

Solving the Counseling Problem in Churches

By Wib Newton, L.P.C., L.M.F.T.

I have worked with churches for over 30 years in a number of capacities (youth, family, small groups, and counseling/support groups). In each of these specific areas the churches with whom I have worked reached a resource challenge. More manpower was needed but the financial resources were limited. This is especially true for the area of pastoral care. If a church has people in it, then it has hurting people in it. To hire a full-time, trained professional counselor is appealing; but it doesn't seem cost effective. This Counseling and Pastoral Care Ministry is behind-the-scenes invisible to the average member. While it is believed to be of value to a church, it is not often viewed as a ministry which helps the church grow.

Earlier this decade, Amarillo South Church's reputation as a caring and accepting church was well known in the panhandle. The amount of counseling that had been going on at the church was growing every day which led to several challenges even with a full-time person responsible for pastoral care. First, with free and frequently accessed services by community and congregational members alike, Amarillo South's **staff became overwhelmed**. The church leadership realized it could not hire enough full-time therapists, professional or not, to meet this need.

Second, because of the complexity of issues being presented to the staff, they knew their **knowledge of how to help was limited**. Referring them out to the best possible resource as quickly as possible became a very important part of their ministry. The challenge became knowing who would be the best referral around specific issues because that list of resources seemed to be constantly changing.

Third, the uncomfortable reality of counseling someone and participation with them in ministry (**dual relationship**) also became more present in the life of the church. Even with a full-time Pastoral Counselor, churches often find this unhealthy situation because the church usually has to have him or her head another ministry to find them cost effective.

Fourth, the staff is overwhelmed to the point that some of their **tasks are not getting done**. Yes, these men and women got into ministry to serve people and to reach the lost. However, in the culture of today's church, this means that tasks around ministry, programs, special events, etc. must take place. With counseling thrown in the midst, balance becomes more and more difficult.

Fifth, if Amarillo South wanted to make counseling a significant ministry of the church, then a part of the **present facility needed to be adapted for a more conducive setting**. People coming in for counseling were often greeted in a very friendly way but in surroundings typically found in an active, sometimes loud and chaotic church office. Another option, which proved not feasible, was to build a separate building.

I was asked to take over the counseling area of Amarillo South Church in fall of 2004. This is a natural fit for me because I had received my formal education at West Virginia University in speech communications, and Harding University in counseling. I also am a Licensed Professional Counselor, Licensed Professional Therapist, and a Board Certified Professional Christian Counselor. Therefore, because of my professional training as a counselor combined with my church staff experience, I knew the pitfalls and challenges before me. I immediately suggested a new way of doing things when it came to counseling. This new way included funneling all the counseling concerns through my office, even the ones that came from the community. I began to do the following:

- Initially assess the individuals' or couples' concern through my trained ears.
- Suggest to each a customized plan of treatment.
- Guide them to the most appropriate resources in the church or the community. This might include a therapist, a support group, a training event, etc., even if it was not at Amarillo South.
- For those not attending any church, try to plug them into Amarillo South's existing resources when appropriate.
- When I felt appropriate, agree to do some short-term therapy (1-3 sessions only). If I felt that it would take more, refer them to another professional in the area.

When I initially began this effort, I took over the existing load of the Pastoral Counselor on staff. He was seeing around 30 people in a week and he had reached a burnout stage. He felt obligated to see them as long as they wanted and he only referred out as a last resort. I took these people and systematically moved them along in the therapy. Some needed to be referred out immediately. Others' needs were met with a shorter term approach. The first several months, I began to see on average 35-50 people a month. Most of these were placed into existing area or church resources. The goal became not to do long term therapy, but to **get them to the very best resource... quickly.** Within a year, I was averaging 75 people per month with 70% of these being one time sessions with possible referrals. In the fall and winter of 2006, I was seeing over a hundred people a month, all using the same template of care. The church was still viewed as a place to receive care, even though it was not doing long term therapy in house. Any one from anywhere in the city was welcome to come in for this free initial assessment and that seemed to be very appealing to many.

I wonder how many people in congregations do not get the emotional help they need because they:

- **don't know the best place to go?**
- **are afraid to walk in a church because someone might see them and talk?**
- **are misguided by well intending pastors and friends?**

A key to this was that not only did I make sure the person(s) were listened to, their issues summarized and clarified, but a next step was clearly suggested. I had received many anecdotes from people in my office about other churches in the area that had visited with them and simply set them on their way, hoping that was enough. It left a bad taste in their mouths concerning their home churches no matter how much I tried to rationalize the church's behavior.

