

BRIEF PASTORAL COUNSELING

101

A TRAINING MANUAL

BRIEF PASTORAL COUNSELING 101

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION...

He was at the very height of his ministry. He had proven himself to be a champion for God.

No one could have anticipated this man's next, dark chapter. Indeed, it was a threat from a critic that derailed this man's ministry focus. Following that obstacle, we find this man of God in a deep state of burnout. We find him asking God to take his life.

This man was the chosen prophet, Elijah. Here was a candidate for divine intervention...which God supplied. Here was a man who could have benefited from wise counsel.

The Bible is filled with examples of men (and women) who faced a life crisis ...those who could have benefitted from intervention and counseling. Included on such a list would be common names like—Adam and Eve, Moses, Naomi, David, Jeremiah, Peter, and Paul. Wasn't it divine counsel that Jesus was humanly seeking in that dark Garden of Gethsemane?

As we reflect on these biblical examples we need to consider that God does not create fully, self-sufficient human beings. He creates creatures with individual vulnerabilities. Mankind created the "Lone Ranger" and "Superman." God creates human beings with a fragile side...who are called to live a life of interdependence vs. independence.

It was wise King Solomon who gave this sage advice for us to meditate upon (and who would have benefitted from his own insight later in his life)—

"Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance." (Proverbs 1:5)

Yes, even believers will find themselves in life situations where wise counsel can prove valuable. Pastors are often the ones contacted to help members work through a variety of life crises. As is evident from Solomon's insight, God is fully aware that "guidance" is a valuable tool for those in need.

In this article we will consider the dynamics of brief pastoral counseling. As is evident from the title this is an entry-level "primer" for such counseling. It is not meant to offer the full depth of answers; but to offer insights that will provide a

foundation for the deeper work that may be needed (by the pastor, if he is qualified; or by another, outside counselor).

2

BRIEF PASTORAL COUNSELING...

DISCLAIMER: It is critically important that each pastor assess their ability to counsel. Since this skill set is not taught extensively at seminary, it is common to find pastors who are called upon to counsel, but, based on limited education and experience, are not properly equipped to become involved in this complex area of work. This training piece is meant for those who feel competent to do brief pastoral counseling as presented here.

We begin with a definition that outlines the uniqueness of “brief pastoral counseling” (as contrasted with professional, licensed counseling outlined later)—

“The compassionate, Bible-centered care that occurs between a pastor and his parishioners, to meet the need(s) that exist, within the skills and gifting of that shepherd.”

In the majority of cases, such counseling is done within four sessions (yes, it is intended to be “brief”; as contrasted with outside, professional counseling which is typically longer in duration). The major focus of such care is in the spiritual arena. Significant emotional, psychological, and addiction issues call for an immediate referral, unless the pastor has sufficient training in these areas.

The following steps are meant to offer a structure for brief pastoral counseling—

Step 1—The pastor shares his strengths and limitations in the area of counseling. He also addresses the possibility of using the option to refer as needed at any time where it becomes clear that the counseling need exceeds his expertise.

Step 1—Assess to find out whether this situation meets the criteria for such counseling. Though this is an emphasis in this early stage of involvement with the parishioner, this step is often on-going, as new insights are gained about this member’s needs as the counseling progresses.

Step 3—Be ready with the name(s) of qualified counselor(s) who match the need(s) of this member. Be willing to make the connection with this therapist if this will facilitate this

member's involvement in this next level of care.

3

Step 4—In the case of referral, be available to offer spiritual guidance to the member while they are involved in this outside counseling...and beyond that counseling, as needed.

When a referral is made, recommend that the member sign at Release form with the outside therapist so he/she can share with you appropriate information that will assist if you are going to be providing spiritual care at the same time. Keep in mind it is rarely necessary to get deep details about the member's life situation; only what will enhance the spiritual care you are providing. After gaining permission from the member, share appropriate insights with the outside counselor that will aid in that care.

Additional information regarding the referral process is shared at the end of this training.

THE FIRST SESSION...AND BEYOND...

