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**PASTORAL COUNSELING WITH
AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE YOUTH OFFENDERS**

Introduction

This article emerges from the writer's experience working with youth offenders entangled in the juvenile justice system in Georgia. They are younger than seventeen years of age and have been involved in juvenile courts because of a legal violation. The subjects represent those youth to whom pastoral care and counseling services were provided when they were sixteen. They were primarily male and African American, resided in the family of origin, and were in public schools or alternative public schools.

Pastoral Counseling: Conceptualization

The nature, purpose and meaning of pastoral counseling is conceptualized in the writer's dissertation, demonstrating response to youth offenders struggling with their sense of self in various contexts. The method of practical correlation is an interdisciplinary and ecumenical dialogue, which enables practical intervention strategies for an African-American woman pastoral counselor. Womanist theological response is the locus for engaging a conversation with theoretical and theological disciplines for constructing a model of pastoral counseling for this population who experience estrangement in relationships.¹

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¹See Elizabeth J. Walker, "Counseling African-American Women" (Th.D. diss., Interdenominational Theological Center, 2000).

Stages of Pastoral Counseling

There are three stages of the pastoral counseling process in which the self structures meaning and healing: (1) discernment; (2) interpretation; and (3) reconnection and reunion. The movements for these stages are interrelated, interdependent, and inseparable. The assumption is that the primary condition of the self entering pastoral counseling is fractured from self, God, and other selves. The self experiences healing through the process of grace, using the mediums of reason, imagination, and revelation. While the pastoral counselor is essential to the healing process, the agency of healing is God's activity manifested in the counseling context and embodied in the person of the pastoral counselor. The counselor's primary role is empathic response, understanding, and interpreting the client's experiencing and mediating God's grace in and through the revelation of Jesus the Christ.

This article defines each stage and describes the nature and dynamics of how the self structures meaning both theologically and psychologically, uses clinical material counseling with African-American youth, and critically constructs the initial stages of counseling appropriate to the developmental stage for ministry. The focus on this population is related to the concern for an adequate theoretical rationale for counseling African-American youth that considers the destructive issues (gender and race images in the socio-cultural context) not generally addressed by previous counseling models. This is essential for an in-depth understanding and vulnerability to the self-experiencing of youth, particularly our African-American male youth in Western culture in the United States.

The first movement is the discernment stage that has two phases: estrangement analysis and the social context of the self's

estrangement. The second movement of the counseling process involves the assessment of three ongoing interpretive dimensions: the pastoral counselor interprets the dynamic and genetic experiences of the client's experience of the inner world as the self manifests these experiences in transference; the client's experience of "optimal frustration" and self acceptance; and working through wherein the client internalizes "bits" of the self-worth functions of the counselor's attitude. In this model, the pastoral counselor immerses herself in the experiences of the client in order to help facilitate restructuring of the client's personal and historical material, as well as the restructuring of oppressive experiences, manifest in estrangement relations, due to socio-cultural location. This is the third movement of the counseling process—the dimension of reconnection and reunion. Here the client has the potential to experience aspects of the stage of mature faith and full participation in God's life and in God's community.²

Case Studies: The Variables

A response to all the variables present in the counseling relationship at the time the work was done is not possible; therefore, the focus is narrowed to several variables. The case studies are representative of two sixteen-year-old African-American male youth first-time offenders living at home. The socio-economic status of their parents was considered middle class and upper middle class for Western culture in the United States. In talking with the youth offenders and their families, the emerging theme was the feeling of estrangement in relationships, including those of the social agencies intended to

²Ibid., chap. 6, 167-198.

assist them. Based upon the youths' self-report, the distress manifested itself in their own sense of self-ambiguity; self in relationships with peer and parents; and in relationships with systems in the larger society. The suffering they experienced had a definite effect upon their reality and informed their choices. The feeling of pain often left the writer's clients feeling confused, desperate to be part of a relationship with a sense of self-understanding. The goal of the counseling process was to make visible to the clients their own sense of spirituality. The youth and their families were cultural resources for meaning-making.

