

THE “COUNSELING COMMUNITY”

INTRODUCTION TO PASTORAL COUNSELING
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Introduction

If a person who had no prior knowledge of the phenomenon of “pastoral counseling” were to survey the literature on the subject, he would leave with a definite picture of the standard model. He would envision someone sitting in his office with a nameplate “Pastor _____” resting on the desk. The “pastor” would check his appointment book and welcome an individual into his office. The two would speak for a certain period, perhaps pray together at the end, and then the individual would depart. The pastor might take a few notes, then check his appointment book, and then welcome the next individual. And so on and so on.¹

While this picture may accurately depict “pastoral counseling” in most churches, it has seemed foreign to both my philosophy and experience of ministry. For the last six years, I have served as a campus minister in Boston with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the last four with a student fellowship at Tufts University. When I think of “pastoral counseling,” a plethora of images spring to mind. I see myself in a car with Sung and Eric on a road trip.² From the back seat, Sung begins to recount how his father has just threatened to pull him out of Tufts because of Sung’s lower than expected grades. From the front seats, Eric and I talk with him for over an hour, covering 90 miles and a complex history of family dynamics. Later, when Eric and I are alone, we talk about why I asked Sung a particular question.

Or I envision a group of students sitting in a circle in a Florida hotel room. They are on the last night of a Spring Break missions project and each is sharing about how they are feeling. When Elizabeth’s turn comes up, she instead talks about her eating disorders and experience of parental abuse. None of the students has heard this from Elizabeth before. As she finishes sharing, they look at each other in silence, wondering what to do or say next.

Or I envision Tina having a late night conversation with her hall mate Katie, who is not a Christian. Tina is a member of an relational outreach team in the fellowship and has been developing a friendship with Katie. Katie awkwardly stammers to Tina about how much she appreciates their developing friendship and “that I can really trust you.” She then finally discloses to Tina that she is a lesbian. When Katie leaves, Tina’s roommate returns. Tina’s roommate is also on the outreach team and also is friends with Katie. Tina wonders whether she should speak with her roommate about what just happened.

There are many explanations for why my pictures of “pastoral counseling” so differ from that of the textbooks. Certainly some of these reasons stem from the different realities of a campus ministry context. However, I also believe I am depicting a fundamentally different model of pastoral counseling. In this paper, I seek to elaborate on what I call the “counseling community” model. The paper takes the form of two main parts: 1) a brief description of the model, including the theological and contextual reasons behind this model; 2) a case study of an individual’s experience in my own “counseling community.”

¹ For example, see William R. Miller and Kathleen A Jackson, *Practical Psychology for Pastors*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1995 where the office setting is the assumed setting for counseling for most of its discussion. Similarly, the transcripts included in William Oglesby, *Biblical Themes for Pastoral Care*; Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1980, all record encounters which fit this standard model.

² All of the names in this paper have been changed.

The Counseling Community Model

The “counseling community” model can be understood by comparing it to the standard model in some key features. The following table summarizes this comparison. Each of these comparisons are explained in more detail below.

	Standard Model	“Counseling Community” Model
Who	The individual pastor as “a hub to spokes”	A flexible web of relationships
Key Determinant	Church role, qualifications, etc.	Relational history and trust
Where and When	The office or other church “turf” Scheduled appointments	Community “turf” (could be wherever) Community time (could be whenever)
Expectations	Confidentiality; One way direction of ministry	Shared appropriately within the community Mutual exchange over the course of the relationships
Length	Set duration of each session Limited number of appointments	Open ended unless specified under some community structure
Role of the pastor/leader	Provider of counseling service	Model, trainer, key interventionist, counselor of counselors
Training	Seminary or other graduate program	Mentoring combined with training within the community’s leadership structures
Referrals	A sequential connection	A complementary connection

