



RESPONDING TO CONTEMPORARY ETHICS ISSUES FACING COUNSELORS IN PASTORAL OR RELIGIOUSLY-ORIENTED SETTINGS

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CONTEXT OF COUNSELING IN RELIGIOUSLY-ORIENTED SETTINGS

UNDERSTANDING COUNSELING IN A PASTORAL CONTEXT

- What makes counseling in a religiously-oriented or pastoral setting unique?
 - Vision of the human person that informs clinical work
 - Possible professional role overlap for counselors who are also ministers, priests, or clergy persons
 - Close association with a pastoral setting
 - Content of the counseling conversation
 - Issues of credentials/licensure



VISION OF THE HUMAN PERSON THAT INCLUDES....

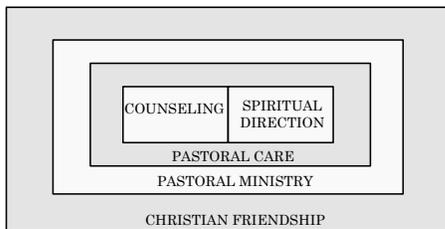
- o Being of dignity and worth
- o Made in the image and likeness of God
- o Responsible to his/her own self development
- o Relational being – in relationship to God, others, and natural world
- o Being deserving of basic rights, such as love, food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, employment, respect, etc.
- o Responsible to others' welfare
- o Search for meaning
- o Appreciation for the mystery of life

PROFESSIONAL ROLE ISSUES: PASTOR, COUNSELOR, OR BOTH?

- o Professional training and role identity informs actions as well as one's assessment of those actions as more or less appropriate to the professional role
 - What services or rights/protections do people expect of a minister/priest/religious leader?
 - What services or rights/protections do people expect of a licensed counselor?
- o When dual professional identities are espoused, the potential for complexity and confusion emerges with regard to interpreting legal and ethical standards.

COUNSELING IN A PASTORAL OR RELIGIOUSLY –ORIENTED SETTING

Religious Ministries



CONTENT OF THE COUNSELING CONVERSATION AND RELATIONSHIP INFORMED BY:

- o Explicit, though not exclusive, spiritual focus
- o Church teachings, doctrine (including moral doctrines), and scripture
- o Spiritual resources, rituals, practices
- o Vision of the eternal goal – kingdom of heaven- as part of personal choices
- o Foundational clinical skills, including relationship techniques, treatment planning, research, ethical competence, etc.

LICENSURE/CREDENTIALS ISSUES

- o In Ohio, licensure is granted to counselors, social workers, MFTs, and psychologists
- o Title protection of the word “counselor”
- o Licensure = responsibility to the law, rules, and regulations that govern those who are licensed.

ETHICS ISSUES UNIQUE TO WORK IN A PASTORAL SETTING

EXAMPLE PASTORAL CONTEXT

Rev. Miller is the pastor of a mid-sized church in a somewhat rural community; she also is a licensed counselor and provides pastoral counseling services to parishioners in need. As the pastor, she often is invited to visit community members in their homes as a way to build relationships or join in celebrations; she leads a bible study group; she visits the hospital on a regular basis to attend to the sick; and she preaches at weekly services. Wanting to be perceived as friendly, warm, and dedicated to her congregation and mission to God, Rev. Miller views these all of these interactions and duties as important to her pastoral role. She regularly works with other lay ministers in the church to provide valued outreach to parishioners in need, and those ministers are trusted members of her pastoral team who support her in her pastoral role.

CASE EXAMPLE OF BOUNDARY DILEMMA

Rev. Miller has been seeing Sheryl, a single mother in the parish, for pastoral counseling. After suffering years of abuse from her husband, Sheryl finally separated from her spouse and found a place to live on her own with her children. Sheryl has confided to Rev. Miller about her emotional, spiritual, and financial struggles relating to her separation. Though Sheryl has not asked for the church's financial assistance to help her with basic bills, Rev. Miller has felt tempted at the end of sessions to give Sheryl some gift cards for grocery stores and gas stations that the church has available for people in need, though she's not sure if that would be appropriate.

