

# Guidelines for Counseling by Clergy of the Virginia Annual Conference

## *Preface:*

While all clergy generally complete courses in pastoral care as a part of either the Seminary or Course of Study experience, a significantly fewer number have received supervised, clinical training to do “pastoral counseling.” Yet many clergy are engaging in “counseling” which goes beyond the generally expected spiritual guidance and pastoral care of church parishioners and other persons within the broader community. Often this “counseling” moves into areas beyond the knowledge, training, experience and skill level of the respective pastor.

We believe that this has important implications for: (1) clergy effectiveness in ministry and (2) the potential for clergy misconduct.

The first concern, effectiveness, is addressed in a statement by Dr. Bill Blackburn in his article, “Ethical Issues in Pastoral Counseling.” He writes, “How should pastors decide how much to counsel, whom to see, appropriate boundaries in counseling, and how available to be to persons in need? These boundary issues are crucial, because if they are not decided in some reasonable manner, the pastor can risk his or her own effectiveness, mental health, family life and leadership of the congregation.” The second concern arises from our experience that clergy misconduct and boundary violations most often originate in the pastoral “counseling” context.

During the 2009-10 conference year, the Board of Ordained Ministry initiated a third tier of training for clergy and religious professions to address the issues of ethical “Boundaries in Pastoral Care and Counseling.” This program was planned and coordinated by the Board of Ordained Ministry’s Ethics Committee and the Sexual Ethics Response Team with the assistance of certified pastoral counselors from within the bounds of our Annual Conference. This new training provides thoughtful guidance in the “why and how” of setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries as well as making referrals in the counseling relationship. An excellent participant’s handbook, “Boundaries in Pastoral Care and Counseling,” has been prepared as an integral resource in this training. Five of our 18 districts have already provided this training to their clergy during the first year of its availability. We are working to coordinate training dates for the remaining districts. Given the important issues being addressed in the workshop and the handbook, we believe that it is critical for all of our ordained/licensed clergy and religious professionals to participate in this new training when offered either on their own district or another district. At the same time, we believe that there is a need for the adoption of some basic “Guidelines for Counseling” by clergy and religious professionals in our Annual Conference. We present the following for adoption by the Annual Conference:

## *Guidelines:*

While it is to be expected that parishioners will come to their pastor seeking help and guidance with personal issues or concerns, we believe that our first responsibility to our parishioners as a clergy person or religious professional is in the realm of spiritual guidance and pastoral care. We recognize that the scope of knowledge, training, experience, and skills required in “pastoral counseling” is very different from that in pastoral “counseling” which is an extension of one’s broader pastoral care of a parishioner. Indeed, few clergy are trained and qualified to engage in “pastoral counseling” of a psychotherapeutic nature. Therefore, it is incumbent that each clergy person be mature and professional enough to know the limits of his/her professional knowledge, training, skill, and expertise. As such, clergy should make it a practice to provide a listening ministry of brief, supportive counseling and to use appropriate referrals when the problems or issues clearly go beyond the knowledge, training, experience or skills of the pastor.

Clergy should establish a personal policy which limits any counseling relationship to no more than three sessions of 60-90 minutes each per individual incident. Advise your congregation and church leadership of this policy and the rationale for it. Advise those who come to you for counseling of this policy at the outset. Be aware that exceeding appropriate limits in counseling increases the risks of the potential development of inappropriate relationships, boundary violations or misconduct between the pastor and the counselee, as well as the risk to parishioners of applying well intentioned, but misunderstood and inappropriate interventions or advice.

It is the clergyperson's responsibility to be aware of the various counseling and referral resources which are available in your community. In most communities, there will be a variety of certified or licensed mental health professionals and self-help groups to whom you can make referrals. Where this is not the case, you can make referrals to resource persons within a reasonable travel distance. Remember that persons in rural or more isolated communities already are accustomed to traveling to receive various kinds of professional care not readily available in their own community.

In consultation with the counselee and referral counselor, the clergyperson continues to provide appropriate needed pastoral care and support during the period of referral.

Clergypersons maintain confidentiality in all counseling relationships. What is shared by the parishioner in counseling with the pastor is considered privileged information and is not to be shared in any way outside the counseling relationship. However, we understand that we are legally mandated to report the suspicion of child abuse or neglect and such exception to confidentiality is provided for in the *2008 Book of Discipline*, ¶341.5.

Always use caution in the physical setting and observe appropriate boundaries of touching and other inappropriate physical contact or comments, especially when meeting with minors. Always be sure that other adults are nearby as protection for yourself, the counselee and the church. Help your church develop and implement a Child/Youth Protection Policy if one is not already in place. All clergypersons should complete the Board of Ordained Ministry training on "Boundaries in Pastoral Care and Counseling" being provided at the district level. This workshop provides a more comprehensive rationale and overview of the guidelines to be observed in counseling and how to make appropriate referrals to licensed or certified counselors and other mental health professionals.

*Approved 11/3/2010 by the Virginia Conference Board of Ordained Ministry*