In the standard model, the pastor stands as the hub connecting to all the counselees in the community. The pastor is the primary counselor. In the “counseling community,” people receive counseling based on their location in the web of relationships within the community.³ The community primarily counsels each other. The key determinant of who counsels is not any title nor professional qualification, but rather relational history and trust. Thus, an individual who needs counseling but is on the fringe of the community’s web will probably not go to the “pastor/leader.” Instead, he will go to the one other person to whom he is most connected. As he is drawn into the community, he will probably be increasingly counseled by several different people.⁴

This may take place in a series of one on one meetings or quite possibly in a group setting. Indeed, groups -- both ones formally set up and informal gatherings -- can often be the settings for how a “counseling community” works to serve individuals. Whether in a group or in one on one settings, however, the key is that counseling takes place within the rhythms of community life. Community trips, retreats, meetings and homes are much more likely to serve as the counseling locale, as opposed to a specific appointment at a designated office. There exists an unavoidable and even desired level of unpredictability of where and when counseling may break out.⁵

The expectations also differ in a “counseling community.” Since people are counseled by a web of relationships, confidentiality is not routinely assumed nor promised. Whereas the standard model breaks confidentiality mainly on questions such as “Is the individual an immediate threat to self or others,” the “counseling community” model asks, “Are there others who are counseling the individual?”

³ It should be noted that when I speak of “community” in this paper, I am referring to a specific group of believers in a local version of the Body of Christ. I do not mean “community” in geographical or residential terms, nor as any collection of individuals, regardless of Christian faith.

⁴ For this concept of a “web of relationships,” I am indebted to my own mentor in ministry, Rich Lamb.

⁵ Robert Coleman has emphasized that Jesus’ “counseling” was thoroughly embedded in the settings of his community in his classic book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Grand Rapids, Revell, 1993, pp. 38-49

and “Would the individual be served if others knew?” The model also expects that counseling relationships will over time move in the direction of mutuality. While there may be imbalances at any given point in the counseling (especially in the beginning), the model aims for friendship, as opposed to a professional relationship. Indeed, some have stressed the redemptive power of this sort of friendship, noting that the Greek word for the type of counseling friendship is *therapon* (from which “therapy” is derived) and that Jesus mediates healing “as the therapon of God.”⁶

Since the movement is towards friendship, the length of the counseling is rather open ended for both any given “session” and the overall course of the counseling. However, individuals often decide to enter group structures in the community that have more definite boundaries and expectations.⁷

The role of the pastor/leader in a “counseling community” is multifaceted. She will certainly counsel in group settings and/or one on one settings. But her ultimate goal is to model counseling such that those who receive her counsel replicate the ministry. Thus she also plays the role of trainer. In especially challenging situations, the pastor/leader might also be called upon to make a key interventions to help community members counsel each other. Finally, she will continue to counsel her most gifted and active counselors in her community.

The counselors in the community thus receive “on the job” training. The emphasis is on mentoring over some professional program. The mentoring will be supplemented by more formal training in the community’s leadership structures. A key responsibility of the pastor/leader is to make sure that material, wisdom, and influences from outside the community find their way to the counselors.

Regarding outside referrals, the standard model tends toward a sequential connection: pastor counsels an individual for a few sessions and then refers him to another professional as necessary. In contrast, there is a complementary relationship in a “counseling community”: deep issues are first raised for an individual in his “counseling community” relationships; the community might encourage the individual to pursue professional counseling, and then continues to pray for and counsel the individual precisely over the issues that get discussed with his professional counselor.

