

**DOING THE JOB WELL:  
LOOKING AT THE ROLE OF ETHICS AND  
ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN THE WORK OF  
PASTORAL COUNSELLORS**

*Ms H Human*  
*Student: MA Practical Theology,*  
*&*  
*Prof JC Müller*  
*Dept of Practical Theology*  
*University of Pretoria*  
*Pretoria*

**ABSTRACT**

*This article looks at the experiences and needs of pastoral counsellors and ministers regarding ethical dilemmas in performing their duties. The problem that arose is that pastoral counsellors have an ethically and psychologically dangerous task and are not necessarily adequately prepared for or supported in that task.*

*It is a study conducted within the framework of practical theology. A social constructionist paradigm, supported by a narrative approach to research was chosen. Thus the research was of a descriptive, qualitative nature. The empirical research took the form of unstructured interviews with pastoral counsellors and others who work in related circumstances. Three themes were investigated as playing a role in pastoral counsellors' experiences of ethical issues. They are: training and the role of mentors, approach to ethics and ethical dilemmas. Professional ethics was also identified as a contributing factor in the literature review.*

*This study has shown that the emerging profession of pastoral counselling is faced with challenges in terms of ethics.*

## **1 WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF DOING THE JOB WELL?**

Social constructionism teaches us that reality is created in the spaces between individuals, where their stories merge (Müller 2000:58). Therefore, the space between counsellor and counselee should be a space where stories can be safely shared. There is a depth of pain and confusion in people's lives that commands the utmost respect. The pastoral counsellor's job is to be an "interpreter and guide" (Gerkin 1984:39). They have to listen to and interpret people's stories in such a way that they can help them to change those stories for the better. The only way to do that is to care deeply about their stories and to recognise the authenticity and power of their own voices and their own knowledge of their lives. No counsellor, despite qualifications, knows more about somebody's life than the person who has lived it. In the end, everything related to being a good counsellor is for the benefit of the counselee and not the counsellor.

The dilemma that arises is that, although counsellors have high ideals, people make mistakes. The whole world is full of laws and codes that show people how to avoid mistakes. Pastoral counsellors also need the assistance of a code and a governing council in South Africa.

The act of caring for and helping other people is a manifestation of the counsellors' desire for them to live the best life that they can. This includes ensuring that you are well-trained and skilled and try to make the best decisions possible at all times. Counsellors need to be skilled in what they do and much time is spent on that. The question that has not been answered is whether enough time is spent on ethics. Lynch (2002:1) writes that "ethics ... is one of those disciplines whose relevance to pastoral practice has not been considered in such depth".

The weight of the responsibility that is implied in the pastoral relationship cannot be over-emphasised, since the fact that one is working with other people's suffering guarantees that one will be faced with ethical dilemmas. Gerkin (1997:228) explains that being a pastoral counsellor goes hand-in-hand with an "awareness of the fragility of life" and that, "life moves in time and therefore is constantly in a state of flux. That reality itself makes for a fragile, unstable existence for all humankind."

Furthermore, pastoral counselling places one person in a position of power over another. The counsellor is approached because he/she is perceived as being able to guide someone through the process that will bring their lives back on track. Lynch (2002:61) explains, “there is often a power imbalance in such relationships with one person offering care (and often holding a particular institutional status) and the other ... needing this support.” It makes sense then to recognise the fact that any position of power, even in a caring profession, can be abused. Counsellors are not immune to temptation. This is why Collins’ (1988:31–34) guide includes a warning against sexual temptation within the counselling relationship.

A counsellor should acknowledge the imbalance of power and respect the well-being of the counsellee. Campbell (1986) makes an important point about a pastoral counsellor’s identity – that it should be rooted in humility and mutual humanity, a desire to share rather than to be in a superior position. Yet, this desire for a healthy relationship is not always enough as Lynch (2002:61) explains: “Where such power imbalances exist in human relationships, it is useful to think in terms of limits or boundaries that are placed on the actions of the more powerful partner to protect the vulnerability of the weaker one”.

The aim of the research in this article was to investigate the experiences of pastoral counsellors with regard to ethical dilemmas and decision making in their work as counsellors. Pastoral counselling is perceived to be an emerging profession, for which there are not as many support structures, such as a governing council, in place as for other more established professions. However, the work of pastoral counsellors carries as much responsibility and risk as related professions and I felt it necessary to discover more about the ethical aspect of pastoral counselling.

