

Today to produce something better, all to the good. The point I wish to make is that ministers striving for excellence in ministry need to put their minds to the mundane task of producing a job-description. Only so can they truly enjoy the benefits of appraisal.

THE POWER & THE GLORY

By Paul Goodliff

Reflections on the Conflicts of Interest Between Local Churches and Church-based Counselling Centres

One of the fastest growing developments in local church ministry in the last 20 years is the proliferation of counselling centres and ministries in Britain, mirroring the explosion of counselling in the secular world. From the early days of the London based Westminster Pastoral Foundation (WPF) the Church Army Counselling Service, the Clinical Theology Association (CTA), and Care and Counsel, has emerged a nationwide (though patchy) counselling movement. Many Pastors have seen in this ministry an answer to their pastoral overload, either in becoming counsellors themselves, and aspiring to helping wounded people more effectively, or in establishing a counselling ministry in their church staffed by members of their congregation, trained or otherwise. There may also be a loss of nerve on the part of some pastors who trade the birth right of pastoral ministry for the pottage of humanistic counselling in the hope of more effective helping skills.

Ken Leech a decade ago rightly saw in the search for counselling skills among some clergy a symptom of their own profound loss of direction and purpose in our secular age: "So we have seen the retreat of many clergy into the 'caring professions' where they can at least feel needed and useful, earn their keep for a job well done, and retain something of their priestly role on Sundays and after office hours So the pastor becomes concerned primarily with the non-copers, with the broken and the casualty, with 'crisis

intervention' and problem solving."¹² In a similar critique Eugene Peterson, the North American pastoral theologian, writes that American pastors are: "abandoning their posts ...at an alarming rate. They are not leaving their churches and getting other jobs. Congregations still pay their salaries. Their names remain on the church stationery and they continue to appear in pulpits on Sundays. But they are abandoning their posts, their calling. They have gone whoring after other gods. What they do with their time under the guise of pastoral ministry hasn't the remotest connection with what the church's pastors have done for most of twenty centuries".¹³ In the second issue of this journal Morgan Derham opened up some of the issues concerning a counselling ministry in the local church, contrasting the secular philosophy, goals and processes of modern counselling with the kind of counselling practised by Richard Baxter in Kidderminster, perhaps best described as spiritual formation and direction.¹⁴

In this paper I want to build on some of Derham's issues and see how we might avoid some of the more destructive effects of the conflicts that arise when a counselling ministry or counselling centre is incorporated into the local church. I write from some experience of the tensions that can be present between church expectations and the role of counselling. Currently I am the minister of a Baptist church which does not operate an organised 'counselling ministry'; I am a counsellor and a tutor in counselling, and a part-time hospital chaplain (where confidentiality is a legal requirement of my contract of employment) but I have also been a supervisor and overseer of a church/community-based counselling centre linked to the church where I began ministry and from which I moved two years ago. I had to work hard then to know what my role was at times and am aware of the views from both sides of the debate, having variously espoused them both at times!

1. Understanding

Some critics regard counselling as a Trojan Horse for the secular humanism that has so ravaged the church in our day. 'Let counselling into your church and before you know it there will be all manner of godless philosophies and attitudes in the

¹² Kenneth Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*, Sheldon Press, London, 1986.

¹³ Eugene Peterson, *Working with Angles*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1987.

¹⁴ 'Pastoral Counselling', *Ministry Today* 2, Autumn 1994 (14-19)

congregation,' they say (as if there are not enough anyway!). Paul Vitz has exposed the way in which self is deified in the philosophy underlying many counselling theories.¹⁵ In this view counselling is about encouraging 'self- actualisation' or the elevation of self, whereas the Christian message is deeply suspicious of the self in all its radical ambiguity (capable of wickedness and sanctity), seeing in the self people's attempts to live independently of God. It is selfishness that is at the root of so much destruction of relationships and so the Christian is called to love God and to dethrone self from its place of pre-eminence in order to allow Jesus Christ to be Lord. Clearly a pastor holding such negative views of counselling is unlikely to initiate a counselling ministry along such lines, but he or she may arrive in a church only dimly aware of the existence of such a ministry and find a profound conflict between the values of that ministry and those of their own pastoral care of the flock. Certainly we dare not baptise uncritically the beliefs of, for instance, Rogerian therapy into our pastoral practice. However, we may find some of its insights and skills appropriate and commensurate with our Christian belief, and many pastors have found their pastoral skills enormously enriched through acquiring listening and counselling skills from a variety of sources, such as CTA, WPF, St John's College, Nottingham, Relate or CRUSE.

