



*Shepherding*  
**MARRIAGES**

A Pastoral Guide to Marriage Counselling  
in African Churches

**Dr. Adetunji Christian**

**SHEPHERDING MARRIAGES**  
**A Pastoral Guide to Marriage**  
**Counselling in African**  
**Churches**

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## PREFACE

Across Africa, marriage is more than a private relationship between two people. It is a covenant that involves families, clans, churches, and communities. Strong marriages strengthen many lives. When a marriage breaks down, the pain affects far more than the couple alone. For this reason, African marriages need intentional pastoral care. This care must be compassionate, informed, and responsibly guided.

In many African societies, the church remains the most trusted moral and relational authority. Before couples think of counsellors, psychologists, or social workers, they usually turn to pastors. They may visit a pastor's office, speak with an elder under a tree, or ask for prayer after a Sunday service. They come not only because of faith but also because pastors are considered guardians of wisdom, morality, confidentiality, and hope. A pastor's word still carries great weight in decisions about forgiveness, reconciliation, endurance, separation, and restoration.

This special role of pastors in African family life is both a gift and a burden. It is a gift because pastors meet couples at their most vulnerable moments. These are moments when pain is deep, pride is low, and change is possible. It is a burden because many pastors were never trained to handle the emotional, psychological, relational, and cultural challenges of modern marriage. Even so, they are still expected to guide couples and sometimes to “fix” what is broken.

Within this gap lies a quiet but serious danger. It is the danger of turning every marital problem into a spiritual issue without proper guidance. Prayer is powerful. Scripture gives life. Faith is essential. However, not every marital crisis can be solved by prayer alone, just as not every illness can be healed without medical care. When problems such as poor communication, unresolved trauma, financial stress, emotional neglect, sexual difficulties, or abuse are explained only as “lack of faith” or “spiritual attack”, couples may feel blamed, silenced, or even more wounded.

This book was written to honour faith while also respecting wisdom. It upholds Scripture while recognising the need for structure. It supports pastors without turning them into clinical therapists. *Shepherd Marriages offers African pastors a clear, ethical, and culturally grounded guide to marriage counselling.* It respects the sacred role of pastoral ministry and strengthens it with practical processes, careful discernment, and healthy boundaries.

The goal of this book is not to replace prayer but to walk prayer alongside understanding. It is not to weaken spiritual authority but to strengthen pastoral effectiveness. And it is not to judge struggling couples but to shepherd them with clarity, compassion, and courage.

# INTRODUCTION

## **The Pastor as a Marriage Shepherd**

In the Bible, a shepherd does more than lead sheep to green pastures. A shepherd also cares for wounds, protects the weak, and brings back those who have wandered away. In the same way, the African pastor today serves as a marriage shepherd. Pastors are called to guide couples through seasons of unity, conflict, confusion, and restoration. They are expected to walk with couples when things are peaceful and painful.

## **Why Couples Come to Pastors Before Professionals**

Couples come to pastors first for many reasons. Pastors are usually easy to reach. They are affordable. They are trusted members of the community. In many African settings, people still view professional counselling with suspicion. It might be costly, challenging to obtain, or perceived as an indication of failure. Because of this, couples often avoid professional help until problems become severe.

Pastors, however, feel familiar and safe. They are considered spiritually legitimate helpers. Couples trust that pastors will keep their matters confidential and treat them with respect.

Many couples also believe that their marital problems are spiritual or moral in nature. They come seeking prayer, biblical guidance, and reassurance that God is still present in their marriage. Often, they hope the pastor will correct their spouse, confirm their view, or provide a quick solution. Understanding these expectations helps pastors respond with wisdom rather than assumption.

#### The Pastor's Influence, Limits, and Responsibility

Pastors hold great influence in marital matters. Words spoken during counselling can bring healing, but they can also cause long-term harm. Advice given without full understanding may deepen pain instead of resolving it. Silence in situations of abuse or danger can place lives at serious risk.

With influence comes responsibility, but also clear limits. Pastors are not automatically trained psychologists. They

are not equipped to manage violent situations. They are not substitutes for mental health professionals when serious emotional or psychological conditions are present. True wisdom lies not in trying to do everything, but in knowing what to do, what not to do, and when to involve other professionals.

This book helps pastors honour their pastoral authorities while respecting ethical boundaries. By doing so, it protects both the couple and the pastor.

#### Counselling, Prayer, and Spiritual Direction

One major source of confusion in pastoral marriage care is the belief that prayer, counselling, and spiritual guidance are the same. They are related, but they are not the same.

- Prayer invites God's presence and power.
- Counselling helps couples understand patterns, emotions, behaviours, and choices.
- Spiritual direction helps individuals reflect on how God is working in their lives.

Healthy pastoral care knows when to pray and when to listen. It knows when to ask structured questions and when to guide reflection. It also recognizes that prayer should never replace safety planning, accountability, or referrals when they are needed.

### **When Faith Heals—and When Structure Is Needed**

Faith heals. Scripture restores. The Holy Spirit transforms lives. At the same time, God also works through wisdom, order, process, and human understanding. Many marital problems continue not because faith is absent, but because structure is missing. Couples often lack clear communication skills, realistic expectations, healthy boundaries, accountability, and guided conversation.

This book is built on one simple belief: faith and structure are not enemies. When they work together, they produce strong and responsible pastoral care. Such care restores marriages, protects vulnerable people, and strengthens the church.

*Shepherding Marriages* is therefore an invitation to pastors, elders, and church leaders. It calls them to

shepherd marriages with spiritual depth and practical wisdom so that African homes may be healed and the church may remain a place of refuge, truth, and hope.

# PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS

## CHAPTER ONE

# Shepherding Marriages: Why Pastoral Marriage Counselling Matters

### **Marriage as a Sacred and Fragile Calling**

Marriage remains one of the most sacred and demanding institutions within Christian life and African society. It is not merely a private arrangement between two individuals but a covenantal union embedded within family systems, cultural expectations, spiritual beliefs, and communal accountability. When marriage thrives, families stabilise, children flourish, and communities gain resilience. When marriage fractures, the emotional, spiritual, and social consequences ripple far beyond the couple themselves (Anderson, 2001; Mbiti, 1991).

In African church contexts, marriage occupies a central pastoral concern. Churches are deeply involved in mate

selection, marriage preparation, wedding rites, conflict mediation, and moral accountability. As a result, pastors are often the first—and sometimes the only—point of contact when marriages begin to unravel. This pastoral proximity gives the church immense influence, but it also carries significant responsibility.

### **The Weight of Pastoral Authority**

Pastors in African societies are not perceived merely as religious functionaries. They are regarded as moral custodians, spiritual interpreters, community elders, and trusted advisors. Words spoken by a pastor can heal wounded relationships or entrench silence and fear. Decisions made in pastoral counselling can liberate couples or trap them in cycles of harm (Doehring, 2015). This authority is not inherently dangerous, but it becomes risky when exercised without ethical clarity, psychological awareness, or structural guidance. Good intentions alone do not protect couples from harm. Pastoral authority must be guided by discernment,

humility, and well-defined boundaries (Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

### **Strengths and Blind Spots in African Pastoral Care**

African churches possess profound strengths in marriage care. These include strong communal support, deep respect for covenant, reverence for Scripture, and an enduring commitment to marital stability. However, these strengths can become blind spots when endurance is spiritualised without discernment, silence is mistaken for peace, or reconciliation is pursued without safety (Magezi, 2019; Mugambi, 2003).

In many church contexts, pastors face immense pressure to “save the marriage” regardless of cost. Separation is often viewed as failure. Divorce is associated with spiritual weakness. Suffering spouses—especially women—are encouraged to pray harder, submit more, or endure quietly. While these responses may be culturally familiar, they are not always pastorally faithful.

When Preservation Replaces Protection

One of the most dangerous distortions in pastoral marriage counselling is the belief that preserving marriages is more important than protecting people. This belief leads to minimising emotional abuse, spiritualising violence, and encouraging premature forgiveness without repentance. In such contexts, pastoral care unintentionally becomes complicit in harm (Louw, 2016). Scripture affirms marriage as sacred, but it never sanctifies cruelty. Covenant is meant to protect life, dignity, and mutual responsibility—not to excuse fear, domination, or silence. Pastoral faithfulness therefore requires courage to challenge harmful patterns even when cultural or religious pressure demands endurance.

### **The Need for a Structured Pastoral Framework**

Much harm in marriage counselling does not occur because pastors lack compassion but because counselling is conducted without structure. Conversations drift. Authority is misused. Boundaries are blurred. Prayer replaces assessment. Scripture replaces discernment.

This book is grounded in the GAP Marriage Counselling Theory (GAP-MCT), a contemporary pastoral framework that understands marital distress as emerging from perceived gaps between expectation and lived experience. These gaps generate emotional threats, defensive behaviours, and escalating relational breakdowns. GAP-MCT provides pastors with a structured way to assess, interpret, and respond to marital distress without rushing to blame or premature solutions (Adetunji, 2025).

### **Safety as a Theological and Ethical Priority**

Throughout this book, safety is treated as non-negotiable. Emotional fear, coercion, intimidation, and violence are pastoral emergencies that require immediate ethical clarity. Any counselling process that ignores safety in the name of unity violates both pastoral responsibility and biblical justice (Doehring, 2015; Louw, 2016).

Marriage counselling must therefore begin not with advice but with an assessment. Not with reconciliation,

but with discernment. Instead of applying pressure, it should focus on providing protection.

### **Pastors as Shepherds, Not Saviours**

Pastors are called to shepherd marriages, not to control outcomes. They are witnesses to God's work, not replacements for personal responsibility or divine agency. When pastors attempt to rescue marriages at all costs, they risk creating dependence, moral confusion, and spiritual coercion (Bonhoeffer, 1954).

Faithful pastoral counselling walks alongside couples with honesty, patience, and humility. It speaks honestly. It sets limits. It knows when to continue, when to pause, and when to let go (Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

### **Purpose and Structure of This Book**

This book is written to equip pastors, church leaders, and pastoral counsellors working within African church contexts. It incorporates theology, ethics, cultural awareness, and a structured counselling process. Each chapter builds intentionally—from intake and

assessment to intervention, protection, referral, and discernment.

This is not a manual for preserving marriage at all costs. It is a guide for shepherding marriages in ways that honour faith, dignity, safety, and the truth.

### **Chapter Summary**

Marriage counselling in African churches carries immense influence and responsibility. The exercise of pastoral authority can either heal or harm. Without structure, ethics, and discernment, even well-intentioned counselling can be dangerous. This chapter has established the moral and pastoral foundation for the journey ahead: marriage is sacred, but people are more sacred; unity is important, but safety is essential; and pastoral faithfulness is measured not by appearances, but by truth, dignity, and protection.

The next chapter explores pastoral roles and ethical boundaries in marriage counselling, clarifying what pastors can—and cannot—safely do.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# The Pastor's Role and Ethical Boundaries in Marriage Counselling

### **Why Ethical Clarity Is Foundational**

Marriage counselling in the church is never neutral. When couples sit before a pastor, they are not only seeking advice; they are entrusting their lives, safety, faith, and dignity to pastoral authority. This makes ethics central—not optional—to pastoral marriage counselling. Without ethical clarity, pastoral care can unintentionally silence victims, spiritualise harm, and misuse Scripture to preserve appearances rather than protect them. Ethical boundaries do not weaken pastoral ministry; they safeguard it. They protect couples, pastors, and the credibility of the church (Doehring, 2015; Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

## **The Unique Weight of Pastoral Authority in African Contexts**

In many African societies, pastors occupy roles that extend far beyond spiritual leadership. They are perceived as moral judges, cultural interpreters, elders, and mediators. Their words carry communal weight. A pastoral proclamation can legitimise suffering or authorise freedom (Magezi, 2019).

This authority becomes dangerous when it is exercised without restraint. When pastors assume unquestioned power over marital decisions, couples may comply outwardly while suffering inwardly. Ethical pastoral counselling requires humility—the recognition that authority exists to serve, not to control (Bonhoeffer, 1954).

### **Clarifying the Pastor's Role**

Pastors often shift unconsciously between roles during counselling. They may act as spiritual teachers, emotional supporters, mediators, moral instructors, or

investigators—all within a single session. Confusing or naming these roles leads to problems.

Ethical pastoral counselling requires role clarification.

The pastor's role is to:

- Facilitate understanding
- Encourage accountability
- Protect safety
- Support discernment

It is not to:

- Judge guilt
- Enforce reconciliation
- Replace professional care
- Control outcomes

When pastors confuse guidance with authority, counselling becomes coercive rather than healing (Doehring, 2015).

### **Pastoral Counselling Is Not Clinical Therapy**

Pastoral counselling differs fundamentally from clinical psychotherapy. Both involve listening and care; pastoral counselling focuses on meaning, values, spiritual

formation, and relational guidance. It does not include diagnosing mental illness, treating trauma disorders, or managing psychiatric conditions.

Ethical violations occur when pastors:

- Attempt to treat mental illness without training
- Ignore warning signs of psychological instability
- Replace referral with prayer alone

Wisdom lies in recognising boundaries. Referral is not pastoral failure; it is pastoral responsibility (Louw, 2016).

### **Confidentiality in Communal Church Settings**

Confidentiality is often misunderstood in African church contexts, where communal life blurs personal boundaries. Elders, relatives, or church leaders may expect to receive counselling information.

Ethical pastoral counselling requires explicit confidentiality agreements. Couples must understand:

- What confidentiality means
- When it must be broken for safety
- That information is not shared without consent.

Without confidentiality, couples withhold truths—especially regarding abuse, infidelity, addiction, or fear—making counselling ineffective and unsafe (Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

### **Power, Authority, and Spiritual Coercion**

Spiritual authority becomes abusive when Scripture is used to silence pain or force compliance. Statements such as “God hates divorce,” “Submit and pray” or “Forgive and forget” may sound biblical but can function as tools of coercion.

Ethical pastoral care rejects spiritual manipulation. Scripture must illuminate truth, not protect harm. Pastors must be vigilant against using divine language to legitimise control (Louw, 2016).

### **Gender, Power Imbalance, and Ethical Vigilance**

Many African marriages operate within unequal power structures shaped by culture, economics, and gender expectations. In such contexts, ethical neutrality often defaults to favouring the more powerful partner.

