

Jer 20.7). I cannot in any way prove scientifically my sense of call. All I know is that I did not volunteer, rather I responded: “Here am I; send me” (Isa 6.8).

Yet, having said that, there is an objective side to our calling, for the genuineness of my call has been tested by God’s people and found not to be wanting. The very act of ordination on 10 October 1970 was the church’s public recognition of the rightness of my response. I believe that when we are tempted to doubt our calling, there is much to be said to look back to that occasion when hands were laid upon us - just as when Martin Luther was tempted to doubt his standing in Christ he used to reply: “*baptisatus sum* (I am baptised)”.

## THE PASTORAL CARE OF PASTORAL COUNSELLORS

### Paul Goodliff

The very people who offer pastoral care and counselling to those in crisis face a growing crisis of their own. What does this demanding professional role of pastor, carer or counsellor do to their marriage or how does it challenge their singleness?

Is it just a personal impression, or is it really the fact that those who train as counsellors are more likely to leave their marriage partner? If it is indeed more than just a tragic, but unrepresentative, trend amongst my friends and acquaintances, then there are some serious issues to address about pastoral counselling.

In my work as a ‘pastor to the pastors’, and especially as a pastoral counsellor, I am in close contact with both men and women. The heart of both roles is to love people. More specifically, it is to love individuals, often hurting and vulnerable individuals, whose projections and fantasies must ‘bear thinking about’. The personal risk and vulnerability is sometimes high. The psychotherapist Petrushka Clarkson puts it like this: “We are required to act constantly in the arena of love, yet renounce all personal gratification; we work in one of the most potent cauldrons of intimacy, yet we are prohibited to drink from it; we give solace or wisdom perhaps to those who suffer, knowing full well that we

ourselves are wounded healers, scarred by similar terrors, griefs and excesses as those who consult us .... Of course there is joy, satisfaction, awe and wonder as well, but is it any wonder that there is such a high incidence of breakdown, loneliness, burnout and cynicism in this profession?"

I keep to the 'boundaries' (the professional code of practice that ensures moral and pastoral safety for client and counsellor alike,) and do not cheat on my wife or abuse the trust that 'parishioners', pastors and clients place in me. Sadly some pastors and counsellors do not keep to those boundaries, and leave their profession under the cloud of 'conduct unbecoming' a minister or pastoral carer/counsellor.

I thank God for a lasting, loving and supported/supportive marriage partner in Gill. We do not 'do everything together', and she is far from the traditional 'clergy wife' who makes the tea, does church flowers and runs the women's meeting. She has her own career as a college lecturer and manager, and because we both work hard and long, we both run the home, share the tasks, and enjoy our time away from the routine. We are friends, partners, lovers and parents. I have never wanted to live with anyone else, nor live alone. We are not perfect, and I can procrastinate about the decorating and burn the peas with the best of them, but we are together. Am I just lucky, or are there pastoral reasons why I do not want to leave my marriage, as some of my fellow counsellors seem to?

Because Gill knows that I keep to the boundaries (and because we talk about it, and, even if it is sometimes uncomfortable, she asks the awkward questions about how close I am to this or that female client), we cope with the uncomfortable feelings that arise when I work closely with others. Honesty and trust between counsellor and spouse is essential.

Others do not leave because they have entered into a new sexual relationship, but simply because, in the process of training and practising as a counsellor, they change. They are empowered to refuse to settle for the humdrum, the boring, the destructive patterns in their marriage, and they leave. Perhaps this is not so different to the woman who picks up a second career after raising the children, and finds, in the personal and financial freedoms it offers, the opportunity to get out of an unhappy marriage. But with the counsellors (and in my experience as a trainer of

counsellors, the typical candidate presenting for training is a married woman whose children are no longer young), the very process of training in a humanistic and sometimes amoral discipline opens up opportunities to reconsider their experience of marriage in a peculiarly focussed way.

For others, the training process touches deep wounds from way back in childhood, and the only way of trying to keep that pain in check seems to be to leave their spouse. Bewildered, angry and frustrated, the spouse, and indeed the church, blames the counselling, but in actuality, the reasons lie elsewhere.

It is not only women who, in the past twenty years, have been told they 'can have it all' - career, play, happy family and passionate and intimate love. Men too are jumping on the wagon of 'having it all', and in the process are much readier to jump out of the of the marriage or partnership to get it. They want the work which is fulfilling, the play which is fun, the home which is happy and stable and great sex. Perhaps above all, great sex from a woman who is mother and lover ... but rarely equal partner. It is immature, it is selfish, it is often ungodly, and Christian men are not immune. Nor are Christian counsellors, both men and women. Part of the task of pastoral care for those who work in pastoral counselling is to teach the truths of the Gospel and expose the lie that self-fulfilment is the greatest goal. There are values in secular counselling which are inimical to the Gospel, and when allied to the radical consumerism of post-modern society, produce a *Zeitgeist* where 'choice' is the paramount value. That choice extends to partners and family, with little of the stabilising virtues of commitment and duty (neither of which are seen as virtues in the post-modern milieu, but rather, almost 'vices') to modify the desire to have needs met at all costs.

One of the best helping strategies is to enable Christian counsellors to train in an environment which explicitly acknowledges the validity of the faith they practise and to engage in the process of integrating their faith and professional practice. There are few such training courses around, and one of the most widely respected has just closed. We need more, not less, training opportunities in pastoral (as opposed to secular) counselling if those trained are to be given the tools to help prevent the collapse of their own close relationships.

Another essential is professional supervision of the work that counsellors and pastors do. It is the pastor or pastoral carer who is unsupervised, and unwilling or unable to address the issues of being sexually attracted to those they are professionally responsible for, who is at much greater risk of marital breakdown than the closely supervised counsellor well-supported and understood by his or her church community.

Of course, the issues and challenges posed by our sexuality should be among those themes regularly addressed in the teaching of the church to all its community, and not just an 'issue' for the counsellors and carers.

If you are a pastor reading this, you need to be aware that the pastoral carers and counsellors in your church need you just as much as you need their skills and professionalism as part of your pastoral care strategy. Take the courage to ask those awkward questions, especially about their partnerships and marriages, and love them with affection and compassion. You almost certainly will not be their supervisor, but they need you to be their pastor, which is a much more demanding role.

It is not pastoral counselling per se which is to blame for the breakdown of counsellors' marriages, so let us not as churches dispense with our counsellors. But let us be aware of the dangers, the pressures and the opportunities that arise and issue suitable warnings about the risks. Let us then offer appropriate support to those who practise as counsellors so that their marriages may not founder on the rocks of the secular and selfish ideology of 'self-ism', even as they care for others and are the agents of healing and wholeness to many.

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