

For His Glory:  
Mission And Vision of the Smetzer Counseling Center of the Ashland  
Theological Seminary

by Michael Reuschling

The purpose of man is to glorify God and enjoy his company forever.  
(Westminster Catechism)

It wasn't so many years ago that reading the Psalms was much more of a duty than a delight for me. It wasn't that many years ago that the thought of praying, let alone "praying without ceasing," lead to more thoughts of drudgery than delight. And if you had told me, not that many years ago, that I would be spending hours alone with God, just enjoying His company, I would have politely dismissed you, at best, and harshly criticized you (at least in my mind) for not really knowing me at all, at worst. Yet all of these, enjoyment of God's words (and Word), delight in talking to and hearing from God, resting with great contentment in His presence, all of these have become my ongoing experience and blessing. God has faithfully been showing me His great love for me and for others through His kind and gentle and loving treatment of me. He has been answering my prayer that He transform me into the image and likeness of His Son, no matter what the "cost" might be. He has taken me at my word and honored my surrender of my all to Him. May He be praised forever for His great love toward us as His people!

In this and other areas, I have been reminded many times of the words of a Salvation Army officer quoted years ago on the Paul Harvey radio program. The officer was asked at Christmas-time what he thought of telling children tales of flying reindeer and the like, of filling their heads with such fantastic stories. His response was, "Flying reindeer? When I think of what God has done with this black heart of mine, flying reindeer is child's play!" And so it is for me and for many of us. The closest I have witnessed to miracles is in what God has done with this "black heart" of mine. Who I once was, and who I once feared I was (that one who would someday be found out and exposed), have been largely left behind, by the grace of God, and I come to see these "self-images" as the lies they were and are, as contrasted with His truth of who I am because of Him. I have come to see that God's words in Romans 14:4, *Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand*

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(NIV), words that I was mostly able to apply to my treatment of others, also apply to my treatment of myself since God tells me “*You are not your own; you were bought at a price.* (1 Cor. 6:19-20, NIV). In these and countless other ways, He extends his love and kindness to me which, in turn, makes me want to extend them to others and lead them to Him.

Lest this turn into the random ramblings of a raving Reuschling, my point is that God has been glorifying Himself to me and in me in the ways described above. After so many years of trying to “*work out (my own) salvation with fear and trembling*” (Phil. 2:12, NIV), only under my own power and cleverness, only to fail time after time (after time), and after so many years of evidencing only paltry and measly spiritual “fruit” (hardly worth eating and precious little to nourish self or others), God’s unfailing love has rescued me from a spiritual desert and set my feet more firmly in His kingdom. Whether it is more remarkable or simply more understandable that this has taken place in a “mental health professional,” in someone with lots of degrees and lots of titles and lots of clinical experience, I will leave to the reader to decide. Suffice it to say that all of these degrees and titles and experiences did precious little to contribute to my enjoyment of God or my glorifying Him.

So we come to the mission and vision of the Smetzer Counseling Center of Ashland Theological Seminary. What is it that the Lord would have us to do in this place and in this ministry? The mission statement of the Smetzer Counseling Center states,

*The Smetzer Counseling Center of Ashland Theological Seminary exists to glorify our great and gracious God! We strive to bring His comfort to a hurting and heavy-laden world through training exceptional Christian counselors, obedient to the Master’s command to “Go and do likewise.”*

We believe that the Smetzer Counseling Center is, first and foremost, a gift from God. A gift to those of us privileged to work there, a gift to the students who will be trained there, a gift to Ashland Theological Seminary, and, finally, a gift to those “hurting and heavy-laden” ones who will receive God’s comfort through this ministry. This author saw a need for a training laboratory for counseling students upon first being hired at ATS in the Fall of 1997. At that time, the Seminary president, Dr. Fred Finks, and the Pastoral Counseling department chair, Dr. John Shultz, graciously agreed to make available money and space for a modest lab for student training. In what seemed like very short order, it was announced that Mrs. Smetzer had donated one million dollars for the creation of a counseling lab to train Christian counselors and minister to the community! It was as if God was saying, “Yes, you do need a training center,

but I've got something much better in mind!" This began the dream and vision of what God might do and would have ATS to do in and through this ministry.

First, and foremost, the mission and vision of the center is to glorify God. Throughout my twenty-plus year career in mental health, I have had the opportunity, and occasionally the privilege, of working in a variety of settings. These have included private practices, group practices, community mental health agencies, non-profit mental health and family service agencies, for-profit corporations providing mental health care, and in-patient psychiatric settings, among others. While many of the mission statements of these organizations contained lofty sentiments and aspirational language, the reality of day-to-day operations usually betrayed the stated mission. The "actual mission statement" of some of these organizations could, more honestly, have been stated as "Circle the wagons" (in an agency where an "us (staff) versus them (clients)" mentality was prominent), "Go for the gold" (in a for-profit corporation much more interested in earthly treasure than in any other kind), or "Divide and conquer" (in an organization headed by an insecure and even paranoid leader intent upon maintaining his position and power). Day-to-day reality has a way of eroding even the loftiest of ideals until mission statements are only resurrected in annual reports and fund-raising efforts. In many of the organizations mentioned, any glory sought was usually self-glory.

