

**Christian Counselors and Counselors Who Are Christian:
Religion, Research, and Relationships**

May 11, 2013

Atlanta, Georgia

Several weeks ago, a corporate executive asked me a question that became more perplexing as it remained in my thoughts each day: “What is the difference between a Christian counselor and a counselor who is a Christian?” “About \$50.00 an hour—if you’re in private practice.” [That’s a joke] Seriously, there are lots of counselors out there in the real world who use the term *Christian* simply because it permits them to practice without a license.

For example, last fall, an IT expert was setting up some equipment at a conference where I was speaking. After he overheard someone say that I was an ethics professor, the IT guy came up and asked: “Is a Christian counselor someone who uses the Bible like a Ouija board?” Taken back, I asked him what he meant. He explained that he and his wife had recently been to see a marriage counselor who, after listening to each spouse for a few minutes, proceeded to take out a King James Bible, open it up to what seemed like a random place, and then read several verses of Scripture to them. The IT guy asked me, “Is **this** what Christian counselors do?”

How **does** one explain what Christian counselors do? The **differences** among those who call themselves Christian counselors often seem greater than the **similarities** that bind them together. And this may not be a bad thing, **if** we believe that the Body of Christ is large, diverse, and inclusive. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1982, 2001), states that Christianity has splintered into 26,350 denominations—as of 1970. The 2001 figure was 38,820.¹ If those estimates sound high, the Pew Forum from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) “has obtained denominational membership information from about 41,000 organizations worldwide” (The Pew Forum, 2011, p. 95).² How **do** we tell a story of ourselves that spans six continents, two millennia, and 2.2 billion followers? Of all the

world’s religions, **ours** is a **relational** religion: In the Nicene Creed, it is “**We** [who] believe in one God...” In the Lord’s Prayer, it is “**Our** Father.” In the Gospel of Luke (17: 21 NIV), “The Kingdom of God is **among you**.” In the Gospel of John (14: 27 NIV), “Peace I leave with **you**.” As Jesus demonstrated, our faith is---and has always been—**relational** in nature.

As you can see, I’m not a theologian—but a psychologist, so let me give you one last tedious professorial lecture on a topic that I **do** know something about—**research**.

Research in the field of psychotherapy recognizes over five dozen evidence-based models and over **450** theoretical models of psychotherapy.³ In the **practice** of psychotherapy, however, Common Factors Theory⁴ asserts that it is not what is **different** that makes a particular therapy more or less effective but rather what is **common** that makes therapy successful. Common factors include things like client characteristics, expectations, hope, and—the biggest single factor of all—the **relationship**—defined as the degree to which the counselor conveys an empathic, accepting, nonjudgmental environment. It is the **relationship** between the counselor and client that is the most widely cited and the most researched common factor, revealing robust findings and generating a significant body of literature in scientific journals.⁵

So how **do** we tell the story of ourselves? Let’s start with Carl Rogers (1902–1987), the son of a devout Pentecostal mother, who maintained that the empathic bond between a client and therapist was—**in and of itself**—sufficiently powerful to induce positive therapeutic change in a person. Before he became a psychologist who became America’s Christian alternative to Europe’s atheistic Freud, Dr. Rogers had been a seminary student at the University of Wisconsin.⁶ One

cannot help but see the path by which Rogers came to believe that a person, by establishing a **relationship** with an understanding, accepting counselor, could gain the insights necessary to completely restructure his or her life. Carl Rogers was a counselor who was a Christian. He was also a training director⁷ and mentor of Donald Kiesler (1933-2007), whose 1966 article on the *patient uniformity myth* (one of twelve “classic articles” in the field of clinical psychology) forever changed how psychotherapy research was conducted.⁸ Kiesler was a great training director when I was in school, and we were lucky that he decided to become a psychologist after dropping out of seminary to become a Roman Catholic priest. Don Kiesler was a counselor who was a Christian.

One of Dr. Kiesler’s best friends was James McCullough, whose landmark research in the 1990s showed how psychotherapy could be **as effective** as powerful tricyclic antidepressant medications (nefazadone, Serzone®) in treating chronic depression. In the year 2000, he was co-author of a psychotherapy outcome study that was largest psychotherapy and medication clinical trial ever conducted in psychology and psychiatry—resulting in the first psychiatric article ever to be published in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*.⁹ Jim would never have written the book on disciplined **personal involvement** in treating chronic depression¹⁰—nor would he have ever been my major professor---had he not given up his job as a United Methodist Church minister in southern Mississippi. Jim McCullough was a counselor who was a Christian. When I got my first job 1980, there was a young therapist named Donald Keeley who worked at the largest mental health center in metro-Atlanta. He not only helped change the lives of hundreds of adolescents with whom he worked at a counseling center—just a few miles from here—but he also changed the lives of the staff members—including mine—with whom he worked each day.¹¹ We were lucky to have Dr. Keeley as a counselor, because he had previously been in seminary training to become a priest. Like Don Keeley, James McCullough, and Donald Kiesler, I, **also**, am a counselor who is a Christian.

