

## SAFEGUARD GROUP

### A Preliminary Report on Group Psychological Work in the Church

In the Church, present-day knowledge of the psychological behaviour of a group, has been put to use in such activities as T-Groups, leadership training institutes, group dynamic courses and clinical theology sessions. There is to an increasing extent, a psychological basis for a great deal of the Church's work and the phenomena associated with group psychology play an important part in this development. From the earliest days of Christianity, group psychology was brought into the processes of conversion and witness. The early Church consisted of small groups and St. Paul showed considerable psychological insight in his leadership of them.

The commonsense of early psychology has given way to a sophisticated knowledge, based on experiment and observation. Likewise, the informal application of commonsense psychology has been or can be supplanted by a purposeful, scientific and skilled application of the considerable body of knowledge and experience of human motivation and behaviour. Methods have been developed for influencing a group and through group processes, the individual. Changes in attitude and behaviour can often be induced if some well understood techniques are applied.

Among the organisations applying psychological techniques in furthering the work of the Church in the U.K. are the Church of England Board of Education, Christian Teamwork and the Clinical Theological Association. The membership of the majority of courses run by these bodies is ecumenical, including for example Baptist, Methodist and Roman Catholic as well as Church of England participants. On some courses, however, non-Christians are admitted. The composition and functioning of each type of group is as follows:-

Clinical Theology Groups. Most of these are organised directly by the Clinical Theological Association and are usually constituted on a diocesan basis. The main purposes are (i) to equip the student with an understanding of interpersonal relationships, and to enable him to relate this knowledge to a theological understanding of man, (ii) to guide the student in helping people with longstanding emotional problems or in crisis situations which present as social or spiritual problems, and (iii) to enable the student to learn how his own personality affects his pastoral relationships and to deal creatively with his own anxieties.

Seminars are held, consisting of 24 three-hour sessions over a period of two years for groups of 10 to 20 persons. About 40 Seminars have been started each year over the past eight years, attended by clergymen and ministers, doctors, caseworkers and voluntary helpers engaged in caring organisations. Each group has a tutor trained by the Association.

A more recent development is the parish clinical theology course. Harpenden has three of the only five such groups in the U.K. Another development is the clinical theology group attached to an educational establishment, such as a Technical College.

Christian Teamwork Consultations. These are organised by the Christian Teamwork Institute of Education, shortly to be called the Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies. They are of a group dynamic nature and are similar to those run by the Tavistock Institute. They are intended for both Christians and non-Christians. Approximately eight weekend courses are held annually, each with a membership of about 30. Longer courses are also held. In 1969, for example, there are four one year courses and with an attendance of 40 to 50 on each. Tailor-made courses, for instance for missionary training colleges, are also provided by the Institute.

Leadership Training Institutes. These are generally organised under the auspices of the Church of England Board of Education, Adult Committee. Over the past five years there have been some 20 to 30 per annum with membership usually from 20 to 30 but occasionally reaching up to 50. Each "institute" has one or two staff members associated with it. Full courses are in three stages, the first covering small group behaviour and the second and third introducing large and intermediate group processes. Some "institutes", derived from those run by the Board of Education, are organised independently by dioceses or regional groupings.

In the U.S.A. there are corresponding groups. The Clinical Theology session has its counterpart in the Methodist Christian Actualisation Group, the Episcopal Church runs similar group dynamic courses to those in this country and indeed introduced them to the Church of England in 1957.

Terminology varies widely from one area of group work to another. For convenience, except where necessary to distinguish between areas, the terms T-Group (T signifying Training), staff member and course member will be used for group, trainer, trainee etc., in the remainder of this report.

### Benefits

There is no doubt that considerable benefits result from the use of these modern methods. To learn about oneself and one's relationship and effect on others is to realise oneself more fully. A participant becomes more relaxed when meeting other people and largely indifferent to their foibles, whereas previously he would have been upset. In the minister, this means he can carry out his work of pastoral care more effectively. The layman can, through greater understanding, more readily love his neighbour and enter into a closer communion with God. Normal everyday encounters in life do of course increase our understanding of (or bewilderment at) the behaviour of ourselves and others and condition us to accept, shrug off, react for or against or be oblivious to actions which earlier would have been disturbing or harmful. The purposeful application of group psychological processes accelerate the achievement of greater harmony with all sorts and conditions of men. At the same time a much greater understanding of human behaviour is obtained by reference to psychological concepts.

While, however, the benefits derived from the use of psychological techniques can be very great, there are several attendant dangers. It is the purpose of this preliminary report to point out some of these dangers, to discuss their implications and to indicate some safeguards and precautions that might be adopted.

