

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. (Isaiah 40:1)

The Past 75 Years of Counseling Methodology in the
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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In his allegorical masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne made several statements about the cause of mental and emotional ailments that were remarkably ahead of his time: “A bodily disease which we look upon as whole and entire within itself may, after all, be but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part.” But he goes on to say that the reverse may also be true: “For when the body’s sick and ill at ease, the mind doth often share in the disease.” In his own brilliant way Hawthorne was asking the very modern question, “where do mental and emotional problems come from and how much are they the result of spiritual problems?” This paper seeks to identify how Lutherans, particularly the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, have dealt with this question in the past seventy-five years (dating back to the 1930s), which roughly coincides with the emergence of the pastoral care movement.

1930s-1950s

The first half of the twentieth century was in many ways a cold time in America. Many tremendous advances were being made to improve the conditions of man’s life.

Americans, products of a modernist era, felt that they could accomplish anything they put their minds to through the use of logic and reason. However, two World Wars and a Great Depression later, scientific perception of the world and the God who had created it felt cold and heartless. Those who had lost loved ones, lost a fortune, or simply lost hope in the world were seeking guidance, preferably that which had God’s approval. “A survey conducted during the 1950s by the National Institute of Mental Health showed that 42% of all people who sought help for emotional problems turned first to their

ministers.”¹ Consequently, out of the late 1930s came a period in American history known as the “pastoral care movement.” Up until this time few theological schools had ever bothered to incorporate counseling courses that taught psychological methods in their curriculum. “By the 1950s, almost all of them did, over 80% were offering additional courses in psychology, and 80% could list at least one psychologist on their faculty.”² Several terms grew out of this era, suggesting how ministry was mutating to fit the needs of God’s people. One that has nearly dropped out of existence today, but is indicative of the spirit of the time was “pastoral psychiatry.” In his book published under this name in 1938, John Sutherland Bonnel defined “pastoral psychiatry” in this way:

Pastoral psychiatry is the ministry of pastors directed to the healing of the soul. It is distinguished from the practice of the psychiatrist and the physician by the fact that the pastor works to bring this parishioner into contact with God and the spiritual resources that flow from Him. A minister devoted to the service of God has neither the intention nor the desire to limit himself to the work of either the psychiatrist or the physician.³

It’s evident that Bonnel felt strongly about the high calling of pastor. He guarded pastors against “limiting” themselves to becoming mere psychiatrists, but rather to develop some of the simple skills of a psychiatrist and couple these with their already existing theological training. In his mind this would be the unstoppable strategy to curing emotional and mental problems, which were believed to have unquestionably stemmed from spiritual problems.

One of the dangers of this rapid advancement in psychological studies in ministries and at seminaries would be the lack of discernment in selecting methodology that coincided with the desired theology. Postwar pastoral theologians, which became

¹ Ibid., pg. 274

² Ibid, pg. 270

³ Bonnel, John Sutherland. *Pastoral Psychiatry*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938. Pg. 199

another term for pastoral counselor, often allowed themselves to be influenced by psychiatrists and psychologists who had vastly different views of religion and the state of mankind than Christian pastors. Carl Rogers, Sigmund Freud, and such revisionist Freudian analysts as Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, and Harry Stack Sullivan were among those regularly cited. “Following the lead of neo-Freudians, they (the psychiatrists just mentioned) adopted, explicitly or implicitly, an ethic of self-realization which defined growth as the primary ethical good.”⁴ The “growth” they sought, however, was not spiritual growth. It was the growth of the human being to reach his full potential in becoming whatever it is the human was destined to be. The embrace of one’s self, i.e. “acceptance”, would become one of the major themes in secular psychology, and eventually would spill over into American Christianity.

Despite an often negative spiritual influence from secular psychologists, Christian counselors benefited from several counseling methods and practices that became commonplace in this era, developed by these psychologists and psychiatrists. For instance, pastors were learning to “listen carefully to the parishioner who has come to talk.”⁵ The pastor had been carefully trained to talk, whether it be the Sunday morning sermon, Bible classes, Sunday school, teaching elementary school, or making visitations at home. The pastor, for many years, was often the most educated individual in a congregation. Therefore he had the most worthwhile things to say on a variety of topics, particularly when it came to spiritual matters. In the pastoral care movement, the pastor had to learn to occasionally keep his mouth shut. Sometimes the parishioner simply had to get things off of his/her chest and could figure out the problem without any advice.