Others come to regard counselling with almost idolatrous reverence. Nothing must contradict the value system and therapeutic processes of whatever counselling guru they follow, regardless of the established teachings of the church. Counselling all too easily becomes a pseudo religion, and in common with all religious attempts to reach God on human terms, it stands under the radical judgement of the God who speaks his final Word in Christ (here Barth would no doubt include 'counselling' in his category of religious systems condemned by God). The minister will want to remind himself of the role he/she is called to fulfil as guardian of the flock of God under his/her care and act with understanding and sensitivity to integrate the Christian message with whatever of the secular philosophy can be redeemed, rejecting that which is not merely inappropriate, but also untrue. Rather than either dismissing secular counselling altogether, or accepting it uncritically, the pastor has a responsibility to attempt some

¹⁵ Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion. The Cult of Self Worship*, Lion, Tring 1979.

integration of a Christian world view and value system with skills and value system with the skills and processes that secular counselling has developed and shown to be of assistance in the processes whereby men and women grow in their humanity and emotional health. It is no surprise that the three values that research has shown are indispensable to the effectiveness of the counselling process: (i) genuineness, (ii) non-possessive warmth and (iii) *accurate empathy*, (are themselves heavily freighted with theological concepts. ¹⁶For 'genuineness' we approach truthfulness and openness; for 'non-possessive warmth', read agape love and with 'accurate empathy' we are aware of continuity with the category of incarnation (but also of the very real discontinuity between those two categories). In this counselling relationship client and therapist together discover a wholeness that is greater than that of either individual, in a way reflecting something of the image of the God of Trinity, the God who is Persons - in relationship, intrinsic to our createdness. That 'wholeness' is best summed up in the quality of love. The person of the Father has no separate being apart from the Son and the

Spirit who is the bond of love. From that eternal relationship God has stepped out of Himself into the created order in the person of Jesus Christ in a way that is genuine and true; full of grace that seeks not to rob us of our individuality, but to perfect it; and in such a way that God has become incarnate, taking frail human flesh.

Being aware of the differing perspectives of counsellor and evangelist is also vital, as Derham makes clear. Counselling is not 'an evangelistic programme designed to make converts'. This proves problematic when there are tight constraints on finances (and when in church life are there not tight budgets?!). The temptation is to put money where 'results' will be most likely, with 'results' meaning the thorough conversion of people, especially their wallets. If rents on premises and salaries are required then counselling can become too expensive for all but the wealthiest churches and such ministries become vulnerable to the vagaries of budgeting decisions by PCCs or diaconates. On the whole church leaders are only vaguely aware of the nature of counselling and

¹⁶ Charles B Truax & Roben R Carkhuff, *Towards Effective Counselling and Psychotherapy: training and practice*, (Aldine 1967,) quoted in Roger Hurding, *Roots and Shoots*, (London 1985),

have expectations of church growth that are unrealistic. Perhaps the best context in which to place counselling is in the area of social responsibility as an arm of the church's care in its community. Here the ministry can be offered for its and Christ's sake, rather than the membership's sake. It comes to express Archbishop Temple 's dictum that the church exists for the benefit of its non-members.

2. Boundaries

(i) Confidentiality.

Ministers often have a proprietorial interest in 'their' members; they will speak of 'my congregation' or 'my leaders'. That sense of ownership may well derive from the strong commitment that they feel toward their congregation and a passionate belief in their responsibility before God for the welfare of those in their charge, a sense of having to give an account (Hebs 13:17). Or it may have its roots in an unconscious desire for power and control over others that is symptomatic of a neurotic craving for significance and control. They may want to know what transpires in the counselling exchange between 'their' member and the counsellor. Derham makes clear that 'Not even the pastor has the right to know what goes on in the counselling relationship.'

Counsellors almost universally operate with a strong ethic of confidentiality and will not disclose information on their clients to anyone other than their counselling supervisor, although the matter is more complex with the subject of sexual abuse. This can lead to a disempowering of the minister that can be disconcerting to him or her and lead to a conflict with the counsellor unless these boundaries are well understood and accepted.

(ii) The Minister as Counsellor.

Derham is emphatic that counselling should not be done by the minister. In an ideal world I would agree with his view, not least because of the enormous potential for role confusion; but many pastors find themselves in my current situation with no trained counsellors in their congregations, although there are some in the early stages of training. Here the pastor either ignores those situations where counselling is appropriate, or he/she rolls up his/her sleeves and embraces the task. The pastor following the latter course needs above all else a wise supervisor to help avoid the extremes of role confusion between spiritual guide and non-

directive counsellor and an awareness of the transference issues that may be present. In these circumstances clear, established boundaries between minister/counsellor and client/ member are vital. A colleague of mine who was counselling his church's youth leader maintained boundaries by ensuring that for the duration of the counselling one of the elders (instead of himself) provided the link between the youth leader and the church leadership. The issue of the duration of the counselling relationship is also problematic in this context. Generally, the longer the duration the more inappropriate it is that the minister is the counsellor, but very often at the outset of a counselling relationship the anticipated duration is unknown. Short-term (6-12) sessions can work satisfactorily, but longer relationships are better conducted by another counsellor. One possibility is the establishing of a reciprocal relationship with another minister/counsellor to see members from one another's churches, thus avoiding the conflict of roles.

