

What is the State of Mental/Emotional Health Within The Christian Churches of New Zealand?

Study Leave Report After Completing Living Wisdom Life & Counselling Skills. Level 1.

The Living Wisdom Life & Counselling course skills level 1 was held at Stoke, Nelson under the direction of David & Rosemary Riddell. This programme which consists of 2 weeks of intensive input,

Living Wisdom Life & Counselling Skills course has been described in various ways by previous students including: “A check up from the neck up.¹ But is most commonly referred to as a course to: “Teach your mind to become your friend.”²

The personal results of this course I am sure will be worked out over the rest of my life and should become obvious in due course, however it is the other question that I want to address in this study leave report, IE the state of mental/emotional health within our church congregations?

David Riddell gives us food for thought:

“A salvation which does not include the assimilation of the fundamentals of mental/emotional health will seriously limit access to the abundant life and daily quench the Spirit of Truth. It will result in a form of religious suppression and denial, and relationships will always be a struggle. **Salvation is not the short-cut** into the abundant life which it has often held out to be. We all have four fundamental emotional needs (innocence, significance, safety and progress). If even one of these needs is not recognized, ‘salvation’ will not over-rule our unhappiness. We are to learn how to love God with all of our *minds*, as well as all of our hearts.....

What a disappointment to discover on occasion, that mental health is actually worse inside the church than outside. The predicament of the church today is that people often do not have the tools they need to cope with mental/emotional failure but she is still not willing to admit, because “God can do anything” and “Jesus is the entire answer”.³

So the Question we need to ask ourselves as Teaching Elders and Leaders/shepherds of Gods people is: what are we teaching our people on a weekly basis about their mental/emotional Health, and why should we teach them anything, after all the Bible says very little about this subject?

That’s the problem, the Bible says a great deal about our awareness of our internal self talk but we have not taken what is said seriously, and have not had the knowledge or know how to seriously guide our people to: “make their minds their friend.”

For example in Romans 12:2 we are told:

¹ Living Wisdom Manual pp.1.1 No 6.

² Living Wisdom Manual pp.1.1 no 12.

³ Living Wisdom Manual pp.1.5.

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect”.⁴

And in 2 Corinthians 10: 4-5.

“For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ”.⁵

These are remarkable statements for a culture that is not supposed to have had any real understanding of the internal workings of the human mind and that was not supposed to have had any language to articulate such understandings.

What parts of our minds may need to be renewed? What are the speculations that need to be destroyed? What thoughts might we need to take captive to the obedience of Christ? What might be in the minds of the average person sitting in the average congregation listening to the average (or vastly above average) sermon on any Sunday in the Wairarapa?

Lies, king lies, family motto's, unbearable feelings, welds, default moods, life defining moments, survival kits, emotion based reasoning, childhood experiences and traumas, echoes, mis-associations,⁶ to name some of what is likely to be sitting before the preacher each and every Sunday of the year – much of which will not enable the truth to be taken in and acted upon, however truth is desperately needed. Insights to realign the mind, to make the mind a friend instead of a condemning, depressive enemy.

Let's get back to my previous question, what are we teaching our people on a weekly basis about their mental/emotional Health? What might good mental/emotional health look like? The following are 12 building blocks upon which to rebuild your mind or in Christian terms to “put on the mind of Christ, or to enter the abundant life which Christians are still missing in their daily lives.”⁷

1. Mental Health is Accepting Responsibility for the outcome of my own choices.

This includes my attitude, my volitional moods and my predicament. This is power to self-determine. “How did I contribute to this situation – this mess?” is a very healthy question to ask oneself repeatedly throughout life, and one the blame-shifter never asks.

2. Mental Health is the Ability To Accept Correction from those who know better than I.

This is the humility to take correction on methods, ideas and beliefs that simply aren't working, without taking offence.....to become wise, first trust the wise. To Trust the wise, first humble yourself.