⁴ Holifield, E. Brooks. *A History of Pastoral Care in America*. Pg. 276

⁵ Bonnel, John Sutherland. *Pastoral Psychiatry*. Pg. 56

The parishioner felt the compassion of a pastor who patiently sat and listened to the story and sympathized with the heartache. He would more likely come back for help when other problems arose. In addition, the pastoral care movement made it less of a taboo issue for someone to pay the pastor a visit. If people were coming in droves to visit the pastor, then one did not have to feel insecure about going, since everyone was doing it.

Although pastoral concern certainly existed prior to the pastoral care movement, in this era pastors seemed to really learn to be friendly to those who came seeking their help. Bonnel described it this way:

It is too easy for ministers as it is for doctors to become professional in their manner of dealing with people, to regard them as in their manner of dealing with people, to regard them as “cases,” to forget that they are souls. Nothing will drive people from them so quickly and render them incapable of helping individuals as the spirit of unfriendliness.⁶

Pastors learned that if they truly wanted to help their people with their problems, they would need to appear as though they wanted to help – not aloof, not condescending, not judgmental, but humble and compassionate.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution to this era in pastoral counseling, cited by Wayne Oates in his book *New Dimensions in Pastoral Care*, was “the importance of a carefully developed anamnesis, i.e., recorded, uninterpreted facts of what had actually happened in the life of the person to whom I ministered.”⁷ Compilations of case studies allowed ministers to learn from previous cases. It allowed ministers to assist one another with concrete data in similar cases. Broad scale compilations allowed pastors of America to see trends in Christian mentality across the country. This is an enormously important aspect of contemporary counseling still today.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 227.

⁷ Oates, Wayne E. *New Dimensions in Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970. Pg. 7.

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) was significantly more hesitant to accept the psychological methods and practices of the secular world than those in other Christian traditions. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was not one of the seminaries that readily adopted psychological courses into the curriculum or a psychologist onto the faculty. The WELS had good reason for its reluctance, seeing the negative impact that secular psychology was having on theology elsewhere. However, psychology, as a relevant and beneficial study for pastors had made its mark and would not go away.

In the meantime, the WELS continued handling counseling situations in the Confessional Lutheran way that it always had – appropriately dividing law and gospel, allowing God to work through his means of grace, and humbly and boldly approaching God in prayer. WELS pastors understood that every spiritual and mental problem has some sort of spiritual component to it, therefore they would handle the spiritual aspect to the best of their training. Since spiritual needs are the greatest needs that a man has, once these are taken care of, pastors would trust that the Great Physician of Body and Soul will take care of the rest. WELS pastors of this era would likely have whole-heartedly agreed to a statement like this one from Bonnel:

I have cited several illustrations of the profound disturbances caused in the minds and bodies of men and women through a deeply-rooted sense of guilt produced by sin—disturbances which were relieved only as these individuals became reconciled to God through confession and forgiveness and thus found themselves once more in a right relationship with their fellow-men.⁸

⁸ Ibid, pg. 201.

1960s-1970s

Christian therapy was certainly gaining popularity by the time of the 1960s and 1970s, but the secular field was still the place where most advances were being made in counseling. In the sixties, therapists were popularizing dozens of counseling techniques that Americans, particularly Christian pastors trying to incorporate some of these techniques into their ministry, were left guessing which was best. Psychodrama, guided fantasy, biogenetic, rolfing, and psychosynthesis, were just some of the new methods for therapy.⁹ Other more widely used conservative practices gained notoriety a little later. These included: Relaxation Therapy, Cognitive Restructuring, Systematic Desensitization, Behavioral Rehearsal, Problem Solving, and Thought Stopping.¹⁰ Many schools of thought developed on therapy as to what was most effective and most ethical: Individual or group therapy? Predominantly cognitive or behavioral? Emphasis of nature or nurture? There had been inconclusive research to determine answers to these types of important questions.