### **1.1 Theological, paradigmatic and research positioning: laying a foundation**

This study is specifically about pastoral counselling, which places it within the broader discipline of practical theology. I therefore explain the theological model within which I place myself as researcher, before exploring the paradigms for research. Gerkin (1997:110) espouses one of the models described by Lindbeck as “cultural-linguistic.” This model, he explains “is the most fundamen-

tal model by which a community can care for individuals and families. It has the unique ability to provide people with a storied context of ultimate meaning in their lives.” This approach most closely resembles my approach because this model teaches us that our ideas about faith and religion are shaped within and because of our community and history. In the case of the Christian community, it means that our understanding of God and faith is not formed within ourselves, or because someone tells us that things are a certain way, but amongst others and in relating with others and the phenomena that shape our culture as Christians, such as our beliefs, rituals and habits. Gerkin (1997:112) places the pastor’s position in the centre of the “dialogical connection” between the individual’s story and the community’s story.

Gerkin’s approach is supported by Müller (1996:10) who explains that it also means that the existing texts on faith shape our experience of faith. Such texts include the traditional texts such as the Bible, but also include the stories of our history and our families’ histories within the larger history. Further, they include “woorde, gebare, handelinge, historiese en maatskaplike verskynsels.” (words, gestures, actions, historical and social phenomena) (Müller 1996:10) He includes all the above texts as he espouses an eco-hermeneutical approach to pastoral care, which means that one is concerned with looking at the individual within a socially constructed context. This necessarily places the theologian within the social constructionist paradigm, the approach chosen for this research. I have used qualitative methods in a narrative approach while placing myself in the social constructionist paradigm. Within this paradigm, the search is not for objective truth, but for shared constructs. According to social constructionist theory, we construct our reality and our identity through the stories we tell and share (see Gergen 1999, Müller 2000:58).

I shall use the metaphor of a cathedral. The paradigm of social constructionism is the foundation, upon which everything will be based. If we construct our world together, then the participants and I could construct an image of what pastoral counsellors’ experiences look like. The walls, within which the participants’ stories must fit, will be the narrative approach. This approach builds further on social constructionism, by explaining that we construct our reality through the stories we tell about ourselves (Müller 2000:9).

The stories that the participants and I have shared, form the stained glass windows. As the stained glass of the Gothic ages told stories from the Bible, so our stained glass tell the stories of pastoral counsellors. The unique colours and composition of each story, in relation to the colours and composition of the other stories, affect how the finished windows look. This connects directly with the narrative approach, supporting the constructionist idea that stories shape reality (Müller 2000:58). As Babbie and Mouton (2001:272) describe “thick descriptions” as they quote Geertz (1973), I must add that the intensity of colour is what gives stained glass its beauty. Similarly, the density of shared narratives lends brightness to the colour of our stained glass windows.

Another aspect of the research is the supporting literature. The literature formed the frames of the windows, supporting and holding them together. Apart from the lead between the different colours, stained glass windows usually also have an extra grid which strengthens them. In later centuries, this grid was designed to follow the shape of the window as far as possible (De La Croix, Tansey & Kirkpatrick 1991:403). The literature study strengthened the stories of the participants, by allowing me to explore very specific questions about ethics, pastoral counselling and what it means to be a professional. What is important to note is that the literature, just as the frames of the windows were shaped by the design of the windows, followed the themes that emerged from the empirical study. It is appropriate at this point to mention that I refer to pastoral counsellors as professionals throughout.

## **2 BUILDING THE WALLS: NARRATIVE RESEARCH**

The research for this article is of a qualitative nature. Qualitative research focuses on two primary outcomes: description and understanding. This means that this article is meant to look at the stories about ethical dilemmas encountered by pastoral counsellors, to describe them and come to a greater understanding of them. It is then hoped that this understanding will lead to further questions and suggestions that will help pastoral counsellors to do their work well. From a qualitative research perspective, the best way to describe and understand whatever is being studied, is to look at it “from the perspective of the social actors themselves” (Babbie & Mouton 2001:270).

## 2.1 The actors

Obviously, if the study focussed on pastoral counsellors, the actors that were chosen have to know something about pastoral counselling. However, for the sake of getting different perspectives, four people were selected who have four different links with pastoral counselling.

