

DRAWING WATER THE MINISTER WHO COUNSELS

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There is always present the lurking danger to use proof texts for one's own purposes. Counselors are no exception to this temptation! In introducing myself professionally to groups, I frequently use two verses from Proverbs that confirm, with some depth and satisfaction for me, both my call and my task as a counselor. For all of us who counsel, these verses seem to be a worthy justification and confirmation. The Biblical author, to a general audience, but more specifically to those who counsel, writes:

"The purpose in a man's mind is like deep water
but a man of understanding will draw it out."

Proverbs 20:5

"Where there is no guidance a people falls;
but in an abundance of counselors there is safety."

Proverbs 11:14

Moffatt translates the first verse:

"A man's mind may be deep as water in a well,
but a clever man will draw it from him."

Every minister is a counselor. That is an established, agreed upon fact. That truth could be expanded to include every person, but our purpose is more defined. What is our task as ministers as it relates to the role of counselor? This question can be addressed by perceiving of the task as a triangle. Each of the sides are equal and valid.



I. The Counselor.

There is no higher calling than to be with someone who is hurting in their pain, struggling with their options, confused in their thinking, estranged in their relationships, or limited by their past. There are pregnant moments or times in person's lives when ministers are called to be caringly present. One of the translations describing God's coming to us in Jesus Christ states, "And God became flesh and pitched his tent among us." As ministers, one of the occasions when we "pitch our tent" is when we counsel. We seek to enflesh the presence of God in a "tabernacle" way with one who needs from us a perspective that includes a spiritual, eternal dimension.

As ministers who counsel, what are the qualities that are needed in a counselor and what are some accepted, respected limitations? There are three qualities that studies confirm to be important for all counselors.

1. *Empathy* — Empathy is the ability to get inside another person's frame of reference. It requests that one "feel" into, and participate with another person while remaining oneself.

2. *Acceptance* — Acceptance is a conscious effort to relate to persons where they are, rather than where we wish or want them to be.

3. *Congruence* — Congruence is a desire and a willingness to be transparently real. It is the practice of making our external expressions, words and body language, consistent with our internal feelings.

These same studies give strong evidence that the qualities and personality of the counselor are more important than the techniques of the counselor.

As ministers who counsel, it is critical that we know and live with our limitations. We have some obvious and some not so obvious limitations.

Some of the obvious ones are:

1. Counseling is only one aspect of ministry and ministers need to limit one aspect in order to be free and present to do the others. A good, sensitive, caring counselor will tend to have more counselees than he has time.

2. The limitation of time needs to be honored. Too little time for other important tasks will pressure the minister to either rush the counseling process or to directly or indirectly pronounce cures and solutions that are premature. The push for time can change an invitation to enter into a counseling relationship into a rejection under the guise of completion or termination.

3. Medication is an effective and needed resource for some stressful situations. A minister's inability to prescribe or give medication places those needs and frequently those persons, outside our care, and into the care of those who can prescribe and supervise medication. This does not negate our being a part of the caring team. The counselee may be referred to the physician for full care, or the physician could assume medical responsibility and the minister keep the counseling task; or the physician could become primary care giver and the minister be in a secondary, supportive role.

4. A general rule of counseling for ministers is that they stay away from long term therapy. Crisis, growth, and short term counseling are types of counseling that are consistent with and appropriate for ministers and their training. Ministers without in depth training had best approach counseling as a generalist who appropriately refers to specialists. Just as a doctor in general practice would not perform heart or brain surgery, ministers who counsel would wisely choose not to do long term therapy. There are both training and time issues

here.

Ministers, more particularly student ministers, are expected to counsel and want to approach counseling as a task that is indigenous to the call. Minister counselors often possess innately the essential qualities. They need to know and to accept willfully and wisely their limitations. Then, they need to approach the counseling task as one that calls forth from the minister a commitment to growth; to learn how to do that task more efficiently and effectively. There are some specific ways to do that.

1. A basic unit or several units of clinical pastoral education that is highly accessible to all ministers would be valid. The basic units of Clinical Pastoral Education are strong in focusing on the health of the minister so that the instrument of one's ministry, oneself, is more available and free. The approach is one that is scripturally akin to Jesus' words that "It is truth that sets one free."

2. An increased awareness of short term clinics and seminars on various aspects of counseling are growth stimulating and producing.

It is critical that ones continuing education be balanced. An educational experience each year in the counseling area would establish this ministry task as valid and substantial.

3. A support growth group of fellow ministers could have as one of its designated assignments, case histories that honor confidentiality, but serve to teach by using real life experiences. Such a group is valid for several reasons, but two primarily: one, to learn from each other better how to do it; secondly, it has good checks and balances on one's own "hiddenness." It is predictable that a counselor's own agendas often become operative in the counseling process. Group feedback is helpful to keep the counselor both aware of those agendas and from transferring his agendas to the counselee through the counseling process.

