**Covenant Presbyterian Church**

**Lakeland, Florida**

**Title: Counseling Policy**

**Date: 1/18/2011 Revised 2/20/2013**

**Revision: Final**

**Purpose: To establish our Counseling Policy and Methodology**

**Scope: All counseling relationships at Covenant**

**Author/Title: CB Campano/ Congregational Care Coordinator**

**Approved by: JM, SM, BC**

**Date Approved: 1/21/2011**

**Counseling Methodology**

The pastors, elders and congregational care staff at Covenant Presbyterian Church are committed to a branch of counseling referred to as Biblical counseling, at times referred to as nouthetic counseling (1 Cor. 10:11, Acts 20:31, Rom. 15:14, 1 Cor. 4:14, 1 Thess. 5:12 and 14, 2 Thess. 3:15). It is the firm conviction of the staff and church leadership that the Bible is uniquely qualified and sufficient to address the deep needs of the human soul or “heart”. We are unequivocally committed to the transforming power of the gospel, applied by the Spirit, as the only means of effecting real and God honoring change in the heart of man (process of sanctification).

The staff recognizes, however, that there are situations in which significant physiological issues are at play which may cloud and confound spiritual issues (sleep deprivation, malnutrition, chemical or hormonal imbalance, brain pathology or injury, etc.) and which might require the care of medical physicians before or during the counseling process. Counselees will be advised to seek medical care as deemed necessary.

**It should be emphasized that we do not** support an integrationist counseling methodology in which psychological principles and methods (e.g., Freudian psychotherapeutic methods) are sprinkled with Biblical principles in an attempt to come to a middle ground on how to best deal with the soul care of a congregant(s). We reject such mixtures of worldly and Biblical wisdom.

Additionally, there may be occasions in which observations made by mental health care professionals outside the church prove useful in describing and characterizing certain behaviors. In such cases, we might use these descriptive tools to aid in communication and interaction with parties in and outside the church. Though we *might* make use of descriptions and characterizations, we will always reject proposed solutions that exclude the Word of God and ministry of the Holy Spirit as the most essential elements of counseling.

**Definition of Biblical Counseling[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Biblical counseling has its center in the Lord Jesus Christ, and is a fluid event and process, as part of the great commission, whereby one or more theologically and relationally qualified persons provide spiritual, emotional, and behavioral comfort, instruction, admonishment and guidance in love to one or more persons relying on the truth and power of God’s Word under the ministry of His Holy Spirit.

**The Pillars for Biblical Counseling are:**

* It is rooted in the God of the Bible and His covenant of grace. It is God centered, utterly determined and driven by God’s Word.
* It exalts Jesus Christ. It upholds the deity of Christ, His incarnation, the sufficiency of His wrath-bearing death, His resurrection, His future return, His present and future kingdom, and His judgment of the world, etc. We are most concerned that our counsel presents Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and Man and the Person towards whom our sanctification is focused.
* It is empowered by the Holy Spirit, which is essential to all of salvation.
* It is loving, caring, sensitive, and humble counsel and the counselor is relationally gifted, seeks the eternal good of the counselee above all else, and always speaks the truth in love.

**God’s Purposes in Biblical Counseling:**

* To Glorify Himself
* To Further the Great Commission
* To teach us to love Him above all else and to love and encourage one another
* To convey Biblical truth for living

**Who does counseling?**

All members of Christ’s church are called to speak the truth of God’s Word into the lives of other believers. Scripture instructs that believers are specifically called to biblically encourage, admonish, teach, edify, rebuke, pray for each other, etc. on a regular basis. At Covenant, we highly encourage this “one-anothering” and feel strongly this is the most commended model in Scripture for the soul care of the body of Christ. With this in mind, it is incumbent on members of Covenant to be growing constantly in our knowledge of God’s Word and its application to daily living, both for our own good and for the good of those with whom we fellowship.

We recognize, however, that sometimes complicated needs and situations arise which require the involvement of a more skilled and experienced counselor in a more formal counseling setting. Skill in this case is measured by the knowledge of God’s Word and the ability to apply the Word to the particulars of a person’s needs. As such, we believe that our **pastors** (teaching elders), with their advanced training in God’s Word and experience with soul care, are indeed the most capable of counselors, and the ones most capable of discerning suitable counselors. Though this is true, we recognize that due to time constraints and emphasis on public ministry, our teaching elders cannot be the sole providers of such care. Often times, their role will be limited to offering insight to others taking the lead in counseling.

**Staff or lay counselors** who are trained, approved, and held accountable by the pastoral staff, are regularly called to provide counseling in a formal setting. Accountability with pastoral staff and church leadership is an essential aspect of this counseling arrangement. By formal counseling, we are not referring to a clinical, wooden or impersonal setting which limits the relationship with a counselor. Rather, by this we mean that counseling sessions are scheduled, structured around God’s Word or other scripturally sound materials. In this setting, the counselee recognizes the authority of the counselor as a spokesperson of Christ. The counselee will be constantly encouraged to take the process seriously, demonstrated by completing assigned homework, keeping scheduled appointments, and being involved in the life of the church. Likewise, the counselor is expected to take the counseling sessions seriously, preparing in advance, reviewing homework, frequently assessing progress, and praying consistently for the counselee.

