

Laboring Wisely: Using Outside Resources Well

By Jeremy Pierre and Deepak Reju

When Jesus called you to shepherd his people, he called you to walk with them through complex and sometimes ugly problems. But we also know that pastors have limitations, both in time and in experience with the complexities of human trouble. Here are some indicators it may be time to seek outside help.

You're on your own and maxed out. You are pastoring an unhealthy church. Your congregation is not serious about discipleship. So when problems arise, you are basically on your own. Apart from your wife praying for you, there is really no one else who is willing to lend a hand.

You've tried your best without much effect. You have helped someone for months with a deeply ingrained problem. While there has been some progress, the trouble remains largely untouched. You've sacrificed much time and remain dedicated to the person, but you've reached the limits of your insight to help with patterns that are not changing.

You sense the need for further medical help. While you should have counselees seek regular medical advice from the beginning, sometimes people display bizarre behavior, intrusive thought patterns, or extreme emotional responses that seem uncontrollable. These may be indicators that their physiology needs further attention from a doctor.

You must disclose information that protects people from abuse or deadly harm. When a person threatens suicide, homicide, or any abuse of children, elderly folks, or dependent persons, you must immediately report to authorities. If you have reasonable suspicion or direct admission from your counselee that such abuse has occurred already, you must report this as well. Get to know your state's laws as well as whatever child-protective services it offers. The folks you see for counseling should know that you are required to disclose such things when they first start the process with you. Reporting to authorities does not mean you are being an untrustworthy pastor, and you can explain this with two simple facts: First, you are not permitted by law to determine guilt or innocence on your own authority.

Second, you will remain committed to shepherding their spiritual needs through whatever may come.

Pastoral ministry will bring all these types of situations your way. You can be ready now if you figure out *when* and *for what reasons* you will seek help in your local community. In this chapter we'll present some simple criteria that can be applied to whatever community your church is in.

The counseling resources you will find in your community will generally fall into one of three categories: (1) church or parachurch counseling, (2) professional counseling, (3) medical or

psychiatric help. Each of these can be found in regular or residential forms. Regular care occurs as a series of appointments with a counselor or doctor. Residential treatment is more intensive and involves living away from home under the direction of counselors or doctors.

REFERRING TO OUTSIDE RESOURCES

As we discuss referral, we want to be careful with what we mean by it. By “referral,” we are not implying that you are moving someone out of your care and into someone else’s. You are this person’s pastor and are called to watch over his or her soul. You maintain spiritual oversight of your members by helping them think through whatever counsel they receive from these other resources. As their shepherd, your primary goal is to keep Jesus Christ central to their understanding of genuine heart change.

Just to be clear: we are not saying that pastors oversee the outside resources directly. They function outside your authority in terms of their own practices and procedures. Rather, you are helping your people sort through the guidance they’re receiving, making sure they critique it from a biblical standpoint. This will help them determine for themselves if they want to continue with it or not.

Church or Parachurch Counseling

The place to start in your search for solid, local biblical counseling is to seek out other gospel-preaching, Bible-based churches in your area. You may find that they either offer counseling services as part of their ministry or have done their homework and found a reliable counselor in your area. So start by contacting a few like-minded churches in your community, and ask them who they use for counseling. Start your own referral list by using some of their recommended counselors.

If no other solid church in your area has done the research, you’ll need to do your own. It probably won’t be easy to find a counselor who fits with both your theology and your philosophy of care. But here are some helpful criteria.

First and foremost, you want to find a Christian who knows God’s Word and knows how to relate its power to the problems of life. Is Scripture a regular and authoritative source of this person’s counsel? You’ve probably experienced talking with a member whose counselor addressed how the problem expressed itself, but offered advice and strategies only marginally related to the Bible. If a counselor knows and trusts the Bible, you will know it in how he or she advises your member.

Second, you want someone who has a loving, gracious, trustworthy demeanor. Tone matters. Yes, a person will sometimes need a firm, loving rebuke. But that is best done after the counselor has earned the counselee’s trust. A necessary step to earning trust is being a gracious person who approaches troubled people with the patient kindness of Jesus. On the whole, a counselor needs to be someone who is approachable and has a merciful disposition toward life’s problems. Do not entrust your people to someone whose demeanor does not match what the Bible commands (1 Pet. 3:8), even if he ostensibly knows the Bible well.