The first session with a member is pivotal. Though is very likely that a past pastor-member relationship already exists, this contact is different. Your role as pastor is now changed to that of a personal caregiver. Even though a degree of trust and rapport are likely already in place, the context of this new experience will call for an increase in both. This is a key goal in this first session—building a foundation of both trust and rapport to facilitate the counseling process.

It is the pastor's responsibility to understand and communicate the above insights with the member early on in this first session. This will help facilitate sharing by the members who is likely entering into a counseling relationship for the first time.

It is also important to address the potential for a referral to an outside counselor as an outcome of this first session. It is important to remember that trust and rapport can be negatively impacted, if this recommendation comes as a "surprise" at the end of this session (or later in counseling).

It needs to be emphasized that a referral is not abandonment of a member. It is simply one of professional ethics to insure the best care is provided for the person in need.

The other goal of this first session is to assess the need(s) of this member. Three things need to be kept in mind in this process—

4

1. In many counseling situations there will be a primary presenting concern (i.e. marital crisis, depression, addiction, etc).
2. There are often other concerns that are also present that may, or may not be related to this main issue (i.e. an affair is a contributing factor in the marital conflict; a major loss in the person's life is a variable in the depression; a compulsive disorder underlies the gambling addiction, etc.).
3. Assessment work is on-going to insure that the counseling is thorough. This also means that a referral may be necessitated at any time during the counseling when a new issue puts the on-going, pastoral counseling outside the expertise of the pastor. [This is the same expectation in the outside counseling field (i.e. the mental health counselor uncovers an underlying addiction and now is required to refer this patient to a licensed addiction counselor)].

One way to view this assessment process is to follow this structure-- "Listen... listen...listen...listen...understand"—

- +Listen...to the person's view of life, themselves, God, etc..
- +Listen...for the underlying emotions tied to the situation being described. The "dark" emotions of—guilt, shame, loneliness, fear, and anger are especially relevant as they are tied to core pain within the individual...and to sin that is present.
- +Listen...for needs that are not being met. Every person has three, essential needs—love, security and hope. When any of these needs are not being met, life can begin to unravel.
- +Listen for the spiritual issues that are interwoven with the life concerns that are being expressed. Looking for a spiritual connection may be new to an average church member going through a crisis (i.e. it may not be obvious that they have been distancing themselves from God, and this is fostering a part of the life problem).

The pastor is in an ideal position to address such concerns, as contrasted with most outside counselors who have little, to no

training in the spiritual side of life; or whose work is not Bible-based. The vast majority of professional counselors have no training in the Bible as a counseling text.

5

This “listen” technique is like having a “third ear” where the pastor is always “tuned in” to clues that will uncover the full extent of a parishioner’s counseling needs. Such listening will, at times, uncover an area of concern that has not been directly expressed, but still relevant in counseling.

This technique also points to an aspect of the complexity of counseling, where training and experience can make a significant difference. Most pastors have had limited training in the assessment process, for which outside counselors have had extensive training. For these counselors, an accurate assessment is essential to get paid for the counseling that they do. There has to be evidence of a clear need for counseling, referred to as “diagnoses.”

It needs to be noted that it is common for those in the pastoral role to be myopic in “listening” (being attentive only for spiritual issues needing attention). This is a natural tendency as pastors have training in this area more than other areas.

Yet, for the average member, their awareness in the spiritual area of their life may be far less appreciated. Some examples of this are—

+“I didn’t realize I was depressed because I had been giving Satan room to work in my life.”

+“I never saw my addiction to gambling as a pursuit of another “god”—money.”

+“I didn’t realize I was struggling with forgiveness.”

Through full “listening” the pastor pieces together how the relational, emotional, psychological, physical areas of concern are tied to the spiritual. This sensitivity to the spiritual would be far less likely to take place in a secular counseling setting.

When it comes to “understanding” the following questions can be very useful—

+What I hear you saying is....is that correct?

+Are you saying that one of the emotions you are struggling with is...?

+I am getting the impression that your need for love is not being met. Is that true?

+What gives you hope in your life right now?

6

+Are there other areas in your life where you are also struggling right now?

+How are you and God doing at this time in your life?

