

Counseling Offers Resource for Leadership Development

By Trisha Taylor

If you had a tool that could dramatically improve your leadership effectiveness, would you use it? If you had a resource that could help you communicate better, manage conflict more easily, avoid unnecessary stress and burnout in your ministry, and grow spiritually, would you implement it? If there was someone who could help your church's leadership team work together with greater harmony and cooperation, would you call on them to help?

An ongoing relationship with a skillful counselor may be the most underused and potentially helpful tool available to church leaders who want to understand themselves better, relate to others more effectively, and minister more successfully.

Houston ministry leader Jim Herrington says, "I frequently find myself turning to a Christian counselor to equip me in pastoral leadership. When serving as pastor to folks in crisis, I often get anxious and fearful for them. Having an outside resource helps calm me down and gives me some perspective. But what I've learned over time is that practicing being calm with a counselor translated into learning to be more calm in the face of crises as they were occurring."

Many other Houston leaders have also discovered the value in consulting with a counselor in doing the hard but necessary work of personal growth and spiritual reflection as well as enhancing their own ministry skills. These same leaders also recommend counseling to the people they work with as an important resource for leadership development.

Counseling can help leaders increase their self-awareness and improve their relationship skills. All of us come into leadership with certain areas of brokenness. These emotional wounds may be well concealed and may not give us trouble most of the time. But under the stress of leadership and the demands of relationships, it is those places of vulnerability that have the ability to shipwreck our good intentions. We may know how we want to lead but be unable to follow through.

Molly Little, a therapist with the Center for Counseling, has worked with many ministers and lay leaders in her counseling career. "Leaders must know what their strengths are and where their blind spots and growth areas are," she says.

"In a safe and objective setting, a person can be helped to see these things. It's so important to see ourselves as God sees us, with unconditional love. I want people to know, you really do have all these wonderful gifts He's given you and I want you to also see where you need to grow. "

Herrington says, "It was in seeing a Christian counselor that I learned how I often project my own fears onto other people. The counselor helped me to see my fears. She taught me how to be able to set them aside for a time so that I could truly be present with another person."

Counseling can help leaders manage conflict more effectively. A good leader understands how conflict shows up in a congregation and sees his or her own part in it. This skill is, however, a challenging one to develop and is one that many leaders lack.

Little adds, "I have personally seen counseling help ministers who really didn't recognize where their blind spots were and why they kept getting into conflict after conflict. Once they could see that, they had much less conflict with their church and handled it better."

Of course, counseling is not just for individual leaders. Just as counselors work with families to help them understand each other and work through their conflict, a counselor can help a church staff or a leadership team in the same way.

Little says, "We help people learn to resolve conflict in an effective way, in a biblical way. Church leaders often don't resolve conflict any more biblically than anyone else. We can help with that."

Counseling can provide a safe place for leaders to think through their actions and evaluate their own spiritual condition. Many ministry leaders spend far more time listening to the problems and needs and complaints of others and far too little time listening to their own hearts and to the Spirit within them. Many leaders have told me that it is invaluable to have time set aside every week or every month to ask, "What am I doing? Is it effective? What is God saying to me? What is the condition of my own soul?"

Herrington describes this process in his own life: "The most powerful thing a pastor does is listen deeply to people. Being understood is to spiritual health what air is to physical health. The primary way I learned to truly listen to others was by being listened to by a Christian counselor."

Being listened to and understood by another person in a safe and caring place is a powerful antidote for the stress and potential burnout that leaders face.

Although many leaders often refer others to counselors, it can be difficult to make that appointment for oneself. The stigma of seeing a counselor, concerns about confidentiality, and the fear of the unknown can present obstacles.

Center for Counseling therapist Molly Little wants ministry leaders to know, "It's safe. It's always scary, but it's safe."

She goes on to say, "It also teaches leaders how to create a safe atmosphere with people in their own lives."

Counseling is not just for people in crisis or for the mentally ill. Counseling is also a powerful resource for leaders who want to stay spiritually and emotionally healthy, have better understanding of their relationships, communicate skillfully, and lead more effectively.

Trisha Taylor works with the Center for Counseling, network of Christian therapists dedicated to professional mental health care guided by a Christ-like model for growth and transformation. Therapists are available for workshops, individual counseling, and working with church staffs and other leaders.