

On Pastoral Counseling: Calling, Ministry, and Profession

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Good afternoon, Your Eminence, Rev. Fathers, and sisters and brothers in Christ. First, thank you to the St. Phoebe Center for the opportunity to be here together today and to speak to you about Pastoral Counseling. I will start by giving you a bit about my journey into ministry, then some nuts and bolts defining Pastoral Counseling and its role in the healing professions. Then I'll describe, as one example of what's possible, some features of my 20-year ministry as a Professional Pastoral Counselor. Finally, I'll touch on my musings about the potential for Pastoral Counseling Centers in the Church, and for Orthodox Deacon/nesses ordained to a specialized ministry.

I was born and raised Greek Orthodox and married in the Church. Orthodoxy is and always will be my home and family. After my youngest child started school, I began an intentional journey toward a calling which I had only glimmered in undergraduate school. Because I had a family in Denver, I could only consider local schools for my theological education, since there were no online or distance programs back in the day in the 1980s. So I earned an M.Div. in Pastoral Counseling at our nearby Methodist School of Theology, and my saint of a husband supported me patiently, even though we were both pretty baffled about why God called an Orthodox woman to do an M.Div. with the Methodists and then try to find a job!

Around 1989 the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) changed their certification requirements. The previous requirement had been that you must be an ordained pastor or priest to become Professionally Certified. When that broadened to include laypersons who are endorsed by their religious communion, I immediately began my field supervision with AAPC, and in 1993 was graciously given an endorsement for my

Professional Certification as a Pastoral Counselor and Hospice/Health Care Chaplain by His Eminence Metropolitan Isaiah of Denver.

During my twenty-year ministry as a Pastoral Counselor, many people asked me, "What is Pastoral Counseling, anyway?" The short answer is it is a double discipline of theology and psychology focused on offering spiritual and psychological healing to those who seek it, in this, our American pluralistic setting.

Pastoral Counseling is not the same as Christian Counseling. Christian Counselors counsel you from and toward their own particular denominational perspective. Pastoral Counselors are trained to companion persons of all spiritual or religious backgrounds, respecting the client's own spiritual beliefs and practices.

As a Pastoral Counselor, you have to feel secure enough in your own theological grounding to venture out and learn not only good psychology and good listening skills, but also to gain familiarity with a range of other faiths, and the ability to translate your therapeutic responses into language and approaches which are not perceived as hostile to your client's belief system. I always think about Justin Martyr and the "spermatikos Logos" -- his famous quote: "The seed of the Logos is in all creation."

It's basically a matter of learning how to communicate with the Holy Spirit's presence and action in the life and circumstances of each client who asks for your help, with the dual goals of psychological healing as needed and spiritual transformation as the Spirit guides.

This differs from a straightforward psychology practice. Any good psychologist will never venture into discussing your value system, let alone your spiritual values, and rightly so.

They are trained to identify and remedy pathology, not trained for spiritual health.

Without such training, they could easily abuse clients and be sued for it. On the other end of the spectrum, there are many self-styled counselors out there who may bring any kind of training or no training at all to their counseling. They rely on intuition and/or techniques that match their own spiritual preferences, and are limited only by the laws of the State in which they practice. Both these extremes can be dangerous. I personally feel comfortable

referring people to counselors who are members of the AAPC because they have clear ethical guidelines for ministry in our pluralistic culture.

The AAPC website describes it this way: “Pastoral Counselors, as clinical mental health professionals, serve clients of any or no religious affiliation by integrating spiritual beliefs and practices with therapeutic process. They offer the guidance, skill, relationship, and information needed to promote psychological and spiritual growth and wholeness.”

My own Pastoral Counseling practice was as a staff member of Pastoral Counseling for Denver (PCD). At PCD, we had six to ten AAPC-trained Pastoral Counselors who serviced our offices in fourteen churches throughout metro Denver. Over time, my practice was housed in five different churches, two Lutheran, one Presbyterian, one Methodist, and one Disciples of Christ. At each of our church locations, the church would provide free office space, telephone, furnishings, office supplies, and security services. They also provided a fund which subsidized counseling fees for church members and their families, and provided a liaison Counseling Center Committee composed of church members, to promote and publicize the Center as well as fund-raise to replenish the church’s counseling subsidy fund.

In exchange, counselors would contract individually for their services to that church. In my case, this always included offering reduced fees to church members and their families, offering ten hours per year of workshops and retreats at no charge to the church, plus additional classes or events for fee, as requested. I also provided free consultation and counseling to the pastors and any paid staff members. In addition, I agreed to attend the weekly meeting of the church’s Pastoral Staff, where I would participate in planning church education and events, including community events.

I also was expected to participate in leading Sunday morning worship at least four times a year, so parishioners could become acquainted and comfortable with me and our Counseling Center. About 15% of my clients came from within the host church, the rest from the public community. In one church I served additionally as the Chaplain to their clean-and-sober Men’s Homeless Shelter, and in another I was their church’s representative to the Downtown Denver Council of Churches.

Founded by the Christian Reform Church (CRC), PCD had a contract with Quiet Waters Ministries, a national retreat center in Denver of the CRC dedicated to healing their CRC pastors and spouses when they were suffering from marital problems, personal mental health crisis, or burn-out. We provided them intensive daily one-on-one counseling over the duration of a two-week leave-of-absence from their parish.

During my time at PCD, we were contracted by two different local churches for reconciliation counseling for their parishioners after the traumatic removal of their pastor when the denomination discovered that he was a sexual predator abusing his power with the parish's women. We also were first responders to the Columbine School shooting and led several ongoing counseling groups there for a few years afterward.

