

John Patton

Pastor as Counselor

Wise Presence,
Sacred Conversation



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Chapter One

The Pastor's Specialty: Relational Wisdom

The pastor's counseling offers a "wise presence" and "spiritual conversation" to persons who are in some way lost or separated from what is meaningful in their lives. Although the chapters of the book that follow this one are specific in prescribing what the pastor should do in his counseling, what is said there is not dependent on learning a particular mental health type of counseling but upon being there in relationship as a person who represents a God who cares for the one who has asked for help. What the pastor does is based on faith in the power of such care to make life better.

I believe that the pastor's education and experience in ministry provide an unusual opportunity to develop wisdom about personal, group, and family relationships. If he can avoid being intimidated by what he does not know about counseling and psychotherapy, make use of what he represents, claim what he has already learned in his ministry about relationships, and be committed to further development, he can be an effective counselor for individuals and families.

The world today is populated with all kinds of specialists. Pastors practice what can be called "relational wisdom"—a wisdom about relationships with persons and with God that is part of the pastoral tradition that the minister represents. Ministers who offer pastoral counsel may not initially possess a great deal of wisdom understood in this relational way,

but because of what they represent to persons seeking help, the wisdom they have developed may be enough to allow them to be effective in their counseling.

The pastor's specialty in "relational wisdom" grows out of the Christian pastoral tradition's belief in a God who cares for persons and who empowers the caring behavior of members of its faith communities for ministry to persons both inside and outside of it. Certainly, that caring is not the only purpose of religious communities, but it continues to be one of the most important, particularly today. It is important not only for counseling that may take place in a church or parish but also for pastors who represent religious communities as institutional or military chaplains.

The pastor's wisdom is relational when it conveys a sense of security to the person who is sharing some of his life with the pastor. It is relational when it is "care-full" and sensitive to the feelings of the persons with whom he is in conversation. It is relational when it is an honest and genuine expression of who the pastor is as a person, not just something he thinks he ought to say. Obviously not all ministers possess this wisdom to the same degree, but it is something that can be further developed by attention to and learning from their relationships with persons in the institutions or religious communities in which they serve and to which they are responsible.

Relational wisdom contributes to what in institutional chaplaincy is often called spiritual care, but it clearly grows out of the faith and images of the Christian tradition. It is based on faith in a relational God who is present in human relationships with the shepherd's care for both the whole flock of sheep and for the individual one or two who, for some reason, are separated from the supportive experience of the group.

The Meanings of *Pastoral*

The term *pastoral* may be less familiar today for people who have lived primarily in an urban rather than a rural setting. Moreover, the common understanding of the pastoral relationship as growing out of a dominant and submissive relationship between shepherds and sheep has in recent years contributed to a negative understanding of the pastoral image. This

book attempts to correct or modify that negative image by asserting both of the two important meanings of the term *pastoral*. As the pastoral image from Luke's Gospel suggests, the pastor may be called to find and care for one lost sheep, but that part of the story is told against the backdrop of the shepherd leaving the flock to do that. The power of the story depends on the tension of the two responsibilities and the fact that the majority of the pastor's task is caring for a spirited flock that is not lost. Both meanings of *pastor* are essential for understanding the image and applying it to the pastoral care of persons.

The meaning of pastor as keeper of the whole flock is similar to the New Testament meaning of *bishop*. A pastor is like a shepherd in that he has oversight, supervisory, or administrative responsibility for a whole group, whether one is speaking of sheep or persons. In some traditions, in churches where there is more than one minister, it is only the senior minister who is understood to be the pastor. He is the one thought to have sufficient wisdom and experience to be the supervisor, and usually it is the public and supervisory part of his work where the pastor develops his reputation and through which most people know him.

The second meaning of *pastor* comes particularly from its association with the image in Luke 15 of a shepherd going in search of the lost sheep, even at the risk of limiting his time to care for the whole flock. Although this image is far less familiar than it once was, most any news program on television today presents at least one story of loss or separation. We continue to be inspired today by stories of those who are willing to go after persons and things that are lost in spite of the risk that the effort may involve. And most of us are aware of different kinds of lostness, including the lostness that we describe in this book, the lostness or separation from families and communities of care.

Shepherd is much more an image of personal strength than one of dominance over lesser creatures. The pastor, who is like the shepherd, risks failing to fulfill his broader responsibilities in order to go after one or two who are lost. The strength necessary to take this risk is an important part of the meaning of *shepherd* in the story. Being a pastor is having enough wisdom and strength to deal with this kind of tension between two

often-conflicted functional roles. The concern for lostness in tension with overall pastoral or supervisory responsibility for a faith community is the continuing meaning of the term *pastoral* today.

