

Mental Health Care as Mission: Developing Leaders Globally

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They are here for counseling?” My thoughts betrayed my surprise at seeing a highly esteemed missionary couple in the waiting room of our counseling center. As the newest counselor on staff, I was still acclimating to providing mental health care for missionaries. This was not a demographic I associated with counseling needs. A year prior, our family had moved from a small rural town in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan to Chiang Mai, Thailand. We traded the crisp, frigid alpine air, bleating of sheep, and tea-pouring hospitality of our Muslim community for dense tropical humidity, the chirping of exotic birds, and the kind smiles of our Buddhist neighbors. Our years in Kyrgyzstan reshaped our naïve understanding of being missionaries as we faced unexpected challenges that led to humility and growth.

It was supposed to be a smooth transition for our family. We believed we were moving “up,” increasing our access to amenities, conveniences, and educational opportunities for our three children. And yet our family continued to struggle with the adjustment a year into our new assignment. We were still grieving the loss of Kyrgyz friendships, learning a new language, and searching again for where we belonged—in one of the largest missionary communities in the world, an environment ripe for comparison. I was convinced that we were the only ones struggling. Other families seemed to be flourishing with their happy smiles, friendship groups, successful ministries, and testimonies of God’s goodness. However, in providing counseling for numerous missionaries and their families, I discovered that we were not alone. Many in our community

also felt lonely, burned out, and ashamed that they were not thriving in ministry and relationships as they had hoped.

Missionaries Struggle Too

Most people—perhaps especially those in ministry and leadership—do not honestly share their difficulties because they believe they are alone in their struggles. That belief often translates into behaviors and thoughts that hinder their flourishing. As the world suffers under the weight of unprecedented global crises, the accompanying isolation reveals the brokenness and sinfulness of humanity. Sadly, God’s people often contribute to the sense of aloneness by masking their pain instead of facing it. This can lead to fractured individuals, families, communities, and societies. As a result, the church’s witness, both local and global, negatively impacts God’s mission in the world.

Cornerstone Counseling Foundation believes that addressing mental health needs is an enactment of the gospel to those who are hurting and in need of healing. Our mission is to empower others towards greater wholeness and reconciliation with self, others, and God through providing quality professional counseling. In particular, we provide counseling to missionaries and to the local Thai community. This vision is God’s call to faithfully fulfill our part in developing men, women, and children who are leading and influencing the gospel’s growth throughout the world.

Cornerstone Counseling Foundation was established in 2004 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, by Dr. Bruce Narramore, founder of Rosemead School of Psychology and former president of Narramore Christian Foundation, and Dr. Timothy Friesen, who served as Cornerstone’s first executive director. Dr. Friesen had counseled many missionaries who needed to return to the United States for care due to the absence of counseling resources in their region of service. This often resulted in extended disruption of ministry and schooling and exacted a financial and emotional toll on the entire family and mission. In some cases, home churches questioned their support of struggling missionaries who apparently were not “fit” for overseas ministry, compounding the shame experienced in the unanticipated return. The vision emerged, therefore, to provide professional Christian counseling to global personnel without significant disruption to their lives. Chiang Mai’s location allows access to quality services within a reasonable travel distance.

Our clients serve as missionaries in more than forty-three countries throughout the world and are sent from over thirty-three passport countries. Most come to receive weekly or intensive counseling. Asia is home

to the largest population of non-Christians, which includes the majority of the world's Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Many who serve in this area of the world face considerable stress, isolation, and trauma that impacts their personal and relational well-being.

Currently, Cornerstone has fourteen clinicians who provide counseling for missionaries and the Thai community. Because most of Cornerstone's staff raise their salaries through various mission organizations, we are able to provide affordable care on a donation basis. Our team possesses depth and breadth of education, experience, and expertise to address the variety of issues our clients face. Since Cornerstone's founding, thousands of Christian workers have received help for marriage and family crises, depression, anxiety, addictions, burnout, trauma, abuse, team conflicts, and other significant issues. Our ministry is rooted in a vision empowered by the Holy Spirit and a group of people willing to serve globally to be vessels of God's healing. We serve some of the most courageous and passionate people who are seeking to minister in the most challenging places in the world. They are influencing, impacting, and innovating in local contexts and unique ways to see the gospel of God's kingdom reach the far corners of the earth.

You Are Not Alone

In *Leading with a Limp*, psychologist Dan Allender writes, "Anyone who wrestles with an uncertain future on behalf of others—anyone who uses her gifts, talents, and skills to influence the direction of others for the greater good—is a leader. No one is a mere follower....Every believer is called to help someone grow into maturity—and such is the core calling of a leader."¹ This aligns with Jesus's command to his disciples in the Great Commission to "go into all the world and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Each of us is called to invest in the growth and development of others—be it an employee, church member, colleague, child, student, or friend—in whatever role God has placed us. Every follower of Jesus is a leader because each of us is in a position of influence in someone else's life. Tod Bolsinger defines leadership as "energizing a community of people toward their own transformation in order to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world."²

¹ Dan B. Allender, *Leading with a Limp: Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2008), 25.

