

The Pastor As Counselor

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Pastoral counseling is one of the pastoral care functions of the parish minister.¹ The "pastoral" emphasis need not be disregarded.

The word pastor is derived from the Latin word *pascere*, meaning to pasture or to feed. The biblical term, *poimēn*, as found in Ephesians 4:11 ("some teachers and pastors") means "shepherd." Historically, the work of the pastor has been to provide spiritual leadership through public services and through a personal ministry to persons and families.

Pastoral calling has been a method widely used in providing pastoral care. Although concern has been voiced lest pastoral calling be neglected,² the trend for less and less regular pastoral calling appears to be continuing. A recent survey of ministers indicates a felt need by pastors for more time to engage in counseling.³ This trend is especially evident in urban and suburban centers where it often becomes practically impossible to find entire families at home at an hour convenient for pastoral calling. To fill the need for individual ministry to persons, pastoral counseling is being used to a great advantage by many pastors, and has been utilized increasingly for the last two decades. This paper does not propose a deemphasis on pastoral visitation in the homes of church families. Rather, this paper suggests that pastoral counseling may become a valuable pastoral function complementing and supple-

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1. See Seward Hiltner, *Pastoral Counseling* (New York: Abingdon, 1949), for discussion of pastoral functions and roles, p. 150 ff.
2. W. Curry Mavis, *Pastoral Psychology*, XIV, 133, p. 49 ff.
3. "News and Notes," *Pastoral Psychology*, XVIII, 177, p. 55 (1967 survey completed by Minister's Life and Casualty Union).

menting pastoral calling, by which the pastor can help people help themselves at the point of their needs.

A DEFINITION

Pastoral counseling is a dynamic experience in which two or more persons in an understanding, honest relationship, seek a solution to some perceived need which may be spiritual, social, or psychological in nature. Counseling, by this definition, cannot begin until at least one person perceives a need, with at least part of the problem lying within himself. The husband or wife who, in coming to the pastor with a problem, places all the blame on the spouse is not coming for counseling. He wants advice and assistance in bringing his spouse into line with his preconceived notions of what should be done. Such a presentation of a problem may result in a counseling situation if the parishioner comes to realize that at least part of the problem may be within himself. The term counseling implies problems and problem solving.

ATTITUDE OR TECHNIQUE

If a pastor is to function effectively as a counselor, he must be willing to function differently in this capacity than when functioning as a "prophet," or proclaimer of the Gospel. The temptation, when confronted with a person in need, is to preach, to give advice, to assume the role of the expert giving suggestions, answers, and advice. Such behavior may prove to be threatening to the parishioner and detrimental to the counseling relationship. Before seeking help, the parishioner already knows his pastor's ethical and spiritual stance, and often is not concerned with these issues early in a counseling relationship. He seeks a solution, his solution really, not the pastor's. He seeks understanding of himself and of his problem first of all. He may ask for advice, but if given, will not accept it if contrary to his own preconceived notions. More than advice and moralizing, he wants and needs someone to understand, someone who will explore with him the ramifications of his problem and alternative plans of actions. And when a decision is reached, it should be his own, and not one forced upon him.

A professional man in his late twenties decided to divorce his wife. The emotional honeymoon had ended after the first four months; during a seven-year marriage, the couple had gradually drifted farther and farther apart. More recently, home had been only a place to sleep. When it was suggested that he see his pastor before leaving his wife and filing for divorce, the man said he couldn't. His pastor wouldn't understand; he would only preach about what a sin he was committing. This young husband and father,

who said he had to talk to someone, refused to see his pastor in a time of deep distress because he wanted not preaching but understanding, and felt he couldn't get the latter in the pastor's study. The parishioner's perception of his pastor's approach and attitude was completely negative.

On occasion, counseling may include teaching, the giving of information, or the sharing of insight the pastor has gained through experience. For example, a youth who is undecided about which college to attend visits his pastor. He is interested in a large state university but is naive in what to expect there. His parents want him to attend the Christian denominational college they had attended. What should be the pastor's stance in this counseling situation? Take sides with the parents? Take sides with the student? Or together with the youth explore the alternatives, look at motivations, realistically appraise educational opportunities at the two institutions and then let the decision belong to the youth? The pastor may give "facts" about the two schools, even impressions and opinions, but any attempt at coercion is likely to destroy any relationship which has developed between the pastor and youth.

THE RELATIONSHIP

Among professional psychotherapists⁴ a variety of techniques are utilized. Historically, the work of Carl Rogers has been described as "non-directive" (a misnomer) or client-centered. Other therapists used more directive techniques such as interpretation of dreams. Some techniques are insight oriented while others are symptom oriented. An important common element found in all theories of counseling is the nature of the relationship between counselor and counselee.

