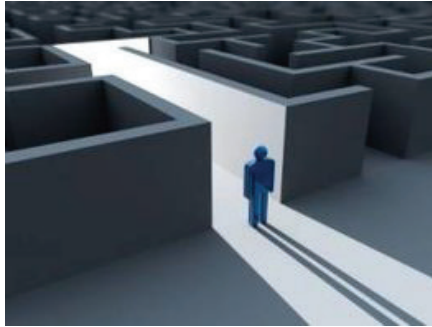


The Good News of



Sandhurst Counselling Service

How it all began...

The *Counselling Service* initially started with Sue Smith, a member of the congregation and a qualified and experienced Training and Development specialist, who designed and produced an original '*Rebuilding your Life after Divorce*' course. This was intended for use in workplace situations, where the cost of lost time and productivity, due to marriage or relationships breakdown was an increasing problem. This initiative was successful and Sue became certain that this same healing strategy should be embraced by the church.

Sue gifted the work to *Relate* in the hope they would find it useful; their valuable work to date being focussed upon repairing marriages rather than addressing the devastating after-effects of separation and divorce. Simultaneously, she sought the support and blessing of Revd Roger Packer, the rector, to use and develop the work in St. Michael's as a church initiative. Roger was enthusiastic and supportive, which was courageous, because the Church in general, at that time, was not regarded or understood to be welcoming or loving towards divorcees, and re-marriages for divorcees in churches was unacceptable.

As a starting point Sue arranged a meeting with local GPs to explain the objectives and methodology of the course, and to offer its free availability. They recognised that the programme would fulfil a growing need where relevant resources were scarce, and medication seemed to be the only immediate solution to the depression and anxiety seen in patients suffering the consequences of broken marriages. The GPs agreed to advertise and promote the programme in the surgery.

Drop-in sessions, with open access to courses, were started in August 1990; and this little, but energetic, seed grew and developed into the amazing counselling service that became and has remained so important to the people of Sandhurst.

In its first year alone 20 individuals received one-to-one counselling sessions. Ten of them had been advised by their GP, others had heard through friends, family, church attendance or seeing a poster. Two six-week workshops were successfully completed, with a third to follow; each with 8 participants.

The Annual Report for 1994/95 says: '*Counselling or group work was offered on behalf of the church for the local and wider community. The work is offered*

as a practical healing ministry, with a focus on those going through divorce and has expanded into marriage repair and enrichment. Work has continued with divorced people, expanded in to the areas of marriage repair and enrichment and met the occasional needs of young people caught up in the divorce problems of their parent’.

Pat Erdman had now joined Sue and brought qualifications and experience to offer help to the wide ranging problems of depression and anxiety. This is the beginning of the service as we know it today.

St Michael’s Counselling Service – the early years

This finished in 1998 when Sue moved away from Sandhurst following her ordination in 1997, leaving the project in Di’s capable hands. Di Taylor, who had been working with Sue since 1996, stepped into the breach as another lone operator, but soon had the assistance of Jan Watts who was an answer to prayer. Jan supported the service fully until she moved away to support her husband as he trained for the ministry. Alan Wilson was Rector at this time and he encouraged Di to move forwards. He was always willing to help when Di needed it.



One lady who had a traumatic but Catholic background, had lost a child before she was married. The seat of her depression turned out to be that the baby had not had a funeral.

After Di had spoken with Alan, a service was arranged and the lady only needed a couple more sessions before resuming a full family life without depression.

How it all began...

The service continued to grow and started to take in trainee practitioners, but most were qualified and giving their time. In the Annual Report of 2010 it says:

'there were 1,656 sessions in the year from 12 practitioners (3 trainees and 9 qualified) offering 36 sessions each week. Referrals came from local health practitioners and the Community Mental Health team and self-referrals, usually recommended by someone who has used the service.'

This reflects the service that we are celebrating, and now we have more trainee practitioners. In 2024 we had 16 practitioners and 1515 sessions were completed. Every practitioner also receives regular supervision and we have a team of supervisors who lead these sessions. *Sandhurst Counselling* has trained several hundred practitioners and has had a positive effect on the lives of thousands of people, not just those who have attended sessions but their families and work colleagues too. Take the man in the building trade, who turned up weekly for his sessions with Di but was uncomfortable and didn't really engage. His wife wanted another child and he didn't. Then one week he

turned up with shorts on and a large plaster on his leg. Di asked what had happened and he explained that when cutting something with a Stanley Knife he had sliced into his leg. He had then held it together and superglued it and put a plaster on. Di's nursing background came to the fore and she gave him some 'gentle mothering' and wound care advice. These actions caused him to cry which proved to be a release and then he was in a better place and he wanted another child too. Happy client, happy family.

The service has always been free at the point of delivery and dependent on donations and grants and has been very grateful for these, particularly when *Bracknell Forest* made a regular commitment. The Church has played a huge part here too as they have donated the room hire as well as listing us a charity of the month. Without financial support the service would have ended long ago.

It was at the PCC meeting in May 12th 2010, when the counselling service had been operating for 20 years, that it was felt that it needed to move out from the umbrella of St Michael's whilst still keeping its Christian ethos, and become an independent charity.

