

Counseling Church Members



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



Practical Ministry Skills: Counseling Church Members

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COUNSELING CHURCH MEMBERS

Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by
BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Leadership Resources and Christianity Today, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This special theme of BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS is designed to guide pastors and church leaders in counseling those in your congregation. As you face this process, simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary. The handouts are designed to give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may use them as background information as you tackle the various elements of counseling.

To help you and your leaders know how to take the first step, you may want to start with "The Don'ts and Do's of the Counseling Relationship" (p. 3). If you need to determine the amount of help someone needs, read "Long-term Care" (pp. 6–7) and "Short-term Care" (pp. 8–9). Other articles cover specific issues, such as counseling those who are remarrying (pp. 10–11) and how to care for your congregation during a crisis (p. 12).

We hope you enjoy this theme as you and your church leaders seek to build up Christ's church.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.
To contact the editors:

E-mail BCL@christianitytoday.com
Mail BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS, Christianity Today
465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188

The Don'ts and Do's of the Counseling Relationship

The ultimate goal of Christian counseling is to increase the client's dependence upon God.

Proverbs 25:11

The following tips can enhance the counseling relationship:

Don't Foster Counselor Dependence; Do Foster Interdependence

The ultimate goal of Christian counseling is to increase the client's dependence upon God, not man. Counselors are tempted to assume responsibility for the outcome of the presenting dilemma. An over-responsible counselor can unknowingly cripple a client's growth by fostering an unhealthy dependence that resembles a parent-child relationship. Meeting every need and answering every request is a sure way to burnout. Learning to assist those in need without controlling the counseling process is a masterful art.

The analogy of the relationship between a pilot and copilot serves as a model for healthy interdependence. The pilot is the one who flies the plane and is responsible for reaching the planned destination. The journey may include unexpected delays, turbulence, and rerouting. The copilot serves to assist the pilot when asked for feedback and support, not to sit in the captain's chair. A client will encounter personal growth when he or she senses the healing journey is truly his or her own path.

Don't Force the Format; Do Follow the Client

Effective counseling involves following the lead of the client. Although it might be obvious to the counselor how to resolve the client's problem, responding effectively to their dilemma requires both counselor reflection and client readiness.

A common mistake is to respond too soon with recommendations before making a thorough assessment. After listening to the client and identifying their physical and emotional symptoms, it would be prudent to recommend a medical evaluation as well. Learning to walk alongside clients at their own pace is as important as getting to the end of the path. They will be able to internalize the discoveries of grace and truth along the way.

Don't Focus on Conformity; Do Focus on Congruency

Admonishing clients to biblical behavior without a significant change of heart and mind leads to a pattern of performance for the pastor, church, spouse, or friends. Masking a discrepancy between the public self and the private self takes an incredible amount of energy and is a sure route to severe anxiety and/or depression. Stopping a behavior is one thing, but permanently changing the behavior is another.

Layers and layers of shame often keep Christians from disclosing their secrets. Some would rather maintain a reputation of deception than lose their public standing within the church. Subtly, an appearance of godliness and performance becomes more important than matters of the heart. The role of an effective counselor is to mirror that discrepancy in a non-shaming manner and invite the client to a life of congruency. As the client learns to identify and manage underlying issues that have been buried underneath secretive behavior, it is probable he or she will be able to stay on the path of recovery.

Don't Forget Your Limits; Do Further Your Resources

A pastor does not always have the luxury of selecting additional staff or lay leadership who are equipped to counsel. Taking time to identify people within your congregation who have the gifts of exhortation and mercy can be a preliminary step to building a counseling resource team. Once those individuals have been identified, they can then be challenged to receive adequate training to begin a counseling ministry.

—LINK CARE CENTER (www.linkcare.org). Used by permission.

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When to Intervene

Without some kind of personal relationship, intervention is difficult and risky.

2 Timothy 4:2

A pastor encountered one of life's little dramas as he entered the YMCA: a toddler wearing a wet bathing suit was coming out the door from the swimming pool area, and her mother was saying, "You are such a coward!"

The child was shivering, and her cheeks were wet—from tears or the pool? The pastor couldn't tell. She simply stood there shaking as her mother continued, "It's the same every week. You always make your daddy and me ashamed. Sometimes I can't believe you're my daughter."

The pastor found himself thinking, *I wonder what the penalty is for hitting a woman?* "What she was doing was more hurtful, more brutal than a beating," he reflected. "It was emotional child abuse, and if it continues, that toddler will grow up feeling worthless, which will lead to all kinds of destructive behavior."

