

Enquiry into the Anglican Counselling Centre

(A report from the Standing Committee)

Introduction

1. In 1998 the Standing Committee reported that it had appointed a committee to survey and enquire into the operations of the Anglican Counselling Centre (the "Centre"). In particular, the committee was asked to consider and report on –

- (a) the number of persons employed in counselling;
- (b) the nature of their experience and qualifications;
- (c) what regulations/guidelines are in place and how they are monitored;
- (d) what insurance arrangements exist and what is the history of claims; and
- (e) the range and nature of the counselling practices and techniques used by the Centre.

2. The committee, comprising the Rev Dr John Woodhouse as chairman, Dr Roslyn Doyle (a general practitioner), Mr Michael Durrant (a psychologist), Miss Sunny Hong (a social worker), Dr Christopher Kirkby (a psychiatrist), Dr Robin McMurdo (a psychiatrist) and Mr Michael Orpwood QC (Deputy Parliamentary Counsel), reported to the Standing Committee on 22 March 1999. Each member of the committee endorsed the report and its recommendations.

3. The committee determined its own procedure for informing itself about the Centre and its work. It received material on request from the Centre and from counsellors associated with the Centre, and responses from other persons. It met with senior representatives of the Centre on 2 occasions, and circulated 2 written questionnaires to counsellors.

4. The report of the committee of enquiry was substantial, comprising 146 pages. It considered a wide range of issues, namely –

- (a) a brief history of the Centre;
- (b) the organisation of the Centre;
- (c) the nature of the experience and qualifications of the Centre's counsellors;
- (d) the regulations and guidelines of the Centre and how they are monitored;
- (e) insurance arrangements and the history of claims;
- (f) the range and nature of counselling practices and techniques used at the Centre; and
- (g) "recovered memory" and the Centre.

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5. The report contained 22 recommendations.
6. The Standing Committee referred the report to the council of the Centre for its response. In preparing its response, the council was able to discuss the report with members of its staff and other professionals.
7. The Standing Committee received a response from the majority of the members of the council of the Centre on 21 June 1999. It too was a substantial document comprising 124 pages and it addressed the following issues –
 - (a) the Centre's position on the recommendations of the committee of enquiry;
 - (b) a critique of the report and enquiry;
 - (c) the effect on the Centre of the main recommendations of the committee.
8. Two members of the council of the Centre did not support the response of the majority, and sent separate responses to the Standing Committee which were also received on 21 June 1999.
9. The Standing Committee considered the report of the committee of enquiry and the responses on 21 June and 26 July 1999.
10. This report summarises the main points of the report of the committee of enquiry, the responses to that report and the Standing Committee's decisions. As a summary it does not attempt to address the relevant issues in detail.
11. In the report and the responses references were made to the opinions of experts, and to scientific and legal literature, to support the case being made.

Work of the Committee of Enquiry

12. In its report, the committee of enquiry recognised the importance of Christian counselling, together the opportunity it gives to serve a needy community in the name of Jesus Christ. The committee expressed its appreciation for the very considerable good work that has been done by the Centre over many years, often under severe financial constraints and other difficulties, noting that –

"The work has grown remarkably, and has involved the dedicated service of many people. The Committee has no reason to doubt that they have done much good."
13. However, while recognising the good work the Centre has done, the committee reported in detail on several issues of concern which it considered needed to be addressed if the Centre was to continue to be a strong and effective Diocesan counselling agency. The 22 recommendations made by the committee address these issues.

14. In their response, the majority of the members of the council of the Centre rejected 7 of the committee's recommendations. Those recommendations are referred to in this report as the "Disputed Recommendations". The other recommendations were generally accepted by the Centre, although in some cases, the acceptance was only qualified.

The Disputed Recommendations

15. In summary, the Disputed Recommendations sought to achieve the following –

Having the Centre major on General Counselling. In this context, General Counselling is counselling which focuses on assisting people to deal more effectively with issues and difficulties arising during the normal course of relationships and personal development.

Requiring that counsellors of the Centre who engage in Clinical Counselling have professional registration or membership as psychologists, social workers or equivalent. In this context, Clinical Counselling is counselling which is more specialised than General Counselling and is a more specific activity undertaken with clients who are experiencing more serious and/or persistent difficulties.