The outcome of this “listen...listen...listen...listen...understand” process is to determine three important things—

1. What is the full counseling need that exists at this time?
2. Are you the best counselor to meet this need? And, related to this,
3. Is a referral advisable to better meet this person’s need?

These three questions should always be at the back of the pastor’s mind throughout the counseling process. As mentioned earlier, the complexity of what is really going on can be revealed at various times in counseling.

It is important for the pastor to never be afraid to be honest with a member about a limitation that has become evident. To continue a counseling relationship with a parishioner whom you are not equipped to fully help is a disservice to that person. It also violates the ethical code for such counseling (See the “Code of Ethics” for Pastoral Counselors on the website for the “American Association for Pastoral Counselors.” It is under the “Policies” section.)

In this first session it is also important to begin formulating the following—

1. The initial goal(s) to be pursued in counseling. These goals can be added to as counseling progresses.
2. An agreement to use the Bible as a primary resource in the work to be done. This will mark this counseling experience as unique from secular-based counseling. In our current culture, it should not be assumed that the parishioner is familiar with the content of the Bible.
3. Discussion about the involvement of significant others in this counseling. This is especially relevant when relational conflict has been identified in the assessment. More on this later.

4. A tentative projection of the number of session that may be needed to address the goal(s) that have been identified. This determination may point to the need for a referral to an outside

7

counselor if the pastor feels this extent of counseling exceed his realistic limits.

At the end of the first session the pastor should summarize what has been accomplished in this time together. This should include verbal praise for the courage and openness of the member—for initiating counseling and being forthcoming with information.

It is also recommended that the member be given a “home work” assignment tied to one of the goal(s) that has been agreed upon. This should be a relatively simple assignment, but one that points to two things—

1. The reality that counseling is an active process even outside of sessions. God’s Spirit works daily toward healing.
2. That the parishioner has an active role in the change process.

The use of such outside assignments also promotes efficiency in the counseling process. This strategy is also a way to assess the motivational level of the member. Motivated members follow through with assignments.

Here a “rule of thumb” can be applied—

If you are doing more work in counseling than the member, you are not doing genuine counseling.

This reality will become evident in subsequent sessions when no progress is being made in counseling. When this takes place, it is the pastor’s responsibility to point to the goal(s) of counseling, the projected number of sessions to reach those goal(s)—and the reality that little, to no progress is being made.

This is an opportunity for “care-front”ation.” In essence what this means is—I “care” enough about you that I need to put in “front” of you a concern that I have. In a less direct way this can be stated as a question to the member—

“Based on the goal(s) we set up for our counseling, what do you feel about the progress we are making?”

It is important to address such concerns as soon as they are evident. When they are not addressed they are likely to become patterns that stalls progress. Such a tendency can also point to underlying issues that have not surfaced.

When a “stuck” condition exists this may also be a time when a referral will need to be discussed. This situation also points to the advantage of having clearly

8

established goals and parameters for counseling from the beginning. These are key reference points to address issues.

A “SOLUTION” FOCUS...

Since the majority of pastoral counseling is “brief” in nature, it is important to use a strategy that matches this design. The “solution” focus in counseling fits well here.

In old, traditional counseling, an extensive amount of time was taken up uncover the full extent of the problem(s) being faced by the client. The rationale here was that a counselor needs to fully understand all the dynamics within the life of the one being counseled before an effective plan of action could be put together.

In “solution”-focused counseling the emphasis is on incremental progress. This can include what “solutions” have been attempted by the member in the past; and, new “solutions” now. Outside assignments are used to work on such “solutions.” There are four practical objectives within this technique—

1. To help the parishioner recognize areas they have control over in their life.
2. It helps the counselee appreciate that really do have the ability to change.
2. It gives the member a greater sense of ownership for personal change that takes place.
4. It creates a beneficial emphasis in life “solutions,” rather than the “problem(s).” An emphasis on the latter bogs down counseling.

There is a 5th and 6th objective within Bible-based counseling—

5. To make the member aware that God is “solution”-focused.
6. To appreciate that it is God’s desire that the counselee has a personal responsibility, in partnership with God, to work on these “solutions.”