If that woman had been a member of your congregation, what would you have done? When is intervention appropriate? How do you enter a situation uninvited?

Recognizing the Risk

Sometimes Christians step in—and later regret it. Despite pure motives and a deep desire to help, their well-intentioned intervention can at times do more harm than good. If a family has poor patterns of communication, we may add to the ammunition they could use against each other. Seeking disclosure for disclosure's sake is a mistake.

If even well-intentioned intervention can prove destructive, when should a person intervene, and when should a bad situation be left alone? Even in small churches, there are going to be more fires flaring up than church leaders can personally stamp out. How do you decide which ones to take on?

When Not to Intervene

The following occasions are when it is probably best not to try to help those who don't want help:

- ◆ *When you don't know the person.* Intervention is difficult and risky. In these cases, the better strategy is an indirect approach. Say something positive to take the tension out of the moment.
- ◆ *When you're beyond your depth.* When a situation demands more skill or time than you have available, the best thing you can do for yourself and for the person is to bring in someone else.
- ◆ *When your motivation isn't right.* Motives are always mixed; elements of fear/love/worry/altruism/reputation all get tangled together when confronting a volatile situation.

Men need to be particularly aware of their motivations in trying to help a woman.

Another dangerous and ineffective motivation is self-righteousness, leading you to be angry with an individual. Even when the individual has acted so badly as to deserve punishment, "you need to deal with your own feelings before you can deal effectively with the situation," says psychiatrist Louis McBurney. "It's natural to see a child abuser or workaholic as a real villain. But simply being judgmental will not help anyone."

A final motivation Christians must guard against is seeing themselves as saviors. We tend to believe that given enough time and money, we can love people enough and pray hard enough and work hard enough to help anybody. Not so. There are some people you cannot help no matter how hard you try.

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When to Intervene

How do you discern the leading of the Spirit from a human compulsion to correct someone? Here are some factors to consider when deciding whether to help a person who doesn't want help:

- ◆ *God's persistent call.* Opportunity does not equal a mandate to act. Just because you become aware of a need does not mean God is calling you to meet that need. But if you can't get someone off your mind, God may be nudging you to act.
- ◆ *When, before God, motives are right.* If we are tempted to "straighten someone out," it is doubly important to check our motivations. What should the motivation be? Because I love God. It sounds simple, and it is. But in essence, that has to be the primary motive: loving God and wanting to help others love God, too.
 - Before attempting to correct anyone, ask these questions to check your motivation:
 - Do I really care for this person?
 - Am I a close enough friend that I am willing to bear his or her burdens?
 - Is the timing right for a confrontation?
 - Is the Holy Spirit directing?

Sorting Out the Options

Before taking the initiative in a ticklish ministry situation, ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I have all the facts? Do I have something more than hearsay? What can I do to get a fuller picture?
2. Once I have a better understanding of the situation, is it as bad as I thought? Whom does it really impact? Is it a church-wide problem? Is it going to affect one family, four families, or forty families?
3. Can we afford to wait? If we don't respond, what's the worst thing that could happen in a week? In a month? In a year?

Recognizing the Right Moment

What are some of the signs to look for?

- ◆ *A time of personal crisis.* With resistant people, the breakthrough often comes as a result of tragedy or failure.
- ◆ *Increased nervousness, as evidenced by blushing or inability to sit still.* Body language reveals much about a person's internal condition.
- ◆ *A lapse in the defensive posture.* Before a person is ready to deal with an issue, he usually will be defensive about it.

Not every case of intervention ends with positive results. There are times to intervene and times not to intervene. The key to effective ministry is timing—noticing the subtle clues that God is already at work in a life, and then moving gently but firmly when the defenses begin to come down.

—MARSHALL SHELLEY. Adapted from "When to Intervene," *Building Your Church Through Counsel and Care* (Bethany House, 1997).

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Long-term Care

Long-term counseling allows us to witness firsthand the subtle yet powerful healing that God brings.

2 Corinthians 5:17

We must define what long-term counseling is. That's best done by comparing it to short-term counseling.

Defining Short-term and Long-term Counseling

Short-term counseling deals with crisis intervention (death in the family, divorce, loss of a job) or supporting and guiding people through significant transitions (marriage, retirement). The problem doesn't require a major adjustment in personality.

Long-term counseling goes a layer deeper into a person's psyche. It tries to help people with serious psychological problems (e.g., depression or schizophrenia) to function normally. It usually involves reconstructing some part of a person's personality.

As a general rule, the more severe the problem, the longer counseling is needed.

