

An Interview with the Founders of Two Church-Based Counseling Ministries



by MICHAEL GEMBOLA

An important emphasis over the years in the pages of this journal, and in books by CCEF authors, has been the surprising power of God's care for his people through their everyday relationships with each other.¹ The consistent theme has been to hold high the calling to church ministry that engages every member. And exploring this positive vision for relational care in the church has been profoundly fruitful. It does not lower the value of the pastoral office, or denigrate the expertise, training, or wisdom of counselors and pastors. Rather, it raises the value of the church member. We do not have to devalue the specialist or sage to emphasize the value of the friend. Neither one can provide what the other offers, but both are precious commodities in a community and in a church.

1. CCEF (Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; ccef.org) publishes this journal.

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The fruit of these efforts has brought this vision of one-another care to life in the establishment of creative and thoughtful lay counseling programs.² What follows is a conversation with the leaders of two such programs. Jonathan Holmes (JH) ministers at Parkside Church, a multi-campus church based in Solon, Ohio, and Karen Shannon (KS) serves at Liquid Church, a multi-campus church based in Somerville, New Jersey. Both have created ministries that mobilize their members to walk with one another through the troubles of life. Both have also done so on a large scale, and thus have had the benefit of selecting, training, and supervising many people. They understand these matters well. I (MG) have invited them to share, so that we might benefit and borrow what we can from their experience as we all seek to serve as burden-bearing members in our churches. Our conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Prequel: Providing Care in a Pandemic

This interview took place in May, 2020 when most people in the United States were staying at home to prevent further spread of the COVID-19 virus. This impacted churches dramatically. Most worship services took place online and face-to-face ministries like counseling were either suspended or revamped so care could be offered safely.

MG: In times like these, it seems unusual to start a conversation about counseling anywhere other than with how you and your ministries are faring during the COVID-19 pandemic.

KS: Of course, we're in the epicenter here in northern New Jersey, so we were one of the first areas to close, and we likely will be one of the last to reopen. But that has not put ministry on hold. Our care needs have gone through the roof. Yesterday alone, we had seven deaths among people who attend our campus of Liquid Church, and in the last two weeks, there were four suicides within our larger community. Our care ministry is more vital now than ever.

2. I use the term *lay counseling* in order to distinguish these programs from pastoral, parachurch, or professional contexts.

We have about thirty-five people serving in our care ministry, and at this point they are leading online support groups for anxiety, addiction, and grief. Those serving with GriefShare say they've never processed such raw grief as what they've seen in those not able to be with their loved ones who are suffering and dying from the virus.

We also started a pastoral care line. When people call in, they are able to speak and pray with a pastor. Sometimes we also refer them to a care team member or professional counselor, but often the people reaching out just want to be heard and prayed for.

JH: In Ohio, we have benefited from a strong early response to the pandemic. We are hopeful, but we've had to put a hold on lay counseling. It all happens in our building, and we had concerns about transitioning the team toward providing remote care. Certainly, informal care is still taking place. And at Fieldstone, the counseling center Parkside Church has launched to serve the community, we've had our busiest time. We now have twenty-two counselors and we receive daily intakes.

I anticipate this time of high need will continue. An *LA Times* article recently surveyed how societies handle large-scale global traumas, comparing the pandemic to the Indian Ocean tsunami, 9/11, and other major tragedies.³ Beyond the actual physical suffering, the toll of grief and pain for this kind of event on a society is staggering. *Time Magazine* also projected an estimated 150,000 mental health-related deaths in the US due to the pandemic, not counting deaths caused directly by COVID-19.⁴

KS: Yes, because of that we are trying to be proactive in our support of our care team members. Tim Keller recently shared about his experience pastoring in New York right after 9/11. A pastor had reached out to him with his experience in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. The pastor told him that your church staff will get through this and keep serving, but the burnout in two or three years will be terrible. The pastor

3. Deborah Netburn, "Isolation is hazardous to your health. The term 'social distancing' doesn't help," *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-03-28/isolation-is-hazardous-to-your-health-the-term-social-distancing-doesnt-help>.

4. Jessica Gold, "Could COVID-19 Finally Destigmatize Mental Illness?," *Time*, May 13, 2020, <https://time.com/5835960/coronavirus-mental-illness-stigma/>.

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