SECULAR AND CHRISTIAN COUNSELOR

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What is the difference between a secular counselor and Christian counselor?

How can parish staff use this information to help a person?

During assignment #1 I interviewed two mental health professionals. The first interview was a face to face interview in Topeka. Mary is a case manager for children. Because this interview turned out to be primarily with serving children I chose to do a second interview in Iowa by email. Mike is a case manager for adults with developmental disabilities. Both interviews produced basic information about the questions, but the process with Mary and her personal use of a Christian counselor led me to question, what is the difference between a secular counselor and a Christian counselor? I know this question seems simple and it should be intuitively obvious but I want to know boundaries and benefits. A counselor is a counselor, but what does being a Christian counselor really mean? Since my ministry is in the parish and often this ministry involves referring people, I need to know the difference and how does a parish worker use that information? Working on this question has led me into a swamp of muddled information for which I have organized a response in this paper.

First, what is the definition of a secular counselor and a Christian counselor? The Merriam Webster on line dictionary (2012) defines secular as “of or related to the worldly; not overly or specifically religious”. Counselor from the same source is defined as “a person who gives advice or counseling” such as marriage counselor. No definition is offered for Christian counselor at this site. The American Association for Christian Counselors (n.d.) defines Christian counseling as “a revelation of the life and love of Jesus Christ in helping someone change for the better. That life, that love, comes alive in the use of the Bible, and in relying upon the Holy Spirit to advance the goals and challenges of counseling.”
With further research a major difference is who licenses the counselor. The secular counselor is licensed through the state where they work and the Christian counselor is licensed through a Christian organization. But, it is not that clean cut as some Christian counselors are licensed by both. Roger Young (2012) in *What is the Difference Between Christian Counseling and Secular Counseling* says that “Secular Counselors are licensed by the state, and must abide by the rules the state creates. Most states promote the idea that God cannot be a part of anything endorsed by the state. Consequently, most state licensed counselors are forbidden to even mention anything of a religious nature. They agree not to pray, not to ask God for help, not to mention anything religious at all. Christian, Pastoral, or Biblical Counselors answer to the church. This frees them to ask God for help, to pray, and offer religious solutions to those they counsel. It also creates a responsibility on the church to properly oversee the activities of these counselors.”

An online site called Christian Counseling Degree (2011) called the secular counseling “the business of counseling where the counselor follows the laws and regulations of the field of psychology and counseling of that state.” The Christian counselor is in the “ministry of counseling where tenets and rules of the organization you serve are followed.” This Christian counselor then is accountable to the religious organization they serve. The online site called Christian Counseling Degree (2011) continues with “these counselors are required to pray, provide guidance based in the Scriptures, and counsel the Word of God. They are also required to promote certain lifestyles practices upon which the Church has a declared stance. The most common of these issues that Christian counselors are likely to face are abortion, divorce, and homosexuality.” The National Christian Counselors Association and the International Board of
Christian Counselors are two of the best known associations that provide credentials for Christian Counselors.

If a person chooses a Christian counselor over a secular counselor, are there different counseling roles or counseling options? Pastor David Martin on the Christian Broadcasting Network (2012) lists the following options: “a pastoral counselor, counseling professional who works out of the church, a lay trained counselor or a support group. The Professional Counselor may be available in various settings, including private practice, clinics, government agencies, treatment centers, etc.” David Martin continues that there are different profession counselors. Some of these are:

- Licensed Social Workers (LSW, CSW, or LCSW) which have a master’s degree in social work or behavioral science with a state exam, a certain amount of clinical experience and supervision.

- Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC) which have a minimum of a master’s degree and completed 2000 hours of supervised counseling experience and passes a state exam.

- Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) which holds a master’s degree and specializes in assisting families and individuals overcome relational problems. The license usually requires two years of supervised experience after earning one's degree.

- Licensed Clinical Psychologist (LCP) which have a doctoral level of education and specialize in diagnosis, research, and applied counseling.

- Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselors (LCDC, CADAC) which have a bachelor's or master's degree in chemical dependency. Most of these counselors use 12-Step programming.
• Board Certified Psychiatrist (MD, DO) which are medical doctors who have advanced training in behavioral sciences and can prescribe medications and supervise mental health treatment.