Requiring that the Centre not practise Specialised Psychotherapy but emphasise other methods of counselling. In this context, Specialised Psychotherapy is therapy which deals with longstanding behavioural and emotional difficulties and seeks to bring about change in psychological or personality functioning.

Requiring that the Centre not be involved in cases involving "recovered" (or "enhanced") "memories" of abuse. In this context, cases involving "recovered memories" are cases where a person apparently remembers abuse experienced as children, having previously no conscious memory of the abuse. Cases involving "enhanced memory" are cases where a person appears to recover additional forgotten details of childhood abuse, where the fact of abuse has always been consciously remembered.

Reasons for the Disputed Recommendations

16. The following briefly explains the committee's reasons for making the Disputed Recommendations. No distinction is made here between fact and opinion.

17. The Centre had its origins as the Marriage Guidance Centre, a ministry of St Andrew's Cathedral. In 1963, a council was constituted by ordinance to carry out the work of the Centre. The ordinance envisages that the Centre will be a marriage, family and "general counselling" agency. However, the work of the Centre has expanded

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and developed considerably beyond that envisaged by the ordinance, particularly since 1980. This raises the fundamental issue whether –

- (a) the work of the Centre should reflect more closely the terms of the its ordinance; or
- (b) the ordinance should be amended to recognise and endorse the work of the Centre as it has developed.

18. In essence, in making the Disputed Recommendations, the committee recommended that the work of the Centre should reflect more closely the work envisaged by the ordinance, namely that the Centre will be a marriage, family and "general counselling" agency, with clearly defined limits to the kinds of counselling offered and specified qualifications for those practising different levels of counselling.

19. As the work of the Centre has expanded and developed, the Centre has developed its own model of counselling which, broadly, posits that an inability to change present emotional difficulties relates to a traumatic event in the past, usually in childhood. Thus, when a client cannot change his or her behaviour now, this model seeks to achieve deeper contact with the individual's emotions to uncover the precipitating traumatic event and locate it in its original context. By identifying and understanding the past trauma, it is thought that the client may be freed to behave differently. Thus, the model of counselling adopted by the Centre, and taught to its counsellors, endorses the use of therapies which encourage emotional expression to change present behaviour.

20. While counselling is intended to lead to growth, fulfilment and reconstruction of relationships, it can also damage and cause decompensation into frank mental illness, or breakdown of relationships, which might not otherwise have occurred. Therapies which encourage emotional expression are more likely than other forms of therapy to be damaging if used inexpertly or without competent supervision.

21. The actual training, qualifications or experience of the counsellors who are involved in such therapies is not adequate. This increases the risk that such counselling may cause harm to the client and/or to third parties such as family members or friends.

22. The Centre has become involved with some cases of "recovered" and "enhanced" "memories". The issue of "recovered" or "enhanced" "memories" is controversial among professionals for many reasons. For one, there are different views as to whether such "memories" correspond to what really happened. Further, there are different views as to whether the recovery of memories is beneficial to the person who seeks help.

23. The current professional consensus appears to be that –

- (a) most people who experience sexual abuse retain conscious memories of the abuse;
- (b) in some cases people may repress or dissociate memories of abuse which are later recovered in adulthood; and
- (c) in some cases "memories" are "recovered" in adulthood which are in fact untrue.

24. The sincerity with which "recovered memories" can be believed to be true was not disputed. However in the absence of corroboration one way or the other, it is impossible to know whether such "recovered memories" are related to real historical events or not.

25. Many of the Centre's views on "recovered memories" are controversial and its views have caused it to operate from a position that is not in keeping with the more cautious positions now adopted by most professional organisations. Further, the protocol under which therapy involving "recovered memory" is practised is not adequate to safeguard against potential harm from the therapy. The practice of the therapy requires a level of expertise not generally available in the Centre.

26. The committee of enquiry did not draw any conclusions about the validity or invalidity of "recovered memories", either generally, or in any particular cases. Professional members of the committee represented various views in the debate about "recovered memories".

Responses to the Disputed Recommendations

Majority of the Council of the Centre

27 The majority of the council of the Centre was critical of the report of the committee of enquiry and the Disputed Recommendations on several grounds –

- (a) the composition of the committee;
- (b) the methods of the enquiry;
- (c) the use of the published literature;
- (d) the inadequate regard for the great good done by the Centre;
- (e) the wide recognition of the Centre's counsellors' training and expertise;
- (f) the small number of complaints made; and
- (g) the detrimental effects of the recommendations on the Centre's work.

