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RUNNING A CHRISTIAN ADVICE CENTRE¹

Fran Beckett

Fran's essay describes the advice centre which her church runs in north London. As well as describing the way the centre was conceived and set up she shows how its role is part of the ongoing work of her church's life and the lessons which can be learned from such an activity.

Woodcroft Evangelical Church is strategically situated on a crossroads on the corner of a large pre-war council housing estate. The local shops, library, park and underground station are all within a few hundred yards of the church, with people from the estate having to pass the church in order to reach them. Beyond the shops, across a main road, are mainly owner-occupied family homes for those with a middle range income.

Through carrying out a community survey it was discovered that many newcomers to the area weren't too sure what sort of a church we are or if indeed we are one at all! Residents of longer standing knew that we were a church but little more than that. However, many from both groupings felt that the church should have a higher profile in a caring capacity in the community if our faith was to have credibility. This formed a backcloth to subsequent discussions with a majority of the area's professional and voluntary helping agencies e.g. Social Services Department, Citizens Advice Bureau, local welfare rights groups, the Housing Department.

As a result of these discussions and through contact with individual local residents many needs were highlighted. Our thinking and praying began to crystallize into a consideration of the establishment of a Christian Advice Centre. This would be a place, on church premises, where people could come for advice and information on a wide range of issues — such as welfare benefits, housing, consumer affairs, resources for the elderly and handicapped, and other areas of concern. Many people are frightened or put off by large, seemingly bureaucratic, organizations and don't understand the 'system' that encompasses so much of life in the 1980s. They need someone to take the time to help them fill in forms, to negotiate on their behalf with large government departments, to explain in an uncomplicated way their legal rights in certain situations, and who above all will be prepared to listen and to care in a way that will restore a sense of dignity and worth.

Fourteen months ago we opened an Advice Centre that offers information, care and a limited amount of counselling help to members of the local community. It functions from a Christian basis, incorporating Christian principles sensitively applied, but is open to all no matter what their personal convictions. Whilst maintaining a Christian stance, we work in co-operation with secular agencies and where possible try to complement what they are offering rather than compete.

Careful consideration was given to how this could be a bridge-building exercise to enable those who would normally never go near a church begin to grasp something of the reality of God's love and concern for them. This affected the type of publicity used, the appointment of receptionists in the Advice Centre who have the ability to put people at their ease, and the provision, where appropriate, of follow-up befriending of clients by church members. It was also important to ensure that there were resources within the overall life and activities of the church which could be utilized as a next step in contact and relationship building. These included a weekly evangelistic coffee morning, an informal evangelistic discussion group and Sunday services that were relevant to visitors to the church.

Several factors emerge when coming to assess the life and effectiveness of the work of the Advice Centre fourteen months after it has opened.

Firstly it has been increasingly used by the public with over two hundred clients on our books during that period, and probably three times as many actual visits to the Centre by those clients.

Secondly, the work of the Advice Centre has created greater and more positive community awareness of the church as a whole, and has significantly increased the quantity and quality of our contacts with non-Christians.

A third factor is the type of problem and need that people have presented. They cover an enormous range of areas from seeking advice about a neighbour's troublesome cats to needing someone to talk to about complex marital difficulties. A large number of the enquiries are concerning welfare benefits, and many others are of a largely practical nature rather than involving emotional problems. However, an apparent underlying motive for a majority in using the Advice Centre is a sense of loneliness and a very real need to have someone caring to talk to. It is this that brings us to the fourth factor in our assessment.

The initial contact with the Advice Centre has led naturally beyond that into attendance at some of the activities listed earlier in this article, and has significantly increased the size of the fringe of the church, with some having subsequently become Christians. Follow-up befriending and the existence of an evangelistic coffee morning, discussion group,

guest services, and Sunday lunches have therefore proved vital.

The final area of consideration in this article is to consider some of the lessons that have been learnt over the past fourteen months of the life of the Advice Centre. This is not an exhaustive list — we anticipate learning much more — and we would stress that what has been learnt and achieved is due to the grace and enabling of God rather than human accomplishment. Many of the points listed below could be developed as subjects in themselves, but space does not permit this.

1. What is offered to the community must be relevant to their felt needs

This point can be illustrated in several ways. Firstly, judging by the response, the Advice Centre is meeting a felt need in our particular community. Secondly, we have contact with another Christian group who have attempted in some measure to duplicate the Advice Centre but have had very little response because that model is not appropriate to their particular local community. Thirdly, a recent Advice Centre Open Evening including a buffet meal and a talk by a doctor on 'Coping with Stress in the 1980s' packed the church with visitors because stress is a human experience that we are all subject to — a very obvious felt need.

2. True commitment needed

To get involved with individual and community needs requires a considerable time commitment, and we should be aware of the implications of this.

3. Compromise

We have found out there is a temptation to compromise our distinctiveness as a Christian agency, and that we need to be constantly alert to this.

4. Snowball effect

There are always more needs than an individual church can meet, and we have therefore found it important to ensure that the work of the Advice Centre keeps pace with the life of the church, and does not out-

strip it. Equally, it would be easy to build a separate 'empire' but we have found it vital to keep in mind that the Advice Centre is a servant organization of the church.

5. Follow up

It is of great value to be able to provide individual follow-up and other means of ongoing contact in order to build relationships which will facilitate natural personal evangelism.

6. Prayer and the power of God

Increasingly, we are discovering the necessity of prayer as a priority to undergird all that is done, and the answers to prayer so far have been a great source of encouragement. We are now more aware of the need to see a greater degree of direct intervention by God, breaking into the lives of those who come to us.

7. Importance of building a team ministry

To be a 'listener' can be tiring and stressful and so we have found it valuable to belong to a team where we can pray for and support one another, as well as learn together. It is also important that the focus of the Advice Centre is not centred on one particular personality, and a team approach has minimized this possibility.

8. Bridging the gap

One of the main aims of the Advice Centre has been to bridge the gap between the church and the surrounding community and in so doing, to demonstrate the vital relevance of the Christian message. We have found that this type of service to the community has in many instances bridged that gap, and has brought us into meaningful contact with people who would not normally 'darken the doors of a church'.

NOTES

1. This article originally appeared in *Harvester* April 1984 as the second of two articles explaining the need for the local church to be active in its serving role to

the community in which it is situated. It is used here by permission of the author, Fran Beckett, and the editor of *Harvester*, Jonathan Lamb, to both of whom we express our grateful thanks. *Harvester* is published monthly and can be obtained from Paternoster Press, 3 Mount Radford Crescent, Exeter, EX2 4JW. The annual subscription is £8.40.