



PATHWAY

WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries

»» Mental Health Ministry ««

»» MENTAL HEALTH MINISTRY - ANTIOCH COMMUNITY CHURCH, WACO, TX

Vicki Smyer spent a decade working as a marriage and family therapist in private practice before she entered the somewhat uncharted realm of professional counseling within a church setting. Vicki joined the staff of her church, Antioch Community Church in Waco, TX, after they recognized a need for individual and family counseling within the congregation. The ministry that evolved sought to strike a balance between a counseling center and pastoral guidance. Through the use of trained congregants, the church now offers a biblical approach to counseling/pastoral care. This approach incorporates the use of lay persons, trained counselors, and professionals in order to meet the emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of its members. The cornerstone of this ministry is reliance upon the Holy Spirit as the Counselor. Vicki says, "Change doesn't really happen when you talk to someone. It happens when you experience God in a powerful way."

Goals of the ministry

Antioch Community Church desires "to see men and women manage the rough waters of life in the context of a loving and wise community of believers." The church wants "people to be set free from sin patterns, to walk in healing of emotional wounds, and to enjoy healthy relationships with family and friends."

The ministry seeks to:

- Reach out to the hurting within the congregation with resources and support
- Utilize lay leaders to provide for the needs of church members
- Equip members of the church to provide pastoral care/counseling
- Promote healing through the work of the Holy Spirit

Funding the ministry

The funding for this ministry is minimal. Vicki's salary is paid out of the church budget for staff members. Her office is located within the church building along with the other staff. As lay ministers and volunteers provide the remainder of the counseling, there is no additional cost to the church.

Recruiting volunteers

The process for selecting team members for this ministry is very intentional. The volunteers are specifically chosen and trained. The first group of volunteers, who are called Life Group leaders, is composed of the regular leaders of the church's small groups who interact consistently with congregants. Therefore, they are the first line of defense when crises arise. A second tier of volunteers are the Pastoral Care Team, leaders who are given regular training on how to help people with such issues as depression, grief, relationships, conflict management, addictions, etc. Some of these individuals hold a professional degree in counseling, although most do not.

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Structure of the program

The model of this ministry is three-pronged (with a possible fourth step). Life Group leaders are naturally the first ones to address any issues that arise as members are already familiar with them. If the situation is especially difficult, section leaders step in to provide backup help in pastoral care. If the problem is more serious, the church will provide three free counseling sessions with Vicki, a Licensed Professional Counselor. It is expected that church members are involved in Life Groups and use their leader as their first resource.

If the problem is chronic, outside the scope of Vicki's expertise, or a serious mental illness, Vicki will make an outside referral to a professional in the community. The ministry is designed to handle acute crisis management, not long-term therapy.

Promoting the program to the community

The program is for individuals who are already members of the church. It is not designed to be a community outreach but an outreach to the individuals struggling within the congregation. If someone from the community calls seeking assistance, Vicki will provide a referral to another counselor or social service organization.

Program as evangelism

The foundation of this ministry is reliance upon the Holy Spirit as a Counselor, and it is based on the belief that "the Holy Spirit comes with His gifts of wisdom and discernment and healing to personally tend to his children who are suffering." Scripture is heavily incorporated into the counseling process as a tool in the healing process. The program is a response to the Biblical mandate to carry the burdens of Christian brothers and sisters.

Stepping Stones

Brief descriptions of how to implement specific ministries. For each of the five broader areas above, many ministries can be envisioned. We have identified a few of these for each area and have articulated the steps for how that ministry might be planned.

Backpacks

The Walking Alongside Web site provides a Backpack of additional resources and examples for this specific ministry. Included are published articles, Web sites, selected books, testimonials and existing ministries with contact information.

Food for the Journey

A short devotional based on scripture that can be used in church bulletins, as a Moment for Mission during worship or as an introduction to a Bible study.