3. Mental Health is the willingness to accept Short-Term Pain For Long-Term Gain. Coaching themselves through the dreaded feelings and ghosts of the past, such as failure, disappointment, guilt or rejection in a deliberate effort to stay in reality and find the truth necessary to work it through

⁴ The Holy Bible New American Standard Holman Bible Publishers Nashville

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See the Glossary, Appendix 1 for information on these terms

⁷ Living Wisdom Manual pp.1.10.

4. **Mental Health is characterized by Realistic Expectations both for myself and Others**, and the ability to check and adjust when they are no longer helpful. They know that expectations are subconscious assumptions which need to be examined when ever they prove to be troublesome.
5. **Mental Health is Accepting My Past**, by learning and benefiting from my mistakes. We attend to the damaged perspectives which result from historic abuse, trauma and regrets, wherever, interpretations & over-reactions indicate there's a problem. 'Can I recall an event without recoiling from the memory?' is a useful test.
6. **Mental Health is balancing Head And Heart (Subjective and Objective)** – neither purely analytical/intellectual, nor relying on feelings, moods and emotions to interpret people and life.
7. **Mental Health is Balancing My Needs & Wants With others**. Balancing my space with theirs, by speaking the truth in love (assertiveness) at all times. Neither dominating another, nor giving away to much power to another. Other's sovereignty is respected and negotiating skills are developed to achieve a respectful mutuality.
8. **Mental Health is characterized by Smart Trust**. Understanding that trust need not be dangerous by knowing how to trust, and knowing who to trust and who is worthy of trust. It knows that innocent naivety is dangerous in this world, and insists that trust first be earned, before entrusting ones body, heart, children or finances to another. Vulnerability is required for intimacy, but must be wise.
9. **Mental Health is having a sense of Progress Via Worthwhile Goals**. This keeps alive a strong sense of hope, personal power and future. We reveal our worth by the worth of our goals, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick."
10. **Having an internalized sense of Belonging & Security**, rather than having to control all the people I need and the events of my life to keep safe. This includes letting go when holding on is no longer helpfulyou compose yourself, for you are the canvas, and you are the artist.
11. **Having an internalized sense of Worth and Value**, rather than relying on others to give it, knowing that, if others give it, then others can also take it away. I am OK, all by myself.
12. **Mental Health is properly Caring For Our Bodies, which are the overcoat' to our souls and our right to live on earth**. As stewards of our bodies we must see to it that we protect it by giving it a moderate balanced daily diet of minerals, rest and exercise, and protective equipment in hazardous environments, for safe and healthy function. The brain that doesn't think ahead, abandons the body.⁸

Wow! Where do I get people like that, and what would I have to do all week? Where do we get ministers and church leaders like that? We are just going to have to encourage through insight and education our ministers, leaders and people to earnestly desire good emotional/Mental Health. The problem is that when our ministers and leaders do not have those basic foundations for their lives they are dangerous to themselves, their families, wives, children, friends and acquaintances, employers, employees, church congregations and all others that cross their paths, the endless splits and fractures in the Christian church is testimony to this.

⁸The 12 Building blocks are quoted directly from Living Wisdom Manual pp.1.10.

So what are the obstacles to this sort of teaching within the Christian Church?

There are many but one that for me stands out above the rest is to do the nature of human beings and our ability to distinguish between who we are and what we believe. Just as God is three persons or personalities and we are made in God's image so we are Three in one Body, Soul (mind, will, emotions) and Spirit. Our beliefs reside in the soul. It is the soul's job to present the spirit with options which the spirit decides between. If we can differentiate between what we believe and who we are we can take our thoughts and our beliefs and examine them, change them correct them or validate them in the light of new information and new insights. However if we cannot and we believe that we are our beliefs, then to suggest that a belief or a thought pattern is in need of revision or correction is to directly affront the very core of a person which results in defensiveness, withdrawal, attack and refusal to even consider what is being said.

