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## CONDUCTING A COUNSELLING INTERVIEW

**Campbell Bell**

*Helping others often involves a one-to-one interview. Campbell's essay deals specifically with this. His approach highlights the type of skills and attitudes which we need to develop in order to increase our awareness and sensitivity in helping individuals. He deals with both the verbal and non-verbal sides of interviewing, and takes us through the various stages of an interview. His essay draws attention to ways in which, unwittingly, we may be making our attempts to help less helpful than they might otherwise be.*

To say that there is a need in our churches and church-based organizations for individuals skilled and practised in the art of counselling is an understatement. Over the years we have emphasized the need for evangelism and mission and the importance of presenting the claims of Christ to a sinful world. This is right and proper, but in our eagerness to heal the spiritual needs of man we have tended to neglect the physical and psychological aspects of everyday life which cause both Christians and non-Christians such despair, depression, helplessness and grief. Terms such as 'social gospel' have been used by many to denigrate what, in my opinion, is a vital part of the church's function in the community, namely, addressing ourselves to the more practical aspects of being a service to our local communities. Spiritual, psychological and social factors are inextricably linked, as these are factors which make up the whole person that Christ gave his life for. The role of the church as a loving, caring entity in the world needs to, and indeed should, address itself to every area of life where Christ can be presented as a positive and only alternative.

Generally, when a term like 'psychology' is mentioned in Christian circles several reactions are observed. It may be dismissed as merely the 'airy-fairy' ideas and the ramblings of mid-European eccentrics. It is also argued (rather more strongly) that many psychological and counselling theories are not Christian in their conception or their practice.

I would to some extent agree with both of these claims, but must insist that the insights given by psychology can be an ally rather than an enemy to the Christian. These insights can inform us in all areas, from the temperamental adolescent to the couple who are having difficulties

in their marriage, to the retired man or woman who, after a lifetime of work, feel that they have been thrown on the scrapheap. Professor Malcolm Jeeves, a Christian who lectures in psychology at St. Andrews University, points out that 'Christians have no need to be defensive about these matters'. He argues that the findings of psychologists help us to answer some of the problems we face when dealing with human behaviour and feelings. I believe that many of these insights are God-given, and we are therefore failing those who come to us for help if we do not use them in a constructive manner.

That there is a need for counsellors in our churches is undeniable. There is an increasing number of problems related to marriage break-ups, single parent families, solvent abuse, drugs, pre- and extra-marital sex, alcoholism, family discord, lack of parental control, high levels of unemployment, and so on. These are problems which are acute both outside *and* inside the church family, and we, as Christians, should be addressing ourselves to them in both spheres. Coupled with this is a point already made — the church needs to rediscover its caring role within society. Many people can be won for Christ if they are shown compassion and helped in life-crises (cf. John 8; Matthew 17; Luke 5; John 4 etc.). This may mean a radical change in attitudes and in the way in which we administer church resources, but I believe that it is essential that we become more involved in the community around us and address ourselves to the personal needs and problems within the geographical areas in which we serve God.

This article is not designed to outline a particular kind of counselling, nor is it intended to turn the individuals who read it into expert counsellors overnight. What it does aim to do is to give some basic, practical guidelines for an interview/counselling session: how to make people feel at ease, give and receive relevant information, pick up verbal and non-verbal cues, clarify and define problems and how the counsellor's behaviour can have both positive and negative aspects. Realizing how an interview is structured and the various stages that it involves is important in giving purpose and direction to a process which can so easily lose its way and move very little from where it started.

Hopefully, reading this will encourage those already interested in this subject to read and practise in a constructive way so as to improve their skills as counsellors. It must be stressed at this point that to be a good counsellor involves not only natural skills but also years of practice and reflection, including acquainting oneself with the relevant literature. The guidelines that follow are therefore by way of introduction, but may be of some help to those who are faced with a counselling situation and are finding it difficult to know what to do next. Their ultimate aim is that through helping individuals through the problems that a fallen

world produces we can bring them into a deeper understanding of and personal relationship with God.

## Introduction

Any encounter between two people is a complex event involving several processes. Each perceives the other, and also perceives the other perceiving him. Each person behaves in such a way as to attempt to influence the other's perceptions and, at the same time, to adjust and change his reactions and behaviour according to the feedback he receives. Therefore a meeting between two people produces an interaction which is an evolving process in which each person perceives the other's verbal and non-verbal actions, and learns to react to these actions, changing and adapting their own behaviour either appropriately or inappropriately. This can be explained as follows:

Person A perceives person B  
 Person B perceives person A  
 Person A perceives person B perceiving person A  
 Person B perceives person A perceiving person B  
 Person A behaves (e.g. by greeting person B)  
 Person B perceives person A's behaviour and responds according to the way he has understood what he has seen and responds behaviourally.