To put it another way, long-term counseling focuses more on the unconscious than the conscious. In terms of time, short-term counseling deals with problems that can be handled in two to six weeks; long-term counseling may require up to a year or two.

When to Take a Long-term Case

Most pastors are not trained in unveiling the unconscious motives and drives of counselees. And even when trained, they have many demands placed upon them that preclude much, if any, long-term counseling. Still, there are occasions when it is wise for a pastor to counsel long term:

- ◆ *No adequate referral is available.* When a person with serious problems comes along, most pastors will want to refer the person to a competent professional. But some pastors can't do so because they live in a community in which pastors, in fact, are the most competent professional counselors.
- ◆ *The client can't afford professional care.* Pastoral counseling is often the only counseling offered gratis to the community.
- ◆ *The pastor is in a rut in short-term counseling.* Every once in a while it's important to see the deeper dynamics that work in people's lives. The pastor who decides to take a client long term will want to get as much training as possible in working with the subconscious. He or she should also have available, in the community or long distance, a professional with whom regular consultation can be made.

Problems to Avoid

No matter the circumstances of the pastor and potential counselee, there are some problems pastors should not counsel:

- ◆ *Severe personality disorders.* These require special understanding and unique treatment that pastors are not trained for.
- ◆ *Immoral Compulsions.* Problems in which psychological compulsion is mixed with moral wrong may need, at first, to be addressed apart from the moral weight of the church. It may be better that pastors refer such cases as sexuality issues—gender identity, homosexuality, transsexualism, addiction to pornography—to a Christian professional.
- ◆ *Biologically based problems.* Some chemical imbalances can only be treated through medication.

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Particularly Appropriate Cases

Pastors are especially equipped to take on these problems:

- ◆ *People with distortions about God.* Many people, because of abuse by their fathers, have a distorted image of God. Such people need long-term counseling to deal with their past. A pastor is in a better situation than a counselor to help people reshape their image of God.
- ◆ *Sufferers from guilt.* Ultimately, guilt—healthy guilt, not neurotic guilt—is a theological issue, a topic the pastor is better trained to address. A pastor also has unique liturgical resources—services of confession and public worship—that can help people realize God’s forgiveness.

What Does Progress Look Like?

In long-term counseling we aim for a change in the person’s basic beliefs, lifestyle, or personality. Such change takes place slowly, and sometimes it’s hard to see much progress. If we recognize what types of changes ought to be taking place in each stage of long-term counseling, we are in a better position to determine if the counselee is making progress.

- ◆ *Early stage.* In the early stage the goal is to get through the outer defense system. At this stage people are reluctant to share who they are. Their early confessions are superficial. Until they trust you, they’ll change the subject.
- ◆ *Middle stage.* In this stage people start sharing deeper concerns. Embarrassing things, almost shameful things begin to emerge. They begin to trust you more with their private thoughts, even fantasies.
- ◆ *Final stage.* In the final stage, the counselor and client begin to pull together the information and insights that have emerged. The client begins to see connections, how decisions and actions lead to consequences, and how those consequences can be avoided if he makes the right decisions.

When There Are No Signs of Progress

Sometimes clients do not progress. When people resist progress, as you conclude a session tell them, “I feel there has not been a lot of progress these last three months, that we have skirted around some issues, and issues that interest you seem to have no relationship to our larger goal. How are you feeling about the process? Do you think we’ve done enough? Is it time to stop coming to me?”

That usually alerts them to the fact they need to keep working. And for those who don’t want to work, it gives them a gracious out.

Terminating the Therapy

Termination is the process by which the counselor helps the client summarize what’s happened in the counseling, highlight the main insights, point to progress, plan for the near future, and end the counseling relationship. This can take one session, or up to six months.

A danger in this stage is to terminate prematurely. Because of the demands on our time, we can be tempted to end things abruptly. When we push them out too quickly, it can provoke a crisis.

Ask, “How much longer do you think it would be appropriate for us to counsel?”

If the response is something like, “Well, I’m not thinking of any limit right now” or “Another six months,” then continue. Help the counselee work through the dependence before terminating.

—ARCHIBALD HART. Adapted from “Long-term Care,” *Mastering Pastoral Counseling* (Nelson, 1993).

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Short-term Care

Start solving problems in the very first session.

1 Corinthians 2:10–13

Short-term counseling is one of the most effective ways to help people, provided we keep a few things in mind.