The Cases Studies: Analysis

Normal narcissistic personality development at the age of sixteen may manifest itself in a split-off sense of self; the youth is confronted with internal images that may conflict with how one actually experiences one's self in community. As a result, African-American male youth have two internal aspects of themselves, a subjective self and an objective self; they are often separated from conscious awareness. The subjective self and the objective self are not only contradictory but often represent defective and idolatrous images internalized from the family of origin, significant others, and the socio-cultural and historical contexts.

Developmental tasks associated with the individual life cycle for youth are related to the adolescent "looking for an identity: continuing to voice authentic opinions and feelings in the context of societal, parental, and peer pressure to conform to age, gender, and racial stereotypes; learning to balance caring about self and caring about others."³ The oppressive and destructive practices of sexism and racism in Western culture exasperate

³ Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, eds., *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives*, 3d ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 37.

the task associated with development for African-American male youth because the *isms* foster a hostile environment of suspicion and intolerance. It has been the writer's experience that an empathic pastoral counseling relationship is helpful to counter the dehumanizing experiences some of our youth encounter and enable them to identify their own spirituality. Spirituality has always been a primary resource in the African-American community.

The Cases

Desmond is a sixteen-year-old African-American male. I met Desmond at a youth detention facility where he was awaiting action on his case. His crime was possession of an illegal substance on public school facilities. The illegal substance was located in his locker and discovered during a routine drug sweep when trained dogs alerted officers. He initiated therapy after his social worker informed him he was eligible for a confidential visit from a pastoral counselor. Upon his invitation, I arranged to visit with him at the youth detention facility.

Desmond is the elder of five children. He understands one of his roles in the home is to provide a positive role model for his siblings and to make his mother feel proud of him. He perceives he is the man of the house while his father is away. His goal is to become a professional soccer athlete or a high school coach. He has a 3.3 GPA in school, is involved in extracurricular activities, and enjoys youth activities in his church. Desmond describes a close relationship with his mother and good relationships with his siblings. The relationship with his father is strained.

His birth story is no surprise. His mother and father married shortly after college and planned their family. He was the first child and first grandchild—hopes were tied up in him. He was the member of an intact family of origin until the age

of thirteen at which time his father relocated to another state for work. Desmond found himself accepting responsibilities at home and with his younger siblings to help his mother.

Desmond describes his relationship with his mother as close and loving but confusing. He feels that something important is missing as he grapples with the issues of growing up. While he is certain that his mother loves him, Desmond feels she is always tied up with his father, his siblings, church, her work, or a million other things. He reports that his mother desires him to be "good" and stay out of trouble; this comes with "great expectation and no direction."

Desmond felt when he was good his mother was pleased; and when he was not good, he perceived she was absent. For instance, after two days in detention, his mother had not visited. In a telephone conversation, she said his father would take care of problems. This made Desmond sad and angry. He sensed his mother and father did not care about his experiences. However, his mother was not aware of his feelings.

Desmond had a close relationship with his father until adolescence and his dad's relocation. He resented his father's frequent absence, feeling he had been left with a household full of women. He felt angry even when his dad was visiting; there was no time for him. Recently, attempting to ask his father questions about his sexuality and changes in his body, his father lectured him for thinking about sex, and told him not to think about sex until he was a man. Further, he told him to concentrate on his grades and sports and stay out of trouble. Since he turned thirteen, Desmond felt his relationship with his father had become strained due to emotional and physical distance. He reported that somehow his dad stopped treating him like his son; he felt like a stranger to himself and to his dad.

By the time Desmond was fourteen years old, he was popular at school and the church youth group. Despite the fact that he was well liked, he felt sad about his relationships with his parents. In the church youth fellowship he discovered that there were other youth who expressed similar feelings of estrangement in their most significant relationships. In this group, Desmond was introduced to drugs.

Relationships with extended family were comfortable. Well liked and included in family activities, he still could not get over a profound sense of being alone as he grew older. On occasion, similar to the recent school violation, Desmond managed his tension with illegal drugs. He recognized the risks involved and made the choice to violate the law anyway.