- The first is a very experienced minister who has often been called on to perform the duties of a pastoral counsellor.
- The second is a minister who is now a full-time pastoral counsellor.
- The third is a minister who was completing his master's degree in pastoral counselling at the time of the interview.
- The fourth is a full-time pastoral counsellor, who comes from a background that does not include any theological study prior to her degree in pastoral counselling.

All participants were chosen for the fact that they lived and worked in Gauteng and were therefore easy to reach. This made the practical aspects of the study much easier to manage and reduced costs. It is important to note that the four participants are not related to one another, nor do they work together.

## 2.2 Method

The research is of a descriptive nature, focusing on what pastoral counsellors have to say about the topic. Thus, unstructured interviews are best suited for the research. As Babbie and Mouton (2001:270) explain, qualitative research focuses on “the actor's perspective” and “in-depth (“thick”) descriptions and understanding of actions and events.”

In keeping with the social constructionist approach, every attempt was made to contact participants for a discussion of the interpretations, before the final report, so that the interpretations do not reflect a one-sided perspective. However, owing mainly to the fact that much time had passed since the start of the study, only one participant could be contacted and responded. He expressed satisfaction with the original findings.

### **2.2.1 Interviews**

As has been mentioned, unstructured interviews were used in order to give participants as much freedom as possible in terms of their interpretation of questions and to give them the space to steer the interview to a certain extent. As Greeff (2002:298) explains, “At the root of unstructured interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of people and the meaning they make of that experience.” Therefore, one’s questions should be as open-ended as possible. Greeff (2002:298) continues to state, “interviews are social interactions in which meaning is necessarily negotiated between a number of selves.” The approach can be linked with ideas related to social constructionism, in that the generated data between interviewer and interviewee is more important than the data that existed previously in the mind of either one.

An unstructured interview should not be an unfocussed interview, therefore it is necessary to have a prepared set of questions that will help the interviewer to “minimise the drop rate” (Greeff 2002:299) and keep the conversation on track. Such a set of questions need not be followed rigidly and many questions may even be omitted or rephrased, depending on the course of the discussion.

What follows is a list of possible types of questions to be used in the interviews. Often only one or two questions were enough to spur a respondent into a dense discussion of the topic, making further questions redundant. These types of questions were:

- questions relating to how and why participants became involved in pastoral care
- questions relating to the pastoral role and professional behaviour
- questions relating to ethical decision-making and dilemmas
- general questions about the broader context of pastoral care
- participants’ recommendations

### **2.2.2 Analysing the information**

I found it most useful to look for thematic categories. It was quite surprising to discover how much of what the participants had had to say overlapped, especially considering the fact that they might have

been approaching the questions from opposite perspectives. In this way, the participants themselves helped to strengthen the *validity* of the research.

It is important to mention at this point that, regardless of the fact that a thematic categorisation may be a very “conventional” (Seidman 1991:99) method, it does not necessarily stifle the freedom of the actors to speak for themselves. The secret is to be cautious in choosing categories and to allow the categories to arise from the interviews, rather than to think of a category and then find information in the interview that fits the category (Seidman 1991). It is when one keeps this in mind that ideas arise from the records that one may not have expected. This approach falls in with the narrative approach and is probably the closest that a qualitative researcher can come to *objectivity*.

In addition, also for the sake of *reliability*, I found it helpful to return repeatedly to the notes and tapes over an extended period of time. This way, I could approach them with fresh eyes and ears and discover nuances previously missed. Further attempts were made to contact interviewees again, so that they could give further feedback and input, but owing to logistical problems this proved to be very difficult.

### **3 COLOURED GLASS: STORIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ACTORS.**

#### **3.1 Training and the role of mentors**

When asked about the importance of academic training and background, all respondents were in agreement. A counsellor’s job is to help others to the best of his or her abilities. Two respondents feel that ministers are often asked to perform the duties of a therapist, while they do not necessarily have the required skills.

One explained that, while studying pastoral counselling, he realised that what he knew of counselling was lethal. He stresses that one must be professionally qualified. Ministers are equipped to guide people spiritually but they may not fulfil the role of a psychologist or counsellor.

