

# New Structures in the Ministry: Therapeutic Groups in the Church

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Many pastors are discovering the great potential for ministry within the structure of the small group. Effective therapeutic groups are being utilized and researched in diverse settings. They are known by various names such as personal groups, sensitivity groups, Yokefellow groups, group counseling, and group psychotherapy.

The use of the group by the church is not a new phenomenon. It is a rediscovery of an old tradition which has been modified for contemporary use. Jesus Christ chose twelve men whom He could train and prepare for a life mission through the instrumentality of the group structure. In the Early Church, converts “continued . . . in . . . doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Later, they were “comforted, being knit together in love . . . unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding” (Col. 2:2).

The group structure has been prominent in various historical movements within the church, including the German pietistic movement. In such a warm atmosphere, John Wesley found new spiritual life and the class meeting, a therapeutic group, had its genesis.

## THE CLASS MEETING IN METHODISM

The class meeting was begun in Bristol, a seaport town, on February 15, 1742, when one Captain Foy suggested that 11 persons be assigned to him. He offered to make a collection of a penny a week for each member of his “class” and if members were unable to pay that much, he promised to make up the difference. Later that same year (April 25, 1742), “several earnest and sensible men” suggested that Wesley organize classes

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in London like those at Bristol, but for the purpose of spiritual supervision and nurture.<sup>1</sup> At first, the leader visited members of his class in their individual homes, but later, because of the great amount of time required, the 12 individuals met together weekly. Attendance at the class meeting was required for continued membership in the Society.

The class leader was required to perform three functions: "1. To see each person in his class once a week; to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort them; 2. To receive what they are willing to give toward the expenses of the society; and, 3. To meet the Assistant and the Stewards once a week."<sup>2</sup>

In a very real sense, the class leader was the key to the success of the class meeting. Sometimes leaders were removed or members were assigned to different leaders when personality conflicts hindered progress. One of the necessary qualities of a class leader was sympathy. "A man of cold spirit, and lacking in affectionateness, cannot minister to tried and weary and burdened hearts in a way to encourage, lighten and cheer them."<sup>3</sup>

Though Wesley recognized the spiritual and social nature of the class meeting, he stated that it was not like "auricular confession in the Roman church,"<sup>4</sup> nor was it designed solely to meet social needs. Five years after the inception of the class meeting, he stated that its purpose was to examine the life, not the heart. It was his conviction that the pointed questions of the class leader would reveal the practice of one's faith.

The value of the class meeting to the growth and development of Methodism, both in Britain and in the United States, is fully documented. For example, Wesley said:

It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to "bear one another's burdens," and naturally to "care for each other." As they daily had a more intimate acquaint-

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1. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint), I, 357,364.
  2. *Ibid.*, III, 426.
  3. John Atkinson, *The Class Leader* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1882), pp. 48, 49.
  4. Wesley, *op. cit.*, X, 351-352.

ance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, attendance at the class meeting as a test of membership was dropped in 1866 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and in 1912 by the British Methodist Church.<sup>6</sup>

### THErapy GROUPS OR THERAPEUTIC GROUPS

Americans are plagued with many problems which are psychological in nature. Physicians report that a large percentage of their patients suffer from illnesses which are psychogenic in nature. In great numbers, people feel lonely, insecure and fearful. They are afraid of their impulses, their performance in daily life, their futures. Being emotionally isolated, they feel that their problems are peculiar to themselves. The feeling that someone *really* cares (or loves) is often absent, impeding personal growth and development—spiritually, socially, vocationally.

Those who appear to be most gregarious are frequently aware of their lack of love. For such persons, therapeutic groups are indicated rather than therapy groups. Therapy groups, aimed at the solution of more serious emotional disorders, are restricted to professional mental health workers such as the psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. On the other hand, informal church groups can be therapeutic; they can facilitate the healing of the deep personal hurts of the group members.

Three indispensable elements of a therapeutic group are *intimacy*, *acceptance*, and *sharing*. By intimacy is meant a personal quality, a deep concern or caring for another. In intimacy, the individuality of man will be recognized. Group members will seek to understand each other as they are, from the other person's frame of reference, and not try to force everyone into some predetermined idealistic mold.

Acceptance grows out of intimacy; a person will not feel accepted until he has been with another person long enough to know and to be known. The traditional church group (i.e., Sunday school class) is content-oriented with the personal needs of the members being secondary. With such an organizational goal, a sense of being accepted and of accepting

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5. *Ibid.*, VII, 254.

6. Mary A. Tenny, "The Origin and History of the Methodist Class Meeting," in *Spiritual Renewal for Methodism*, Samuel Emerick (ed). (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials), p. 18.

others is slow to develop. A therapeutic group is more concerned with active participation by each member than with the dispensing of a body of information. As one's need for love and acceptance is met, he will become deeply involved in the group.

Sharing is progressive in nature. The most obvious is shared before the more personal. In one study, S. M. Jourard found that it was easier for people to share thoughts regarding their tastes and interests, attitudes and opinions, and work, and that it was more difficult to share concerning their personality, finances, and feelings about their body.<sup>7</sup> Sharing centers on problems, questions, insights, and judgments and may take the form of confession. O. H. Mowrer indicates in many of his writings that confession of one's faults in an intimate group facilitates emotional healing and growth.<sup>8</sup> Sharing and confession grow out of depth communication where each member's words and actions are noted and valued.