² Tod E. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 42.

This is at the heart of Cornerstone’s ministry: seeing people transformed to accomplish God’s mission in a world that needs transformation.

What happens, then, when followers of Jesus—these leaders—are themselves struggling to live out this mission to the world? Many of our clients seek counseling because life, ministry, or relationships are no longer working. External circumstances, a traumatic event, a relationship breach, or long-standing behavioral patterns expose underlying issues that need to be addressed. Our clients indicate their struggle with phrases like, “I feel stuck,” “I’ve lost my passion and sense of purpose,” “I don’t like who I’m becoming,” or “I don’t hear God anymore.” They have already expended efforts toward healing through typical means such as prayer, Bible study, sharing with others, or self-reflection and observe little progress in their well-being. Many suffer privately, struggling to understand the surfacing symptoms that indicate something deeper may be amiss. Eventually, the inner turmoil leaks outward to negatively impact their family or ministry and brings them to counseling.

A quote I often use in counseling is, “Suffering is inevitable; suffering alone is intolerable.” While pain is part of the human experience, it is the aloneness that becomes a heavy burden. The prophet Isaiah wrote that we will pass through the water and fire (Isaiah 54:2–4); Jesus confirms that we will have trouble in this world (John 16:33); and James reminds us that we will face many kinds of trials (James 1:2). Suffering is inevitable. But on the other side of these verses are the promises of God’s presence amid hardship, Jesus’s assurance of the Spirit’s presence, and God’s accessibility in trials. The antidote to aloneness is the presence of another in the suffering. There is no greater example of this than Jesus, who left the glory of heaven and came to earth in human form as Immanuel, “God with us.”

As counselors we seek to embody this incarnational presence with our clients. It involves listening to stories of pain, trauma, injustice, and sin that can evoke emotions of grief, anger, and fear. I often leave the office heavy-hearted from hearing numerous stories of unspeakable heartache and agony. Henri Nouwen speaks to the burden of leaders as “wounded healers”: “Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind? In short: ‘Who can take away suffering without entering it?’”³ Some in the mental healthcare provider commu-

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, NJ: Image Books, 1972), 72.

nity may say we are to be completely objective and emotionally distant in therapy. Professional and emotional boundaries are necessary, but not at the cost of our humanity. Entering into another's suffering is the first step toward healing because it targets the core need to know that we are not alone, that we matter to another. Time and time again, our clients give witness to the impact of our counselors' acceptance, empathy, care, and commitment that empower them toward greater self-compassion, courage, forgiveness, reconciliation, and resilience: "I am overwhelmed by God's grace and love and grateful to dive into parts of my heart and life I was afraid to explore"; "My time here has given me the courage to step back into ministry"; "Jesus met me in my time of counseling"; "I felt safe to share and process without judgment; I feel so loved." With the Spirit's power and the counselor's incarnational presence, our clients can more fully engage and lead in their spheres of influence, wherever they serve in the world.

Our Part in the Work of the Gospel

In the process of counseling, our missionary clients discover that their pursuit of the Great Commission must be anchored in the lived reality of the Greatest Commandments of loving God, loving others, and loving self (Luke 10:27). Our clients' courage and vulnerability yield the fruit of renewed vision, reconciled relationships, and restored hope. We witness sacred moments that build on each other and lead to ongoing healing. A husband tearily turns to his wife in repentance instead of defensiveness. A woman shares the details of her trauma for the first time in a wave of relieved sobs. A parent pulls his teenage daughter close, affirming his love regardless of her choices. A team leader confesses the impact of his authoritarian leadership. These moments are glimpses into the shalom God desires to be increasingly present in this world.

Al Tizon describes the biblical vision of shalom as "God's very best," restoring and reconciling the world to how God intended it to be. The church is called to proclaim and live out the whole gospel, "the gospel of the shalom kingdom: reconciliation between God and people, between people and people, and between God, people, and creation. God calls us to preach this whole and reconciled gospel and nothing less."⁴ Cornerstone's vision is part of this larger vision of the "whole gospel, for the

⁴ Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 88.

⁵ Mission and Motto, Palmer Seminary, quoted in *ibid.*, 97.

whole world, through whole persons.”⁵ Our starting belief is that every client is created in the image of God. Sin and its effects devastate humanity at every level, including the self from which every other relationship stems. Tizon states that the needed reconciliation “begins with me. In our brokenness, we forget our uniqueness, our incalculable worth.... Before we participate with God... in the ministry of reconciliation, we look upward to God to heal and reconcile the broken pieces of our interior selves.”⁶ Herein lies Cornerstone’s call to bring wholeness to the “interior self.”

Our vision is grounded in the powerful words of Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. (Isaiah 61:1–3a, NIV)

The good news is healing the brokenhearted, setting people free from captivity and darkness, comforting those who mourn and grieve, and helping people experience joy again. Each phrase describes the ministry of counseling and inspires our staff to live out mental health care as mission. As we enter into the brokenness of our clients, we are God’s vessels of healing and reconciliation. The final verse of Isaiah 61 speaks of the fruit of this Spirit-anointed ministry: “For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations” (Isaiah 61:11, NIV). God transforms the global landscape as people experience freedom; through the good news of hope and healing, nations will be blessed with God’s justice and glory.

