

Counseling Care and Evangelical Pastoral Leadership:  
Implications for Seminary Education<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Training evangelical pastors to fulfill the complex expectations and role demands of diverse ministry settings requires extraordinary intentionality. Credit hours dedicated directly to counseling in typical Master of Divinity (M.Div.) programs are limited (2-4 credit hours or 3% of the M.Div. degree). Curricular elements dedicated to counseling must be a) strategically selected; b) linked seamlessly with other seminary mission priorities; and c) flexible to fit the outcome expectations of shepherds who will likely move through various positions to fulfill their ministry calling. A brief model to guide these curricular decisions is considered (i.e. theological worldview; philosophy of ministry; person; and process). The emphasis is on curriculum features that target educational outcomes to equip the shepherd to shape congregational care, including the use of pastoral counseling, in a manner consistent with the Gospel as understood through an evangelical theological lens.

## I. COUNSELING CARE AND EVANGELICAL MINISTRY LEADERS

Imagine the following four statements spoken by a parishioner to his pastor following worship, only steps away from the coffee cart.

- “Pastor, thank you for a wonderful sermon. It is such a blessing to hear what Scripture really teaches. God intends marriage to be a covenant between a man and a woman.”
- “Pastor, how would you connect your biblical teaching on marriage to the rapid acceptance of same sex marriages throughout our nation?”
- “Pastor, would you pray for me? I have an important person in my life, not living for the Lord, who is struggling with an identity as a homosexual.”
- “Pastor, I need to speak with you about a deeply personal matter. My son is actively leading a gay lifestyle. He and his partner will soon marry. As a parent and a Christian, my insides are being torn to shreds over how to relate to my adult child and only son, whom I still love with all my heart.”

Recognize that in each variation, the parishioner disclosure increases in personal intensity. What may not be transparent is the underlying dimension of trust in pastoral capacity to shepherd. Confidence in a pastor’s readiness to provide support, guidance with excellence, sensitivity, and biblical discernment must exist *before* a parishioner’s conversation proceeds from superficial coffee-hour chatter to heart-wrenching conversation. Christ-followers struggle over how to live out the Gospel in a pagan, individualistic society. The key distinction between these statements does not relate to authoritative biblical content. The primary issue is the nature of the relationship

that binds parishioner to pastor, sheep to shepherd, and perspective counselee to pastoral counselor.<sup>3</sup>

- Is this preacher my bible teacher, spiritual director, discipleship mentor, *and* pastor?
- Is my pastor trustworthy, safe, compassionate, authentic and approachable on sensitive personal matters?
- Do I have an inner conviction that my pastor will partner with the Holy Spirit and speak to form my Christian identity when trials surface?

Congregants weigh the hope of provision against the risk of shame associated with candid interpersonal exposure before expressing critical needs. This paper addresses how seminaries can prepare ministry leaders with the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) curriculum to nurture congregational trust and invite counseling dialogue. Shepherds must demonstrate a heart prepared to offer benevolent nurture and the wisdom to prudently deliver conscientious counsel.

## II. EVANGELICAL SEMINARIES AND COUNSELING ROLE CONTROVERSY

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<sup>3</sup> On March 8, 2012, the board of directors for the National Association of Evangelicals adopted a Code of Ethics for pastors. Most service professions have a published code of ethics to clarify practice expectations and to specify how to manage potential person-role-client conflicts. This is a first for evangelical pastors. The code includes five primary admonitions grounded on biblical priorities: pursue integrity, be trustworthy, seek purity, embrace accountability, and facilitate fairness. Explicit statements on trust call for pastors to “model the trustworthiness of God”...“Keep promises”...“demonstrate a commitment to the well-being of the entire congregation”... and “Guard confidences carefully. Inform a person in advance, if possible, when an admission is about to be made that might legally require the disclosure of that information.” The issuance of such a code of ethics and its explicit content are evidence that pastors cannot take trust for granted or assume that this honor flows automatically from the pastoral role to the one actually shepherding. Sarah Kropp, “Press Release: NAE Releases Code of Ethics for Pastors,” *National Association of Evangelicals*, Access Date, October 10, 2012, <http://www.nae.net/resources/news/763-press-release-nae-releases-code-of-ethics-for-pastors>.

Decades of passionate debate amidst Christian theological leaders on the legitimacy, scope, and authority of counseling has not achieved consensus on whether or not this service is a critical function of the pastoral role.<sup>4</sup> There is ample evidence that folks in the pew wish that they could speak with their spiritual leaders and obtain quality help. Research suggests that this preference is strong amongst Protestants, even stronger for regular service attendees, and highest amongst those who hold theological convictions about the priority of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, these expectations are rarely realized when pastoral guidance is regulated by pre-determined limits, patterned after antiquated policies, or narrowly construed as spiritual prescriptions for problem/crisis remediation. Accordingly, the M.Div. counseling curriculum would do well to increase consideration of recognizing mental health concerns, ministry ethics, skill competencies, stewardship of resources, and methods to cultivate caring communities.

