How Might Psychiatrists and Chaplains Collaborate in Delivering Spiritual Care to Persons with Mental Illness? – A Canadian Perspective

A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Divinity in Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the collaborative practice between psychiatrists and chaplains within three mental healthcare facilities in south central Ontario, Canada. From an overview of the current literature, there has been a renewed interest by psychiatrists in the healing qualities of religion and spirituality. However, the literature also reveals that psychiatrists have a tendency not to be interested in spiritual matters. So, despite the renewed interest in the effects of spirituality on persons with mental illness and the positive outcomes that the research reveals, many psychiatrists remain unconvinced about the use of spirituality in their practice. In the light of this, I undertook this research into the lived experiences of twelve psychiatrists and ten chaplains within three mental healthcare facilities within south central Ontario. From an overview of the literature, I noted the lack of engagement by chaplains in performing research and the lack of a theological focus on the collaborative practice between these two disciplines.

This study is located within the discipline of practical theology using a transversal model of praxis. Through the use of hermeneutic phenomenology as both methodology and method within a qualitative framework, I engage some of the fundamentals of the concepts within the work of the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer,¹ in order to gain access into the collaborative practices between psychiatrists and chaplains. Through the use of Gadamer’s principles of prejudice, horizons of understanding and the hermeneutic circle, I was able to reflect on the lived experiences of psychiatrists and chaplains. In order to deepen my understanding of each of these disciplines and

their interaction between each other, I was able to draw on themes that emerged from this research. I was then able to compare and contrast these themes to the findings reported in the literature through the perspective of practical theology.

Using the transversal model of cross-disciplinary dialogue, I come to an understanding of the array of collaborative or non-collaborative practices between psychiatrists and chaplains. Therefore, I come to the understanding that in many instances, it is up to the chaplain to lead the way in collaborative practice. Drawing on the Christian notion of hospitality and the persuasive communication techniques used by Jesus, I begin to demonstrate how to enliven the collaborative practices between psychiatrists and chaplains. I also bring to the fore how chaplains can also make use of the current organizational theories within healthcare to bring about a more robust collaborative practice with psychiatrists.