Third, you need someone who can patiently persist through the complexity of life's problems. Patience is always a virtue, but especially in counseling because change is slow. Generally, problems get better in small steps, not large leaps. Proper expectations and a willingness to work within God's timing are important characteristics in a counselor who may help a struggler for months or even years.

Finally, you want someone who has the competence to handle the problem. Having no counselor is better than sending your member to a bad one. An incompetent counselor can quickly make things worse by holding a person to unrealistic expectations or by indulging self-oriented perspectives. A guy with a Bible is not enough. He has to have the quality of situational wisdom—the ability to recognize the fine nuances of human responses and understand how biblical truth shapes them. You don't necessarily need a counselor who specializes in a particular problem, as long as he has the tools to handle complexity in human life.

Even if you find someone who exemplifies these qualities, please remember that the counselor is simply helping a person through the specifics of an issue. You still need to stay in touch with your member to ensure that counsel is consistent with the Bible's promises of grace and expectations for godly living. Here are a few practical ways to stay engaged with counseling:

- Take some time to visit the counseling sessions. One of the best ways for you to learn how to deal with the problems that you feel ill equipped to face is to watch a counselor work through them with your church member.
- Ask the member to e-mail you a short summary of each session. This gives you an opportunity to keep up with the person's progress and get some sense of the counselor's theology and methodology.
- Ask the member to give the counselor permission to talk with you so you can check in with the counselor and get an assessment of how things are going. A helpful counselor will work alongside a pastor, keeping him informed of how the church can wisely love the struggling person. If the counselor is unwilling or won't make time to talk with the pastor, cross him off the referral list.

Professional Counseling

Our criteria for choosing a good church or parachurch counselor apply to professional counseling as well. A licensed professional *Christian* counselor should counsel like a Christian. The term "Christian" can't just be a label; it should characterize the counsel given and the kind of help offered.

We would warn you more strongly against a professional Christian counselor who is weak in his biblical framework of human problems than against a psychologist who does not claim to be Christian. The lines of distinction are at least clear in the latter case. In the former, they are blurry. If a professional Christian counselor offers advice that is largely based on unbiblical therapeutic models, then distinguishing between what stems from the Bible and what stems from an alternate model becomes difficult.

Here's an example. Let's say a professional Christian counselor and a professional secular counselor advise your member to go into his bedroom and punch a pillow when his wife angers him. This seems reasonable. It's certainly better than punching his wife, and the pillow is replaceable. If the professional Christian counselor has advised this, your member might assume that this is biblically based advice. After all, it doesn't seem unloving to others or dishonoring to God to treat a pillow viciously. A professional Christian counselor giving such pillow advice would likely cite Scripture to make his point, maybe showing how Jesus directed his anger appropriately by overturning the money changers' tables and not striking the money changers themselves. And this would seem reasonably biblical to your member. But the problem with this advice is that it's based on a faulty understanding of people: that their negative impulses should be expressed so long as they are directed toward safe objects. This reasoning is only a sad attempt to baptize an unbiblical anthropology. The apostle Paul would scoff at such advice, saying that it merely indulges a "fit of anger," which is a "work of the flesh" (Gal. 5:19–20).

With a psychologist who has no Christian convictions, at least an unbiblical anthropology is in plain view. Counsel from such a source can contain practical insights, but has clear limits. Psychologists may give mental strategies for taking control of obsessive thoughts, uncover patterns of disruptive emotive responses, or provide communicative strategies customized for certain problems, and these can be genuinely helpful. But all of these fall short of life-shaping wisdom. So specialists for certain problems can prove useful to your people, but only when their counsel is submitted to a larger biblical worldview.

For instance, a psychotherapist who specializes in posttraumatic stress disorder will know much about the common experiences of a returning soldier and can recognize warning signs in behavior. But he cannot explain the theological starting point of fear, the reality of danger in a fallen world, or the hope of a re-created one. The same can be true of psychologists who specialize in sleep disorders, Tourette's syndrome, infertility issues, childhood trauma, and more.

Pastor, your job may not be to know as much as the therapist about the observable dynamics of a given condition, but it is to show how your people can respond with faith in God to whatever condition they're in. The wisdom to respond in faith comes only from God's Word. So if your people see secular professional counselors for whatever reason, do not let them think they've replaced the need for biblical guidance from their pastor.