In consultation with Desmond, I understood he was suffering from the result of chronic nonempathic parental responses; the need for mirroring and idealizing activity. In his developmental process, attempting to establish a firm sense of self, the maternal object was empathically absent, thwarting his ambitions.

Desmond was unable to tolerate and manage his anxiety, seeking the paternal idealizing object and healthy admiration for the idealizing object, thwarting development of goals. He was deprived of the empathy needed to develop an adequate structure of the self. The paternal failures were chronic. Because chronic idealizing failure and transmuting internalization did not occur sufficiently, Desmond was unable to perform functions that the parental objects performed for him, such as mirroring, soothing, management of tension, and developing goals and ambitions; these would have emerged from good feelings about himself, gained from paternal approval. His failure to have sufficient internalized love indicates depression, lack of self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, and a distorted self-image. These

characteristics point to a split where the grandiose self remains un-integrated with the reality ego.

I approached the pastoral counseling process with Desmond with a posture of acceptance and understanding, desiring to know what it was like to be Desmond. At the close of the third session, Desmond cried and reported that he liked counseling because it was all about him.

From the point of view of estrangement analysis, Desmond is suffering from a fragile sense of self with a vertical split (mirroring and idealizing). He used the counseling session to demand my attention and affirmation, resisting any interruption.

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Anthony was a sixteen-year-old African-American male. He and his mother were referred to me by a social worker. Anthony was an only child, a native of California. He and his mother relocated to Georgia when Anthony was twelve. Anthony's mother contacted juvenile justice, concerned that he was involved in gang activity.

Carol, Anthony's mother, came in for an initial consultation to explore options for care and intervention. She said she had approached the pastor of her church only to learn that no program for potential youth offenders existed. The pastor blamed her parenting skills and the absence of the father for any of her son's problems. I asked her to tell me about the nature of her concern.

Carol was a single mother. She was divorced and rearing her son alone. She had no relatives or close friends in Georgia. She joined a large church in order to develop relationships, especially to provide Anthony with male role models; it was difficult to make connections. Their social life was related to local cul-

tural activities and occasional visits back home to see relatives.

Anthony's father had remarried, now lived in another state, and was uninvolved in the youth's life. Since age fourteen, it became important to Anthony to re-initiate a relationship with his father. Carol intervened and volunteered to send Anthony to see his father. She reported that after Anthony returned from the visit everything seemed to change. She noticed that Anthony began to manifest unexpected flares of temper. Having always been a "compliant child," she found his behavior odd and sought counseling. She said the therapist's intervention was anger management. For some time, Carol thought this successful.

At the age of sixteen, Anthony stopped confiding in his mother and wanted to become part of a gang. He explained that the terms of membership were secrecy and violence. During his initiation, he was beaten and injured but refused to reveal to authorities who had beaten him. At that point, I agreed to talk with Anthony, and at his request, we arranged individual counseling sessions.

Anthony was a junior in high school with average grades. He could be the life of the party with his wit and charm. He was well liked by his teachers but had no real friends. The gang members were a way to survive in his neighborhood, not a relationship based on care. He reported feeling close to his mother and loving her but felt she was unable to help him get out of the gang. He felt sad about his relationship with the gang and his intention was to leave upon graduating from high school, going to college out of the area.

Anthony further reported that his mother and grandparents had always told him he was just like his dad; his dad was nice and intelligent, wanting him at birth. Visiting his father, he found, "a white, high class crook with no respect or feelings

for anyone." He discovered his father was an alcoholic and abusive; his mother and father divorced right after he was born. Anthony said he was devastated and wanted to melt into the ground when he discovered *who* he was like. Attempting to protect his mother from what he encountered, he never revealed his experience of his father to her. He felt ashamed and depressed about himself since that visit and wondered what kind of man he would be.