An insightful Bible verse that reinforces these two objectives in from 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Here we find a practical outline of the Bible's purpose and power—

9

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (ESV)

The Bible is God's inspired “Guide Book” for life. It is filled with real people who faced real life challenges...and who, when they searched, found “solutions” through God. God delights in helping people find “solutions,” as they also find Him in the process. As the psalmist also shares—

“Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.” ...
“I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O Lord, according to your word!” (119:105 & 107)

It is important to also note that within this “solution” focus, there is no room for “blaming” (a human pattern that dates back to the Garden of Eden where we also find the first marital crisis in human history). God's focus is on “claiming” responsibility, asking for forgiveness and then making whatever changes are needed to avoid a repeat of any unhealthy patterns in one's life.

God works from a position of grace, leaving room for pardon and new life choices. This is part of the “new life” in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

A STRUCTURE FOR ADDICTION...& BEYOND...

One of the most successful strategies for aiding addicts in their recovery is the “Twelve Step” program. These “Steps” are offered here for three reasons—

1. To make you aware of this recovery (life transformation) process.
2. To give you a basic structure for your potential work with addict.
3. So you are aware of what stage of recovery a member is in if they are in a “12 Step” program.

It should also be mentioned that this “Step” process can be used for other counseling scenarios (a structure for life change). This process can be interwoven into the “solution” focus addressed earlier.

These “Steps” also have a very strong spiritual foundation. Here a Bible reference is included with each “Step” to increase the Christian focus.

10

- Step 1—We admitted we were powerless over our dependencies, that our lives had become unmanageable. (Romans 7:18-20)
- Step 2—Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. (Mark 9:23-24)
- Step 3—Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand him. (Matthew 11:28-30)
- Step 4—Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. (Romans 13:11-14)
- Step 5—Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. (1 John 1:8-9)
- Step 6—Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. (Ephesians 4:17-23)
- Step 7—Humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings. (1 Peter 5:6-7)
- Step 8—Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. (Luke 6:37-38)
- Step 9—Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them and others. (Matthew 5:9)
- Step 10—Continued to take a personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. (Mark 14:38)
- Step 11—Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out. (John 4:13-14)
- Step 12—Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. (1 Timothy

1:12-16)

These “steps” hold no special power. But they do offer a pastor a pathway to guide their work with a troubled parishioner. They are a path to help someone

11

who is ready for a life change, and is in need of structure to fulfill this goal. These “steps” point to the direction of hope—offered through God, rather than oneself—just as God planned it to be.

For parishioners with an addiction problem, or other serious habits, another resource is “Celebrate Recovery.” This is a Bible-based approach to life transformation. The book written by John Baker, *Life’s Healing Choices*, offers a good overview of this transformation process. The “Celebrate Recovery” website offers this and other resources.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF SIGNIFICANT OTHERS...

In most situations, counseling takes place with individuals. There are those times, however, where involvement of significant others can be valuable... sometimes, essential. This is especially true in these scenarios—

1. When there is a marital concern, and the spouse is a part of the “problem,” or a key part of the “solution.”
2. When the “solution” being explored needs the involvement of a “partner” for success. This is the case when there is a need for support or accountability.
3. When there is a lack of information to arrive at a “solution.”
4. When outside “care”-“front”-ation would help promote the changes that need to be made.

In regard to pastoral counseling, another situation occurs often—

5. When “spiritual leadership” is a critical part of the “solution.”
In the Bible God makes it clear that such leadership is a male role. In a marital and family situation, the involvement of the husband and father may be necessitated to give spiritual direction and accountability internally, beyond what the pastor can offer.

In the counseling situations it is advised that a Release to be signed by the original patient for sharing to occur between the pastor and the significant other.

Sharing should be limited to what is pertinent to the specific “solution”/issue being addressed. All other information remains confidential.

12

MANDATORY REPORTING...

It is encouraged that clergy take a look at the “Mandatory Reporting By Clergy” document put out by the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Their website is—
www.wichurches.org

THE REFERRAL PROCESS...

