

# SETTING LIMITS IN MARRIAGE COUNSELLING FOR PASTORS.

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## Introduction

This article arises out of a twenty year journey of attempting to relate counselling skills and theory to the context of the local church. It addresses the practical issue of the extent to which a local minister should be involved in the marriage and family counselling of his own church people.

'Counselling' has become a stock in trade term for the local pastor, but the word is almost devoid of content. In practice, it may mean anything from a short evangelical monologue given to a parishioner in distress to attempts at long term therapeutic encounter with no explicit theological component other than the belief that a good pastor must be psychologically proficient. One of the tragic results of the churches' journey into counselling has been the apparent separation of theology and therapy. This separation has led many pastors to a choice of two unsatisfactory options. Firstly, a practical pastoral care informed by the social sciences only. Secondly, a choice made by many evangelicals, a pastoral care which pointedly avoids making use of the social sciences.

## A Brief Personal History

The journey began for me in the mid 1960s when I became pastor of a small church in a western Sydney housing commission area. My commitment to religious conversion was the total answer to all the human predicament. You can imagine the shock horror of my 'young man's realisation' that for many people, conversion was only the beginning of a positive but painful journey towards a new and fulfilling life style. It was here I realised that something more was needed if I was to be totally faithful to my pastoral task. Counselling in the form offered by Carl Rogers seemed to be the answer at that time. I entered counsellor training and practice with the same degree of evangelical zeal, to find that by the early 1970s my proficiency in counselling was drawing me many clients, and my work as a local church pastor was no longer being done. The move to a full time counselling role in a church mission centre was the obvious answer.

In the early years at the Mt. Druitt Baptist Centre it was found that while many people responded well to the counselling help, which by this time included a lot more than client centred therapy, rarely did they enter into the life of the church. Many made a religious commitment, usually as something that happened alongside of counselling rather than in it, and then chose to join churches of other denominations and districts. It seemed clear that after the healing of an intense counselling experience, people wanted to move to new environments for worship and not be reminded of the pain of the past.

After three years in Mt. Druitt I moved out of the life of the local church while continuing a week day counselling service. Almost immediately clients and ex-clients began moving in to the church's life. In fact the church grew fastest at the time when a clear separation was maintained between pastoral care and counselling with the counsellor taking no part in the life of the local church. It now seemed obvious, that while counselling builds persons and marriages, it certainly need not build churches. It may in fact help them shrink.

The question: 'what is it about Christian care expressed in the form of intensive counselling that mitigated against involvement in the life of the local church?' needed to be answered.

In battling with this question I was also facing an inner battle from my own tradition, a pull between the thought of becoming a secular therapist and the call of a religious vocation. While I could experience the spiritual nature of my therapeutic work, I found it quite difficult to translate this into evangelical language.

The emergence in 1977 of the Baptist counselling service added to the pressure to define the counselling role in relation to the local church. A book entitled **Depth Perspectives in Pastoral Work** by Thomas Klink had a decisive impact in helping separation between the concepts of care and counselling that are appropriate for church building pastoral work and the concept of a clinical pastoral counselling role that must be separate from the life of the local congregation.

The continued work of the counselling service has shown the validity of making a clear distinction in levels of counselling done in a church setting. When applied to marital counselling the case is even stronger to separate pastoral care from counselling. Therefore I would strongly suggest that the local minister of religion should not be involved in long term or intensive marriage counselling of couples that already comprise, or it is hoped will join, his congregation. This is not to deny to the minister a vital role in the support and maintenance of marital and family life. It is to suggest though, that the minister who takes up the marital counsellor role may do so at the expense of his more important functions in the total church scene.

### **Why Pastors should not be Marriage Counsellors**

In the December 1980 **Journal of Pastoral Care**, Richard Krebs presented an article, "Why Pastors should not be Counsellors". Krebs, a clinical psychologist, found that his entry into the pastorate spelt an end to his role as counsellor. "I am convinced", he wrote, "that when I try to do counselling as a pastor, I am certain to fail". He offers four basic reasons for the failure of the pastoral role in long term counselling.

These are:

1. The promise of cheap growth that often seems to be the hope of the parishioner who is looking to the clergy for a painless magic cure. These people who are not willing to pay the price of change, resist all attempts positive change, and may reject the pastor as well.
2. The danger of transference relationships getting out of hand in the total pastoral relationship. In my experience the pastor, by nature of his role, is already the focus of a range of projections from his people without adding the intensity of positive or negative transference from an attempted therapy relationship.
3. Role confusion is increased the higher counselling profile a pastor attempts to take.
4. The danger for the pastor that counselling will become an absorbing misplaced priority to the detriment of his other roles.

Krebs' statement applies well to pastoral attempts at a therapeutic relationship with individuals, but there are greater dimensions of potential problems when attempting similar work at a marital or family level.

In the role of minister of religion, a representative of God and His people, the church, the minister has a vital function in the support, pastoral care and education of the family. He has a significant role in leading the family in worship and in the expression of its faith. When crisis and loss come to a family, the minister provides structure for the family's grief and assists its members in finding a meaningful way to cope. But in cases where marital dysfunction needs intensive counselling, the minister plays the role of counsellor at some risk.

