

Ten Questions to Ask before Starting a Counseling Ministry in Your Church



by DAVID POWLISON

Churches often contact us at CCEF¹ asking how to establish a counseling ministry. Naturally they want some step-by-step guidance. But wise advice on the “how to” questions calls for a number of orienting conversations first to think through the “what to” questions. Careful assessment of what you ought to do precedes any decision on the step-by-step implementation of a program for delivering counseling ministry. In what follows, I will propose ten questions to pastors and other church leaders. Answering these questions will give you a better understanding of your own church and your context. Each question is followed by a short discussion of its implications.

My hope and intention is that each person involved in the decision-making process will take the time to ponder and work through these questions. Some of them might surprise you. They challenge you to define your intentions, assess spiritual wisdom, and evaluate the needs and readiness of your church. Discuss them together as leaders and ministry teams. Discuss them over time, expecting your answers and insights to develop. Some answers may not come easily, but greater clarity will come as you consider these matters prayerfully, honestly, humbly, and cooperatively. As the path forward becomes clearer, counseling ministries can emerge that fit organically both with who you are and with who needs your help.

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¹ The Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) serves churches through counseling, teaching, and publishing ministries. Restoring counseling to Christ’s church is central to our mission.

But something important precedes asking any of these questions. Ask the Lord for help. Ask him for the particular kinds of wisdom that are able help people. The human heart can be a confusing tangle of insight and confusion, a living contradiction between good intentions and evil impulses, a disturbed land where truths and falsehoods vie for final say. And the troubles people face are often overwhelming and heartbreaking—and insoluble this side of heaven. And false voices chant false views and values. All this is to say, personal ministry patiently works amid a battlefield. Who is sufficient for these things? The care and cure of souls (the literal meaning of “psychotherapy”) is the art of arts. If you lack wisdom—and we all do—ask God who gives freely. Our generous Father does not reproach his children for needing what he alone can give us (James 1:5). Your abiding need for the Lord’s good and perfect gifts is the context for considering these ten questions. Your need continues throughout all that you will decide to do.

Here are the ten questions.

1. *Should you even call it “counseling”?* Think about the words you will use to describe what you want to do. *Counseling* is a perfectly good word. It is one way to *care personally* for another person. It usefully describes the honest, intentional, helpful conversations of *personalized ministry*. And *biblical counseling* means we can care and can serve each other as Christians—honestly, intentionally, and helpfully orienting our lives to God. Our faith speaks meaningfully into anything that really matters: who we are, what we live for, how we live, how we face troubles, and the like.

But the word *counseling* also carries unhelpful connotations. In our culture, people tend to think about counseling in the following way:

It is a client-initiated conversation with a secular mental health professional in an office on a fee-for-service basis. Personal and interpersonal problems are keyed to a diagnostic label. The counsel-seeker has an identified mental illness. Problems are caused by a combination of personal history and biological propensity. The struggles of life are disconnected, in principle, from any reference to God. The goals of counseling are self-referential: self-esteem, peace of mind, independence, and productivity. These goals can be accomplished by a combination of personal insight, self-effort, medication, the relationship with a professional, and a support network of other people.

This train of secularized associations assumes people’s problems can be solved with no outside input and help from a Savior, Scripture, church, or prayer. People

have no need for sins to be truly forgiven, for sufferings to be meaningful, and for life to triumph over death. The goal of this counseling does not include loving others from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith in Christ.

Counseling in the light of Christ is point by point a different creature. What we mean by “counseling” is the care and cure of souls into reliance on Christ and fruitfulness in his image. We aim for *wise* counseling, with the wisdom that anchors in the fear of the Lord. We aim to comfort the disturbed (who seek help), and to disturb the comfortable (who feel no need for help). So the initiative goes both directions, because pursuing love and responsive love are both intrinsic to ministry. The counsel-giver’s skill, experience, and training are very significant. But in principle, any wise, loving, honest, Christ-reliant person can become a channel of encouragement to another person in need.