Reasons For The Counseling Community Model

I believe there are fundamental differences between these two models that extend beyond simply the appropriateness of certain models for certain contexts. The standard model of counseling stems from an ecclesiology that emphasizes individualism and a conception of ministry that stresses professionalism. Space does not allow for an extensive critique of this model on those fundamental levels; suffice it to say that I believe the “counseling community” model more faithfully represents the Biblical vision of the *ecclesia* and ministry. Scripture consistently depicts the community as the main agent of God’s healing and the pastor as the enabler of the community’s ministry.⁸ Even members of the professional Christian counseling profession are seeing the need for a change. As Larry Crabb has noted, “The development of the local church into a counseling community employing its unique resources of fellowship and ministry is an exciting concept which needs further thinking.”⁹

⁶ Samuel Southard, *Theology and Therapy: The wisdom of God in a context of friendship*, Dallas, Word, 1989, p. x

⁷ Church history is filled with examples of such “counseling community” structures. They range from the classic monastic orders to Wesley’s covenant groups. See William Clebsch and Charles Jackle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*; New York, Jason Aaronson, 1983, pp. 282-84

⁸ See for example, Eph. 4: 11-13. For a more thoroughgoing critique, see Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King*, Downers Grove, IVP, 1978

⁹ Larry Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling*; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1977, p. 17. Unfortunately, his book does not go on to provide

But even setting aside arguments at the fundamental level, I believe the “counseling community” model is more compelling because it is better suited to the largest contextual shift facing the church today, namely the shift from modernity to post-modernity. The standard model is a classic child of modernity in its view of authority and the self. The pastor stands at the hub of all counseling by virtue of his authority, an authority invested in his formal role or credentials. It is no surprise that the modern epoch saw the rise of professional credentialing for pastors and specialized degrees in counseling. This authoritative hub connects to reasonably well formed “selves” who suffer from well specified and diagnosed problems: a family crisis arises, there is a death and grief process, a decision needs to be made, *etc.* (the discreteness of such problems is also why the pastor can afford to be connected to a large number of people). He counsels for either a short duration in order to solve a specific problem or on periodic occasions because people will remain relatively stable and well functioning in the interim. To put it another way, the modern counselee wants to know, “Are you an expert authority?” and “How do I solve this specific problem?”

Postmoderns ask fundamentally different questions. Postmoderns are highly suspicious of claims to expertise and authority, especially when such claims are made by virtue of some formal role. Postmoderns want to know, “Why should I trust you?” and the answer, “Because I am the pastor” is not compelling.¹⁰ Instead, authority to counsel a postmodern must be painstakingly earned in relationship over time. This means that a pastor who waits for people to call him up for counseling appointments or show up at his “office hours” will wait for a long time. Furthermore, if he seeks to establish trust with individuals which can lead to a counseling relationship, he will necessarily be limited by the time and energy required.

Postmoderns also generally enter counseling as weakly formed selves. Observers of psychotherapy have noted a sea change in the “presenting symptoms” over the past several decades. Rather than presenting problems that can be categorized into specific “phobias and fixations,” the “main complaints centre around ‘ego loss’, or a sense of emptiness, flatness, futility, lack of purpose, or loss of self-esteem.”¹¹ Other observers have affixed postmodern man with labels such as “The Decentered Self” or “The Depleted Self” and offered varying explanations for why this weakly formed self is so common.¹² Regardless of which explanation one accepts, one often encounters the postmodern as an individual who cannot even name his “problem” very precisely. Rather than asking “How do I solve this specific problem,” he is plagued by the question, “Who am I?” -- a condition that defies the limited and occasional intervention of the standard model of pastoral counseling.

In contrast, pastoral counseling that is based on the community of faith offers hope for the postmodern condition. The web of relationships offers more points where trust can be built for counseling friendships to develop. Also, the burden to continue the counseling process is spread out over multiple friendships. Most importantly, the community is an inescapable feature of identity formation. Charles Taylor has argued persuasively that a self depends on what he calls, interestingly enough, “a web of interlocutors:”

One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it... My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question Who I am. And this question finds its original sense in

this “further thinking.”

