

THE CAMPUS MINISTER AS COUNSELOR: THE ART OF LISTENING

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It is inevitable that campus ministers will find themselves in the role of counselor. College students are in a state of transition, a time when they must make decisions about values, relationships and careers. As they make these decisions, they will seek out persons who express concern and caring--and campus ministers are likely to fit that criteria.

The way the campus minister handles counseling situations is extremely important. First of all, the wrong approach can damage the student/director relationship permanently. Second, a seriously emotionally disturbed student with a bad attitude can seriously affect the overall spirit of the organization and have long term negative effects on the program.

The good campus minister is a wise counselor who knows when to listen, when to respond, and when to refer.

In our opinion, the best thing a campus minister can do is listen. That sounds easy, but it is extremely difficult, particularly for a student director who has a myriad of things to plan, direct, and do.

Listening takes time. It also consumes an enormous amount of energy. The good listener participates in the speaker's pain, and that can be draining, both emotionally and physically.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of listening is learning not to talk--not to give advice. Students can very often solve their own problems if they feel they are really being heard. If students are allowed to talk without interruption, they may get in touch with feelings and insights that they were not aware of.

They may be surprised at (and a little frightened of) the conflicting feelings of love and hate, selfishness and generosity,

trust and suspicion they can feel simultaneously.

The good listener, by his accepting attitude, can provide a safe environment for the student to explore these feelings. The listener need not approve or disapprove of the feelings — just accept them without judgment.

Allowing students to talk through their agenda is the most valuable gift a minister can give. Talking through their feelings can provide students a more organized inventory of their inner worlds. They may even become aware that they have the resources for solving their own problems. Listening communicates a kind of unconditional acceptance to students that often encourages them to look within themselves at a deeper level than they have had the courage to explore. The student who feels accepted may be able to discuss for the first time feelings about growing up in a dysfunctional family, a mistake made as an adolescent, fears about sexual identity, or concerns about career goals.

This kind of listening says louder than words can say: "You are significant; you matter; you have worth." Listening says, "I'm bringing to this encounter with you the best that I have — I'm bringing myself. I'm retiring all my clichés, my band-aids, my easy answers; and I want to hear you in your world. I want to understand you."

We remember one student who, when someone listened to him, responded with, "Thank God, somebody finally understands how it feels to be me."

Good listening involves "hearing" a student's body language, facial expression and tone of voice — as well as the spoken words. For example, a student may understate fear and anxiety with words, but the body language may be screaming a different message.

The listener's body language is also important in the hearing process. Facial expression, posture, and gestures should say to students that the minister is totally present to them. If we convey to students through our body language that we are rushed, or our minds are on other matters, we discourage them from communicating all the things that

concern them.

If the encounter is taking place in an office, the director who really intends to listen will close the door and have someone hold the phone calls during the counseling session.

Responding can be an important part of the listening process. A good initial response, particularly to students who are depressed or experiencing a great deal of anxiety, is to paraphrase what has been said. After students have talked through their feelings, the listener may say, "What I have heard is. . ." After paraphrasing, the listener may ask, "Is that what you said?" This kind of response can be significant in clarifying the concerns of students and in establishing a bond between the student and the listener. This bonding often encourages students to share more of themselves. Paraphrasing signifies to students that they have been heard and taken seriously.

Another appropriate response is to ask students what options they have already considered regarding possible courses of action. Students often have well-conceived ideas, but they need affirmation and permission to act upon those ideas. The counselor who asks for a student's opinion is showing respect for that student's feelings and ideas and affirming his or her worth as a person.

The counselor may use open-ended statements to encourage students to face themselves. Some examples are: "You seem worried about your meeting with Joe tomorrow. You seem discouraged about your major. " Especially after students have talked out their initial concerns, open-ended statements can help them to explore more of their thoughts and feelings.

There are times when it is helpful for the campus minister to make suggestions for students to consider regarding possible courses of action. However, this is appropriate only after the student has been listened to thoroughly and had the opportunity to articulate his or her own suggestions.

Knowing when to refer a student is a very important function of the campus minister. Not only are there times when it is in the best interest of the student to be referred to a professional counselor, it may also be necessary in order for the

campus minister to continue to be effective. If a campus minister gets involved with a few students in long-term counseling, it will limit his effectiveness in the multitude of other tasks that must be done.

Examples of problems and concerns we believe fall within the role of the campus minister include: homesickness, a broken romance, failing a test, doing poorly in a course, coping with doubts about religious beliefs.

Some problems we believe indicate a need for referral to a professional counselor include: inability to develop relationships, failing everything, abusing alcohol or drugs, sexual promiscuity, serious concerns about sexual identity, depression that persists for more than a few days.

After referrals are made, it is important to follow up with the student periodically to express interest in how the counseling is going and to encourage the student to continue until the concern is completely addressed. However, it is important not to allow the student to play the director off against the counselor. The professional cannot be effective if the director discusses the process with the student, and there is disagreement between the minister and counselor.

Since most of our readers are ministers, it seems appropriate to give some attention to the subject of spiritual counseling. To some degree, the expression is redundant, since we believe that all good counseling speaks to the issue of wholeness. We also believe that most, if not all, problems are problems of relationships — and relationships, whether with other people or with God, are "spiritual" in nature.

It is the task of the campus minister to help students grow in faith — to expand their concept of God. Most students come with more "knowledge" about the wrath and judgment of God than of His love and grace.

Advising distraught students to "pray about it" is somewhat like telling them, "Don't worry; be happy." However, guiding students to a disciplined prayer life with the understanding that prayer is more likely to change the person than to change outside circumstances may be the most important direction any

counselor can give.

The degree to which campus ministers participate in the counseling role will vary from one person to another. But every campus minister can learn to be an effective listener, and every one can be responsive to the students' needs for professional help. Theology 101 as an academic subject will probably not do much to strengthen a student's faith. A personal relationship with another human being who expresses unconditional acceptance and non-judgmental love will be much more effective in helping a student recognize his worth and internalize God's grace.