Pastors must actively assess:

- Who controls resources
- Who speaks freely
- Who appears fearful or silenced

Where a power imbalance exists, ethical pastoral care prioritises protection for the vulnerable. Silence in the face of imbalance is not neutrality—it is complicity (Magezi, 2019).

### **Dual Relationships and Conflict of Interest**

Pastors frequently counsel individuals they know well—relatives, friends, church leaders, or financial supporters. These dual relationships increase ethical risk by compromising objectivity and confidentiality.

Ethical pastoral practice requires recognising when:

- Neutrality is compromised
- Pressure to take sides exists
- Referral is the safest option.

Stepping back is sometimes the most faithful pastoral act (Doehring, 2015).

### **When Pastoral Counselling Becomes Unsafe**

Certain situations fall beyond the safe scope of pastoral counselling. These include:

- Physical or sexual violence
- Severe emotional abuse
- Active addiction
- Serious mental illness
- Suicidal behaviour

In such cases, continued joint counselling increases danger. Ethical pastoral responsibility requires an immediate shift toward protection and referral (Louw, 2016).

### **Ethical Use of Scripture in Marriage Counselling**

Scripture must never be weaponised. Ethical misuse occurs when Scripture is:

- Quoted selectively
- Detached from context
- Used to enforce submission
- Presented as a divine command to endure harm

Faithful pastoral counselling allows Scripture to restore dignity, clarify responsibility, and support repentance—not silence suffering (Bonhoeffer, 1954).

Knowing When and How to Refer

Referral is an act of pastoral maturity. Ethical referral:

- Explains the reason clearly
- Removes shame
- Maintains pastoral presence
- Collaborates with professionals

Within GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, referral is often necessary when relational gaps escalate into psychological threats beyond pastoral scope (Adetunji, 2025).

### **Pastoral Self-Awareness and Integrity**

Ethical pastoral counselling begins with self-awareness. Pastors must examine their beliefs about marriage, authority, gender, and suffering. Unresolved personal wounds can unconsciously influence counselling responses.

Integrity requires humility, supervision, and accountability. Pastors who know themselves are less likely to harm others (Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

#### Chapter Summary

Pastoral marriage counselling carries immense authority and responsibility. Without ethical boundaries, good intentions can produce harm. Ethical clarity protects couples, pastors, and the church. Authority guided by humility, confidentiality practiced with integrity, and limits respected with wisdom form the foundation of faithful pastoral care.

The next chapter examines contemporary threats to family stability, equipping pastors to understand the social, economic, psychological, and digital forces shaping modern marriages.

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## CHAPTER THREE

# Contemporary Threats to Family Stability

### **Why Pastors Must Understand the Times**

Marriage and family life today are shaped by pressures that differ significantly from those faced by previous generations. Many pastors were trained within relatively stable cultural assumptions: predictable gender roles, strong communal regulation, economic continuity, and limited external influence on family life. These assumptions no longer hold.

Couples now navigate forces that are global, digital, economic, ideological, and psychological. When pastoral counselling relies solely on moral exhortations or scripture quotations without understanding these contextual realities, it becomes disconnected from lived experience. Sound pastoral care requires contextual discernment before intervention (Osmer, 2008).

Understanding contemporary threats does not weaken biblical authority; it strengthens pastoral accuracy. This chapter equips pastors to interpret marital distress wisely by recognising the forces that destabilise families today.

### **1. Economic Insecurity and Chronic Financial Stress**

Economic instability is one of the most powerful contemporary stressors affecting marriage. Unemployment, underemployment, rising living costs, debt, labour migration, and informal economies create ongoing pressure on households.

Economic strain destabilises marriages by:

- Undermining provider identity
- Increasing anxiety and irritability
- Intensifying power struggles
- Delaying family formation
- Making couples vulnerable to exploitation

Pastoral error occurs when financial conflict is interpreted primarily as spiritual failure rather than systemic pressure. Research consistently shows that chronic financial stress erodes emotional availability and

marital satisfaction long before overt conflict emerges (Conger et al., 2010).

Within GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, financial strain often widens the gap between expectations and lived reality, generating an emotional threat that activates defensive behaviours within the marital system (Adetunji, 2025).

## **2. Digital Technology and the Erosion of Intimacy**

Digital technology has reshaped relational life. Mobile phones, social media, and constant connectivity offer convenience but also introduce new vulnerabilities into marriage.

Digital-related marital threats include:

- Emotional affairs via messaging platforms
- Pornography and sexual desensitisation
- Comparison-driven dissatisfaction
- Distraction from presence and parenting
- Hidden private worlds

Many couples report feeling emotionally displaced by screens rather than people. Pastoral counselling that

ignores digital realities risks misdiagnosing betrayals and emotional distance. Relational wounds now occur digitally as well as physically (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2014).

### **3. Sexualisation of Culture and Shifting Moral Narratives**

Contemporary culture increasingly frames sexuality as personal entitlement rather than relational responsibility. Media messages prioritise pleasure, performance, and self-fulfilment over covenant, patience, and mutual care.

This shift contributes to:

- Unrealistic sexual expectations
- Shame around sexual difficulty
- Pressure to perform rather than connect
- Increased vulnerability to infidelity

Silence from the church on sexual matters leaves couples shaped primarily by media narratives. Pastors must address sexuality with clarity, compassion, and theological depth rather than avoidance (Anderson, 2011).

#### **4. Redefinition of Gender Roles Without Relational Preparation**

Rapid social and economic changes have altered gender roles across African societies. Women's increased access to education and employment has expanded opportunity but also created relational tension where roles are renegotiated without preparation.

Unprocessed role shifts often lead to:

- Identity confusion
- Power struggles
- Passive resistance or withdrawal
- Spiritualised dominance or submission

The threat lies not in changing roles but in unmanaged change. Pastoral counselling must help couples renegotiate roles intentionally rather than reactively (Magezi, 2019).

#### **5. Weakening of Extended Family Support Systems**

While prolonged family interference can strain marriages, the absence of extended family support is also destabilising. Urbanisation, migration, and nuclear living

arrangements have removed buffers that previously absorbed marital stress.

Consequences include:

- Isolation of couples
- Overdependence on spouse
- Parenting fatigue
- Escalation of minor conflicts
- Loss of mediation figures

Many marriages deteriorate not because of hostility, but because of exhaustion and isolation (Cherlin, 2014).

## **6. The Rise of Individualism and Its Impact on Commitment Culture**

Modern culture increasingly evaluates marriage through personal fulfilment rather than covenantal responsibility. Questions such as “Am I happy?” often replace “Are we faithful?”

This shift produces:

- Low tolerance for discomfort
- Rapid exit from conflict
- Consumer-orientated counselling

- Fear of sacrifice

Pastoral counselling must gently but firmly address individualism. Without confronting this worldview, counselling becomes demand-driven rather than responsibility-centered (Osmer, 2008).

### **7. Mental Health Strain and Emotional Dysregulation**

Depression, anxiety, trauma, and burnout are increasingly common and deeply affect family functioning. However, church contexts often spiritualise or deny mental health struggles.

Unaddressed mental health challenges may manifest as:

- Emotional withdrawal
- Irritability and anger
- Sexual disconnection
- Parenting difficulty
- Mislabelling illness as sin

Pastoral counselling must discern when distress is psychological, relational, or spiritual—and refer appropriately when required (Doehring, 2015).

## **8. Weak Pre-Marital Formation and Unrealistic Expectations**

Many couples enter marriage with limited preparation for conflict, financial management, sexual adjustment, or extended family boundaries. Romantic idealism often replaces realistic understanding.

Unmet expectations frequently produce disappointment that is later interpreted as incompatibility or spiritual failure. Preventive formation is consistently more effective than post-crisis repair (Stanley et al., 2006).

Within GAP-MCT, unrealistic expectations significantly widen relational gaps, intensifying emotional threat and defensive interaction (Adetunji, 2025).

## **9. Spiritualisation of Harm and Misuse of Scripture**

One of the most dangerous contemporary threats is the misuse of religious language to silence pain or justify endurance.

This includes:

- Using submission to suppress fear
- Using forgiveness to avoid accountability

- Using prayer to delay action
- Using faith to oppose referral

Such practices prioritise harm over holiness. Ethical pastoral care insists on safety before unity, truth before prayer, and accountability before forgiveness (Louw, 2016).

### **Implications for Pastoral Counselling**

Understanding contemporary threats reshapes pastoral practice by:

- Encouraging assessment before intervention
- Reducing judgement and moral panic
- Improving empathy and accuracy
- Preventing spiritual harm
- Strengthening ethical courage

Pastors who ignore context risk misdiagnosis. Pastors who understand context become safer and wiser guides.

### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

- Which of these threats appears most often in my counselling?

- Do I interpret modern struggles through outdated assumptions?
- Do I address digital, sexual, and mental health realities directly?
- Do I intervene before fully understanding the context?

### **Chapter Summary**

Family instability today is shaped by powerful economic, technological, psychological, and cultural forces. Pastoral counselling that ignores these realities becomes disconnected and potentially harmful. Faithful pastoral care requires theological depth, contextual awareness, ethical clarity, and a disciplined process.

The next chapter examines the pastor's ethical authority and boundaries, clarifying how power can heal or harm within marriage counselling.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# Authority, Confidentiality, and Limits in Pastoral Care

### **The Weight of Pastoral Authority in African Marriages**

In many African societies, pastors hold significant moral, spiritual, and relational authority. They are not perceived merely as religious teachers but as elders, moral arbiters, community stabilisers, and custodians of wisdom. When marriages are in distress, couples frequently turn first to pastors—often before approaching professional counsellors, psychologists, or legal systems.

This authority is powerful and must be exercised with care. Pastoral words can heal or harm, clarify or confuse, liberate or silence. When authority is exercised without ethical boundaries, pastoral counselling may unintentionally protect abuse, reinforce fear, or create unhealthy dependency. Ethical clarity does not weaken pastoral ministry; it safeguards couples, pastors, and the church (Louw, 2016).

## **Understanding the Pastor's Multiple Roles**

Pastors often move seamlessly between several roles during marriage counselling. These may include:

Spiritual shepherd offering prayer and biblical guidance

Pastoral counsellor listening to emotional pain

Mediator reducing conflict

Moral teacher clarifying values and responsibility

Unconsciously blending these roles can lead to problems.

When a pastor changes from counsellor to judge, couples become guarded. A pastor's rescue role can weaken one spouse while strengthening the other. When a pastor adopts an investigative stance, trust erodes quickly.

Ethical pastoral counselling requires role clarity. The aim is not to control outcomes but to support understanding, accountability, and wise discernment (Osmer, 2008).

## **Pastoral Counselling Is Not Clinical Therapy**

Pastoral counselling differs from clinical therapy in scope, method, and responsibility. It focuses on meaning, values, spiritual formation, and relational guidance. It

does not involve diagnosing mental illness, psychological testing, or treating severe psychiatric conditions.

Ethical risk arises when pastors:

- Attempt to treat mental illness without training

- Ignore serious psychological warning signs

- Replace professional care with spiritual language

Recognising limits is not failure; it is wisdom. Referral to qualified professionals is an expression of pastoral maturity and ethical leadership (Doehring, 2015).

### **Confidentiality in Communal Church Contexts**

In communal church settings, where elders, relatives, or leaders may expect access to counselling conversations, people frequently misunderstand confidentiality.

Pastors must clarify confidentiality at the outset:

- What is shared remains private.

- Information is not shared with a spouse without consent.

- Church leadership is not automatically informed.

- Confidentiality is broken only when safety is at risk.

Without clarity, couples withhold crucial information—particularly about infidelity, abuse, addiction, or emotional distress. Trust cannot flourish where privacy is uncertain (Louw, 2016).

### **Power, Authority, and Spiritual Coercion**

Spiritual authority carries emotional weight. When misused, it becomes coercive. Ethical violations occur when pastors:

- Pressure couples toward premature reconciliation

- Use Scripture to force compliance

- Shame one spouse publicly or privately

- Automatically side with men, elders, or leaders

Spiritual coercion often sounds righteous. Phrases such as *“God says...”* or *“You must forgive”* can silence pain when used without discernment. Scripture is intended to heal and liberate, not to control or intimidate (Anderson, 2011).

### **Gender, Power Imbalance, and Ethical Vigilance**

Many African marriages are shaped by unequal power related to culture, economics, and gender roles. A power

imbalance becomes visible when one partner dominates the conversation, controls finances, defines what is "spiritual," or responds to disagreement with intimidation or withdrawal.

When power is unequal, neutrality often supports the more powerful by default. Ethical pastoral care requires active protection of the vulnerable. Silence in the presence of imbalance is not neutrality; it is complicity (Magezi, 2019).

### **Dual Relationships and Conflict of Interest**

Pastors frequently counsel people they know personally—relatives, close friends, church leaders, or financial supporters. Such dual relationships increase ethical risk.

They may:

- Reduce objectivity

- Compromise confidentiality

- Create pressure to take sides

- Expose pastors to accusations of bias

When objectivity is compromised, referral or shared counselling is often the wisest course. Ethical leadership sometimes requires stepping back to protect all parties involved (Osmer, 2008).

### **When Pastoral Counselling Becomes Unsafe**

Some marital situations exceed the safe scope of pastoral counselling and require immediate referrals or external interventions. These include:

- Physical violence
- Sexual abuse
- Severe emotional abuse
- Threats to life
- Active substance addiction
- Serious mental illness
- Suicidal ideation

In such cases, prayer alone is insufficient. Silence becomes harmful. Protecting life and dignity is a non-negotiable pastoral responsibility. Joint counselling must cease when safety is compromised (Doehring, 2015).

## **Ethical Use of Scripture in Marriage Counselling**

Scripture must be used responsibly. Ethical misuse occurs when Scripture is:

- Quoted selectively without context

- Used to silence pain

- Employed to enforce submission

This view is presented as a personal opinion that is framed as a divine command.

Ethical pastoral care allows Scripture to illuminate truth, encourage accountability, and restore dignity. Scripture must never be weaponised to demand endurance at all costs or excuse harm (Louw, 2016).

### Knowing When and How to Refer

Referral does not mean abandonment. Ethical referral includes:

- Explaining the need calmly and clearly

- Normalising professional support

- Maintaining pastoral presence

- Collaborating respectfully with professionals

Pastors strengthen their ministry when they build referral networks and recognise competence limits.

