

Effective pastoral counseling in africa

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Effective pastoral counseling is influenced by appropriate pastoral diagnosis, a diagnosis which focus on the socio cultural system in the African context. The diagnosis seek to address personal problems like anxiety, grief, guilt, resentment, uncontrolled desires and appetites, selfishness, feelings of insecurity or worthlessness, indiscipline and destructive patterns of behavior; relationship problems between spouses, parents and children, , siblings, employer and employee, neighbors, friends and work associates and ‘ spiritual’ problems like loss of identity, bitterness against God, resentment over sufferings, feeling of desertion, lack of assurance, spiritual doubts, fear of death or judgment, and a host of doctrinal difficulties. Usually diagnosis entails understanding the people’s worldview of distress embedded in stories. Thus, the process of assessment in Africa should concentrate, among other factors, on the constructive and destructive role of the community and the strength of beliefs in supernatural causes of distress in order to focus the probing and interpretation of the conversation. Pastoral diagnosis seeks to understand and analyze the quality of an individual’s faith and spirituality. Charles Taylor referred to this process as “ theological assessment”. The events taking place in a person’s life are understood from a Christian faith perspective, that is, eschatological. An assessment of faith is done in terms of God-images and life’s ultimate meaning. However, this does not mean that emotions and experiences are ignored; rather, they are put in a theological frame.

Louw summarizes the meaning of diagnosis by clarifying that a diagnosis does not focus on a procedure of classification through which behavior is categorized and typologized in advance. Diagnosis is simply the

interpretation of the person's total existence. It focuses on clarification, establishing connections, organizing data and interpreting behavior in terms of the quest for meaning. Focus on the organizing, summarizing and interpretation of data enables a pastoral diagnosis to establish links between faith and life; between God-image and self-understanding; between Scriptural truth and existential context. Thus Louw, Crabb, Clinebell and other pastoral counselors stresses that pastoral diagnosis focuses on the interplay between faith and life issues in all its dimensions. It namely focuses the effect which faith has on: a person's emotional processes (affective dimension); the association between faith and personal motivation (conative dimension); faith as a form of knowledge rational component (cognitive dimension); faith and the existing concepts, ideas and perceptions (experiential dimension); faith and ethics (ethical dimension); and faith and socio-political dimension (contextual dimension).

In the African context, beliefs and traditions are the core faith of the African. The African believe that behind every good or evil there is a supernatural force that has direct influence on the occurrence. Some of the defining elements of African worldview are community with and belief in supernatural beings. Several African literature on society, family, religion, philosophy and other related themes in the influential works of Senghor (1963), Mbiti and many others, attest to this fact. Pastoral diagnosis should therefore assess the constructive or destructive tendencies of these elements.

It stands to reason that due to the practice of oral tradition and the low literacy level in Africa, story analysis is critical in diagnosis. However, this

may prove contrary to diagnosis in other contexts, especially in the West where a confrontational approach may be effective. In Africa, people usually do not open up unless the counselor is aware of areas to probe. The counselor is expected to give advises when he or she is told of the story. In consideration of this cultural distinction, the challenge for the pastoral counselor is to create an atmosphere in which an individual may open up freely. And as the counselee tells his/her story the counselor needs to be very attentive. The counselor is expected to have accurate knowledge and understanding of the causes of distress in order to interpret the conversation effectively and meaningfully.

However, while the value of story analysis in Africa is crucial it is sometimes overemphasized. The overemphasis on stories has a danger of elevating them to become complete documents or texts that can easily be read, analyzed and inter-preted, and then intervened. It seems this overemphasis on stories is an attempt to come up with a uniquely African counseling approach. In doing so, however, the centrality of the African worldview in diagnosis is underemphasized, though, stories are analyzed based on worldview. It is therefore strongly suggested that a counselor should listen to stories in order to focus probing. This implies that listening for probing is equally critical.