Counseling takes shape in a Christian context in far more flexible ways than the culture’s definition. We counsel whenever and wherever we talk or pray meaningfully about what really matters. Counseling can happen when a deacon speaks with a needy man after church. Or when a family invites a lonely young woman over for dinner. Or when you make a thoughtful prayer request in a small group. Or when a pastor makes a twenty-minute hospital visit. Or in an office by appointment. It’s what happens whenever you talk honestly with a person you deeply trust about your struggles, troubles, and perplexities. These conversations break out of the boundaries of what is usually meant by “counseling.” So it might be more helpful if your church first approaches the topic using different words: *How can we care well and wisely for each other?*² This is a good place to start.

2. *What are you already doing as a church that you can do better or differently?* This question helps to open your eyes to what is already happening. Consider both the formal and informal ministries that are already taking place in your church. If counseling means wise, personal conversations, where are those taking place in existing relationships and ministry contexts? Where could you improve the quality of conversation?

For example, perhaps now is the time to further equip your small group leaders. How can they better exhibit the right kind of candor about themselves and encourage such candor in others? Can they learn how to ask the kinds of questions of Scripture that demonstrate the personal relevance of God’s words? How can they and their group interact more constructively as they become aware of people’s struggles in life?

² See Robert Cheong’s “Why We ‘Care’ instead of ‘Counsel’ One Another”: <http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/blogs/2012/06/07/why-we-“care”-instead-of-“counsel”-one-another>.

Similarly, how can your diaconal mercy ministries address the “personal-relational” issues as well as the “material” issues that open a door for aid? Every need for material assistance interweaves with significant spiritual issues—e.g., fears of what might happen, shame at having to ask for help, entitlement in expecting others to ante up, a lifestyle of foolish choices, feeling overwhelmed at troubles that seem insoluble. Every hospital visit involves both the physical problem and the sufferer—a person who may be fearful, discouraged, presumptuous, or angry. Jesus’ entire ministry demonstrates the dual action of the mercies of God. Jesus acts to feed the hungry and heal the sick—and he speaks to renew the hearts of confused, sinful people. Any encounter with objective human need opens up a counseling opportunity where a person’s soul can also be touched. Consider how significant life transitions—a child leaving for college, an elderly parent declining in health, a new job, or retirement—can become moments for thoughtful reflection, for setting significant goals, for repentance, for renewal.³

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Here is a simple matter that is often overlooked: What do people in your church pray about? In many churches, a visitor might think that God’s main concern is curing sickness—and that he is not doing a very good job. When you upgrade the quality of people’s prayer requests and prayers, you automatically upgrade the quality of opportunities for personal ministry. Prayer arises from the subjective experience of a need for help. Prayers ought to reflect and express the personalness, candor, repentance, faith, need, and joy expressed in the Psalms. But more typically, people list situational requests of God—find a job, heal sickness, draw an unsaved relative to faith, bless a ministry initiative, give traveling mercies. Those are natural things to pray about—the Bible gives examples of situational prayers for such blessings. But if that’s all that people say, such requests express a shallow and depersonalized understanding of human need, and an inattention to how Scripture portrays prayer.

Teach parishioners to ask for prayer and to pray for one another in a pointed

³ Consider the daily-life opportunities mentioned in my article “The Pastor as Counselor” (*Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26:1, 2012).

and personal way. For example, Sam is facing cancer surgery. Pray for his healing, for protection, for the doctors, *and* pray for Sam as a person:

“Lord, you love Sam. Give him courage in the midst of something threatening and unsettling. It is so easy for any of us to spiral into our own little world when we are in pain or feel vulnerable. Give him clarity of mind to trust you and to love those around him. Sustain his faith. Deliver him from all fear. Be his refuge.”

Such prayers express where the real battle lies. These kinds of issues are the front line of counseling, and they ought to be on the front line of praying.

Churches already do many things that contain latent opportunities for personal ministry to take place. What are yours?

Teach parishioners to ask for prayer and to pray for one another in a pointed and personal way.