### **Pastoral Self-Awareness and Integrity**

Ethical pastoral counselling begins with self-awareness. Pastors must reflect on their beliefs about marriage, gender, authority, and suffering. Unresolved wounds, fatigue, or burnout can unconsciously influence counselling responses.

Integrity requires humility, accountability, and ongoing reflection. Pastors who know themselves are less likely to harm others.

### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

Do I confuse authority with control?

Do couples feel safe telling me the truth?

Do I protect marriage more than people?

Do I know when to stop counselling and refer someone?

### **Chapter Summary**

Pastoral marriage counselling carries profound influence and responsibility. Ethical boundaries protect couples,

pastors, and the church. Authority exercised with humility, confidentiality practiced with integrity, and limits respected with wisdom form the foundation of safe and effective pastoral care.

The next chapter focuses on intake and first contact, which can either establish or irreparably damage trust.

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## PART TWO: THE COUNSELLING PROCESS

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Intake and First Contact with the Couple

### **Why the First Session Matters More Than Pastors Realise**

The first counselling meeting between a pastor and a struggling couple is not a casual conversation. It is a defining moment. Before advice is offered, prayer is said, or Scripture is opened, the couple makes a critical internal judgement: *Is this space safe?* Closely tied to this issue is a second question: *Can this pastor be trusted with the truth?*

Research and pastoral experience consistently show that many marriages are helped or harmed not by theological knowledge, but by how the first session is handled (Doehring, 2015). In African church contexts—where shame, reputation, and communal perception carry significant weight—the intake session often determines whether couples will speak honestly or retreat into

silence. Intake is not about fixing the marriage. It is about establishing safety, dignity, and clarity so that truth can emerge without fear.

### **How Couples Typically Arrive for Counselling**

Couples usually arrive for counselling agitated, biased, and unprepared. Most come emotionally charged, guarded, and protective of their narratives. Some attend voluntarily; others come under pressure from extended family, church leaders, or crisis situations.

Common reasons couples seek pastoral counselling include:

- Fear of separation or divorce

- Public embarrassment or church discipline

- Discovery of infidelity

- Escalating conflict

- Emotional exhaustion

At this stage, couples are often not seeking understanding but validation, justification, or leverage. Pastors must recognise this dynamic without becoming suspicious or defensive (Osmer, 2008).

### **Presentation Narratives and the Deeper Reality**

Couples rarely present the full story in the first session. Initial narratives are shaped by fear, self-protection, shame, or the hope that the pastor will take sides.

Common opening statements include:

“We don’t understand each other.”

“She does not respect me.”

“He has changed.”

“We fight all the time.”

These statements are not lies; they are partial truths. Beneath them often lie deeper issues such as emotional neglect, power struggles, unmet expectations, sexual dissatisfaction, or unresolved resentment.

Effective intake requires patience and disciplined listening. Pastors must resist the urge to treat first stories as final explanations.

### **Visible Problems and Hidden Issues**

Some concerns are immediately visible during intake—infidelity, financial conflict, sexual issues, or extended

family interference. Others are hidden and often more damaging over time.

Hidden issues may include:

- Chronic emotional neglect
- Fear or intimidation
- Silent punishment through withdrawal
- Gradual erosion of trust
- Shame and wounded identity

Intake is a time for observation, not interrogation. Tone of voice, emotional reaction, contradiction, silence, and body language often reveal more than words alone (Doehring, 2015).

### **When One Spouse Comes Alone**

In many African church settings, one spouse—often the woman—approaches the pastor alone. This may occur quietly, through encouragement from relatives, or after prolonged distress. Frequently, the individual hopes the pastor will confront or correct the absent spouse.

Pastors must respond with ethical restraint. Listening does not mean agreement. Compassion does not mean

taking sides. The aim is to understand the relationship system and assess whether joint counselling is appropriate and safe.

Ethically, pastors should:

- Listen without aligning

- Avoid promising confrontation.

- Encourage joint sessions when safe

- Remain alert to fear, coercion, or control

Where fear or intimidation is evident, counselling directions must shift accordingly (Louw, 2016).

### **Creating Safety in the Counselling Space**

Safety is the foundation for effective counselling. Without safety, couples perform rather than speak honestly.

Pastoral safety includes:

- Emotional safety – freedom to speak without humiliation

- Spiritual safety – absence of coercive or threatening theology

- Physical safety – absence of fear or intimidation

Pastors create safety by:

Speaking calmly and respectfully

Avoiding judgement, sarcasm, or moralising

Explaining confidentiality clearly

Establishing rules for respectful conversation

Couples must feel confident that their counselling will not expose them to public shame, spiritual pressure, or retaliation.

### **Confidentiality at Intake**

Confidentiality must be explained clearly in the first session. Pastors should outline:

What confidentiality means

When confidentiality must be broken for safety

That information will not be shared without consent.

In communal church settings, this clarity is essential. Without it, couples withhold critical information, particularly regarding abuse, addiction, infidelity, or emotional distress (Magezi, 2019).

## **Listening Before Teaching**

Pastors are trained to teach truth. Counselling requires a different posture. Intake demands listening before instruction.

Common intake errors include:

- Quoting Scripture prematurely

- Offering advice before understanding context

- Correcting behaviour too early

- Turning the session into a sermon

Early teaching often shuts down honesty. Understanding must precede guidance.

## **Managing Blame and Escalation**

Blame is common in early counselling sessions. Each partner often arrives with a catalogue of offences. The pastor's role is not to determine who is right but to prevent the session from becoming adversarial.

Helpful pastoral strategies include:

- Redirecting accusations toward personal experience

- Encouraging each partner to speak for themselves

- Slowing emotional escalation

Naming interaction patterns rather than assigning  
blame

This approach reduces defensiveness and opens space  
for reflection (Osmer, 2008).

### Clarifying the Purpose of Counselling

Before concluding the intake session, pastors should  
explain:

- What counselling involves

- What counselling cannot promise

- The pastor's role and limits

- Expectations for future sessions

Clear explanation protects both the couple and the  
pastor from confusion, dependency, or unrealistic hope.

### Setting the Tone for the Counselling Journey

Couples may leave the first session without solutions.

However, they should leave with:

- Clarity

- Dignity

- Realistic hope

- Clear next steps

A well-handled intake communicates that healing is possible, but it will not be rushed or imposed.

#### Pastoral Reflection Questions

Do couples feel safe with me?

Do I listen more than I teach in early sessions?

Am I alert to fear and power imbalance?

Do I rush reconciliation prematurely?

#### **Chapter Summary**

Intake and first contact are not about fixing marriages. They are about creating a safe environment where truth can emerge. Pastors who listen carefully, observe wisely, and establish clear expectations lay a strong foundation for ethical and effective counselling.

The next chapter moves from first contact to systemic assessment, introducing the family genogram as a tool for understanding what lies beneath marital symptoms.

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## CHAPTER SIX

# Family Genogram: A Systemic Tool for Pastoral Assessment

### **Why Pastors Must Look Beyond Symptoms**

Couples often come to pastoral counselling presenting urgent and visible problems—conflict, silence, infidelity, anger, withdrawal, or financial tension. Pastors may feel pressure to address these concerns immediately through advice, prayer, or Scripture. Although these responses are well-intentioned, they often transpire prematurely.

Research and pastoral experience confirm that most harm in counselling occurs before proper assessment (Doehring, 2015). Symptoms are rarely the core problem; they are expressions of deeper relational and emotional patterns shaped over time. Treating symptoms without understanding their origins leads to repetitive, ineffective counselling.

The family genogram offers pastors a disciplined method for moving beyond surface experiences toward systemic

understanding. It shifts counselling from reactive problem-solving to informed discernment.

### **What Is a Family Genogram?**

A family genogram is a visual, multigenerational map that records family structure, emotional relationships, and repeating patterns across at least three generations. Unlike a family tree, which documents lineage, a genogram captures relational dynamics—closeness, conflict, emotional cut-off, triangulation, trauma, loss, and coping styles (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008).

For pastors, the genogram is not a diagnostic instrument. It is a pastoral lens that helps situate a marriage within a wider emotional, cultural, and spiritual system. By externalising patterns, genograms reduce blame and increase insight.

### **Theological and Systemic Foundations**

The genogram is grounded in systems thinking, which views the family as an emotional unit rather than a collection of isolated individuals. Scripture repeatedly acknowledges intergenerational influence:

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes,  
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

— *Jeremiah 31:29*

While Scripture rejects fatalism, it clearly recognises the transmission of patterns across generations—faith practices, fear responses, silence, violence, loyalty conflicts, and coping strategies.

Genograms align strongly with Bowen Family Systems Theory, particularly concepts such as:

- Multigenerational transmission of anxiety

- Differentiation of self

- Triangulation

- Emotional cut-off

These concepts resonate deeply with African extended family systems, where loyalty, hierarchy, and interdependence are culturally embedded (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

## **Why Genograms Are Especially Valuable in Pastoral Counselling**

Genograms help pastors to:

- Shift from blame to understanding

- Reduce moral panic

- Slow premature intervention

- Recognise repeating marital patterns

- Understand why certain conflicts feel emotionally “loaded”

- Discern what change is possible and what is entrenched

They also protect pastors from spiritualising behaviours that are actually learned, inherited, or systemically reinforced.

Within GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, genograms are particularly useful in identifying how expectation–experience gaps are formed across generations and how these gaps activate emotional threat in present relationships (Adetunji, 2025).

## **Core Elements Pastors Should Map**

A pastoral genogram should be simple, respectful, and consent-based. Key domains include:

### **1. Structural Information**

- Marriages, separations, divorces
- Polygamous or blended family structures
- Children (biological, adopted, fostered)
- Deaths, miscarriages, major losses
- Migration or displacement

### **2. Relational Patterns**

- Chronic conflict
- Emotional cut-off
- Enmeshment
- Alliances and triangulation
- Repeated marital breakdowns

### **3. Functional and Life-Stress Data**

- Mental health challenges
- Substance use
- Violence or abuse
- Chronic illness or disability

Imprisonment or legal conflict

Significant trauma

These elements help pastors see how present struggles may be echoes of earlier family experiences rather than isolated failures.

### **Cultural Sensitivity in African Contexts**

In African settings, genograms must be used with cultural humility. Extended families, elders, polygamy, remarriage, silence around trauma, and spiritual interpretations of suffering require careful handling.

The genogram is not an exposure tool. It is a meaning-making tool. Pastors must approach it with curiosity rather than judgement and with consent rather than interrogation (Magezi, 2019).

#### **Genogram Questions for Systemic Pastoral Assessment**

The following questions help move counselling from symptoms to systems.

#### **A. Structural and Family History**

Who was married to whom across generations?

Were there repeated divorces or separations?

Who raised you during childhood?

Were there early deaths or major losses?

Who holds authority in the extended family?

### **B. Marriage and Conflict Patterns**

How were conflicts handled in your family of origin?

What happened when marriages struggled?

Who was protected, and who endured?

What patterns do you see repeating in your marriage?

### **C. Emotional Expression and Silence**

How were emotions expressed or suppressed?

Was anger feared, punished, or normalised?

How was silence used?

What emotions feel unsafe to express now?

### **D. Power, Gender, and Authority**

Who made decisions in your family growing up?

How were masculinity and femininity defined?

What happened when roles were challenged?

How does power operate in your marriage today?

### **E. Trauma, Loss, and Unspoken Stories**

Were there events kept secret?

Who suffered quietly?

Were there experiences of violence or humiliation?

How did the family cope—or fail to cope?

#### **F. Faith and Spiritual Patterns**

How was God portrayed in your family?

How was Scripture used during conflict?

Was faith comfort or control?

What spiritual patterns repeat in your marriage?

#### **G. Differentiation and Boundaries**

How easy is it to disagree with family members?

What happens when you say “no”?

Do you feel torn between your spouse and family of origin?

Where do you feel emotionally stuck between generations?

#### **Using Genogram Insights Pastoral-Wisely**

Genogram insights should lead to:

Clearer assessment

Realistic counselling goals

Safer intervention choices

Reduced blame

Increased compassion

They help pastors answer critical questions:

Is this conflict situational or generational?

Is resistance driven by fear or loyalty?

Is the marriage carrying unresolved family anxiety?

Is counselling aiming for repair, regulation, or discernment?

### **Ethical Use of Genograms**

Ethical pastoral use requires:

Informed consent

Respect for confidentiality

Avoidance of blame

Emotional pacing

Readiness to pause or refer

Genograms are powerful tools. Used without care, they overwhelm. Used wisely, they illuminate (McGoldrick et al., 2008).

### **Chapter Summary**

The family genogram enables pastors to view marriages systemically rather than symptomatically. Generational patterns, emotional inheritance, and relational loyalties shape present struggles. When used ethically, genograms transform pastoral counselling from reactive advice-giving to informed, compassionate shepherding.

The next chapter moves from mapping patterns to careful assessment, asking: *What is really going on beneath the surface?*

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Assessment – What Is Really Going On?

### **Why Pastors Must Learn to Slow Down**

After the first counselling session, couples often press for immediate answers: *“Pastor, what should we do?”* *“Who is wrong?”* *“Can this marriage still work?”* The pressure to respond quickly is intense. Pastors want to offer clarity, comfort, and direction.

Yet many counselling failures occur not because pastors lack wisdom, but because intervention precedes understanding. Assessment is the disciplined practice of slowing down to see clearly. It requires patience, curiosity, and restraint. Without assessment, counselling becomes reactive, inconsistent, and sometimes harmful. Assessment is not delayed. It is discernment.

### **Assessment Is Not Interrogation**

Pastoral assessment is not an investigation or cross-examination. It is careful, compassionate listening guided

by curiosity rather than suspicion. The goal is not to expose secrets but to understand patterns, meanings, emotional realities, and relational dynamics within the marriage.

Effective assessment helps pastors to:

- Avoid premature judgement.

- Resist taking sides

- Separate symptoms from root causes

- Identify risk and danger early

- Offer guidance that fits the real problem

Within GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, marital distress often develops when partners experience a widening gap between expectation and lived experience. These gaps generate emotional threats, which activate defensive or protective behaviours within the marital system (Adetunji, 2025).