3. Integration

Many counsellors in local churches feel alienated and marginalised. Perhaps the greatest gift a pastor can give to counsellors in his or her church is the same gift that they give regularly to their clients: unconditional acceptance. I still belong, though loosely now I have moved, to a group of Christian counsellors who felt themselves so marginalised and judged in their local churches that they call themselves the 'heretics'! It has often been remarked that the longer one works with the hurting and wounded people who come for counselling and walk with them empathetically through their pain the looser is one's grip on some of the more rigid dictums of evangelical doctrine of persons. I am not talking about the Christological or soteriological areas of the faith so much as the anthropology and psychology of persons. The more I walk this journey the less inclined I am to speak of the depravity of my clients and the more I feel the glory of their wounded humanity. Yes, I have read Romans, but I want to celebrate the image of God in every client, and not simply to isolate the fact of its brokenness and marring by sin. Through counselling some have come to accept their glory, and not only their fallenness; God's grace and not only his condemnation of their sin. Many Christian counsellors wrestle at the boundaries of faith and experience and find their uncertainties condemned by

others in their local church as loss of faith and sinful doubt. Blessed are they if they find acceptance and security from their minister, for then they will remain open to God and vulnerable to the Spirit as they encounter Him in others.

If acceptance of the counsellors is an invaluable part of the minister's role in the process of integrating a counselling ministry in the local church, then conversely, the counsellors must be patient with the rest of the congregation and avoid at all costs a sense of superiority. St Paul's admonition to pastoral counsellors too!

Brian Thorne, a Christian person-centred therapist, writes: "With those who are more damaged, however, the experience is often one of frustration, stuckness and even of powerlessness. It is in such relationships that it becomes so blindingly obvious that I am not a powerful magician who can work miracles by offering acceptance, genuineness and empathy. I am learning increasingly to accept my stuckness and powerlessness so that I can get somewhere near the humility that is necessary if I am to become a channel for a power greater than my own. If I can let go of anxiety and simply relax, I experience what I can only describe as a new resource which becomes available to my client and to me ... to those familiar with the disciplines of prayer and worship, it will not be difficult to see the process as akin to that of resting in the presence of God."

¹⁷Perhaps this experience is not so different from that of pastors everywhere as they wrestle with intractable pastoral problems. Some integration and acceptance of pastors and counsellors can be encouraged from shared faith, experience and understanding of their respective roles. At the same time, a blurring of the roles rather than genuine integration brings only confusion. Peterson argues that it is high time pastors rediscovered the discipline of spiritual direction as the heart of our calling (together with prayer and the reading of scripture). 'Being a spiritual director, which used to loom large at the centre of every pastor's work, in our times has been pushed to the periphery of ministry.' Perhaps if we valued, trained and supported pastoral counsellors in the local

¹⁷ 'The Blessing and the Curse of Empathy' in *Person Centred Counselling, Therapeutic and Spiritual Dimension*, Whurr Publishers, London 1991

church, pastors might be set free to fulfil our essential role in the church as prayerful companions along the pilgrim 's way of faith.

One way of listening to one another as counsellors and ministers might be to form a study/reflection group so that counsellors can become more aware of the theological dimension of their work, and ministers more aware of the basic issues in counselling that would inform their own pastoral ministry as well as help them to understand better the perspectives of their counsellors. A recent attempt to build just such a framework is Francis Bridger & David Atkinson's *Counselling in Context: Developing a theological framework* (Harper Collins, London 1994), but older texts such as those of Michael Jacobs, *Swift to Hear, Facilitating skills in listening & responding* (SPCK, London 1985) and *Psychodynamic Counselling in Action*(Sage, London 1988) or Roger Hurding's *Roots & Shoots* and its secular counterpart by Windy Dryden, *Individual Therapy: a handbook* (Open University Press, Milton Keynes 1990), would also prove useful to ministers in particular. Similarly, counsellors wishing to understand better the pastoral calling of their ministers would benefit from reading Eugene Peterson's trilogy: *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Eerdmans 1980; *Working with Angles, The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Eerdmans 1987); *Under the Unpredictable Plant: an Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Eerdmans 1989). As always in church life, careful listening to one another on the basis of mutual trust and openness pays a healthy dividend in growth towards that effectiveness in ministry and mission that is the goal for so many, and helps to avoid the ruinous conflicts that rob the church of its integrity.

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