

Church and Mission

Strategic Pastoral Counseling: A Short-Term Structured Model by David G. Benner. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003. Pp153. \$13.99 paperback.

Pastors live and work with the professional identity of a generalist. Throughout their week, they function in a variety of roles: worship leader, preacher, teacher, administrator, evangelist, pastoral caregiver, pastoral counselor, student of God's word, and on-call social worker. In a culture that gives increased credibility to specialists, a pastor's professional identity may seem anachronistic, leaving the pastor feeling adrift. Though people from Paul Pruyser to Eugene Peterson have affirmed the value of pastors as generalists and call pastors to be true to their calling as priestly theologians, the nagging question continually lurks nearby: "What is my role as a pastor in this situation?" or "How do I minister to this person here and now?" David G. Benner's book, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, clarifies a pastor's distinctive counseling ministry. Benner first articulates a way for pastors to ground their identity as counselors in the theological nature of their more general calling and then presents a structure to guide pastors in their counseling.

In the preface to the first edition, Benner indicates the direction of his book. He writes, "The importance of pastoral care and counseling is grounded in the centrality of the proclamation of the Word of God in Christian ministry" (11). In pastoral counseling, according to Benner, the word of God, especially the gospel of Jesus Christ, is communicated both verbally and nonverbally in the pastor-parishioner relationship. The ministry of pastoral care and counsel-

ing presents an opportunity for God's word to be spoken and embodied as the pastor meets with a specific person seeking help with current life experiences. Pastoral counseling is pastoral, then, when it fulfills one's calling to be a minister of the Word and sacraments and when it cares for someone's soul.

Pastoral counseling is pastoral, too, because it is offered within the context of the Christian community, the church. Benner identifies "five forms of soul care" that are alive in the church: Christian friendship, pastoral ministry, pastoral care, pastoral counseling, and spiritual direction. Thus, pastoral counseling is not primarily defined by the individual relationship between the pastor and the parishioner within a structured series of "therapeutic hour" sessions. When a pastor and parishioner encounter each other in a counseling relationship, their relationship is embedded within the relational context of the church. The church community and its history of relationships provide the context for the meaning of pastoral counseling and provide invaluable resources for the counselee's needs and growth.

The phrase *pastoral counseling* combines nomenclature from the fields of theology and psychology, thus carrying an inherent danger of confusing a pastor's identity: Is the pastor as counselor a psychologist operating from a Christian perspective? Or, is the pastor a minister who uses psychological approaches in pastoral counseling? Benner offers pastors an important service by sharpening the focus of his book on the word *pastoral*. He reminds pastors of the distinctive value of their place as spiritual leaders in the lives of people. He draws attention to the distinctive need people have to consider themselves and their suffering in the light of God. He remembers that this is a common reason why people bring their needs to pastors: They want to be taken seriously as spiritual people living in relationship with God. They want to have the resources of their faith and faith communities available to them. If pastors gain a sense of satisfaction out of being pop psychologists, they lose a part of their souls and do not attend very well to the souls of others.

Benner does not choose between theology and psychology; rather, he believes pastoral counseling "can be both distinctively pastoral and psychologically informed" (14). His approach maintains the theological integrity of pastors and allows them to use wisdom from psychology to understand and serve the needs of people. The strength of Benner's book is that he presents a distinctively pastoral approach to counseling. The weakness is that there are few references as to how psychology informs the pastoral counseling approach he presents. His approach is consistent with what psychology teaches about human experience and helping relationships; however, his book would be strengthened if he had written more explicitly on ways in which psychology contributes to his understanding of strategic pastoral counseling. Such writing would not only deepen the content of this book but also model for pastors how to maintain theological integrity in a psychologically saturated society.

Benner defines pastoral counseling in this way: "Pastoral counseling involves the establishment of a time-limited relationship that is structured to provide

comfort for troubled persons by enhancing their awareness of God's grace and faithful presence and thereby increasing their ability to live their lives more fully in the light of these realizations" (40). He presents a model for short-term strategic pastoral counseling consisting of up to five sessions. His approach respects the limits of a pastor's training, time, tasks, and the results of research on the typical number of sessions pastors have, or believe they can afford to have, with counselees. He calls his model strategic, because it is highly focused on goals and tasks for the counseling process as a whole as well as for each session. As is true of other short-term counseling approaches, the main purpose of this model is to move a person further along the path of dealing with life issues.

