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The Apostle Paul wrote to the ecclesia at Corinth with encouraging words:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 ESV).

In his first letter Paul encouraged the brothers and sisters, describing the church as the body of Christ with different members offering different levels and forms of service. As the body of Christ we are his eyes and ears, his arms hands and feet as we serve each other seeking to meet our brothers and sisters both in their suffering and joy. The Christadelphian Support Network UK (CSN) seeks to complement the welfare work of the ecclesia by offering support to ecclesias, brothers and sisters by bringing together those who seek help and those who offer help in a confidential and caring service. This support can range from “a listening ear” through to receiving skilled professional support.

Introduction

‘Is that the Christadelphian Support Network? ... I’m sorry to ring you so late, but I’m so worried and anxious that I felt that I must speak to someone. You see, I’

This is not an uncommon situation for a CSN volunteer contact. What a blessing that there is someone there!



A brother or sister might have been struggling with a problem for a long time and been reluctant to seek help. Asking for help is not always easy. The opening of the heart involves taking a risk. It can bring feelings of discomfort, vulnerability and even shame. Often there may be a fear, perhaps unfounded, but a fear nevertheless, that exposure will bring criticism, suspicion, misunderstanding and strained relationships.

But what are the options? The worried and distressed caller could ask someone in their ecclesia for help, but for personal reasons may not feel able to do that. Another way could be to seek help from a good friend, but the friend may not have the specialist knowledge or the experience or even the impartiality which could help solve the difficulty. There are times when an ecclesia, despite all good intent, may lack the specialist skills to help their brothers, sisters and young people. Sometimes the problem is just too personal or sensitive to ask those you know.

There are outside agencies like the General Practitioner, Social Services, Citizens Advice Bureau, Relate or Christian Counselling services or perhaps in desperation, The Samaritans. But however willing, these do not underpin their advice and support with the gospel hope and values that we share.

The CSN holds this basis as fundamental in the service we offer, as stated in our mission:

Underpinned by the faith we share, the CSN aims to:

-  *Offer loving support and guidance at difficult times of life*
-  *Raise awareness of problems we face in life and encourage compassionate care in our community*

Background

The CSN originated some thirty three years ago because an ecclesia was trying to act with wisdom and discretion in a particularly distressing problem which involved alcohol abuse and physical violence. 'Surely', it was said, 'there must be someone in the Brotherhood who can offer some guidance. Perhaps there may be brethren and sisters who work with Social Services, in hospitals or clinics, someone with professional training and vocational experience who could help'.

So, in 1981, in the correspondence section of this magazine, the question was asked: "Is there a need for a caring service separate from but complementary to the care already being provided by ecclesias?" The response was immediate and substantial with many brethren and sisters offering their help. They were either working in a caring capacity or felt that their own personal experience equipped them for the task (or rather, the privilege) of helping others who had similar problems to face. Some wrote merely to say how thankful they were that at last someone was aware of the need for such a service. Others wrote to say how much they would have welcomed such help had it been available in their particular time of need.

Meeting a Need

Encouraged by this response and certainly moved by it, a meeting of all interested parties was arranged. As a result a committee was formed whose task was to: define aims; to harness expertise in the Brotherhood; to devise a workable system and to prepare guidelines for helpers. Then as now the conviction remains that anonymity and confidentiality are crucial elements in the successful operation of such a service. The creation of trust and a thorough commitment to reliability are essential.

The Christadelphian community is blessed with brothers and sisters who have a wide variety of professional expertise and others who have had personal experience of particular problems. Many have volunteered to share their knowledge and experience to help others.

This valuable resource is further used in our "Awareness Days" which cover a range of topics and seek to raise knowledge of particular issues and encourage compassionate care and support within the community.

Our developing resource library covers many pastoral care issues and is available at www.chsn.org.uk/resources

Our Organisation and Structure

A committee of brothers and sisters deal with the administration and planning of the CSN including establishing the needs and our response and resources to deal with them. In line with our confidentiality policy individual cases are never discussed. We are currently seeking new committee members and are advertising these positions within the news pages of 'The Christadelphian' and on our web-site.

Charity trustee governance is increasingly impacting on us with individual trustee responsibility key to implementing processes for our work and providing evidenced training and support for those working with us. Whilst all of us are volunteers, we take our responsibilities seriously seeking to be as professional as we can in managing the Help Line, Prayer Line and organising events and publications.

Additionally our services to the community include fellowship weekends, a holiday week, Awareness Days, Sisters' Days and Praise and Fellowship Days and a series of publications dealing with specific matters of care, e.g., Marriage Matters – a Pre Marriage Course; Care Matters – Supporting the Aged; Coping with Depression, Addictions, Leaving home; Managing Conflict and Child Safeguarding Guidelines for Ecclesias. We also have resources for running Marriage and Parenting courses.

Further information is available from our web site www.chsn.org.uk

First time calls/emails to our Help Line average two a week, with variable frequency over the year. Of these 21% concern marriage and relationships and 20% families and children. 10% are from ecclesias seeking support on behalf of their members.

Sadly, there are members of some ecclesias who are unaware of our existence as for various reasons our notices do not reach ecclesial noticeboards. If anyone in such circumstances would like to receive information regarding our services, events or publications directly from us then please contact us at: admin@chsn.org.uk or call 01555 705099.

Summary

We live in a complex world and the problems which beset our community are very often those which are common to all mankind. The attitudes and behaviour of those dear to us can sometimes be at odds with the beliefs and principles we might expect of each other and situations do arise which once were not so much as named among us. It is very sad when these things occur, but fact is that they do and will continue to occur as long as our Lord remains away. Sometimes a whole history of difficult circumstances seems to focus into one dramatic crisis. Such problems are not easy to solve. It is only with the Father's help and the love and compassion taught to us by our Lord that we can look to bring resolution and peace to such situations.

We ask that all will encourage and pray for those who are struggling to cope with trials of faith and those seeking to help while we await the Lord's return.

The CSN Committee

Further Information from our Web site www.chsn.org.uk or from admin@chsn.org.uk

Coordinator Phil Cox Phone admin: 01555 705099

Help line: 0845 11 300 72 Email: help@chsn.org.uk

Prayer Line: 0845 643 2572