4. A more available, private resource is a good book written preferably by a practicing clinician. It is good to have a reading plan in this area. A suggested one would be to choose at

least one book each year in the following areas:

a. The counselor and individual counseling (On Becoming A Counselor by Eugene Kennedy, Peoplemaking by Virginia Satir.)

b. Family and marriage counseling, (The Family Life Cycle, Monica McGoldrich, Traits of a Healthy Family, Delores Curran)

c. Specific counseling areas (Christian Care Books, Wayne Oates, Editor; Anxiety and its Treatment, John Greist)

Counseling is more of an art than it is a science. Our proficiency in doing counseling is directly related to our commitment to approach it as a journey with some stopping places, but with no final designation.

II. The Counselee

A counselee is defined as a person whose need for help is perceived to be beyond one's own resources. Thus, there is the need to turn to another for help. What are the appropriate and inappropriate expectations that come with that decision to seek help?

First, there is the expectation that confidentiality is a given. A counseling ministry is built on confidentiality. A counseling ministry is maintained by quality service and care. Confidentiality is more than secrecy. The fact that a person comes to and leaves your office culls out secrecy. Confidentiality is the assurance that what is shared between counselor/counselee is private, personal material that will be treated with both respect and confidence. Trust is the basic essential in any relationship. Trust is especially essential in counseling.

Confidentiality does not bind a counselor in every situation. A counselor, for example, should not assume responsibility for a counselee's suicide thinking or plans. There are other situations such as child abuse, AIDS, personal danger to another, in which the same call to care for others is as binding as the one the counselor assumes with the counselee. It is important in the initial session to discuss openly and fully what responsibility a counselor does assume in the counselor/counselee relationship.

The counselee has to trust that the counselor will be both appropriate and responsible with information that is life threatening to either the counselee or to some one else. Confidentiality is a given that allows both the counselor and the counselee to be free to pursue a process that brings healing and health. It is not to be a shackle that binds either from pursuing the good that is common to both.

Secondly, there is the expectation of the counselee that he/she will get help. The help one receives is often closely related to the amount of discomfort and pain one feels. Counseling is still primarily a profession of intervention, not prevention. Physical and emotional health are more visibly identified with intervention and prevention, but both are still primarily responsive to intervention. Thus pain is a motivator for seeking help.

Pain, too, increases the counselee's expectation for relief. As counselors, we are to take seriously pain and address it with the realistic intention of decreasing its presence. Counselees frequently come with enough pain to expect quick results, and it is to that need that we counselors are most often tempted to over-promise. It is often difficult to walk the tight rope between promised relief and promised cure. We are better counselors when we identify with the counselee's pain with promised relief, not cure. This allows us to rest the pain on the most dependable resource we have to offer: the counseling process. I have found that persons are not generally helped by some word a counselor says or because of insight the counselor helps to birth. They don't even remember! They are often helped by the counseling process!

The counseling process is the counselor's best friend, not only because it is a dependable resource. It saves counselors from the need to be messiahs and rescuers.

Thirdly, for ministers who do counseling, there is both the pastoral freedom and responsibility to follow up after the formal counseling is terminated. As a counselor who counsels both church members and non-church members, I find myself following up on church members more frequently than I do with

non-church members. I'm closing the gap between the two groups because those who are not members of our church respond positively to a follow up call, letter, or appointment. Just recently, I got a phone call from a couple with whom I had counseled, who are members of another church. They took the time to call and let me know that their marriage was going well. The positive stroke I received from their phone call is there for me to give to those persons with whom I have terminated counseling. With premarital couples, I make a maintenance checkup a part of the counseling contract. A significant relationship has the power to keep blessing, when it employs appropriate follow up.

III. The Counseling Process

The counselor has the training and the skills. The counselee has the pain. It is in the meeting of the two, in what is called the counseling process, that healing occurs. In counseling it is the process that counselors can trust to both promise and deliver healing. When I first began counseling, I thought that I was the source and cause of healing. Under supervision, I learned that it was not the counselor, but the process that helped to orchestrate and empower healing. As I learned this, I recall the tremendous amount of pressure that was lifted off me. I could make mistakes, be more honest, be more creative and spontaneous because the process was more dependable and more mutually dependent on the counselor and the counselee. It also freed me from being "under the gun;" to have the right word, to make the right move, to be solely responsible for what took place. I learned that I assumed that pressure in exchange for control. I could make it happen, I thought. It felt good to have the power and to exert the control. My supervisors led me through my own process in which I learned that to lose power was to gain power. In counseling, the power is rightly located and vested in the counseling process; not the counselor; not the counselee.

The counseling process is no one thing. It is so many things. It is time. It is trust. It is insight. It is limits. It is personalities. It is values and beliefs. It is cutting loose and catching hold.

Because it is a process, it is more real, more believable, more therapeutic. . . .more powerful to provide the options that allow one to choose what he/she wants to do with his/her life. A good process does not produce one option. It seeks to make clear what all the options are so that one can choose the door out of which one walks into a better life. As counselors, we are invited to be a "divine presence" in that critical and life giving process.