1/11/85

Brief encounter

British Weekly and Christian Record

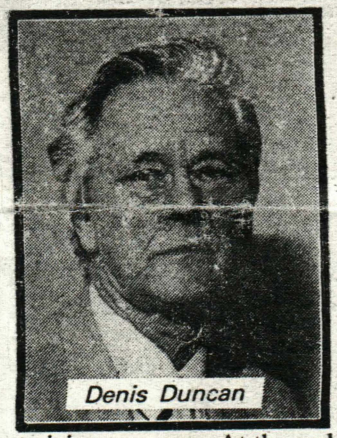
'BRIEF ENCOUNTERS' are very much part of a pastoral ministry which involves the world at large, rather than only a congregational situation. It has been part of life for a long time to have a name in the diary with a day and a time, and know sometimes little, and often nothing, of the person one is due to meet. You never know what will become the material of such an occasion.

This was very much the situation when I met Miss X recently. I found myself with someone in her sixties, walking a little awkwardly, with a stick (perhaps an arthritic hip, I thought), but otherwise looking strong and confident.

It is often impossible to mention pastoral situations publicly because of the absolute need for confidentiality which, it goes without saying, is mandatory in pastoral work. I have freedom, at least, to mention the content of *this* brief encounter, though I will not mention the name. For reasons which will become clearer, it would be permissible to do even that, but as I omitted to ask for that permission at the time, I do not feel free so to do.

The reason for our coming together was, on the surface, normal and valid — a discussion focusing on the initiating of a healing ministry within a particular congregation. The conversation moved beyond that in other important directions.

Miss X had taken an official course within her church's lay



Denis Duncan

training processes. At the end of it, she had not been 'authorised'. She was, nevertheless, now taking a leading part in the spiritual and pastoral life of her congregation. She serves on 'the governing body' (if I may so, loosely, describe it to avoid specific identification) of her own church. She is respected for her work, her spirituality and her leadership. Her minister (whom I know, as it happens; he is a cleric of distinction and experience) values her contribution to the life and work of the church.

The reason for Miss X's rejection at the end of her course was (and as she had declared it, and was and is known to her religious authorities, there is nothing hidden about it) that she was — or rather is — a 'transexual'. Formerly male and married with a family, she is now divorced and totally separated from her family because of the (as they would say) perversion he/she represents. Within the life of the church, rejection has been her experience since she became, through the final act of surgery, a woman. The exception to this rejection is her present church, where she is accepted, respected and loved.

I feel free to say all this because knowledge of the feelings, strain and stress of the transexual needs to be extended, and Miss X is committed to give her life to doing this. As she rightly claims, psychiatrists and psychotherapists can discuss the *theory* of the condition, but only one who has gone through the pain — the experience — can really help others who are similarly aware of inner pressures to 'be oneself' and to be true to one's inner identity is overwhelming. The rate of suicide among transexuals is high because where the necessary 'outer' change is delayed or impossible, life becomes intolerable. Three of Miss X's transexual counsellees have taken their lives recently.

Miss X in 'her' (at the time it was 'his') professional life was a noted academic, teaching at professional level in the States. She is, manifestly, an articulate intellectual with a wide public experience. Since she has, at a later stage of her life, come into the Christian faith, the rest of her life will be given to serving the Lord, through the Church, through its healing ministry, and in a specialised ministry to a body of people whom she understands. Only those who have gone through this particular valley of darkness can help with such problems.

Miss X is a ~~counsellor with~~ member of SHAFT, a body set up nationally to help transexuals. She talks to religious communities about these problems. I hope myself to have her lead training days for counsellors on this subject, never having found it possible before to find the experience needed to deal with such a subject.

I read with interest Eldin Corsie's Letter from the Churches in the British Weekly of October 18, where he spoke of the current realisation in the Elim Pentecostal Churches of the need for ministry to the pastor himself or herself. Having written a good deal on this in these articles over the past eight years, it was encouraging indeed to read Principal Corsie's words. One statement he made relates to the main theme of this article.

He writes: "One young man confessed that he had been in the ministry for a considerable number of years, but had not been able to share a problem with anybody because he did not have a real friend to whom he could go". Miss X counsels several clergymen who know they are transexual but dare not reveal their position to the Church or their ministries would be over.

I am glad that there is help for such people, and I tell this story of a brief encounter so that others who are afraid to admit to their situation, may know some help is available. I shall be happy to put anyone in that position in touch with a friend indeed.