So we see that a meeting between two people can very quickly become a complex affair in which each person in the dyad can have a very false impression of the other, and in consequence their aims and objectives.

The behaviour which takes place can be differentiated into two types — verbal and non-verbal. Verbal behaviour or language tends to be concerned with opinions, problems, facts and objects, whereas non-verbal behaviour generally communicates emotions and attitudes. Language is usually carefully managed, whereas non-verbal signals are more spontaneous and less easy to control consciously. Both are interdependent, and one can impinge on the other (e.g. how and where we sit can convey a particular attitude, and what we say may reinforce or contradict the attitude we have portrayed non-verbally: the converse is also true).

Therefore it is helpful to be aware that your verbal and non-verbal behaviour is having an effect on the interview (and vice-versa) and that you are both perceiving each other's behaviour. In practice these processes form a rapid stream of feedback loops, each one affecting the next.

Non-verbal messages come via touch, dress, jewellery, body movements, voice (tone, pitch, speed), vocabulary, facial expressions, eye

contact (gaze or avoidance), closed sitting, hunched-up positions, slouching, hopeless droopiness, gestures of hands, feet or legs. All these convey aspects of the person to us. It is important to remember that our non-verbal messages are also being perceived by the interviewee. Through training ourselves and being trained we can respond to and be aware of these sometimes fleeting signs. Their context, persistence and repetitiveness can give us information regarding the person we are interviewing.

Language and vocabulary should be attuned to the person you are interviewing or counselling. Age and intelligence, cultural and educational background as well as their present emotional state, should be taken into account. A rule of thumb is: the simpler the language the better. You should always ask if you have made yourself clear. As has already been pointed out, what we *think* we say or do is not always what is perceived by the interviewee.

Of course, much of your contact depends on how well you know the individual and how much you know about them. If it is a young person who has grown up in your church or a married couple whom you have known for many years, the interview *may* be more relaxed and easy to conduct. On the other hand, the nature or difficulty of the problem may cause uneasiness, confusion or embarrassment between the best of friends. To be aware of verbal and non-verbal cues is particularly important in such cases. It is equally important if you are counselling someone who is new to your church or whom you have never met before.

## **Preliminaries**

The stages which precede an interview need to be carefully managed since they can be important factors which determine the outcome of the interview.

It must be realized that before an interview each participant is influenced by his store of expectations built up from previous experiences. Also, factors such as role, status and the purpose of the contact influence how both parties respond and react to the interview. These reactions/responses and the behaviour they elicit tend to fit the expectations of the other person.

In a church setting the first contact may be made through a letter, telephone call, face-to-face contact (planned or otherwise) or a long-term relationship. It is valuable if each stage is observed, since it can lay the basis for a beneficial working relationship. For example, a formal letter to a social worker or doctor may be appropriate, or a friendly letter to

someone who is reluctant to talk, or an appropriate phone call. (We have noted that our behaviour — e.g. gaze, voice tone and gestures — can have an effect on people. In the same way we must remember that attitudes and behaviour can also be communicated by the tone of a letter or telephone conversation.) Sometimes it is necessary to reassure a person of your status, competence or the purpose of the interview, and some of the above examples are ways of facilitating this. The way in which these overtures are handled will have an important influence on the processes of the interview.

All interviews require preparatory work regarding their purpose — there will, of course, be the spontaneous, impromptu counselling session for which you cannot plan. Venue can be significant. It may be formal or informal, at the church, office or in a home. It can be on one participant's own territory or on neutral ground. All this can have an effect on the helping process. We can communicate by the way we arrange the furniture. For example, desks between persons act as barriers. But some protection can help. A small table in between, or sitting at the side of a desk, can lessen the isolation or confrontation situation without threatening too much intimacy. Seating arrangements are also important. Two people sitting opposite each other may suggest confrontation.