### Stress.

One source of danger in the use of group psychological techniques arises from the stress created within the group. It is widely held that no change in attitude or behaviour can take place without pain, anxiety or tension and since the purpose of participating in group psychological sessions is to bring about change, stress is an absolutely necessary part of the process. In a T-Group, for example, stress occurs inevitably from the meeting of new people, the uncertainty of the task before the group and the reaction between members of the group in unfamiliar circumstances as they struggle to create a productive and viable organisation. In the Church of England, T-groups are structured by the timing of the sessions, the building, the furniture, the outlining of the task and the presence and helpful participation of the staff members of the group. Stress in the Church of England T-Groups is thus reduced to a considerably lower level than can be obtained elsewhere and is based on the natural relationships within the group; there is no artificial generation of crises. None the less, cases have been brought to our attention where the strain induced in individual members of Church of England T-Groups has been very great and perhaps excessive.

One case was reported where the member found the burden so intolerable that he walked out in extreme anger and anxiety after 24 hours and it was many months if not years before this experience could be recalled without considerable pain or discomfort. In another instance, the abnormal psychotic reaction to stress of one member of a T-Group caused considerable pain and anxiety to another who, when he reported the situation to a staff member, had his distress even further heightened by the refusal of the staff member to take action. In a third case, extreme feelings of enmity were reported, mounting even to inclinations to murder during the course and a disordering of the digestive system for several months afterwards. The participants affected in each of these three cases were ordained members of the Church.

One of the principal difficulties concerning the level of stress in group psychological sessions is its measurement. Members of the group react as individuals to group pressures, incidents and crises. The response to a given set of stressful circumstances varies widely from one person to another and even from one time to another with a particular individual so that there is little point, even if it were possible, in measuring the stress applied. Even the strain or response to stress by an individual appears to be impossible to measure objectively. Weeping, for example, is no guide since it depends on the social acceptance or otherwise of weeping in the community and the conditioning of the individual to conform to the social norm.

The perception of staff members is in effect the only means whereby the effect of stress on individuals may be assessed. Part of the staff member's task is to feel what is going on. Although anger may be suppressed by course members, an experienced staff member can feel it directed against him. There is, however, the possibility that stress may be experienced by a course member to the point where it is destructive without it being detected by the staff member. In this sense, all group psychological work carries with it a definite risk that the stress that benefits most members of the group may be destructive to one or more of the individuals taking part.

### Joining a Group

The risk of undesirable results from group psychological processes raises the question of the manner in which a person becomes a group member. It seems clear that participation must be on a voluntary basis. No person should be forced to take part against his real wishes. There should be no pressure from above and care should be taken to avoid creating the feeling that unless a person joins a T-Group he will be an outcast.

Equally, group processes should not be employed purposefully in a covert manner to change an individual. This amounts to mental assault. Even God asks to enter our lives; He does not force Himself upon us. The sanctity of an individual must be preserved in an environment which emphasises the importance of groups, indeed almost to the point of adopting a new article of faith - "I believe in the Holy Group".

It is important, therefore, to explain carefully the nature of group psychological processes and their effects, risks and consequences and then to let each prospective participant come to a conscious decision on whether to take part or not. Possibly there should be a signed consent by the participant as there is with surgical operations. Yet even a full explanation may not give sufficient preparation. A T-Group for Bishops in the U.S.A. was preceded by a talk in which a full description was given of the nature of T-Group processes and what they were going to experience. A transcript of the talk was then presented to them and the T-Group began. The participants were referred to these when they asked, at the end of the course, why they had not been told what was going to happen! It seems, therefore, that in addition to a conscious decision in the light of full information by the participant himself or herself, a selection or recommendation by a staff member or possibly a former course member might also be desirable. The experience gained by earlier participation should enable a broad assessment to be made of the suitability of the prospective course member and, combined with his own conscious inclinations, act as a double check on participation.

### Staff Members

The functions of staff members of groups are clearly of crucial importance, not only in the prime function of explanation to course members of their patterns of behaviour so that they may understand themselves and others more fully but also in the detection and alleviation of undue stress. So far, no solution has been found to the problem of objective selection. Experience has shown that academic qualifications are no guide and a lengthy course even extending over several years is not enough in itself to fit a person for this type of work. One approach advocated is that of "apprenticeship" of recruits from among course members who have shown unusual awareness and perception of the group processes.

