

Relationship specialists help pastors transform their churches

By Lori Arnold

SAN DIEGO — Leigh stood on the driveway as her long-time pastor drove away. Already heartsick over a teenager who was spiraling toward hell thanks to a volatile addiction to methamphetamine, the mother was stung with numbness as her spontaneous confession to the pastor yielded nothing more than a trite, "I'm sorry." No prayer, no guidance, no resolution; nothing of substance offered for her courage to finally come clean about the secrets in her house.

Unfortunately, encounters such as Leigh's are not isolated, said Don Welch, an ordained pastor, professor and San Diego therapist. By the time ministerial candidates graduate seminary, he said, they are well versed in theology and the Bible. But the coursework on relationships is often limited, generally just one or two courses, a sketchy exposure to the intricacies of interaction, a foundational element for clergy.

Welch, founder of the locally based Center for Enriching Relationships, is planning to change the relational disconnect by placing therapist interns into local churches where they serve as relationship specialists.

"It grew mostly out of watching my students going into the pastorate and they would implode," said Welch, who was a professor of Christian Education and Family Studies at MidAmerica Nazarene University in Kansas before moving to San Diego, where he also serves as the counseling and Marriage Saver pastor at Skyline Church. "It was mostly relationship issues, not theology issues."

The concept evolved over the past two years when several other ministry leaders began working together to form a marriage coalition to help strengthen Christian families.

"It seemed like a real help to the local churches," Welch said. "It releases the pastor to do their calling, which is to preach and to teach."

Pilot program

So far, five congregations across the county have placed the relationship specialists, pro-



Dan Welch, founder of the Center for Enriching Relationships, has developed a pilot program of placing intern therapists into churches to help pastors strengthen relationships.

viding its members with services including sliding-scale counseling, workshops and even conflict resolution pointers for staff members.

"You have all these volunteers and how do you manage volunteers who may have some pathologies?" Welch said.

The relationship specialists are Marriage Family Therapists interns, who need to complete 3,000 hours of practical work—about three years to complete—before they are eligible to take the state license exam.

"It's not like it's a one-year process," Welch said.

The interns are paid for the church work through a sliding scale payment plan for clients. Many health insurance policies cover counseling, Welch said. Each intern is supervised weekly, and participating pastors and leaders meet monthly to touch base.

"We want to be a parachurch organization that doesn't ask anything from the churches," the counselor said. "We want to give to the church."

Healthy relationships

Bryon Scott, pastor of Living Hope Christian Fellowship in Lakeside, said he began exploring the internship program about 18 months ago.

"It started with the question, 'How do we equip pastors and

Christians with the ability to build healthy relationships within the church and in their own homes?'"

Saying his primary interest was in building stronger marriages, Scott said that as local churches pressed Proposition 8 in 2008, he felt strongly that not enough was being done to address the issue of Christians and divorce. He began a sermon series promoting strong marriages.

"As Christians, if we are not showing people what healthy marriages are, we have no authority in telling people what healthy marriage is," he said.

Impressed with the work of Welch's Center for Enriching Relationships, Scott said he eagerly accepted the opportunity to offer on-site counseling to his parishioners.

"The reality is we're not called to be counselors, we're called to build churches," he said. "As pastors we want to equip people to have happy lives, happy marriages, happy families, but, at the same time, it takes time away from things we are called to do. At the same time, it takes away from people who have been called to do that."

Families served

With the assistance of intern Jennifer Konzen, several Living Hope families are now availing themselves of the service.

"We need to break down the stigmatism of counseling that Christians have built up," Scott said, admitting that the concept was slow to catch on at his church. "We need both God and good counselors. There is a wall up between faith and mental health that needs to be broken down and I think this is one step in the right direction. There is not a whole bunch that a pastor is taught about relationships."

In addition to the counseling, Konzen said she will be offering three free classes to the church, the first being Pillow Talk, which will encourage intimacy between couples. That class is set for Aug. 21. The other two classes are on the Power of Parenting, planned for Sept. 18 and Holy Sex, an Oct. 23 class that she describes as the "marrying of the creative and the spiritual in the bedroom."

Konzen, a master's graduate from Alliant International University, said her goal is to dampen the fear of seeking professional help.

"There is so much that never gets discussed," she said of Christians. "They come into church and put up a smiley face when others are going through the same thing. Being honest and helping each other is vital."

She said she relished the chance to participate in the fledgling program because it gave her an opportunity to serve in the two fields in which she is most passionate.

"The bottom line is I was wanting to work as a therapist by being able to use the Bible and my beliefs to work in a Christian office," she said. "One of the pulls with CER was, 'Yes, you could work within the church.' The goal is to be that support, to provide that support. You can meet a need that might often go unmet."

Conflict resolution

As the program progresses, both Welch and Konzen said they hope churches will begin to feel comfortable using the relationship specialist to help address conflict within the church

body, either among members or for staff development.

"One of the greatest areas of training is how to help people with conflict and how to speak honestly about their marriages, their families or living in a community together," Konzen said. "People often have a hard time resolving conflict. To be able to be there to help with a conflict is a blessing. It's a joy to be able to step in and resolve something that may have just festered without it."

Welch agreed, saying internal conflict is a real danger for churches.

"That's where the devil comes in," the counseling expert said. "He likes to divide and conquer. I've seen it in so many churches over the years, especially when it comes to misunderstandings and mismanaging conflict. In fact, that's true of many marriages. That's the beauty of this because I can see the huge value for these local churches."

Skeptics abound

Although the concept of supplementing biblical training and discipleship with counseling is not new, Welch admits it can still be a tough sell in the Christian community, where image and tradition can stymie change.

"I have a unique voice with pastors in that I'm one of them," he said. "I come with the good-old-boy club card. I believe because of my religious background we are paving the way and allaying the fears of pastors. We're just not seeing (concern) with the pastors we've been working with."

Scott said he agreed with Welch's assessment, but added that having an objective second set of ears to handle such issues can eliminate embarrassment for church members.

"When a pastor does counseling, there is a danger that people may leave the church because the pastor 'knows too much,'" Scott said.

For more information on the Center for Enriching Relationships, visit www.enrichingrelationships.org.