Counseling is a natural part of the pastoral care that the religious community or institution offers; therefore, parish ministers or chaplains who serve outside a religious community provide counseling as an extension of their pastoral care. Such counseling is not a private practice, something done apart from the regular ministry of the community the minister represents. It is important, therefore, that the group within the religious community to which the minister is accountable know about and support the counseling that is done as a part of the pastor's or chaplain's pastoral care. And as a part of this understanding and support they need to be aware of how much counseling the pastor does and be able to consult with him about limiting or extending the counseling done as a part of the pastor's ministry. More discussion about limits will be found in the next chapter.

What a Pastor Is Expected to Have

In quite a number of religious communities the traditional words used for giving authority in the ordination of clergy are something like this: "Take thou Authority to preach the Word of God, and to administer the holy Sacraments in the Congregation." That statement can be understood broadly or quite narrowly. We are speaking in this chapter of how a minister who has taken that authority symbolically can actually express it in his ministry. With respect to conducting and certifying marriages, the state confirms the authority given to the pastor by the religious body of which he is a part. Pastors themselves need to have a sense of the relevance of the authority given to them for the lives of persons so that in difficult life situations they are not so anxious about making a mistake that they cannot be fully present with those who need their help. Some of that authority is conveyed in more formal and objective ways through his ordination as a minister and by the academic degrees he may hold. More of it, however, rests in the way he functions, in his representation of the values of a community of faith and of what life ought to be, as well as in what he himself is expected to be as a person.

In a discussion of pastoral counseling as an extension of pastoral care, consideration of the meaning of *pastoral authority* is a helpful counterpoint to the common association of pastoral care with a passive or reactive understanding of ministry as expressed primarily through listening. Seeing pastoral care as essentially passive care contrasts with a more assertive view of ministry that takes place in preaching, teaching, and administering the programs of an organization. Actually “care-full” listening is not passive. It is quite active and often interruptive in order to gain a genuine understanding of person and problem.

Pastoral authority used in pastoral counseling, as well as in other functions of ministry, is an expression of both a profession and a calling. Christian ethicist James Gustafson said that,

A “calling” without professionalization is bumbling, ineffective and even dangerous. A profession without a calling, however, has no taps of moral and human rootage to keep motivation alive, to keep human sensitivities and sensibilities alert, and to nourish a proper sense of self-fulfillment. Nor does a professional without a calling easily envision the larger ends and purposes of human good that our individual efforts can serve. (James M. Gustafson, “Professions as Callings,” *Social Service Review*, December 1982, 514)

Although the expression of pastoral authority may involve the use of any management and communication skills that the minister acquires, the theological assertion that the practice of ministry is a calling affirms that the use of those skills cannot appropriately be used apart from the community of faith authorizing them and the person of the minister using them. Thus counseling done by a parish minister or institutional chaplain is not a private practice. It is an action of the faith community that the minister performs on the community’s behalf.

Some other things about the expression of pastoral authority in pastoral counseling should be said here. The first is that it is not based upon what the pastor says or does but upon supporting and encouraging the counselee in making choices and changes in his own life. Change is frightening to most people whether or not they can admit it. The pastor’s authority is expressed in his willingness to be present in change and transitions

in life and, when judged to be appropriate, to bless those changes and transitions.

A second thing to be said is that expressing pastoral authority involves risk to the pastor's self. In some ways this risk is parallel to the risk of the counselee in making choices and changes in his life situation. In attempting to guide another, the pastor may be wrong in some of what he says, but if that guidance is given with the honesty of self-expression it has more likelihood of offering positive guidance than hiddenness and ambiguity in what is said. The counselee will have more sense that the pastor is *there*, and the pastor's own self-expression can encourage that of the person seeking help.

A third element in the expression of pastoral authority is that it is not just based on words. Again, it is presence, being there with the faith that the pastor represents. It may involve ritual such as the structure the pastor uses for the counseling or a blessing or informal touch. It may involve, if this is not just words but something the pastor honestly does, telling the counselee that he prays for him in this time of change or transition. Certainly prayer involves words, but these words reference a ritual behavior that is taking place outside the actual counseling. The beyond words behavior that can express the pastor's authority may, for example, also be expressed by his not telling the counselee to come back for further counseling but insisting that he make the decision about that himself.

Something that is negatively related to all the characteristics noted above is the need to please, to be "nice," to have difficulty saying "no." The pastor asserts his authority in insisting on conducting the counseling in the way he thinks best, and this sometimes involves saying "no" to the way the counselee wants to proceed. More will be said about this, particularly in the discussion of pastoral counseling related to problems of addiction and abuse.