Once you determine that your counselor is trained and licensed/certified by a church or organization to which they are held accountable, a person would be encouraged to setup a phone interview before you start the counseling process. This is part of being thorough in choosing a counselor. Ask question so you feel comfortable with this person. MedicalNet.com (2005) suggests the following questions.

• What kind of therapy does she/he practice? Will you have individual sessions, group therapy, or sessions with other family members? Are you comfortable with his/her philosophy in this regard? Has this counselor dealt with your specific issue?

• What is your therapist's position on pharmaceutical therapy for mental conditions?

• What kind of licensure or certification does the counselor have?

• What hours is she/he available to see you? How often does she/he recommend seeing you initially? Does this fit into your schedule and expectations?

• What are the fees? Will she/he wait to accept payment from the insurance company, or must sessions be paid for immediately? Be up front if you anticipate any financial difficulties; often a payment plan can be arranged to suit your needs.

• Is she/he available and reachable in the event of an emergency? How does she/he feel about contact between scheduled sessions (e.g., phone calls) should the need arise? After hours, is there always someone covering for the practice who is available in the event of a sudden need or emergency?
Other elements of care to consider are the individual needs/resources and the church & community resources. Pastor David Martin (2012) in Choosing A Christian Counselor suggestions the parish staff need to be aware of the severity of the problem and if it is life threatening; the person’s finances, medical insurance, time family and other support systems; types of counseling offered at church and funds to assist for counseling; and the resources, competencies and accessibility of available resources in the community. The parish staff needs enough information to guide the person to appropriate care.

Some parishes provide lay counselors or caregivers to use the skills of the people of the congregation for meet the needs of people. One such ministry is the training program called Stephen’s Ministry. This ministry offers a confidential, free service to people in need. Stephen’s Ministers are trained to know when they need to refer to someone with more skills and experience.

Also, some congregations offer support groups. These support groups meet some of the practical needs of people with such challenges as addictions and divorce. Some examples are divorce care, celebrate recovery, alcoholic anonymous and narcotic anonymous. In these settings the group is a critical source of support for its members.

In an actual counseling session, what tools can a Christian counselor use that a secular counselor’s would not use? Obviously, as mentioned in the licensing section of this report, the Christian counselor can use the Bible, prayer and religious solutions. I remember a friend who received Christian counseling mention the client has choices when with the Christian counselor. This person suggested there were more intensive Christian options if desired. I cannot affirm this in any research. Dr. Brian Campbell on his Christian Counseling web site (2011) states that the major tools of a Christian counselor is “the Bible as the authority and background to
counseling. If you are seeing a Christian counselor, it should be obvious that he/she is using the truths of God's Word as a guide to helping you back to mental health. Christian counselors should use the bible, or at least the scriptures, and he/she should offer to pray with you. If your counselor calls himself/herself a "Christian Counselor," and does not use God's Holy Word or does not pray with you, then you need to question whether you are receiving "Christian," counseling.

So, what do I learn from all this research? Both the secular and Christian counselor’s are working to meet the client’s needs. The Christian counselor also has training in the Christian tenets of faith that can be used in addressing client needs. A counselor who is Christian is not to be confused with a Christian counselor. They are not the same and will not be counseling in the same manner. Secular and Christian counselor’s are licensed and/or certified through different sites. These sites determine their scope of counseling tools. These sites also provide many different abbreviations & titles for licensure or certification. When choosing a counselor, the client may opt to have a phone conversation to meet the counselor before starting counseling sessions. As we have talked about in many CUNE classes, having information and reference list is helpful for parish staff. This information shortcuts the multitude of counseling options when needs are pressing and of a timely nature. Some churches offer in house ministries that care for people without cost. Some of these ministries are offered by trained lay people and others are licensed/certified counselors. If a person has a strong connection with the tenets of their faith, using a Christian counselor adds the use of pray and the Bible in healing and addressing needs.

Given all the research and information, I feel a need to meet or talk with a Christian counselor to hear first hand examples and tools he/she would have available for use. As I built my Des Moines resource list having a conversation with a Christian counselor may be possible.
Reference