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING BOUNDARIES

Counselor Considerations

Counselors develop trust from clients by:

- o Minimizing dual or multiple relationships;
- o Not counseling friends or family members;
- o Considering the risks and benefits of extending the relationship beyond conventional boundaries

Pastoral Considerations

Pastors seek opportunities to:

- o Enhance human dignity by ensuring basic rights
- o Live out a mission to support the poor and suffering in a variety of ways
- o Show concern for the spiritual and material needs of parishioners

OTHER POSSIBLE BOUNDARY DILEMMAS

- o **Use of touch** – hugs and other physical signs of comfort can be viewed positively by parishioners and pastors
- o **Location of clinical interactions** – in small communities or at gatherings of the community (e.g., Mass or worship services) where the pastor/counselor and clients are in attendance, ensuring privacy and avoiding overlapping boundaries can be difficult, if not impossible

CASE EXAMPLE OF CONFIDENTIALITY DILEMMA

In her work with Sheryl, Rev. Miller has become acutely aware of the suffering of her client and, by extension, that of all women who are abused by their spouses or intimate partners. Moved by want to advocate on their behalf, Rev. Miller feels it is her duty to preach about the evils of abuse and, alternatively, about the vision that she believes God has for all people who are married to treat one another respectfully and in a way that is a witness to God's . She would like to also let one of the church deacons know of Sheryl's situation so that additional support and outreach can be offered.

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING CONFIDENTIALITY

Counselor Considerations
Counselors develop trust from clients by:

- o Respecting privacy and confidentiality of clients and explaining the limits of confidentiality;
- o Making only minimal or necessary disclosures when circumstances require disclosure;
- o Ensuring that subordinates uphold clients' privacy

Pastoral Considerations

Pastors may:

- o Inform and educate the community or other lay ministers who are deemed to be colleagues about important spiritual and personal issues, as well as seek to garner spiritual support/prayer from the Church regarding pressing issues;
- o Operate under the legal protection of privileged communication, which also limits clients' legal right to confidentiality under the priest-penitent privilege
- o Defer to Church policy and normal helping models regarding sharing of info.

OTHER POSSIBLE CONFIDENTIALITY ISSUES

- o Privileged communication (confession, spiritual counsel, etc.) offered by clergy is protected through First Amendment rights; conversely, clergy have not been held legally responsible when breaking the clergy-penitent privilege and sharing information inappropriately
- o Need for clarification regarding under which role the pastor-counselor is intervening with the client/parishioner to ensure full disclosure to client/parishioner about his/her ethical and legal rights

CASE EXAMPLE REGARDING SERVICES TO SEXUAL MINORITIES

Rev. Miller is working in a pastoral counseling relationship with Matthew, a parishioner in his early 20s who tentatively approached her to discuss concerns about his sexual desires related to men. Matthew seems well-aware of the church's teachings on the immorality of sexual behaviors with people of the same sex, and he is grounded in his faith community. Matthew shared with Rev. Miller that he genuinely is struggling with how to relate to and understand his own human-being; how to define his place in the church; what he should reveal to others about his sexual attractions; and whether or not to explore his attractions or suppress them. Rev. Miller is pondering the best, most ethical means by which to help Matthew. What might you recommend?

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING SERVICES TO SEXUAL MINORITIES (AND OTHER CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLIENTS)

- Counselor Considerations
Counselors develop trust from clients by:
- o Being aware of and not imposing personal values on clients;
 - o Not discriminating against prospective or current clients on any basis protected by law;
 - o Developing broad cultural competence
 - o Not using techniques indicated to harm clients, even when requested by clients
 - o Respecting client autonomy

- Pastoral Considerations
Pastors develop trust by:
- o Respecting the dignity and worth of all clients/ congregants (non-judging stance)
 - o Being knowledgeable about Church doctrine, scripture, and tradition regarding sexual ethics and being willing to dialogue about those teachings in light of issues related to sexuality
 - o Being authentic about one's roles/responsibilities as a pastor regarding sexual ethics; and
 - o Respecting autonomy



**SEGMENT 3:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
ADDRESSING ETHICS ISSUES**

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

- o Informed consent addressing: services provided; nature of clinical relationship; confidentiality and its limits as well as privileged communication; how chance encounters will be handled; office policy regarding scheduling and fees, etc.
- o Intentional pursuit of supervision and consultation to prevent professional isolation
- o Development of self-care strategies
- o Training for church communities that defines who is a lay minister and how those persons handle confidential information
- o Authenticity in ethical decision-making that allows for creative, grounded, and care-full ethical choices reflective of professional ethics and pastoral values

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