Perhaps the most important facet of secular counseling in the 1960s was the movement of humanists in psychology:

Such theorists as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Gardner Murphy, and Gordon Allport proposed an approach to psychotherapy that would accent the potential for growth, fulfillment, and creativity....they were devoted to the understanding of such human capacities as creativity, love, and self-actualization. By the time they had organized themselves into an Association of Humanistic Psychology in 1962, they had concluded that it was those higher capacities, rather than unconscious conflicts or habits, that most deeply defined the self.¹¹

⁹ Holifield, E. Brooks. *A History of Pastoral Care in America*. Pg. 309.

¹⁰ Stone, Howard W. *Using Behavioral Methods in Pastoral Counseling*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980. Pgs. 17, 36, 60.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pg. 310.

The secular humanists destroyed the notion of sin in many American denominations by their insistence of man's potential to do good. Perhaps a better way to look at it is that man wanted to know that whatever he had done was perhaps not "good" but was "good enough." No single idea had more impact for the pastoral theologians in this era than the idea of "acceptance," which had already become popular amongst secular counselors. Much of the discussion about the relation between theology and psychotherapy at this time, therefore, returned again and again to this concept of acceptance.¹² The embodiment of these concepts at this period, where theology met psychotherapy, and sinner met acceptance, was the person of existentialist philosopher Paul Tillich. He explained his theological concepts in psychological vocabulary. He taught this as (the Apostle) Paul's understanding of Jesus as the Christ:

The apostle had found himself accepted in spite of the fact that he had been rejected. "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything new; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens to us, we experience grace."¹³

More conservative biblical scholars and Christian counselors saw the danger and objected to Tillich's liberal stance. A tremendously influential voice came out of the Reformed Church, a pastor named Jay Adams. Adams approached counseling with the perception that the Bible has the answer to every problem that life may present. This viewpoint is not surprising, considering his theological background and the Reformed emphasis of a Sovereign God, that Adams would approach counseling in this regard – the Bible, God's

¹² Ibid, pg. 328.

¹³ Ibid, pg. 330.

Word, is an answer book in any and every situation. As could be expected he strongly promoted distinctly Christian (more specifically, pastoral) counseling:

Come to counseling with hope. Many persons seek counseling in hope-against-hope attitude. They expect little and often (as a result) get what they expect. If the counsel is biblical, you have every reason to have genuine hope; God has an answer to your problem—no matter what it is. Your expectations may have much to do with the outcome; they should be realistic but high.¹⁴

Adams had somewhat of a band-aid mentality when it came to pastoral cure. As long as the pastor makes the correct diagnosis and supplies the right passages as medicine, the problem will inevitably go away. There is certainly some truth in what he was teaching. The Bible does contain all the answers necessary for salvation. However, practical questions still exist in life that the Bible does not and never was intended to answer. Can the Bible help a teenage girl fight anorexia? Can the Bible relieve an ailing widow of depression? Can the Bible cure a man suffering from schizophrenia? A Christian will likely answer “Yes, at least to some degree.” *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). But to what extent does the Bible provide the answers for such problems? This is the question Christian therapists, either pastors or those dedicated solely to counseling, were wrestling with at this point.

The WELS had begun to realize that this issue of psychology and Christian counseling was not going to go away anytime soon. The WELS had fallen behind in this study of modern counseling and needed to do something to remedy the situation. In a paper delivered in April of 1970 at the Nebraska District Pastoral Conference of the

¹⁴ Adams, Jay E. *Essays on Counseling*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972. Pg. 164.

WELS, Pastor Howard E. Russow makes this very observation: “in recent years so much has been observed concerning the nature of personality and behavior that pastoral care can no longer ignore such significant findings in the art of helping individuals in difficulty.”¹⁵ Russow sensed a weakness in his formal training in an area that became a large part of many pastors’ ministries. In his own way he made an encouragement that this part of the WELS pastoral curriculum needed to be reevaluated:

Too much of pastoral counseling is a hit and miss affair because of little training. Out of seven years of college and seminary training my seminary class received but two or three hours of classroom courses in pastoral theology and classes related to counseling. As a result, our practices and goals vary greatly because we have either taken further courses in this area, or have done some studies on our own, or both, or have done nothing at all. Judging from the books and periodicals of the day, pastoral counseling (but not necessarily ours) has changed considerably in recent years. This is due primarily to the contributions of psychiatry and psychology to the knowledge of human personality and behavior.¹⁶