Marital counselling, unlike individual counselling, involved intervention into a pattern of relationships that can have implications way beyond the marriage of the clients. Marital counsellors are not only faced with the turmoil and dysfunction of the couple but are also influencing the lives of the children of the marriage, wider family and friendship relationships. A change, even a positive change, in a marital relationship will cause a need for restructuring of family and friendships. Even when considered positive by the couple, this could be viewed as quite negative by others. One of the most difficult tasks of the marriage counsellor is to

maintain neutrality and avoid becoming caught up in the family system in a way that neutralises the therapeutic effects.

Because of the many and varied facts of the pastoral role it is impossible for the pastor not to be caught up in the family system. The close involvement with the family that is the essence and value of good pastoral care, gets in the way of the creative change possible in a counselling model.

To effectively act as a therapeutic change agent the pastor may need to withdraw his normal form of support and create for himself considerable role conflict between that of the supportive sharer of the Word of God and the more objective, process oriented therapist. This becomes even more difficult if the therapy moves the family toward separation and divorce or a necessary separation between the family generations. While this may be seen as valid in the counselling role it is not at all acceptable in the pastoral value model.

The most extreme is the value conflict caused for pastors if faced with counselling an extra-marital affair or divorce.

A common need in marital counselling is the separation of a couple from the influences of their parental families. During the process of separation the conflict between the generations can be strong. A separate therapist is in a position to ward off the pressure applied by wider family and/or creatively involve them in therapy. A pastor faced with both generations in his congregation is in a most difficult position.

Family and marital intervention often causes a couple to act out their problem in the arena of their social relationships. It is not uncommon for a relational problem in a church congregation to in fact be a projection of a problem of one couple or family. Jules Henry in his book **Pathways to Madness** describes with delightful clarity the way in which a dysfunctional couple avoided fighting between themselves by setting up a local Bible study group to fight on their behalf. If the pastor had been caught between responsibility for the group and a therapeutic relationship with the couple, I doubt if he could have survived.

It is my experience that people undergoing counselling gain much more from counselling if they are also receiving good pastoral care from a separate person at the same time. The pastoral care acts as a buffer in assisting them to relate the change in their relationship to their daily environment. When a pastor is the counselling change agent, it becomes far more difficult for the family to negotiate its change in health with its church relationship. In fact the pastor becomes a constant reminder of the problem of the past. In such a situation the couple will need to leave the church before they can complete the healing task.

I trust I have presented to you a strong case for the clear separation of roles between that of Pastor and marriage counsellor. What then is the scope of pastoral intervention in marital problems?

### **Pastoral Intervention in Marital Problems**

In attempting to delineate pastoral and counselling roles in the church, the Baptist Counselling Service created four categories of work as follows.

#### **1. The Pastoral Carer**

Pastoral care has been defined as the attitude of the pastoral person in all his or her relationships. It is marked by its diffuseness in that the pastoral carer enters in to all of a person's relationships as a representative of the care of God and the fellowship of his people. In some ways pastoral care can be used as the context for lie space counselling; that is, the using of therapeutic skills within a person's own life setting. The nature of the setting still implies a diffuse as opposed to then intense focus of the counselling room.

#### **2. The Pastoral Counselling**

Pastoral Counselling is defined as the short-term, focused, goal directed, contracted counselling work that is often undertaken by a pastor as a function of his or her role in the congregation. This is limited to short (one to four sessions) series assisting people to deal with personal, conflictual issues or specific transitional or situational crises. The pastoral counsellor needs to be aware of the limits of these relationships and be prepared to refer if deeper personality or familiar issues arise.

### **3. The Clinical Pastoral Counsellor**

The Clinical Pastoral Counsellor is a specially trained counsellor with skills geared to create a therapeutic relationship for persons experiencing individual and marital problems. The clinical pastoral counsellor works only from a clinical setting to provide a professional service on behalf of the church. Such counsellors accept clear limits in working with clients. The relationship is on a professional basis to achieve clinical goals only. They see their role as a specialist adjunct to the work of local pastors. They are available for counselling in centres other than the church of which they are a member or pastor. Clinical counsellors guarantee that they will not enter into a counselling relationship with members of their own congregation.

### **4. Psychiatric or Depth Psychotherapy**

Long-term psychotherapy was not seen as the task of the clinical pastoral counsellor who referred such clients to specialist psychiatrists or therapists in that field.

The move from pastoral carer towards clinical counsellor demands greater levels of training and entails more risk for both client and worker. The local minister is best able to provide a role in the areas of basic pastoral care and short-term counselling. Ideally he should have access for referral to a body of qualified clinical counsellors that are separate from the congregation.

### **What then is the Role of the Pastor in the Care of Marriage?**

Pastoral intervention in family life must be consistent with the total role of the ministry to the local church and have a theological basis in building the church as the people of God.

Therefore, the pastoral role in leading worship and in teaching is a vital form of marital care. It is important to recognise that worship is a form of therapy and as such should be a prime focus of pastoral attention.

The Pastor has a privileged role of contact with a family in all aspects of its life. In the general care and support of the family the pastor has opportunity for many subtle healing interventions that can act as powerful preventative therapy. The option for 'life space' or informal counselling is one of the most exciting privileges of pastoral work.. Much of this will be helping people unravel the unrealities they have collected from their past family life.

In particular, the focused areas of pastoral intervention are in marital crisis intervention, short-term supportive problem solving, and long-term supportive care in a religious context.

The pastor can be helped fulfil these roles if he also has access to good referral sources for long term clinical counselling when this is indicated. The use of a separate counsellor so that the pastor can continue in a pastoral care role has much greater potential for church building.