



7. Promoting Programs Over People

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The following vignette is an excerpt from an upcoming book by Dr. Craig. It is designed to give pastors, professional therapists, and pastoral caregivers options for dealing with ethical challenges. It is copyrighted and may not be duplicated, edited, or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the author. If you would like to duplicate or transmit any of this material, contact James D. Craig at jcraig@northernlightcc.com.

Case Study

Jeff is a physician, and Joan is a stay-at-home mom. Jeff met a nurse at the hospital and developed a “special friendship” with her. Joan discovered the relationship when she popped in to visit him one afternoon and found him hugging the other woman in his private office.

After many hours of explosive anger, screaming, and tears, both decided they wanted to save the marriage. Pastor Rich broke his three-session rule and agreed to meet with them once a week indefinitely. Through the process, they began to demonstrate a willingness to repent and forgive. Even so, they still tended to get into runaway arguments, especially when the other woman was mentioned. Typically, Joan would express anger and suspicion, and Jeff would respond with psychiatric and theological terms suggesting his wife was mentally ill and unspiritual. This would further enrage her, and so forth.

Six weeks after beginning counseling, Joan saw an ad in the church newsletter calling for a mature married couple to lead a mentoring program for newly married folks. She told her husband this would be a good way to make use of what they had learned in therapy, and he did not disagree (a behavior she always interpreted as agreement.) During their next counseling appointment, Joan said, “Pastor Rich, we would really like to become mentors. We think we have a lot of wisdom to offer younger married people. We have prayed about it, and definitely feel God wants us to do this. What do you think?”

Pastor Rich smiled. He honestly believed Jeff and Joan were making progress. He also thought recruiting them to become program leaders might justify the amount of time he was spending on them. The board was pressuring him to train more volunteers and delegate more responsibility. He knew Jeff’s professional qualifications would enhance the visibility and status of the mentoring program, and that their lovely home would provide a comfortable off-campus setting for meetings. Win, win, win, and win. Joan’s suggestion seemed to be the ideal solution. “Sounds good to me” he said. “Now that you are substantially healed, you can help others.” Basking in his own good fortune and caught up in Joan’s enthusiasm, he easily overlooked Jeff’s acquiescence and downward stare.

For three months, the mentoring program went smoothly. Then a fifteen second voicemail message sent chills through the young pastor. Obviously in tears, Joan called to say she suspected Jeff had struck up an inappropriate friendship with one of the young wives they were mentoring. She asked for a counseling appointment. When the couple came in, Joan was back to her angry, accusatory ways while Jeff firmly denied having done anything wrong and accused his wife of being paranoid and vindictive. Joan kept saying, “This is just he way he started out before” while Jeff became more indignant and clinical. Totally confused and regretting he had every



agreed to work with them, Pastor Rich suggested that the problem had gotten to be more than he could handle and suggested they call a professional therapist.

The Problem

Growing churches need a growing number of members who attend regularly, give financially and volunteer willingly. Unofficially, pastors are retained, rewarded, and promoted on their ability to attract and hold such members. When a pastor has an active counseling ministry, opportunities for conflicts of interest abound.

Some counseling pastors require troubled people to accept Christ, join the church, participate in a small group, and/or serve in one of the church's ministries as conditions for treatment. Others use counseling as a screening device, a method for identifying talented, malleable people to fill volunteer positions. Correctly, both believe salvation, responsible church membership, and Christian service are good for people. Incorrectly, both ignore the ethical problems that come when pastors confuse their counseling and recruiting responsibilities.

Counselors do have the right and responsibility to make demands of their counsees. For example, they can require a cocaine addict to get substance abuse treatment or insist that an unfaithful spouse break off the affair. "Until you do this, I will not work with you" makes good clinical sense because they know nothing will get done in the counseling office until the primary issues is addressed.

But requiring people to join a church or become a volunteer worker is different. Pressing people in this way allows the pastor to benefit from the counselee's problems, forces fragile people in positions where they will bear unnecessary stress, and introduces multiple potential conflicts of interest—all dressed in the garb of spiritual unity, ministry involvement, and answered prayer.

The Solution

Pastor Rich might have answered Joan's request in a way that opens the door to mentoring possibilities while installing necessary safeguards. For example:

We have counseled for some time now, and you two are doing very well. I believe you would be a great mentor couple, provided you understand how this might affect your marriage. Jeff, how badly do you want to do this? And what is your strategy for maintaining adequate boundaries? Are you open to Joan's feedback in this matter? And how am I to interpret your silence?

I am helping train the mentor couples, and I want to be careful not to confuse the roles of counselor and trainer. Let's meet next week and specifically address the pros and cons. I want you to be sure you make an informed decision. I want you to help me keep my relationship with you clear and confidential.



This approach can affirm a couple's progress, honor their desire to serve, respect their freedom to volunteer, and guide them to anticipate and discuss possible positive and negative outcomes. It addresses the challenges that brought them into therapy as well as the weaknesses that are characteristic of the local church, e.g. the assumption that prominent people are automatically fit for leadership, the delegation of responsibilities to people who are enthusiastic yet not adequately prepared, the uncritical promotion of dual relationships, and spiritual naïveté.

Pastoral Teaching Tip

Local churches have trouble filling leadership slots. This is especially true of conservative churches whose charters demand rigid adherence to biblical leadership standards.

Even when they are biblically qualified, thinking people often hesitate to run for local church office. They know the real power in many congregations rests with the unofficial leadership—wealthy contributors, former leaders, and outspoken critics. They also know church boards and committees are small ponds that attract those who want to feel like big fish. Self-important obstructionists can dominate meetings, elevate trivial matters, and frustrate authentic leaders.

Widespread biblical illiteracy and cultural role confusion have given rise to today's highly structured discipleship, shepherding, small group, biblical counseling, and leadership development programs. The idea seems to be that given a spiritual gifts inventory, a mentor, an accountability partner, a training manual, a quiet time/memory verse log, and a small group, just about any Christian can become a leader. While this approach is somewhat naïve, it does quickly multiply the number of people available for leadership and service slots. It also reveals the need to understand the difference between qualities and qualifications.

In an ideal world, qualities and qualifications would be identical. But in the daily grind of the local church, qualities tend to describe the nature of a potential leader; whereas qualifications tend to denote the potential leader's commitment and intent. For example, a person who regularly invites guests into his home may be said to have the quality of hospitality; whereas a very private person who expresses a willingness to entertain may be said to be qualified. With the first person, hospitality comes naturally. With the second, it becomes an obligation.

Church boards, committees, and ministries are loaded with people who are qualified in this sense—dutiful men and women who intend to fulfill their job description but are not naturally predisposed to do so. This approach produces ineffective leaders—Sunday school teachers who dread teaching, board members who hesitate to make decisions, and youth leaders who steer clear of controversial issues.

Some advocate waiting for those who are naturally "gifted" to step forward. But this approach denies God's ability to grant and renew gifts as necessary. It also diminishes the church's responsibility to see needs and meet them.

A better approach would be to unleash the church's counseling ministry. Pastors, caregivers, and small group leaders can be more than crisis managers. They can be facilitators of dynamic spiritual growth, integrity, and progress.



This idea parallels the Apostle Paul's expectations in II Corinthians 4:7. He compares the grace of God working in His people to a priceless treasure stored in clay pots. The idea is simple and profound: Even in our brokenness—especially in our brokenness—God's Word is magnified. In this passage, Paul functioned as a counselor, offering a spiritual frame of reference that promoted daily renewal rather than despair. The practical result was genuine concern for others demonstrated by generous, planned giving and ministry involvement.