3. *What problem areas do you want every church member to be growing in personally?* Counseling is not just problem solving for unusually disturbed or disturbing people. Every one of us struggles somewhere on the spectrum of the sins and afflictions we have in common (1 Cor 10:12–13; 2 Cor 1:4). Every person finds the Psalms relevant. We are each prone to variants of the desires of the flesh (Gal 5:16–17). And the outworking of those desires into a myriad of sinful actions is “obvious” (Gal 5:19–21). So another prequel to effective counseling ministries is to equip every person in your church to face, fight and flourish within the basic problems common to us all. Such growth will enable wise one-anothering to increasingly happen organically.

Choose three or four key issues. Equip everyone for practical growth through a sermon series, a Sunday school class, small group discussion, and good written resources. Leaders should be transparent examples of how we face the common struggles of life. It’s a fight, and no one arrives until we see Christ face to face. Get people talking honestly. Get them praying for each other pointedly.

Consider where God has you and what issues are most relevant for your particular people. In our current time and place, three areas I would choose to focus on are anxiety, anger and escapism.

- Equip people to deal with their anxieties. Some of the variants are worrying, fears, preoccupation, obsessing, stressing, drivenness, panic, and feeling overwhelmed. Scripture speaks to our anxiety in rich ways. “Do not be afraid” is the most frequent command in the Bible—and God says it in a tone of intimate reassurance. He freely gives the resources to make trust a growing reality.
- Equip people to address their angers. The various forms include grumbling, bitterness, self-righteousness, irritability, complaining, judgmentalism, and conflict. Ephesians 4:31–32 guides us: You are not to harbor hard feelings inside yourself (bitterness). You are not to attack the other person (wrath and anger). You are not to go complain to other people (clamor and slander). In Christ, there is a way forward into forgiveness and peace-making.
- Equip people to identify escapism. Among the variations are pleasure-seeking, addictions, feel-goods, false refuge, laziness, and restless busyness. Opportunities to tune out and disconnect are as close as the cell phone in your pocket. Dozens of psalms portray where true refuge, safety, and joy lie. God’s people can become aware of their escapist tendencies, and find the path to life.

Every Christian can grow more trusting, more merciful, and more discerning about where they turn for help.

If everyone in your church becomes aware of these three temptations, and is finding the grace of God in the struggle, then you are building an important base for counseling in your church. The troubles that spark people’s sins become the crucible in which the ability to care well and wisely grows. People can start to give away to others the comfort they are receiving for themselves.

4. Do you, church leader, live out the lifelong dynamics of the Christian life? Wise counsel involves more than having strategies for tackling a few basic life problems. Maturity has a feel for how life works. Wisdom is able to navigate the many variables that come into play. Thus it has an ability to bring creative insight to complex situations. Wise counseling ministries call for seasoned people. You cannot give away what you do not know firsthand. You must embody the candor and flexible wisdom that arise out of *wide personal experience* of your ongoing need for God’s varied mercies:

- His forgiving mercies cover both our overt behavioral sins and the subtle sinfulness of our hearts. You are truly forgiven.
- His generous mercies are tailored to meet each person’s particular need

for encouragement and wisdom today. He walks with you.

- His protective mercies guard our hearts in any and all of the innumerable afflictions and difficulties we face. He will never abandon you.
- His powerful mercies patiently keep on working to change us over a lifetime. He will finish what he has begun.

You *can* give away what you are coming to know.

You can build a program for counseling ministry with people who understand the dynamics of a daily relationship with the living God.

Theoretical answers are not helpful. The pat answer, the promise of a quick fix, the formula, the panacea—these never work. But a particular biblical truth, an accountability relationship, a spiritual discipline—when these good things are informed by hard-won wisdom they flourish into more wisdom. As we live the rhythms of the Christian life, our answers no longer skim over the need. Your opportunities to counsel—to meaningfully care, inform, affect, help, and hearten another person—will not be wasted.

You can build a program for counseling ministry with people who understand the dynamics of a daily relationship with the living God. You become a person who combines caring and clarity. People who feel deeply for others often don't know what to say. People who clearly see what needs to be done often don't communicate tenderness. A kind heart and clear thinking don't usually go together—but when wisdom lives in you, you become capable of both. You gain instinctive compassion for others. You understand where people get stuck—because you know where you get stuck. This helps you to be patient. And yet you know what is right and true. You are experiencing God's help, and so you clearly, confidently, and directly point others to the God who is faithful.