Assess the Situation

Determine whether the person needs short-term or long-term counseling by asking yourself the following questions. If you answer yes, the person needs long-term care:

- ◆ Is there an on-going family or personal conflict in this person's life? Is there a repeated pattern in this issue?
- ◆ Is addiction evident in this problem?
- ◆ Is there evidence of obsessive/compulsive behavior with this problem?
- ◆ Is there a long-term pattern of abnormal behavior?
- ◆ Is this an issue that requires a specialist?
- ◆ Are there multigenerational issues involved?

The Counselor's Biggest Temptation

During that first session, the counselor faces a grave temptation: to ease people's pain.

Christian counselors are generally a tenderhearted lot. Sometimes we're so anxious to get people out of their pain that we make the biggest mistake of all—missing a long-term symptom while doing short-term counseling. Don't be too eager to move people out of their pain when it would have been better to leave them there a little longer.

Never jump to the conclusion that a situation only needs some prayer and biblical reassurance. People often hide the core issues of their problems even from themselves. By letting people off the hook too quickly, we become unwitting accomplices in their denial, compulsions, and sins.

Expectations and Assignments

Once you've determined that counseling will be short-term, determine what the counselee expects to happen in your sessions.

In marital counseling, for example, ask both the husband and the wife to summarize the problem as they see it. Then ask how each would like their marriage to be different. That tells you what they expect (or at least hope) to achieve in counseling.

Set a contract with the couple for a counseling term of between four to eight sessions. At the end of that term, determine together whether to renew the contract for another four to eight weeks.

Having a definite time frame tends to focus everyone's mind on the task at hand. It also eases the counselee's anxiety: Many people are apprehensive about counseling because they fear it may go on forever, draining their time and resources without ever achieving closure. Short-term counseling should take place within limits that are agreed upon at the outset.

In short-term counseling, help counsees understand (1) why they do what they do, (2) what they would like to do differently, and (3) how to do things differently. Assignments move us more quickly to that last goal, so assign projects by the end of the first session.

Assignments help both the counselor and counselee cut to the chase and quickly expose the issue. Use three types:

- ◆ *Readings.* If the counselee needs to better understand his childhood, for instance, assign a book that describes various parenting styles and the kinds of problems those styles often engender in adult life. The counselee can read that book at home and get insight into whether he was over-indulged, over-corrected, neglected, driven toward over-perfectionism, and the like.

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♦ *Journaling.* A journal forces a person to consciously reflect on his or her choices and feelings. *Am I down on myself—or my own best encourager? Am I upbeat about the future—or a defeatist?* A journal gives us a record of moods and attitudes, almost like an emotional electrocardiogram.

♦ *Homework.* These are tasks you ask people to undertake to help them grapple with their problems. The purpose is to reverse hostility and get things moving in the right direction.

For example, I'll tell the husband he has to do something special for his wife at least once a day until our next session. He has to write it down on a list that he will bring to the next counseling session. But he's not allowed to announce to his partner, "Here's your goody for the day." The wife has to do the same.

This assignment does several things. It gets each partner focused on the needs of the other. It begins a pattern of kindness toward each other; often, kind feelings will follow kind acts, and healing will begin to take place. It also gives the couple hope. They begin to think, *Maybe we're not doomed to divorce after all. Maybe there's a chance we can work this thing out.*

♦ *Writing.* Pose a number of questions and ask the counselee to come to the next session prepared to discuss the answers to these questions. For example:

- What was the warmest room in the house, emotionally speaking, when you were growing up?
- Think of your mother. What are some key words that come to mind when you think of your mother?
- Think of your father. What are some key words that come to mind when you think of your father?
- How did your parents feel about money?
- How did your parents feel about sex?
- Who was the chief disciplinarian in your home? How did that person feel about the disciplinary role?

Closure

Closure doesn't mean happily ever after. It doesn't mean the problems are all wrapped up and tied with a bow. Closure means that insights have surfaced, choices have been clarified, and the counselee can now see the road to wholeness. Whether the counselee chooses to walk that road or not is up to the counselee, not the counselor.

When you get to the end of a course of counseling, ask the counselee:

- ♦ What has been helpful to you?
- ♦ Where have we gotten?
- ♦ How have your hopes and expectations been met? And how have we failed to meet them?
- ♦ What changes have you made in your life as a result of these counseling visits?

The final session is a time to summarize the past and look to the future. It is also a time to let the counselee know the door is open if he or she ever needs a return session. Say, "This issue may resurface in the future. If you want to come back and talk with me, you are welcome to do so."

