

Counselor's Corner: *Not Just a Number* by Steve Palmer, M.A., L.P.C., Westminster Counseling Center

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Recently, while filling out some forms for an insurance company, I was required to check off the various conditions or issues I work with as a therapist. There was a long checklist of things like "depression," "anxiety," "grief," "attention-deficit issues," "divorce," "parenting," etc. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*, the standard reference for naming psychiatric disorders and issues, has numbers for the conditions that we mental health professionals work with everyday. Frequently, especially if billing third-parties, we need to affix one of these numbers to our flesh-and-blood clients. I was also recently reading an article in the *New York Review of Books* exploring the ways we in the mental health field make use of these diagnostic categories. The author was exploring the concern some have about the disconcerting influence that pharmaceutical companies seem to have on the way diagnostic categories are used, developed, and seemingly marketed for profit. All this has me thinking about the numbers we use in the counseling world.

Please don't misunderstand me. I really recognize the value of these categories. The DSM system allows for communication among professionals and makes research more meaningful as we attempt to better understand human functioning in both its healthy and distressing forms. The ideas and information that are categorized by the DSM can really be in the service of the folks who seek counseling. And most mental health professionals make use of these categories with intelligence, care and respect. I make use of these categories all the time. It's just that I know we need to really keep human complexity in mind

as we deal with numbers. Maybe it's because we're in the Christmas season of celebrating the Incarnation of God-among-us that my thoughts are drawn to human uniqueness. I remember a professor in grad school telling us to watch out as we studied the DSM because we might be tempted to think we had every single disorder as we went along. There's a bit of truth to that. I remember discussing diagnoses with one client as she tried to find the number that "fit" her. We ended up saying that in reality she found the DSM a bit like a salad bar! What she meant was that she could recognize part of herself in many of the categories without seeing herself fully in any one. Real-world psychotherapy has to deal with this kind of complexity and this kind of uniqueness. One size does not fit all!

And maybe my thoughts are drawn in this direction because this is my last "Counselor's Corner" column. I'll be leaving the Westminster Counseling Center at the end of January as I move to another clinic, and my mind is ranging back over the people I've had the privilege to work with over the last few years. Each one unique, each one dealing with a set of stressors that was specific to them. The "numbers" were very helpful to me (and I think, often to them) as we explored their experience and some ways forward, and we made use of the DSM categories often. But these folks have always been more than just a number to me. Have a blessed Christmas Season!



Steve Palmer

Cantus to Offer Report on Trip to Cameroon, January 13

By Timothy Hart-Andersen, Pastor

On Sunday, January 13, Cantus, the internationally-renowned male vocal ensemble, will sing at Westminster's 8:30 and 10:30AM worship services. Following the 10:30AM service, members of Cantus will describe their recent singing tour of Cameroon as part of Westminster's mission partnership trip. All are invited to what promises to be a lively, fascinating report.

Thirty-eight people from Westminster, including the singers of Cantus, spent ten days traveling through the West African nation at the invitation of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon (PCC). The group participated in events related to the celebration of the PCC's Golden Jubilee 50th Anniversary.

Light finger-foods will be provided at the gathering on January 13. No RSVP is needed—just come to the Meisel Room after the 10:30AM service. The event should conclude by 1:00PM.



Photo of Cantus by Jen Cress.