Is pastoral counseling a professional specialization or a routine ministerial function? Do pastors serve as gateways for referral or is it their duty to oversee a congregational level helping endeavor? These can be contentious issues. Proponents of opposing views tend to split over how

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<sup>4</sup> M.Div. degrees typically segregate counseling coursework from pastoral duties and practical theology. In fact, counseling courses often originate from separate departments. This structural element implies that counseling is not perceived as a customary pastoral duty but is instead a specialty skill. Despite trends, it is the contention across these ETS 2012 papers that the evangelical tradition of pastors providing biblical nurture, care and counsel is worthy of revitalization.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher G. Ellison, Margaret L. Vaaler, Kevin J. Flannelly and Andrew L. Weaver investigated factors that contribute to viewing clergy as frontline mental health workers. The most potent predictor for the perception that clergy are a key mental health resource was the respondent's position on biblical interpretation. Those who hold the Bible as literal rate pastors as the professional of choice for counseling support ("The Clergy as a Source of Mental Health Assistance: What Americans Believe," *Review of Religious Research* 48 [2006] 190-211).

to define professional boundaries and the implementation of biblical authority in counseling.<sup>6</sup> Evangelical seminaries serve pastoral leaders well when these artificial and destructive dichotomies are rejected. For example, perspectives differ on the division of labor between those with specialized training as mental health professionals (MHPs) and clergy serving as congregational pastors. MHPs and evangelical pastoral counselors offer distinct services that do not need to compete.<sup>7</sup> It is more productive to cultivate a coherent perspective on how helping services can shift back and forth as a hand-off or mutual effort without relinquishing one's role or responsibility. Pastoral counseling and mental health care can be viewed as cooperative ventures along the lines of a primary care provider and medical specialist.

Another example is the debate over what authoritative content should establish the framework, language, and direction of a counseling exchange. Often, thick walls are constructed between revelation, evidence-based medicine, and social science. It is the view of this writer that a far better approach is to recognize that the authoritative content for a particular counseling experience will reflect the unique features and priorities of the problem, participants, and setting.<sup>8</sup> Pastoral counseling within an evangelical ministry is primarily concerned with spiritual

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<sup>6</sup> David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> There is evidence that the general public is more prone to view clergy as the appropriate source of help when consolation or guidance is the main concern, while severe mental health matters are a better fit for the skill set of MHPs. Those with higher levels of education are more likely to make such distinctions (Ellison et al, "The Clergy as a Source of Mental Health Assistance", 203).

<sup>8</sup> For an extensive discussion of this perspective, see Chapter 10: "Conceptualization and Contextualization" in Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy Sisemore's (Eds), *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

formation while mental health care targets optimal functional adjustment. Certainly there are no discrete lines to separate problems in living from mental health concerns. The primary knowledge base that informs care varies by setting and the receptivity of a particular client. Those who hold to an evangelical perspective require deep footings in a theological foundation. From a pastoral care perspective, parishioners are guided to submit all areas of life to the Word of God. Supplemental resources of support may lean on scientific, medical, behavioral or pragmatic foundations as the pastor deepens the lived experience of identity in Christ through clarification of a Word-centered, evangelical worldview.

M.Div. students enter seminary with a general sense of calling, a personal dedication to grow spiritually, and an earnest desire to become a proficient ministry leader.<sup>9</sup> At admission, only one third of M.Div. students intend to become congregational pastors.<sup>10</sup> Upon completion, the number of graduates who plan to move directly into parish ministry is still under half.<sup>11</sup> Since 50% of M.Div. degree recipients serve outside a congregational role, the degree's counseling component must address the broad purpose of equipping Christian leaders to serve in a wide assortment of positions. These future leaders anticipate a variety of roles across their career. When it comes to a model for counseling and the acquisition of requisite skills, evangelical

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<sup>9</sup> This writer holds the traditional view that the M.Div. remains the ultimate professional degree for congregational pastors. This does not necessitate that this is the exclusive career path for those with this degree.

<sup>10</sup> "Entering Student Questionnaire: Total School Profile. 2011-2012 [pdf document]," *Association of Theological Schools 2012*, <http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Student/Pages/EnteringStudentQuestionnaire.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> "Graduating Student Questionnaire: Total School Profile. 2011-2012 [pdf document]," *Association of Theological Schools (2012)*, <http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Student/Pages/GraduatingStudentQuestionnaire.aspx>.

students do have expectations for the M.Div. curriculum.<sup>12</sup> Students anticipate that their M.Div. will prepare them to: 1) enter as dialogue partners in counseling sessions that honor a Christian theological worldview; 2) respect the social/cultural/political/medical and regulatory climate that does impose ethical stipulations and guidelines; and 3) function as effective spiritual leaders for saints and seekers who may require occasional counsel or intensive pastoral support.

Credit hours dedicated directly to counseling in typical M.Div. programs are limited (2-4 credit hours or 3% of the M.Div. degree).<sup>13</sup> A single course cannot train leaders and pastors for the vast range of potential counseling scenarios across cultures. Nor can it provide encyclopedic depictions on how to speak with theological acumen into the range of complexities associated with modern living. However, one course can effectively provide a sequence of guided experiences that assist students to consolidate theological learning on pastoral care, stir creative ministry imagination, and prompt reflection on effective interpersonal engagement. Emphasis can be placed on the development of a lifelong plan to increase shepherding insight and how to provide reasonable counsel along the way. Students can participate in guided learning activities to facilitate self-assessment regarding readiness to undertake intensive and productive interpersonal contact. Students can learn ways to survey needs and identify resources within a

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<sup>12</sup> Those who aspire to be advanced pastoral counselors do seek additional training. Ministry generalists tend to rely on the standard M.Div. to obtain basic counseling skills. Three obstacles make this difficult: a) limited exposure to counseling in required courses; b) the separation between knowledge domains such as theological studies and practical theology; c) the separation between academic scholarship and ministry praxis. See Kelvin F. Mutter, "Seminary-based Pastoral Counseling Education for Ministry Generalists: A Preliminary Assessment of Pedagogical Methods," *Biblical Higher Education Journal* 12 (2012) 67-80.