What a Pastor Is Expected to Be

Although we may live in a time in the United States when church and ministry are less influential than they seem to have been in the past, many persons still look to pastors for help with personal and family problems.

They come to pastors for counseling because the pastor appears to be more available and less threatening than psychotherapists who may be identified as only treating those who are thought of as mentally ill.

Like the good physician, a pastor is expected to be a certain kind of person. The religious body that ordains the pastor and the person who comes to him for counseling don't have to agree on what this specialness about him should be. Some of it is that he is expected to be an educated professional with special knowledge and convictions about life and how it should be lived. Some of it is related to the faith of the religious tradition that the pastor represents.

Within the Christian tradition an important example of how the New Testament, particularly the later epistles, understood what a pastor should be is found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Wayne Oates referenced this text in his classic book *The Christian Pastor*. I paraphrased that same text thirty years later in my book *Pastoral Care in Context* in chapter 3, "Characteristics of the Carers," (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). The text in 1 Timothy is describing what bishops should be. *The Common English Bible* translates the Greek word for bishop, *episkopos*, as supervisor, and this touches on one of the meanings of the word *pastor* that I commented on previously.

[Pastors or] the church's supervisors must be without fault. They should be faithful to their spouse, sober, modest, and honest. They should show hospitality and be skilled at teaching. They should not be addicted to alcohol or be a bully. Instead, they should be gentle, peaceable, and not greedy. They should manage their own household well—they should see that their children are obedient with complete respect, because if they don't know how to manage their own household, how can they take care of God's church? They shouldn't be new believers so that they won't become proud and fall under the devil's spell. They should also have a good reputation with those outside the church so that they won't be embarrassed and fall into the devil's trap. (1 Tim 3:2-7 CEB)

How might we understand these expectations today? My current interpretation of the text is given below. My way of putting this is not important, but it is intended to say that it is important for ministers to

take seriously how they are viewed by church and community. This does not mean uniformity of behavior, but it does mean that what they do in ministry cannot be separated from the persons they are. They should not be naive about or indifferent to the facts and affirmations of the faith. Uniformity in their theological education is not required, but serious involvement in such education is.

Pastors should also be aware of how their relationship to their own families may affect the way they approach and respond to the pain in the families of other persons. The minister's own marital status is not as important as his awareness of the importance of issues of intimacy and closeness in the lives of everyone. Such issues cannot be separated from more explicitly "religious" concerns. At the same time it is important that ministers be able to handle personal issues with objectivity and wisdom, not using the situation of others to work on their own personal concerns.

Ministers should be committed to the importance of faith for their own lives. Their convictions cannot afford to be casual. They must be firmly but not defensively held in a way that they are available for dialogue, not indoctrination. Pastors' attitude about their ministry is important. They obviously cannot be happy about all the tasks of ministry, but they should have a way of doing them that is not resentful and hostile about having to do the work.

These statements about what ministers should be and do may not be in the awareness of those who come to them for counsel, but they are useful reminders that representatives and leaders of religious communities are expected in some way to have a special knowledge and ability as well as an association with a profession representing a worthwhile or more meaningful life. Thus in their counseling, pastors need to embody and be seeking to embody in a more profound way an understanding of life and of meaningful relationships.

What a Pastor Is Supposed to Do

In addition to the term *pastoral*, the meanings of *counsel*, *counseling*, and *pastoral consultation* are important in describing the kind of counseling the pastor should do with persons seeking help. *Counsel* is a term

that most often is associated with the legal profession. It is commonly understood as advice, opinion, or instruction given in directing the judgment or conduct of another. Other understandings of *counsel* include the interchange of opinions as to future procedure; consultation; deliberation; a deliberate purpose; plan; design; and in theology, as one of the advisory declarations of Christ. All of these ways of describing *counsel* can be useful in thinking about the care that a minister who is not a counseling specialist can give.

The terms *counseling* and *psychotherapy* are often used interchangeably, but a common distinction between the two is that counseling is more often associated with thoughtful reflection and decision about a person's life situation, whereas psychotherapy is more concerned with personality change and improved mental health. Psychotherapy is usually a longer-term process requiring more psychological knowledge and technical skill on the part of the therapist. Counseling is likely to be a short-term, more cognitively focused process. Although pastors who do not intend to specialize in counseling can profit from some study of the techniques of psychotherapy and from being patients in psychotherapy themselves, they can generally be more effective if they consider themselves as counselors who focus more on a person's dealing with his life situation than on personal, psychological change. One qualification to this statement is that religious change, often described as conversion and guided by a pastor in ministry both to the whole community and to individual persons, may indeed involve significant psychological change. The focus of the pastor's counsel of individuals and families, however, is usually on issues of personal change that can be discussed cognitively.

