

# ***HOW WOULD FAITH LEADERS REFER INDIVIDUALS FOR COUNSELING?***

## ***“The Art of Pastoral Referral: Guidelines for Making a Successful Referral of Someone in Need”***

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**P**astors and other clergy are called upon frequently to provide pastoral care and counseling for people in need. If the pastor’s assessment is that the need of the individual(s) is for ongoing and/or in-depth counseling or therapy many pastors will choose to make a referral. Usually this is done because of perceived limitations in time and/or training. At times it is done because of the complexities of dual relationships.

Successful pastoral referral is more than handing someone a therapist’s business card or giving him/her a name and a telephone number. What is a successful referral? How do you make one? A successful referral has taken place when the person(s) referred has accepted the fact of needed professional help, made the initial contact with the potential source of help, and followed through with at least one visit.

How do you introduce the idea of counseling with someone else to a parishioner, relative, or friend, who has come to you for help? How will a referral to counseling/therapy impact the nature of your relationship to a parishioner? How do you help a person in need overcome the perceived stigma of asking for professional therapy? How do you assist in getting the therapy off to a good start? These are a few of the questions that a thoughtful pastor will ask as s/he considers the art of pastoral referral.

Pastoral referral is an art form. It is one of the most effective ways of providing pastoral care. A successful referral might literally mean the difference between life and death for a person in need. The following guidelines are offered to assist you in developing the fine art of pastoral referral. A successful referral is a sign of your ongoing care for someone in need.

- 1. Be Positive and Hopeful.** Therapy outcome is directly impacted by the client’s belief that the therapist and the therapeutic process can in fact be helpful. Also, the one making the referral must have hope, to some degree, that the potential for help is there. Be sure to state this in as positive and hopeful a manner as possible.
- 2. Encourage Realistic Expectations.** While you want to be as positive and hopeful as possible, you also want to encourage realistic expectations. Therapy is not some “quick fix” and the therapists I know don’t have any “magic.” Therapy is hard work and, more often than not, a demanding process. It will take time, energy, and commitment. This needs to be stated, too.
- 3. Provide Information.** Hopefully, you are making a specific referral to one or more counseling resources. Most likely, you know the therapists to whom you are referring. Give the parishioner the therapist’s name and telephone number. Their card and/or

brochure, if available, would be helpful. Expect the parishioner to initiate contact. Rarely should you do it for them. Tell him/her what to expect. Has this person been helpful to others? What about fees? Are third party payments a possibility? What is the professional identity of the therapist? Explain the intake procedure. (If you don't know it, it would be good to find that out from the therapists you use as referral resources.) In most instances it will be a matter of: (1) an initial telephone call, (2) the giving of limited, basic information over the telephone, (3) the scheduling of an intake interview. Remind your parishioner that s/he is free to ask any questions of the therapist that they might have, over the phone or during the initial interview. Inform them that they do not have to make a final decision about whether or not this is the person with whom they want to work until the end of the intake interview.

- 4. Affirm the Decision to Enter Therapy.** A person who is hurting, who is in need, is usually vulnerable, and may be self-deprecating. However, for one to ask for help when help is needed is a sign of strength. Affirm their decision to enter therapy. Compliment the wisdom of taking care of oneself, one's marriage, one's family, etc. Express your respect for their decision.
- 5. Continue to be Pastorally Supportive.** Continuing pastoral contact by the referring pastor is important even after the referred person has become involved in a committed way to the therapeutic process. It may be only an informal passing query or a brief telephone contact, but it is important for several reasons: (1) It helps to deal with any possible lingering feelings of rejection from when the referral was initially made. (2) It may provide encouragement when motivation to hang in with the therapy process falters. (3) It will communicate your continuing pastoral care for the individual and appropriate pastoral support even though you are not now the primary helper.
- 6. Stay in Touch with the Therapist as Appropriate.** Once the parishioner(s) referred has had an initial interview with the therapist you should have communication from the therapist to inform you that contact has been made. That is nothing more than professional courtesy, and is to be expected. The amount of information shared with you by the therapist will vary and depend on issues of confidentiality, formal releases of information, and the appropriateness of that which is communicated. You should feel free, however, to maintain contact with the therapist about the case in any way deemed helpful to the referred parishioner. The ongoing welfare of the referred individual, couple, or family should be the deciding factor for both you and the therapist. There may be specific ways in which you and the therapist cooperate in implementing the treatment plan arrived at for the client.

The art of pastoral referral is an important part of the "cura animarum" or pastoral care. It is a rich and ancient tradition of the Christian Church and deserves our serious attention.