<sup>13</sup> Michael W. Firmin and Mark Tedford, "An Assessment of Pastoral Counseling Courses in Seminaries Serving Evangelical Baptist Students," *Review of Religious Research* 48 (2007) 420-427.



congregation and its surrounding community. Finally, students can consider with theological discernment how to best provide faith-nurturing, prudent, and effective care across the wide spectrum of human need. This customized perspective on helping ministry is relevant to the diverse careers that today's M.Div. participants are likely to pursue.

### III. DEFINING PASTORAL COUNSELING AND ITS OBJECTIVE

1. *Generic Counseling.* A panel of thirty helping experts, representing diverse counseling organizations, were called upon to reach consensus on a definition of secular counseling. It took a year to affirm the following declaration: "Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals."<sup>14</sup> Notice the insistence that counseling is a professional relationship. This conveys the critical implication that common standards and a code of ethics direct counselor role, function, and practice. It is noteworthy that the core purpose of counseling is empowerment. Evangelicals may not find this particular definition agreeable, nor its implications consistent with biblical priorities. Nevertheless, this represents a 'best practice' definition in the broadest sense. It is unequivocal that such a definition shapes the benchmarks for effective care for counseling practice in the contemporary cultural, political, legal, and consumer-oriented context.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> J Rollins, "Making definitive progress: 20/20 delegates reach consensus on definition of counseling," *Counseling Today Online*, June 2010, Access date March 14, 2011, <http://www.counseling.org/Publications/CounselingTodayArticles.aspx?AGuid=dd8a7048-4433-45e8-85ce-7b42d0b777a4>.

<sup>15</sup> The NAE Code of Ethics for pastors (2012) has guidelines that speak to counseling. Under the heading of "Facilitate Fairness," pastors are to "assume responsibility for congregational health" and "when asked for help beyond personal competence, refer others to those with requisite expertise" Kropp, "Press Release: Code of Ethics".

2. *Christian Counseling*. Counseling that sets out to be wholeheartedly Christian can modify the purpose of helping dialogues to include outcomes such as fostering spiritual formation, pursuit of sanctification, and optimizing faith development. Educating clients and securing consent in order to include these priorities is essential. Clarifying expectations allows helpers to express with integrity the type of empowerment that Christian partnerships will seek and the range of spiritual processes that the counselor agrees to stimulate. Counseling participants who hold to a Word-centered worldview require that such a wisdom quest or change-oriented discussion must intentionally be infused with biblical themes and principles.

3. *Pastoral Counseling*. The definition of counseling should be nuanced further to describe a pastor/parishioner encounter. Pastoral counseling for evangelicals carries distinct implications. Specifically, the doctrine, tradition, values, and resources of the faith community will inform not only the tone of the conversation but its intended outcomes (Eph 4:14-16).<sup>16</sup> Gospel-oriented pastoral care replaces the central helping goal of personal empowerment with the shepherding priority of Christian identity formation. *Pastoral counseling becomes a strategic conversation in a delineated relationship to promote the expansion of the mind and heart of Jesus Christ within participants*. Given the dramatic chasm between contemporary professional

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<sup>16</sup> The issue of fees is an extremely critical element that is often in the background. Standard secular counseling and most Christian counseling follows the medical/professional model of fee-for-service. Pastoral counseling tends in evangelical circles to be a benefit of congregational affiliation. Clergy are paid by the congregation, not hired by the individual client. The matter of who pays for the service not only shapes expectations, but has real world implications for outcome criteria. When pastoral counseling is offered for a fee, even one labeled “suggested donation” it becomes undistinguishable from standard secular or Christian counseling in terms of expectations. Pastoral counseling for a fee must consider carefully the matter of client autonomy versus counselor commitment to encourage adherence to community ethical standards.

and evangelical pastoral counseling, it is essential that M.Div. graduates recognize the vital importance of establishing a mutual understanding with clients on these parameters. Ministry counseling is not actually a ‘free’ service. Rather, it is a support benefit derived from community affiliation. Thus, it is grounded in the tradition, doctrine, and values of the faith community. It is imperative that M.Div. graduates implement informed consent procedures to ensure that counselees are aware of distinctives and intended direction.<sup>17</sup>