The other respondent is afraid that ministers often do more damage than anything else. He emphasises the importance of knowing your own boundaries and when to refer a person to somebody else.

Similarly, a respondent stressed that a pastoral counsellor who did not study theology is not equipped to deal with the theological aspects of pastoral counselling.

All respondents felt that pastoral counselling is often a “sink or swim” situation. Time and experience are the only true teachers and one must be very careful not to overstep the boundaries of one’s own knowledge. Yet, one participant explained that one must not be so careful that the minister is afraid to do anything at all.

To help overcome difficult situations, respondents recommended some important steps that need to be taken. Firstly, a respondent spoke about the necessity of in-depth practical training at university level. Secondly, another added that people should be trained to be very sensitive to their boundaries. Thirdly one should also be willing to refer one’s client to somebody else, if necessary. Fourthly, one respondent tells that she chose a mentor for herself, a more experienced counsellor. She stresses that his input is valuable and adds that the reason why she trusts him is not because he is a friend, but because he is honest and forthright. Lastly, two respondents spoke about the value of turning to literature. Nevertheless, one must be careful about what one reads. It is easy to select literature that will support one’s own convictions.

### **Approach to ethics**

The main theme of this study is ethics. What is the underlying principle that guides an ethical decision? Most people approach ethics from one of two perspectives: Either the decision is made from a deontological (virtue-based) or from a teleological (utilitarian) perspective. In other words, decisions are either made from asking, “Would a good person do this?” or from asking, “What would bring about the best outcome?” However, either decision can only be made after the decision-maker has decided what “good” or “best” means. This is where one has to look for an underlying principle.

It has already been established that all the respondents approach their work from a Christian perspective. However, only one respondent expressly stated that his decisions are based on the question: What would Christ do in this situation? This approach is based on his conviction that he is accountable to God for his actions. Thus, his approach is deontological.

The other respondents all take a more utilitarian approach. One respondent said that he always asks himself whether he is truly helping. He explains that his faith helps him to be more human and that this is what his approach is based on. Another participant prefers to try and place herself in the other person's shoes and asks, "How would I feel?"

Two approaches to ethics were identified within the group of respondents, both with the desire to do what is best for the people involved.

### **3.3 Ethical dilemmas**

Once one has looked at the respondents' approach to ethics, it is appropriate to identify situations that respondents may have found difficult, or expressed concern about, in terms of ethical decision making.

Participants named a number of tough questions they had to deal with. Questions surrounding marriage were mentioned repeatedly. One respondent tells how couples often come to him when their marriage is failing and that he sometimes finds that divorce is not out of the question. Premarital sex, an issue within the Christian community, also seems difficult to deal with. Similarly, homosexual relationships pose problems for counsellors, finding it difficult to judge two people who love one another.

Another counsellor recounted a story of great indecision, when a young counselee decided to go for an abortion and asked for help. In the end, the counsellor's compassion for her won out over any objections against abortion. Pastoral counsellors also often find themselves at people's deathbeds and in the presence of very sick people, confronted with the question of euthanasia.

Most importantly, there were issues mentioned that affect the counsellor-counselee relationship. The counsellor's level of competence is a factor that was mentioned often. If counsellors continue the relationship, when they know that they are no longer helping, participants felt that such counsellors would be acting unethically.

Further, counsellors should be honest about the limits of their competence and experience. Counsellors should be well-qualified, technically competent and experienced.

One participant was struggling with the question of whether a counsellor can terminate the counselling relationship on the basis of

personal principles. Is it ethical to say that you will no longer help someone?

Confidentiality is always mentioned when counselling ethics is discussed. Unique to pastoral counselling is the level of personal involvement in counselees' lives. The minister is expected to know everyone and be involved in everybody's lives. If that minister is also a pastoral counsellor, the lines blur. One participant explained that he tried to avoid situations that would affect him directly and tried to be as honest as possible to counselees at the start of the relationship. Although it is difficult not to get involved, especially if one is also the person's minister, participants also warn against getting too personally involved. Furthermore, participants asked the question that always follows discussions about confidentiality: "When is it acceptable to break the confidence and where does one draw the line between individual freedom and social responsibility?"

Pastoral counsellors are often faced with a broad spectrum of ethical dilemmas. The nature of the counselling relationship itself also poses a number of problems, ranging from questions about the counsellor's personal convictions to competence and confidentiality.