28. In stating the grounds in paragraphs 27(a) to (g), no distinction is made between fact and opinion.

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Minority responses

29. Two members of the council of the Centre disagreed with the response of the majority and submitted separate responses. Those responses expressed particular concern about the Centre's work with recovered memory.

Standing Committee's Decisions on the Disputed Recommendations

30. After considering the material before it, the Standing Committee adopted the Disputed Recommendations.

31. The Standing Committee has asked that the council of the Centre provide a timetable for the implementation of the recommendations. The timetable was received by the Standing Committee on 20 September 1999. It addresses the implementation of the Disputed Recommendations and the other recommendations referred to in paragraph 35.

32. The implementation of the recommendations will affect the work of the Centre, although the detrimental effects foreshadowed by the majority of the council on the Centre's work may be overstated. On the recommendation of the committee of enquiry, the Standing Committee has appointed a committee comprising Messrs Rodney Dredge, John Cross, Richard Lambert and Doug Marr to consult with the council of the Centre about the financial consequences of implementing the recommendations, and how best to ensure that adequate funding is available for the future operation of the Centre. The committee has been asked to report to the Standing Committee's November meeting.

33. The Standing Committee is concerned about suggestions that the work of the Centre may have caused harm to some families. On the recommendation of the committee of enquiry, the Standing Committee has agreed to appoint an independent group of qualified persons to receive any complaints about the Centre. The group will –

- (a) develop an appropriate protocol in consultation with the council of the Centre;
- (b) publicise its existence and the procedure for complaints to follow; and
- (c) report to the December meeting of the Standing Committee on the number and nature of the complaints received along with recommendations for any action which the group believes be taken.

34. The Standing Committee has not yet appointed the committee to receive complaints.

Other Recommendations

35. The committee of enquiry made a number of other recommendations. The majority of the council of the Centre supported these recommendations although, in some cases, the support was qualified. They deal with matters such as –

- (a) the Christian commitment and affiliation of the Centre's counsellors;
- (b) the composition of the council of the Centre;
- (c) amendments to the Centre's Ethical Principles for the Conduct of Clinical Practice;
- (d) reviewing the Centre's training and supervision programs;
- (e) reviewing the requirements for personal counsellors;
- (f) the development of a register of the qualifications, experience and therapeutic practice of counsellors;
- (g) the developments of a triage (intake) process;
- (h) the development of clear guidelines of the circumstances when a client must be referred to a professional outside the Centre; and
- (i) the insurances of the Centre.

36. The recommendations about these matters have been adopted by the Standing Committee.

Preparation of an Ordinance

37. Some of the recommendations adopted by the Standing Committee require the amendment of the Centre's ordinance to be implemented. The Standing Committee has requested that an amending ordinance be prepared for its consideration.

Referral to Sydney Anglican Home Mission Society

38. The report of the Committee of Enquiry has also been referred to the Sydney Anglican Home Mission Society Council for a report on the ways in which the counselling services conducted by HMS conform and/or deviate from the recommendations of the committee of enquiry, as adopted by the Standing Committee.

Integration with HMS

39. At the initiative of the Archbishop, the Standing Committee has appointed a committee comprising Bishop Peter Watson, Mr Rodney Dredge and Mr Richard Lambert to negotiate with the Executive Director of HMS and the manager of the Centre about the most effective means of implementing the resolutions of the Standing Committee by investigating possible full integration of the Centre with the Society and the preservation of the best elements of the Centre. The committee has been asked to report by 30 November 1999.

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Copies of Reports

40. Following requests, the Standing Committee has agreed to make available to Synod members, upon request, the report of the committee of enquiry at a cost of \$20, being a charge for the copying of the document. The Standing Committee has also agreed to make available the response of the majority of the Anglican Counselling Centre and the 2 minority responses, subject to the Council and the persons making the minority responses agreeing to their respective responses being made available. I am awaiting receipt of confirmation that these responses may be circulated. The copying cost of these documents will also be \$20. Requests for these documents may be made by contacting the Diocesan Secretary.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee

MARK PAYNE
Diocesan Secretary

24 September 1999