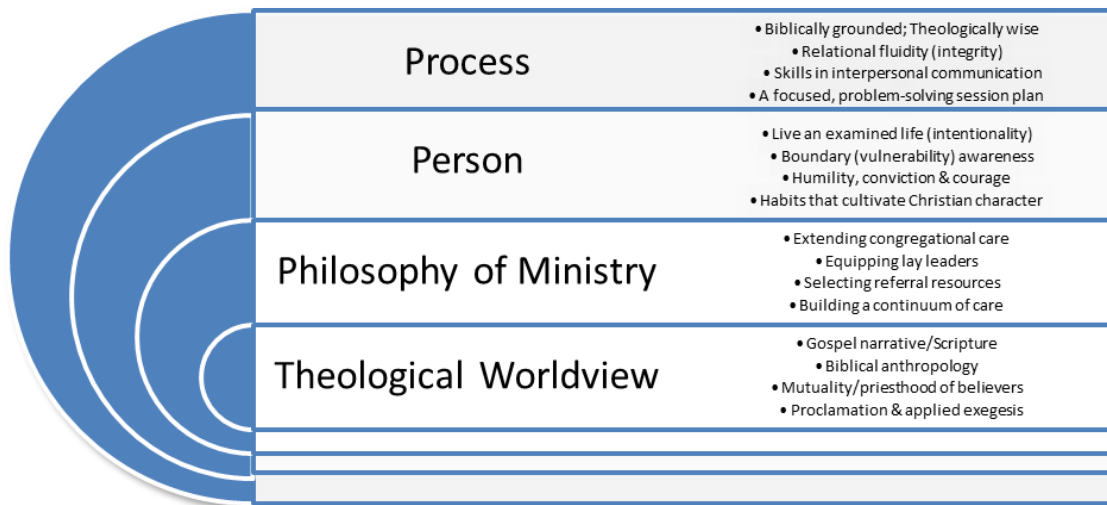


Figure 1: Model for an Evangelical M.Div. Counseling Curriculum

### III. THEOLOGICAL WORLDVIEW

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<sup>17</sup> There is an extensive co-curricular certification utilized by mainline seminaries to further training of pastoral counselors known as Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) (<http://www.acpe.edu>). Coverage of this didactic and intensive clinical training program is not covered in this paper. One embedded value in CPE is to respect the autonomy of patients regarding their spirituality and faith direction. In this regard, CPE runs in a direction parallel to mainstream mental health practice and thus does not fall under the heading of evangelical pastoral care as defined here. There are evangelicals who benefit from this extensive, well-developed training paradigm. However, since one intended outcome of CPE training is to remove the imposition of an external theological dogma from counseling, I suggest that CPE endorses the consensus counseling definition and not the alternative pastoral focus offered here.

The M.Div. backbone in evangelical seminaries is the construction of a sophisticated Christian theological worldview grounded in sufficient expositional expertise. Thus, M.Div. students come to counseling courses equipped with competence to deliver applied biblical exegesis. The curricular challenge for training to counsel is to offer experiences that cultivate high level listening proficiency and case conceptualization capability before the exegetical results are applied via pastoral authority. Pastoral caregivers must discern the distinction between defending the meaning of the text and discovering with counselees the significance of the text for wise living that will honor Christ. Sermon summations, biblical illustrations, and personal anecdotes may contribute to brilliant monologue. Too often, these techniques are deficient for counseling since they derail genuine dialogue and detract from a supportive experience. Counseling relationships that grow out of a shepherding relationship generally favor priestly (intercessory) over prophetic (admonishing) interactions.<sup>18</sup> The beauty of the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration narrative is that God's people are vitally important to this progressive story. Counseling within this framework becomes intentional conversation where followers of Jesus Christ unite their personal story with the outworking of God's activity. Autobiography is transformed into a dynamic theodrama where pastoral counselors coach believers to speak and act the mind of Christ in everyday living (Vanhoozer, 2010).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Warren J. Heard, "Wiseman, Pastor, Prophet, Priest: Tailoring Your Counseling Style," *Christian Counseling Today* 1 (1993) 10-14.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KN: Westminster John Knox, 2005). For a targeted treatment of theodrama and counseling see Vanhoozer's "Forming the performers: How Christians can use canon sense to bring us to our (theodramatic) senses," *Edification: Journal of the Society of Christian Psychology*, 4 (2010) 5-16 and Stephen P. Greggo's

Theological and biblical content exploration is limited within a typical M.Div. counseling course. This is not because it is unessential but because doctrine is given such extensive attention elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> It may be useful to reflect further on select theological matters that directly inform the methodologies to deliver congregational and pastoral care. The following Reformation imperatives continue to prevail in evangelical settings:

- 1) *Mutuum colloquium fratrum*, the priesthood of all believers, is a core evangelical worldview priority. Evangelicals proclaim mutual submission, brotherly dialogue, body life, and living in community as an outward demonstration of being a member of the bride of Christ.<sup>21 22</sup>
- 2) *Cura animarum*, the care (nurture) and cure (healing) of souls, is foremost a function of the outpouring of the Word through the body of Christ.

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“Forming the Performers: Canon Sense and “Common Sense”,” *Edification: Journal of the Society of Christian Psychology*, 4 (2010) 20-23.

<sup>20</sup> For theological orientation to counseling, see Robert W. Kellemen, *Soul Physicians: A Theology of Soul Care and Spiritual Direction* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2007). Alternative perspectives can be found in Gary R. Collins, *The Biblical Basis of Christian Counseling for People Helpers*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993) or James R. Beck & Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Hans Martin Dober, “What can the Pastor Learn from Freud? A Historical Perspective on Psychological and Theological Dimensions of Soul Care,” *Christian Bioethics* 16 (2010) 61-78.

<sup>22</sup> Mutual dialogue can be the basis for congregational care as redeemed human beings realize what it means to participate in loving community. Support networks can become a priority for the body of Christ when community is recognized as a manifestation of Shalom. See Stephen P. Greggo, *Trekking Toward Wholeness: A Resource for Care Group Leaders*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008).