¹⁰ See Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A strategy for reaching the postmodern generation*, Downers Grove, IVP, 1997, pp. 147-57

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1989, p. 19

¹² J. Middleton and B. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used To Be*, Downers Grove, IVP, 1995, pp. 46-62 and Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self*; Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993

the interchange of speakers... in the space of moral spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out.¹³

Leanne Payne has written perceptively about how the core of the Christian counseling ministry is the process of helping people with false and poorly formed selves encounter the Real Presence of Christ, for “we do not know who we are until we find our own truest selves in God.”¹⁴ The primary context for this transforming encounter is relationships within the Body of Christ. Indeed, God’s goal in His healing of any individual is that she may take her “place among those who are sanctified by faith in me;” that “place” frequently involves counseling others in the community who share her condition.¹⁵ One receives one’s true identity from God only as one is incorporated into Christ’s counseling community and joins in its healing work.

A case study of the “counseling community”

To better illustrate how a “counseling community” originates and operates, I have included below a short case study of Jean, a student in our campus fellowship at Tufts University.¹⁶ I make no claim that her story represents the standard experience -- she is in so many ways an extraordinary individual -- yet I believe her story is nevertheless instructive about how God works via a “counseling community.”

Jean describes her condition as a sophomore in college with the classic symptoms of a weakly formed self in distress. “I was feeling dead, absolutely nothing. But I didn’t know what was wrong with me or why I felt this way.” In the past, Jean’s parents had sent her to a professional counselor, but she had felt unable to share openly in that setting.

Jean visited an InterVarsity meeting, although she did not know anyone very well at the time. During the meeting, she began crying rather uncontrollably and inexplicably. She remembers what happened next: “A woman in the fellowship, Arlene, came over to me and just began to hug me. I didn’t even know her but she kept just saying, ‘Just keep crying. I won’t let you go through this alone.’” After the meeting, Arlene took Jean back to her dorm room and began to talk. “She asked me all these questions about my past and family, stuff that I wasn’t even thinking about at the time. I never thought that my current state was connected to that stuff.” The two continued to meet together once a week for about two hours. Arlene encouraged Jean to read a book called Drama of a Gifted Child. “Reading that book,” Jean recalls, “was one of the first times I realized that there were all these bottled emotions in me and my first time sensing that there might be a reason why I was the way I was.”

Unfortunately, Arlene (who was an exchange student) left to return to her native country at the end of that year. While Jean had developed more friendships in the fellowship, there was very little sense that it was a “counseling community.” According to Jean, “We didn’t really know how to go into each other’s lives with any depth. When I look back at what we were like, I realize how unreal we were with each other. We all had our own problems and we didn’t know how to deal with them, much less with each other.”

At about this time, my wife and I arrived to serve as campus ministers for the fellowship. We began to develop a friendship with Jean, seeing her about once a week. Most of the time, she would just

¹³ Taylor, p. 35

¹⁴ Leanne Payne, The Real Presence; Eastbourne, Monarch, 1988, p. 10

¹⁵ Acts 26:18. Leanne Payne quotes C.S. Lewis that “Every disability conceals a vocation” in her discussion of this process. Leanne Payne, The Broken Image; Grand Rapids, Baker, 1986, p. 115.

¹⁶ As mentioned, the name has been changed. The interview was conducted on Feb. 25 and 27 1998.

come over at unscheduled times. Some of the “sessions” occurred at retreats, fellowship meetings, short term mission trips, or other random community times. Some of them involved talking with both my wife and me, others just with one of us. Jean recounts the nature of those times: “I was in such a state of constant crisis that I would just need to talk to someone. I felt terrible with all these confusing emotions and thoughts in me that I had to get out of myself. I needed to be with someone who saw something good in me that could be found, that believed I was more than just this terrible person.”

In that context, God was beginning to raise the deeply rooted issues behind Jean’s weakly formed self. “It was in those times I first learned to make some basic connections. For instance, I used to always want to just scream at my mother whenever she called me on the phone. I finally began to examine the reasons why. It seems like an obvious step now, but I needed help to see things. I also learned some basic tools for dealing with the stuff I found inside me. I learned to feel anger, to forgive (that was big!), to confess and repent. I learned to believe that God does really cleanse me totally -- in some ways, I’m just starting to learn that recently. I needed to be shown how to do all that.” Jean believes there was no substitute for friendship as the main context for this process. “I could say deep and dark things,” she stresses, “and people wouldn’t run away from being my friends; that was very healing itself.”