The Wisconsin Synod had received the message and intended to make the necessary changes to bring pastors up to speed in counseling. In the early 1970s, Armin Schuetze, professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Fredrich Matzke, counselor at the newly formed Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services, an organization dedicated to the perceived need for healthy Christian counseling, collaborated on an effort that would be called *The Counseling Shepherd*. They defined its goal this way:

Its purpose is not to show the pastor how he may become a professional counselor. It is not intended to enable the pastor to do everything that lies in the province of psychology and psychiatry. There is no intention to evaluate critically the various psychologies, the various methods, systems or approaches to counseling, secular or religious, or to propose a method uniquely our own. This book is not a potpourri of what has been written in

¹⁵ Russow, Howard E. “The Lutheran Pastor and Modern Psychiatry.” This paper was presented to the Nebraska District Pastoral Conference of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, April 7–9, 1970, pg. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid, pg. 4.

the growing mass of counseling literature, assembled in a more or less scholarly fashion. It is intended rather as a practical help to the parish pastor, who has many responsibilities besides counseling. We hope this volume will help the pastor feel more confident and comfortable and become more competent as he serves as a counseling shepherd.¹⁷

Despite the suggestion that *The Counseling Shepherd* was not intended to propose “a method uniquely our own,” many WELS pastors and it could even be said Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary treated it somewhat as “the WELS method.” Counseling training at the Seminary primarily consisted of working through this book as a textbook. Pastoral counseling in the WELS would come to be defined the way that Schuetze and Habeck defined it: “Pastoral counseling is that pastoral care which deals with those who suffer from troubles, griefs, burdens, fears and illnesses, which involves not simply giving advice, but assisting them to find help and healing from the Word of God.”¹⁸ Schuetze and Habeck saw the pastor as a unique counselor because he has 1) a divine call, 2) objectives (starting with the spiritual), and 3) tools given by God himself in the Word and Sacraments. With this in mind, *The Counseling Shepherd* offers an abundance of techniques, or perhaps more accurately, encouragements in mindset, to help the pastor who has not had extensive training in counseling with his counseling efforts. Examples of such encouragements were:

- *Pastoral heart* – “Concern and compassion are not identical with condoning sin. Our Savior, who never condoned sin, was supremely compassionate.” (pg. 4)
- *Pastoral home visits* – “One of the best ways a pastor and his people get to know each other is by visits in the members’ homes.” (pg. 5)
- *Availability* – “In adult class and new member interviews I stress that any time, day and night, 24 hours a day, I’m as close to them as their telephone.”

¹⁷ Schuetze, Armin W. and Matzke, Fredrich A. *The Counseling Shepherd*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House; 1988. Pg. xiii.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pg. xii.

- *Christian Self-Worth* -- “a heart can have a feeling of self-worth, not rooted in one’s own accomplishments or simply in being a part of God’s creation, but in being a redeemed child of God...This gives a true sense of worth.” (pg. 21)
- *Questioning in Counseling* – Open questions are advocated instead of closed so that the pastoral counselor may be a better listener. (pg. 94)
- *Number of Counseling Sessions* – The suggestion is a 3 session minimum, with a longer distance between 2nd and 3rd than 1st and 2nd. The 2nd should go more smoothly than 1st session and the 3rd is set to make sure that progress is still being made. (pg. 100)
- *Homework Suggestions for Counselees* – Three possibilities are proposed that re designed to give help counselees identify certain attitudes or repetitive behaviors on their own. (pg. 103)

The Counseling Shepherd did a very good job of accomplishing its intended goal of giving pastors a standard guidebook for their counseling ministry. Perhaps more than the advice it gave though, pastors benefited from *The Counseling Shepherd* by some important questions that it raised. For instance, it asked how much a pastor alone could help in difficult counseling situations. In other words, at what point should a pastor refer a member to a licensed therapist? It then wisely suggested that there were two extremes to avoid: 1) failure to recognize the gifts the Lord has given to others in various helping professions; and 2) failure to recognize that every problem has its spiritual aspects. It also identified certain areas in particular where pastors should consider early referral. These areas include physical illness, financial and legal matters, and alcohol and drug abuse.¹⁹

A vital issue that *The Counseling Shepherd* addressed, pertinent in an increasingly litigious culture, was that of the legal implications that accompany counseling. It talked

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 113.

about the issues of Privileged Communication, Abuse Reporting, and Malpractice.²⁰ All of these issues have become even more applicable as time has passed, as will be referenced later in the paper.

