

Stick to Six to Start: Shepherding the Basics

When I first started counseling, I remember a frustrated man who lived separately from his wife and had little hope that anything could be done to save his marriage. He made a shocking statement: “No marriage from my church has ever been restored. The elders won’t even try to help.” He concluded that his only two options were misery or divorce. I wasn’t sure what to think of his sad statement, so I arranged a meeting with the elders from his church. They indeed confirmed that their church had no examples of marriage restoration in the previous 25 years, so the elders quit trying to engage hurting marriages. People were on their own to get help they needed to try and restore their marriage.

We at Biblical Counseling Center walk with a number of churches that desire to develop caring and counseling teams using a Titus 2 model. Churches that are able to do ministry beyond the pulpit are strategically more flexible to continue effective ministry in the current pandemic context. Though there is an increased interest and desire to prepare teams ready to reach their community effectively during times of crisis, the idea of creating such teams to be ready for any struggle, at any time, seems like an overwhelming responsibility to most pastors and church leaders.

So where do you start?

When it comes to providing care and counseling, your church must develop shepherding skills in six critical areas. I recently conducted several informal polls with about 100 active biblical counselors who described themselves as “regularly providing biblical counseling.” I asked them to identify the most common presenting struggles that led to the counseling relationships they currently have in their ministry setting. These top six likely won’t surprise you if you are doing any level of shepherding ministry.

1. Anxiety
2. Marital Strife
3. Depression
4. Conflict and Anger
5. Abuse (Childhood Sexual and Intimate Partner)
6. Addictive Behaviors (Sexual, Relational or Substance)

For those called to shepherding roles in the church, it is likely that 90% of the counseling struggles your people face would be with these top six issues as well. Some will struggle with more than one issue concurrently, but most individuals seeking counseling or pastoral care will identify with at least one of the above

struggles which led them to seek outside help. If you were to poll professional therapists, you would find a similar list of counseling issues.

If you desire to increase the quality of your shepherding or to develop a care and counseling team in your church, you do not need to be prepared in the beginning to counsel every possible issue. However, you can begin by preparing your church leaders and lay counselors to engage more effectively in the most common issues that keep your people up at night. Ultimately, different team counselors will mature in skills to help with different issues, providing specialized care by your team. One team member may focus on addictions while another specializes in fear and anxiety.

If you are intentional in developing lay counselors, your church can grow significantly over the next five years in your ability to help struggling people. By choosing just one strategy per quarter to improve your top six issues, you would find that over several years, your team would grow in confidence that God, God's Word and God's people really can meet the needs of hurting people in the church and community.

As a ministry, we love to train church leaders to engage these issues more effectively and we have seen good results when churches begin to intentionally equip their lay leaders to shepherd. Some churches create a counseling team. While formal counseling will often create an environment where serious and profitable conversations can take place, the informal opportunities embedded in ordinary life are also valuable. Even if you don't already have a counseling team, church leadership can begin to address the top six issues with an intentional strategy to engage in conversations that show you care.

9 Practical Ways to Address these Top Six Counseling Issues

- Plan a weekend sermon series every year addressing one of these topics
- Engage an expert to help your church to recognize warning signs
- Develop short-term, elective study groups/classes to address each issue from a biblical perspective.
- Share stories of success from those who have experienced victory
- Partner with ministries who specialize in specific issues
- Buy a topical book or resource that you challenge your small groups and leaders to read, then discuss
- Plan a Men's, Women's or Youth retreat topic around one of these issues
- Invite a weekend speaker to address one these topics
- Create a resource page for specific issues from a biblical perspective

Many in our churches or community may spend a significant portion of their waking hours thinking about the pain to them and their loved ones caused by one of these top six struggles. However, most people have never experienced a sermon series on depression, abuse or addiction. Most evangelical churches have never had a Sunday School class or Small Group address directly any of these topics like abuse or conflict. Most gospel believing churches have never publicly shared a success story of marital restoration or brought in an expert to speak about a topic like anxiety. It is sad that many churches lack any discernible strategy to proactively address these common struggles.

What would it look like to create a more intentional plan to address the Top Six? A three-year and five-year sample are below to provide a possible systematic approach for help and hope in each area.

Sample 3-Year Shepherding Plan to Address the Top Six Counseling Struggles

Topic	Anxiety	Marital Strife	Depression	Anger and Conflict	Abuse	Addictions
Year One	Teaching Series	Short Term Study		Topical Book or Resource		Share Stories
Year Two		Retreat Topic	Teaching Series		Engage an Expert	Short Term Study
Year Three	Resource Page	Share Stories	Short Term Study	Teaching Series	Partner with a Ministry	Partner with a Ministry

Sample 5 year Shepherding Plan to Address Top Six Counseling Struggles

Topic	Anxiety	Marital Strife	Depression	Anger and Conflict	Abuse	Addictions
Year One	Teaching Series	Short Term Study		Topical Book or Resource		Share Stories
Year Two		Retreat Topic	Teaching Series	Share Stories	Engage an Expert	Short Term Study
Year Three	Resource Page		Short Term Study	Teaching Series	Partner with a Ministry	
Year Four	Share Stories	Teaching Series		Partner with a Ministry		
Year Five		Share Stories	Resource Page		Invite a Weekend Speaker	Teaching Series

With just 3-4 practical shepherding strategies a year, you could address each of the “Top Six” twice in a regular cycle with differing approaches each year. As a leadership team, you could assign a topic to a leader who can develop possibilities for an effective shepherding strategy to address each of the top six. Perhaps they will befriend an expert or reach out to a local ministry, develop a short-term study or find the two best biblically-based resources for your small groups to work through. Your teaching team can work on a month-long topical series; men’s or women’s groups might think through a retreat weekend that can effectively and experientially encourage your people to take the next step to overcome certain struggles.

Conclusion: As a ministry, we conduct “Depression and Disappointment” weekends where we train church leaders to engage with those struggling with depression. We provide teaching and opportunities to encourage those who personally battle with depression. We help to equip those walking alongside others in their battle with depression. I have found repeatedly that church leaders are surprised by the number of people who come forward who were previously uncertain about how their struggle with depression would be viewed. By taking an issue like depression seriously, lives can be saved, wasted years are avoided, and Christ’s love can be experienced by those who previously felt all alone in their battle with depression. Any church leader can learn to provide compassionate care for struggles like depression if your church will be proactive to equip them. Reach out to your counseling partners and see if they can help. If Biblical Counseling Center can help you think through a shepherding/equipping strategy for your church, please reach out. We can help you train and equip your leaders.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is your church intentionally doing to equip your leaders to shepherd the most common counseling struggles?
2. How might a shepherding plan help you more holistically care for the needs of your church body?