The people on point in your counseling ministry need to be able to generalize from their individual experience to the wide variety of struggles and strugglers. They combine insight into the core themes operating in every person with the creative freshness needed to help any one particular person. It is a precious skill to understand the commonality within all diversity, while always engaging the diversity. You are able to stay oriented (because all people are similar); but

you do not use a cookie-cutter approach (because each person is different). Jesus demonstrates this skill—no two conversations are the same, but the same life-determining themes are always on the table. The apostles demonstrate this skill—no two speeches in Acts and no two letters are the same, yet the same truths are always being creatively reworked. You can demonstrate this skill, because wisdom is a communicable gift from God.

So, before starting a counseling ministry, do careful self-evaluation. How well are you, church leader, living the flexible wisdom that Scripture embodies and teaches? Do you express that basic sympathy for people that so characterizes Jesus? Do the bruised reed and dimly burning wick find a tenderness in you? Do you express the disarming clarity of Jesus who makes lucid sense of right and wrong, of true and false, of good and evil, of mercy and warning? Are you increasingly living the honesty of the psalms and the practicality of the proverbs? Is your need for help from outside yourself a daily reality?

5. *What will be the content of your church's counsel? What model impacts how you presently minister, and is it the worldview to which you want to commit?* You need to be self-aware of the counseling model that already shapes your counsel and impacts the helping ministries in your church. There are innumerable secular counseling models out there, each offering its own interpretation of people's problems and its vision for a solution. Many of these popular understandings operate within the church, presenting themselves as compatible with Christianity, perhaps dressing up in a bit of Christian language. And there are also many overtly Christian approaches out there, which, though well-meaning, are inadequate. They often slide into a "Just _____" approach to personal and interpersonal problems. Just remember this one key doctrine. Just cast out that demon. Just have your quiet time. Just sit under good preaching. Just join a small group. One biblical truth, one spiritual discipline, one explanatory model, one trajectory of growth... is presumed to apply to any and all people.

Every counseling system asserts (or assumes) a worldview that answers key questions. Why do people do what they do? What should a person be like? What is wrong with people? What goes wrong? What is the meaning of suffering and disappointment? How do you weigh the significance of biological factors and experiences in a person's history? What is the goal of change? How do we get there? It takes thinking Christianly to get the answers to these questions right.

The Bible's wisdom is odd, unusual, wonderful music. A biblical way of understanding our lives is so different from the prevailing assumptions, the trends, the current answers, the theories, and the self-help formulas of our culture.

The *counsel* of Christian faith is so different from every other way of seeing and understanding.⁴ It is a unique take. Are you and your church consciously committed to a biblical model?

6. As church leaders, do you really love, identify with, and hang in there with struggling people? The previous three questions pursued a first-hand, growing, and self-aware understanding of the Christian life. Now in this question and the one that follows, we probe more pointedly into how you treat people and inquire into the quality of your relational skills.

One essential ingredient in caring well is realizing “I don’t arrive until we all arrive.”

For starters, biblical ministry is not, “The healthy treat the sick.” Caring well is not, “People who have it all together minister to people who struggle with problems.” We are all in this together. It can be sobering to consider your fundamental attitude and stance toward strugglers. Before you initiate any action plan to meet counseling needs, remember that these “counseling needs” are *people*. A dear brother. A sister for whom Christ died. A human being who struggles, who may have had a rough past, who was presented with few opportunities and many bad options, who made some foolish choices, who has a long way to go. Like you, perhaps. A troubled person is a person to love, not a problem to fix.

There is a reason “Love is patient” comes first on the list in 1 Corinthians 13. People often change slowly, struggle deeply, and are troublesome to others. There is a reason “be patient with them all” wraps up the list in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. Some people are willful and tempestuous. Some feel anxious and discouraged. Some operate with huge limitations. All need patience. Do you actually love strugglers? Do you identify with them? Can you say, “I am more like that person than different”? Can you say, “We are in this together”? Christ embodies patience. He identifies and hangs in there with all his people through all their troubles. He is committed to us for the long haul.