### **From Symptoms to Patterns**

Couples usually present with surface problems—frequent arguments, sexual dissatisfaction, financial

conflict, interference from in-laws, or communication breakdown. We must take these real concerns seriously. However, surface problems are often symptoms rather than causes. Beneath them may lie:

- Unmet emotional needs
- Chronic disappointment
- Fear of abandonment or failure
- Loss of trust
- Power imbalance
- Accumulated resentment

Assessment seeks to move beyond isolated incidents to identify repeated interaction patterns over time. How conflicts begin, escalate, and end is often more revealing than the content of the argument itself (Johnson, 2019).

### **Patterns Over Incidents**

Couples frequently focus on the most recent disagreement. Assessment listens for repetition rather than drama. Common destructive patterns include:

- One partner pursuing while the other withdraws
- Escalation followed by prolonged silence

Cycles of accusation and defensiveness

Emotional shutdown after conflict

Research in couple therapy consistently shows that repeated interaction patterns are stronger predictors of marital distress than single events. Helping couples see patterns reduces blame and increases insight (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

### **Pattern-Focused Assessment Questions**

Pastors may gently guide couples toward pattern awareness by asking:

“What usually happens just before your arguments begin?”

“When conflict arises, who tends to speak more and who withdraws?”

“How do disagreements typically end?”

“What happens emotionally after the conflict?”

Such questions invite reflection rather than accusation.

### **Communication and Emotional Expression**

Many African couples were not socialised to express their emotions openly. Silence may be taught as respect. Anger

may be learned as authority. Assessment must therefore explore how partners express hurt, disappointment, and vulnerability.

Pastors should observe whether:

Silence protects peace or enforces punishment.

Anger expresses pain or asserts control.

Humour masks emotional injury.

Faith language avoids emotional responsibility.

Long-term emotional withdrawal can be as damaging as open hostility. It often produces deep loneliness within marriage (Doehring, 2015).

### **Unmet Expectations and Meaning Gaps**

Marital conflict frequently reflects unmet expectations related to affection, sexual intimacy, finances, parenting, respect, or appreciation. Many expectations remain unspoken or are shaped by family-of-origin and cultural norms.

When expectations are unmet, partners often experience disappointment as personal rejection. According to GAP-MCT, distress intensifies when unmet expectations are

interpreted as a lack of love, respect, or commitment, rather than as relational misalignment (Adetunji, 2025). Assessment must therefore explore expectations carefully rather than assuming bad intention.

### **Expectation-Focused Questions**

Helpful questions include:

“What did you expect marriage to be like that it is not?”

“What do you feel you gave that is not recognised?”

“What do you believe your spouse expects from you?”

These questions shift the focus from blame to meaning.

### **Family-of-Origin Influence**

Every marriage is shaped by early family experience. How conflict is handled in childhood often informs adult marital behaviour. Some partners repeat familiar patterns unconsciously; others react strongly against them.

Assessment should explore:

How parents handled disagreement

Emotional availability in childhood

Models of gender and authority

Expectations around loyalty and obedience

Understanding family-of-origin influence allows pastors to view behaviour as a learned response rather than deliberate harm (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

### **Power, Control, and Fear**

Assessment must attend carefully to power dynamics. Pastors should notice who controls finances, who makes decisions, who defines what is “spiritual”, and who appears fearful or silent.

Fear is never a normal feature of a healthy marriage. When one partner feels afraid to speak honestly, safety has already been compromised. Such situations require heightened ethical vigilance and possible referral, as outlined in Chapter Three.

### **Power and Safety Screening Questions**

Pastors may ask sensitively:

“Do you ever feel afraid to express your thoughts in this marriage?”

“What happens when you strongly disagree?”

“Have you ever felt emotionally or physically unsafe?”

The presence of fear must never be minimised or spiritualised.

### **Spiritual Language and Emotional Reality**

Not all marital struggles are spiritual in origin, though all carry spiritual meaning. Assessment helps pastors recognise when faith language strengthens responsibility and when they avoid it.

A healthy assessment honours faith without permitting a spiritual bypass. Prayer should support truth and accountability, not replace them (Louw, 2016).

### **Recognising When Referral Is Necessary**

Assessments must always screen for conditions beyond the safe scope of pastoral counselling, including:

- Physical or sexual violence

- Severe emotional abuse

- Active substance addiction

- Serious mental illness

- Suicidal ideation or behaviour

When these are present, counselling must shift toward protection and referrals in accordance with the ethical guidelines discussed earlier.

### **Common Assessment Errors to Avoid**

Pastors should guard against:

- Rushing to spiritual conclusions

- Assuming culture justifies harm

- Over-identifying with one spouse

- Ignoring their own emotional reactions

Assessment requires humility, patience, and courage.

### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

- Do I allow enough time to understand before advising?

- Do I listen for patterns rather than isolated incidents?

- Am I attentive to fear and power imbalance?

- Do couples feel understood rather than judged?

### **Chapter Summary**

Assessment is the foundation for effective pastoral marriage counselling. It transforms confusion into clarity and blame into understanding. By identifying patterns,

expectations, emotional wounds, and power dynamics, pastors create a responsible pathway toward change.

The next chapter moves from understanding to direction, examining how counselling goals are set so that change is intentional, realistic, and shared.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Setting Counselling Goals with the Couple

### **From Confusion to Direction**

Couples have already laid important groundwork when they reach the goal-setting stage of counselling. Stories have been heard, emotions named, patterns identified, and risks assessed. Yet without clear goals, counselling can drift into a series of meaningful conversations that do not lead to sustained change.

Many couples enter counselling feeling overwhelmed. They know something is wrong but struggle to define what improvement would look like. Others arrive with fixed demands such as, *“I want him to change,” “I want her to apologise,” “I want peace at all costs,”* or *“I want to leave.”* At this point, pastoral counselling must help couples move from emotional confusion to intentional direction.

Goal setting marks the transition from understanding what is happening to deciding what will be worked on.

### **Why Goal Setting Matters in Pastoral Counselling**

Clear goals add structure and moral clarity to the counselling process. They serve several essential functions:

They give direction to the counselling journey.

They create shared focus and accountability.

They prevent manipulation or endless crisis management.

They allow progress to be reviewed and evaluated.

Without goals, counselling reacts to the most recent conflict. With goals, counselling becomes purposeful and hopeful (Osmer, 2008).

Within GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, goals help reduce relational gaps by gradually aligning expectations, responsibilities, and behaviours between partners (Adetunji, 2025).

### **Pastoral Desires Versus Counselling Goals**

Pastors often bring unspoken hopes into counselling—reconciliation, peace, or marital preservation. These desires are understandable and often rooted in compassion and theology.

However, pastoral hopes must never replace the couple's reality or compromise safety. Ethical counselling clearly distinguishes between:

- What the pastor hopes for

- What the couple is willing and able to work on

- What the situation realistically allows

Goals must be developed with the couple, not for the couple. Imposed goals often create resistance or silence (Doehring, 2015).

### **Common Unhelpful Goals Couples Bring**

Couples frequently propose goals that sound positive but are ineffective. These include goals that are:

- Vague – “We want peace.”

- One-sided – “I want her to change.”

Unrealistic – “We want things to go back to how they were.”

Avoidant – “We just want the fighting to stop.”

Stopping conflict without understanding it often results in silence rather than healing. Pastors must help couples move beyond avoidance toward meaningful change.

### **Helping Couples Clarify What They Truly Want**

Effective goal setting begins with clarification, not correction. Pastors can guide reflection through questions such as:

“What would be different if counselling was helpful?”

“What change would you hope to see first?”

“What are you personally willing to work on?”

“What would improvement look like in three months?”

These questions shift focus from blame to responsibility and agency.

### **Restoration, Repair, or Regulation**

Not all couples are ready for the same kind of work. Pastors must discern the immediate focus of counselling, which may be:

Restoration – rebuilding trust and emotional closeness

Repair – addressing specific injuries or betrayals

Regulation – reducing conflict intensity and emotional harm

Discernment – clarifying decisions about the future

For couples with long histories of pain or instability, regulation often precedes restoration. Scripture affirms patient and orderly healing rather than rushed reconciliation.

### **Short-Term and Long-Term Goals**

Pastoral counselling is most effective when goals are layered.

Short-term goals may include:

Reducing hostile communication

Establishing respectful boundaries

Creating emotional safety

Stopping harmful behaviours

Long-term goals may include:

Rebuilding trust

Deepening emotional connection

Clarifying roles and expectations

Strengthening spiritual partnership

Couples often desire deep change immediately. Pastors must help them value steady, sustainable progress.

Shared Goals and Individual Goals

Healthy counselling includes both shared and individual goals.

Examples:

Shared goal: “We will discuss disagreements without shouting or withdrawing.”

Individual goal: “I will express my needs without threats or silence.”

This balance prevents counselling from becoming a place where responsibility is shifted to one partner.

### **Goal-Setting Questions for Pastors**

Pastors may guide couples using questions such as:

“What is one change each of you could make to reduce tension?”

“What would make this counselling worthwhile for you personally?”

“What behaviour are you willing to change, even if your spouse does not?”

“What does a respectful disagreement look like to you?”

These questions encourage humility, accountability, and collaboration.

### **When Couples Have Competing Goals**

Sometimes partners want different outcomes. One may seek reconciliation while the other seeks clarity, distance, or support in decision-making. Such an outcome does not mean counselling has failed.

In such cases, counselling may focus on:

- Understanding differences

- Reducing emotional harm

- Supporting honest discernment

- Preventing coercion

Forced alignment often produces withdrawal or resentment.

### **Safety as a Non-Negotiable Goal**

Where fear, intimidation, or violence has been present, safety becomes the primary goal. In such cases, counselling should prioritise protection over reconciliation. Ethical principles governing safety and referral, outlined earlier, must guide goal formation.

No spiritual or relational goal overrides safety.

### **Integrating Faith into Goal Setting**

Faith can enrich goal setting when integrated responsibly. Faith-aligned goals should support accountability rather than avoidance.

Helpful faith-based goals include:

- Practising honesty before God and each other

- Developing humility and repentance

- Growing in patience and self-control

- Aligning behaviour with professed beliefs

Spiritual goals must reinforce relational responsibility, not bypass it (Louw, 2016).

### **Documenting and Reviewing Goals**

Agreed goals should be summarised clearly, whether verbally or in writing. Documentation provides clarity and a reference point for evaluating progress. Goals should be reviewed periodically and adjusted as understanding deepens.

### **When Goal Setting Reveals the Limits of Counselling**

Sometimes goal discussions reveal serious limitations—refusal to change, persistent fear, incompatible expectations, or external conditions such as addiction or severe illness. In such cases, pastoral work may shift toward containment, referral, or decision support rather than restoration.

Knowing when to change direction is a mark of pastoral wisdom.

### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

Do I impose my preferred outcome on couples?

Do I prioritise safety over reconciliation?

Do I help couples set realistic goals?

Do I review and adjust goals responsibly?

**Chapter Summary**

Setting counselling goals transforms pastoral conversations into purposeful journeys. Clear, shared, and realistic goals help couples move from confusion to intention, from blame to responsibility, and from chaos to direction.

The next chapter addresses communication, silence, and emotional distance, examining how couples lose connection even in the absence of open conflict.

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## PART THREE: COMMON ISSUES

## CHAPTER NINE

# Communication, Silence, and Emotional Distance

**When couples say, "We don't fight," they often mean that they are not emotionally close.**

One of the most common concerns pastors hear is not loud conflict but quiet distance. Couples sit together and say, *"We don't fight,"* yet avoid eye contact. Their bodies turn away from each other. Their voices sound flat or restrained. To an untrained observer, the marriage may appear peaceful. To a discerning pastor, it signals emotional disconnection.

In many African marriages, silence is often praised as maturity. Couples are admired for *"keeping the peace"*, *"avoiding trouble"*, or *"maintaining privacy"*. However, silence does not necessarily indicate peace. More often, it reflects emotional withdrawal. Over time, withdrawal breeds loneliness, resentment, and quiet despair.

Communication is not merely the exchange of words. It is the sharing of meaning, emotion, and presence. When communication weakens, emotional distance grows—even when the marriage remains outwardly intact.

#### Why Communication Is So Difficult in African Marriages

Communication difficulties in African marriages are usually caused by factors other than intelligence or vocabulary. They are shaped by upbringing, power structures, fear, and socialisation.

Many men are taught that vulnerability signals weakness. Many women are taught that speaking openly leads to punishment, disrespect, or instability. Silence becomes a survival strategy. Authority replaces dialogue. Anger may feel safer than openness.

Research consistently shows that emotional suppression and withdrawal damage marriages more deeply than open disagreement (Gottman & Silver, 2015; Johnson, 2019). Pastors must therefore listen not only to what is said but also to what remains unspoken.

## **Silence as a Form of Communication**

Silence always communicates something. It may express:

- Fear of conflict
- Desire to punish
- Emotional exhaustion
- Loss of hope
- Learned submission

In counselling sessions, one partner may speak freely while the other remains quiet. Silence should never be assumed to mean agreement. It often reflects power imbalance rather than peace.

Within GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, silence commonly emerges when relational gaps feel too painful or risky to address. Withdrawal becomes a protective response against rejection, escalation, or emotional harm (Adetunji, 2025).

Scripture Reflection Box 9.1

*“Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life;  
He who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.”*

— Proverbs 13:3

Pastoral reflection:

This verse is often used to justify silence. Scripture, however, also warns against hardened hearts, deceit, and avoidance of truth. Wisdom is not silence at all costs. It is speech shaped by love, timing, and purpose. Silence that protects fear rather than truth weakens intimacy.

### **The Pursue–Withdraw Cycle**

One of the most destructive communication patterns in marriage is the pursue–withdraw cycle. One partner seeks engagement through questions, complaints, or emotional expression. The other responds with silence, avoidance, or emotional shutdown. The more one pursues, the more the other withdraws.

In African marriages, this cycle often appears as:

One partner *“talking too much”*

The other *“shutting down”*

One labelled disrespectful

The other labelled uncaring

These labels obscure the deeper reality. Both partners are responding to fear—one fears abandonment, the

other fears conflict or failure (Johnson, 2019). Without intervention, this cycle hardens into emotional distance.

### **When Anger Replaces Vulnerability**

In many marriages, anger feels safer than sadness. Shouting feels safer than crying. Accusation feels safer than admitting pain. This pattern is common where vulnerability has been punished, ignored, or mocked.

