

Counsellor or Spiritual Director - Do I Have to Choose?

**by
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The question of how counselling and spiritual direction overlap is one that has interested me right from the beginning of my SGM training. As we considered the question, “What is Spiritual Direction?” in our very first workshop in this course, and wrote about it in our essays, I felt an internal irritation with models that emphasized the distinction and differences between the two. As I considered this I noticed my own life was drawing me, conversely, towards the overlap.

Professionally, I became aware of times in my “counselling” work where clients were wanting spiritual direction. And I have ended up with two directees who have definite counselling needs. Personally, my own spiritual path becomes increasingly holistic and inclusive. Again there is a jarring in me with ideas of dividing up our spiritual concerns and our daily life concerns at a time when I am seeing more of God in the everyday.

If I imagine printing brochures, offering my services, I wonder how to advertise myself. Am I Rose Jenkin, counsellor, or am I Rose Jenkin, spiritual director, and really, do I have to choose?

Commonly, the literature seems to present a model of intersecting sets (if you can remember back to your Venn Diagrams from maths’ classes).

It is not always easy to differentiate between spiritual direction and its closest relatives: pastoral counselling, mentoring, and discipling. These helping relationships, while possessing some distinctive characteristics, also share some in common. (Bakke, 2000)

Pastoral counselling and spiritual direction do share a set of core skills such as creating rapport, encouraging openness, active listening, appropriate questioning, reflecting content and feelings, summarising, etc. Both respect the uniqueness of the individual person’s life story and desire for health and wholeness. Both are committed to confidentiality and ethical behaviour, using regular supervision or peer review of their practice. However, the central work, focus and structure are different (Pickering, 2008).

And Thomas Green (2000) heads up one of his chapters with the words *Similar but Distinct: Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Counselling*

I would like to offer an alternative model however, where counselling sits entirely within the bigger field of spiritual direction. This is not the intersecting sets model, but a model of subset within a superset. In order to do this I will look at some of the areas that other authors have seen as distinct to either counselling or spiritual direction, and argue for their position to actually be within the whole.

Before continuing I would note that I do not think I am actually alone in my thinking or in entirely new uncharted territory. Despite generally supporting the overlap (yet with some distinct areas) model, some authors are seeming to, nonetheless, be allowing for the subset superset model.

Some pastoral counselling is close to, or may actually include, spiritual direction if the orientation of the counsellor is toward spiritual material and if the counsellor senses God’s calling and gifting in this area. (Bakke, 2000)

Spiritual direction is being rediscovered and revalued in our time, especially among the laity. It is a proven way to hold personal experience accountable to Scripture, common sense, reason, frankly some good psychology, and the Tradition. All together this might be the best way to hear and trust "God's will". (Rohr, 2014)

But how can the practice of psychotherapy become more receptive and effective in dealing with spiritual issues and concerns? I propose that psychotherapy can become more receptive and effective by incorporating some or all of the functions of spiritual direction. (Moon and Benner, 2004)

And although May (1992) says

I have tried to keep clear the distinctions between spiritual and psychological guidance. There is good reason for doing so. Like it or not Western culture is bound up in such distinctions.

He later follows this with

The only reasonable remedy is simply to stop making the distinctions. In a very intimate, present-centered way, it is indeed possible to quiet our compartmentalizing minds.

So, let us look at these areas where difference or distinction has usually been observed, and see whether I can collapse them into an integrated whole.

Firstly, it is commonly cited that counselling is about finding solutions to problems, whereas Spiritual direction is about the directee's deepening relationship with God. Pickering (2008) puts it like this,

In counselling,

The focus is on helping the client to find a way through the issues they have raised, to develop strategies and become better able to function.

In spiritual direction however,

Problems and difficulties may form part of what is discussed, but always the focus will turn to the questions of faith, of prayer, of wondering where God might be in the midst of the directee's experience. Valuable when there are no pressing problems, and the directee is learning to discern the movement of God in the midst of daily routines

Bakke (2000) starts off with a similar description of how, in counselling, the focus is on problems.

She writes,

Many people seek counselling when they are in a crisis situation. They are in the midst of personal distress, grief, or trauma and hope someone can help them make sense of their experience.

Yet she concludes by noting,

Each of these reasons for seeking counselling may have spiritual dimensions as well.

I would in fact say that *all* of the reasons that people seek counselling *do* have a spiritual dimension; for all of life is spiritual. The only difference is that some clients see it this way and some clients do not.

Those clients who do not see the presence of God in all of life are sitting in the middle of the counselling subset, the spiritual superset is there around them, but they are not aware of this. I would sit with them where they were at, yet hold a bigger focus. I would not be seeing them in part of a circle that is outside the reach or encompassment of God. In these sessions I would not use “God” language, but I could well speak of freedom, love, healing, comfort, encouragement or peace. Any of these words could be seen as helpful or relevant to problems, or, spirituality.

