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**PASTORAL COUNSELING WITH
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN:
A CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

Introduction

Constructing a contextual model of pastoral counseling with African-American women, the writer describes, interprets, and evaluates use of the practical correlation method. This technique is the interdisciplinary conversation between Womanist pastoral counseling, the Tillichian concept of grace, and the Kohutian concept of empathy. The processes by which some African-American women clients restructure meaning need to be defined by an approach responding to the various dimensions of the self. This concept refers to the client's reflective awareness in the pastoral counseling context and is the center of the meaning making activity of interpretation and appropriation.

The problem this model addresses is the tendency of some African-American women to develop a divided, distorted, and destructive sense of self stemming from their internalization of flawed images from misrepresented human and divine relationships. The sources of estrangement stem from the absence of adequate relationships with significant others and the larger society. This condition manifests itself in defensive responses and anxiety in relationship with others.

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The Model

The model under consideration is both theologically and psychologically grounded and presents a pastoral counseling approach responding to the various dimensions of the self. The theological perspective is informed by Paul Tillich's philosophical-theological understanding of the nature of the self and the courage to be. Tillich describes the following perceptions of the self:

1. The genesis and the dynamics of the self and the self's predicament;
2. The sources of the self's healing patterns in relationship with God; and
3. The potential for salvation/grace.¹

Tillich's theology of the processes by which the self structures and restructures informs the writer's theological concept of grace.

The psychological perspective of this model is based on the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut.² Kohut's theory is adequate for the following reasons:

1. He defines the dynamic aspects of the self's psychological fixation and restoration.
2. He describes the nature of the self's bondage and restoration in relationship with significant others.

¹For a discussion of Tillich's concept of self, see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), "Being and God," chap. 1, 163-210, especially 168-174.

²For discussion of Kohut's concept of self-psychology, see Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), 87, 185, 191-193, 243.

3. He designs a theory of psychoanalysis which accounts for the relationship between internal psychological structures and the socio-cultural milieu of the self.
4. He describes the basic needs of the self (mirroring and idealizing)—integral to some African-American women's experiences.
5. His process of empathy (transmuting internalization) is integral to the writer's understanding of grace.

While Tillich's and Kohut's conceptualizations of the self represent diverse orientations, their perspectives alternately describe and interpret the dynamic processes by which the self structures a coherent self theologically and psychologically. Tillich describes how the self structures triadically from a state of idolatry to a state of faith.³ Kohut defines an in-depth analysis of how the self in relationship with its self objects, restructures from archaic self and object configurations to mature narcissism.⁴

Although both theology and psychology inform this model, the normative perspective of pastoral counseling is theological. To define the model as pastoral counseling defines the writer as theologically grounded because of her accountability to the church in Jesus Christ. As a clinical-theologian, the care of souls is attended to constructively in the context of faith commitment to the church. Significant to this model is the structure and restructure of being or the self with understanding principles that serve as guiding parameters. Pastoral counseling, therefore, is defined as the ministry of grace to some African-American women clients in the atmosphere of caring relationships where God's revelation is experienced. This counseling proceeds in the context of an

³Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 168-174; also vol. 2, 66-75.

⁴Heinz Kohut, *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut, 1950-1978*, vol. 1 (New York: International Universities Press, 1978), 36-48.

empathic responsive relationship between a pastoral counselor and a client where reason, imagination, and revelation are engaged. Here the goal of pastoral counseling is to assist some African-American women clients to restructure meaning and cohesion as they move from the state of self-estrangement and disconnection to faith. Grace enables the self to structure meaning and cohesion. The African-American woman asks: "What is meaning regarding the experience of my self"?

Principles of the Model

In developing this model of pastoral counseling four principles are defined:

1. The nature of the pastoral counselor's function;
2. The empathic response;
3. The pastoral counseling engagement; and
4. The concept of value.

The Pastoral Counselor's Function

The counselor's function must be grounded in a theological ethical framework adequate for formulating the experiences of African-American women. This first principle implies that the counselor must respond to the African-American woman in a manner appreciative of her sense of being individually and collectively estranged from self, God, and others. In the writer's work, issues of spirituality are important for understanding the sense of estrangement and the sense of reunion in relationships with self, God, and others. The counseling relationship facilitates grace in

the restructuring activity of the client in a relationship that is understanding and caring. The counselor offers the potential for healing from estranged relations.