## **Interview stages**

The stages in an interview can take the following structure:

1. The social stage
2. Clarifying the purpose/problem stage
3. Discussion stage
4. Goal setting stage
5. Ending stage

### *The social stage*

This is a very important stage in the interview. During the greetings and first few minutes of meeting, each has collected and interpreted a great deal of data about the other. This data is used to confirm or change preconceived notions regarding each other. It is therefore an ideal opportunity to set the tone of the interview. Both parties are likely to be anxious, and because of this the tendency is to feel uncomfortable and rush this stage. It is helpful, therefore, to follow some socially accepted rituals concerned with greetings and introductions. This will help both

parties to relax and to prepare themselves for the interview. Shaking hands, arranging the seating, commenting on the weather, introduction of names and the offer of refreshments — all this can be carried out in a warm and attentive way which helps to personalize the situation and make the basis for meaningful contact between the participants. This is also the stage where role and status can be clarified and communicated. It is important that the counsellor recognize the counsellee's status for four reasons. 1. To note points of similarity which will aid the process of identification with each other. 2. To use this for the introduction of new ideas later. 3. To enable the counsellee to feel valid as a person. 4. To give both parties more time to become relaxed and to prepare to start the interview.

It is most important not to rush or omit introductions and formalities. Often, because of anxiety and the fear of the unknown, this stage is omitted or rushed, and the interview suffers in consequence.

#### *Clarifying the purpose/problem stage*

Moving from the social stage should be the responsibility of the interviewer. The next stage is concerned with clarifying and agreeing the purpose of the meeting. The change should be made clear, and a conscious effort should be made to change the atmosphere to one of 'work'. It is necessary for the interviewer to identify his role and status and the reasons for the interview. Introductory remarks can do a number of things. 1. They identify the name, role and purpose of the interviewer. 2. They set specific time limits. 3. They state the aim of the interview. 4. They seek the agreement of the interviewee. (This is of the utmost importance. We do not want individuals to be involved against their will, and there is a much greater chance of success if you have the individual's consent.) 5. They give the interview a point from which to begin.

The scene has been set for both parties to begin to clarify the purpose of the interview by making clear the abilities and purposes of the interviewer and the expectations of the interviewee. There should then follow a period of negotiation and exploration which allows the purpose and the problem for solution to be fully clarified. It may help, for instance, to have an informal written contract which can be referred to and amended if the need arises. To facilitate this you could ask the interviewee to write down his expectations of the interview, and his felt needs. Writing down these points can not only help to clarify ideas but can serve as a point of reference if an area becomes muddled or fudged.

During this stage, the interviewer should be using his focusing, listening and attending skills. He must encourage the interviewee to be concrete in his descriptions and must help him to select issues to focus on

first. Although the interviewer should *listen* throughout the interview, it is especially important that he should do so at this stage. Listening well is vitally important, and we should resist the temptation to reach preconceived conclusions on a little information. It is necessary, however, to use our own experiences and knowledge as we listen, in order to build up a picture and framework of the presenting problem. This will enable us to help the person if they fall silent or find it difficult to express themselves.

This leads us to an important but difficult area — silence. Silence tends to generate anxiety, but it can be productive. Understanding a silence may lie in what was discussed prior to the silence. We must be careful to balance respect for the individual's right and need to withdraw or fall quiet with the sensible use of his and your time. Silence can be the springboard to another area or the point at which you can probe deeper into what has been said previously. But it must be stressed that silence should be respected. If it is it can be constructive and supportive. Above all, do not be afraid of silence.

### *Discussion stage*

This stage is concerned with testing out the ideas which the interviewer has formulated regarding the nature of the problem. He may do this by summarizing what he *thinks* has been said, challenging the same, offering information, probing to ascertain whether more information is forthcoming or whether more information is needed. The interviewer should be involved in engaging the interviewee in a problem-solving activity which will lead to some agreement about goals.

### *Goal setting stage*

Participants should now attempt to reach some agreement about further action. This may be simple or complex. It could mean a series of counselling sessions or a simple problem-solving approach (e.g. financial) which redresses the equilibrium in the interviewee's life and enables them to cope.

### *Ending stage*

This stage, like the first, is often rushed or omitted. The end of the interview should be signalled in good time, so that any further important points the interviewee wanted to say can be said. Sufficient time should be allowed to enable the interviewee to leave unhurriedly and without feeling under pressure to leave. Social rituals can be helpful



once more. These allow the person to feel like an individual, and to leave feeling that the interview has terminated on a positive note. The interviewer should take responsibility to end the interview at the time agreed at the beginning. It is not usually helpful to allow the interview to drift on. This entails the interview ending either vaguely or abruptly, both of which are undesirable. It also leaves the interview without structure, which can be counterproductive, especially if you are trying to help someone who needs structure and boundaries.

### **Practical points**

Let us now look at a few practical aspects of interviewing and counselling which are related to what we have already discussed.

