

Clergy, 'Counselling' and Pastoral Care

Introduction

It is not unusual to hear a minister talking about their counselling load. What that usually means is that the pastor is spending time with individuals and/or couples discussing issues or problems in their lives and helping them to select Biblically-oriented ways to improve their life situations.

The word 'counselling' in the title above has intentionally been italicised, because the writers believe that in the vast majority of cases, what pastors are doing is something other than counselling.

The confusion seems to have its origins in a number of issues:

- Historically, the term counselling has been applied to a wide range of contexts and interpreted in the public domain in its broadest possible meaning.
- The use of the word in Scripture has opened the door to pastors (and lay people) believing that what they do is 'counselling', and that to name it as such is legitimate.¹
- Many of the micro-skills used in caring and in pastoral care are similar to those used in counselling therapy. This has served to blur the boundaries around being a (naturally or particularly gifted) caring person 'helping people with their problems', and also between the disciplines of pastoral care and counselling, allowing people with insufficient training (or no training at all) to feel and claim that they are competent to counsel.

Pastoral care vs. counselling²

A pastoral or spiritual carer offers a [relationship] that is intentionally seeking to 'walk with you along your path'. Its focus is on emotional support and spiritual care.³

Psychotherapy and Counselling are professional activities that utilise an interpersonal relationship to enable people to develop self-understanding and to make changes in their lives.⁴

The differences between the two disciplines are undoubtedly blurry. However, extrapolating from the definitions above:

- Pastoral carers journey alongside, implying a long-term relationship; counsellors are accessed at specific points of time to address specific issues ;
- The basis of pastoral care is the pastoral relationship; the basis of counselling is a suite of professional activities around clinical goals;
- The focus of pastoral care is largely spiritual; counselling's focus is intentional change within any dimension of the self.

None of this implies in any way that pastoral care is not professional, or that counsellors don't 'care' for their clients.

A further relevant issue here is the potential conflict between the two roles of pastor and counsellor. The *pastor's* call generally requires them to preach, proclaim, and sometimes act as the prophet. They may therefore come to the pastoral relationship with a perceived sacred duty and obligation to 'tell' or to 'convert' the parishioner to a God-honouring perspective. The professional requirement of the *counsellor* is to work within the client's world view, and challenge it only when it is internally

¹ This in spite of the fact that 'counsel' in scripture tends to mean giving advice, which counselling certainly is not.

² The term 'pastoral counselling' has also come into vogue via North America. Although pastors tend to understand the term to mean counselling (or formalised care) provided by pastors this is not how the literature defines the term, so it will not be used in this discussion.

³ Definition from the website of The Pastoral Care Council of the ACT – we have used the word 'relationship' in this definition rather than the original word – 'friendship'.

⁴ Definition from the website of The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia Inc.

inconsistent (i.e. the client contradicts themselves). It is unethical for the counsellor to impose their own world view on the client. The role of the counsellor is to listen, to help the client formulate options, and to empower the client to act on the most favourable option, *even if the counsellor disagrees with the client's choice*. The ultimate task of the pastor is to help the parishioner become more God-focussed. The task of the counsellor is simply to be client focussed.

There are clearly significant differences between pastoring and counselling which make it questionable whether 'counselling' being offered by pastors is actually in the parishioners' best interests. It could be argued that there is an inherent conflict of interest in pastors offering 'counselling' which automatically precludes clergy from operating in that discipline.

Training

Most pastors are not trained in the discipline of counselling. They may possess many of the micro-skills used in counselling (perhaps even to a greater degree than some professional therapists), but this does not make them qualified counsellors. Many pastors complete a pastoral care or pastoral counselling unit as part of their theological studies. Some complete the more robust Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) unit, either as part of their undergraduate or post-graduate program. Some may also complete John Savage's *Skills for Calling and Caring Ministries* and similar programs, which enhance listening and caring micro-skills. All of these provide an excellent entry into the field of intentional pastoral care but, once again, this should not be confused with counsellor training. If pastors wish to competently offer therapy to parishioners they need to complete a recognised university or other appropriate program.

Operational issues

Ministers need to be clear about what they are called and qualified to provide. Some believe they don't possess the necessary gifts for pastoral care, and so have established an effective pastoral care system utilising gifted and trained lay congregants. Some local churches have set up a counselling service as part of the congregation's ministry, staffed by professionals and interns.

However, some clergy sense that their call does include a ministry of intentional pastoral care. We recommend that they consider providing this ministry in similar ways to other professional care-giving services (see Guidelines on p. 4). Churches located within a demographic characterised by significant emergency and crisis care would also benefit from formalising their systems and processes. This would clearly call for specialised skills and training.

In the case of a more 'professional' formalised service, an agreement in relation to what is being provided to the client and an informed-consent document should be signed at the outset by the pastoral care recipient.

In this context, as a minimum, pastors and carers should be familiar with:

- Dynamics of power in helping relationships;
- Transference and counter-transference;
- Scope and limits of confidentiality;
- Professional indemnity requirements;
- Mandatory reporting requirements;
- Record-keeping requirements.