Pastors must recognise that anger often conceals fear, shame, or grief. Addressing anger without exploring vulnerability treats the symptom rather than the wound (Louw, 2016).

### **Scripture Reflection Box 9.2**

*“Be angry and do not sin;*

*Do not let the sun go down on your anger.”*

— Ephesians 4:26

Pastoral reflection:

Scripture acknowledges anger without endorsing harm. The issue is not emotion, but how emotion is managed. Suppressed anger damages intimacy. Uncontrolled anger destroys trust.

### **Gendered Communication Expectations**

Communication difficulties often intensify because of gendered expectations. Men may associate respect with silence and compliance. Women may associate closeness with conversation and emotional sharing. When these expectations collide, both partners feel misunderstood. Pastors must avoid reinforcing stereotypes. Counselling should help couples learn each other's emotional language rather than declaring one style superior. Marital satisfaction increases when partners feel emotionally heard, not merely obeyed or tolerated (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

### **Faith Language as Communication Avoidance**

In church contexts, faith language sometimes replaces honest dialogue. Couples may say:

“Let us just pray about it.”

“God will change him.”

“I have forgiven, so I don't talk about it.”

Prayer and forgiveness are essential, but they must not be used to avoid conversation. Forgiveness does not

eliminate the need for dialogue. Prayer does not replace responsibility. Faith that avoids truth weakens relationships (Doehring, 2015).

Scripture Reflection Box 9.3

*“Speaking the truth in love,  
We are to grow up in every way.”*

— Ephesians 4:15

Pastoral reflection:

Truth without love wounds. Love without truth deceives.  
Healthy marital communication requires both.

### **Helping Couples Relearn How to Talk**

Many couples do not lack love; they lack skills. Pastors can teach simple communication practices, including:

Pastors can instruct couples on how to speak from personal experience, utilising the "I feel" approach.

Listening without interruption

Reflecting back what was heard

Avoiding extreme language such as *“always”* and *“never”*

Though initially awkward, these practices gradually rebuild emotional safety.

### **Sample Pastoral Questions for Emotional Distance**

Pastors may ask:

“When did you stop sharing freely with each other?”

“What do you fear would happen if you spoke honestly?”

“What does silence protect you from?”

“What do you miss about how you used to communicate?”

These questions invite insight rather than blame.

### **When Silence Signals Hopelessness**

In some marriages, silence no longer protects peace. It signals resignation. Partners stop speaking because they believe nothing will change. This form of withdrawal reflects loss of hope rather than conflict.

Pastors must treat hopeless silence as a serious concern rather than a sign of maturity.

Communication and Safety

Open communication is not always safe. Where fear, intimidation, or violence exists, encouraging open dialogue without safety planning can increase harm. In such cases, communication strategies must be adapted in line with ethical safeguards already established.

### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

Do I confuse silence with peace?

Do I encourage communication without checking safety?

Do I spiritualise avoidance?

Do couples feel heard when they speak with me?

### **Chapter Summary**

Communication struggles in African marriages are rarely about words alone. They are shaped by fear, power, unmet needs, and learned survival strategies. Silence may preserve appearances, but it slowly erodes intimacy. Faithful pastoral counselling helps couples speak honestly, listen carefully, and reconnect emotionally.

The next chapter examines infidelity, polygamy, and sexual conflict—areas where silence, shame, and power collide with deep moral and relational pain.

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## CHAPTER TEN

# Infidelity, Polygamy, and Sexual Conflict

### **Why Sexual Betrayal Cuts So Deep**

Few experiences wound a marriage as deeply as sexual betrayal. When infidelity is uncovered, trust fractures, personal identity is shaken, and the meaning of the marital covenant is threatened. In African church contexts, this pain is often intensified by shame, silence, and pressure to endure quietly for the sake of family or church reputation.

Pastors frequently encounter couples only after betrayal has been exposed. Emotions are intense and uneven. One partner may be devastated and disoriented, while the other may appear defensive, ashamed, minimised, or spiritually evasive. Extended family members may already be involved, and the fear of public embarrassment often complicates the counselling process.

At this stage, pastoral response is critical. Poor handling can deepen trauma. Wise handling creates space for truth, accountability, and healing—whether reconciliation eventually occurs or not.

### **Understanding Infidelity Beyond the Act**

Infidelity is often treated as a single moral failure. While it is a moral violation, it rarely occurs in isolation. Infidelity usually develops gradually through weakened boundaries, emotional disconnection, secrecy, and opportunity.

Forms of infidelity include:

- Sexual affairs

- Emotional affairs

- Online or digital intimacy

- Repeated boundary violations

Recognising these paths does not excuse betrayal. Rather, it enables pastoral responses that address both responsibility and relational reality. From a systemic perspective, infidelity often emerges where emotional,

sexual, or relational needs remain unmet over time (Glass & Wright, 1997; Johnson, 2019).

Within GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, infidelity frequently appears when persistent expectation–experience gaps combine with emotional threat and avoidance. Seeking validation outside the marriage becomes a maladaptive attempt to restore worth or escape pain (Adetunji, 2025).

Scripture Reflection Box 10.1

*“The one who commits adultery lacks sense;  
Whoever does so destroys himself.”*

— Proverbs 6:32

Pastoral reflection:

Scripture treats adultery as both sinful and self-destructive. Pastoral care must therefore address moral responsibility while recognising the profound relational damage caused by betrayal.

## **Emotional and Sexual Infidelity**

Many couples struggle to define what constitutes infidelity. Pastors must help couples understand that betrayal is not limited to physical acts.

Emotional infidelity may involve:

- Secret emotional closeness

- Deep personal sharing outside the marriage

- Emotional prioritisation of another relationship

- Concealment and deception

For many spouses, emotional betrayal is as painful as sexual betrayal because it violates exclusivity and emotional safety. Research confirms that secrecy and emotional displacement are primary predictors of relational rupture (Glass & Wright, 1997).

### **Immediate Pastoral Priorities After Disclosure**

When infidelity is disclosed, pastoral priorities must be clear and disciplined:

- Stabilisation – containing emotional overwhelm

- Containment – preventing escalation, retaliation, or violence

Truthfulness – resisting denial, minimisation, or blame-shifting

Protection – safeguarding emotional and physical well-being

Rushing couples toward forgiveness or reconciliation without safety and accountability often retraumatizes the wounded partner and undermines trust (Herman, 2015).

### **Scripture Reflection Box 10.2**

*"A person's heart holds deep purposes, but only one with insight can uncover them."*

*but one who has insight draws them out."*

— Proverbs 20:5

Pastoral reflection:

Healing after betrayal requires patience, depth, and discernment. Quick spiritual answers often silence pain rather than heal it.

### **Forgiveness and Reconciliation Are Not the Same**

A common pastoral error is equating forgiveness with reconciliation. Scripture calls believers to forgive, but reconciliation requires more.

Reconciliation requires:

Genuine repentance

Accountability

Behavioural change

Time

Forgiveness is a spiritual posture. Reconciliation is a relational process. Pressuring reconciliation without repentance or safety often results in repeated harm (Worthington, 2013).

Scripture Reflection Box 10.3

*“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.”*

— Luke 17:3

**Pastoral reflection:**

Scripture links forgiveness to truth and repentance. Restoration follows responsibility, not denial.

**Polygamy in African Christian Marriages**

Polygamy remains a complex and sensitive issue in African churches. Some couples enter Christian marriage with polygamous histories. Others face cultural pressure

to normalise multiple partners as a solution to marital dissatisfaction or infertility.

While Scripture records polygamy descriptively, it does not present it prescriptively as the Christian ideal. New Testament teaching consistently affirms exclusivity, mutuality, and sacrificial love (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:25–33).

From a counselling perspective, polygamy frequently intensifies emotional neglect, sexual rivalry, power imbalances, and financial strain. Rather than resolving marital gaps, it typically widens them (Pruitt, 2008).

#### **Scripture Reflection Box 10.4**

*“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother  
and hold fast to his wife,  
and the two shall become one flesh.”*

— Genesis 2:24

#### **Pastoral reflection:**

The language of *two becoming one* highlights unity and exclusivity. Pastoral teaching must remain anchored in

this vision while engaging cultural realities with humility and wisdom.

### **Sexual Conflict Within Marriage**

In church contexts, shame and silence often conceal sexual conflict, despite its significant contribution to resentment, infidelity, and emotional distance.

Common struggles include:

- Differences in sexual desire

- Sexual refusal or obligation

- Using sex as control or reward

- Changes after childbirth

- Health-related sexual challenges

Sexual conflict must be addressed without coercion, entitlement, or moral shaming. Scripture emphasises mutual care rather than sexual demand (1 Corinthians 7:3–5).

### **Scripture Reflection Box 10.5**

*“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.”*

— 1 Corinthians 7:3

Pastoral reflection:

This passage teaches mutual responsibility, not entitlement. Consent, care, and sensitivity are central to biblical intimacy.

When Sex Becomes a Weapon

Sex becomes destructive when it is:

- Withheld as punishment

- Demanded through pressure

- Used to assert power

- Detached from emotional connection

Pastors must name these patterns clearly. Sexual intimacy cannot flourish where fear, coercion, or resentment dominates (Cloud & Townsend, 2008).

Infidelity, Shame, and Church Culture

Church culture can intensify shame surrounding sexual failure, particularly for women. Pastors must guard against:

- Public shaming

- Gender-biased discipline

- Minimising male infidelity

### Silencing wounded spouses

Scripture confronts sin while protecting dignity. Pastoral care must do both.

#### **When Reconciliation Is Not Possible**

Not all marriages recover from sexual betrayal. Persistent deception, refusal to repent, repeated violations, or serious safety concerns may make reconciliation unwise or impossible.

In such cases, pastoral faithfulness involves walking with couples through discernment rather than forcing outcomes. Supporting separation for the sake of safety or dignity is not a failure of faith (Herman, 2015).

#### **Scripture Reflection Box 10.6**

*“God has called us to live in peace.”*

— 1 Corinthians 7:15

Pastoral reflection:

Peace does not always mean remaining together at all costs. Sometimes peace requires distance from harm.

#### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

Do I rush forgiveness without accountability?

Do I minimise my sexual pain because of shame?

Do I apply Scripture equally to men and women?

Do I protect the vulnerable when sexual power is abused?

### **Chapter Summary**

Infidelity, polygamy, and sexual conflict fundamentally undermine trust, identity, and covenant. Pastoral counselling must address these realities with honesty, patience, accountability, and compassion. Scripture provides moral clarity, but healing requires time, safety, and a disciplined process.

The next chapter turns to money, power, and provider stress—forces that profoundly shape identity, respect, and control in African marriages.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Money, Power, and Provider Stress

**The topic of money is never solely about financial figures.**

In pastoral marriage counselling, money often appears as a practical issue—low income, unpaid bills, debt, or competing financial demands. However, conflicts about money rarely start with numerical issues. It usually begins with meaning, identity, power, and fear.

In many African marriages, money means far more than currency. It represents provision, respect, authority, security, sacrifice, loyalty, and love. When finances are strained, hidden, or contested, identity feels threatened and power becomes unstable. Couples are not merely arguing about spending; they are struggling over dignity, control, and worth.

Pastors who treat financial conflict as a budgeting problem alone often miss the deeper emotional wounds

driving it. Effective pastoral counselling must therefore listen beneath the financial complaints to the meanings they carry.

### **Provider Identity and Masculinity**

In many African cultural contexts, men are socialised to equate provision with manhood and marital legitimacy. Employment, income level, and visible provision become measures of masculine success. When a man loses employment, earns less than expected, becomes ill, or faces prolonged economic hardship, the impact extends beyond finances. His sense of identity may fracture.

When provider identity feels threatened, men may respond by withdrawing emotionally, becoming irritable, attempting to control limited resources, or avoiding conversations about money. Women, in turn, may experience anxiety, resentment, fear, or increased pressure—especially when children's needs and extended family obligations remain constant.

From a systemic perspective, financial stress becomes relationally toxic when shame replaces dialogue. Within

GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, financial distress often activates expectation-experience gaps related to respect, responsibility, and partnership, generating emotional threats and defensive behaviour (Adetunji, 2025).

### **Scripture Reflection Box 11.1**

*“Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their household, has denied the faith.”*

— 1 Timothy 5:8

Pastoral reflection:

This verse is frequently used to condemn rather than clarify. Pastoral wisdom requires distinguishing unwillingness from inability. Scripture affirms responsibility, not humiliation. Provision includes honesty, emotional presence, and shared stewardship— not income alone.

### **Money as Power and Control**

Financial conflict becomes harmful when money is used as a tool of power rather than stewardship. This may occur when:

One partner controls all income.

Financial decisions are made unilaterally.

Money is withheld as punishment.

Spending is monitored to enforce obedience.

Access to resources is restricted.

When money functions as control, emotional safety erodes and fear increases. Research recognises financial control as a significant form of intimate partner abuse, even in the absence of physical violence (Postmus et al., 2012).

Pastors must therefore recognise that financial abuse is real, harmful, and spiritually corrosive. Earlier chapters on safety and abuse more fully address the ethical implications and protective responses related to power and control.

### **Female Economic Empowerment and Marital Tension**

As more African women enter employment, business, and professional life, marital power dynamics often shift. These shifts can strengthen families, but they can also create tension where roles were previously rigid.

Some men experience their partner's financial success as a loss of authority, public embarrassment, or a threat to their leadership identity. Some women feel pressure to carry financial responsibility while remaining silent about their contribution to preserve peace.

Pastoral counselling must normalise role negotiation. Authority in marriage should never be equated solely with income. Biblical partnership emphasises mutual contributions rather than hierarchy (Ephesians 5:21).

### **Scripture Reflection Box 11.2**

*“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour.”— Ecclesiastes 4:9*

Pastoral reflection:

Scripture affirms cooperation rather than dominance. Financial contribution in marriage is shared stewardship, not a measure of control or worth.

### **Extended Family Obligations and Financial Strain**

In many African marriages, financial responsibility extends beyond the nuclear family. Couples may support parents, siblings, school fees, medical care, or community

needs. Culture values generosity, yet it frequently leads to marital conflict.

Tension increases when:

- Financial obligations are not discussed openly.

- A partner feels exploited or marginalised.

- Loyalty conflicts develop between spouse and family.