- 3) *Sola Scriptura*, the principle that Scripture is the source and final authority for faith and practice, remains central.<sup>23</sup> Evangelicals are to be known as people of the book. M.Div. students recognize that pastoral care flows from and perpetually returns to a biblical framework for the Word informs Christian identity and praxis.
- 4) Common or general grace is an area that M.Div. learners need to consider in reference to pastoral care.<sup>24</sup> Believers can benefit from the reasoning, expertise and helping efforts and strategies of human beings who are not overtly recognized as members of the household of faith. Such human discovery is an outpouring of God's grace.

The reference to the doctrine of common grace is not to set the stage to introduce humanistic theories or social science dogma into core of pastoral care.<sup>25</sup> Rather, one's convictions on these matters will inform the extent of congregational engagement with medical specialists, community agencies, and publicly supported social services. M.Div. students should ponder when, how, and to what extent the pastor and the fellowship of believers should serve as the exclusive helping resource. Are believers reluctantly permitted or actively encouraged to participate in services that derive legitimacy outside of the congregation and neighboring faith

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<sup>23</sup> James R. Beck, "Sola Scriptura: Then and Now," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 16, no. 4 (1997) 293-302.

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975/1559), 237-238.

<sup>25</sup> It would be useful for M.Div. scholars to recognize the range of views on how to relate revelation to material gleaned from disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, and in particular, psychology. This is particularly helpful for ministry leaders when generating lists of MHPs to whom they are comfortable to refer. See Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy Sisemore (Eds), *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012) and Eric Johnson (Ed), *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

communities? Examples would be programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), publicly-supported career coaching, medically-oriented infertility counseling and psychiatric services.

This is not a mere pragmatic issue. Rather, boundaries for such referrals will emerge from one's theological convictions on how the Lord currently attends to the needs of his saints in our culture with its sophisticated medical and social welfare systems. Future ministry leaders must form a theological position on when, who, and to what extent they will cooperative with the wide array of helping services. No matter what parameters are subsequently established by the MDiv graduate, the curriculum fosters the view that the spiritual leader keeps close contact with members of the flock. This is not a plan to refer and release; it is a vision to collaborate and retain. The pastor remains responsible to interface spiritual formation with other professional services to nurture Christian growth. Pastoral discourse with parishioners can discern wisdom on how these special services might contribute more and compete less with the ministry of the Word under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

#### IV. PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

M.Div. students pose questions in counseling courses to determine explicit policies.

- Should the office door be opened or closed when counseling?
- Is it best to have my wife or the church secretary sit in on sessions with women?
- Since preaching is my priority, does pastoral counseling end after three sessions?

Before drafting policy statements, it is critical to equip seminarians to formulate and to take ownership of a comprehensive philosophy of ministry that makes explicit links between counseling activity and pastoral care.

M.Div. students also want to know what to say in response to dramatic requests.

- "Pastor, long ago I fell out of love with my husband but stayed for the children."

- “Our son was arrested for selling controlled substances at school and the district plans to enforce its zero tolerance policy.”
- “My employer claims that I use company technology to access pornographic material.”
- “The specialist told us that without extensive assisted reproductive procedures, we will continue to suffer infertility.”
- “After our daughter’s cutting incidents and hospitalization, the psychiatrist informed us that she is mentally ill with a bipolar disorder.”

Again, a solid, theologically-grounded, philosophy of ministry to guide the shepherd’s response is essential. It is worthwhile to assist future ministry leaders to visualize the faces of those who will utter these words. The voices who will make these dramatic disclosures will be members of the elder board, gifted performers on the worship team, bible study leaders, and the quiet couple who consistently sits in the fourth pew in the second service. Once a realistic portrait of the scope and severity of counseling concerns is understood, sufficient angst may provoke a critical teachable moment. This is not the time to drill down on the old tune “refer, refer, and again I say refer.” These folks come to a ministry leader for direction and support, not merely to consult a gatekeeper to services. Making a referral reflects a ministry leader’s ongoing commitment to partner with parishioners and put together the best possible team to produce change.

The M.Div. curriculum can offer a rubric to categorize concerns along a continuum of service level response that connects needs with care options in the congregation and beyond.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This is often the juncture in the curriculum when future ministers are introduced to the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (<http://www.dsm5.org>). This nosology is an important tool for MHPs. The merit of a cursory review for ministry leaders beyond its existence and structure is debatable. The net effect too often is to overwhelm and discourage pastors. They exit counseling courses



One useful framework draws from the field of public health.<sup>27</sup> Primary prevention builds competencies and resources within a general population before a particular need, disease, or disruption occurs. Secondary prevention offers education and support for a narrower population pool with known risk factors but who have not yet had the full experience of a crisis. Tertiary prevention is aimed at those who are affected by a tragic event, sudden crisis or illness. Services seek to reduce adverse consequences and complications by managing the long-term effects. Developing a continuum of care perspective allows ministry leaders to recognize that ministry counseling is not about a crisis response. Counseling entails extending instruction and care before, during, and after life disruptions, transitions, or tragic events. Ministry programming can ideally address needs at the primary and secondary prevention levels. Solid biblical preaching is a prime example of primary prevention because it cultivates a lifestyle of vibrant relationships and an abundant spiritual life. Seminars, support groups, topical bible studies, and programs such as Celebrate Recovery exemplify secondary prevention and offer terrific ministry opportunities for lay leaders. Further, to single handedly take on the responsibility to remediate a major crisis might easily overwhelm a single pastor or an entire congregation. However, providing tertiary prevention in the form of direct assistance and spiritual nurture is central to normal Christian community life. This epidemiological perspective respects the notion that our purpose and mission is to be with one another for the long-term, including before, during, and after adversity. Counting our blessings in the Christian life is never a means to avoid suffering or avert conditions that may produce a trial (Jas 1:2-12).