Yet another issue that needed to be discussed at this time was that of whether or not Scripture addressed the issue of substance abuse. The Counseling Shepherd explained how the abuse of substances like alcohol or even food had strong parallels to the abuse of any substances. Likewise, it also asked the incredibly modern question “Should Alcoholism Primarily Be Viewed as Sickness or Sin?”²¹ This question marked a very important distinction that developed between secular and Christian counseling. Secular counseling would at first come to see such behavior as homosexuality, alcoholism, obesity, etc. as a disease. Conservative Christianity would see such behavior as sin – sin that may have an addictive or perhaps even biological element due to man’s inherited, flawed condition – but sin nonetheless.

Christian counseling, and *The Counseling Shepherd*, understood that sin distorts a man’s image of himself. The believer who acknowledges that he is indeed a wretched sinner will undoubtedly be tempted to view himself in a negative light. In modern terms, his “self image” and “self-esteem” will be destroyed until he recognizes his worth as a redeemed child of God. *The Counseling Shepherd* taught that a positive self-image could indeed be a God-pleasing thing. Amongst conservative Christians who had a thorough understanding of man’s sinful nature, there was some confusion over where the line between healthy self-esteem and haughtiness or pride was. Schuetze and Habeck helped to clear up some of this confusion: “To love oneself is not necessarily a sinful feeling.

²⁰ Ibid, pg. 116.

²¹ Ibid, pg. 189.

On the other hand, not to love oneself is contrary to the nature God created. Since the fall, however, our sinful nature is prone to either of two extremes: excessive self-love and pride, or low self-esteem and depression.”²²

The last contemporary issue that *The Counseling Shepherd* recognized the need to comment on was the use of medication in counseling. It certainly did not embrace medication, but saw it as occasionally necessary in extreme cases. The book spoke of mental health medication and mental health professionals as gifts that God gave to his people to ease mental illness:

Faith in God’s help does not rule out the use of medication...I have to point out that to use the right kind of people and help provided by God is important. At the same time the pastor knows that the best help he can give is to continue bringing them (his emotionally troubled members) the comfort of the gospel.²³

The Counseling Shepherd was a great accomplishment for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod that would have large, wide scale impact. Have I properly used both law and gospel? Have I been too judgmental? Have I failed to call sin sin? Have I been a good listener? Have I talked too much? Have I turned to the Lord for help and prayed for and with those I serve? These were all worthwhile questions to think about and *The Counseling Shepherd* was largely responsible for raising them. *The Counseling Shepherd* encouraged pastors to reevaluate counseling in their ministry.

Another significant change took place in this era concerning WELS counseling that needs mentioning – the emergence of the Wisconsin Lutheran Child & Family Service. Begun in 1965, Wisconsin Lutheran Child & Family Service, Inc. (WLCFS), is

²² Ibid, pg. 198.

²³ Ibid, pg. 204.

an independent, not-for-profit agency within, but not financially supported by, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. This organization was started because of the changing nature of psychology and counseling and the difficult challenge for pastors to stay on top of these changes, handle serious cases, and adequately give time to the many other aspects of their public ministry. Simply put, pastors have not always had the hours in the week or the education needed to sufficiently handle their entire counseling ministry. WLCFS would serve the purposes of assisting both a busy pastor and giving the necessary attention to a Wisconsin Synod Member with unique emotional needs. WLCFS would continue to grow over the next four decades.

