

A STATEMENT OF PRACTICE FOR THE MINISTRY OF PASTORAL COUNSELING

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This is a theological statement. It is a working theology of practice, giving shape to the therapy I do and informing you of the principles on which my practice is based. It is brief enough for you to easily read, yet detailed enough to provide you the basis for understanding the process. Many counselors are eclectic in the way they do therapy. They draw from a variety of approaches. Others follow a specific approach. Whatever direction is taken, it is critical that the counselor take a principled approach grounded on the best available research about what works. A pastoral counselor, in my estimation, is especially expected to have a principled approach that is consistent with whatever his or her core beliefs are about God, human nature, and the healing process.

You have choices when it comes to therapy. “Why should you see a pastoral counselor when you could see another mental health professional? What difference do I make to the therapeutic journey?” I have come to believe, on the basis of study and my own experience, that what is needed is a balance of the psychological—enacted through talk therapy—and the spiritual—enacted through the use of sacred rites and rituals. They are both important elements in the pastoral counseling process as they occur within the context of the therapeutic relationship itself.

Pastoral Counselor as both Pastor and Counselor

Healing takes place within the context of the pastoral, therapeutic alliance that we establish with each other. The relationship we forge is itself part of the healing process.

I believe that the efficacy of sacred rites and rituals to effect healing is grounded in both my authority as a called and ordained pastor, and in the therapeutic alliance we establish. It is a matter of *both/and*. Both office and relationship contribute to the healing power of sacred rites and rituals. Such healing flows from the symbolic character of the divinely instituted office as well as from the symbolic character of the rites and rituals themselves.

The pastoral counselor, as both pastor and counselor, is building on both the divine and human elements of the office he or she is called to. Insofar as the office is divinely instituted by Christ himself, the rites and rituals as they are received with faith bring healing and wholeness. Insofar as the office is filled by a human with specific counseling skills, the relationship sets the context for the therapeutic effectiveness of the whole experience in the healing process.

My operative theology of ministry is guided by an historic Lutheran understanding of the pastoral office. Such an understanding sees the ordained pastor as a representative of God in service to the people. It is an authority exercised by virtue of the office to which the pastor is called and into which the pastor is ordained. In this sense, it is a matter of position more than person. As a pastoral counselor who occupies such a position, I have the authority inherent with this office.

At the same time, such an understanding respects that the occupant of this divinely mandated office is not a different person because of it. I remain an imperfect, sinful human being who brings to the office my unique blend of gifts, skills and abilities. To the extent that I grow into the pastoral office, I am better able to exercise the authority that comes with it. In this regard, it is not a matter of position so much as it is a matter of person.

My ability to form a successful therapeutic, pastoral alliance is based on who I am, and who I am is shaped by both the pastoral office I occupy and the unique person that God created me to be. It is, in the final analysis, less a matter of one or the other, than a matter of *both/and*.

If healing were singularly rooted in either the positional authority of the one doing the sacred rite and ritual, or in the sacred rite and ritual itself, one would expect that healing would occur more often than it does. The healing power comes out of the relationship as well. It is rooted in grace, not law. It is rooted in that which is deeply spiritual and largely beyond control.

In the Augsburg Confession of the Lutheran Confessions, Article V reads: “Through Word and sacraments, as through means, the Holy Spirit works faith when and where it pleases God in those who hear the Gospel.” To the extent that I can, as a pastoral counselor, I set the conditions through a working “pastoral therapeutic alliance” for God to work in your life.

My pastoral counseling practice is Christ-centered, existential, and sacramental. These are dimensions of a Lutheran-Christian way of doing a ministry of mental health offering healing and hope.

Christ-Centered

The first and central principle is expressed in the term, “Christ-centered.” The apostle Paul said in his Letter to the Corinthians, “*For I resolved to know nothing while I was among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” (1 Corinthians 2:2 NIV) This central focus on Jesus is at the heart of what I do. **I believe that the primary and most important element of what I do as a pastoral counselor is to bring the healing power of a relationship with Jesus Christ to bear in the life of the “sufferer.”**

Healing comes from a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Healing comes when the source of your suffering is embraced and a new way to live with it is created. Henri Nouwen, Catholic theologian and chaplain, writing in his book, “The Wounded Healer,” says this: “*A Christian community is a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings and occasions for a new vision.*” Together, we co-create a new narrative that acknowledges and embraces your suffering but centers it in the healing, redemptive love of Christ.

Existential

The second principle that informs my work is that it is “existential.” As a pastoral counselor, I draw from both postmodern clinical practice and sacred tradition in order to heal by all means possible. I describe what I do as postmodern pastoral conversation because it is eclectic and because it draws heavily from the postmodern therapy approaches which emphasize the construction of meaning and the equality of the therapist/patient relationship. My goal is not to impose a solution on you, but rather it is to listen to your need and together with you to find a constructive resolution of the issue. I do not seek to effect change so much as to provide the context within which change can occur.

Good therapy reveals the healing love of God in Jesus Christ, which alone is curative. Pastoral conversation then is what might be termed therapeutic conversation. Therapeutic conversation is of a different order than the therapeutic strategies of medicine.

It is about engaging you in the process of “thinking theologically.” It is about inviting you to construct a new way of ordering your world that is grounded in the gracious action of God. Healing then comes about not so much because I am able to make your suffering go away, so much as because I am able to engage you in a new way of making sense of it.

Sacramental

The third principle is that my work is “sacramental” and “incarnational.” I invite you to move beyond conversation into a sacred space and time where the divine is experienced in new and fresh ways. Sacred rites and rituals are enacted as a balance to pastoral conversation. They take the healing process further by moving beyond words into symbols, actions and experience. Through these means, the healing, redemptive work of God takes place.

My daily practice of pastoral counseling is deeply grounded in sacred ritual. I typically prepare for sessions by reviewing notes and taking a few moments to pray for the persons I am about to see. When you arrive, I typically light a candle to symbolize the presence of God and to accent the sacred nature of our work together. At the close of each session, I will invite you to pray. If such prayer is hard to speak, then I will close the session with prayer. When my day is over, I typically commend all whom I have seen to the Lord, and pray for God’s peace and strength for each one. I find such ritual practice keeps me grounded and lets me face each new day with energy and hope.

Summary

Three basic elements of healing are present in the pastoral counseling process. These are the relationship itself, talk therapy expressed through pastoral conversation, and sacred rite and ritual that flows out of the conversation and moves beyond it to deepen and enlarge the healing.

What I do is very much in the realm of intuition and discernment, at least as much as it is in the realm of science and craft, and perhaps even more so. Sacred rites and rituals work in bringing about healing to the extent that they are located in the context of the pastoral counseling relationship. This is a *both/and* relationship grounded in mutual trust and shared faith in the One who alone is the great physician of body and soul and who alone can deliver a true and efficacious cure to whatever is your presenting issue and deep need.