During our first year of ministry with Jean, my wife Jody gathered Jean and three other women into a women’s group. This group was the seeds of our “counseling community.” At the time, all the women knew each other, but did not have very significant friendships, much less counseling relationships. Jean remembers how she learned to counsel in that setting: “Jody called us to commit to each other and the group. None of us had ever been in a group like that before. We didn’t know how to counsel each other. It was a new idea even just to take time as a group to listen to one person talk for any length of a time. It was a new idea to ask questions and not just immediately give advice. We learned mainly by watching Jody. She led the times probably 75% of the time. Sometimes she would bring up group dynamics, like whether one of us was mad at the others or something like that.”

In this “on the job” training, the women slowly developed their own gifts at counseling. The following year, Jean and the three others began a household community. As part of the household structure, they met regularly each week to essentially counsel one another. It was a rocky process at first; several times Jody and I had to intervene to help the group deal with a problem. But Jean recounts the growth of their relationships with evident satisfaction: “We learned how to respond to each other’s crisis, to have insight. And it became normal even outside of those meetings to just walk into each other’s rooms or while we were on a road trip to begin talking about an issue in our lives and have the other person counsel.”

During our first year of counseling Jean, we also encouraged her to see a professional counselor. Jean finally decided to do so, and she connects that decision to her relationships in the “counseling community.” “I might have wanted to see my [professional] counselor otherwise, but I don’t think I would have had the self motivation unless I told people I was going to.” Jean views her sessions of more formal counseling as a complementary part to the healing process already begun in her community: “The sessions [with her professional counselor] were more of the same stuff I talked about while meeting with you, but it just gave me a more regular space. It was helpful that it wasn’t a friend’s time. There was a lot inside me and it was just OK to spew there because the person I was doing it with didn’t have to respond the way a friend would have to. I could verbalize things there without the other person feeling any pressure to respond and that was freeing. However, I feel strongly that it wouldn’t have helped if I was just seeing my [professional] counselor. The professional counselor gave me more space and time to ‘do work,’ but I had to learn how to ‘do the work’ in the community. It was in the community that I got the framework.” Jean recounts several times that “I would have a big realization or a powerful prayer time

happen for me in the fellowship time, and then I would go and fill out the details of it with my counselor." Or conversely, "I once finally admitted a very shameful incident from my past in a formal session with my counselor, but it was not enough that it only came up in a professional relationship like that. I needed a place for it to go so that it wasn't just flitting around." As such, confessing that incident to several members of her "counseling community" turned out to be a major step in her healing.

In subsequent years, Jean has occupied a crucial place in the web of relationships that comprise our "counseling community." She has started and led her own women's group with younger students. She explains: "I still have a lot of issues to work out myself, but I'm not so crippled and I know I have places to go to deal with them. But a major work of being a self had occurred. So I had the ability and desire to focus on other people. I wanted to pass on the concept of purposefully listening, praying, and growing." She has counseled several women, usually in the same informal web of friendships. She especially feels strongly about one woman who reminded her a lot of herself at that first meeting with Arlene: "She needed someone who would stick it out with her the way Arlene did with me. I felt a call and love for her. I've seen what God has done to heal and I believe it can happen for others. But someone has to help make it possible for others."

Conclusion

As the case study indicates, the "counseling community" model will entail pastor/leaders developing a wider set of skills. They will need to learn to gather and train as they seek to replicate counseling relationships within the community. They will live on the community's "turf" and time, tending over the web of relationships that will care for their congregations. In the process, they will fulfill the call "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."¹⁷

¹⁷ Eph. 4: 12-13

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