

# **Pastoral Care vs. Professional Counseling: Discerning the Differences**

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Mary Johnson completed a two-year training program in spiritual direction and routinely meets with individuals and small groups in her church to encourage them in their spiritual development.

John Jones requires couples he marries in his church to meet with him for three premarital counseling sessions. He routinely administers and interprets several personality inventories in these sessions and interprets the results to the couple in his sessions with them. He also focuses on matters of sexual intimacy and techniques.

Sally Smith is an ordained part-time associate pastor whose portfolio is pastoral care and counseling. She also has another office in town where she has a private professional counseling practice that she developed with several other colleagues before accepting the call to the church. She does extended personal and marital counseling of church members at the church office and also her private office for a fee.

Tom Anderson is trained in family systems theory and does family counseling in his church office with persons from the community as well as members from his church.

Bob Green is particularly skilled in hospital visitation as well as grief counseling. He regularly follows up with persons in crisis, using Pastoral care is regarded as a primary function of ministry by many ministers themselves as well as a majority of parishioners. But what is the distinction between pastoral care and the professional discipline of counseling? Some pastors are members of the American Association of Pastoral Counseling which has developed educational and training standards along with a carefully formulated Code of Ethics. The same is true of American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. However, most pastors do not meet these educational or training standards.

his practiced listening skills and understanding of the grief process along with prayer and helpful scriptural themes in his pastoral ministry.

Ann Brown, a parishioner, reflects: When I was thinking about separating from my husband, I never thought about going to a marriage counselor. The person I wanted to talk with was my pastor. He had known us as active members for a number of years and was well aware of our family history and marital tensions. He had helped us when we had a crisis with our oldest son. I felt safe with him, and I believed he would provide needed support for me and the children.

Many persons today continue to turn to their pastors as a primary resource in times of crisis. Pastors are usually more immediately and directly accessible than some other professionals, do not charge fees, and are often known and trusted within a community. They are also generalists who have some familiarity with a broad spectrum of experiences. Consequently, parishioners and community residents commonly look to pastors for assistance with a wide range of needs, including counseling. Pastors usually have taken some helpful classes in counseling during their seminary training as well as an important basic quarter in Clinical Pastoral Education.

There are certainly many potential similarities in the relationship between pastors and professional counselors and the people they serve. All these relationships involve issues of trust, intimacy, and vulnerability. There is an inherent imbalance of power which some, particularly pastors, are uncomfortable acknowledging, but which exists whenever a person in distress seeks succor from one viewed as more knowledgeable. Healing is certainly a central focus in any such helping relationship. Also, boundary issues must be attended to in

order to create the safest possible atmosphere in which a parishioner or counselee can process his or her pain.

However, there are a number of potential differences between professional counseling and pastoral care. Professional counselors are trained to understand the transference and counter-transference phenomena (e.g., strong feelings which may develop in a counseling relationship related to vulnerability and power issues), dual-role conflicts, and the limits of their professional competence. Continued supervision and education are required. Professional counselors also work within formalized settings, with stated hours, fees, and cancellation policies. Avoidance of dual-role relationships with clients is clearly stated in all professional counseling codes of ethics. Professional counselors generally help individuals to “fix” something and to gain greater self insight. They operate with a clear termination process and referral procedures. The courts expect them to create and maintain reasonable documentation in the kind of detail and quality that would be consistent with reasonable scrutiny in an adjudicative forum. Also, in many jurisdictions, there is a legal requirement to inform appropriate authorities when a client indicates a specific danger to self or others.

Although pastors also have codes of conduct to guide their activities, they are religious in origin. These codes are based on religious beliefs and canonical or ecclesiastical law. Except for prohibitions regarding sexual misconduct, pastoral codes usually are more generalized in nature than professional counseling ethical codes of behaviour.

In contrast to professional counselors, pastors often engage in their ministries in a variety of informal settings with a multiplicity of roles with parishioners. Their core functions, however, are rooted in a spiritual discipline that touches on many aspects of life and society.

