

Preface

The problems and choices that bring many women to pastoral counseling are, at the very least, complicated by the layers of gender training, gender oppression, and the dynamics of racism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism. Pastors need to be equipped with pastoral counseling approaches that are informed by psychological, theological, and clinical methods that address the realities of women's lives. When religious leaders counsel with women who are struggling against depression, anxiety, abuse, exhaustion, and frustration, we need to be able to do more than listen and support. We need to be able to help women gain confidence about and language for the challenges they face. We need to be able to help women see their struggles in a way that exposes the cultural biases and distortions at their roots. And we need to be able to help women make the kinds of choices and connections that assist them to gain and maintain greater satisfaction and richer life options. The purpose of this book is to provide a set of resources for religious leaders who engage in pastoral counseling with women.

I became interested in the issues involved in counseling women when, after graduating from seminary, I engaged in two years of pastoral care and counseling training and then a doctoral program in pastoral counseling. During the two-year residency, I found myself primarily in counseling situations with women who presented descriptions of various problems they were facing. Those descriptions—of depression, of uncertainty, of weariness and frustration, of abuse—seemed to have many story strands in common. Yet the theories and approaches to pastoral counseling I was being trained in, didn't lend themselves to exploring these commonalities. Instead, they encouraged me to look at each counselee's story through an isolating lens where cultural factors and issues of power and marginalization were less important than the particular developmental issues, with their intrapsychic and narrowly conceived systemic implications. My feminist consciousness resisted both the theological and psychological lenses that seemed to obscure and pathologize the real life experiences of and consequences for these women who were seeking help. But that left me without adequate means to offer the kind of relevant and effective counseling that should have been available. I was able to offer affirmation, validation, and companionship, which were nurturing for women counselees, but my pastoral counseling theory and practice were missing a necessary integration.

Through a doctoral program and into many years of practice I continued to experience a lack of integration between theory, theology, and practice that could provide an effective means of taking culture and its layers of power and oppression, marginalization and entitlement, shared experience and unique life story, seriously. Feminist philosophy provided unifying threads but never adequate integration.

Two developments helped me to break through this stalemate. First, I was able to pull together my experiences in pastoral counseling with women to create a four-fold pastoral counseling framework that reflects my deepest theological commitments of empowerment, justice, grace, and interdependency. This framework gave me a way to bring consistency and integrity to my pastoral counseling work. *Counseling Women* is organized around this framework. Second was my discovery of and training in narrative counseling theory. This counseling approach, highly influenced by feminist and other liberation theories, reflects an attentiveness to both culture and person. It is deeply respectful, relies on a consultative rather than an expert model, and is elegant in both its simplicity and thoroughness. It is efficient, effective, empowering, and deeply relational. The relationship of focus, however, is not that between counselor and counselee as much as it is between the counselee and the variety of relationships that form the warp and woof of her life story. It is a theory based on hope and on the foundational reality that human beings are makers of meaning at their deepest core and that reality is constructed as we make meaning out of our experience.

These theoretical dimensions are crucial for the practice of pastoral counseling. Narrative theory's efficient and effective qualities, as well as the de-centering of the counselor in the counseling process, make this approach well suited to parish pastors. Its respectful and advocative nature make it well suited to a liberationist theological commitment. Its care for the particular story in the midst of dominant cultural discourses make it well suited for working with women. Its focus on hope and possibility make it well suited for all.

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group in which I have participated for the past eight years read this manuscript and offered helpful ideas and powerful support.

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