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Introduction

My goal for this book is to help pastors and other church leaders gain the confidence to be able to counsel members of your congregations in some of the basic relational problems you may have. Another goal is for you to be able to know when to refer someone you are counseling to a more qualified counselor.

I have discovered over the years that a strong counseling ministry in the local church will turn out to be a good outreach tool. Even if it does not bring people from the community into your church, they will look at you much more favorably.

My experience has been that it does both. When I was a fulltime crisis counselor for nine years, I helped several hundred people find a local church. Even when I was a pastor, I saw many people come because of our counseling ministry. Currently, my church has almost thirty people on the fringes or actual members who are coming out of a lifestyle of addiction. This does not include others who have come due to other types of counseling.

This book is for you, the pastor, or other church leader. I strongly believe that someone who has a good basis in the Bible is a potential counselor. The main thing we have to do is rely on God in all we do and bathe everything in prayer.

I will address all comments to you directly. In addition, to save space and energy, I will address all of you as church leaders, since pastors and all other leaders fall into that category.

This book is divided into four parts. Part 1 consists of my beliefs and practices concerning pastoral counseling. Part 2 is a systematic description of how you would conduct various individual counseling sessions. Part 3 covers marriage counseling. Part 4 shows how the counselees can stay free from their problems. A last section deals with your follow-up with the counselee.

I will write the instructions for each step of the process as if I were talking to you in person. I want you to be comfortable

with everything that I ask you to do. If not you will not be comfortable in asking your counselee to do what they need to do to achieve victory in Christ.

To keep clutter down in these sections, I will precede each set of comments that I address to you with an asterisk (*). Whenever you see a paragraph with the asterisk, you will know that this is a set of instructions for you only.

I will precede each set of comments that I want you to give to the gamblers with the pound symbol (#). Whenever you see a paragraph beginning with a pound symbol, you will know that these are instructions you are to give to the counselee. You may put these instructions in your own words, but please do not change the meaning or thrust unless you have a good experience based reason.

When a paragraph begins with one of these symbols, all succeeding paragraphs will be the same until you come to a paragraph beginning with the other symbol.

Part One: Pastoral Counseling

1. The Basics of Pastoral Counseling

I will begin with the basics of pastoral counseling as I see them. I want you to feel comfortable with what you are doing and saying to your counselees.

Fear of Counseling

We fear those things we know nothing about or those things we do not understand. Many church leaders have a strong fear of counseling. Most fall into one or both of the above categories.

There is nothing to fear about counseling. If you are waiting for a "but" or an "if" you are correct, you will get both.

If you understand the basics of counseling, there will be nothing to fear about counseling.

But, if you do not understand the basics of counseling, you have much to fear.

When we apply the word "counsel" to what we do, we are actually using a misnomer. The word means to give advice. Don't! That is where many church leaders and even some professional counselors run into problems.

Now that I have your attention, I want to give you my golden rules of pastoral counseling.

My Golden Rules of Counseling

1. Listen

Never criticize!

Never assign blame or guilt!

Never let your thoughts even hint at blame or guilt. They will pick them up.

You are there to help them. That should be your only goal. Of course, as Christian leaders, we are more concerned about the hereafter than the here and now. Our ultimate goal for each person we counsel is for him or her to accept the Lord as Savior or to rededicate his or her life to Him. Nevertheless, our short-term goal is to help them out of the situation they find themselves in right now.

You will never know what the problem is if you don't listen carefully to everything they say, even prompting them occasionally to continue. Quite often, you will need to take note of some things they don't say.

It has been my experience that when someone comes to me for help, genuinely wanting help, they will tell me everything I need to know if I just listen. Sometimes you may have to allow some quiet time to pass before they will continue and tell you everything. Wait them out.

2. Use Common Sense

I have to be blunt here. But, God gave you common sense, don't even attempt to counsel another person without it. Be sure you approach each session only after a great deal of prayer. Then, be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit as He leads you to do and say the appropriate things.

What I am implying here is that you don't have to have a degree in counseling to help most people out of most problems that they may encounter. Notice, I said "most" not all.

3. Never Give Advice

You are not writing an advice column. You are trying to help them. They will ask you for advice. They may even demand that you tell them what to do.

Taking advice from others may be part of their problem. They have asked others for advice and received damaging advice that either put them where they are or made the situation worse.

Help them list their options and help them to choose the best one. This is easy! You will be surprised at how many options they will be able to come up with, even when they come to you thinking they have no options.

Once they have told you all of their problems, the solution or best option usually simply jumps out at them without you having to do anything else.

Encourage them to write their options down. If the best option doesn't jump out at them immediately, encourage them to take the list home with them and pray about it.

Make sure they understand that they were the ones making the decision. Once they choose an option, remind them strongly that they are the ones who chose that option.

What do you do if they choose an option you think could be the wrong one? You have two choices. Either guide them carefully away from a harmful option, or stall them by getting them to think and pray about it more. They will usually see the folly of harmful options if given time to think about them.

4. Make Them Promise Not to Accept Advice from Anyone!

Remember, that means you too!

You will have very limited success if your counselee is acting on advice from friends or family members who generally don't have a clue about what they are doing.

Issues for Immediate Referral

There may come a time in any of your counseling sessions when you will realize that this person needs to consult someone who is more highly trained to address whatever the problem may be. You will need to use your common sense again, and of course rely on God to guide you.

I will mention four types of counseling that you will need to refer immediately, unless you happen to be trained in that particular area.

Depression

Only trained personnel can address this condition. You will know quickly if the person is suffering from a passing depression or one that will not pass with time and encouragement. This is what the medical community calls clinical depression.

Addictions

Counseling anyone who is addicted to a harmful substance or activity, requires a highly specialized type of intense counseling.

Medicated Individuals

As mentioned later, you need to know what medications your counselee is on before attempting to counsel them. If they are on any kind of medication that is considered to be mood altering, refer them immediately. You would only be fighting against the effects of the medication.

Suicidal Tendencies

If you recognize that your counselee is possibly suicidal, refer them immediately. A later section on suicide will give you the signs to look for and what to do when you see them.