



## 5. Stealth Counseling

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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](mailto:jcraig@northernlightcc.com).*

### Case Study

Betty, an influential long-time church member, stopped Sally in the hallway Sunday morning. Noticeably upset, she said needed the young lady's advice. Sally whisked the now tearful Betty to the counseling office, and closed the door.

Betty said her daughter Jill had recently married and moved into the apartments just south of town. She described her new son-in-law Jason as a controlling, manipulative man who doesn't want his wife to have anything to do with her church or family. "I think he has a problem, and I know you have had experience with men like this. I know she won't come to church on her own."

Hurting for Betty, and recalling ten years with her abusive ex-husband Bob, Sally asked sympathetically "What can I do?" Betty stopped crying. She produced a small piece of notebook paper from her purse with an address and said, "Friday is Jill's day off. I don't think Jason will be around then. Would you just drop by and invite her to church? Maybe you could tell her you are taking a community survey or something. Whatever you do, please don't tell her I sent you."

Sally felt uncomfortable with the request, but she didn't want to disappoint the older woman. She remembered her father, a pastor, often stopped at people's homes to call on them and invite them to church. She rationalized she could do the same without *really* lying. She answered, "I'll see what I can do."

Throughout the week, Sally pondered and prayed about the matter, finally managing to convince herself that God was leading her to make the contact. Friday late morning, on her lunch break, she stopped by the apartment and rang the doorbell. She carried a clipboard and some brochures from the church, trying hard to appear as if she was taking an evangelistic survey.

Jill answered the door. "What do you want?" she asked abruptly, staring straight at Sally, obviously irritated by the interruption. Unnerved, Sally did her best to respond cheerfully. "Well, our church is trying to reach out to newly married couples that have just moved into these apartments." Jill frowned. "How did you know we were just married?" Sally's face flushed with embarrassment. Struggling to maintain the façade, she sputtered, "Well, I, uh, volunteer at our church and am just trying to making some outreach calls on my lunch hour. I have to be going, but I hope to see you in church some Sunday."

On the way home, Sally struggled to rationalize her approach, telling herself she was only trying to help, and that everything she told Jill was technically true. She also noticed she felt a lot like she used to feel when she lied to cover up her ex-husband's drinking and infidelity. Pulling the car



safely to the side of the road, she bowed and prayed for God's forgiveness and the courage to be straightforward next time.

Sunday, Betty stopped Sally in the church hallway. Her voice was icy cold, almost menacing. "I don't know what you said to my daughter, but she told me to stay out of her life and swore she would never come to this church again."

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## **The Problem**

Unlike doctors and lawyers, pastors (and in some cases, pastoral caregivers) have the privilege of initiating professional contact. Our grandparents and parents remember a day when ministers routinely telephoned or stopped in to see their parishioners. "Calling" is still expected in many congregations, particularly by older members who grew up in small town and rural churches. Even the younger city dwellers and suburbanites expect their pastors to notice when someone is absent and initiate contact discretely.

Because of this pastoral privilege, church and community members often act like bird dogs, pointing out "needs" to pastors and caregivers while insisting they keep the source of their information confidential. These requests can be overt, as in the case example above. They can also be covert, such as when someone voices a "prayer request" during a worship service or Bible class. "Please pray for my father and mother as seek God's will for their lives" can really mean, "I expect someone from the church to contact my parents, but I want it to appear spontaneous."

Responding positively to such requests threatens a caregiver's credibility. Our culture is already hostile toward "organized religion", and pastoral trustworthiness is in short supply. Honest pastors and caregivers must avoid situations in which they are pressured to initiate contacts while concealing the source of their information. This is especially true when dealing with narcissistic, histrionic, and passive-aggressive people.

Narcissistic people are extremely selfish and thoughtless. They expect pastoral workers to bend the rules, implying they will accept and support them if they do their bidding. Narcissists ask pastors to intervene in situations inappropriately, with little concern about how it will impact the pastor's integrity, credibility, or tenure. For example, I know a church leader who quietly demanded that the pastor visit his wife daily while she was a patient at a psychiatric hospital. He said he would like to spend more time with her, but he had important meetings that could not be rescheduled. He added, "They don't allow pastors in there, so just tell them you are her brother."

