

U.S. Christian students come to learn from Chabad

JANICE ARNOLD

jarnold@thecjn.ca

Can a fundamentalist Christian educational institution and a chassidic service agency find common ground? They can if the issue is helping people overcome addiction to drugs, alcohol and behavioural compulsions, including sex addiction.

For the past eight years, the Lancaster Bible College, a private seminary and graduate school based in Pennsylvania, has sent students to Montreal for a week, to learn from social work practitioners in the city.

They always spend a day at Chabad Lifeline, a support program for people in recovery, which provides services on a non-sectarian basis, out of a centre near the Jewish General Hospital.

This year's group of about 25 students were completing professional counselling degrees. With close to 2,000 students, Lancaster predominantly issues degrees in ministry, biblical studies, pastoral care and counselling.

"The students visited our centre, in order to learn from our model," said Chabad Lifeline director Rabbi Benyamin Bresinger. "They are interested in how a



Students from Lancaster Bible College in Pennsylvania gather at the entrance of Chabad Lifeline's centre.

grassroots, front-line addiction facility operates." This includes how it deals with differing types of addiction by offering a range of treatment options for both the person affected and their families, including children, as well as running prevention programs for at risk youth.

Services are free and, Chabad Lifeline promises, immediate, which is made possible entirely through private funding.

Of course, the college also shares Chabad Lifeline's sense of mission, which is rooted in their respective faiths. However, they differ markedly on how that should be ex-

pressed, Rabbi Bresinger said.

The students participated in workshops and heard from members of the clinical team, including family counsellor and clinical director Karen Bresinger (Rabbi Bresinger's wife), addiction counsellor Ruth Weinberger, youth co-ordinator Lindsay Faul, psychiatric social worker Donna Cohen and trauma and sex addiction therapist Jennifer Kotry.

"A candid conversation took place between myself and the students, in which I expressed our belief that, while addiction may resemble a spiritual ailment, in fact,

the needs are much greater and require professional intervention. Therefore, servicing addicts and their families without a religious agenda is crucial," said Rabbi Bresinger.

Most the staff does not belong to Chabad, nor are many of them Jewish, he points out.

He admits this viewpoint does not square precisely with that of Lancaster. According to its mission statement, the 84-year-old college's goal is to "educate Christian students to think and live a biblical worldview and to proclaim Christ by serving him in the Church and society."

Rabbi Bresinger told *The CJN* that Chabad Lifeline never imposes religion on its clients. "My message was that, while spiritual healing is necessary, it should not be mixed with sound, clinical practice. We have no religious agenda; only when clients want to go down that road do we help them. As evangelical Christians, they have a somewhat different point of view. We had a lot of discussion," he said.

Despite this respectful disagreement, or maybe because of it, Rabbi Bresinger regards Lancaster's annual visit as "an amazing example of different communities working together to address the disease of addiction." ■