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with a sense of being ill-equipped to digest its medical terminology and conceptualizations. Given the biological and medical implications, there are few options but to hand off parishioners via referral.

<sup>27</sup> Greggo, *Trekking*, 93-106.

The continuum of service rubric may be poorly portrayed as a ladder with specialized care esteemed on the upper end (i.e. inpatient or outpatient psychiatric care) and lay level support minimized on the lower (i.e. fellow parishioner bringing a meal and prayer to the bereaved). My conviction is that each distinct service layer has restorative merit as well as its optimal season. Thus, it is best to see a holistic continuum of care as multiple layers available across public and private systems available in a given community. Each resource meets a particular service level and should be not seen as hierarchical, competitive, or exclusive. Once the inherent benefits along with any potential faith risks are understood, ministry leaders can evaluate what critical Christian resources need to be in place. These supports may replace a select service option or perhaps supplement care to sustain a person through a period of distress. This includes pastoral counseling designed to contribute to the cultivation of Christian character. When an outside specialist offers expertise but does not share the faith perspective of the congregation member, pastoral counseling may complement the necessary service.

A fruitful learning exercise for M.Div. students is to imagine beyond what a single pastor can deliver in one on one counseling sessions and creatively ponder how to network, team, and dialogue with theological purpose. The pastor remains the Christian worldview authority, a central resource for biblical direction, and the congregational representative who facilitates engagement with the body of Christ. Pastors encourage Christ followers to draw from the Word as a tree planted by streams of water (Ps 1). This can produce an optimistic and realistic view of what can be offered via direct pastoral encounters. For example, a ministry leader can provide pivotal sessions to a couple working through severe communication issues in professional marital therapy. The intent would be to advance biblical comprehension of the marital covenant, promote mutual submission, foster forgiveness, and escort the search for wisdom. The pastor

counselor would avoid plodding recklessly through intricate relational ruptures and strains on a weekly basis. Or, a youth pastor could accompany parents to a tense session with their son's probation officer to demonstrate fruit of the Spirit, such as patience. This can sustain the parental determination necessary to defuse the stormy outbursts of a defiant adolescent.

## V. PERSON

In *Shared Wisdom: Use of Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Cooper-White writes: "The intersubjective space created between two persons in the pastoral relationship is sacred space. We enter with awe, with fear and trembling."<sup>28</sup> This realization promotes humility. It offers a central premise to establish trust with parishioners when engaging in the type of communication that constitutes counseling. Pastoral counseling can offer more than *informational support*, defined as communication that offers guidance or direction to a valuable resource. There is the opportunity to convey *emotional support*, that is, the communication of compassion and love for one another. As a representative of the Great Shepherd and of the congregation, emotional support in pastoral care can have a tremendous effect. *Instrumental support* is assistance that increases coping skills and conveys strength to complete a task or make change.<sup>29</sup> When the Holy Spirit is called upon as a partner in counseling, imagine the implications of how instrumental support can be realized.

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<sup>28</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom: Use of Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Minneapolis, MY: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 129.

<sup>29</sup> These three support categories are common in the literature. The definitions here were drawn from Barbara R. Sarason and Steve Duck (Ed), *Personal Relationships: Implications for Clinical and Community Psychology* (New York: John Wiley, 2001). For an extended discussion of helping alliances from a ministry perspective see Greggo, *Trekking*, 133-180.

Evangelical M.Div. students are correctly trained to stimulate confidence in the power of the Word. It is also correct to recognize that messages from the Word, communicated in the close quarters of the counseling experience, are most effective when expressed through authentic, faithful, and empathetic helpers. This expands support from the informational sphere into the emotional and instrumental. As defined earlier, counseling is dialogue within a delineated, examined, and intentional relationship. The person in the role of counselor bears the weight of responsibility to clarify what it will take for the exchange to reach sufficient transparency, genuineness, and intimacy. The minister prepares to use ‘self’ by cultivating a high level of awareness and by inviting the presence of the Holy Spirit through prayerful openness. There is clarity within how one’s personal perspectives, cultural filters, background experiences, and current stressors could have an adverse impact on any given interpersonal encounter. Put succinctly through the use of loaded psychological terms, the helper must recognize the potential dangers of transference and learn how to manage counter-transference.<sup>30</sup> Most pastoral counseling is brief and focuses on situational or formation matters. Thus, working through these dense relational dynamics is not typically a source of exploration. Nonetheless, the pastoral

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<sup>30</sup> This is basic acknowledgement of the complexity and messiness that can accompany a close interpersonal encounter. There is no intent in the M.Div. curriculum to suggest that proficiency in the use of these dynamics is an aspect of ordinary pastoral counseling. Rather, there is a distinction made between management of transference elements and the intention use of intense or underlying interpersonal strains. The use of these dynamics is appropriate for counselors with adequate training, supervision, and experience. This message is conveyed to M.Div. students. This does not elevate the use of these human relational forces as the ultimate in care. Rather, these are respected resources available to those who must address the effects of sin manifesting as mental illness and personality excesses or deficiencies. See Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*.