- Boundaries remain unclear or repeatedly violated

Pastors must help couples distinguish generosity from harm. Honour encourages openness, and respect strengthens the marital bond.

### **Financial Secrecy and Betrayal**

Hidden debts, secret bank accounts, undisclosed loans, or concealed spending frequently feel like betrayal. Financial secrecy damages trust in ways similar to sexual infidelity.

Research shows that secrecy, rather than financial hardship itself, often causes the deepest relational injury (Gudmunson & Danes, 2011). Pastoral counselling must therefore treat secrecy as a relational wound, not merely a financial mistake.

## Pastoral Financial Assessment Tool 11.1

### **Financial Climate Snapshot**

Pastors may guide couples through a brief reflective exercise. Partners may answer privately before sharing where it feels safe.

How safe do you feel discussing money with your spouse?

(Very safe; somewhat safe; not safe)

Do you feel like your financial contribution is recognised?

Are there any financial matters you feel uncomfortable discussing?

Do you feel controlled or powerless around money?

Patterns in responses often reveal fear, imbalance, or control more clearly than numbers.

## **Pastoral Financial Assessment Tool 11.2**

### **Money Meaning Mapping**

Invite each partner to complete this sentence aloud:

*“Money in this marriage represents \_\_\_\_\_ to me.”*

Common responses include security, respect, control, freedom, survival, or love. Differences in meaning—not income level—often drive conflict.

### **Budgeting Without Blame**

Pastors are not financial planners, yet a simple structure can reduce anxiety and conflict. Couples may be encouraged to:

- Commit to honesty and transparency

- Agree on shared financial priorities

- Separate needs from wants

- Establish clear boundaries for extended family support

The goal is not financial perfection. It is shared responsibility and reduced fear.

Scripture Reflection Box 11.3

*“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost?”*

— Luke 14:28

Pastoral reflection:

Scripture affirms planning. Financial structure is not lack of faith; it is wise stewardship.

### **When Financial Stress Hides Deeper Issues**

Money conflict often masks deeper relational struggles, including power battles, feeling unappreciated, emotional neglect, or fear of abandonment. Pastors must listen for emotional meaning beneath financial complaints. Treating money as the problem may provide temporary relief while leaving the deeper wound untouched.

### **When Financial Conflict Signals Danger**

In some marriages, financial conflict signals serious risk.

This may occur when:

- One partner is economically trapped.

- Access to money is restricted.

- Threats accompany financial disputes.

- Children's needs are neglected.

Such situations require ethical vigilance and a protective response consistent with pastoral safety principles and referral protocols.

### **Helping Couples Set Financial Goals**

Pastoral financial goals should be prioritised:

- Transparency

- Shared decision-making

- Fair recognition of contribution

- Healthy boundaries with extended family

- Reduction of fear and secrecy

Goals must be realistic and reviewed regularly as circumstances change.

### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

- Do I treat money conflict as purely practical?

- Am I alert to signs of financial abuse or control?

- Do I shame my partner or help stabilise their identity as a provider?

- Do couples feel safe discussing money honestly?

**Chapter Summary**

Identity, power, fear, and cultural expectations deeply connect to money-related conflict in African marriages. Pastoral counselling that addresses money without meaning leads to shallow solutions. When handled with wisdom, financial conversations can restore trust, dignity, and partnership.

The next chapter turns to in-laws, extended family, and cultural pressure—forces that often intensify both financial and emotional strain in marriage.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### In-Laws, Extended Family, and Cultural Pressure

**Marriage in many African contexts is not understood as a private bond between just two individuals.**

In many African contexts, marriage is not understood as a private bond between two individuals. It is a communal institution involving parents, siblings, elders, clans, and sometimes entire communities. Families contribute resources, claim moral authority, and feel entitled to participate in marital decisions long after the wedding ceremony.

This communal structure can provide stability, support, and accountability. However, it can also become a persistent source of strain when boundaries are unclear, loyalties are divided, or cultural expectations override marital unity. Pastors frequently encounter couples whose conflict does not originate primarily from communication breakdown or personality differences

but from sustained external pressure exerted by extended family systems.

Systemically, the marriage becomes overloaded. Competing allegiances pull the marriage apart, preventing it from functioning as a unified emotional unit. Over time, trust weakens, intimacy erodes, and conflict intensifies.

### **Why Boundaries Are So Difficult in African Marriages**

Boundaries are often misunderstood in African cultural settings. Setting limits is frequently interpreted as:

- Disrespect

- Ingratitude

- Pride

- Rejection of culture

- Foreign influence

As a result, couples often avoid boundary conversations to preserve peace. Interference is tolerated quietly. Financial demands are met without discussion. Decisions are deferred to elders even when they undermine marital

agreement. Resentment accumulates silently until conflict becomes emotionally charged and polarising.

Pastoral counselling must help couples understand that boundaries are not rejection; they are protection. Healthy boundaries clarify responsibility, reduce confusion, and preserve relationships rather than destroy them (Minuchin, 1974).

### **Biblical Balance: Leaving, Cleaving, and Honouring**

Scripture presents marriage as requiring both separation and continuity. The call to “leave” establishes a new primary loyalty, while the command to honour parents remains intact. Holding these truths together requires discernment rather than rigid application.

Leaving does not mean abandoning parents.

Cleaving does not mean isolating the couple.

Honouring parents does not mean surrendering marital authority.

Pastors must help couples resist false extremes—either total submission to family systems or total rejection of cultural ties. Biblical marriage establishes a new center of

emotional and moral responsibility while maintaining respectful connections.

### **Scripture Reflection Box 12.1**

*“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife.”*

— Genesis 2:24

Pastoral reflection:

Leaving signifies a shift in primary loyalty, not emotional abandonment. Marriage forms a new household that requires protection, unity, and decision-making authority to flourish.

### **Common Extended Family Stressors**

Pastors commonly encounter marital tension arising from:

- Financial demands from relatives
- Parental control over major decisions
- Living arrangements and privacy concerns
- Interference in parenting
- Criticism or humiliation of one spouse

Cultural pressure regarding fertility, gender roles, or inheritance

These pressures often intensify during life transitions such as childbirth, illness, unemployment, migration, or bereavement. Without guidance, couples may begin to align emotionally with their families of origin rather than with each other.

Within GAP Marriage Counselling Theory, such dynamics widen expectation–experience gaps around loyalty, protection, and partnership, increasing emotional threat within the marital system (Adetunji, 2025).

### **Triangulation: When Others Enter the Marriage**

Triangulation occurs when a third party is drawn into marital tension to reduce anxiety between spouses. This may involve parents, siblings, elders, pastors, or respected community figures. It often begins unintentionally when one partner seeks comfort or validation.

Common forms of triangulation include:

Reporting marital conflicts to parents

Seeking family support without spousal agreement

Allowing relatives to criticise one's spouse

Using elders or church leaders to pressure a partner

While triangulation may reduce short-term anxiety, it weakens marital trust and autonomy. Over time, the couple stops functioning as a unified system and becomes emotionally dependent on external regulation (Bowen, 1978).

### **Boundary-Setting as a Skill, Not a Fight**

Many couples avoid boundaries because they associate them with confrontation, rebellion, or hostility. In reality, healthy boundaries are calm, respectful, and consistent. They do not require anger or disrespect.

Pastoral counselling can help couples practice boundary language, such as:

Affirms respect

Clarifies responsibility

Protects marital unity

Reduces anxiety

Rehearsing such language in counselling sessions increases confidence and decreases fear.

Boundary-Setting Scripts for Couples

**Script 12.1 – Financial Requests from Extended Family**

*“We value supporting family, but we have agreed to discuss all financial commitments together first. We will let you know what we can responsibly do.”*

*Pastoral coaching note:*

The pastoral coaching note emphasises the importance of promoting generosity and safeguarding the process of joint decision-making.

**Script 12.2 – Parental Interference in Decisions**

*“We appreciate your advice. We will consider it together and decide what works best for our household.”*

*Pastoral coaching note:*

Shows respect without surrendering autonomy.

**Script 12.3 – Criticism of a Spouse**

*“I am not comfortable discussing my spouse negatively. If there is a concern, we prefer to address it together.”*

*Pastoral coaching note:*

Interrupts triangulation and protects marital unity.

#### **Script 12.4 – Pressure About Children or Fertility**

*“We understand your concern. This is sensitive for us, and we ask for patience and prayer as we walk this journey together.”*

*Pastoral coaching note:*

Pastoral coaching establishes emotional boundaries without fostering hostility.

#### **Gender, Loyalty, and Cultural Expectation**

Extended family pressure often interacts with gender norms. Men may feel torn between loyalty to parents and responsibility to their spouse. Women may be blamed for boundary-setting and accused of “taking” a husband away from his family.

Pastors must actively challenge narratives that place disproportionate blame on women or excuse male avoidance. Loyalty to marriage is not betrayal of family; it is a prerequisite for marital stability (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31).

When Extended Family Pressure Becomes Harmful

Extended family involvement becomes harmful when:

- Encourages control or humiliation

- Supports violence or coercion

- Reinforces economic exploitation

- Undermines emotional or physical safety

When fear, coercion, or emotional injury is present, pastoral counselling must prioritise protection and ethical responses in line with established safety principles. Cultural respect must never override human dignity.

### **Helping Couples Establish a United Front**

Pastoral counselling should consistently reinforce marital unity through practices such as:

- Discussing family matters privately before responding publicly

- Supporting each other during boundary-setting

- Presenting joint decisions respectfully

- Addressing disagreements within the marriage rather than through relatives

Unity does not require secrecy. It requires shared responsibility and mutual respect.

### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

Do I minimise extended family pressure as part of the “normal culture”?

Do I support couples in setting boundaries without shaming them?

Do I recognise triangulation when it appears?

Do couples feel empowered to protect their marriage respectfully?

### **Chapter Summary**

Extended family involvement is a powerful force in African marriages. It can strengthen relationships or gradually undermine them. Pastoral counselling must help couples establish healthy boundaries that honour cultural values without sacrificing marital unity, safety, or dignity.

The next chapter turns to anger, escalation, violence, and abuse—areas that require pastoral courage, moral clarity, and a firm commitment to safety.

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## PART FOUR: INTERVENTIONS

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Anger, Escalation, Violence, and Abuse

### **Why This Chapter Is Non-Negotiable**

Many marriages that present for pastoral counselling are already unsafe. Some couples seek help only after anger has escalated into threats or violence. Others arrive after years of hidden abuse, masked by religious language, cultural loyalty, or public respectability.

In many African church contexts, violence within marriage is frequently minimised, spiritualised, or mislabelled as discipline, stress, or temporary loss of control. Victims are often encouraged to endure, pray harder, submit more, or forgive quickly. Silence is praised as maturity. Endurance is equated with faith.

This chapter exists because silence kills. Any pastoral guide to marriage counselling that does not confront anger, violence, and abuse directly is incomplete and dangerous. Pastoral care that prioritises marriage

preservation over human safety violates both ethical responsibility and biblical justice.

### **Understanding Anger in Marriage**

Anger itself is not violence. Anger is a natural emotional response to perceived threat, injustice, frustration, or loss. In marriage, anger may arise from:

- Feeling disrespected or unheard

- Unmet expectations

- Fear of loss of control

- Shame or wounded identity

- Accumulated resentment

Healthy anger signals that something requires attention.

Unhealthy anger becomes destructive when it is expressed through intimidation, humiliation, coercion, or harm.

Pastors must help couples distinguish clearly between feeling angry and acting abusively. Conflating the two creates moral confusion and unsafe counselling practice (Johnson, 2019).

### **From Anger to Escalation**

Escalation occurs when anger is unmanaged and emotional regulation breaks down. Arguments intensify, voices rise, and behaviour becomes threatening.

Common signs of escalation include:

- Shouting or screaming

- Name-calling and insults

- Threats of harm or abandonment

- Throwing or destroying objects

- Blocking exits or restricting movement

Escalation is not a communication problem alone. It is a safety issue. Treating escalation as a normal marital phase places victims at serious risk.

Within GAP-MCT, escalation reflects heightened emotional threat triggered when expectation gaps intersect with fear, shame, or loss of control. Without containment, defensive responses escalate into harm (Adetunji, 2025).

## **When Conflict Becomes Violence**

Violence occurs when anger or power is expressed through physical force, threats, or coercive control.

Violence may be:

Physical

Sexual

Emotional

Psychological

Economic

Examples include:

Hitting, slapping, choking, pushing

Forced sexual activity

Threats of harm

Destruction of property

Restricting access to money, movement, or communication

Violence is never justified. It is not caused by provocation, stress, alcohol, or disobedience. Responsibility lies solely with the perpetrator (WHO, 2013).

Scripture Reflection Box 13.1

*“The Lord examines the righteous,  
But the wicked, those who love violence,  
He hates with a passion.”*

— Psalm 11:5

Pastoral reflection:

Scripture draws a clear moral boundary against violence. Any pastoral teaching that excuses harm contradicts the character and justice of God.

### **Emotional and Psychological Abuse**

Not all abuse leaves visible marks. Emotional and psychological abuse often causes deeper and more enduring harm than physical violence and is frequently overlooked in church settings.

Common patterns include:

- Constant criticism or humiliation

- Gaslighting and denial of reality

- Threatening abandonment or punishment

- Monitoring behaviour or communication

- Isolation from family or friends

Victims of emotional abuse often present as confused, anxious, self-blaming, or spiritually conflicted. Pastors must listen carefully and resist the urge to minimise invisible wounds (Herman, 2015).

### **Sexual Abuse Within Marriage**

Sexual abuse can occur within marriage when sexual activity is demanded, coerced, or used as punishment or control. Cultural beliefs that deny consent within marriage have caused immense harm.

Scripture affirms mutuality, dignity, and care in marital intimacy. Coercion violates covenant.

Pastors must name sexual abuse clearly and respond with seriousness, protection, and referral when required. Silence or euphemism increases harm.

### **The Myth of Mutual Responsibility**

One of the most dangerous pastoral errors is framing abuse as mutual conflict. Statements such as *“It takes two to fight”* or *“You both need to change”* may sound balanced but often silence victims.

While all marriages involve shared responsibility for relational health, abuse is never mutual. Neutrality in the presence of abuse supports the perpetrator by default (Lundy, 2002).

Scripture Reflection Box 13.2

*“Rescue the weak and the needy;  
Deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”*

— Psalm 82:4

Pastoral reflection:

Biblical leadership demands active protection of the vulnerable. Pastoral neutrality ends where harm begins.

