

Saint Marylebone Healing and Counselling Centre

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Saint Marylebone Healing and Counselling Centre was opened in July 1987, with the aim of bringing together medical, complementary and religious approaches to healing. As originally envisaged, doctors, clergy, counsellors, music, and complementary therapists would work together. It was imagined that they would be able to do this because they would approach their patients in a holistic way. From the Christian point of view (the inspiration for the venture came from the then Rector of St Marylebone Parish Church, in whose crypt the Centre was established), it was felt that all could be partners in the same enterprise, because all truth and healing come from God.

Eighteen years later, it is possible to appreciate both the grandeur and the naivety of that vision. The medical team, originally led by Professor Patrick Pietroni, has grown into the Marylebone Health Centre, which delivers primary care to nearly 8,500 local residents; as well as offering, and investigating, a range of complementary therapies. In 2002 four doctors from the practice published a substantial book on *Integrating Complementary Therapies in Primary Care, A Practical Guide for Health Professionals* (David Peters, Leon Chaitow, Gerry Harris, and Sue Morrison. Church Livingstone: Edinburgh and London).

The Church's Healing and Counselling Centre has also prospered. Today we offer spiritually informed professional counselling and psychotherapy, healing prayer, spiritual accompaniment, a mental health support group, a meditation group, a reading group, and a rolling programme of conferences which make space for some engagement between medical, psychotherapeutic, and Christian understandings and approaches to healing and the spiritual journey.

Gone, sadly, is the dream of a fully integrated approach in which clergy, doctors and complementary therapists would work together as one team. The reasons for this are complex. In part they can be traced to unrecognised, or unacknowledged, philosophical and organisational differences between the various practitioners at the time they came together. Medicine, even holistic medicine, has its own 'spirituality' and rationale. Those working in the NHS are much more tightly controlled in their working practices - and, increasingly, in their targets and agendas - than those who have the luxury of working privately, or for the Church. There is also the fact that most alternative and complementary therapies can be delivered in a seemingly objective way, without reference to the philosophical and religious traditions in which they were developed. In this sense, although they may lack a clear scientific rationale, they can be 'prescribed' by a doctor and 'taken' by the patient, with little intrusion into the patient's existing belief system. Indeed, they may benefit from our society's current suspicion of scientific medicine, and preference for approaches which appear 'natural' and non-invasive.

Religion has also proved an obstacle to creating a fully integrated system. The NHS makes provision for people of all faiths - although this sometimes seems to equate with being 'blind' to religious differences, as one might be blind

to differences of race or colour - so that the fact that the Crypt is part of a Christian church, with overtly Christian architecture and decoration, has sometimes caused disquiet among practitioners trained in religious neutrality (though I am not aware that it is such a problem to their patients).

More than this, there is the fact that Christianity – like every religious tradition - has a distinctive ‘take’ on life. In common with other religions, it sees health as more extensive than physical and psychological well being, although it cherishes both. At the heart of the Christian vision lies the notion of relationship, with health (wholeness, holiness) the fruit of a living relationship with God. The Biblical notion of peace, *shalom*, is of all aspects of being - ourselves, and the rest of creation - brought into harmony with this transpersonal source of life. Christian approaches to healing are therefore concerned to establish and deepen this relationship. As in other religious traditions, so in the Christian vision, the spiritual journey cannot be prescribed or ‘taken’ as a course of treatment. It is a journey which has to be embarked upon consciously, if questioningly: a ‘taste and see’ approach which progressively engages every aspect of our lives.

The counsellors and psychotherapists who work in the Church’s Healing & Counselling Centre are accredited by the BACP, or registered with the UKCP or BCP, and are available to work with people of all faiths and none: relationship lies at the heart of the psychodynamic approach, and relationships between self and other, and within our internal worlds are the stuff of psychotherapy. But our therapists are also embarked on the Christian journey and sensitive to the needs of those who are trying to get free from a punitive God image - or discovering the touch of the Life Giver in their lives. For those living with chronic mental illness and for whom individual counselling may be unhelpful, we offer a drop-in support group in which religious issues are never forced but often raised, as participants help each other to find meaning in their experiences. For those wishing to explore the spiritual journey within the Christian tradition of imaginative and contemplative prayer, we have a team of spiritual directors; and the services of St Marylebone Parish Church, with its wonderful musical tradition, and its round of quiet, thoughtful services of prayer for healing, accompanied by the laying-on-of-hands, are available to all.

In maintaining its Christian identity the Centre is committed to dialogue with other religious traditions and also to owning and trying to understand the Christian ‘shadow’. We run a rolling programme of meetings that make space for dialogue between religious and therapeutic approaches. Forthcoming events include three ‘*Soundings in Christian psychology*’, and a day conference for health professionals and religious leaders, *Spirituality, Religion and Mental Health*, at which the main speakers will be Professor Peter Gilbert, Dr Kathy Aitchison, Mr James Myers, and myself. We welcome inquiries from health professionals, and are always glad to arrange visits and consultations. More information can be obtained from healing@stmarylebone.org or 020 7935 5066.