Other words associated with the dictionary definitions of *counsel* and *counseling* noted above were *consultation*, *deliberation*, *deliberate purpose*, *plan*, and *design*. And specifically related to theology, counseling related for the aid of living morally and achieving a good and moral life. All of them are associated with the meaning of advice and the achieving of a more satisfying life whether or not one that is in some way thought of as perfect. A minister or religious leader is generally thought of as a consultant on what a good life is, whether or not the person consulting

with him is particularly concerned with values that are specifically Christian.

Because we are describing the minister's role and function as a counselor or consultant it seems important to say something about what I understand as the meaning of those terms for pastoral counseling. Consultation is generally understood by contrasting it to supervision. A supervisor is a person who is responsible for the completion of a task that another person is carrying out. If the work is not done effectively, the supervisor as well as the person supervised may suffer the consequences of that failure. Consultation is different in that the consultant, unlike the supervisor, is not responsible for what the person consulted does or thinks. He simply examines the situation as an experienced and knowledgeable person. He gives his opinion on or response to the situation, and the person or persons consulted are free to take or leave what has been given them.

Consultation extends beyond this more general understanding to the situation of a minister who offers counsel or consultation to persons about their lives. In the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* ([Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990] 223-224), which I paraphrase here, O. L. DeLozier observes that, except for the most dependent relationships of childhood, and in some conditions of being a patient, no one knows what is best for another person. Recognizing this frees us from the burdensome task of knowing what is best for another. The consultant, therefore, is able to be open enough as a person to offer a variety of responses and impressions with the confidence that the person consulted can pick and choose what is useful. I believe that is something very important for pastors to consider when they are called upon to give advice in either the language of theology or the language of everyday life.

Wisdom as Slowing Down

The kind of counseling that a pastor can most effectively do requires using the wisdom about life and relationships that he has developed through responding with pastoral care to particular situations of human lostness. Moreover, pastors can appropriately be expected to continue developing wisdom about relationships through disciplined reflection upon

Pastoral counseling is a wisdom ministry of care, connection, and restoration.

This very practical book offers no-nonsense instructions for pastors, chaplains, and ministers whose real specialty is the practice of relational wisdom. Patton provides a helpful step-by-step template for pastoral counseling sessions and clear guidelines for understanding when to defer and how to refer—all while remaining faithful to the basic pastoral calling to connect persons seeking help with the relationships and resources they need to deal with their lives.

“In a society of specialists, John Patton’s *Pastor as Counselor* is a bold reminder of the healing potential of ‘care-full’ attending to lost and separated persons through the unique relational wisdom of the generalist pastor. This is vintage Patton, written with gentle wisdom and generous counsel that summarize decades of practicing and teaching pastoral counseling.”

—**Herbert Anderson**, Emeritus Professor of Pastoral Theology, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, IL, and Faculty in Practical Theology, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA

“John Patton wrote this how-to book for ministers without specialized training in mental health issues. Ministers are good at developing and deepening human relationships, and those are exactly the skills they need in order to become skilled short-term pastoral counselors. Concrete, down-to-earth, and quintessentially practical, this is a book that should be on the syllabus of every seminary’s introduction to pastoral care and counseling. It is the fruit of a lifetime of reflection and embodied relational wisdom at its best.”

—**Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger**, Charlotte W. Newcombe Professor of Pastoral Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ

“When it comes to counseling, our first port of call is often the mental health professions. In this book John Patton carefully draws out what is special about pastoral counseling. With theological depth and wise practical utility, he offers a clear guide for pastoral counselors as to what it is that gives them their identity and what that looks like in practice. This is a wise and deeply practical book that will inevitably be transformative.”

—**John Swinton**, Chair in Divinity and Religious Studies; School of Divinity, History and Philosophy; University of Aberdeen; Aberdeen, UK

“John Patton has acquired unparalleled wisdom over decades of providing, supervising, teaching, and writing about pastoral care. This most gifted and deeply reflective thinker has crafted a primer that will become a classic, spelling out what’s central for those new to the vocation, reminding the more seasoned of what really matters.”

—**Chris R. Schlauch**, Associate Professor of Pastoral Psychology and Psychology of Religion, Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA

John Patton is the emeritus professor of pastoral theology at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and a retired United Methodist minister. He is the author of many books, including *Pastoral Care: An Essential Guide* and *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care*. Dr. Patton is also an associate editor of Abingdon’s *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*.

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