

# STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

**C**ounseling used to be a purely amateur affair between friends in which one sought the advice of another. And within the walls of high schools *counseling* describes academic and disciplinary advisors—deans, or counselors.

Now, however, the term is tightly defined, largely because within a very few years an entire realm of professions has been built on the once-casual practice of giving advice kindly. Counseling professionals have honed their already-specialized techniques so that they are conversant with virtually all personal and interpersonal crises, from insomnia to psychoses.

Yet what does *pastoral* counseling mean? Is there actually any difference—or ought there to be any difference—between professional and pastoral counseling? What role should pastors, youth workers, and other church workers assume when people approach them for counsel? Is the one sitting opposite my desk my client or my parishioner?

## Sheep or Clients?

I strongly believe that my pastoral role in counseling should resemble more the old-fashioned kind—amateur, frankly, since few pastors are trained or supervised as psychotherapists. And not just amateur, but kindly, from one friend to another, without charging payment for their counsel. And, furthermore, not just on a casual or compassionate basis, but with a definitely Christian point of reference. The relationship is plainly one of pastor-parishioner, not therapist-client.

The fact is, I'm the most helpful to parishioners when I keep my counseling to kindly advice, from friend to friend. I say this because the pastor who stays a pastor instead of a psychotherapist is probably more helpful to

people in crisis. Why? Because the part of Christ's Body that he represents as counselor can absorb the troubled one into its community of believers for the long therapeutic road to healing. To sort out the tangle of experiences and reasons that contributed to the present pain is the work of a therapeutic counselor—and I consult Christian therapists, of course—but the pastor's role is different.

A pastor friend who felt in-depth counseling was part of his ministry told me about the severe marital problems of two young couples in whom he had invested long hours of counseling. The time was well spent, he felt, in view of the couples' responses. I asked him where the four now were in their faith pilgrimage. Well, the pastor said, they felt compelled to change fellowships, although they still counseled with him.

What happened? Perhaps this—as they gradually became more clients and less parishioners to this pastor, he became less and less prophet, teacher, pastor to them. Perhaps they perceived in every sermon a reference to themselves or to their problems. At any rate, he lost four sheep—if not from the fold, then at least from his corner of it. No damage done, I guess. Yet it seems to me that we are not nearly as well equipped to provide therapy as to be Christian ministers of the Word, to be friends in Christ who listen thoughtfully and support, to respond honestly, to think through with a brother or sister our walk with Jesus Christ. We would do well, I think, to resist the nudge toward quasi-therapeutic relationships that in the long run are healthy for neither their journey nor ours. We may be flattered by their requests for our counsel, motivated by the power that intimate counseling produces when it's joined with pastoral authority, or aroused by the pathos of desperate human need. All these reasons are understandable—but dangerous.

From the first appointment, a counseling pastor should give clear signals

that he is committed first to the Lord Jesus Christ and His gospel and secondly to the people. What does this mean? First, that we respect every person's journey toward faith or within faith and will consequently listen carefully to them—but there is no promise or pretense of therapy in a counseling appointment. It means furthermore that we don't chart out extended, months-long series of in-depth session.

## Working Our Own Turf

Okay then, amateurs we are—but don't equate this status with carelessness or preachiness. In our care of souls, we need to cultivate pastoral gifts that are exercised thoughtfully, faithfully, sensitively, and wisely in order to be friends with those who desire our counsel.

Such pastoral gifts may include, first, a tight grasp of the theological ins and outs of Christianity so that our responses to questions of faith are clear and sound. Another pastoral gift for our cultivation is the grace of listening wisely, of concentration on the various ways people talk to us—eyes, hands, legs; signs of hope, love, fear, deception. We should never take our impressions too seriously, but nevertheless we are able to develop skills in people watching and these skills help us to be more helpful when help is necessary.