1980s-Today

By the time the 1980s had arrived, it was obvious to all involved that the scope of counseling had changed drastically in the past half century, including in the WELS. There was a time when pastors did the bulk of their counseling when members would visit the pastor to let him know that they intended to take Holy Communion on Sunday. That moment provided a convenient opportunity for the pastor to ask if there was anything troubling his member. If there was, the pastor could handle it then or set up a visit at the member's home. By the 1980s this whole scenario was almost non-existent. The increased mobility of society caused members to live farther and farther away from the church. Consequently, weekly or bi-weekly visits to the pastor to register for Communion became impractical and fell out of practice. Pastors no longer had that Communion registration regular point of contact. In addition, pastors visiting the homes of members became significantly less frequent. Much of the counseling was now done in

the pastor's office for varying reasons – e.g. public appearance and potential for offense, the pastor being on home turf and therefore in control, society's desire to put up walls around their property and not let in outsiders, just to name a few. Some of the fallout from this tendency towards counseling at the pastor's office was the stigma that was attached to being seen at the pastor's office during the week. Anyone who saw, or whom the church secretary might tell, could know the member's *shame*. This was just one example of many obstacles to pastoral counseling that needed to be evaluated in this era.

As in any era, secular counseling continued to lead the way in new methods and record keeping, which the Christian counseling world benefited from immensely. Pastor H. Curtis Lyon, who authored *Counseling at the Cross* in 1991, a book that would be as influential in WELS circles as any from this period, made note of this:

We can thank the secular and professional field for many “tricks of the trade.” Basically we are talking about communication skills. The secular and professional fields of counseling have made great strides in improving upon communication, diagnostics, program outlines, record keeping and other techniques for counseling. Many of these techniques have valuable applications for gospel resolution, just as the media can provide valuable avenues for the dissemination of the gospel.²⁴

Lyon had picked out a handful of tremendously valuable methods developed in the secular world of counseling, refined them, and was teaching them to WELS pastors. He taught pastors how to become better listeners by becoming more active listeners. Instead of simply teaching pastoral counselors to ask open-ended questions, he was instructing them how to use open-ended questions that helped the counselees to develop and narrow a point. Questions like “What did you mean by that?” or “Would you put that in different words so I can be sure I understand you?” were suggested. He also explained how questions beginning

²⁴ Lyon, H. Curtis. *Counseling at the Cross*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991. Pg. 120.

with “why?” were generally not good since the counselee may feel as though he/she has to take a defensive approach to explaining his or her feelings.²⁵

Another helpful technique that Lyon was proposing was the family constellation. This method had its roots in the psychotherapy of Alfred Adler and had become popularized by Kevin Leman’s book *The Birth Order Book*. The basic premise was that expectations could be made of an individual’s personality depending on what place he/she was born into in the order of a family’s children, i.e. where one fit in the family tree. This was helpful for a pastor in identifying if a child’s behavior was simply a “phase” that was typically best dealt with in a certain way or if it was a unique case.

A method in which Lyon perhaps overextended a pastor’s role in promoting was a concept called early recollections. In this theory, a patient is supposed to recall and write down the earliest memories that he has. However that patient describes the feelings that he experienced in those memories are supposed to be a general theme for that individual’s life. For instance, if the first memory that an man has is striking out at a little league game and when he looked back, his dad was hanging his head in embarrassment, the fear of disappointing would then be anticipated as a reoccurring theme in the man’s life. A natural question is: when do these methods fall outside of the scope of pastoral care and counsel? Should a pastor really be expected to know and apply skills early recollection methods? Most would say, “Probably not.”

In a paper delivered on October 3, 1984 at the South-Central Conference of the South-Atlantic District, Pastor Larry A. Zahn commented on what he felt makes a pastoral truly competent to counsel: “When we are counseling on the basis of the Word,

²⁵ Ibid, pg. 126.

the Spirit's power is at our disposal. Because of Him we are equipped to counsel."²⁶ In a reading of his paper, one gets the sense that a certain disdain for the "scientific" methods of psychiatry and psychology had developed among WELS pastors. At the very least, they wanted to make sure that the authority of God's Word would not be undercut by the methodology of secular counselors. This desire to teach that God alone has the answers in his Word is shown by Zahn's endorsement of the writings of Jay Adams (the Reformed Christian counselor mentioned earlier). When discussing Adams' methods, Zahn says, "They are sound. If you have not read his books, do so. They will certainly benefit you."²⁷ In a church body where there was as much uncertainty as ever about any incorporation of psychological practices and methods, Zahn summarized the voice on one side calling to primarily rely almost solely on the authority and effectiveness of God's Word in counseling:

Yet the treasure inside the clay jars makes us effective. Psychiatrists often use mind-boggling and mind-changing drugs; they may use shock treatments to alter thoughts and change emotions; they make use of x-rays which can penetrate to the darkest recesses of the body. We have a more powerful tool—the very Word of God—which penetrates to the darkest recesses of the soul and enlightens those living in darkness. It makes the loveless loving, the selfish selfless.²⁸

He makes his stance even clearer as his paper goes on, despite making a small allowance for counseling outside of the pastor's jurisdiction:

We don't have to refer people to a counselor for every problem they face. I believe we, with God's Word and the patience and wisdom He supplies, can handle many, even most, of the problems people might have. Yet, I believe there are many problems we need to refer to other people, particularly to psychiatrists. It is my opinion that our people need help

²⁶ Zahn, Rev. Larry A. "Encouragement to Counsel. Presented at the South-Central Conference of the South-Atlantic District, Abita Springs, Louisiana, on October 3, 1984. Pg. 3.

²⁷ Ibid, pg. 4.

²⁸ Ibid, pg. 3.

from other professional counselors from time to time because we were not trained to counsel every problem.²⁹

The uncertainty as to what role a pastor should play as counselor remains today. Some suggest that when resources like WLCFS and other counselors willing to work with pastors are present, it is foolish not to refer to them. Others, like Zahn, suggest that counseling is primarily the pastor's work. Since no other person in his member's life is likely to have the training in applying God's Word to the member's life and the member's problems, the pastor should be the primary counselor in the member's life. Who is right?

There is no doubt that the non-pastoral Christian counselor has significantly more time, more resources, and better education on the principles of counseling than a pastor in the WELS could ever have due to the other aspects of the pastor's training and work. When asked what biggest perceived change in Christian counseling of the past ten years was, Elsa Manthey, a licensed counselor at WLCFS, said, "increased emphasis on therapists specializing in a counseling area rather than being generalists."³⁰ Sin is certainly a general condition that affects all mankind, but it manifests itself in innumerable complex ways in the sinner's life. Christian counselors who have been specially trained in certain areas including depression, anxiety and panic disorders, parenting, bipolar disorder, phobias, substance abuse, personality disorders, trauma, grief and loss, child development, etc. would seemingly be the most qualified to counsel Christians wrestling with problems in such areas.

The issue of where exactly these mental and emotional problems really come from is perhaps the question to be asked when debating who should handle the

²⁹ Ibid, pg. 4.

³⁰ Manthey, Elsa. (Interview conducted on 11/29/07)

counseling though. Licensed psychologist Dr. Anne Huebner's asks the essential question: "Basically, the question is whether or not mental disorders come about because something goes wrong physically or because that person isn't thinking the right things (philosophical) or whether the person isn't 'right' theologically."³¹ By virtue of a pastor's training and profession, he naturally would lean toward a theologically-centered interpretation of mental and emotional problems. An example of a dangerous abuse of this elsewhere in Christendom was seen on December 5, 1484, when Pope Innocent VIII issued the *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, the famous "witch-bull." This would serve as a preface to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, written in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, members of the Dominican Order and Inquistitors for the Catholic Church's inquisition against heretics. This book identified those with certain strange behaviors and emotions as being under the devil's influence and thus should be treated by tortuous methods as if they were witches or warlocks. Obviously a strictly religious approach to mental and emotional problems and disorders could be horribly mistaken.

While acknowledging that there is an undeniable spiritual component to mental illness due to the weakened state of man caused by sin, both Manthey and Huebner promote that there are clinically proven methods, not inherently dangerous to Christian faith in any way, which are proven to reduce mental and emotional problems. This is evidenced by the fact that legal documentation of the use of effective methods is necessary. Dr. Huebner puts it this way:

The legal bottom line is that I'm still expected to demonstrate that I've used research-based therapy strategies for mental disorders. This includes suggesting medications via a visit to the psychiatrist or primary care doctor if those symptoms are bad enough. If I don't suggest this because

