



'Comfort as we have been comforted'

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The faith journey can be one of both mountaintop and valley experiences. For Doyle Hamilton, a pastoral counselor at First Baptist Church Roswell, GA, it was a personal valley experience that led him to his life's work.

Hamilton had earned his Clinical Pastoral Education certification at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas. He had previously graduated from Baylor University (Waco) with a bachelor's in sociology and then obtained his MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

During that time, he and his wife, Salley, sought marital counseling from a pastoral counselor and it was through that experience that Hamilton realized this was the perfect combination for him – the integration of clinical counseling with spirituality.

"I took to heart the passage from Second Corinthians to 'comfort as we have been comforted,' and it has shaped my life," said Hamilton, whose position at the church is under the auspices of the Care and Counseling Center of Georgia.

"There is a sense of sacredness and holiness as we listen to another's journey," he said. "There is a depth at which we're able to walk with people which I don't take lightly."

From that point on, Hamilton shaped his professional path toward this goal. He next ministered to singles at Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas and later completed a one-year residency at the Pastoral Counseling and Education Center in Dallas.

"In my experience as a minister to singles at Park Cities Baptist in Dallas, I was doing a lot of brief, informal counseling. I got really motivated

and inspired and influenced by that practical experience of learning to integrate theological, spiritual values and behavioral sciences.”

In January 1988, Hamilton started work as a pastoral counselor with the organization that later became the Care and Counseling Center of Georgia, with which he is still associated. After that move, he also earned his DMin in pastoral counseling from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary through a program offered in Atlanta.

At First Baptist Church in Roswell, Hamilton counsels individuals and families, offers pre-marital counseling workshops for engaged couples, grief support groups for children (Hope for Grieving Children), infertility support, support groups for families who are caring for aging parents, and seminars on how to better understand anxiety and depression in the context of faith.

Hamilton points to his life experiences as catalysts and sources of insight for his work in these areas as he has dealt with marital stress, infertility, grief and depression in his own family.

It is hard-earned wisdom that Hamilton passes on to ministerial students when he has the opportunity. Recently on a trip to his alma mater, Baylor University, Hamilton visited with a group of students interested in social work for the church and answered their questions about how they could help pastors better understand their role in counseling others.

Today’s families face many difficult challenges, all of which impact congregational life, Hamilton said. He cites grief, anxiety, depression and addictions as examples.

“When you get involved in the complexities of family life, ministry gets complicated and messy. There are no easy answers,” he said. “I regret that there are some who want there to be easy answers.”

If pastors and congregation members can let go of the need for “quick fixes,” he said, all will benefit. The pastor will not feel compelled to “always get it right,” and the individual will gain strength and confidence in walking through the process at his or her own pace.

Recognize, too, that there are just times when the pastor will have to turn the problem over and refer to someone else. “It’s OK for a pastor to say to a congregation member, ‘I’m not the one who can best help you with this problem, but I can find someone who can help you,’” Hamilton said.

Beyond the personal and spiritual components of pastoral counseling, one of the biggest challenges for those interested in this role is the impact of managed health care, Hamilton said. Because of the reduced rates that insurance companies negotiate for counselors, many pastoral counselors are challenged in supporting themselves solely as counselors.

For Hamilton at First Baptist Church of Roswell, the church provides office space and pays for utilities while the Care and Counseling Center of Georgia handles clinical accountability, billing and clinical consultation. Hamilton has a consistent income from the church as a part-time staff member and a fluctuating income from pastoral counseling.

Hamilton believes that his own experience in personal counseling and psychotherapy was a good first step in self-care that prepared him to better minister to others.

“You know we, as caregivers, are notorious for caring for the needs of



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pastoral counselor***

others and not taking good care of ourselves. I'm always reminded when I fly on an airplane, the flight attendant asks adults to put their masks on first before putting on the masks of the children in their care. Pastors are often skilled at caring for others while not taking care of themselves," he said.

"I learned how to do that through my own growth in psychotherapy. My own counseling experience was invaluable for me to learn how to better care for myself. Likewise, pastors and pastoral counselors also need individuals to remind them of these truths."

Hamilton has offered clergy support groups and says they offer pastors a safe place to give feedback and input on personal and/or sensitive congregational issues. "Get involved in accountability to trusted friends or in an accountability group, people with whom you can be completely honest and open," he advised.

Although a profession with challenges, Hamilton believes that being a pastoral counselor also provides "sacred moments of sheer joy."

"God does use the valleys and personal experiences we have walked through to help us walk with others through their own," he said. "When we do that and experience the comfort of Christ, we have something to offer. Discover the passion that God has given you through life's experiences....God can definitely use you."

Even if . . .

Julian of Norwich

Pray, even if you feel nothing,
see nothing For when you are dry, empty, sick
or weak, at such a time is your prayer most
pleasing to God, even though you may find
little joy in it.

This is true of all believing prayer.

Source: Revelations of Divine Love

GOOD COUNSEL

- Understand the role that family systems play in the life of the church. Congregations are only as healthy as the families within them, and pastors often undergo a lot of stress when they get caught in the middle of conflict between a family and the church body.
- Understand the impact that your own family of origin has on your worldview and your ministry.
- Understand that awareness of family systems helps in working with church staff.
- Understand the impact of grief and loss in the life of families and in the church.
- Understand the impact of dual relationships on their ministries and be willing to refer individuals to other counselors or churches in town when the situations require it.



FIND OUT MORE ...

The Unwanted Gift of Grief: A Ministry Approach, Tim P. Vanduivendyk

Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life, Ron Richardson

Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, Murray Bowen

Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue, Edwin H. Friedman