In consultation, Anthony was suffering during the adolescence developmental process with the problem of identity, self-esteem, self-image and developing meaning based upon those value systems given to him. When confronted with the conflict of varying models of self meaning, Anthony used himself as a resource to make mature choices for himself and his mother. At his age, Anthony was in critical need of empathic wisdom and guidance because he did not have a firm sense of himself. The non-empathic events with his father touched his fragile-self, and his attempts to soothe himself had been unsuccessful. As a matter of fact, his attempts to take care of himself had been destructive.

The consultation in this case suggested that a large part of Anthony's self was formed in the absence of the paternal object and yet an adequate fragile self-structure was developed due to the function of the maternal object, and other self objects. Anthony seemed to have internalized negative aspects of his mother and father at a young age. The primary need of the client was for acceptance, affirmation, and understanding in the pastoral counseling relationship.

The Process of Discernment: Stage One

The primary need of the client in the first stage of counseling is acceptance, affirmation, understanding, and attention

to the self and experiences historically, socio-culturally, and ultimately. Two issues emerge when exploring the self. They are the exploration of the inner world of the client, which involves estrangement analysis, as well as the social analysis of the self's estrangement.

The condition of the self that emerges is that of estrangement. Persons feel estranged or disconnected from self, God, and others. In the first clinical case, Desmond felt set apart in his family of origin and in his community. His responses to others continuously reenacted his childhood feelings of being set apart. He felt alone, sometimes confused, and unconnected in his adolescence.

During our sessions, Desmond idealized me and called me "little mommy," explaining that I was a mommy with whom he could confide without consequences. He gradually began to talk about what he meant by feeling alone. He tentatively began to expect the therapy relationship to provide him with a means of exploring his own self-value and self-meaning.

In the second clinical case, Anthony demonstrated the idealizing transference. His father was absent and unknown. As an idealizing image at home, Anthony felt divided about his father's absence and insecure about what that meant. With me, Anthony began to experience a sense of ordered purposefulness that enabled him to talk about his feelings regarding his father.

The activation of the mirroring and idealizing transferences for Desmond and Anthony represent the precursors of the need to experience grace. As their transferences mobilized, each client became aware of split-off dimensions of themselves, known as idolatrous archaic images. As their responsiveness increased, they reported a gradual consciousness of God's presence in the pastoral counseling process. As this awareness became stronger, they sensed that deliverance from these internalized

images and a sense of reunion or reconnection in relations was possible. In addition, they were guided to explore their social location, race, gender, and class dimensions of their experience of estrangement and disconnection.

In the first stage of pastoral counseling the process of grace is experienced in two phases: the discernment of faith and the social nature of estrangement of the self. These phases are inter-related, interdependent, and occur concurrently.

(a) The Discernment of Faith

The first phase to emerge in the client's mobilization of respective transferences is manifestation of the activity of grace, moving toward faith. The hope and trust symbolized in the transferences, made it possible to be apprehended by God's grace, guided by the pastoral counselor's empathic and gracious responses.

The pastoral counselor, listening and attending to the inner experience of the client, discerns that hope and trust are the manifestation of faith. When Desmond sensed God in his therapy, the counselor discerned this manifestation. In the clinical case, Anthony's faith began to emerge in response to the counselor's mirroring acceptance of him and led to affirmation of himself.

The activity of faith had been distorted by the idolatrous images inherited from their family of origin and community relationships. It was important that the counselor was a professional African American. Due to family members' influence, they trusted that pastoral care in regard to their concerns and needs would be provided, accepting the formulation of social and ultimate concerns in regard to family relationships. Pastoral counseling framed in this way leads to salvation. While each client has the potential to participate in the process of grace,

there are limits. Attitude may block the process. The client must be open to God's activity for the new self to emerge. An open attitude is an opportunity of faith, which necessarily leads to the manifestation of the second stage of the pastoral counseling process of grace.

The pastoral counselor's search into the faith of the client makes the counseling process pastoral. This inquiry enables the counselor to discern the truth for the client and in so doing point to the client's center of value and meaning. This investigation leads to the possibility of experiencing God's grace and to the emergence of a new sense of self.