And then there's a counseling gift that comes hard to many pastors—the gift of restraint. That is, I need to narrow, to restrict my own responses when it's my turn to speak. I learned something from reading C. S. Lewis's letters: in giving advice he touched on only one or two major things without attempting to include everything that popped into his mind as he read his friends' letters. So now I try to brush aside as many arguments as my conscience allows and then focus upon

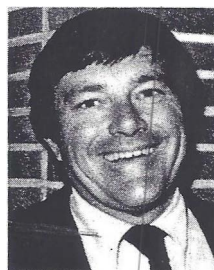
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what seems to me to be the one or two fundamentals at the heart of their concern. I didn't always exercise this much restraint — during the early days of my ministry, my usual approach was to empty my brain of all I could think of that would solve my parishioners' problems. A hit-and-miss randomness began to characterize my conversations, of course, and I really believe folks began agreeing with me just to end my avalanche of advice.

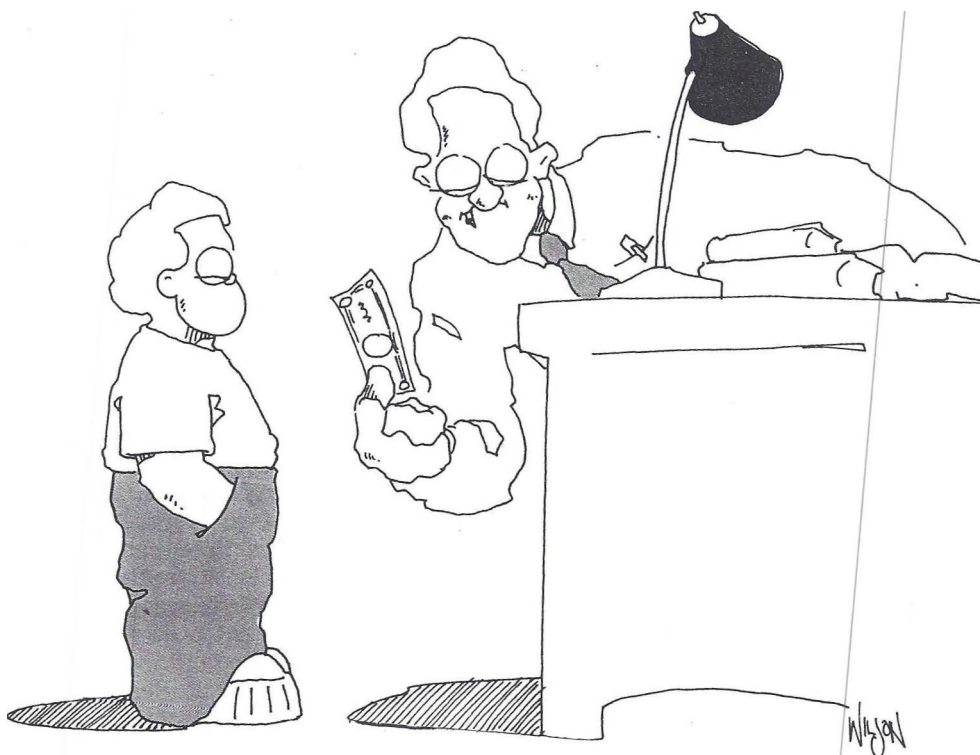
Pastors' gifts to give away to counsel-seeking parishioners should include, finally, the gifts of love, faith, and hope—not because they are our own brave possessions, but because we have ourselves received them from

the Lord of faith, hope, and love. Others in the Body will catch them from us when they see that we really care. That God is real and that He can be known by mere human beings makes all the difference in the world to a parishioner come to us for counseling, in search of authentic faith. Only because God's faithfulness never ends can we know that there are no hopeless situations. The night does end—and when morning comes, there is joy. It is hope that replaces cynicism and opens up dead-end streets into spacious boulevards.

Counseling in the church is badly needed in this dehumanized age especially; but what is needed most from us is the counsel of an amateur who is a friend. ♦



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*"Five dollars says you don't ruin my Successful Parenting sermon."*