Sandhurst Counselling Service is born

The PCC meeting of 14 Sept 2011 approved moving reserved funds from St Michael's accounts to SCS. They also agreed to donate use of the Pastoral Centre. *Sandhurst Counselling Service* came into being on 17 Aug 2011 with the signing of the Trust Deed.

The service is like a mustard seed and has grown into an amazing charity from very small beginnings; the value of its work ripples out through the community and has touched many lives. One of the special qualities of the service is that the practitioners feel that they are held and cared for too. The Christian ethos runs through the veins of the service and John Castle, our current Rector is also passionate about the work that is done.

Sometimes people are worried about talking because of the Christian ethos of the service, but once it is explained that it is about genuine caring and not evangelising then people relax.

Even romance can bloom. Di had a male client who had been 'thrown out' by his wife, this meant he didn't see his children often but he did pay her

household bills. At the same time, she had a female client who started talking about the new man in her life and Di correctly put two and two together. They'd met in the waiting room and it worked out for them.

One young lady who came to Di with depression was from a Christian family. She said that she had been raped but after several sessions Di picked her moment and observed that:

"sometimes we say things because we can't bear to own them."

This caused the young lady to burst into tears and the story unfolded that she had been at a dance with girlfriends and had danced with a young man. They had gone out the back and one thing led to another. The truth was that she was disgusted with herself, but the admission enabled her to see things more clearly and put her life straight again.

How it all began...

Di also recalls a practitioner asking her for advice in the office one day and when Di had finished a member of office staff said “*would you really say that to clients?*” and when Di’s answer was “Yes” she replied “*You’re not very kind*”. Sometimes the truth is painful but needs to be faced.

It was sad that Di decided to retire from the service but when one door closes another opens and in September 2019 we welcomed Helen Wells as our Clinical Manager. Helen had been a trainee with the service and then continued as a volunteer. In supervision Di had once said to her “*perhaps one day you’ll be in my position*”.



Helen Wells

Helen’s response was “*Not in a million years!*” Helen had stepped away from the service to focus on other things when we advertised for a new clinical manager and several people prompted her to apply. She did so hesitantly, thinking nothing more of it. However, God moves in mysterious ways and she was offered the job. Thankfully, she accepted.

A time of change

What a baptism of fire she was to have as the Covid pandemic struck just as she was settling into the role. Helen could see that the service was going to need to reinvent itself if people were not going to be able to meet in small rooms. She talked with Dave, our chairman, and the BACP (our regulatory body) about how we could move forward. At that time trainees were not allowed to work remotely. Eventually permission for trainees to work remotely was given by BACP and their colleges, but only if they had had the relevant training. Fortunately, Helen found a very new training scheme and all the practitioners engaged with it. When the first lock down was announced Sandhurst Counselling was ready to move forward remotely.

Everything was different, a new aspect of the service was created. When people could meet in rooms again Sunita had managed to source clear masks so that faces could still be seen as expression is an integral part of communication in counselling. In Helen's words "it was a crazy time". There was so much to consider, confidentiality, who else could hear what was being said? Were people safe? Then when people could go back, what if they weren't vaccinated? What were the risks? It's no wonder Helen's hair turned grey!

Strangely the service grew in this time. We had 23 practitioners each seeing at least 3 clients a week and the number of sessions cancelled declined dramatically. *Sandhurst Counselling* weathered the pandemic well when others had closed for the duration. Thank you team you really did come up trumps and the clients were very grateful for the support. Now the service uses a hybrid model using face to face sessions most regularly, although some clients were most reluctant to return to this, but we recognise that there is a place for some online interface. People still regularly talk about before and after the pandemic.

Sometimes it is apparent at assessment that a person is too distressed to go away alone, feeling that the world and their family would be better off without them.

This happened when a young adult was assessed and the practitioner called Helen in immediately. The person had come alone and not told anyone how they felt.

After a while of calm talking, the person said they would talk with their mum. Mum came in and the tears, love and support that flowed in that assessment session were very humbling.

The young person went home safely, appropriate support was put in place and they were no longer alone.

The story continues...

Sunita is a very important part of this success story. Hers is the first voice that people hear when they call. She 'meets' the people who are afraid and anxious and the clients trust her. She is a busy lady but she never rushes a client. That first encounter, that first welcome is so important. Sunita is able to steady and hold people until they have the courage to come through the door. Sunita joined us in 2005 and her roles have included keeping statistics, records and accounts clerking. She has been the unsung backbone of the service whilst working in the office.

At this point have I also have to pay tribute to Peter Hulbert, who took on the role of Treasurer and Trustee within days of the charity being set up. He masterminded many successful

bids to raise funds for us and was the mastermind behind our financial stability. He will be greatly missed.

Holding is an integral part of this service for both clients and volunteers. Knowing that you are listened to, cared about and respected as an individual is key. This is reflected in the number of practitioners who volunteer time for the service.

Thank you to all those who have made *Sandhurst Counselling* the success that it has been so far. As I said earlier, when one door closes another one opens. As *Bracknell Forest* have withdrawn our core funding we have had to pray and work hard to come up with a way forward. Now we have exciting times to look forward to in the near future, with a new Clinical Manager and a new operational model.

Watch this space, or even better join us!

For more information on current plans and ways to get involved, visit:

www.sandhurstcounselling.org.uk



SCS history compiled by Sarah Ashton