

Some Thoughts on the Topic of “Counseling” (Church Handbook Page 21)

Brethren, you have been called, set apart and given keys for the members of your wards. You were chosen party because of a combination of your personal and spiritual maturity, life experiences, clear thinking and ability to lead and inspire members of the church. No matter what you think of your abilities and strengths in these areas, the Lord has entrusted to your care some of His saints and He therefore thinks you are the best one at this time for your ward. Believe it. Victor L. Brown said, “... bishops may lack much in formal training or they may be specialists high in academic circles. But both will succeed in proportion to their dependence on divine guidance and their humility, industry, love and consecration. I have been amazed on numerous occasions when I have joined with a bishop in a serious problem of a ward member to see the sagacity [discernment], wisdom, inspiration and judgment which some of these young bishops display in their handling of most perplexing problems of members.”

There are also statements on this single page that I consider sleepers. That is, they are very important statements said in only one sentence or phrase. An example is “If a member has transgressed, the stake president or bishop firmly and lovingly helps him or her repent.” To me that means that throughout the meeting, and when the meeting is over, the member needs to feel your love for him. He also needs to feel firmness or strength in your encouragement to live the gospel. For, although there is “no allowance for sin” (we all sin and all must repent) Christ has his arm [lovingly] outstretched for us “all the day long.” We need to do so also. An example of this is that we should not freak out when a young man or young woman tells us they have masturbated or viewed pornography.

Another sleeper example is, “The stake president or bishop should avoid making decisions for those he counsels.” When we tell people what to do we take responsibility for what happens and take away their agency.

My final sleeper example is “People often need someone they trust to listen to them as they work through their challenges and problems.” That means you are their sounding board. Your job is to give them compassion, empathy and teach them correct principles. Again, you need not tell them what to do. You may be watchful to make certain their thinking and reasoning are clear and not muddled by emotion or self deception. Listen to them carefully and guide them to figure it out for themselves.

The instructions say that if we do not feel prepared to counsel a member we should seek guidance through study, prayer, etc. The scriptures and Ensigns are full of helps for you in your study. The Church has on its website lists of Ensign articles to help people with various problems. For instance, “Do Not Despair,” by Ezra Taft Benson for those depressed or in despair. This is located on an official church list on the Provident Living website. Follow this path: providentliving.org, Social and Emotional Strength, Library of Helpful Information. Reading these listed Ensign articles are a great way for stake presidents and bishops to get ideas for their counseling sessions.

The scriptures are filled with helps. I use Mosiah 3:19 to teach men they must choose how they will think about women. I use this same scripture to discuss the human need of putting off the natural man. D&C 121:41-42 helps me teach that we should not control others but try to influence them. The Lord gives us a powerful list in this reference on ways to develop influence with others. The list starts with persuasion and longsuffering.

Helping couples with their marriage is a completely different matter than helping someone repent. Assistance may be found through reviewing topics in the scriptures and teachings of the prophets. Useful

topics to search include: hard hearts, pride, selfishness, unrighteous dominion, loving and nurturing one another, and equality of the marriage partnership.

The Proclamation on The Family also contains a list of things that help marriages and families. *Strengthening Marriage: A Resource Guide for Couples* produced by LDS Family Services can be of great assistance for marriages. Providing healthy relationship examples from your own marriage and from observations you've made watching other couples can also be valuable. Please remember though that everyone does not think or act in marriage the same way you personally think they should.

When you're working with couples, it is like walking a tightrope to stay aligned with both parties. If one member of the couple feels you favor the other your effectiveness most likely will diminish or become nonexistent. Sometimes this is curable if you catch it quickly and reposition yourself.

Check with each party regularly (every meeting) to determine how well things are going.

When a ward member makes that first phone call to ask for your help it demonstrates motivation and shows they are taking responsibility. Steps they have taken prior to calling on you for assistance include recognizing and admitting they have a problem that is somehow causing them pain or interfering in their lives, realizing they cannot fix the problem by themselves, and deciding to reach out to ask for help to fix it.

Additionally, what the majority of people need most is a listening ear, a consoling helper, someone who loves them, who wants them to be better and who will guide them if they need it. Best of all, you are the Father of their Ward, their spiritual leader at the ward level. You already know and love them and have the appropriate priesthood keys.

Carl Rodgers used the term "unconditional positive regard" for his patients. That is, no matter what someone had done or was doing, he accepted them just as they were and helped them become better. He firmly believed people had it within themselves to solve their own problems and he would help bring that solution out of them.

Finally, every bishop and stake president in the church is entitled to free, unlimited consultation with a professional therapist at LDS Family Services. Consultation can assist and advise you on counseling your members, or deciding to refer them to a professional counselor. Simply phone your area's LDS Family Services office, their response times are generally fast.

Brethren, I encourage you to read and reread page 21 of instructions in the handbook. Read, study, pray and ponder on these things and you will, as Victor L. Brown said, "succeed in proportion to [your] dependence on divine guidance and [your] humility, industry, love and consecration".

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