*"First, and foremost, the mission and vision of the center is to glorify God."* How will God be glorified in this ministry and place? He will not be glorified by the self-effort, clinical cleverness, professional degrees, nor licenses of those ministering therein. My experience and the experience of many of my colleagues speak to the ultimate emptiness of such "resources." Rather, He will be glorified by those of us ministering in the Center fixing our eyes on Jesus as *"the author and perfecter of our faith"* and by considering Him, so that we do not *"grow weary and lose heart"* (Heb. 12:2-3, NIV), so that we do not elevate self, and so that we are not sidetracked in the "weeds" of our clients' woes (Matt. 13:3-23, NIV). It is God who will glorify Himself in his setting, to and in and through those devoted to His glorification. Our "job" will be to earnestly and faithfully seek Him in our own lives and in the lives of our clients, intent upon pleasing Him and, in return, being rewarded by Him, especially through the privilege of being participants in a glorious endeavor (Heb. 11:6, NIV). Those of ministering in the Center must be devoted to Him, first and foremost, or we will be devoted to self or to others at the expense of glorifying Him.

Personally, one of my primary motives for involvement in the Center is to see what God will do in a place devoted to His glorification. Having spent most of my professional career seeking self-glorification (no matter how lofty my sentiments and rationalizations), I now desire to see Him glorified and

clients truly comforted. While it was my privilege to work in and to lead many fine organizations, with many dedicated and gifted professionals, most of this time and energy was driven by motives other than His glorification. I have also seen the baser side of professional mental healthcare, with its petty territoriality (sometimes at the client's expense), its rampant bureaucracies, and its all-too-frequent clinical impotence. For once in my career, more importantly, in my Christian journey, I want to see what God will do in a place and ministry devoted to His glorification. If He, in His sovereignty, decides to do nothing in the Smetzer Counseling Center, then to Him be all glory! However, I have this sneaking suspicion (more accurately, this eager expectation) of what He will do in this place.

Those of us who will minister in the Smetzer Counseling Center must "*strive to bring His comfort to a hurting and heavy-laden world...*" The best definition of Christian counseling I have ever found is contained in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:3-4, NIV) which says *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.* It is because of God's comfort to each of us in the troubles we face, that we learn more about His great and unfailing love for us. In this way we are greatly comforted. His comfort is manifested in a myriad of ways, not the least of which are the kind and gentle encouragers He sends our way at such times. As we grow in His love, as we realize more and more in the depth of our heart how much He loves us, we are then enabled and empowered to love Him and others more ably and healthily. *We love because he first loved us* (1 John 4:19, NIV) and so loving, we are commanded to *love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sin.* (1 Peter 4:8, NIV). Perhaps we will best glorify God and bring comfort to others by showing clients God's great love for us all. I have often remarked that the mental health professions are a "growth industry," as there seems to be no shortage of pain, quite the contrary, there seem to be increasing levels of anxiety and other forms of distress. Ultimately, the only true and lasting comfort will be found from the great Physician and not from clinical cleverness nor from the greatest human compassion.

Who will God use to provide such comfort to a "hurting and heavy-laden world?" Those "exceptional Christian counselors" who will be "*obedient to the Master's command to 'Go and do likewise.'*" Academic excellence has been a core value of Ashland Theological Seminary since its inception, whether explicitly stated or implicitly practiced. Such excellence has been evident in the training of countless godly men and women for a variety of ministries, including pastoral counseling. While academic excellence will be critical in providing needed comfort, thereby glorifying God, it must take a back seat to

the more essential core values of Scripture, spiritual formation, and community, or, another of ATS' "core values," servant leadership. It is only by acknowledging one Master (and that He is not "me") and by being obedient to Him that true comfort will be provided and true freedom occur. The Smetzer Counseling Center will strive to equip exceptional Christian counselors, "shepherds" of their respective "flocks," who will demonstrate "technical and clinical proficiency" energized and enlightened by a vibrant and vital faith. The mental health world and profession does not need more "proficient clinicians," the world needs the Life and the Light and the Truth and the Power. These are the type of "exceptional Christian counselors" the Center aspires to train and disciple.

When it's all said and done, when we all stand before His throne at the final judgement, may we all hear the Lord's words from Mat. 25:23 spoken to us, *Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!* It is toward this end, toward these words, and toward honor of the Word that we press on. May God find us faithful.