I then began to look around our community. Amarillo, Texas is considered by many to be one of the "biggest little cities" you will ever find. Even though it does have a small town feel, the churches in this area often are not very cooperative. Churches across town are duplicating services such as divorce adjustment, parenting classes, and alcohol/drug recovery groups. Not

only are these churches duplicating efforts, they are not adequately communicating to the community their offerings. Personally, as a therapist also in private practice, I find it extremely valuable to know what is being offered in the community so I could refer these resources to my clients if it met their needs. I often wonder, “Who in town is having a parenting class right now”, or “what church might be having a group for women in transition?”

Another frustration... the volunteer led recovery/support groups at Amarillo South, were being offered often and the results were not always good... at least not always good for the leaders. The leaders felt committed to have their group or class often. They would have a group of ten one semester and then two the next. They would feel obligated to help the two but it would have a toll on the leaders, sometimes just in their frustration that they could not get more to attend. Again, why if my basic concern as a pastor is to find care for my members, can I not send my people to another resource in town... even to another church's resources? Or (here is a difficult one) are Pastors more concerned about someone stealing their flock or finding the best care for them? (Ouch!)

Well, all of this began to spin in my head until I came up with a dream... New Hope Counseling and Resources (NHCR). This center is not owned or directed by any one church. It is an independent contractor, neutrally located away from any one church and yet contracting with churches.

This idea is not really new. One church had such a great audio/visual crew that they spun off and developed a company so that they could provide the same benefit to other churches, even in the same city. Another church had developed a church management software that was meeting a real need in the market. The developers of the software developed a separate company, contracted back to the church from which they came, and then also offered their product and technical support to other churches. Why not share a good idea for the larger Kingdom's sake?

NHCR is to provide a cost effective answer to the mental health needs of the local congregation. By partnering with NHCR, the church gains a valuable asset in ministry. The member's mental health needs will now be assessed by trained Christian professionals in the mental health field

without any cost to this person. These members will then be referred to the best possible resources in the area for their specific issue. NHCR will be able to provide some of those services and if needed, at a reduced cost to the client. Assessments take place conveniently in the members' home through a phone call or by them visiting a neutral, non-church location. This location is a professional office designed for this type of visit. Confidentiality and anonymity are much more likely to take place with these options.

In addition, NHCR offers a variety of other options to assist the local church as if the center was acting as a part-time employee. Consulting, coaching, training are all options offered to individual staff, volunteer leaders, or to the entire church. One church that is contracting with NHCR uses it to consult monthly with their volunteer leaders who are responsible for the support groups and recovery groups of the church. They also ask NHCR to provide personal coaching to their pastor.

A website is offered to the entire community to access a listing of all the support/recovery groups and special classes the churches in the area offer. NHCR hosts www.NewHopeResources.com and proactively updates this resource every month.

Here is how the system works for a partnering church. When someone calls a partnering church asking for counseling, after determining if the request is not really for benevolent help, the church simply transfers the call directly to NHCR (*ain't technology wonderful*). At that time, an appointment is made either for a personal visit or a phone call to assess the concern. When the assessment takes place, the counselor first determines if the referring church has any resources that might best serve this client. If so, they are encouraged to be involved in those areas. If not, other options are considered, including referrals to professional counselors.

This is different than the traditional way churches and counseling centers work together. Usually, someone looking for counseling calls the church office and they make an appointment with the pastor. This pastor tries to assist them with pastoral direction... what they do best. He might suggest another professional in town that he refers to regularly if the issue seems to be beyond their abilities to help. This typical scenario can be problematic for the following reasons:

- The pastor might not identify the real problem with the client because what is presented as the problem often is not.
- The pastor might not make the best referral because of their limited knowledge of possible referral opportunities.
- The client must now pay \$130/hour to tell another professional their problem who hopefully will be able to help them.
- The client might have been just as appropriately served through a support/recovery group.

Get them to the very best resource... quickly.

How does NHCR help Pastors?

- Frees up time normally spent on personal visits
- Comfort of knowing members are being given many more options of receiving good, Christ-centered help
- Knowledge that the church staff would not be overwhelmed with trying to provide care to people beyond the staff's training. Better use of time of talent.
- Availability of consulting with Wib at anytime thus drawing from his 30+ years experience in working with churches. He would be a perfect, objective sounding board for personal and professional issues with the Sr. Pastor
- More intentional opportunities to connect with other pastors through special workshops, retreats and other services provided by AFR.

Churches?

- No need to include or increase pastoral care staff.
- Center acts for the congregation as a community based referral source, especially to those clients without churches
- Opportunities to focus on providing what resources fits them (no need to have every kind of group in every church to meet needs of members)
- Comfort in knowing that more people are going to know about the resources the congregation provides
- Presents to the community a picture of unity and cooperation

I would encourage every church who is considering hiring someone to take care of their church's counseling concerns to stop and reconsider. Contact New Hope Counseling and Resources and see if what you are looking for is already available for a lot less cost. Even if it is a small congregation, the resources at New Hope can be of tremendous value to the mental and spiritual health of the people. Why recreate when the resource is already available?



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