Although training in counseling can assist pastors to work more effectively with parishioners, their calling is to something very distinct. Eugene Peterson in his many writings admonishes pastors to return to their distinct, ancient calling. “The definition that pastors start out with, given to us in our ordination, is that pastoral work is a ministry of word and sacrament.” He charges pastors to embrace this unique, set-apart ministry. “We want you to help us: be our pastor, a minister of word and sacrament, in the middle of this world’s life. Minister with word and sacrament to us in all the different parts and stages of our lives—in our work and play, with our children and our parents, at birth and death, in our celebrations and sorrows, on those days when morning breaks over us in a wash of sunshine, and those other days that are all drizzle. This isn’t the only task in the life of faith, but it is your task. We will find someone else to do the other important and essential tasks. This is yours: word and sacrament. . . . Your task is to keep telling the basic story, representing the presence of the Spirit, insisting on the priority of God, speaking the biblical words of command and promise and invitation.” (*Working the Angles*, pp. 22ff.).

David Hansen, a pastor who values small church ministry, writes, “I could fill up many hours every day with counseling. People believe counseling is a great panacea. Yet many are loath to go to a professional counselor. That costs money, and real counselors ask hard questions.” He continues, “For me, trying to be a counselor is a shortcut. It is pandering to my people’s desires to have me do something to them rather than admonish them to live through the thick forests of their lives by following Christ in discipleship.” (*The Art of Pastoring*, pp 71f.)

Pastoral care, then, as defined here, is rooted in word and sacrament; it does not have its origins in various scientifically grounded personality

theories or schools of psychotherapeutic modalities. Its heritage is in the sacred scriptures, in prayer, in proclamation, and in care of the soul. Again, in the words of Peterson, “The pastor’s responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God.” (*Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, p.2.)

Like pastoral care, professional counseling (or professional counseling by a pastor) is serious business with significant clinical responsibilities given our cultural climate today. Legally, professional counseling is no longer regarded a casual activity. Pastors who engage in

Be clear about the expertise offered. Refer to your activities in unambiguously religious terms, not professional counseling terms. Unless you are trained and are willing to adhere to all of the professional standards of licensed professional counselors, stay with practices that you identify as pastoral care. If you hold yourself out as a “professional” or “psychological” counselor, the law will treat you as one.

Do not assume broader duties which are not part of your competence or calling.

Adopt, in conversation with your church leaders, policies and guidelines for pastoral care practice.

Determine appropriate physical settings and circumstances of meeting for pastoral care.

Engage in regular peer review or supervision to maintain clarity in your pastoral practice.

Maintain a list/network of counseling professionals to whom you can refer persons with chronic or more serious emotional/mental difficulties.

professional counseling activities are not free to simply dabble with some tools and techniques under the umbrella of their ordination. When they move away from the ancient activities of pastoral care and engage in professional counseling methods, they are then held to the specific standards of the counseling profession, regardless of whether they are, in fact, licensed professionals. Before the law they will not find the privilege or protection they have within the ancient practice of pastoral care.

Several protective legal guidelines for the practice of ministry include:

The situations given at the beginning of this article are common to ministry. While the lines between pastoral care and professional counseling are clear in some of these situations, in others they appear less distinct. A process of discussion, reflection, and discernment is needed. It is not likely that the level of discernment required can be done alone by a pastor. This type of discernment needs the company of, and accountability to, others: colleagues, parishioners, religious officials, supervisors, spiritual directors, legal counsel, etc. Core questions of pastoral identity and function need to be addressed:

Who am I called to be in this particular ministry setting?

What are my sacred functions as one who has a “set-apart” ministry?

What distinguishes my role and relationships from those of psychologists, family therapists, and specialists in pastoral counseling?

Where do I set the limits and boundaries to my pastoral activities?

How do I communicate these limits to those to whom I minister?

How do I handle persons who turn to me for help in areas which are not part of my competence or calling?

Where are appropriate forums for me to address my own need to be needed which may seduce me into worthy activities peripheral to my calling?

Pastors are an important resource to a wide range of people with a variety of needs. There is a wonderful challenge to all this opportunity. But it is crucial for pastors to focus clearly on their calling, to reflect carefully on their gifts, and to acknowledge humbly their professional limits.

*For information about scheduling a workshop on this topic, please contact one of Midwest's offices. L. Ronald Brushwyler, D.Min., is Executive Director of Midwest. Sheryl Carle Fancher, M.A., is Associate Director for Kansas City. John R. Matthews, S.T.M., is Associate Director for Columbus. Margo M.R.. Stone, Psy.D., is a professional counselor in the Chicago area office. James C. Geoly, J.D., is an attorney with Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella, P.C., Chicago, IL, specialized in representing religious and not-for-profit organizations.*