Green (2000) says,

I see pastoral counselling as problem-centered (in a good sense), whereas spiritual direction is growth-centered.

Surely the aim of getting through our problems is so that we can continue to grow. I find these two inextricably linked and am merely confused that they can be used in this way to try to show a distinction. As we grow, we encounter blockages or problems, we work through these, and in so doing, we grow. Again, for me, growth and problems can be seen within one big circle of God’s involvement in our lives.

The directee may *come* for spiritual growth and encounter his or her problems along the way. The counselling client may *come* for solutions to his or her problems and grow as he or she works through them.

In the end, I think this is an arbitrary distinction and can be incorporated into the inclusive model.

Another comment, and point of difference, I have heard is that counselling is a dyadic process, involving the counsellor and client, but spiritual direction is triadic, involving the director, directee, and the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit who is the true director in this strange ministry called spiritual direction (Guenther, 1992)

God’s Holy Spirit informs our thinking, strengthens our will, guides our decision making, and enlivens our prayer – and enables us to be present to another person in the compassionate listening which is at the heart of spiritual direction. (Pickering, 2008)

God, as Third Party Presence is openly acknowledged. Silence and space help both director and directee listen to the Spirit. (Pickering 2008)

This would be a point of difference for a counsellor who did not wish to include God in their counselling work. Not me. I pray every day as I drive to my job as a school counsellor, that God will be with me in my work, and that God’s love will flow through me to the kids I work with. At times in my counselling work I pause and pray, “God, where do we go with this one?” And at other times I let my clients sit there in space and silence before asking what has come up for them in that silence. Yes spiritual direction is done with three, but I need and invite God’s Spirit in my counselling room too.

In spiritual direction this presence of God is known to the directee, in counselling, it sometimes is and often isn't. But God is present.

The third and final distinction is one that I feel is really quite a small matter, however, I will mention it purely because I have heard and read of it as something that is different between counselling and spiritual direction. It is about the frequency and duration of appointments. Counselling, they say, is weekly. Spiritual direction happens once a month. The thinking here is that counselling is often sought at times of crisis or difficulty and therefore requires the more frequent and intensive work. When the problem is solved, the counselling can end.

But once my seminarian-directee had conquered his anxiety and was able to speak freely without choking up, he could bid a grateful farewell to his counsellor. (Green, 2000)

Spiritual direction, in contrast to this, is set at times that are further spaced apart, usually monthly, in order to allow time to see where God is leading. The relationship between the director and directee may continue for many years.

Spiritual direction may
extend for many years, so long as the directee is still growing in his or her relationship with God
(Pickering, 2008)

Or, spiritual direction may
continue indefinitely (Bakke, 2000)

Yet these same authors also point out that these are in fact arbitrary distinctions, and not hard and fast rules.

Direction pairs decide together about the frequency of spiritual direction conversations. Some people schedule a few meetings fairly close together at the beginning of the relationship. Monthly direction appointments are most usual but not necessarily right for everyone. Some people establish a pattern of less frequent meetings or make appointments as needed. Individual circumstances vary (Bakke, 2000)

My own experience confirms that weekly counselling, and monthly spiritual direction, is not how it always happens. I have just come back from a five day silent retreat and met with my director for an hour each and every day. And in my counselling work I have many clients who are not in crisis mode and ask for appointments every few weeks or even "just a check in once a term please".

One final point on this matter of the frequency of appointments, Bakke (2000) writes that
Limited contact helps directees maintain responsibility for their own lives and refrain from becoming overly dependent on the director.

Yet counsellors are ethically led to encourage independence in their clients too, and this is therefore not something that is achieved by limiting contact to once per month. Instead, the counsellor holding a view of their client in which the client is moving towards health, well-being, and

independent functioning brings it about. All work is oriented to lead the client in this empowered direction.

Again I would say that this supposed area of difference, when examined, cannot be used as an example of where parts of counselling and spiritual direction sit in mutually exclusive zones. Once more we find overlap and common ground.

So what does some of this look like in practice?

I am employed as a school counsellor, as I have mentioned. My school is officially secular yet the students come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds. Many of my clients fit the standard picture of counselling clients described above. Namely, they come because they have a problem that is interfering with their well being, we work on that, and they finish with me when they feel they are functioning well again. Sometimes the problem is solved, and at other times they become better resourced to manage life with this problem. It is quite possible that there has been no overt mention of spirituality in any form. Because of my own life perspective however, I would still have seen that young person, in the inner circle, surrounded by God in the outer circle, and if I had seen Love or Life at work in them, I would say that there had been movement from God, in the outer circle, to meet them.