Probably a combination of approaches will yield the best results, with variations in emphasis according to the type of group concerned. For work in the Church it seems clear that one staff member of a T-Group should be an ordained member of the Church. Another necessary element to be introduced into the group is a knowledge of some relevant aspect of psychology. In clinical theology sessions this will be biased towards psychiatry while in group dynamic sessions, the psychology of groups will be important. The Christian and psychological attributes need not necessarily be present in one and the same person. In the Methodist Christian Actualisation Groups, a minister and psychological therapist work together. There the two basic functions are carried out by different people; the group contains the two essential elements but to be effective it is important that they work closely together in harmony. It must be emphasised that being ordained and having a knowledge of psychology are not the only attributes necessary. The ability to detect undue stress and to deal effectively with it are additional requirements of obviously considerable importance. Clearly, a careful examination needs to be made of the attributes, knowledge and experience required to fit a person for a training role in each type of group psychological work.

### Misuse

There is a unusual danger in group psychological work, that of its misuse for secular, non-Christian ends. A group dynamic session is like an open confession. The participants, under unfamiliar stress conditions, reveal themselves – their fears, aversions, motivations, aberrations and so on – to an extent and depth which in all probability could not be obtained by any other means. They are brought to state of spiritual nudity. As a source of information on persons and as an opportunity for influencing others, group psychological work, either under the auspices of the Church or outside it, provides an unprecedented opportunity. Great care must be exercised in keeping the proceedings strictly confidential, yet because a group is involved and not just a private encounter between two people, this is extremely difficult. Clearly staff members should have complete integrity and records they keep should be unassailable from outside. This should go a long way to placing group work on a par with the established traditions of security for confessions. As regards the leakage of confidences by course members of the group and the possible "indoctrination" under stress or the deliberate increasing of stress of one group member by another, again it falls upon the trainer to be aware of this possibility and take action if he has grounds for suspecting that it might be taking place.

### Aftercare

With the inevitable casualties from group work in the Church, aftercare becomes an important part of the duties of the organisers of T-Groups. It might be desirable to follow up all course members to see if there are any delayed effects. Certainly where excessive stress is indicated directly or indirectly, particular attention and effort should be devoted to alleviating the stress and to bring comfort and succour to the individual. In the first of the cases cited above, three years elapsed before a chance contact with an organiser of his particular course enabled a satisfactory and comforting account of the processes leading to his anger and anxiety to be given to him. The success of the group in achieving its main purpose of helping the majority of its members must be allied to a concern that not one of its members should suffer as a result.

Where a group is parish-based, members of the group who are overstressed have the opportunity of talking to their minister about it and indeed it is important that the minister makes himself readily available for such approaches. It is not so easy to walk out of a parish group if stress becomes unbearable as it is from a group run on a diocesan or national basis. Opportunities for feedback in private are therefore, extremely important. Where a group is run on a diocesan or national basis, the organisers of the group should follow up the casualties directly, until they are quite satisfied that no permanent harmful effects remain.

#### Some General Considerations.

A case could be made out for a body to keep an overall watch on group psychological techniques in the Church. Such a committee or council could be ecumenical and constituted under, sa, the British Council of Churches. It could have as its function the setting of standards in the selection and training of staff members, the conditions and procedures to be observed in applying for and accepting course members, the composition of a group, the measurement of stress, aftercare practice and other related matters.

There are some more general dangers attendant on the inclusion of group psychological processes in the life of the Church. It is possible that psychological values may be given undue emphasis in comparison with Christian values. Thus the psychological concept that all change is accompanied by pain may lead to justification of aggression in the name of the Lord. As Christians we should surely be challenging in a constructive manner the concepts of secular disciplines based on the science of people. Certainly a great deal of thought and action is necessary to ensure that these powerful modern techniques are harnessed in the most effective manner to establish Christ's Kingdom upon earth.

#### Specific Recommendations

1. A two-way process of application and acceptance of participants in group work should be instituted, designed to ensure the voluntary participation in the fullest possible knowledge on the part of the applicant and the assessment of the applicant's suitability on the part of an experienced staff member.
2. The constitution of each type of group in terms of staff members and their Christian and psychological attributes should be examined and recommended.
3. The training, experience and attributes necessary for staff members in each type of group should be determined and recommended.
4. The facilities necessary for staff members to ensure that the proceedings of T-Groups remain confidential should be determined and recommended.
5. Examination should be made of the problem of detecting and controlling stress and strain.
6. Procedures for coping with casualties, and their aftercare, should be determined and recommended.
7. Practices used for the generation of stress should be delineated and acceptable standards of practice for Christians should be drawn up.
8. Methods should be sought whereby change and understanding can be induced without stress.
9. To carry out the above recommendations, an ecumenically-based council should be set up to formulate standards and procedures to provide safeguards in the use of group psychological techniques in, or on behalf of, the Church.