By the grace of God and thanks to AAPC and the ecumenical community, I stumbled into a very rich and rewarding ministry. Secure in my Orthodox identity and praxis, I navigated the ecumenical community as the token "Orthodox woman in ministry" on many occasions. Frequently, I was able to witness for Orthodoxy in settings where our Priests could not or would not go.

What I personally missed the most was the companionship of peer Spiritual Care providers within my own faith. OCAMPR (Orthodox Christian Association of Medicine, Psychology and Religion) alleviated that need somewhat, but there weren't many of us, and we only met once a year. My priest provided as much spiritual support as he could. My parish could only appreciate me as a good candidate to teach Sunday School. Often I felt very isolated and sometimes even adrift.

But at a deeper level, my heart ached for another reason. Once, at an international Orthodox women's conference sponsored by the World Council of Churches just after the fall of Communism, I met some Orthodox women from Russia. They each told me stories of how they had endured the anguish of being forced to turn over their children to state-sponsored daycare and go to work in factories under Communism. They were overjoyed with the fact that finally, they could choose to stay home and raise their own children according to their own spiritual values.

This struck a chord with me. I realized the deep ache in me was because I felt my sisters and brothers got to stay home with mom while I was forced to go to Protestant daycare. I had to abandon my own Orthodox family as the only way to offer my pastoral talents for healing. Of course the Orthodox parishes continued just fine without my professional services. But I was grieving the fact that my call to ministry was not of much help to my Orthodox sisters and brothers, and was not part of our Church's ministry to reach out to the world in practical ways with Christ's healing message. Plus I missed the comfort of my own spiritual family's understanding and support in those deep places of human suffering where my ministry led me. We have the International Orthodox Christian Charities. Why not an Orthodox Christian Pastoral Counseling outreach? That would be "OCPC" ...? If not that, perhaps at least Orthodox Pastoral Assistants trained in Pastoral Counseling.

The depths of human suffering are very much with us in these times. I am glad to see that we as Orthodox are asking God to help us help each other in some new, open-ended ways. Today there are more options for Pastoral Counselor Training. We even have at least one Orthodox Training Center affiliated with AAPC: the Antiochian House of Studies, where I did my D.Min., offers a program for an Orthodox Masters in Theology in Pastoral Counseling. Plus the problems of isolation are largely overcome by the availability of modern technology.

The human spirit is very fragile and easy to break, but not impossible to repair. It can be not just mended by psychology, but also healed with the help of the Holy Spirit. But until our laypeople become more comfortable with the idea that someone besides the Priest might have valuable, trustworthy spiritual input for their lives, and until our clergy and hierarchs find value in our supporting them with our talents, opportunities for Pastoral Counselors within Orthodoxy may be few.

The timing for fresh approaches to age-old problems in modern form must seem good both to us and to the Holy Spirit. I do believe that when the Church is at a moment of readiness, ordination as a Deacon/ness to a special ministry of Pastoral Counseling could add ecclesial authority, mutual accountability, and shared spiritual responsibility to the ministry, while also making it more trusted by our parishioners. It could attend to the much-needed and

long-overdue woman-to-woman spiritual needs within the Church. The spiritual benefits to the Pastoral Counselor would likely also be significant. A diaconal ordination would attend to what Fr. John Chryssavgis has called “The Missing Link” in Orthodox ministry, augmenting the sacred ministries within the Church and extending the work of the Church further into the world.

There is a certain way to do ministry in a Western context, and a certain way to do ministry in an Orthodox context. In my experience, Orthodox Bishops discern and respect the movement of the Spirit in the grass roots of the Church. Orthodox hierarchs don’t give a blessing for great concepts or efficient plans. They give a blessing to the works of the Spirit that bear fruit for the salvation of souls.

The fruits of our ministries must provide grounds for a Bishop’s blessing, not just be a response to a Bishop’s blessing. That could start with one priest and parish council setting up one Pastoral Counseling Center with one trained and licensed Orthodox Pastoral Counselor in one Church – all in the same place, of course! Naturally, that would also require one courageous Bishop to give His blessing.

Then that might need to be replicated by another parish under a different Bishop, or in a second parish under the same Bishop, and so on, until there were enough Bishops at their Canonical Assembly meetings who could vouch for the fruits of such programs. That seems a likely, realistic path toward putting the matter of Pastoral Counseling as a form of Diaconal Ministry on the table. The key is to collaborate with your Bishop and willing clergy at the local level to make a plan for small prayerful steps, and begin.

Unless the Holy Spirit pulls out some wonderful surprise, or you all have a better idea, I believe this may be a way forward. At the gathering of the Assembly of Canonical Bishops one month ago, the first point of discussion was, “Cultivating the Bond of Love and Unity in Christ.” Of course, that is how we must always proceed as Orthodox Christians.

This will require a mature sense of humility, resiliency, faithfulness, commitment and obedience on the part of the Pastoral Counselors involved. We would not be making contracts, but rather covenants: I will be your Bishop, and you will be my Pastoral

Counseling Center. This obedience is important because Bishops have a tendency to introduce changes to our plans when they see ways to improve the ministry which we ourselves may not see.

In the year 2000 several people in this room and I together gave a conference called “Women Where Are You in the Life of the Church?” In attendance we had a statistically representative sample of women from the five largest American jurisdictions. Almost twenty years ago, 75% of those women responded to our survey saying they were ready NOW for the restoration of the Orthodox Deaconess.

The goal of providing for woman-to-woman Spiritual Counseling and trained professional Pastoral Counseling within the Church and the world is a worthy one. Today it is up to you, the next generation, to continue, and if God wills, see the efforts toward the diaconate for these ministries through to fruition. For whatever it’s worth, I offer you my blessing: pray as if it’s up to God, but work as if it’s up to you.