With other students however, spirituality definitely comes into our sessions. They bring it in! And I couldn't say whether we are in the inner problem focused circle or the outer relationship with God circle. We move in and out of both.

For one student, the presenting "problem" was anger and family conflict. Yet this student's anger had come from being told by her family how a good Christian should behave (quietly and respectfully despite injustice). I shared with her the story of Jesus getting angry in the temple. What she wanted from me, her "solution" if you will, was that I would pray for her, so I did. She told me that was "tremendous" yet we hadn't, on the surface, changed a thing.

Spirituality also frequently comes into grief work. I have had a Hindu boy tell me of his experiences leading up to the death of his grandmother. For Hindus, there are certain unusual events that foretell death and these had all happened to him before his dearly loved grandma died. He found that these warnings helped to prepare him for what was to come and actually were comforting. He said it made him more able to accept what had happened.

Another student came with the "problem" of stress and anxiety. In the course of our work together she mentioned meditating. She told me she was a Buddhist. We talked of what that meant for her and how her spiritual practice both relieved her anxiety on one level, but how, on another level the early mornings and lack of sleep added to her stress. The "solution" involved making alterations to her spiritual practices and finding peace with that.

Conversely, yet similarly, I am finding that in my spiritual direction work we move from the outer circle to the inner. I have heard some people say that when they do this with their own spiritual director, the director (if counselling trained) may say something like, "if I just swap hats now and

respond as a counsellor..." I really don't see the boundary so strongly defined that one would need to swap clothes to jump over the fence. Much more like an osmotic boundary where the concentrations flow in and out to achieve balance as is required. Here's what my directee said in this morning's session...

I feel like that reframing of things has been like an ongoing... well like the time that we have spent together very much has facilitated that. I just feel like this has been life changing for me. And the fact that, I know that sometimes it veers into counselling, but the fact that you have that experience as well like I don't know I just feel that between my mental health and my spiritual health this has just been... and at church as well over the last 4 years... there has been a lot of reconciling

And on my own recent silent retreat?

Well I arrived quite shattered feeling due to difficulties with my teenage son. I realised that some of his current risky behaviours were triggering me and sending me back into a traumatic life threatening time I went through when he was born. My "spiritual director" was able to facilitate a very special healing time around this. Definitely counselling training and experience was employed. Yet all of this was situated in the bigger circle because what I wanted was to be able to be free and open to God's Spirit moving through me, and I *couldn't* with that tight blockage in the way. What a treat that my director was able to provide that for me, and what a joy, to once again, get back to an open place with God.

The transitions between counselling and spiritual direction felt seamless.

So, there is the model that I wish to work within. Would it work for everyone? No definitely not. Many spiritual directors do not have the full training and experience in counselling that would ethically allow them to think that they would be competent in addressing some psychological difficulties. The full range of the counselling inner circle does not lie within their reach. And that is perfectly OK. For them, the intersecting sets model *is* the right one. Similarly, for counsellors who are untrained, inexperienced and quite possibly not interested in spiritual companionship, they would be doing their client a disservice to pretend otherwise. Again, stick to the intersecting sets model. And I also have areas where I do come up against a clear boundary. I cannot prescribe antidepressants. I refer. I do not know how to work with psychosis. I refer. But for the areas of spiritual direction and counselling, I would wish to bring all of myself to my work, and let it be used by God as God allows.

I finish with two quotes

Here is how the functions and roles might be negotiated. If a client in weekly psychotherapy wants and needs to focus on spiritual issues, treatment can be planned so that one session a month focuses specifically on these while the other three sessions of the month focus on therapy. While similar issues may be discussed in both types of sessions, the intent and emphasis of each is clear and defined. Since Spiritual Direction sessions in the Christian tradition are typically scheduled monthly, the negotiated perspective provides a proper and effective format for combining the two sets of

functions and roles. In my own professional experience, this has been the most appropriate format for practicing Christian spiritually oriented psychotherapy. (Moon and Benner, 2004)

This one makes my soul scream, “NOOOO”

When the power of care and healing arises from a prayerful heart within a contemplative atmosphere there is no need for any process of integration or holistic thought. Things just are as they are. Appreciation flows, precision is inherent, and – with grace – accurate responses result from the situation at hand. This attitude is not a devaluation of our knowledge or abilities, but a simple loving availability of all that we are, just as we are, in the situation just as it is, with God’s graceful Spirit blowing where She will. This is precisely the attitude I feel is most to be cherished in spiritual direction, and in counselling, and in psychotherapy as well. In fact, it is how I would hope and pray to live every moment of my life. (May, 1992)

This one makes my soul cry, “YESSSS”.

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