It has been implied often in this training that many situations that a pastor will encounter will necessitate a referral to an outside counselor—to best meet the needs of the troubled parishioner. The follow are insights to guide that process.

1. Each pastor needs to assess their own competence when it comes to the arena of counseling. This is a complex area of work for which very little is taught through seminary training. Aside from a class, or two on “pastoral care” there is not a prioritized focus on this skill development.
2. Presuming that the average pastor has had very limited training in counseling, it is vital that a pastor be ready to refer to qualified outside counselors. The next section gives valuable background regarding the counseling field.
3. It is advised that a pastor contact counselors, or counseling agencies in their area and learn six things—
 1. What forms of counseling are done? What kind of problems are the counselor(s) able to address? Do they offer addiction counseling (this form of counseling is far less available.)
 2. Do they offer Bible-based counseling?
 3. What are their fees for the work they do? Do they have a “sliding fee scale” for those who do not have insurance?
 4. How does their referral process work?

5. What is the typical waiting period to get someone in to see a counselor?
6. Are they open to you providing the spiritual side of counseling?

13

It is ideal to meet with those counselors whom you may be referring to. Such a preliminary relationship can aid in later referrals, and cooperation during such counseling. At times this may lend itself to a consultative relationship (you being able to call in the future to get advice on someone you are working with, or with other counseling questions).

It can be helpful to put out information in the church on counselor(s), or agencies to make it easier for members to make their own, confidential contact when there is a need.

4. Be very open with the congregation at large, and individual members who seek help, of your limitations in counseling, and your frequent practice of making referrals. Let them know you enjoy providing spiritual guidance; but that in other areas your goal is to get a troubled parishioner the best help that is available.
5. Do not be reluctant to refer. Such a step is not one of abandonment of a member; but, as stated earlier, a sincere effort to insure they get the best care possible. Reassure those whom you refer that you are willing to offer spiritual guidance to supplement the other counseling they will be receiving.
6. When a referral is needed, be ready to make the call to arrange the first appointment, if this will help the member with this initial connection.
7. Review the next section to gain an appreciation for the outside counseling field, and your role as a pastor.

THE REALITIES OF PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING...

The following are common realities in the professional counseling field. As you read these, consider how they contrast with your role of pastor, as a fellow professional, but typically with far less training in this specialized field—

1. In most states a counselor has to have a Master's degree in

counseling, or social work in order to be reimbursed by insurance companies for their work. They are also required to get additional training to maintain their license.

14

2. Counselors are also restricted when it comes to the forms of therapy that insurance companies and government agencies will pay for. “Christian,” or “Bible-based” counseling are not allowed approaches in most cases. This is, in part, tied to the “separation of church and state” parameter that applies to counseling done within counselors/agencies that receive government funding.
3. There are a wide-range of counselors, most of whom have very little training in spiritual issues. It is rare to find a counselor who uses the Bible as a primary text in their work. Most counselors are trained in secular universities where they gain direction for their therapy. These counselors also get on-the-job training in secular settings, which only reinforces their non-spiritual counseling strategies.
4. Most counseling situations are complex. It is very common for a patient to have more than one diagnosis (specific, personal concerns needing clinical attention). It is also common for people who seek counseling to have both primary and secondary diagnoses (the latter being underlying conditions that complicate the primary area(s) needing attention).

There is a requirement for a thorough assessment to uncover the full nature of a patient’s needs. Reimbursement is tied to the outcome of this comprehensive evaluation. The complexity of issues also determines the time needed in counseling to reach satisfying results.

Here a quote has application—“For every complex problem, there is a simple solution, and it’s usually wrong.” What is implied here is the “complexity” of the situation that brings people into counseling does not lend itself to “simple solutions” (not to be confused with the “solution” focus referenced earlier).

As examples fitting this quote about “simple solutions” are the following—

+As a strategy for treating alcoholism—“Just stop drinking.”

15

+For a severely depressed patient— “Read a book on optimism” ...or, “Just think positive thoughts.”

+In the midst of a marital breakdown, just overlook the faults in your spouse.