(b) The Social Nature of the Self's Estrangement

The second phase of the first stage is the self's experience of estrangement. This is understood to be social as well as personal. Discernment (coming to know self in relation to other selves) and faith (trusting in another) are activities occurring in the context of significant others. The pastoral counselor discerns a correlation between the estrangement of the self and its relation to other selves. This observation is based on the approach that the client participates in the psychoanalytic situation. The pastoral counselor accepts and affirms the client, and this represents God's acceptance through the pastoral counselor.

This phase evidences that the nature of the content and process of the self's faith and narcissistic activities are social. In order to approach the dimension of the self the attitude and approach must be characterized by empathic introspection. Working with the counselor, Desmond became aware that his relationships with family of origin and significant others were related to his distorted self-image. Desmond conceptualized his self experience as related to the family role expectations, gender,

and race limits of his socio-cultural heritage and reality. While there was no explicit God talk in this phase of the pastoral relationship, Desmond retreated to exploring meaning in relationships.

In this phase of counseling, Anthony expressed faith in the Christian tradition he inherited. Anthony relied increasingly upon biblical and gospel symbols to assist in his meaning-making process.

In summary, the first stage of the pastoral counseling process of grace is that of "discernment." There are two movements in this stage: estrangement analysis and the social nature of the self's estrangement. The client is normally unaware of the power of God to heal in this stage. Discernment is the work of the pastoral counselor and can be introduced into the counseling process. The major focus of this stage is attending to the client's sense of estrangement, both theologically and psychologically, with an attitude of understanding and the counselor's posture of listening into the client's self-experience.

The length of time spent here is dependent upon the capabilities of the client. The psychological assets the client brings to the counseling relationship and the experience of the pastoral counselor inform this process. The self that responds by way of self-awareness and insight of the self's predicament to the question "What's going on?" and "What shall I do?" experiences the self as potentially related to self, God, and others.

The Process of Interpretation: Stage Two

The second stage of the writer's model of pastoral counseling involves generative interpretation. This refers to the counselor's introduction of the client to the client's self; when the client claims these new images, new meaning and self-

valuing occur. The self begins to find new ways to preserve and express itself. An in-depth awareness about the sense of self-preservation reveals the nature of the world of the self. The new self is a regenerated self, made possible by grace. The emergence of the new self is a moment of revelation where alternative self-images rooted in God take over the self.

Three things happen in this stage. (1) The self-world is illuminated as divided or split into good and bad images of meaning and value. (2) The self experiences powerlessness and hopelessness within the socio-cultural and spiritual contexts because of distorted perception and interpretations given the self. (3) The self accepts acceptance in the context of the pastoral counseling relationship and process.

The role of the pastoral counselor during this stage assists the client to interpret the interpersonal and ultimate predicament embedded historically and socio-culturally. The pastoral counseling relationship mediates the atoning work of Jesus, freeing the self from the estrangement of its self-destructive behavior. The client moves from self-judgment to self-acceptance; the self is experienced in context and defensive behavior takes new meaning; there is an expected good outcome.

This stage of the pastoral counseling process addresses concerns regarding some African-American youth. Issues of ambiguity brought on by developmental tasks, exasperated by socio-cultural and historical oppression of race and gender—psychologically, socially, and theologically—have emerged with each African-American youth counseled. The client becomes the agent of self-relatedness.

This stage of interpretation is the restructuring activity of the self toward the phase of salvation—justification in the divine activity of atonement. In the context of the pastoral counseling relationship, the client's past images of the self are

restructured in response to the revelatory and mediating activity of God through and in the person of the pastoral counselor. This stage represents a movement, grounded in revelation, from an experience-near-subjective-self-experience to an objective interpretation of experience. The self's external, personal and internal history becomes the medium through which the self's subjective experiences are made contextual. In this process, the client experiences transformation and change.