### **Why Victims Stay Silent**

Victims often remain in abusive marriages for complex reasons, including:

- Fear of retaliation

- Financial dependence

- Concern for children

- Shame and stigma

- Religious pressure

- Cultural loyalty

Hope for change

Understanding these factors prevents judgement and enables compassionate, patient support without excusing harm.

### **Pastoral Responsibilities in Abuse Cases**

When abuse is disclosed, pastoral responsibilities change immediately. The primary goal becomes safety, not reconciliation.

Pastors must:

- Take disclosures seriously

- Avoid minimising or spiritualising harm

- Assess immediate risk

- Encourage protection and support

- Refer to appropriate professionals or authorities

Couple counselling must never continue where violence is active or unresolved. Doing so increases danger and ethical liability (APA, 2017).

Confronting the Abuser

Confrontation must be:

- Clear

Firm

Non-negotiable

Focused on responsibility

Confrontation is not mediation. It is moral clarity. Pastors must never pressure victims to confront abusers directly.

Forgiveness, Repentance, and Safety

Forgiveness does not remove consequences. Repentance is not apology alone. Genuine repentance includes:

Confession

Accountability

Behavioural change

Time

Scripture never demands reconciliation without repentance. Safety must precede restoration.

### **Scripture Reflection Box 13.3**

*“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”*

— Matthew 3:8

Pastoral reflection:

Words without sustained change are not repentance.

Protection precedes reconciliation.

**When Separation Is the Faithful Choice**

Temporary or permanent separation may be necessary to protect life and dignity. Supporting separation in cases of abuse is not anti-marriage. It is pro-life and pro-justice.

Pastoral courage sometimes means standing against cultural pressure to preserve appearances at the cost of safety.

**Pastoral Self-Protection and Integrity**

Abuse cases are emotionally and spiritually demanding. Pastors must seek supervision, accountability, and peer support. Working alone increases the risk of burnout, moral compromise, and legal exposure.

Ethical pastoral care includes protecting oneself while protecting others.

**Pastoral Reflection Questions**

Do I minimise violence to preserve marriage?

Do I confuse forgiveness with reconciliation?

Do I protect victims even when it is uncomfortable?

Do I know when to stop counselling and refer?

**Chapter Summary**

Anger becomes destructive when it escalates into violence and abuse. Pastoral counselling must draw clear moral boundaries, prioritise safety, and reject all justifications for harm. Faithful pastoral care protects life, names truth, and walks courageously with those in danger.

The next chapter focuses on discernment, referral, and knowing when letting go is the most faithful act.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Discernment, Referral, and Knowing When to Let Go

### **Why Discernment Matters in Pastoral Counselling**

One of the most demanding responsibilities in pastoral marriage counselling is knowing when to continue, when to pause, and when to step back. Many pastors operate under intense spiritual, cultural, and communal pressure to preserve marriage at all costs. Reconciliation is often treated as the primary marker of pastoral success.

However, pastoral faithfulness is not measured by marital outcomes alone. It is measured by whether truth is honoured, safety is protected, dignity is preserved, and responsibility is upheld. Discernment is the pastoral capacity to recognise what is possible, what is dangerous, and what lies beyond pastoral competence.

Discernment protects couples from prolonged harm and protects pastors from misusing authority.

### **The Difference Between Persistence and Wisdom**

Persistence is often celebrated in ministry, yet persistence without discernment can become harmful. Continuing counselling when conditions are unsafe, dishonest, or stagnant may deepen injury rather than promote healing. Pastors must learn to distinguish between:

- Temporary resistance and chronic refusal

- Struggle and defiance

- Fear-based hesitation and wilful harm

Not every stalled counselling process requires termination. Some require patience. Others require redirection. Some require referral. Discernment lies in knowing the difference (Collins, 2007).

### **Indicators That Counselling May Continue**

Pastoral counselling may continue when the following conditions are present:

- Both partners are willing to speak honestly.

- Responsibility is acknowledged rather than deflected.

- There is no active violence, intimidation, or coercion.

Change, however slow, is observable.

Safety is stable and protected.

Within the GAP-MCT framework, sustained counselling is appropriate when perceived relational gaps are acknowledged and partners demonstrate willingness to reduce threat through accountability and behavioural change (Adetunji, 2025). Progress does not have to be dramatic. Small shifts in insight, language, or self-regulation often indicate that counselling remains viable.

### **Indicators That Counselling Must Pause or Shift**

There are situations where continuing marital counselling in its usual form becomes ethically unsafe. These include:

- Persistent denial of harmful behaviour

- Refusal to accept responsibility

- Ongoing deception or manipulation

- Escalation of fear or intimidation

- Pressure on the pastor to take sides

In such cases, continuing counselling without modification reinforces harm. Pastoral responsibility

requires shifting focus toward safety, accountability, or referral.

### **When Referral Is a Pastoral Responsibility**

Referral is not abandonment. It is an act of competence and care. Pastors refer not because they lack faith, but because they recognise professional and ethical limits.

Referral is required when couples present with:

- Active domestic violence

- Sexual abuse

- Severe emotional abuse

- Untreated mental illness

- Substance addiction

- Complex trauma beyond pastoral scope

Ethical pastoral care recognises that some forms of distress require specialised intervention. Maintaining pastoral presence alongside professional care is often the healthiest approach (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy [AAMFT], 2015).

**How to Refer Without Shame or Loss of Trust**

Referral must be handled with clarity, dignity, and reassurance. Poorly managed referrals can feel like rejection or punishment.

Ethical referral involves:

- Explaining the reason clearly and calmly

- Normalising professional support

- Affirming continued pastoral care

- Avoiding spiritual judgement

- Collaborating respectfully where appropriate

Referral should be framed as additional support, not failure.

**Scripture Reflection Box 14.1**

*“Plans fail for lack of counsel,  
but with many advisers they succeed.”*

— Proverbs 20:18

Pastoral reflection:

Scripture affirms shared wisdom. Referral honours God’s provision of diverse gifts for healing.

**When One Partner Is Willing and the Other Is Not**

Pastors frequently encounter marriages where one spouse is committed to change while the other remains resistant, dismissive, or hostile. This imbalance creates frustration and emotional pain.

In such cases, counselling may shift toward:

- Supporting the willing partner's clarity and boundaries

- Preventing self-blame

- Encouraging personal growth and discernment

- Clarifying options without coercion

Counselling is no longer centred solely on saving a marriage but on supporting the person within it.

**Letting Go as a Faithful Act**

Letting go does not always mean ending a marriage. It may involve releasing unrealistic expectations, surrendering control, or accepting painful truths.

In some cases, letting go includes supporting separation or distance to protect safety, mental health, or dignity.

These decisions are often accompanied by grief, fear, and spiritual confusion.

Hope rooted in denial is not faith—it is cruelty disguised as spirituality.

### **Scripture Reflection Box 14.2**

*“God has called us to live in peace.”*

— 1 Corinthians 7:15

Pastoral reflection:

Peace includes freedom from fear, coercion, and harm. Faithfulness sometimes requires release rather than repair.

### **Discernment and the Myth of Pastoral Control**

Pastors do not control outcomes. They guide the process. Attempting to force reconciliation or decisions burdens pastoral authority beyond its proper limits.

Discernment respects human agency. It allows couples to face consequences, make decisions, and carry responsibility. Pastoral care walks alongside without coercion (Cloud & Townsend, 2017).

## **Caring for the Pastor's Own Soul**

Letting go can feel like failure. Pastors may experience guilt, grief, or self-doubt when counselling does not lead to restoration.

Without reflection and support, this burden accumulates. Supervision, peer support, prayer, and rest are essential components of ethical pastoral care.

### **Pastoral Reflection Questions**

Do I equate success with reconciliation?

Do I continue counselling out of fear rather than wisdom?

Do I know my limits clearly?

Do I trust God with outcomes beyond my control?

### **Chapter Summary**

Discernment is the quiet strength of wise pastoral care. It knows when to continue, when to pause, and when letting go is the most faithful response. Referral is not failure. Release is not abandonment. Faithful pastoral counselling protects life, honours truth, and entrusts outcomes to God.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Pastoral Courage, Hope, and the Limits of Counselling

### **Why Pastoral Courage Is Required**

Marriage counselling in African churches is not a neutral or purely technical task. It places pastors at the intersection of faith, culture, power, pain, and expectation. Pastors are often expected to preserve marriages, protect reputations, maintain harmony, and uphold moral ideals—sometimes simultaneously.

This work demands courage. Courage is required because truth often disrupts comfort. Courage is required because safety may challenge tradition. Courage is required because pastoral authority can either liberate or imprison.

Pastoral courage is not aggression or stubbornness. It is ethical firmness shaped by humility, wisdom, and compassion (Doehring, 2015).

## **The Difference Between Hope and Illusion**

Hope is essential in pastoral care. Without hope, couples despair and counselling collapses. However, not all hope is healthy.

Healthy hope is grounded in:

- Truth
- Responsibility
- Willingness to change
- Safety
- Time

Illusory hope is built on:

- Denial
- Minimisation of harm
- Spiritual slogans
- Pressure to endure
- Fear of failure

Illusion delays healing and prolongs suffering. Pastors must be willing to dismantle false hope to protect genuine hope (Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

When Hope Must Be Redefined

For many couples, hope initially means reconciliation. Over time, careful pastoral assessment may reveal that reconciliation is not immediately possible—or not safe. In such cases, hope must be redefined. Hope may become:

Emotional stability

Personal clarity

Freedom from fear

Growth in responsibility

Protection of dignity

Peace rather than proximity

Redefining hope is not faithlessness. It is pastoral realism grounded in compassion and ethical clarity.

Within GAP-MCT, hope is reframed when persistent relational gaps generate chronic threat and no meaningful commitment to responsibility or change is evident (Adetunji, 2025).

### **Pastoral Courage Means Saying “No”**

One of the most difficult acts in pastoral ministry is learning to say no.

No to premature reconciliation

No to spiritualising abuse

No to counselling without safety

No to pressure from families or church leaders

No to using Scripture to silence pain

Saying no is not rejection. It is protection. Ethical boundaries honour God, preserve dignity, and prevent spiritual harm (Louw, 2016).

### **Courage in the Face of Cultural Pressure**

African pastors often operate within cultures that discourage confrontation, separation, or referral. Endurance is praised. Silence is honoured. Family unity is prioritised.

Culture offers wisdom, but it must not override safety or dignity. Pastoral courage requires engaging culture critically rather than submitting to it unquestioningly. Honouring culture does not mean excusing harm.

Pastoral authority must challenge cultural norms when they contradict justice, protection, and care (Magezi, 2019).

### **When Pastors Are Blamed**

When marriages deteriorate or end, pastors are sometimes blamed. Families may accuse them of encouraging separation. Churches may question their faithfulness. Couples may project anger or disappointment.

Pastors must remember:

They do not control outcomes.

They are responsible for process, not results.

Faithfulness is measured by integrity, not appearances.

Pastoral courage includes standing alone when truth demands it.

### **The Limits of Counselling**

No amount of counselling can replace this:

Personal responsibility

Genuine repentance

Willingness to change

Respect for boundaries

Commitment to safety

Pastors must resist the illusion that more sessions automatically produce better outcomes. Sometimes counselling reaches its limit not because it failed, but because the situation requires a different response.

Recognising limits is an act of wisdom, not defeat (Collins, 2007).

### **Walking With Grief and Loss**

Not all pastoral journeys end in celebration. Grief—grief for lost dreams, broken trust, or unsalvable marriages—occurs in some pastoral journeys.

Pastors must be willing to accompany couples through grief without rushing them toward positivity or spiritual platitudes. Grief is honoured honestly and often becomes the soil for future healing.

Scripture Reflection Box 15.1

*“He heals the brokenhearted.  
and binds up their wounds.”*

— Psalm 147:3

Pastoral reflection:

Healing does not always mean restoration of what was.

Sometimes it means caring for what has been broken.

### **Faith Without Control**

True pastoral faith trusts God with outcomes. It resists the urge to control decisions, timelines, or results.

Faith allows:

- People to choose

- Consequences to teach

- Time to reveal truth

- God to work beyond pastoral effort

When pastors release control, they remain faithful without becoming coercive (Bonhoeffer, 1954).

### **The Pastor's Role: A Witness, Not a Saviour**

Pastors are witnesses to God's work, not substitutes for it. They walk with couples, speak truth, and offer care.

They do not carry the burden of fixing lives.

This posture protects pastors from burnout and couples from unhealthy dependence.

### **A Word to Pastors**

Marriage counselling in African churches requires more than skill. It demands courage, humility, ethical clarity, and deep compassion.

Protect people.

Speak truth.

Honour dignity.

Refuse harm.

Trust God.

### **Reflection Questions**

Do I confuse hope with pressure?

Do I measure success by appearances?

Am I courageous when safety is at stake?

Do I trust God with outcomes I cannot control?

### **Chapter Summary**

Pastoral marriage counselling is sacred and demanding work. It calls pastors to courage without cruelty, hope without illusion, and faith without control. When exercised with integrity, pastoral care becomes a witness

to God's justice, compassion, and truth—even when marriages do not survive.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# The Pastoral Counselling Process: From Welcoming to Wise Intervention

### Why Process Is a Moral Issue in Pastoral Counselling

Pastoral counselling is often assumed to be a spiritual conversation guided primarily by prayer, Scripture, and goodwill. While these are essential, they are not sufficient. Without structure, pastoral care can unintentionally silence pain, reinforce harm, and protect injustice.

This book advances a central conviction: most harm in counselling occurs before intervention begins. Warmth without structure creates confusion. Prayer without process can create silence. Scripture without discernment may cause spiritual harm (Doehring, 2015; Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

Faithful pastoral counselling, therefore, depends not on pressure or personality but on a clear, ethical, and disciplined process.

### **The Pastoral Counselling Journey as a Guided Path**

Effective pastoral counselling follows a discernible path. This journey does not rush to fix problems. It moves carefully from safety to understanding, from understanding to direction, and from direction to responsible action.

