in the interests of safety and good order at home and at school.

Conclusion

My faith is like a trail of breadcrumbs left over every aspect of my working life, an invitation to others to ask about, share their own with me, or just accept as they wish. I aim for a living, vibrant yet not unduly intrusive expression of my Christian beliefs and foundation that represents Jesus to others in a way that is honouring of all that He means to and has done for me.

Biography

After a number of years working in Intellectual Property within a Corporate environment, following my eldest son's diagnoses of the "hidden disabilities" Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD, I took a 5 year career break in 2006, during which I retrained to Diploma Level 4 as a Counsellor with Willows Counselling Service Charity in Swindon, initially working voluntarily with adults in between advocating for my son and caring for him and my three younger children (who are all currently teenagers!). It became clear to me throughout my training that while I loved working as a Counsellor with my adult clients, my longing (and past Pastoral experience in church from my teens to my mid-twenties) had always been towards working with primary school aged children. In 2014 I completed a Post-Qualifying Diploma in Working with Children and Young People and a 6-month voluntary placement in my local primary school, which then became paid self-employment when I set up my practice and Salt and Light Counselling Services Limited was born. I have been working ever since, growing my practice gradually over the past 5 years, by word of mouth recommendation or from the ACC accredited register, and have provided over 1000 sessions. Alongside my private

practice, between April 2016-July 2017 I also carried out 180 counselling sessions for Teens in Crisis, a Christian Charity in Gloucestershire, working with children aged 9-19 years.



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Proverbs 3 v 5-6*