It is also a time to point the counselee to additional resources that will keep the healing process going—books, tape series, an adult Christian education class on Sunday mornings, or support groups and organizations such as Alanon or Alateen. Pray with the counselee—a prayer that affirms the counselee's desire for continued healing and that asks for God's grace for the road ahead.

Wholeness is not a destination; it's a journey. In this life we never arrive; we're always in process. We face struggles one at a time, day by day, and only at the end of the journey can we see the progress we've made.

—JIM SMITH. Adapted from "Short-term Care," *Mastering Pastoral Counseling* (Nelson, 1993).

How to Counsel Those Who Are Remarrying

Those who are remarrying need even more premarital preparation.

John 16:33

Statistics show that those who remarry are in great need of premarital preparation. While 35 percent of first marriages end in divorce, approximately 65 percent of remarriages end that way, many of them within the first few years.

Clarify Your Position

While not all remarital preparation involves divorce, most does—which means you must come to a clear personal stance on divorce and remarriage. Early in my ministry, I made a decision not to marry anyone who had not undergone premarital counseling. My church leaders seemed supportive of this until I applied the rule to a remarital couple. Since the couple was older, the leaders felt they didn't need counseling. Find out your church leaders' understanding of divorce and remarriage. If they don't have one, study the Scriptures together. The minister and layleaders need to agree on a stance.

Assume No Maturity

I have observed many couples who married later in life. When either person has been divorced, it has almost always been a handicap to future healthy relationships. Communication, role expectations, use of leisure time, vacation plans, sexual adjustment and birth control, conflict resolution, family background, personality issues, spiritual priorities, and church participation are some of the more important areas of any marriage, and they're now among the issues I discuss with every new couple, regardless of how experienced they are.

Evaluate the First Marriage

One of the first steps in remarital counseling is to take an honest look at the first marriages. Describing those relationships is often uncomfortable for everyone, but it's necessary. It should be done with both of the engaged parties present. They need to hear each other describe openly the relationship with the former spouse, which will continue to influence the new marriage.

I ask the couple what steps they have taken to resolve the problems that led to the breakup of their first marriages. I look for a mature response. Have they accepted their share of responsibility? Have they sought forgiveness? Have they addressed the personal problems that may have contributed to the marital stress? If they have not, they aren't ready to enter a new relationship.

The goal of this process is to help each person own up to his or her responsibility for the failure of the first marriage. It also allows the partner to gain a more realistic perspective on the potential problems in the new relationship.

Handling Stepfamily Issues

When two families are blended, they rarely relate to one another like the Brady Bunch. Conflicting loyalties, resentments, and differences in habits can surface. Without the God-given and cultural taboos against sex between natural siblings to temper emotions, the rate of incest in stepfamilies is much higher than in blood-related families. I encourage the couple to discuss these and other stepfamily concerns: adoption, name changes, inheritance, rules for relationships between stepsiblings, how relationships with friends and relatives might be changed by the marriage, child discipline (who will fill what roles and how these roles will be phased in), career changes, competition for love and affection, how jealousy will be handled (it can usually be assumed there will be some), and the setting of priorities for the new family.

Include the Children

In many ways the children are getting married too, and they will be one of the most important factors in determining whether the new marriage lasts. The number-one cause of divorce in remarriages is conflict over the children. This is true even if the children are old enough to take care of themselves. Children are tied so closely to parents that if the natural parent has to choose between the new spouse and his or her children, the new spouse usually loses.

I normally devote two sessions to discussing the issues with the children present. In the first session, I ask them to tell me their understanding of what's happening and what concerns they have. If the children are hesitant to talk (as they often are), I'll ask everyone to write down the topics they think we should talk about; they don't have to sign their lists. If there are children too young to write, I ask them to draw pictures of what

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they think the new family might be like. Once I've received the children's topics, I bring up the issues one by one.

Monitor the Grief Process

After suffering a great loss, the grieving person experiences shock, denial, anger, a desire to bargain, and eventually an acceptance of what has happened. Only after this acceptance stage is reached can the grieving person begin to build a new life on solid ground. In divorce situations, there's the added element of dealing with guilt. If the wounds have not healed by the time the person remarries, chances are high there will be carryover problems in the new relationship. Normally, I don't encourage remarriage within a year of the divorce or the death of a spouse.

Emphasize Premarital Purity

Surveys show that the majority of engaged couples whose partners have already been married are sexually active. I have learned to meet this problem head on. When I find they have been sexually active, I explain my understanding of Scripture on the subject, and I encourage them to seek forgiveness from God and each other. I then tell them that I hope they will remain chaste until they're married. I know—and tell them so—that refraining from a sexual relationship won't be easy. And even when couples are willing, relapses are common. But I make no apologies about calling them to the high standards of Scripture.