You, on the other hand, are **Christian counselors**. You stand on the **shoulders** of these counselors who are Christian. You are not only **Christian** counselors; you are the **standard of excellence** in Christian counseling. You have earned Masters’ degrees in **both** counseling psychology **and** Christian theology---integrating the sacred and the secular. You are not only **Christian** counselors; you are **professional** counselors. You are the **state of the art** in professional counseling---integrating the psychological and the spiritual.

You are **Master** counselors—integrating the empirical and the experiential. You are the **next, new generation** of counselors, with the potential to take your individual clients—and the field of counseling as a whole—farther than ever imagined by any of the pioneers of psychotherapy. You have learned your books and theories well, and now it is time to put them aside when you touch the miracle of living souls (Carl Jung, 1953, p. 4).¹² I’m talking about the healing touch---the necessary and sufficient conditions for positive therapeutic change.¹³ **Fifty years** of psychotherapy research---as well as over 45 years of my own study of psychology--have revealed three things that the Master counselor taught us 2,000 years ago: **empathy, authenticity, and unconditionality**.¹⁴ These are the cornerstones of the counseling relationship:

1st **Empathy** is your ability to feel, understand, and respond to the suffering of others. It is the prerequisite of **compassion**, more active and vigorous than empathy, which will allow you to enter into and maintain a relationship of caring with others. Although you will **listen and learn** a lot from the people you serve, you will discover that they will not **care** how much you **know** so much as they will **know** how much you **care**.

2nd **Authenticity** is also known as genuineness or congruence. It refers to your being a fully integrated person. It is the **opposite** of wearing a mask, or maintaining a façade, or being a Sunday morning Christian. Not just talking the talk, but walking the walk. It is the **balance** between what you think and how you act, the **consistency** between what you believe and how you behave,

the **integration** between who you are and what you do. In the Bible, it is what is sometimes described as *wholeness*.

3rd **Unconditionality** is described in the psychology journals as unconditional positive regard. Unconditionality involves **radical acceptance**, which, for lack of a better word, we call *love*. It is the secular version of that which in our faith tradition we call *agape*—a caring for the other that is **greater** than your care for yourself.¹⁵

“The beginning of love,” said my spiritual mentor Thomas Merton (1915–1968), “is to let those we love be **perfectly themselves**, and not twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise, we love only the **reflection** of ourselves that we see in them.”¹⁶

You, Richmond graduates, are **relational** counselors. Your empathy, authenticity, and unconditionality can be the **foundation** of the therapeutic relationship—the healing touch—in your professional work.

As **professional** counselors, what better example do you have than the **Great Physician**¹⁷ (Matthew 9:12) who touched the lives of others **exactly** where they were suffering?

As **Christian** counselors, **what better example** do you have to follow than the **Wonderful Counselor**¹⁸ (Isaiah 9:6) who **listened** to the lives of others **exactly** where they were living? As the one who **completely** integrated the sacred and the secular, our Master taught us to meet others *exactly where they are*.

So I leave you with three challenges:

1st As you leave this sacred house of worship today, I challenge you to be *living legacies* to the faith that brought you here in the first place.

2nd As you leave this great faith community, I challenge you to be *living examples* of the family that has nurtured you and tested you in your journey of faith.

3rd As you leave this unique university, I challenge you to be *living testaments* to the faith that will take you—and those you serve—beyond any horizon that you can see today.

William F. Doverspike
May 11, 2013

Note to the Reader: The bolded text shows words or phrases that were spoken with more emphasis during the address.

Footnotes

1. Barrett, D. B., Kurian, G. T., & Johnson, T. M. (Eds). (2001). *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in The Modern World* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. Page 10 cites 33,000 Protestant denominations.

Barrett, D. B., Kurian, G. T., & Johnson, T. M. (Eds). (1982). *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in The Modern World*. Oxford University Press.

Marty, M. (2007). *The Christian World: A Global History*. New York: Random, A Modern Library Chronicles Book.

Dr. Martin Marty, Lutheran Minister and Professor Emeritus of History of Modern Christianity in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, states that Christianity has splintered into 38,000 denominations.

See also interesting and provocative article posted on Alpha and Omega Ministries website: <http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php?itemid=2218>
2. Pew Forum from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. (2011, December 19). *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population*. Hamilton, MA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Christian/ChristianityAppendixB.pdf
3. The Society of Clinical Psychology, which is Division 12 of the American Psychological Association, recognizes 61 models of evidence based psychotherapy models, of more than a dozen have empirical support for the treatment of depression.