Expanding the Vision

One of the most significant shifts in Cornerstone’s ministry over the last several years has been its expansion from caring primarily for missionaries to the broader Thai community. The Ministry of Health in Thailand reported statistics that one in every five people in the nation

⁶ Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled*, 103.

⁷ John Fernquest, “Mental Health: Neglected in Thailand,” *Bangkok Post*, September 25, 2012, www.bangkokpost.com/learning/learning-news/314017/mental-health-neglected-in-thailand.

struggles with mental illness⁷; one million adolescents are experiencing depression⁸; and every two hours someone commits suicide.⁹ These numbers are consistent with World Health Organization reports on the global impact of mental health disorders.¹⁰ As Cornerstone has developed quality staff and resources, we are heeding the call to steward our experience to the Thai community. Our initiatives are a response to joining God in what he is already doing as we discern together, pay attention to the Spirit's work around us, and respond with our God-given abilities and skills. Cornerstone's ministry has grown beyond its original mission in exciting ways.

First, God brought several highly qualified bilingual Thai counselors to the team. In Thailand, where less than one percent of the population is Christian, our Thai counselors are part of only a handful of Christian counselors in the country. They are pioneering the path forward in providing mental health care for the Thai from the perspective of faith and psychology. As a result, Cornerstone's Thai client population has increased to twelve percent in the last few years.

Second, God has provided significant opportunities to partner with local institutions and organizations in providing psycho-educational workshops and training. The two primary reasons people do not seek counseling are the lack of knowledge about mental health and its associated stigma. In offering education to local churches and communities, we aim to prioritize collaboration with the Thai psychological community. In a recent all-day workshop, two of our counselors presented with a translator on burnout and depression. In the afternoon, a Thai psychiatrist, Dr. Kittivan, helped the participants understand how depression manifests in the Thai population and ways to receive care. She fielded many questions from the audience who appreciated the opportunity to gain answers about their mental health concerns. As Westerners, we learned how depression presents in different ways in the local context.

As we present lectures for psychology students in the local universities, provide training to Thai pastors and leaders, teach workshops to the hill-tribe minority groups, and hold monthly community workshops, we seek

⁸ Pravit Rojanaphruk, "1 Million Thai Teens Suffer from Depression," *Khaosodenglish*, December 24, 2017, www.khaosodenglish.com/news/bangkok/2017/12/24/1-million-thai-teens-suffer-depression-official.

⁹ "Stats Reveal High Rate of Suicide," *Bangkok Post*, November 2, 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1785214/stats-reveal-high-rate-of-suicide>.

¹⁰ "Mental Disorders," World Health Organization, November 28, 2019, www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders.

to partner with Thai colleagues in both faith-based and secular circles. This cross-cultural collaboration provides a more comprehensive understanding of how mental health issues can be addressed in Thailand. Thai participants have found these learning opportunities highly beneficial, and we continue to receive requests for additional training. Furthermore, attendees come to realize that they are not alone in their struggles. In turn, this recognition fosters an atmosphere of mutual encouragement and support.

Lastly, Cornerstone's staff has grown in number and diversity with the expansion of our vision. We have nearly thirty staff representing a broad spectrum of socio-economic, cultural, educational, and age demographics. We are committed to the truth of 1 Corinthians 12 of being one in Christ and affirming the value of each person's unique contribution to the body. Borrowing from an often-used phrase in Thailand, we are "same-same but different." However, the reality is that our differences have at times been painful, disappointing, and humbling. Our partnership in ministry as an intercultural team exposes our blind spots, insensitivities, and assumptions. As misunderstandings and hurts surface, we are faced with the choice to enter into the continuing work of self-reflection, ownership, confrontation, confession, and forgiveness. The sometimes-difficult relational dynamics trigger our defenses and also call forth humility. It is simultaneously messy and transformative. We must be willing to submit ourselves to the hard work of reconciliation and unity within our team, even as we seek to help our clients do the same. Loving and serving one another amid our differences is one of the most effective ways to "energize a community of people toward their own transformation in order to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world."¹¹

A Final Thought

I recently had a conversation with my eighty-one-year-old father, globally respected for his lifetime of pastoral ministry and leadership. In sharing my struggles with and questions about leading others, I asked him what he had learned about leadership from his decades of experience and his wealth of godly wisdom. He responded, "Leadership has become a simpler definition for me through these years. It is leaving the place where God has called you a little bit better than when you first arrived." I love that definition because it concisely expresses God's call to each one of us to be an agent of his wholeness and reconciliation wherever

¹¹ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 42.

we are. At Cornerstone Counseling Foundation, we are seeking to do our part as we faithfully minister in Thailand through mental health care with missionary clients and the local Thai community. In walking alongside the broken and the hurting in this part of the world, we hope that each person leaves Cornerstone further along in their journey toward wholeness in order to make a lasting impact on a world in need of God's transformation.