counselor should at least be cognizant of the potential to contaminate the sacred space of the between when there is a lack of discipline, attentiveness, and spiritual congruity within.<sup>31</sup>

## VI. PROCESS

The M.Div. counseling course can define the basic features of the helping conversation process, that is, the common sequence of stages and interpersonal elements that facilitate change. Students need to recall the conversation between Jesus and Peter regarding the care and feeding of his sheep (John 21: 15-19). They will benefit from meditation on the biblical images of the Holy Spirit serving as Divine Counselor, the one who strengthens and consoles (John 14:16-21). They can learn that the theme of biblical hospitality informs how they welcome, refresh, and contribute to the restoration of those who become weary on life's journey. There are ample passages to ground a biblical theology for the helping conversation.<sup>32</sup> This biblical platform is the compassionate foundation on which to place practical instructions on matters such as how to arrange the office environment, use body language, prepare clients for counseling via advanced instruction, and explain the limits of confidentiality. There are numerous important elements to foster reasonable helping conversations. Students are in a good position to internalize a basic problem-solving flow chart that can function as a generic helping framework. The phases of

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<sup>31</sup> In my own M.Div. counseling course, there is a long pause when discussing readiness of the self to conduct counseling in order to clarify the risks associated with interpersonal intimacy. This is a critical opportunity to raise awareness of vulnerabilities, recognition of burnout, boundaries, and practices that promote sexual purity. Essentially, there is a call to practice "safe" intimacy and to grow in awareness of one's own susceptibilities. This accountability to the Lord and parishioner well-being is itself a commitment to dependence on the Word.

<sup>32</sup> For an example, see Richard E. Averbeck, "Creation and Corruption, Redemption and Wisdom: A Biblical Theology Foundation for Counseling Psychology," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 25 no. 2 (2006) 111-126.

counseling such as assessment, exploration, understanding or conceptualization, action, and evaluation are common ones to introduce and illustrate.

Evangelical pastors do have expertise to handle the Word. Depriving parishioners of this resource would be negligent. Overuse of this important strength can elevate the risk to adopt a paternalistic posture towards those with less biblical insight. In order to guard against inadvertently conveying a destructive or unproductive superiority, ministers who come alongside to comfort as representative of the Holy Spirit do well to exercise consistent effort to examine motives, monitor implementation of one's shepherding role, and be vigilant in the exercise of one's best interpersonal skills. It is not feasible to survey and improve the full spectrum of helping skills within the parameters of a single M.Div. counseling course (e.g. empathetic listening, immediacy, confrontation, and self-disclosure).<sup>33</sup> What is realistic is to require participation and a visual recording of a simulated helping experience. This is followed with systematic self-review supplemented by peer and expert feedback on the natural expression of appropriate listening skills and interviewing techniques. Interpersonal skills can be fine-tuned to exhibit relational fluidity, that is, helper awareness and flexibility to attune to the client's style of engagement. The M.Div. candidate can evaluate their interpersonal readiness for counseling relationships in their future and make concrete plans to remediate deficiencies, groom strengths, and sharpen ones that need improvement. They may elect to do additional coursework, attend a

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<sup>33</sup> See Gerard Egan's *The Skilled Helper: A Problem-Management and Opportunity-Development Approach to Helping 9<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2010), David R. Evans, Margret T. Hearn, Max R. Uhlemann & Allen E. Ivey, *Essential Interviewing: A Programmed Approach to Effective Communication 7<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Brooks/Cole, 2008), or Robert W. Kelleman, *Spiritual Friends: A Methodology of Soul Care and Spiritual Direction* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 2007).

workshop, enter a pastoral internship with counseling accountability, or pursue a self-directed professional development plan.

When a shepherd offers any directive, consolation, or reflection for spiritual formation in evangelical pastoral counseling, it is appropriate that Spirit guided, well-timed, and uniquely targeted exegesis is applied. Wisdom from the Word flows through the relationship established in these heightened conversations. After all, pastoral counseling sets out to bring the best Christian theology, church tradition, and biblical wisdom to invigorate saints and invite seekers to display the mind of Christ.