³¹ Huebner, Dr. Anne. (Interview conducted on 12/1/07 and 12/2/07)

my religious beliefs are against medications, then I'm in trouble legally. So, my views about psychology and therapy are highly science, ethics, & legally based. They occasionally include religion.³²

Dr. Huebner suggests that as our world has continued to fall apart since WWI, people have blamed immorality and lack of "religion" or "spirituality" as reasons for lots of things including mental health problems, or the stressors that can sometimes trigger mental disorders. This blaming sounds good to our somewhat-religious society. Consequently, people seek out "Christian" counseling, which may or may not really be Christian, because the social expectation is that "Christian" must be good, healthy, trustworthy, right, etc., and Christian counseling and counselors also must be "good." According to Huebner, what you'll see in their research are "poor definitions of spirituality, religiosity, transcendence, religious commitment and other fad words that sound Christian." On closer examination, many of those definitions are more New Age than orthodox Christians can ascribe to. Manthey echoes those sentiments, "I'm not sure what is labeled Christian (in counseling) is always Christian."³³

Perhaps the biggest issue that pastors in the twenty-first century are now faced with in counseling matters is legal issues. As mentioned earlier, an individual sought out as a "professional counselor" better be practicing methods that are research-based to relieve symptoms of disorders, otherwise the pastor could be held legally responsible for the methodology he prescribes if he does not adequately explain to his counselees what his work does and does not involve. Dr. Huebner suggests this example to show the dilemma of "Christian" counseling:

³² Ibid.

³³ Manthey, Elsa. (Interview conducted on 11/29/07)

If "repentance" is prescribed by the therapist, how should that repentance be measured? If increasing a person's faith is prescribed, how should faith be measured? Reduction in mental health symptoms is easier to measure since they're more concrete or observable. Those who understand doctrine (and seek observable results in counseling) have the problem of prescribing good works or other methodologies to do what we know the Holy Spirit does.³⁴

Many questions still need to be answered regarding counseling in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Distinctly Confessional Lutheran counseling is still defining itself. It has certainly moved away from any perception that God's Word will magically heal emotional wounds when the right passages are sprinkled. Yet, it never underestimates the power of God's Word and the providence of God in the life of his children to bring about healing. Should the counseling of WELS members be done primarily by the pastor? When should the pastor refer? When a pastor refers, should he refer to a counselor promoted as "Christian" who also practices accepted psychological methodology, or to a counselor who makes no apologies about stating that the counseling done is sound, research-based psychology that is not Christian-based, but is not inherently anti-Christian?

Inevitably, WELS views, and, in general, Christian views on counseling will continue to change as secular psychological methodology continues to change. In 1992 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary called Prof. Alan Siggelkow to implement a new counseling curriculum that incorporated but revised what had been done by *The Counseling Shepherd*. The desire to more precisely touch the mental and emotional needs of members in direct relation to their spiritual needs is certainly out there though in young pastors. The author of this paper conducted a survey of seniors at Wisconsin

³⁴ Huebner, Dr. Anne. (Interview conducted on 12/1/07 and 12/2/07)

Lutheran Seminary. The survey asked these students to rank in order what they felt were the most important academic disciplines of a pastor. Of the five options, after theologian, the unanimous top choice, on average, they selected sociologist second, linguist third, psychologist fourth, and historian fifth. The placement of sociologist second (and for that matter psychologist above historian) seems to indicate that the students have a strong desire to better understand the behavior of modern man and human needs in general so that they can more clearly communicate to their members what God has to say to them. None of the students, when asked, suggested the cutting of any classes from the Seminary's current curriculum, but many did suggest a desire to better develop their counseling skills. Perhaps this can best be implemented by a regular review and revision of *The Counseling Shepherd*, a book that at over thirty years old is still used as the primary classroom text.

Perhaps the future of counseling for Lutherans, and Christians in general, will exist almost exclusively at organizations like WLCFS. Perhaps the pastor as Christian counselor will become a lost art. For now, Christians can trust that their emotional and mental needs will be met by the God who took care of their greatest need – the need of a Savior from the sins that trouble them so greatly. Whether God provides relief in the form of a pastor's spiritual encouragement or a therapist's sound, researched psychological methods, or perhaps best – both, God will provide relief. Jesus invites us to come seeking that relief. “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*” (Matthew 11:28).

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