5. It is common for a patient to need five to ten counseling sessions to resolve the complex issues that are present. This certainly exceeds the “three session” rule of many clergy.
6. Licensed counselors need to be supervised in order to keep their license and to receive reimbursement for their work. This supervisor is done most often through a professional with a PhD degree in psychology.
7. Most clergy have limited seminary training in counseling. This is not a priority focus in this schooling in theology. This leaves the average pastor in an at-risk situation when he practices counseling outside his expertise.

This is not meant to imply that a pastor cannot offer Bible-based guidance to parishioners. This can be done in “partnership” with a licensed counselor who is responsible for the other areas of need of a parishioner in counseling. In such situations, a Release needs to be signed to allow sharing between the pastor and counselor.

8. In most States a counselor needs to be licensed. There is a distinction between a “mental health” counselor, and an “addictions” counselor. This difference identifies what type of individual can be seen by an individual counselor. For example, a mental health counselor cannot be reimbursed for work with an alcoholic (unless they are addressing an underlying mental health diagnosis that has been assessed). Most counselors have only one type of license. The majority of counselors are licensed only in mental health.

It should be clearly evident that pastors are not counselors (just as counselors are not qualified preachers). Pastors have limits, with counseling aptitude being one of the most common ones!

What is also implied is that clergy should be referring parishioners to outside counselors in many, if not most situations. The strategy to refer needs to be the

16

first consideration of a pastor, even with the first contact with a troubled parishioner.

LIABILITY INSURANCE...

When a pastor does work in brief pastoral counseling it is important for him to call the church's insurance carrier to confirm that such work is covered under the liability section of their policy. The pastor should also ask what the "liability limits" are for such work, to insure adequate coverage.

In light of the reality that lawsuits over counseling matters have become more prevalent it might be helpful for a pastor to have additional, private insurance coverage. This is relatively inexpensive insurance that adds extra peace of mind. Connecting with the internet under "Professional Liability Insurance for Clergy" can be a good place to start a search for coverage.

CONFIDENTIALITY...

Pastoral counseling is meant to remain confidential; and in the vast majority of cases remains so. Only with a signed "Release of Information" should any information be shared with an outside party; and then only on a "need to know" basis (only people who need to know; and only information that is relevant).

There are exceptions that need to be understood. In most states there are "mandatory reporting" requirements for suspected child abuse and neglect. Some states also include elder abuse and neglect. In such cases, a report needs to be made to the local, government social service agency.

Also, when it becomes evident through counseling that there is a serious threat of suicide, or homicide this should be reported, as there is a risk of death. Such a report should be made to whatever party can effectively intervene.

It is recommended that additional research be done through the Code of Ethics of pastoral counselors. This is available on the website for the "American Association for Pastoral Counselors" and/or the "American Association of Christian Counselors."

SUMMARY...

Brief pastoral counseling is a valuable “tool” for helping troubled parishioners. When done by clergy who are trained in it, such work can guide members to “solutions” that meet their needs. A pastor’s special training in spiritual matters makes him a qualified guide when such issues are present.

17

Counseling is a complex arena for which the majority of pastors have not been trained. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the pastor to make appropriate referrals when a troubled member presents a life issue that clearly exceeds the pastor’s expertise.

Even when a pastor chooses to engage in counseling, he should be open with the parishioner regarding his limitations as a counselor, and the potential for a referral. At times, the pastor can provide spiritual direction while an outside counselor addresses other life issues. This is a matter of ethics and wise discretion.

For additional insights regarding counseling, the “Christian Counseling Resource Guide” found on the North Wisconsin District website under “Resources;” or contact the District Counselor—

Pastor Dan Kohn
(715) 610-2400
revkohn@gmail.com

A CLOSING PRAYER...

Oh God of love and wisdom, we hold Your name on high. We thank You for the talents and gifts that You share with us as pastors. May we use these wisely to bring You glory. And, we ask, oh Spirit of God, that You would redirect us when we attempt to counsel when we have not been blessed with such training and gifting. Open doors to outside counselors who can best meet the needs of parishioners who have needs we cannot meet. May we always lead with love, and rely upon You, oh Triune God. In the name of our living Lord and Savior we pray. Amen

word: brief pastoral counseling 101