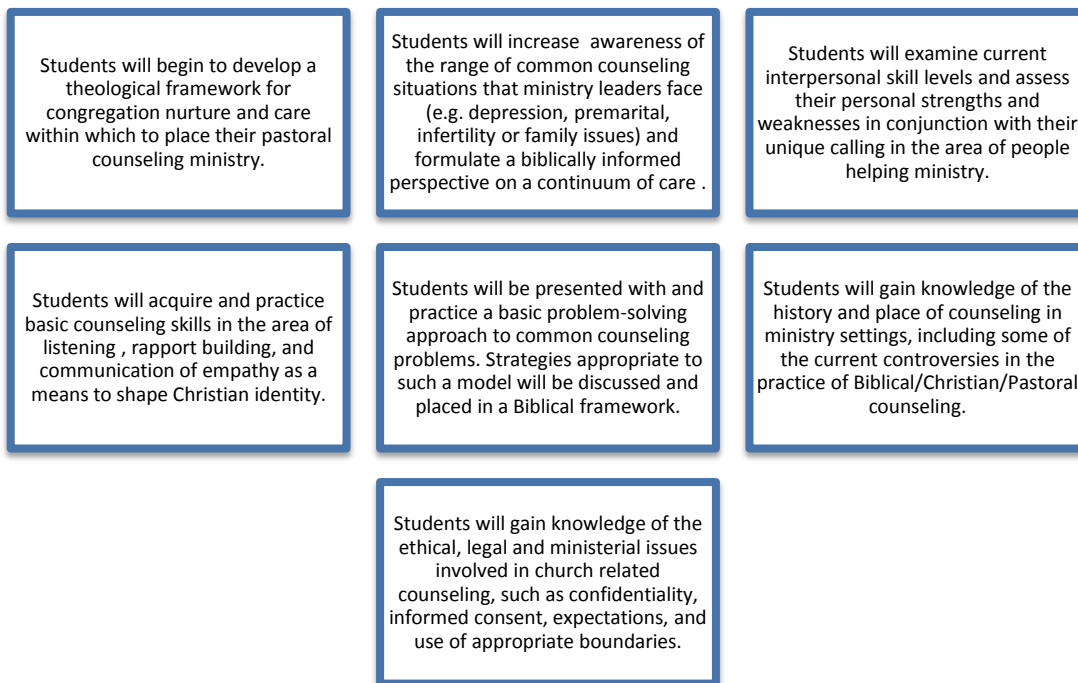


Figure 2: Sample M.Div. Learning Objectives for Counseling

## VI. CONCLUSION: CONNECT COUNSELING TO THE TOTAL CURRICULUM

The essential objectives for the M.Div. counseling curriculum are not designed to provide comprehensive training in pastoral counseling. Rather, the emphasis is in on a sequence of learning experiences that will consolidate a foundation for the ministry generalist, the shepherd who will care for souls. This is an approach to cultivate ministry vision for ongoing personal and

professional development. The curriculum is grounded on critical themes distinctive of evangelical theology. It moves through ways to realize these priorities in contemporary ministry settings and communities to address far ranging parishioner needs. The curriculum concludes with preparation of the ministry professional to manage and use self in constructive, intentional, and biblically informed helping dialogues.

This is an ambitious undertaking.<sup>34</sup> The credit allocation for counseling within the M.Div. is not likely to increase given contemporary pressures to streamline this degree. This is regrettable given the clear recognition that graduates feel ill equipped for the counseling demands imposed upon them in actual ministry. Three recommendations are offered to increase the potency of this curricular approach within the present limits.

Curriculum effectiveness could be significantly enhanced if there was less rigidity in course boundaries in the M.Div. Counselor educators should consider ways to strategically partner with instructors in other courses to achieve these objectives. More credit hours may not be feasible but there is potential for joint presentations surrounding key counseling concerns that arise in biblical studies, theology, missions, and church history. Why not include a counselor in a discussion of the exegesis of Matthew 18 on resolving conflicts? Or, when exploring biblical anthropology related to gender, vocation, and relationality? Pastoral counselor preparation needs to break out of its course constraints by linking to other curricular experiences. Multidisciplinary, case-based learning would indeed facilitate cross-talk and reduce the academic/praxis divide.

Next, the counseling learning objectives can be made clear to other M.Div. instructors so

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<sup>34</sup> The M.Div. counseling course that the author teaches routinely covers these objectives in a two credit offering. Students take at least one additional credit in a particular helping area. A good number take additional credits to sharpen interpersonal skills and to gain proficiency using a generic helping model to pursue a professional development plan.



that they can teach towards the desired outcomes. This is not to make counselors of all M.Div. instructors. Rather, discipline specialists should break into the counseling curriculum by shaping helpers who offer these services in their own courses. Church historians have much to contribute regarding the role of clergy impacting society as they care for congregations and communities. Mission experts can enlighten M.Div. students on cross-cultural communication pitfalls. This would help ministry generalists prepare to host successful conversations between ministers and counselees when there are cultural differences. Pastoral theologians can explore the link between preaching and counseling. There is continuity between creating a public teachable moment in the pulpit and using Christian hospitality in more private conversations. There is a need to stimulate faculty reflection on ways that each academic discipline can equip M.Div. students to gain counseling confidence and competency without increasing course requirements.

Finally, M.Div. students often have extended field placements. This is an optimal opportunity for pastoral consultations with counselor educators. It is when M.Div. students move from the classroom and into actual ministry that broken relationships and the impact of suffering on lives softens their hearts to consider best ministry practices in one-on-one situations. Learning to take advantage of counselor/pastoral partnerships in the form of case consultation has multiple benefits. It will not only foster attainment of the objectives offered here, it may also establish a pattern that will persist long into the minister's professional career.

Speaking as an evangelical seminary professor, these are *our* M.Div. students. Think back on the parishioner disclosers that began our discussion. Saints and seekers are anxious to share burdens with spiritual leaders but hold back due to a lack of trust. Parishioners need to gain confidence that those who preach and proclaim the Word are a viable and reliable helping resource when they are stagnating, struggling or suffering. Let us seek wisdom on how each

M.Div. discipline and curricular element can contribute to the effectiveness of our graduates in the personal aspects of ministry. Together we can prepare them to open their hearts and win the trust of the people under their pastoral care. Can this be done with only one M.Div. counseling course? There may be a need to lament and reevaluate curricular constraints. There is a definite need to hammer out united objectives and be intentional about outcomes.

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