Navigate the Legal Issues

Legal issues are particularly important for remarital preparation because the previous marriage often leaves lingering entanglements. Consider the following questions:

- ◆ When there are children from a previous marriage, who will have custody? Where will the children live? What will the visitation arrangements be? Will anyone besides the ex-spouse have visitation rights? Is the stepparent planning on adopting the children? If so, is this likely to be opposed in court?
- ◆ Financial questions also arise out of the legal aspects. Is either partner receiving or paying alimony or child support? How will this affect the overall financial picture? Will court action be necessary to make a modification?
- ◆ Consider inheritance issues. How should current wills be modified? Who will be designated guardians of the children should the natural parent die? Will the new marriage change the inheritance of the children? Is a trust fund needed?

Many of these legal questions are outside my expertise as a counselor, and the best help I can offer is to refer the couple to a competent attorney.

—RANDY CHRISTIAN. Adapted from “Key Questions in Remarital Counseling,” *Building Your Church Through Counsel and Care* (Bethany House, 1997).

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Congregational Care During Times of Crisis

A crisis requires unique skills in meeting people's needs.

John 16:33

Keep in mind these eight principles when your congregation is going through a crisis:

- 1. Crisis causes tremendous confusion.** Therefore, it is likely that we don't know the answers to things as they hit us, and it's a better idea to acknowledge one's ignorance or inability to have a good answer than to create an answer we may have to backtrack later.
- 2. Requests for answers are not always what they seem.** Often people ask questions, and yet an answer may not be what they need. Sometimes questions need to be seen as rhetorical—an opportunity to simply listen to people process their feelings.
- 3. Don't try to become a “super person” in the midst of crisis.** This is a “cardinal sin” in church leaders: as the supreme caregivers of the congregation, we think we have to be there for anything and everything, which isn't true.
- 4. Try to establish normality in the chaos of the aftermath.** We all get sucked into the chaos of the crisis. We may ignore our nutritional needs, our need for sleep, or other day-to-day responsibilities. In the midst of crisis, we still need to do things like empty the garbage, make dinner, play games, and attend church.
- 5. Remember that everybody responds to crises differently.** People who seem well controlled and healthy can fall apart in a crisis. People who seem fragile may respond with great strength. Everyone is unique, and we need to be forgiving if people have an outburst that seems out of character.
- 6. The vast majority of people get better over time.** That's important to remember. We all have reservoirs of health we can tap into. It is hard to adjust when we don't know what tomorrow will bring, but we eventually make necessary adjustments to a more normal life.
- 7. Crisis can bring out the weakness in people.** People who have other problems like financial hardships or troubled marriages can fall apart in a crisis. Crisis sometimes brings out the best in people, but we need to be sensitive to those who crumble or need additional help.
- 8. Beware of the disillusionment phase.** The Red Cross crisis management training looks at four phases following a crisis, with the most meaningful being the disillusionment phase. People may experience difficulty anywhere from six weeks to a year and a half after a traumatic event. By this point, most caregiving is finished. Be sensitive to those who may be going through this stage long after a crisis occurs.

—BRENT LINDQUIST, Ph.D., President/CEO Link Care Center (www.linkcare.org). Used with permission.

Regeneration, Deliverance, or Therapy?

Ultimately, calling people to respond to God's grace through regeneration has to be our primary focus.

Luke 9:25

No pastor or church counselor can become an expert in every aspect of the human condition. And yet they often have to diagnose a troubled person's problem: Does this person need to make a commitment to Christ and thereby experience the new life of regeneration? Does this person need some supernatural intervention? Or is this a case for psychotherapy or counseling?

Psychological Scars

Hardly anyone reaches adulthood without collecting a few psychological scars along the way. Even Christian homes can be severely dysfunctional and anxiety-producing. Abuse can take many forms. The worst is not physical but emotional.

Divorce is increasingly common in Christian circles, wreaking havoc on the social and emotional lives of children. Or, psychological damage can be caused by bad parenting—neglectful, overly permissive, or overly repressive. In later life these scars can interfere with a person's spiritual development and prevent a free, unhindered experience with Christ.

For example, our understanding of God is shaped by our childhood experiences with people significant to us. When a father, for instance, is abusive, demanding, cold, or unforgiving, we are likely to assume that most authority figures, even God, are that way.