#### **4 BEGINNING THE FRAME: PROFESSIONAL ETHICS**

Professional ethics is a field of study that has contributed much to our understanding of the needs of professionals and their clients, in terms of how ethical codes and guidelines can protect both parties. It must be mentioned at this point that the topic of professional ethics is not being explored as a separate entity, but in support of what has already been said about the nature of pastoral care and counselling as an emerging profession and the need for a governing council in South Africa.

A statement was made, regarding the fact that pastoral counsellors should be professionally qualified. This premise is one of the key concepts that are mentioned when professional ethics specialists discuss the nature of professions. Prominent specialist Bayles (1989:8) explains that "extensive training" is one of the "central features" characterising the professions. Furthermore, such training should be predominantly intellectual: it should include a body of knowledge that is not widely accessible and is employed by the professional in service of the wider community. According to Bayles a professional must hold the necessary licence from a governing body

or the required academic qualifications. Similarly, the Health Professions Council of South Africa states, in the *Rules of conduct pertaining specifically to psychologists*, often used as a guide by pastoral counsellors in South Africa, “A psychologist shall develop, maintain and encourage high standards of professional competence to ensure that the public is protected from professional practices that fall short of international and national best practice standard.” (2004:1) and “A psychologist shall limit his or her practice to areas within the boundaries of his or her competence based on formal education, training, supervised experience, and/or appropriate professional experience” (2004:2).

The one feature of the professional that deserves special attention, is what Bayles (1989:9) terms the professional’s “autonomy”. He explains that in all examples of the professions “an element of autonomy remains because the professionals are expected to exercise a considerable degree of discretionary judgement within the work context”. In terms of pastoral counselling and ethical questions, this is a very important aspect. One needs to look at the nature of the relationship between professional and client and the counselling relationship in order to place Bayles’s statement in perspective.

Bayles (1989:75) explains that the relationship between a professional and a client can take a number of different forms. Firstly, the professional can be seen as the client’s “agent” working on behalf of the client giving the greatest authority and decision-making power to the client. Secondly, the relationship can be seen as a “contract” between equals where both parties carry an equal amount of responsibility. However, this type of relationship does not acknowledge the fact that professionals are often employed because they have a greater knowledge about a specific field than the persons who employ them. A third possibility is a “friendship” in that it is a relationship of mutual co-operation. Arguments against this concept explain that the client-professional relationship is too one-sided to be considered a “friendship”. Fourthly, the client-professional relationship could be characterised as “paternalistic.” In this model, the professional holds all the authority. The last model is a “fiduciary” model, “in which the professional’s superior knowledge is recognised, but the client retains a significant authority and responsibility in decision-making” (Bayles 1989:77). Thus, the client is considered competent enough to make decisions or give consent for the professional to act on their

behalf, trusting the professional to act correctly (see Bayles 1989:69–79).

Trust is at the centre of professional ethics, especially in the “fiduciary” model, as described by Bayles. If the client wants the professional to act on their behalf, the professional must earn the client’s trust. Bayles (1989:79) identifies seven characteristics of a professional’s actions without which the professional cannot be considered trustworthy: honesty, candour, competence, diligence, loyalty, fairness and discretion.

In terms of pastoral counselling, professional ethics also relies on the nature of the relationship and the characteristics of the professional’s actions. Bayles’s “fiduciary” model resembles the counselling relationship as it is described by Müller (1996:33): “Al is die verhouding noodwendig ongelyk, moet dit elemente van uitnodiging, respek, empatie, aanvaarding, ‘n positiewe houding en bevestiging bevat.” (Although the relationship is necessarily unequal, it should contain elements of invitation, respect, empathy, acceptance, a positive attitude and affirmation.) Müller continues to explain that the client’s right to help construct the relationship and make decisions may not be denied. The onus is still on the counsellor to set the boundaries, however.

Lynch (2002:59) states, “Indeed there is a growing awareness in the literature on pastoral care that pastoral relationships have the potential to be extremely damaging”. Since this is true, according to Lynch (2002:61), it is important that pastoral counsellors are fully mindful of the fact that they are often the most powerful party in the relationship and that boundaries need to be set.