**Ruling Elders**, as Shepherds of God’s sheep, are called to offer spiritual counsel and guidance to their sheep. This is not an optional exercise for ruling elders but an aspect of ministry that should be constantly nurtured through the study of God’s Word, training in counseling methods, prayer, and involvement in people’s lives in deep and meaningful ways. Assigned staff, consulting, or lay counselors will often work in tandem with Ruling Elders in providing care for congregants. Consistent with the Scripture’s teaching on spiritual gifts, we recognize that within the office of ruling elder there are some men who are more gifted in the role of counselor than others. These men will be tapped often, based on their availability, to become involved in formal counseling settings.

**Consulting (outside) counselors** at times will be brought in to address special needs. These counselors MUST be approved by our pastoral staff, commit to work under the authority structure of the church, and be in full agreement with the church’s counseling policy and methodology. On occasion, church members may decide to contact such counselors directly. In ALL cases the approved consulting counselor must inform the counselee that he/she does not operate independent of the church’s leadership and, when deemed necessary, the counselor will involve (inform/consult) the appropriate church leadership. In no way should seeking counsel from a consulting counselor be a means to deal with spiritual issues apart from the guidance and leadership of the church. Payment for consulting counselors is usually handled directly by the counselee. On occasion, depending on the need, the church may choose to pay for all or part of the counseling fee.

**Training and Equipping for Counseling**

The most essential training for Biblical counseling is a growing knowledge of God’s Word. At Covenant, we believe the **preaching of God’s Word** to be the most significant tool used by the Spirit to train us up in the knowledge of Christ and his Word. Therefore, enthusiastic participation in worship is a non-negotiable requirement for counselors-in-training (all of God’s people).

Additionally, the **Christian Education Hour** offers ongoing Biblical instruction. This instruction is often targeted to the application of God’s Word to specific needs of the human heart. All members are encouraged to participate in such training. Officers and those aspiring to be involved in more formal counseling relationships are encouraged to prioritize participation in the CEH.

Other **small group settings** (Home Fellowship Groups, Potential Officers Training, Women in the Church Bible Studies, Women’s Care Ministry Training, and Youth Group meetings) offer Biblical training useful for counseling and “one-anothering”. As above, officers and those aspiring to be involved in more formal counseling relationships are encouraged to prioritize participation in small group studies.

More specialized training and resources are offered through associations such as **Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF), National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC)** and **Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC) and the Biblical Counseling Coalition.** On staff/consulting counselors are encouraged to pursue advanced training and certification through these bodies and/or approved seminary work.

**The Journal of Biblical Counseling** is an indispensable resource for those desiring to learn specific counseling methods and techniques. Elders and Women’s Care Ministry trainees have been supplied with a binder full of these helpful articles. Articles are also available free of charge in racks located next to the bookstore or by contacting the church office.

**The Formal Counseling Process**

The start of counseling often takes on many different routes so it is difficult to specify a particular procedure. For the sake of simplicity, this section will be limited to the involvement of pastoral, staff and consulting counselors in a formal/structured counseling setting. Discussion of pre-marital counseling will be handled under a separate heading. Below is the *desired* procedure for initiating formal counseling:

1. Congregants are encouraged to call the church office to set-up counseling appointments. These calls should, in most instances, be directed to the Congregational Care Coordinator (CCC). The exception is when an individual insists on speaking with a pastor to set up a counseling session. In such cases, the pastor will decide to whom to assign a counseling case, and may inform the CCC if deemed appropriate. Counseling of youth will be handled, most often, by the Associate Pastor and/or his assigned delegates. Often times, pastors, elders, staff members or congregants are made aware of a counseling need. In this case, any one of these individuals may initiate counseling by contacting the prospective counselee and encouraging him/her to follow the process for seeking formal counseling. It is important that the counselee himself follows through in making arrangements, thus demonstrating his commitment to the counseling process.
2. The CCC and/or another counselor will meet with the counselee and begin the assessment process. This process involves the review of the personal data intake form (filled out by the counselee and brought to the first interview) and the review of the counseling contract with confidentiality agreement. (See Appendix A and B).
3. Based on the information gathered from the prospective counselee, a counseling plan will be developed identifying the most appropriate counselor and content and expected length of counseling. It is our desire, typically, that women counselees meet with women counselors, men counselees meet with men counselors, and that couples meet with men and women counselors together and separately.
4. Though it is important that a counseling plan be developed, it must be recognized that counseling is a dynamic process, and it is impossible to predict with accuracy the length and direction of counseling. Often, the presenting need is not the most significant need at all and changes to the original may be required. Patience and commitment to the counseling process are essential. The key question to ask, “Is the counselee making progress in understanding the needs of his/her heart and the transforming power of the gospel?” Nevertheless, it is anticipated the typical course of formal counseling will last between 6 and 13 sessions. Discretion must be granted to the counselor to determine when a course of counseling has reached an end. With specific regard to the Senior Pastor, he will rarely see a counselee more than one time. If more than one or two meetings are necessary he will refer the counselee to another counselor.
5. Often times, a counseling relationship may transition into a more of a discipling relationship. The distinction is “is the counseling process dealing with a specific need(s) or has it evolved into dealing with the general application of the Bible to all of life?” If the latter is the case, it is likely that what is most needed is Biblical discipleship. At this time, it is important the assigned counselor have other members of the body become increasingly involved, with the goal of transitioning out of the formal counseling relationship, and remaining as a consultant or sounding board to an assigned discipler. The typical go-to disciplers will be elders, officers, women’s care ministry trainees, and other members who have demonstrated competency and desire to minister in this way. Follow-up with the counselee is essential and should be closely monitored by the counselor for as long as necessary.
6. Sometimes, it may become evident that instead of counseling and discipleship, the need is evangelism. In this case, pastors and elders will be consulted to determine the best course of action.
7. Occasionally, in the course of counseling, it may become clearly evident that an individual does not desire to change and is not seeking the Lord in faith and repentance. In this scenario, it is important for the counselor to bring in the appropriate pastors/ elders to assess the need for church discipline.
8. Sometimes, it may become evident that physiological needs are sabotaging progress in the counseling process. A counselee, for example, may be suffering from sleep deprivation, which renders him/her exhausted and unable to complete assignments and follow through with proposed changes. It is important that a counselor recognize such symptoms (sleeplessness is only one of many) and require the counselee to seek medical evaluation and attention. Often times, this becomes evident from the very beginning of counseling process and it is typically most wise to encourage a counselee to begin addressing physical symptoms before proceeding with counseling.
9. Formal counseling cases will be reviewed and prayed for at least monthly by Covenant’s Counseling Review Board. The board consists of CPC pastors, staff members, consulting counselors, and elders who are involved in formal counseling settings. In addition to prayer, the main goal of this counseling review is accountability for the counselor and counselee. The formal counseling process should not result in an endless number of meetings where little or no progress is being made. It will be the review board’s role to assess which cases are to be continued, postponed, reevaluated or ceased. All such decisions will be made in a pastoral manner and not as a result of pragmatism or frustration, with the counselor’s assessment given the greatest consideration. It is our constant hope that Biblical counseling will result in transformed lives, making patience and reliance on the Spirit essential.

**Premarital Counseling**

All couples seeking to be married by a Covenant pastor MUST participate in pre-marital counseling offered by the church or in collaboration with the church. Currently, this counseling is primarily handled by our Associate Pastor. Occasionally, the associate pastor may involve others in pre-marital counseling, for assistance and consultation. Because time and distance constraints often impact the ability to conduct pre-marital counseling, it is essential that prospective couples give ample time for counseling before setting a marriage date. In fact, it is highly recommended that couples seek pre-marital counseling prior to engagement to assess readiness for marriage, and to develop an early understanding of the counseling process and necessary time commitment. At any time, the pastor/persons involved in this counseling may decide that proceeding with marriage is not wise and may refuse to give consent for marriage. Therefore, pre-marital counseling should not be viewed as simply an item on a check list to be completed before marriage but as an integral part in making the decision ***to*** marry. For more information, see the premarital document posted on the Resources page at www.covenantlakeland.org.

**Record Keeping**

For counseling situations that extend beyond an initial meeting and develop into a formal counseling process, the counselor will keep a file containing the following: the Personal Data Inventory Form, the signed copy of the Contract, the Weekly Counseling Record from each session with the counselee, and copies of the Homework Assignments. These records will be maintained securely in the church office (except in the case of consulting counselors), consistent with community standards of care.

**Confidentiality**

It is essential in a counseling relationship that counselees know matters discussed with a counselor will be handled in the utmost confidence. It is our desire that a person’s dignity and privacy be honored at all times. Counselors **must be committed** to this high standard of confidentiality. Counselees must understand, however, that counselors *may at times* need to involve pastors, other counselors, church leaders, and government authorities as counseling progresses. The involvement of other persons will occur only as deemed critically necessary and will be done, most often, with the full knowledge and consent of the counselee.

**Summary**

It is our hope this policy makes it abundantly clear that Covenant is committed to the soul care of its congregants for the glory of God under the absolute authority of God’s Word and dependence on the Holy Spirit at the agent of change. The goal of Biblical counseling is never to be viewed as simply behavioral change but as true heart transformation that leads men, women, and children to putting off sin and putting on joyful and grateful obedience to God. The goal of Biblical counseling, simply put, is the sanctification of God’s people, witnessed by an increasing conformity to Christ, through the ministry of the Word and its application to the heart by the Holy Spirit.

**Attachments**

Appendix A- Personal Data Inventory Form

Appendix B- Counseling Contract

Appendix C- Weekly Counseling Record Form

1. This section is taken with some modifications from “Equipped to Counsel”, John Henderson, Ph.D., published by the Association of Biblical Counselors. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)