A useful mnemonic for aiding people to develop attending and listening skills is S.O.L.E.R.

*S.* means that we should face the other person *squarely*. This is the basic posture of involvement. It says, 'I am available to you.' Turning at an angle from another person lessens your involvement.

*O.* calls on us to adopt an *open* posture. Arms and legs crossed are often signs of lessened involvement. If you have an open posture you are not on the defensive but are signifying that you are open to what the other person has to say to you and you to them. (Incidentally, this is a reminder of the need to be non-judgemental. We may not agree with what a person is doing or saying, and it will be appropriate at some stage to instruct on what God says regarding an issue. But a judgemental attitude on our part cannot fail to be counterproductive.)

*L.* indicates that we should *lean* towards the other. This again shows involvement and availability. People who are seriously involved in a conversation will automatically lean towards each other as a natural sign of their involvement.

*E.* reminds us to maintain good *eye* contact. You should spend much of the time looking directly at the person you are interviewing. This should not be a 'staring-out contest' but an indication of deep involvement. When people are involved in conversation their eye contact is almost uninterrupted. They are not self-conscious but involved.

*R.* invites us to be at home and relatively *relaxed*. If you are able to convey the message that you are relaxed, this will help the interviewee to feel more at home with you. Of course you should not be so relaxed that you are not listening or attending properly, but your demeanour should allow for the situation to be less threatening and anxious.

Having looked at how we should present ourselves, here are some points which may help in a positive way. You could call this 'counselling First-Aid'.

1. If there is a crisis, first help defuse the crisis.
2. Begin with a manageable problem, i.e. one which shows some promise of being successfully handled.
3. When possible, move from less severe to more severe problems.

It is usually far better policy to enable a person to overcome a problem themselves rather than do everything for them. Solving smaller manageable problems first is an excellent way of gaining the interviewee's confidence which encourages them to go on to tackle larger problems. Allied to this, you may find that by solving one or two minor problems the individual is able to cope on his own with other problems. We all have a threshold beyond which our powers to cope are disabled. The alleviating of one or two problems may be enough to redress the balance.

## Summary

1. There are many needy people in our communities for whom we have a legitimate concern.
2. We must educate ourselves to the problems around us and how we can help people to deal with them.
3. Our actions and reactions, verbal and non-verbal cues, are important in any encounter with people. We should be aware of them and of their consequences.
4. Preparation for an interview is important. Venue, initial contact etc. should be carefully planned.
5. Be aware of the stages of an interview. Do not allow them to structure you but use them to give you insights which will make you aware of the processes and in turn help you to help others.
6. Don't rush the social and ending stages.
7. Clarify the purpose, limitations and time-limit of your interviews.
8. Listen carefully, and make sure that you have understood and that you are understood.
9. Use silence constructively, and don't be afraid of it.
10. Make the interviewee feel important, an individual and at ease. Use language he will understand.
11. Scrupulously respect confidentiality.
12. Be non-judgemental.
13. Remember S.O.L.E.R. and First Aid.

14. All your work should be done in an attitude of prayer.
15. Use God's word and prayer in your sessions when appropriate.

The last two points are obviously of great importance, and without them our help will never be as effective as it could be. In my opinion there is no need to develop a Christian counselling model. If we are living a life in God's will then our Christian love and witness should be apparent in all we do and should pervade our counselling sessions. The degree of confidence, security and purpose which our Christian faith in a risen saviour gives to us has no equivalent in the secular world. At his best the Christian counsellor should be less prone to disillusionment and frustration in the face of difficulties or failure than his secular counterpart. This may not make him a 'better' counsellor than a non-Christian but it certainly should make him better equipped to cope with difficulties.

The reference in the letter of James to the power of the tongue takes us to two final points. Firstly, confidentiality. I cannot stress too heavily the necessity that whatever passes between you and a counsellee must be held in the strictest confidence. You may be dealing with highly emotional and sensitive subjects, and it is the right of the individual to demand complete confidence. A counsellee is entrusting you with very private matters, and it is not open to you to talk of these outside the interview room. If you break a confidence you will lose respect and your work will be nullified. Only if the counsellee gives specific consent may you make the problem a subject of shared prayer with the church. Secondly, James tells us how our tongue can be used for good as well as evil. Trained correctly, we can use our natural abilities to help people in crisis situations in a positive way which will help them to a deeper understanding of God.

'If . . . words are to enter men's hearts and bear fruit, they must be the right words shaped cunningly to pass men's defences and explode silently and effectually within their minds.' (J. B. Phillips)