The Principal of Knox Theological College while I was there The Rev Simon Rae often said that: "Theology was what we did, not who we were". At the time I did not understand what he was talking about but now I do. He was also saying that we are not our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and all the other traffic that shoots around our busy little minds. We can become aware of what our mind is telling our spirit, we can sift out the lies, the past damage, the misconstructions and make our minds our friend and live in mental/emotional health all the days of our life and on into eternity.

Appendix - Glossary of Terms

Lie. Synonymous with misbelieve or mistaken conclusion. It represents a “traitor” in ones ‘army’ (paradigm) may be core or secondary. The spider that spins the ‘web’ of trouble. “people of the Lie” is Scott Peck’s term for those who prefer the lie to truth. It is reality, misrepresented by an erroneous belief.⁹

King Lies. Basement- level or subconscious disbeliefs, which need to be traced. Faced and replaced.¹⁰

Family Motto’s. Your family’s (parent’s) spoken and unspoken beliefs and assumptions.¹¹

Unbearable Feelings. (UBF’s) Highly allergic to a particular and hideous feeling, e.g. For the proud of heart it is usually feeling wrong or humiliated. For the jealous it is usually rejection or inferiority. For the burnt-out it is usually failure or being a disappointment to someone. The bruise of childhood never healed, causing echoes and over-reactions (eg rage) in the present.¹²

Welds. Common confusions of the mind. A potentially dangerous psychological phenomena, which most people suffer from. When the mind mis-associates two separate concepts, resulting in life and relational difficulties. E.g. when any disappointment is experienced is experienced as complete despair. Or when any assertiveness is interpreted as aggression or violence. When ‘no’ feels like ‘never’ or powerlessness or rejection. Public attention can only mean humiliation. Failure means self-hatred. Guilt means condemnation. Questioned means interrogation. Compromise feels like being do0minated or over-ruled. Healing distinctions must be found/understood, to heal this co0ndition simply and quickly.¹³

Default Moods. The minds favourite recipe when it doesn’t know what other mood to make. This habitualised feeling is a fabrication – a feeling that the brain has learnt to readily reproduce, whether or not it is appropriate to the time or situation. For example many have learnt in childhood to feel a sense of despair and now as adults, repeatedly slip into a ‘what’s the use’ mood – no matter how much cause for hope there really is due to a confirmed existentialist belief that ‘my feelings would never lie’.¹⁴

Life Defining Moments. A moment when you decided whether you were Ok or not, popular or not, sporty or not, capable or not, musical or not, “brainy or not, etc. The most important moments of our lives, they decided our concept of ourselves, which in turn drives many of our choices and hence our lives.¹⁵

Survival Kits. Destructive method of avoiding ones UBF. Ineffectual method of staying safe emotionally. E.g. blowing up, clamming up, demanding, manipulating,

⁹ Living Wisdom Manual pp.8.1

¹⁰ Living Wisdom Manual pp.1.7b.

¹¹ Living Wisdom Manual pp.3.7.

¹² Living Wisdom Manual pp.8.1

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ ibid

labeling, ridicule, quoting scripture, sarcasm. A soft option way of coping, avoiding unpalatable truth, etc.¹⁶

Emotion Based Reasoning. “I feel therefore I am. If I feel it, then that’s how it must be.” Feelings are not a totally reliable guide to how things are and if ones background includes trauma, abuse, alcoholism, abandonment or severe dysfunction, then ones feelings will frequently misconstrue the shape of reality “I feel humiliated, therefore I must have been insulted” is probably the most common version of this common and commonly missed phenomenon.¹⁷

Echoes. When memory loses its source – its cognitive element - leaving only a wave of feeling. An emotion subconsciously caused by an old or long-past incident but unrecognized as such. When negative, it results in anger, due to an unbearable feeling/over-reaction or compulsive – obsessive behaviour in order to avoid it. When positive, it results in warm fuzzies and hobbies/recreational activities.¹⁸

Mis-associations. See Welds.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ ibid

¹⁸ ibid

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