The preceding discussion about techniques indicates that the usual preaching-teaching approach is ineffectual in the counseling framework. The important concept of relationship which plays a crucial role in counseling includes the notion of rapport, but relationship also extends beyond rapport in a connotation of depth of feeling and understanding. The concept of relationship involves improved interpersonal relationships beginning with the counselor-client interaction, and the provision of a warm, accepting atmosphere in which the client can practice relating honestly to another

4. Professional psychotherapists may refer to their work with people as psychiatry, counseling, casework, or psychotherapy, depending on their professional affiliation and academic orientation.

person (the counselor). Relationship is thus viewed as the unifying construct by which counseling proceeds.⁵

The nature of the relationship which develops between pastor and parishioner is of great importance in aiding the parishioner in his problem-exploration. If the pastor is perceived (either before, during, or after counseling) as being authoritarian, dogmatic, inflexible, domineering, or unwilling to engage in an honest dialogue designed to discover a satisfactory solution, the counseling ministry will become proscribed. If, on the other hand, the pastor is known in his parish to be flexible, interested in honest, mutual exploration of problems, and willing to look at alternatives in an understanding way, the counseling function will become enlarged.

An important component of a helpful relationship is honesty, genuineness, or "congruence."⁶ This is an ideal, according to Rogers, but no one is able to be completely without façade. When an answer is not known, it can be stated without losing face if the pastor is confident and not threatened by the situation. If the pastor has faced the same doubts as the youth seeking help, a simple statement of having had such doubts may be the necessary and sufficient ingredient permitting that youth to work through his doubts to a firm faith. This does not infer that a counselor has to experience a problem to be a good counselor, but an effective counselor will attempt to admit his humanity in an honest fashion. Rogers stated his view in a personal way: "*In my relationships with persons, I have found that it does not help, in the long run, to act as though I were something that I am not* [Italics his] ."⁷

The relationship is of such importance that Howard Clinebell refers to pastoral counseling as Relationship-centered Counseling.⁸ Paul Johnson emphasizes Responsive Counseling; the counselor is responsive to every mood, feeling, or attitude expressed.⁹ Rogers has emphasized the central position of the counselee in Client-

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5. Buford Steffle, "A Summing Up," in *Theories of Counseling* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 273.
 6. Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1961), p. 61.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
 8. Howard Clinebell, Jr., *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (New York: Abingdon, 1966).
 9. Paul E. Johnson, *Psychology of Pastoral Care* (New York: Abingdon, 1953), p. 100. See also *Person and Counselor* (New York: Abingdon, 1967), where the author develops his theory of responsive counseling more fully.

centered Counseling, especially the relationship between the counselor-counselee. "In the emotional warmth of the relationship with the therapist, the client begins to experience a feeling of safety as he finds that whatever attitude he expresses is understood . . . and is accepted."¹⁰ Therapy is facilitated by the relationship which permits "complete freedom to explore every portion of the perceptual field, and the complete freedom from threat to the self" ¹¹ Reality Therapy emphasizes the need for a realistic appraisal of the life situation by utilizing the relationship called "involvement." William Glasser states that in Reality Therapy, "the therapist must become so involved with the patient that the patient can begin to face reality and see how his behavior is unrealistic."¹²

This brief description of several counseling viewpoints where the relationship is crucial to therapy may be sufficient to underscore the necessity of the pastor giving serious consideration to his performance in counseling, and the way in which he, as a pastoral counselor, is being perceived by his parishioners.

An emphasis on the pastor-parishioner relationship permits the pastor to practice counseling in both structured and unstructured situations. If counseling involves, as noted above, two or more people, in a dynamic relationship, engaged in a mutual exploration of a problem, counseling may take place during what is usually called pastoral calling in hospitals and homes. It can also be practiced in a structured setting such as the church office by appointment. Neither the setting nor the structure is a crucial point; that two persons are in a warm, dynamic relationship and are engaged in an exploration of a problem in a non-threatening environment is of utmost importance.

PREPARATION FOR COUNSELING

How can a pastor prepare for counseling that will be profitable for both pastor and parishioners? The major focus is on the needs of the pastor himself. Is he aware of his motivations and his goals? Does he trust people? Does he see them as being basically

10. Carl R. Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1951), p. 41.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

12. William Glasser, *Reality Therapy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 21.

good and capable of making the right decisions, given enough information and loving concern? Is he threatened by other people's problems? Can he help people facing death, or has he himself not yet worked through his own doubts and fears relating to death? The dictum of Socrates—"Know thyself"—is apropos for the pastor. He cannot help others if he has not first looked long and hard at his own emotional needs and found satisfactory solutions, or if he is not willing to admit that he is still searching.

A second concern in preparation for counseling is a knowledge of the basic needs of people. Why do people behave as they do? Are people rational in their acts, that is, rational to the people involved? If one accepts the thesis that behavior is rational and understandable, the pastor needs to be aware of the motivations operative in the person receiving counseling. Becoming aware of one's own needs and motivations will aid in the understanding of others' needs and motivations.¹³

The pastor as counselor is fulfilling a pastoral function which is historically and biblically valid but which, in its present form, is relatively new. With changing patterns of society and social mores, effective counseling must be adaptable to idiosyncratic situations.¹⁴ By looking at counseling as one of several pastoral care functions, the pastor can give it adequate emphasis in his parish (depending on the type and location of the local church, and the needs of the members) without neglecting other necessary pastoral functions.

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13. A study of the following books will facilitate the understanding of persons: Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey, *Theories of Personality* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1957); C. H. Patterson, *Theories of Personality and Psychotherapy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); Charles B. Truax and Robert R. Carkuff, *Toward Effective Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).
 14. Carol A. Wise, *The Meaning of Pastoral Care* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 66 ff.