Your sanctification is not an individual self-improvement project. It is an equipping for helping others. One essential ingredient in caring well is realizing “I don’t arrive until we all arrive.” By wise mutual counsel (“speaking truth in love”), the whole body grows up into Christ. In other words, *we* will arrive

⁴ My article “The Pastor as Counselor” gives a sketch of what I mean (*Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26:1, 2012).

together. We are together on a trajectory. This is the theme in Ephesians 4, and 1 John 3:1–3, and 1 Corinthians 12–13. Every increment of growth in an individual equips that person to identify with and connect to the challenges and struggles—some of them lifelong—of other people. Your growth builds Christ’s whole church, loves the difficult brothers and sisters. It’s not just a description of how you get yourself more together.

7. *What are your counseling methods?* You want everyone in the church to be equipped in key areas so they have some wisdom to give away to others. You want mature gifted people to commit to loving strugglers. Then you want to hone your skills in effective conversation. This question considers how you relate to people who need help, *how* you actually counsel. Think about how you respond when someone asks to talk. Ask yourself how you approach people who are reticent to acknowledge their need for help. Consider the factors in a human relationship that make a person trust someone else. Consider what elicits honesty between two people, and ask whether those factors are at work in your community. Reflect on what you need to know about someone else in order to be truly helpful. Consider the whole matter of question, answer, and response. What questions should you ask? How do you ask questions? How do you listen well? What are you listening for? What is the pace of the interaction? What are your goals? What do you say? How do you say it? How self-revealing are you? How do you help people define their need for change? How do you get practical? How do you encourage the change process in someone who may feel stuck, or afraid, or hopeless, or confused, or resistant, or self-righteous, or even hostile?

These are all methodological questions. Scripture embodies rich answers—if you are asking these questions and noticing what is unfolding. Scripture does not simply collect principles and precepts. It is a living book portraying the interpersonal processes at work as redemption invades the human story. For example, Jesus does not just wear the title “Wonderful Counselor.” He is a master at interacting with people and getting to what is going on. His wisdom is evident not only in the content of what he says, but in how he goes about saying it, how he asks questions, how he picks up on details. Notice how Jesus establishes connection points with people, how in each conversation he enters that person’s frame of reference. Notice how he sequences what he says. What he chooses to say (and all that he doesn’t say). What his goals are. How he leaves space for the other person’s response. His interaction with the woman at the well (John 4) is a particularly detailed example of the skillful love that Jesus shows in every interaction.

Scripture is filled with such conversational riches. By direct teaching, by

living case studies, by examples, by implication, and by extension, we witness how ministry relationships unfold. Scholarly commentaries on Scripture and expository preaching typically do not probe such details, but these things are happening before our eyes in the Bible. The psalms capture experiential processes. The proverbs nuance our insight into how life works out. The form as well as the content of the apostolic letters are usually more like counseling than like systematic teaching. The writers are pastors of souls: topical according to need, addressing problems at hand, willing to disclose themselves because they are involved with their hearers, openly prayerful, selecting a truth to articulate according to its pertinence to the case at hand. We have many doors into gaining a feel for methods appropriate to Christian ministry, to caring well and wisely for others.

Our Christian faith offers a unique vision for who a counselor is and what a counselor does.

Every counseling system defines the relationship between care-giver and care-seeker, proposes ways of proceeding, and envisions what the process looks like. Evaluate yours. Our Christian faith offers a unique vision for who a counselor is and what a counselor does.⁵

The final three questions ask you to focus more specifically on the counseling needs of your own congregation and the wider context in which God has placed your church.

8. *What are the particular needs of your community, both inside and outside the congregation? Who are the people who need help?* Become aware of who needs your help. Who are the people who naturally reach out to you? Who are the people to whom you need to reach out? There are different kinds of needs. Different churches will address the ministry needs of different populations: college students, elderly, young families, poor, multi-ethnic, urban professionals, working class, an immigrant group, suburban singles. And what sort of needs and struggles are typical of the people God has placed as your neighbors? Differences in economic status and educational level may well correlate to differences in typical problems. One counseling ministry might flow out of a point of contact through mercy ministry to a needy population. Another counseling ministry

⁵ My articles “Familial Counseling” (*Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27:1, 2007) and “The Pastor as Counselor” (*Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26:1, 2012) give you a feel for this.

might specialize in the identity, lifestyle, and commitment issues of educated, urban twenty-somethings.