In the relationships with Desmond and Anthony the evidence of their transformation acquired similarities: (1) There was a gradual awareness of the pastoral counselor as a separate person; (2) There was a reduction in the level of anxiety induced by ambiguity as interpretations were appropriated; (3) There were the clients' activities of interpreting the experiences of themselves in relationships historically, socially, and ultimately; (4) The clients risked responsibility for self-relationships; and, (5) The clients accepted themselves and began to work through historical and social relationships and interactions.

The anxiety and the frustration of the second stage indicate the client's sense of vulnerability, manifesting itself in the tension of the self as it comes to terms with its ultimate dependency in relationships with others. This dependency makes the self subject to the reality of rejection and deception and is experienced as the limitations of finiteness, which were previously masked by grandiosity and unrealistic expectations.

Reconnection and Reunion: Stage Three

The third stage of the writer's pastoral counseling model refers to the self's activity of reconnecting and reunion with the self's history, socio-cultural, and theological relatedness, through interpretation and internalization of more appropri-

ate self-images. Theologically, this involves a movement from faith patterns and interactions based upon distorted images, toward those based upon and grounded in Jesus Christ. As a result, the self is characterized as reunited and reconnected as opposed to the self characterized as estranged. Psychologically, this involves movement from an archaic narcissistic experience of self to a more mature narcissism characterized by healthier self-object relationships.

Reconnection and reunion reflects upon the nature of the self's faith activities as the activity of God in Christ. God initiates reconnection and reunion with the self. This unity is manifested in the ongoing process of sanctification in the history of the self—past, present, and future. Sanctification is manifested in the transformation of personality and community both inside and outside the Church.

What this suggests clinically is that the interpretive process of pastoral counseling must seek to engage all dimensions of the client's experience. This means that the pastoral counselor must assist the client to interpret the effects of persons, symbols, images of affirmation, socio-cultural history, and ultimate patterns of meaning. This is especially important working with African-American youth to describe the particularities of their socio-cultural location in this society.

This stage is characterized by the self-awareness of God. The client begins to interpret history of relationships beyond the pastoral counseling relationship—past, present, and future—through the medium of salvation rather than through estrangement. Further, the client experiences the self as dynamically related to self, God, and others rather than estrangement and disconnection. Reconnection and reunion is possible as a consequence of the activity of the pastoral counselor and the liberating effect of the second stage. These are revelatory

moments that function to enable the client's sense of self-worth. The predominant image of God in the third stage is Mediator with the pastoral counselor embodying the mediating power of God through grace.

The task of the pastoral counselor in this stage is to facilitate the appropriation and integration of the client's ongoing self-understanding, self-interpretation, self-appropriation, self-affirmation, and self-acceptance, of more appropriate object images in the context of relationships with the self and others. This reunion is not a once for all event but is ongoing. Important for this final stage of the self's movement toward reunion and reconnection is self-movement in the context of the self's relatedness to other selves.

In this stage, the client has an increasing sense of both the condition of the self and the answers implied in the situation. The self responds in the following ways to its situation: 1) increasing self-awareness; 2) increasing preservation of freedom manifested in accountable relationships; 3) increasing self-relatedness; and 4) increasing transcendence manifested in an attitude of devotion to God. Theologically, grace moves the self toward spiritual maturity.

This discussion of the nature of this third stage of pastoral counseling was relevant for the writer's work with African-American youth. In the introduction, the concept of grace was important for clients as they made sense of their predicament. Grace is integral to change in the context of the pastoral counseling relationship. Images given during development are integral to defected and distorted self images. The process of reconnection and reunion represents the manner in which persons experience reunion and reconnection of their estranged and disconnected self-images.

Finally, in experience and analysis working with African-

American youth, the writer has observed an attendance to both the defensive and compensatory structures in the interpretive and working through the process of termination. This attends to their needs arising out of experiences of development both among parents and significant others; and among images related to their socio-cultural location compounded by the oppression of race and gender.

Postscript

Desmond remained in counseling for three years. He is in college and is still working on maintaining relationships that nurture and support him. Anthony was killed as a consequence of gang violence one year after he left the gang and relocated to another area. His mother is now advocating for youth involved in gang violence.





