

Policy for Congregation-Based Clergy Doing Counseling
Committee on Ministry
Presbytery of Long Island

General Comments:

Pastoral counseling has always been part and parcel of a pastor's work and ministry, and always should be. Rudimentary counseling training is now part of nearly every mainline seminary curriculum. This policy is not intended to restrict the normal and appropriate pastoral concern and care that Ministers of Word and Sacrament routinely provide to their flock. Rather it is intended to provide clear institutional structure and professional limitations to pastors who provide counseling beyond normal and routine pastoral care.

There is a danger of pastors getting into counseling situations beyond their training of pastoral ministry. The modern pastoral counseling movement takes very seriously the tremendous moral, ethical, professional, clinical, and legal responsibility borne by those who counsel others. The Committee on Ministry also takes seriously the responsibility of those who counsel others. We are particularly concerned about the following 14 areas of pastors doing counseling. This policy is offered, first and foremost, to protect those vulnerable persons who place their trust in a pastor's care as well as to guard the pastor, local church, and Presbytery from any damaging litigation.

1. Training/Certification:

Pastors shall not represent themselves as "counselors" or "therapists" if they do not have professional certified credentials. A few M.Div. or D.Min. counseling courses and/or some Clinical Pastoral Education training is not sufficient to make such a claim. No pastor within the Presbytery should be counseling for a fee without either being properly certified in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) or be currently in an accredited counseling training program working towards AAPC certification.

2. Type of Counseling Offered:

Pastors serving local churches, unless specially certified with standard recognized counseling credentials, restrict their counseling to brief, supportive pastoral care rather than engaging in long term or in-depth counseling or therapy with parishioners or persons in the community.

It is generally agreed that if a person needs more than four to six consecutive counseling sessions with the pastor, and outside professional referral is in order.

3. Fees:

It is not appropriate for any pastor to charge parishioners for counseling, and any charging of fees for counseling outside the congregation should be limited to those pastors appropriately certified to do professional counseling.

4. Setting:

Any pastor doing counseling in any church facilities should be seriously mindful of all the pitfalls such ecclesial settings represent (there are many). Any counseling setting should ensure confidentiality of the counselee. The place should be safe, secure, quiet and yet not too remote or isolated. All counseling shall be done where the normal routine of church functions will not be disruptive or compromise a professional setting.

5. Record Keeping:

All counseling records should be kept in a secure locked place which insures confidentiality. Any Minister of Word and Sacrament doing counseling for a fee must keep up to date on what New York State law requires regarding clinical record keeping.

6. Supervision:

No one is really qualified to do ongoing counseling unless they have undergone significant professional and accredited supervision. Completing counseling course work without in-depth supervision is never enough. If a pastor is going to engage in ongoing counseling (unless they have reached Diplomate status in AAPC) — ongoing supervision with a certified supervisor is a must.

7. Malpractice Insurance:

A pastor doing any counseling (but especially for a fee) shall be added onto the church's regular malpractice insurance policy via a special rider, and all clergy doing counseling for a fee must secure their own personal malpractice insurance policy.

8. Confidentiality:

All pastors doing counseling shall inform themselves of all state laws regarding confidentiality, and every pastor shall be familiar with what current state law requires in regard to what to do in the case of someone becoming suicidal/homicidal, and what to do if a pastor learns of physical, sexual, or child abuse.

9. Boundaries:

The issue of personal and professional boundaries is one of the most difficult issues with which any pastor wrestles, and it is further complicated and exacerbated when a pastor chooses to do in-depth counseling rather than supportive or consultative pastoral care with parishioners or friends in the community. For this reason, pastors serving churches shall keep a well defined "wall of separation" between those who are parishioners and those who are counselees. Pastors should focus their pastoral work on pastoral care rather than in-depth, long term counseling.

10. Referrals:

All pastors in the Presbytery shall visit and acquaint themselves with the nearest local mental health center and have on file a current list of local professional therapists or pastoral counselors to whom they feel comfortable making referrals. Additionally, it would be helpful to have a current list of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings available as well as NA and AA's 24 hour hotline numbers.

11. Code of Ethics:

All Ministers of Word and Sacrament doing counseling for a fee must sign AAPC's Code of Ethics, with a copy being submitted to the local session and to the Committee on Ministry.

12. Clinical Back-Up:

All pastors counseling persons for a fee must secure professional therapeutic back up whenever they are out of town.

13. Accountability:

When a pastor does counseling in church facilities or as part of his/her ministry in the community, the pastor should give regular account to the Session of where the counseling is taking place, how many hours a week is spent on counseling, and whether fees are being charged.

14. Validation/Endorsement:

Ultimately, the Session of the local church and the Committee on Ministry are both endowed with the responsibility and authority to validate and endorse specialized aspects of a pastor's ministry. The Committee on Ministry and the Session of a particular church both look to the minister's AAPC membership level as a measure of her/his clinical competence to practice.

Additionally, AAPC requires denominational endorsement before a pastor can begin AAPC approved pastoral counseling training, and AAPC continues to require denominational endorsement to continue in good standing in the organization.

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