The way you assess the needs locally and in your particular congregation is going to have a huge effect on the shape and structure of the counseling ministry, as well as the personnel you are going to train. There is no one way to set things up.

Go into this thoughtfully.

9. *What gifts are present in your church?* Counseling wisdom indwells people. Assess your human resources. Who are the people whose faith and wisdom are evidently growing? The people others seek out? Who are the seasoned, wise saints in your midst? Is there anyone to whom you would entrust a beloved family member with a delicate problem? Those kinds of questions get you thinking realistically about the people and gifts God has placed in this particular expression of the body of Christ.

Who are the people whose counseling gifts are either mature or budding? Look for gifted people, and for people who can both love well and speak timely words. If the right people with the right gifts aren't there yet, then you might have dreams about counseling ministries, but you can't move forward programmatically. You will have to pray for wise people, grow wiser yourself, and cultivate growing wisdom in other people as you contemplate establishing a counseling ministry.

10. *Now, given your answers to questions 1-9, what will your particular ministries look like?* You have been praying. You have been pondering. Now what should you do? Counseling ministries can and will take many different forms. Para-church? A consortium of churches? Will you need a storefront? Is an office needed? Maybe it will be nothing that formal. Is it time to equip the small group leaders, or inspire a greater degree of trust and honesty in small groups?⁶ Recruit a team to make purposeful, loving hospital visitations? Labor to equip every believer in basic wisdom for a few key areas of life?

Your strategic choices should fit your situation—and you must always remember that these choices are provisional and revisable, not written in stone. As your church grows in wisdom, your ministries will grow and adapt, too.

Your Lord Is Committed to Hands-on Ministry

Remember who you serve. Jesus has a demonstrable knack for getting personal with people. He certainly preached to crowds, but he continually interacted with

⁶ For help with this, see Steve Midgley's article "Something Worth Meeting for—A Biblical Vision for Small Groups" in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:3 (2014).

the experiences, questions, confusions, sins, and graces of individuals. He was always working hands-on to help people make God's salvation and rule personal. He continually disciplined people to greater self-awareness, greater humility, greater faith, greater courage, greater love, greater likeness to himself. The Holy Spirit carries on that ministry, speaking directly into the human heart. The Father is continually at work as a Vinedresser, pruning those who are in Christ for fruitfulness. And fruitfulness includes those forms of wisdom that love to care for others in personal ministry.

As you think about where to go from here, start with these ten questions—and with a commitment to pray always for more wisdom, for more of the Spirit who is wisdom and gives wisdom (James 1:5; Luke 11:13). Let these “what to” questions spur you to a broad assessment of yourselves as leaders and your church body. Let them calibrate how you foster a church environment in which conversations of consequential matters are happening in a routine way. Use them to shape your preaching, your teaching, your planning—and, always, to shape the hands-on personal caring of honest conversations.

“Biblical counseling” is first and always a lifestyle of wisdom and love. It is a form of caring well. It is simply part of how ministry gets personal. There is a place to formalize your care for strugglers into a counseling ministry. You will discover how best to do that as you lay a careful foundation of asking good questions, thinking hard, talking honestly, discussing widely, and praying pointedly.

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On the next page, I have relisted the questions for you as a reference tool to use with your church leadership.

Ten Questions to Ask before Starting a Counseling Ministry in Your Church

1. Should you even call it “counseling”?
2. What are you already doing as a church that you can do better or differently?
3. What problem areas do you want every church member to be growing in personally?
4. Do you, church leader, live out the lifelong dynamics of the Christian life?
5. What will be the content of your church’s counsel? What model impacts how you presently minister, and is it the worldview to which you want to commit?
6. As church leaders, do you really love, identify with, and hang in there with struggling people?
7. What are your counseling methods?
8. What are the particular needs of your community, both inside and outside the congregation? Who are the people who need help?
9. What gifts are present in your church?
10. Now, given your answers to questions 1-9, what will your particular ministries look like?

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