Very briefly, the boundaries of the pastoral relationship can be formulated, based on a number of considerations:

- Firstly, the counsellor must be aware of the fact that counselling should take place in an appropriate setting and at appropriate times.
- Secondly, the counsellor should make the boundaries of confidentiality clear to the client, especially when the counsellor is helping more than one member of the family. Further it should be clear to both client and counsellor that confidentiality is not synonymous with secrecy.
- Thirdly, the counsellor must always be sensitive to his/her own emotional needs and vulnerability. The two parties

spend much time alone together and at least one of the two shares very intimate and personal details with the other. Counsellors are human and subject to the same temptations as others. Furthermore, counselling is an emotionally volatile endeavour, thus it is important to maintain a certain amount of distance between counsellor and client.

- Fourthly, the counsellor should determine at the start of the relationship what the aims of the counselling are, so that they have a goal to work towards and the relationship can be terminated at the appropriate time. In addition, if the counselling is going nowhere, it is the counsellor's job to realise that it may be necessary to refer the client to someone else.
- Fifthly, counsellors have to be honest about their ability to do what the clients require. If counsellors need assistance or find themselves entirely unable to provide help, they must take the necessary steps to ask for guidance. Pastoral counsellors should know of other reputable mental health practitioners in their area (see Lynch 2002:64–70).

In addition, the faith-based nature of pastoral counselling makes the counsellor responsible for letting the client know of his/her faith and discuss the role that it may play in the counselling relationship. Lynch (2002:69) also states that those who provide pastoral care should "(r)ecognise the importance of their own devotional life as the foundation of Christian pastoral care".

The above-mentioned considerations are not the only considerations for the boundaries of the counselling relationship, but they illustrate the point that boundaries are necessary for the success of the counselling relationship. A combination of support structures are necessary to help pastoral counsellors to reflect responsibly on ethical issues, explains Lynch (2002:73). Amongst them, he includes a code of conduct, appropriate training, supervision and other methods of developing the counsellor's skills.

In terms of pastoral counselling, professional ethics takes on a unique appearance. Most of the necessary characteristics of professional ethics are the same for pastoral counsellors as for other professionals. The faith-based nature of pastoral counselling adds another dimension. Most importantly, pastoral counsellors need to be regulated, so that their behaviour is not detrimental to their clients' well-being.

## **5 SHAPING THE FRAME TO THE GLASS: HOW DOES THE LITERATURE RELATE TO THE RESPONDENTS' STORIES?**

### **5.1 Training and the role of mentors**

The sentiment that pastoral counsellors will always need to be comprehensively trained and given additional support in making decisions was expressed early in this article. When asked about it, participants were in full agreement.

As long ago as 1949, the literature has stressed the value of further training for pastoral counsellors. Hiltner (1949:227) expresses concern that experience, not tempered by training, is not enough. Thus, he championed the value of “supervised experience,” in addition to the very necessary academic training.

One point that was made repeatedly by the participants is that counsellors should know their own boundaries and limitations. Hiltner's (1949: 232) advice is of value in this regard, as he explains that through supervision a counsellor can come to know his/her own strengths and weaknesses.

One participant highlighted a further consideration; that a mentor or supervisor should be someone who can offer honest, constructive criticism and advice. Reciprocally, the counsellor under supervision must be open to learning. Clinebell (1995:156) also stresses the importance of a counsellor's commitment to his/her own development.

If the supervisor cannot serve as a crutch, it may be necessary, also in the spirit of Clinebell's openness, that counsellors seek therapy as well. This will open another avenue for the counsellor to learn and grow, as Hiltner (1949:248) explains.

Furthermore, a participant was adamant that one of the counsellor's greatest assets could be his/her ability to recognise the need to refer clients to other professionals. Sands (2000:362) explains this.

To finish, the participants recommend that counsellors should further enhance their knowledge by reading and keeping abreast of new developments in their field in this way. Bayles's (1989:85) point in this regard is valid here: “A professional's knowledge that was current forty-five years ago is not so now”.

The pastoral counsellor's competence relies entirely on vigilance. Firstly, they must recognise the need for adequate academic learning as well as practical training. If counsellors are vigilant, they will also

be open to the criticism and support offered by supervisors. Further, they will be open to learning through personal therapy as well. In this way, counsellors will be aware of their own limits and be more ready to refer clients, if necessary. Lastly, a vigilant counsellor will attempt to stay up to date with advancements in the field, by reading and interacting with new knowledge.

