

Mary's Story

I grew up in a fairly committed, religious, Catholic family.
 The religious influence was from very early years
 about having a relationship with God
 but also very much about having a relationship with other people
 and I think,
 without knowing it,
 early on I got this sense of the personal Christ or the personal God being in other
 people.

So there was always that sense of wanting to help other people,
 probably those people who were less fortunate than ourselves.
 All of that came from my background, my Christian faith, and my family.

I started teaching in my mid 30s
 and around that same time
 I read in our church bulletin
 that there was this organisation called, at that time, the Catholic Marriage Advisory
 Council,
 saying that there was an open meeting within the diocese
 inviting people who might be interested in becoming counsellors to come along.
 So along I went,
 to find about 20 other people there.
 People who were already counselling within the organisation came along
 and spoke to the group about their experience,
 how they'd been involved,
 what they got out of it,
 what they felt they achieved in terms of counselling for other people.
 It was all very positive

You had to go through a fairly rigorous selection process.
 And at that time, because we were affiliated to the Catholic Church,
 one of the things you had to be was a practising Catholic,
 and so you got a visit from a priest.
 It was about, were you an active member of the church?
 and did you profess a Christian faith?
 was that your motivation?

I hugely enjoyed my training as a counsellor,
 but found it hugely challenging,
 and I reckon that that was the period where I as an individual grew the most in my life.
 I never have regretted ever doing that.
 It was, I would say, the best decision I ever made in my life.



Once I started counselling, I really loved it.
 It was hard work,
 and there would be times where you would think,
 am I really doing a good job here?
 am I using the skills the way I was trained to use them?
 you know, all of that questioning that you do.
 However, I don't think I ever had clients, that it hadn't helped in some way,
 even if it was to help them to get to the decision that being apart was the right thing to
 do.
 The idea was not to mend their problem.
 The whole counselling bit was to help them to come to the right decision for them.

I took over in 1999 as chief exec
 We had income from the government
 and from the church.
 I had a real sense that having Catholic in our title
 put off people who were either not Catholic
 or even practicing Catholics who might not have been driving down the main road of
 Catholic theology,
 they might not have wanted to come to us,
 cos they might have had this misinterpretation that we were actually going to be
 spouting some of this theory.
 We had to be very sure that we were not only serving the whole community,
 which we were,
 but that we didn't have any barriers to people coming in.
 So we became Scottish Marriage Care

Over the years it's become much broader
 Both the people who counsel are different
 and the people who come to us,
 cos Scotland has become a much more secular society than it was 20, 30 years ago.
 But what is still around is that sense of spirituality,
 that sense of "we value you",
 "we value your family and your relationship".

The Church would want some sense that we're still linked to them.
 And my line has always been,
 we are linked to you,
 we do what I see as Christian work,
 that's what I do.
 Although other people maybe do it from a different perspective.
 And what we have to try and help them to understand,
 is that a counselling organisation and a religious organisation can work alongside each
 other but they don't always meet on every level.



I see counselling as a kind of pastoral element.
It's about the helping people bit.
I think that gap between clergy and people has very much narrowed.
Lay people have a much more prominent role in terms of spirituality,
in terms of doing that bit which I think I come from,
which is doing the thing that Christ did,
which was to serve others.
So I see counselling and theology totally linked
I see the bit that I would do, and have done, and people still do,
as equal to the kind of pastoral role that a member of the clergy would do.