Histrionic people are inordinately emotional and dramatic. They send pastoral workers into "emergency" situations where no real emergency exists. They compliment pastoral workers excessively and assure them that they make the difference between life and death for the people they see. For example, after ladling out praise for the youth program, a 32 year-old single mother told the volunteer youth leader that her son was involved in a violent gang, and that he was ready to drop out of school and rob convenience stores for a living. Somewhat seductively, she touched him on the hand and whispered, "Please talk to him, but don't let on like I talked to you." The youth



leader rushed to the lady's home preparing to confront a hardened gang member. Instead, he found a shy, pimply child who was having trouble making friends. The youth leader could not believe he was talking to the same person his histrionic mother had described.

Passive-aggressive people are manipulative. One of their favorite power-moves is to withdraw conspicuously, leaving a noticeable hole in the fabric of the church. By experience, they know this is a great way to bring pressure on church leaders without taking personal responsibility for their actions. When someone contacts them to find out what is wrong, they use that person to send an indirect demand to the church leaders while remaining safely in the background. For example, when a church in our area voted to relocate rather than remodel, a long-time Sunday school teacher abruptly stopped attending. When the Christian education director called to check on him, the AWOL teacher greeted her like an old friend and carried on as if nothing were wrong. When asked directly about his involvement in the Sunday school, the man said, "That's my church and it will always be my church. But I have spoken to some of our members who are really hurting over the relocation, and I don't think I can teach under that kind of stress." The young lady left with the impression that the man planned to withdraw his support and convince others to follow him. At the next board meeting, she suggested they poll the membership again to determine if they would actually support the relocation.

Stealth counseling, consultation, and suggestions damage the life of the church and invite more of the same. Thankfully, the solution is fairly simple.

### **The Solution**

When I was a young minister, I was often asked to do stealth counseling and visitation. With the help of an older seminary professor, I developed a better way of understanding and responding to such requests. Now, when someone tells me about another person's problems and asks me to intervene on the sly, I gently refuse by saying

*I know you are concerned, and I do think I can help. However, if I initiate the contact and pretend you have not talked to me, I will be lying. And if say you have talked to me, your son may feel embarrassed and betrayed. Instead, I recommend you tell him you have talked to me, and that you think I can help. Tell him I am expecting his call, and have already cleared time on my schedule to see him.*

Those who really want to help will usually admit this is a reasonable suggestion, and those who have a more malicious agenda usually find this stance hard to overcome.

### **Pastoral Teaching Tip**

The New Testament has several words that may be translated "time". One is *chronos*, where we get our word "chronology". It refers to time in a discrete sense—the inexorable tic tock God uses to remind us we are creatures, not The Creator. Another is *kairos*. It is sometimes translated "season" because it refers to time in a more abstract, hopeful sense. *Chronos* marks minutes, while *kairos* anticipates moments.



The Apostle Paul told the Ephesian church to “Make the most of the time” (Ephesians 5:16). Had he used the word *chronos*, he would be saying “We have a limited number of hours on this earth.. Get moving! Do more! Make the most of every second, you slacker!” But he didn’t. Rather, he chose the word *kairos*, as if to say “We have an *unlimited* number of moments in which we can show Christ to our family, friends, and community. Wait on the Lord. Stay alert. Be ready when the opportunities present themselves.”

*Chronos* yields desperation, anxiety, and frustration. No one has enough hours to fulfill every personal, professional, and religious responsibility while getting sufficient nutrition, exercise and rest. Something has to slide. Ultimately, *chronos* underlines our human frailties and failures. In contrast, *kairos* yields newness, confidence, and satisfaction. We have unlimited opportunities to fulfill his purposes through us.

A mom and dad on a vacation trip to Florida can focus on *chronos*—the measly seven days they have until they have to be back for work, the three tense days they will spend visiting aging parents, and the sixteen awful hours of backseat bickering, whining, and smells that make them wish they had flown. Or, they can focus on *kairos*—the surprises and challenges along the way that will open opportunities to enrich their children’s lives.

Likewise, a mother who is concerned about her daughter’s marriage can focus on *chronos* by counting the number of Sundays she has missed church, pressuring the pastor to hurry out to see her, and blaming him for the negative results. Or, she can focus on *kairos* by praying that God opens her daughter’s heart, waiting watchfully for ministry opportunities, and responding faithfully when the moments present themselves.