## **5.2 Approaches to ethics and ethical dilemmas**

The aim of this article is to provide a description of pastoral counsellors' experience of ethical dilemmas and decision making. Thus, the participants' contribution to this section of the discussion is of the utmost importance.

All participants placed emphasis on the Christian orientation of their approach to ethics as well as their accountability to God and the people that they work with. The underlying principles that were identified are respect, empathy and a desire to look for the best possible outcome for the counselees.

Elford's (2000:148) explication of the pastoral relationship as a triangular one emphasises the approach of Christians to ethics as one that acknowledges the involvement of God in ethical decision making as well. Oglesby (2002:177–183) sheds light on the topic. He explains that a shift in focus towards God's grace will allow Christians to treat others with forgiveness and understanding, rather than judgement. His approach further fosters a sense of mutuality that is much needed in the postmodern South Africa that is still riddled with prejudice and uncertainty. Openness and forgiveness paves the way for love, the ultimate Christian ideal. Love enables us to look at otherwise impossible situations, realise that there is not one right answer and accept the fluidity of ethical decision making because we no longer stand in judgement of others and want to fit them into a world of black and white rules.

The participants revealed similar sentiments when they expressed their wish to be of service to others. One particular example of this is a counsellor's recount of her inner struggle when asked by a client to be with her during an abortion. She is opposed to abortion, but was able to recognise the girl's need for love and support as greater than her own prejudices.

Other important examples of ethical dilemmas that the participants mentioned also revealed their desire to be of help and to re-

spect the needs of their clients. Two participants told of their struggle with knowing when to terminate a counselling relationship. Another participant stressed that the confidentiality of the counselling relationship can pose problems, if it is not discussed in full at the outset. He wanted to know what to do in a situation where it becomes necessary to break confidentiality. This reminds us that confidentiality is always limited and that the counsellor must know when, for the well-being of the client or others, to break the confidentiality.

In conclusion, the preceding discussion has made it clear that pastoral counsellors' approach to ethics is rooted in their faith. The reason for this is that Christians' faith in God as a God of love teaches them to love others and forgive them. It shows them that they must look at others' problems creatively, so that they can help them to find solutions that will benefit them. The key to pastoral counsellors' approach to ethics must be forgiveness in practice. Examples of ethical dilemmas experienced by the participants demonstrated that counsellors approach dilemmas thoughtfully and with the good of the counselees in mind, but that they have questions about ethical decision making.

### **5.3 Professional ethics**

If a pastoral counsellor wants to be the best possible counsellor and be of service to others, his/her conduct must be professional. Thus, Bayles's theories on professional ethics were explored.

A professional, according to Bayles (1989:8), is one who has undergone much training and offers a service to the public that is not otherwise accessible. The professional's obligation to be able to work autonomously and be equipped to make decisions within his work was highlighted (Bayles 1989:9).

The central feature of the relationship between professional and client was identified as trust.

## **6 ENTERING THE SACRED LIGHT: CONCLUSION**

It was believed that the stained glass windows transformed ordinary light into sacred light, when the sun shone into the finished cathedral, enlightening those who enter. Similarly, the light shed on the question of professional ethics by participants' stories enlightens us in new ways.

Pastoral counsellors, who wish to behave professionally, must realise that the greatest amount of power in the counselling relationship lies with them. As Lynch (2002:61) explains, “there is often a power imbalance in such relationships with one person offering care (and often holding a particular institutional status) and the other, to at least some degree, needing this support”. The responsibility to lay boundaries for the relationship that will limit the amount of power that the counsellor has to its positive, helping function, rests on the shoulders of the counsellor.

The conclusion that was arrived at is that a combination of measures and support structures are necessary to help pastoral counsellors to reflect responsibly on ethical issues, as Gordon Lynch (2002:73) explains. Amongst them, he includes a code of conduct, appropriate training, supervision and other methods of developing the counsellor’s skills. “Through such supervision and training, pastoral workers may be able to strengthen their own ‘inner’ supervisor, that is, their own ability to reflect in the midst of pastoral situations about what would constitute good or bad, helpful or unhelpful, practice in that situation”. Thus it becomes clear that pastoral counsellors in South Africa have need of a governing council that will put in place and regulate the measures and support structures mentioned.

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