Scores of people suffer from such distorted images of God. When these people are in emotional pain, these distortions will hinder their ability to appropriate God's help. A counselor will need much wisdom in correcting these distortions. Merely educating people in the attributes of God, teaching them about who God is, is only part of the counseling task.

The psychological damage needs to be healed. While God sometimes intervenes immediately to erase these scars, many times he allows people to work through these problems over time.

False guilt is another example of psychological damage that can hinder spiritual growth. Many children raised in devout Christian homes are traumatized by excessive and unrelenting guilt. Sometimes parents, yearning to raise God-fearing children, impose rigid discipline and severe punishment. This sort of guilt is referred to as neurotic or false guilt, as opposed to true or healthy guilt. We need to develop a clear sense of right or wrong, but when we feel condemned by arbitrary rules, or when the guilt we feel is in excess of what is appropriate, it becomes neurotic. Such guilt does not respond to forgiveness, whether it is offered by human beings or by God. It only knows punishment.

Schizophrenia and Demon Possession

Not every person who has a sexual addiction is under the control of a "lust demon." Lustful thoughts and behavior can be the consequence of poor self-control, inappropriate exposure to sexual activity as a child, sexual abuse, or ordinary sin. We don't need to jump immediately to exotic explanations.

In addition, it can be harmful to assume demon possession too readily. No doubt Satan appreciates the extra publicity, but even worse, the hopelessness that such a label, particularly when untrue, engenders in the victim (especially after exorcisms fail to cure the problem) can often do more harm than the original problem.

Falsely attributing emotional problems to demons has several dangers. It removes the victim from responsibility for recognizing and confessing human sinfulness. It enhances Satan's power inappropriately. But most importantly, it delays the introduction of effective treatment. Delaying treatment for a problem like schizophrenia can significantly decrease the likelihood of the sufferer's return to normalcy.

Schizophrenia is a physical disease. Because it exhibits bizarre symptoms, it is frequently labeled as demon possession. Epilepsy is another disease formerly labeled as demon possession, but now we know that both epilepsy and schizophrenia are the result of a defect in brain chemistry. Medication can bring a cure.

COUNSELING CHURCH MEMBERS

Simplicity Is the Rule

Try to understand a problem at its most obvious and fundamental level. Find the most obvious and natural explanation before moving on to explain it in more complex or less obvious ways. The following can help you determine the nature of a person's problem.

Take a careful history. Include the following:

- ◆ Details of family background
- ◆ History of dysfunctional patterns in the family
- ◆ History of mental illness in the family
- ◆ History of the presenting problem
- ◆ When it first occurred
- ◆ How often it occurs
- ◆ The changes that have taken place in recent history
- ◆ History of spiritual experience and practice
- ◆ Experience of conversion—when, where, and how?
- ◆ Patterns of spiritual development since conversion

Now try to explain the problem in the most obvious or natural terms.

Some words of caution:

- ◆ Never try to diagnose supernatural causes by yourself. Always seek corroboration from others and hold yourself accountable to corporate discernment.
- ◆ Remember that many experts believe that possession doesn't usually manifest itself in bizarre behavior. Satan is more creative than that.
- ◆ Even when you think there is a state of possession, remember that psychological or psychosomatic problems accompany and complicate possession. These may also need treatment.
- ◆ While Jesus instructed his followers to deal with demons, we find no injunction to seek them out. In other words, avoid preoccupation with these causes. Focus rather on the victory and protection we have in Christ.

Consider the need for regeneration. One of the great drawbacks of counseling or psychotherapy is that it does not deal directly with the core problem of human existence: our alienation from God.

Whatever the problem a troubled parishioner presents, the question of regeneration is always a legitimate one. Without the regeneration that God works in the core of our being, all human endeavors to improve the quality of life (mental or physical) are limited. Pastoral diagnosis must always address the question of whether or not regeneration has occurred.

Ultimately, calling people to respond to God's grace through regeneration has to be our primary focus. After all, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

—ARCHIBALD HART. Adapted from "Regeneration, Deliverance, or Therapy?" *Building Your Church Through Counsel and Care* (Bethany House, 1997).

COUNSELING CHURCH MEMBERS

Care for the Caregivers

Church leaders can be viewed either as workers to fill slots or as fellow ministers who need special care.

John 17:22–23

Ministry is too tough to go it alone. Lay leaders and staff need pastoral care as much, if not more, than men and women in the pews.

A Model for Models

Modeling is the most effective teaching method. If you want a tithing church, you have to tithe. If you want a praying church, you must pray. If you want a small-group church, you need to be in a small group.