The pastoral counselling process includes:

- Warm reception
- Purpose clarification and boundaries
- Listening to stories
- Identifying the presenting problem
- Safety screening
- Pattern assessment
- Emotional clarification
- Discernment of direction
- Goal setting
- Intervention

Prayer and Scripture integration

Review and next steps

Each step serves both a moral and clinical purpose. Skipping steps increases the risk of harm, misdiagnosis, and spiritual coercion (Collins, 2007).

### **Step 1: Warm Reception – Creating Safety Before Content**

The first pastoral message is often non-verbal before it becomes verbal:

*“This is a safe place.”*

A warm reception involves calm posture, respectful tone, non-judgemental presence, and gratitude that the couple has come. Research consistently shows that clients decide whether counselling is safe within the first minutes of contact (Doehring, 2015).

Without safety, honesty will not follow.

### **Step 2: Clarifying Purpose and Boundaries**

At the outset, pastors must clearly explain:

What pastoral counselling is

What it is not

The limits of confidentiality

Their role and authority

A critical pastoral statement is:

*“My role is to guide understanding, not to judge.”*

Clear boundaries protect both couples and pastors from confusion, dependency, and misuse of authority.

### **Step 3: Letting Each Person Tell Their Story**

Each person must be allowed to speak without interruption. Pastors listen not only for words but also for:

Emotion

Silence

Fear

Power imbalance

Listening comes before teaching. Teaching too early shuts down truth and increases defensiveness (Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

### **Step 4: Identifying the Presenting Problem**

Pastors explore:

Why the couple came *now*

What triggered the visit

Whether the issue is a crisis or long-standing

The presenting problem is rarely the full one. It is the doorway to deeper relationship patterns.

### **Step 5: Safety Screening (Non-Negotiable)**

Pastors must actively assess for:

Fear

Intimidation

Violence

Emotional abuse

Coercive control

If safety is compromised, joint counselling must cease. No amount of prayer or reconciliation language justifies continued exposure to harm (Louw, 2016).

### **Step 6: Assessing Patterns, Not Incidents**

Pastoral assessment focuses on:

How conflict begins

How it escalates

How it ends

Who pursues

Who withdraws

Who controls decisions

Patterns matter more than incidents. This principle aligns with systematic thinking and protects pastors from blame-based counselling.

Within GAP-MCT, repeated patterns signal unresolved expectation gaps and ongoing emotional threat within the marital system (Adetunji, 2025).

### **Step 7: Clarifying Emotional Impact**

Pastors help couples translate blame into experience:

Hurt

Loss

Fear

Disappointment

Emotional withdrawal

This step humanises conflict and reduces moral defence.

### **Step 8: Discernment of Counselling Direction**

Not all counsellors have the same goal. Pastors must discern whether the focus is:

Regulation (reducing harm)

Repair (addressing injury)

Restoration (rebuilding intimacy)

Discernment (clarifying decisions)

Referral (specialised care)

Discernment prevents false hope and inappropriate persistence.

### **Step 9: Setting SMART Goals**

Goals must be:

Specific

Measurable

Attainable

Reasonable

Time-bound

Goals must include shared responsibility and individual accountability. Vague goals produce vague outcomes.

### **Step 10: Selecting Interventions**

Interventions may include:

Healing conversations

Communication coaching

Boundary setting

Accountability structures

Forgiveness guidance

Referral

Intervention must fit assessment. Technique without understanding becomes harmful.

### **Step 11: Prayer and Scripture Integration**

Prayer and Scripture must:

Ground the process, not silence pain

Illuminate truth, not coerce compliance

Protect people, not preserve appearances

A foundational rule applies:

Never protect harm with spiritual language.

Scripture is most powerful when it supports truth, accountability, and dignity (Bonhoeffer, 1954).

### **Step 12: Review and Next Steps**

Pastors should summarise:

Key insights

Decisions made

Next steps

Whether to continue, pause, refer, or support  
discernment

Clear closure prevents confusion and unhealthy  
dependence.

### **Key Pastoral Principles (Non-Negotiable)**

This entire process is governed by enduring principles:

Marriage is sacred; people are more sacred.

Safety before unity

Truth before prayer

Accountability before forgiveness

These principles must guide every pastoral decision.

### **Final Charge to Pastors**

Shepherd marriages with wisdom, not pressure.

Guard people, not appearances.

Protect the vulnerable.

Refer without shame.

Let go when letting go is faithful.

Faithful pastoral counselling is not measured by how  
many marriages remain intact, but by how many people  
remain safe, dignified, and truthfully guided.

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## APPENDICES

### Pastoral Tools, Scripts, and Flowcharts for Marriage Counselling

# APPENDIX A: Intake & First-Contact Tools

## A1. Intake Ground Rules (Pastoral Script)

### Script:

“This space is confidential and respectful. Each of you will be heard without interruption. My role is not to judge but to help us understand what is happening and decide the next faithful steps.”

Why this matters:

This reduces fear. It prevents courtroom talk. It protects the quieter spouse.

## A2. First-Session Intake Questions

Use selectively. Do not interrogate.

“What makes you seek counselling now?” (*Clarifies urgency and triggers.*)

“When did things begin to change between you?” (*Locates the turning point.*)

“What hurts the most at this point?” (*Names emotional pain.*)

“What have you stopped saying to keep peace?”

*(Reveals silence patterns.)*

“What are you hoping will be different after counselling?” *(Clarifies expectations.)*

### **A3. Safety Screening (Mandatory)**

Ask privately if needed:

“Do you feel safe in this marriage right now?” *(Direct safety check.)*

“Have there been moments of fear, threats, or harm?” *(Screens intimidation.)*

“Are you afraid to speak honestly at home?” *(Screens power imbalance.)*

Rule: If fear is present, stop joint counselling immediately (AAMFT, 2015).

## APPENDIX B: Assessment Tools

### B1. Pattern Recognition Questions

“What usually triggers your arguments?” (*Identifies triggers.*)

“Who pursues, and who withdraws?” (*Maps interaction cycle.*)

“How do conflicts typically end?” (*Shows repair or escalation.*)

“What happens emotionally afterward?” (*Reveals emotional costs.*)

### B2. Expectation Mapping

Ask each partner:

“I expected marriage would give me \_\_\_\_\_.” (*Reveals unmet hopes.*)

“What I give most but feel least recognised for is \_\_\_\_\_.” (*Reveals resentment.*)

### B3. Family-of-Origin Exploration

“How was conflict handled in your parents’ home?” (*Shows learned patterns.*)

“What did you promise yourself you would do differently?” (*Shows values and vows.*)

# APPENDIX C: Healing Conversation Framework

## C1. Healing Conversation Steps (Quick Guide)

Set the frame: “This is listening, not debate.” (*Creates safety.*)

One voice at a time. (*Prevents domination.*)

Speak from experience. (*Moves from blame to emotion.*)

Reflect before responding. (*Builds empathy.*)

Name impact. (*Makes pain visible.*)

Repair intention. (*Creates next-step hope.*)

## C2. Common Interventions

Escalation: “Let us pause. This is becoming unsafe.”

Silence: “You’ve gone quiet—what’s happening inside?”

Spiritual bypass: “Prayer matters, but we must not skip truth.”

# APPENDIX D: Forgiveness & Reconciliation Tools

## **D1. Forgiveness Process Map**

Harm occurs

Truth is named

Emotion is processed

Forgiveness choice (internal release)

Accountability and repentance

Discern reconciliation

Rebuild or maintain boundaries

Key rule: Forgiveness is not automatic reconciliation (Worthington, 2013).

## **D2. Forgiveness Clarification**

Forgiveness IS a process, a choice, inner freedom, and boundary-compatible.

Forgiveness IS NOT forgetting, instant trust, or staying in danger.

## **D3. Reconciliation Discernment Checklist**

Reconciliation is wise only if there is safety, truth, change, time-tested consistency, and free consent.

# APPENDIX E

## Communication & Emotional Reconnection Tools

### E.1 The Safe Conversation Structure (Structured Dialogue Tool)

#### **Purpose:**

To help couples speak without escalation and listen without defensiveness.

#### **Step 1: Speaker Role**

Use "I feel..." statements.

Describe experience, not accusation.

Avoid "always/never".

Speak for no more than 3 minutes.

Template:

"When \_\_\_\_\_ happens, I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

What I need is \_\_\_\_\_."

#### **Step 2: Listener Role**

No interruption.

Reflect back:

"What I hear you saying is..."

Ask:

"Did I understand correctly?"

Step 3: Role Switch

Pastoral Note:

Stop the process immediately if contempt, sarcasm, or intimidation emerges.

### **E.2 The Pursue–Withdraw Cycle Diagram Exercise**

#### **Purpose:**

To externalise the destructive interaction pattern.

Draw three circles:

Trigger Event

Emotional Reaction

Protective Response

Ask:

“Who usually speaks first?”

“Who withdraws?”

“What fear drives the withdrawal?”

“What fear drives the pursuit?”

Reframe:

“The problem is not the person. The problem is the cycle.”

### **E.3 Emotional Vocabulary Expansion Tool**

Many couples lack emotional language.

Provide a list:

Primary Emotions

Sad.

Afraid

Hurt

Lonely

Rejected

Ashamed

Ask:

“Which of these do you feel but rarely say?”

#### E.4 Reconnection Ritual Assignment

Couples commit to:

15-minute daily check-in

No phones

No problem-solving

Only emotional sharing

Prompt questions:

“What was difficult today?”

“What did you appreciate today?”

“What do you need tomorrow?”

#### E.5 Communication Covenant Template

We commit to:

No shouting

No silent punishment

No public humiliation

No spiritual manipulation

Taking breaks when escalation rises

Signed:

Husband: \_\_\_\_\_

Wife: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# APPENDIX F

## **Infidelity & Sexual Restoration Protocols**

### **F.1 Immediate Response Protocol (After Discovery)**

The pastor must assess:

Is there ongoing contact?

Is there danger?

Is there coercion?

Is confession partial or complete?

Rule 1: No reconciliation discussion until:

The affair has ceased.

Contact is terminated.

Full disclosure is agreed upon.

### **F.2 Structured Disclosure Framework**

Disclosure sessions must include:

Responsibility statement

Clear admission

No minimising language

No blaming spouse

Willingness for accountability

Template:

“I violated our covenant. I chose to \_\_\_\_\_. I take full responsibility. I understand the harm caused. I am willing to \_\_\_\_\_.”

### F.3 Trust Rebuilding Roadmap

#### **Phase 1: Stabilisation**

End affair

Transparency of communication

Accountability partner

#### **Phase 2: Emotional Repair**

Validation of injured spouse’s pain

No defensiveness

Repeated reassurance

#### **Phase 3: Covenant Rebuilding**

Sexual boundary reset

Shared vision discussion

Gradual intimacy restoration

### **F.4 Sexual Conflict Assessment Tool**

Pastor explores:

Sexual expectations

Shame history

Trauma history

Cultural beliefs

Use of pornography

Emotional disconnection

Questions:

“What does sexual closeness mean to you?”

“When did it change?”

“What feels unsafe?”

#### **F.5 Decision Discernment Matrix**

If:

Ongoing deception → Pause reconciliation

No remorse → Focus on accountability

Fear or coercion → Shift to safety planning

Both willing → Begin structured repair

# APPENDIX G

## **Discernment, Referral & Protective Decision Frameworks**

### **G.1 Safety Screening Checklist**

Ask privately:

Do you feel afraid in this marriage?

Has physical harm occurred?

Has sexual coercion occurred?

Are threats made?

Is there access to weapons?

Is substance abuse active?

If YES → Move to protective protocol.

### **G.2 When to Stop Joint Counselling**

Joint sessions must stop if:

Physical violence is ongoing.

Severe emotional intimidation exists.

One partner is terrified.

Suicidal ideation present

Active addiction untreated

### **G.3 Referral Decision Tree**

Refer when:

Mental illness suspected

Trauma symptoms severe

Addiction active

Legal intervention required

Domestic violence confirmed

Pastoral response:

“This situation requires specialised care. Referral does not mean abandonment. I remain your shepherd.”

### **G.4 Separation Discernment Framework**

Pastors must distinguish between:

Temporary separation for safety

Legal separation

Permanent dissolution

Questions:

“Is staying increasing harm?”

“Is leaving increasing danger?”

“What protects dignity?”

**G.5 Pastoral Limitations Declaration**

The pastor states clearly:

I do not replace professional therapy.

I do not manage violent cases alone.

I do not enforce reconciliation.

My role is guidance, not control.

**G.6 Protective Action Plan Template**

If risk is present:

Emergency contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Safe location: \_\_\_\_\_

Trusted person: \_\_\_\_\_

Professional referral: \_\_\_\_\_

Follow-up date: \_\_\_\_\_

# APPENDIX H: Anger, Violence & Abuse Protocols

## H1. Red Flags (Immediate Action Required)

Fear (*safety is compromised*)

Threats (*risk is rising*)

Physical harm (*violence exists*)

Sexual coercion (*consent is violated*)

Financial control (*economic trapping*)

Spiritual intimidation (*faith is weaponised*) d)

## H2. Mandatory Pastoral Response

Believe disclosure

Prioritise safety

Stop joint counselling

Refer immediately

Support without coercion

## H3. What Pastors Must NEVER Do

Tell victims to endure

Rush forgiveness

Minimise violence

Use Scripture to pressure staying

Promise confidentiality when safety is at risk.

### ABOUT THE BOOK

*Shepherding Marriages: A Pastoral Guide to Marriage Counselling in African Churches* is a practical and compassionate guide for pastors who walk daily with couples through conflict, pain, and fragile hope. Rooted in African church realities, this book equips pastors to counsel marriages with wisdom, structure, and moral courage—without spiritualising harm or bypassing truth.

Blending biblical insight with counselling skill, the book addresses:

- Communication breakdown, forgiveness, boundaries, financial tension, anger, abuse, and discernment with clarity and pastoral sensitivity.
- Step-by-step frameworks, scripts, and ethical safeguards that help pastors know when to continue counselling, when to refer, and when letting go is the most faithful act.

This is not a call to preserve marriage at all costs, but a call to shepherd marriages in ways that honour faith, dignity, safety, and truth.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. Adetunji is known for bridging theology and therapeutic practice, helping pastors and counsellors move beyond intuition to structured, ethical, and culturally grounded interventions. His work consistently emphasises relational safety, accountability, and healing without harm. He serves through CMAT Family Therapy Services Ltd and is actively involved in training pastors, counsellors, and church leaders across the continent.

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