MacLennan (1996) is often cited as stating that by 1996 there were 450 models of psychotherapy. MacLennan, N. (1996). *Counselling For Managers*. Aldershot: Gower, England.
4. Miller, W., Duncan, B., & Hubble, M. (2005). Outcome-informed clinical work. In J., Norcross & M. Goldfried (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy integration* (pp. 84–104). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
5. The genesis of the therapeutic alliance can be traced all the way back to Sigmund Freud's early papers in which he noted the importance of positive attachment between the analyst and the patient.
6. Carl Rogers' first career choice was agriculture, at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, followed by history and then religion. At age 20, following his 1922 trip to Peking, China, for an international Christian conference, he started to doubt his religious convictions. To help him clarify his career choice, he attended a seminar entitled *Why am I entering the Ministry?*, after which he decided to change his career.
7. 1963 U.S. Public Health Service, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Wisconsin, Psychiatric Institute, Psychotherapy Research Group (Carl R. Rogers, Director) Madison, Wisconsin.
8. Kiesler, D. J. (1966). Some myths of psychotherapy research and the search for a paradigm. *Psychological Bulletin*, 65, 100–136.

1992 Honorary Citation by the *Clinician's Research Digest*: "In celebration of the Centennial of the American Psychological Association," the May, 1992, issue cited and reviewed Donald J. Kiesler's (1966) *Psychological Bulletin* article as one of twelve "classic articles" in the field of clinical psychology
9. Keller, M. B., McCullough, J. P., Klein, D. N., Arnow, B. A., Rush, A. J., Nemeroff, C. B., Ninan, P. T., Kocsis, J. H., Schatzberg, A., Thase, M. E., Miller, V., Keitner, G., & Markowitz, J.C. (2000). A comparison of nefazadone, the Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy and their combination for the treatment of chronic depression. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 322, 1462–1470.

"It has been tested in the largest psychotherapy and medication clinical trial ever conducted in either psychology and psychiatry and was found to be as effective as medication, and when combined with medicine, it produced highly significant response to treatment rates" (Source: <http://www.cbasp.org/dev.htm>).

"Patients who completed the study and who received combination treatment obtained the highest response rates (85%) ever reported in a depression study" (Source: <http://www.cbasp.org/bio.htm>).

McCullough, Jr., J. P. (2000). *Treatment for chronic depression: Cognitive behavioral analysis system of psychotherapy (CBASP)*. New York: Guilford Press.

10. McCullough, J. P., Jr. (2006). *Treating chronic depression with disciplined personal involvement: Cognitive behavioral analysis system of psychotherapy (CBASP)*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

11. Dr. Keeley's daughter, Professor Mary Plisco, is doing the same thing right here at Richmond.

12. Jung, Carl G. (1953). *Psychological reflections*. New York: Pantheon Books. Page 4. "Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your own creative individuality alone must decide."

13. Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

14. Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21, 95–102.

15. Of course, your caring for others must be balanced with care for yourself. In the words of St. Augustine, "Fill yourselves first, for only then will you **be able** to fill others." Remember, loving your neighbor as you love yourself requires that you first be able to love yourself so that you **can** love others.

16. Merton, T. (1955). *No man is an island*. London: Hollis & Carter, London. "The beginning of this love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be charity?" Page 168.

17. Jesus referred to himself as physician twice: Luke 4:23: "And He said to them, 'No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself!'" Matthew 9: 12-13: "But when He heard this, He said, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, I desire compassion, and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.'" The word used for physician in Greek was *iatros*, derived from *iaomai*, which refers to spiritual as well as physical healing (similar to the Hebrew concept of *shalom* or *rapha*). Jesus was undoubtedly using

the word "physician" to refer both to the spiritual and physical aspects of healing that He commanded.

18. Isaiah 9:6 (NIV): "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

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American Psychological Association

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<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

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Modern Language Association

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Note: This charge to the graduates was not published in Richmond Graduate University's (RGU) *Connecting*, although two pull-quotes were used in the Fall 2013 issue (September 9, 2013) and were also distributed to the RGU alumni network:

“You, Richmond graduates, are relational counselors whose empathy, authenticity, and unconditionality can be the foundation of a therapeutic relationship—the healing touch—in your professional work.”

“You are the next generation of Christian counselors, who will integrate the sacred and the secular, balance the empirical and the experiential, interweave the psychological and the spiritual. In doing so, you have the potential to take your individual clients---and the field of counseling as a whole---farther than ever imagined by any of the pioneers of psychotherapy.”

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