Medical or Psychiatric Help

God created us to comprise body and soul, and these two aspects of our nature interrelate in mysterious and wonderful ways. God declared this design good, but sin corrupted both our bodies and our souls. The fall gave us not only a spiritual bent toward sin, but also a decaying body. Disease corrupts every part of the body, from muscular and cardiovascular systems to endocrine and neurological. We are stewards of the body as much as the soul. Thus, pastors should always encourage regular medical care.

As you care for your members, sometimes more specific medical attention is needed. In the course of counseling, a person may demonstrate evidence of physiologically complicating factors that need medical attention: for example, bizarre or unpredictable behavior, severe emotional swings, or invasive hallucinations.

Is a pastor encouraging spiritual laziness in his member by encouraging him to see a doctor? Only if that person is allowed to think that medications can solve his problems. Meds alone cannot solve the problems of the soul. Medicine is just one tool in the overall biblical approach to care for embodied people, and this tool must never be used in a way that undermines engagement with God through his Word.

A pastor ought to be aware that members who seek medical or psychiatric attention often feel shame for doing so. Such shame can hinder their pursuit of a loving God who understands their weaknesses. You can serve them well by assuring them that they can still trust the Lord and seek to understand the core spiritual issues at play as they are being treated medically. Remind them that they are a mysterious combination of body and soul, and that their bodies (not just their souls) are corrupted by sin. Seeking medical help for the things that go wrong with our bodies is a normal part of living in a fallen world. Though medicine, like any created thing, can be a false refuge from deeper problems, it does not have to function that way. Seeking medical help is not a failure of faith.

How can a pastor help in his member's search for medical or psychiatric help? The answer lies in finding the right kind of doctor. Here is what you need.

A doctor who is competent. Competence involves at least two things: conscientious effort and knowledge of the limits of medicine. Regarding the first, some doctors spend the necessary time and effort to get to know their patients, and others do not. A great way to find out how much attention a person gets with a doctor is to find out how long an appointment is scheduled for. With the pressure of managed care and meeting quotas, some practices will schedule seven or eight patients per hour, which leaves seven to nine minutes for each patient. Such a quick turnaround significantly increases the chance for inattentive diagnosis and monitoring. You want a practice that prioritizes accurately understanding the physiological aspects of the problem before prescribing medicine.

Regarding a doctor's awareness of the limits of medical care, a good psychiatrist knows that his or her focus should be on the medical aspects of the problem and not venture into spiritual, moral, or relational counsel. Medical professionals can offer practical tips for helping physical realities, but life-shaping wisdom and spiritual counsel lie outside their professional territory. Obviously, a doctor with vibrant faith and competence as a physician can do much good in complementing the spiritual care of the church. If you find a doctor like this, realize what a precious gift it is to you and your church.

A doctor who is willing to communicate with the pastor. Even with the proper releases, some doctors may be uncomfortable speaking with a patient's pastor. You want a doctor who actually welcomes communication with key members of a patient's support system. This indicates that he or she sees the importance of sources of wisdom and support that medicine cannot provide.

A doctor who is affordable. Health insurance is only becoming more complex to figure out. Costs are dependent on whether a doctor is in-network or out. Added to this complexity is the recent reality that many private practices have stopped billing insurance at all because the reimbursement process, red tape, and hassle are so cumbersome that the quality of the practice suffers. Such practices may provide patients with a form that they can send to their insurance company to seek reimbursement on their own. But this does require the patient to float the cost until reimbursement. Your awareness of these realities will enable you to help your member make a wise choice.

CONCLUSION

As a pastor you serve in a role of spiritual authority over your church members' lives (Ezekiel 34; Heb. 13:7; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). But anyone who has pastored knows that his voice is one among many. As you create a referral list, do so carefully. You save yourself a lot of untangling later by helping members choose wisely on the front end and preparing them to listen discerningly to advice.

If the counselor or doctor consistently conflicts with your pastoral counsel, that makes sorting through the mess much more difficult. Struggling people are not helped by conflicting advice. In situations where conflicting advice is causing confusion and pain, it's best to advise a member to look for a new counselor or doctor. This should be done with humility and courtesy to everyone involved.

The bottom line is that you cannot hand off responsibility for the soul of a member to another caregiver, Christian or not. Referral is not a handing off, but a problem-specific supplement to the biblical view of life you are responsible to instill. This process is not always clear, but with the principles laid out, you'll have a good chance of maintaining the biblical discernment you'll need to use outside resources wisely.

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