As leaders we need to demonstrate openness, vulnerability, the ability to put people ahead of assignments, a steadfast commitment to the Lord, and a genuine relationship with him.

We should tell our leaders, “Your primary job is not to draw up budgets, spend the money, and run committees. Rather, it is to demonstrate how the family of God behaves. We need to be up-front if we’re angry (instead of carrying resentment), preferring one another in love, and quick to support one another. The people of the church are watching us closely. They see the quality of our relationships with the Lord and with one another.”

Caring for Leaders

Encourage your leaders to be real people, not super saints. Your first concern isn’t that they produce tremendous amounts of work, but that they remain genuine and spiritually healthy. For instance, one associate pastor leading worship began the prayer of confession: “Lord, I’m sorry I put my fist through the wall this week.” We could all picture that much better than vague generalities about falling short of God’s best and not doing some things we ought to have done.

This kind of pastoral relationship with leaders doesn’t come automatically; it has to be developed. Get to know each other well enough so that you can laugh and cry and weather tough times. A church is not a clinic in which a faceless and interchangeable staff services the clientele by showing up and handing out pills. It’s a living, breathing family. We may wrestle at times. We may injure one another or rescue each other. But we’re in it together.

People want and need to know others on a deep and personal level and be known by them, but they’re terrified of rejection. They’ve been rejected so many times, they’re afraid of reaching out again. They are determined to avoid anything personal. They’ll do Bible studies, take on projects, bring in speakers, and discuss Christian books—anything but talk about their lives, their failings, their needs.

Yet, however much some tend to avoid intimacy, church leaders need it. Jesus’ commandment was, after all, to “love one another as I have loved you.” Intimacy is scary, but Jesus first modeled it for church leaders when he gathered the Twelve.

Church leaders, lay and clergy, can learn to pastor each other. After all, we need one another, not just to perform ministry, but to be the body of Christ: mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers to each other.

—BRUCE LARSON. Adapted from “Caregiver Care,” *Building Your Church Through Counsel and Care* (Bethany House, 1997).

COUNSELING CHURCH MEMBERS

Further Exploration

Resources for counseling.

The Biblical Basis of Christian Counseling for People Helpers: Relating the Basic Teachings of Scripture to People’s Problems, by Gary R. Collins. This will guide the reader to a practical, working knowledge of Scripture and the basics of the Christian faith—the core of what Christian counselors must know to be truly effective in helping others (Navpress, 1993; ISBN 1576830810).

Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide, by Gary R. Collins. This volume builds on biblical foundations and reflects the author’s practical experiences (Nelson Reference, 1988; ISBN 084993124X).

Christians and Sex: Sexual Issues in the Church. Use this downloadable research report to understand and compare the sexual and marital issues affecting today’s pastors and church laity (BuildingChurchLeaders.com; <http://store.yahoo.com/buildingchurchleaders/chandsex.html>).

“Confidentiality” Training Theme. Use this theme to help deal with delicate information, such as confessed sins from the congregation, counseling sessions, sensitive documents, and financial records (BuildingChurchLeaders.com; click on Training Themes).

Inside Out, by Larry Crabb. This book will help you discover how God works real, liberating change when you live from the inside out (Navpress, 1998; ISBN 1576830829).

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

“Marriage Builders” Spiritual Enrichment Pack. Pass these articles out to couples in your church during counseling sessions, as part of a wedding gift package, or during marriage conferences or retreats (BuildingChurchLeaders.com; <http://store.yahoo.com/buildingchurchleaders/mabu.html>).

Quick Scripture Reference for Counseling, by John G. Kruis. Scripture quotations are from the popular NIV. Scripture passages on each of the practical topics are thoughtfully arranged in a numbered list so users can see their significance at a glance (Baker Books, 2000; ISBN 0801091020).

“Shepherding Others” Training Theme: Articles in this theme include devotionals on how the Bible instructs us to care for others, an assessment of your counseling style, and how to set up shepherding groups in your church (BuildingChurchLeaders.com; click on Training Themes).

A Theology of Christian Counseling, by Jay Adams. This book connects biblical doctrine with practical living. The reader gains insight into the rich theological framework that supports and directs a biblical approach to counseling (Zondervan, 1986; ISBN 0310511011).

“Weddings” Practical Ministry Skills. This theme offers practical handouts to help make weddings at your church joyful and stress-free. Engaged couples and wedding coordinators can use these handouts to plan the ceremony and rehearsal. Pastors and church leaders can learn how to counsel engaged couples and prepare children and youth for lasting marriages (BuildingChurchLeaders.com; click on Practical Ministry Skills).