Role Plurality⁵

Part of the reason pastors get into trouble with congregants around the issue of pastoral care is that they fail to understand the dynamics and effects of the multiplicity of roles they are enacting in parishioners' lives. The potential for role confusion is high (for both pastor and parishioner) in these situations. A minister may be the friend, pastor, pastoral care provider, and - if the term is being used (appropriately or inappropriately) - counsellor, to a parishioner. Expectations of what that aspect of the relationship role should look (and feel like) come with the role being enacted at the time. Expectations from one role will leak into other roles, and a parishioner may feel resentful, angry or let down if their (possibly unrealistic) expectations are not being met. Some role-related issues are:

Role	Characteristics ⁶
Friend	Shared, two-way intimacy. ⁷
Pastor	Teach; lead; shepherd.
Pastoral care provider	Walk alongside; support, especially in a crisis; 'spiritually'-oriented care.
Counsellor	Provide specialised therapeutic skills.

So, for example, if a pastor is functioning as a *friend*, in a social context:

- The pastor may feel they can relax in the presence of congregants, and not behave in especially 'holy' or 'spiritual' ways. Congregants however may expect their *pastor* to always speak, act and behave as the resident holy person.
- The pastor may feel that they can let their guard down and not be overly concerned about congregant's needs. Parishioners, on the other hand, may expect their *pastor* to follow up previous pastoral conversations.
- The pastor may have an expectation that the parishioner be concerned about the things that are going on in the pastor's life. The congregant, relating to their *pastor*, will expect the pastor to be totally 'client'-focussed.

On the other hand, if a pastor names what they are doing with the congregant as *counselling*:

- The congregant will probably come to that relationship with expectations of professionalism – a period of specific training, qualifications, professional membership, professional supervision, and possession of the necessary skills to help them with their issue.
- A counselling relationship carries with it ethical, moral, and sometimes legal obligations that are not present in a friendship.

The main difficulty here is the lack of demarcation between one role and another. Which mode in the pastor is the parishioner talking and relating to? Which mode is the pastor operating from? Do both parties know? How? Do both parties agree?

The more roles at play within a relationship, the more difficult it is to negotiate that relationship. The way professionals handle these situations is instructive:

- Dual relationships are discouraged or prohibited – e.g. *friends* do not become *clients*.
- Professional care is formalised – appointments, professional space, contractual and financial arrangements, etc.
- Even within the professional counselling discipline role confusion can occur. E.g. a psychologist may have to provide therapy as well as professional supervision to a client. Most therapists seek to avoid doing this, but when it occurs they clearly identify what is happening and when the shift from one mode to the other occurs.

⁵ This issue has become much more vulnerable to misunderstanding with the trend towards 'organic' incarnational ministry and the re-emergence of friendship-based evangelism, where distinctives between pastor and lay person are often being intentionally minimised.

⁶ To add a further layer of complexity to an already complicated scenario, pastors are already in a role with parishioners even before any pastoral relationship commences – that of sister/brother in Christ.

⁷ This rarely happens in pastoral relationships - the pastor will always be the pastor in the presence of parishioners, so can never be out of role. Pastors have authentic relationships with congregants, but not mutual intimacy. This is why many pastors look for friends outside their own local congregation.

Boundary issues

Because of the complexity of all the factors identified above, the need for boundaries to be established and maintained is paramount. As well as the normal operational boundaries that are part of any formalised helping relationship (how and where to provide care, cross gender care, etc.) pastors need to set boundaries around:

- The amount of time they will devote to intentional pastoral care;
- The number of times they will see a parishioner before referring to another professional;
- The types and intensity of cases they will take on, recognising the extent of their training and competence.

Our suggestion is that pastors determine these boundaries in conjunction with their church board, and regularly review them with their professional supervisor.

Some suggested guidelines:

- Pastors should determine the percentage of their normal working week that they are to devote to formalised pastoral care in conjunction with their church board.⁸
- Except in emergency situations, pastoral care should take place in a purpose-designed space, and appointments should be diarised.
- Pastors should only use therapeutic techniques and diagnostic/assessment tools in which they have received training. They should clearly articulate their relevant training and qualifications to clients prior to commencing the intentional helping relationship.
- Pastors offering formalised intentional pastoral care should maintain their proficiency through regular professional development.
- Pastors should regularly access professional supervision.
- Pastors should maintain a list of accessible professional care-givers and services (government and other agencies, self-help and support groups, crisis intervention services, etc.) and refer whenever necessary (we suggest after three or four sessions if noticeable progress has not been made - this policy decision made in conjunction with the church board and any exceptions to the policy being reviewed).
- Pastors offering a significant amount of intentional pastoral care should be affiliated with an appropriate professional association and comply with the ethical standards of that body.

References

- Janetski, P. (1998) *The Blurred Picture: Clarifying the roles of pastoral care & counselling within the church*, Master's Thesis, School of Social Science, Queensland University of Technology.
- Terrell, C J. (undated) *Ethical Issues in Pastoral Counseling*, Psychological Studies Institute, PowerPoint presentation, downloaded from http://www.powershow.com/view1/1fbd02-ZDII2/Ethical_Issues_in_Pastoral_Counseling_powerpoint_ppt_presentation

Websites

- The Pastoral Care Council of the ACT: <http://www.pastoralcareact.org/pastoral.html>
- The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia Inc:
<http://www.pacfa.org.au/resources/cid/41/parent/0/t/resources/l/layout>

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⁸ Our experience is that the workload of the majority of clergy is so heavy that the pastoral care component of their normal working week should be closely monitored.