The Empathic Response

The empathic response is the second principle of the model. The self restructures meaning in the counseling relationship as grace is mediated. The empathic response is important in the writer's work with African-American women clients who have a defected self. The objective use of African-American women in culture based upon their gender and race and their historical struggle with oppression inside and outside the church, predisposes them for protection from further harm. The empathic response conveys to African-American women clients the valuing of the pastoral counselor of the client's self. Tillich's and Kohut's theories of the self are helpful here. Tillich suggests that the self is anxious and responds in relationships with others as estranged due to distorted images that the self has been given.⁵ This means that the pastoral counselor responds with faith—accepts, affirms, and seeks to understand the client's experience. Kohut contributes that the resistant actions of the self in therapy are the attempts to defend from further psychological harm due to a history of harmful relationships.⁶

Counseling with African-American women clients, the pastoral counselor accepts the client and immerses herself in the ambiguities of the African-American woman's self experiences.

⁵Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 72-75.

⁶Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1971), 3-4; also Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, 87.

The counselor listens to the structures of the client's self to understand the center of meaning. Listening requires integrity, allowing the rich texture of the client's experience to emerge in the context of the counseling relationship. The counselor interprets the socio-cultural and historical dimension of the client's experience to discern the question. This is a Womanist principle in which the counselor seeks to experience the client's reality, and identifies, analyzes, and correlates issues in order for the client to make the experience coherent.

The empathic response enables counselor and client to form a personal relationship. Some African-American women need to be aware of their responses to and interactions with the cultural issues of gender and race. This is a Womanist concept. Applied to pastoral counseling, this indicates that the counselor engages in networks with other pastoral counselors engaged in conversation with similar issues of African-American women.

The Pastoral Counseling Engagement

The third principle of the pastoral counseling process is characterized by a faith relationship where the counselor and the client take significant risks of trust. The counselor initiates a relationship of integrity and trust in the client through verbal communication and images. In working with African-American women clients, who have been historically distrusted and have been objects of disloyalty in the socio-cultural community, it is essential that the counselor establish this trust level. The writer's clients enter the pastoral counseling relationship feeling anxious that their story will not be heard or understood. Further, they are often anxious and conflicted regarding their own socio-cultural location. Therefore, the pastoral counselor must provide an alterna-

tive experience for the client, trusting in her and encouraging her to plot the course for understanding of her self as she risks being believed and known in the counseling process.

Thus, the pastoral counselor is the mediator of God's activity of grace and helps the client participate in the process by being responsive. Bits and pieces of previously hidden and split off images, internalized by the client, are activated in the counseling relationship. Psychic attributes that unify the self are restructured.

Concept of Value

The fourth principle of the pastoral counseling process is that the self experiences healing in the context of being given value. This means that through the context of the pastoral relationship the client's self is affirmed and responds with a sense of self-worth derived from God. The pastoral counselor facilitates this experience through the nature and dynamics of the counselor's response to the client. This concept is simply accepting acceptance. The process of accepting acceptance in spite of being unacceptable involves a process of accepting the divine value that God has put upon the self. The self re-engages with the resources of history, socio-cultural past, present and future, and transforms these dimensions into new meaning.

The pastoral counselor responds to the self in an attitude of valuing and empathy, enabling the client to experience a sense of self-value and self-affirmation. This means that the pastoral counselor must have experienced her self within the context of a childhood that provided sufficient empathy and valuing experiences communicated.

The experience of value and empathy, redefined as grace, available in the pastoral counseling relationship, helps African-

American women clients. The self of the client in pastoral counseling becomes free from oppression and is able to internalize more congenial images which reunite and reconnect the self's activities and interactions.

Conclusion

The basic thesis of the writer's contextual model of pastoral counseling with African-American women is the method of practical correlation. This is the interdisciplinary conversation between Womanist pastoral counseling and is the first movement toward construction of the model for counseling with this population. Womanist theology engages the writer in selecting spiritual themes emerging from a cultural analysis of the African-American woman's predicament. These themes are significant for an interpersonal connection with God, self, and others in the meaning making process.

Based on the concept of grace, this model bestows a sense of reconnection with self, God, and others. This activity, experienced in the counseling process, propels the self to interpret itself in terms of the past, present, and future relatedness. The self-experience process of grace uses wisdom to discern new images for the self in order to find freedom and value in relationship with God. The pastoral counselor is the mediator of God's activity of grace, providing an avenue by which an unconscious experience of the self occasionally may be a conscious experience through the counselor's interpretation.

This model adapts itself significantly to counseling some African-American women clients whose pathological issues, especially as related to socio-cultural location, do not dynamically inform the model of care generally used by pastoral counselors.

Because of the writer's representative role in African-American community of faith, she can broaden the scope of empathy, redefined as grace, enabling African-American women clients to restructure meaning in moving from a state of disconnection to one of a more mature relationship with God, self, and others.

