

As United Methodist pastors, many of us move from church to church, city to city, district to district with great regularity. Early in my pastorate, I recognized how difficult it was to develop collegial relationships with counselors and therapists when the itinerant system kept us on the move so often. To compensate, I don't wait for the relationships to develop: I search out the relationships shortly after arriving in a new appointment.

Before that first crisis walks into my office, I try to have a list of qualified counselors, therapists, and social service providers in my files. To make this happen, I take several steps. First, I ask the outgoing pastor or other staff members in the church for their recommendations. Second, I ask other pastors or colleagues in the community for recommendations and resource lists. Third, I ask counselors from my former appointment area if they have trusted colleagues in the area where I will be re-locating. Finally, I take my most important step by contacting the recommended providers and interviewing them. In this process, I am trying to gather a myriad of resources to assist people when crisis strikes. These resources usually include:

- ☞ social service helps (food banks, rent assistance, United Way or other social service coordinators, and crisis lines);
- ☞ funeral directors and bereavement counselors;
- ☞ hospital chaplains;
- ☞ licensed therapists and counselors.

Before referring a parishioner to a therapist or counselor, I find it particularly important to know something about that provider by making my own assessment of the counselor's skills. To do so, I telephone the potential referral and conduct a brief interview. Many of the counselors I contact are kind enough to invite me to a personal interview. Such an offer is truly generous when you remember how busy and expensive a good therapist is!

In the interview, I try to address specific issues and ask pointed questions.

☞ What is your training, from where, and what is your licensing? Good training and full licensing boosts my confidence in a counselor.

☞ Do you work with other colleagues, and what kind of supervisory relationship guides you in your work? Counselors who work with peers and

cate a willingness to work with deeply troubling issues such as sexual abuse.

☞ What are your rates, do you accept insurance, and do you allow a sliding scale? This helps me determine which parishioners can access a counselor's services.

☞ What are your hours and availability? Most people in need of counseling will need weekend or evening appointment times.

☞ Are you willing to address spiritual or religious issues, should they arise in session?

☞ Are you willing to work with me, should the client wish that mutual relationship?

☞ How can I assist you in the process of working with clients whom I refer?

There are no correct answers to the questions I ask, and the answers I prefer will sometimes differ from yours. For instance, I prefer

licensed marriage and family therapists over licensed Christian counselors. You may have a different preference. However, the above questions can help any pastor get to the heart of the counselor's abilities and approach to therapy. The time spent in conversation gives one a sense of the counselor as a person and a potential colleague. And the answers to many of the questions can be shared with a parishioner at the time we make the referral, boosting confidence in our referral while also saving much time and energy in the search for a qualified counselor. □

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supervisors also boost my confidence.

☞ Do you have any specialties or preferred types of counseling? This helps in making the right referral in different situations.

☞ Are you willing to help with referrals when dealing with a specialty you do not focus upon? One of my best referrals came from the family counselor I recommended to couples encountering marriage difficulties. When a couple came to me after enduring a homosexual extra-marital affair, my "regular" counselor helped me to find a counselor in our area who specialized in issues related to homosexuality.

☞ What is your approach to counseling? Studies show that consistency is more important than theoretical perspective, but a combination of therapy styles is often helpful within that range of consistency.

☞ What is an average tenure of therapy for most of your clients? Shorter tenures often indicate a strong use of behavior management within the counseling process, something I find particularly important in family and crisis counseling. Long tenures, however, may indi-