### TYPES OF THERAPEUTIC GROUPS

Four types of therapeutic groups can be identified, according to their function:

1. *Worship and prayer groups.* The primary goal is the deepening of one's spiritual relationship. This was the essential purpose of the Methodist class meeting.

2. *Study.* The content is determined by the group or by the parent body. Study may focus on the Bible, religious literature, or other relevant and meaningful topics (e.g., Christian parent/child relations).

3. *Work or service groups.* The goal is a pragmatic approach to the implications of the Gospel in daily living, resulting in some kind of social service.

4. *Sharing groups.* The primary thrust of the sharing group is to aid members in understanding and accepting themselves, and understanding and accepting other members. This type of group focuses on the group itself, which is a microcosm. Each member is to consider his own feelings and reactions to what is being said and done. Instead of saying, "You shouldn't interrupt me," a person will talk about his own feelings, "It bothers *me* when I am interrupted." In this way, each member deals with his *feelings* rather than with another's *behavior*.

The first three types of groups are primarily group-goal oriented and attempt to reach the goal chosen by the group. The fourth type of

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7. S. M. Jourard, *The Transparent Self* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1964), p. 168.

8. See O. Hobart Mowrer, *The New Group Therapy* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1964), and his chapter in *Groups that Work* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967).

group is individual-goal oriented with the sole reason for its existence being to benefit the members individually.

E. T. Gendlin writes of the "experiential" group, which roughly approximates the "sharing" group noted above. He proposes that certain "ground rules" apply to all therapeutic groups, regardless of their setting. Though some of these rules are not applicable to all types of church groups, the principles in the eleven "rules" are applicable. Gendlin's ground rules are:

1. Everyone who is here belongs here just because he is here, and for no other reason.
2. For each person what is true is determined by what is in him, what he indirectly feels and finds making sense in himself, and the way he lives inside himself.
3. Our first purpose is to make contact with each other. Everything else we might want or need comes second.
4. We try to be as honest as possible and to express ourselves as we really are and really feel just as much as we can.
5. We listen for the person's inside living and feeling.
6. We listen to everyone.
7. The group leader is responsible for two things only: he protects the belonging of every member, and he protects their being heard if this is getting lost.
8. Realism: If we know things are a certain way, we do not pretend they are not that way.
9. What we say here is "confidential": no one will repeat anything said here outside the group unless it concerns only himself. This applies not just to obviously private things, but to everything. After all, if the individual concerned wants others to know something, he can always tell them himself.
10. Decisions made by the group need everyone taking part in some way.
11. New members become members because they walk in and remain. Whoever is here belongs.<sup>9</sup>

#### TECHNICAL AND PERSONAL SKILLS

As in counseling and psychotherapy, including pastoral counseling, so in the small group, the *relationship* which develops is the key to

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9. E. T. Gendlin, "An Experimental Approach to Group Therapy," *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 1 (Winter 1968), pp. 24-29.

success.<sup>10</sup> In the group, however, the relationship is between the leader and member *and* between member and member. The relationship grows out of the interaction between all members and leader on a permutation rather than an additive basis. Gendlin describes this relationship as "closeness" or "contact" which is "something felt. It is like looking someone in his eyes and knowing that he sees you. It is a direct feeling for the other person's living inside himself."<sup>11</sup> The development of relationship, closeness, or contact is more dependent on personal than technical skills. The greatest need for an effective group leader is for him to be open to his own experience and to be able to accept himself and his environment as they are.

Members of a congregation who are mental health professionals can be used advantageously in sharing groups, but persons without such technical skills can also be leaders if they have the ability to be perceptive and understanding. In his role, the leader will have three distinct functions. He will be responsible for *procedural* details such as starting and ending as scheduled, and not allowing any person to monopolize or to be overlooked. At other times he will act as a *catalytic* agent, facilitating the smooth and purposeful operation of the group by helping elicit the hidden meanings of obscure statements and by clarifying masked feelings. He may also *interpret* what is happening to the group: the clenched fist of a group member when speaking about his spouse or the reticence of a member to take an active part in the discussion.

### GETTING STARTED

The person interested in beginning a therapeutic group within the framework of the church has many helpful theoretical and practical books available.<sup>12</sup> Books dealing with group counseling and group psychotherapy may be very instructive.<sup>13</sup> Learning opportunities are available to pastors

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10. W. C. Cessna, "The Pastor as Counselor," *The Asbury Seminarian*, XXII (January, 1968), pp. 6-11.
  11. Gendlin, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
  12. See J. L. Casteel, *Spiritual Renewal Through Personal Groups* (New York: Association Press, 1957) and H. J. Clinebell, *Mental Health Through Christian Community* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965).
  13. See G. M. Gazda (ed.), *Basic Approaches to Group Psychotherapy and Group Counseling* (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1968), J. A. Johnson, *Group Therapy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), and H. Mullan and M. Rosenbaum, *Group Psychotherapy* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962).

in a variety of institutions affiliated with the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education.<sup>14</sup>

Group procedures are being increasingly used in mental health settings for two reasons: efficiency and effectiveness. Not only can one worker provide therapeutic services to many more people in groups, but also the interaction of group members is believed to make the therapist's skills more effective. The church has yet to fully utilize the dynamic structure of the small group for prayer, study, service, and sharing.

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If you have been using therapeutic groups in your setting you are invited to communicate something of your experiences to the author. All correspondence will be held in strictest confidence.

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14. For information about clinical pastoral education opportunities write The Association at Room 450, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York 10027 for the brochure "Accredited Training Centers and Member Seminaries."