Three stages or phases occur in strategic pastoral counseling, each one carrying specific tasks. The first is the encounter stage when the pastor and parishioner first meet to discuss the parishioner's need. The pastor's main goal here is to set boundaries for the counseling relationship, explore the central concerns of the person, form a pastoral assessment, and develop a mutually agreed upon focus for the counseling.

The second stage is engagement, which normally consists of one to three sessions. During this time, the pastor and parishioner work together on the focus of the counseling. They explore the person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors regarding their central concern and identify resources for addressing the person's need. The pastor may assign homework for the parishioner between sessions. In the process, new perspectives or ways of coping or interpretations of one's experience may occur.

The final stage is disengagement, which occurs in the last session or perhaps the last two sessions. Now, the pastor and parishioner review and evaluate any progress that has occurred and assess remaining concerns. If needed, the two discuss whether a referral for further work with another professional is needed. In either case, the agreed upon counseling relationship is terminated. The only exception to terminating at this point is if the counselee is facing a significant crisis and referral sources are not available to meet the need. When this happens the pastor may agree to additional sessions, but it is important for these, too, to be time-limited and focused on managing the crisis.

Benner includes helpful case studies of five-session and one-session pastoral counseling relationships. His strategic pastoral counseling model seems to deliver what it promises: It is a focused approach to counseling that respects a pastor's limits of time, training, and tasks. Its goal is not to resolve all the issues a person presents, but to help the person move along the journey toward greater wholeness and spiritual growth.

It is important to remember that strategic pastoral counseling occurs within the context of a pastor's broader ministry, including the ministry of pastoral care. A pastor will most likely spend more time offering pastoral care than counseling to parishioners; however, as a pastor offers pastoral care, needs may emerge that may be helpfully addressed with a counseling approach. It seems

that for Benner, the main difference between pastoral care and counseling is the mutually agreed upon structure for meeting together to focus on a certain problem. This difference may be difficult to discern when pastoral counseling occurs in one session because the one session may be effective pastoral care.

While strategic pastoral counseling respects the pastor's limits, it also seems to have its own limits. One is that it is limited to focusing on one main concern. What if the parishioner lists three or four concerns, all of which merit being taken seriously with follow-up meetings? Do the pastor and parishioner select only one and leave the others be? If five sessions are spent on one issue, does a new counseling relationship develop for subsequent issues? It seems that pastors need to know themselves well enough to negotiate the structure of their counseling when it does not fit the five-session model presented here.

A second limit is that strategic pastoral counseling seems to work best with a cognitive-behavioral theory of change. That is, when exploring the parishioner's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, sharing emotions may relieve some of the person's burden, but real change occurs as the person thinks or behaves in new ways. As an alternative, a dynamic theory of change understands that the pastor-parishioner relationship is the tool for change; that what occurs in this relationship is transformational for the person seeking help. What would strategic pastoral counseling look like with a dynamic theory of change? How would the structure and tasks be different?

People who come to pastors for help want their pastors to be pastors. Benner's book helps pastors know their professional identity as grounded in theology and in the church community.

As pastors listen to their parishioners and offer short-term counseling, they will benefit from reading this book as a companion to other books relating to the human needs presented to them—needs such as grief, marriage, divorce, abuse, illness, and death.

For pastors to put into practice what this book suggests, they will do well to seek supervision from a trained individual or from a group of peers with whom they can discuss case presentations and further integrate this model into who they are as persons. Benner wisely reminds readers that "counseling skills cannot be adequately learned simply by reading books. As with all interpersonal skills, they must be learned through practice, and, ideally, this practice is best acquired in the context of supervisory feedback from a more experienced pastoral counselor" (p.40).

Benner wants pastors to know themselves as pastors and freely offer their ministry within their limits. Pastors who further know themselves as persons will be better able to use his model, with its strengths and limits, without getting in the way of serving others.

—Karl J. Van Harn