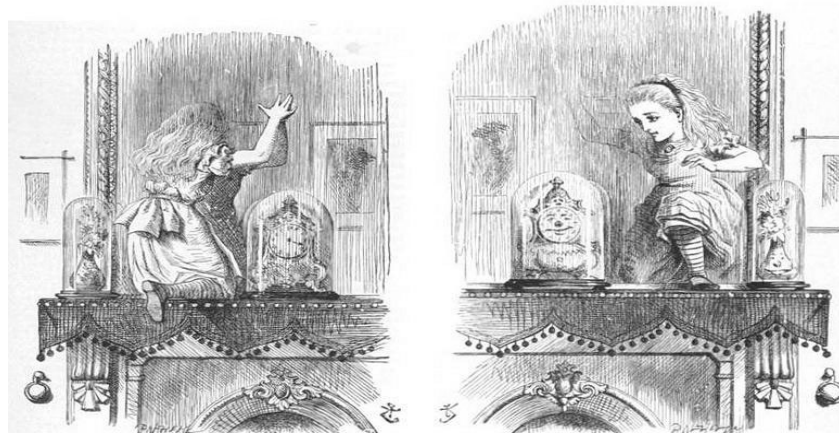


COUNSELING IN PRISONS

Through the Looking Glass



Alice entering the looking-glass

Most Americans are familiar with “Alice in Wonderland” or “Alice Through the Looking Glass.” In these stories, Alice enters a world that contrasts sharply with her own reality, blending reality with metaphorical imagination. This narrative encourages readers or viewers to explore perspectives beyond their own lives to find answers to life’s questions.

Correctional counseling operates on a similar principle, encouraging inmates to look beyond their learned reality and criminal world. Imagination can serve as a catalyst for envisioning new possibilities. Chaplains aim to help inmates reframe their perspectives, particularly through the lens of faith in God.

The term “prism” is used figuratively to describe how a particular viewpoint can clarify or distort reality. For example, “They were forced to imagine the disaster through the prism of television.” In a prison setting, chaplains challenge inmates to view their lives through the prism of new possibilities in Christ. They encourage inmates to use the Bible to discover the opportunities God offers in His Word.

New chaplains often make the mistake of relying heavily on the books and manuals from their seminary or Bible college courses. Given the vast array of resources available for addressing the issues encountered in correctional settings, this manual does not delve deeply into those materials. However, one effective counseling approach in prisons is short-term or brief counseling.¹

Like pastoral crisis intervention, which has gained prominence since 9/11, short-term counseling focuses on moving inmates forward rather than dwelling on the past. Many inmates prefer to avoid their past and seek solutions for their future release. Chaplains spend most of their time fostering new attitudes through biblical understanding to instill hope for the future.

Plato once said, “A State arises, as I conceive, out of the needs of mankind... let us begin and create in idea a State; and yet the true creator is necessity, who is the mother of our invention.” The necessity for effective short-term counseling is a crucial aspect of prison ministry, especially in today’s fast-paced, quick-fix culture. Although incarceration has evolved from being a source of shame to a badge of honor for some street gangs, it remains an abnormal event in society. Usual coping mechanisms are often inadequate for addressing the anxiety of failing to live both a normal and a criminal lifestyle.

Inmates frequently seek answers from chaplains to questions like “Why me?” or “How can I get out of here?” These inquiries are urgent, and stressful. Brief responses often include, “Because you are a sinner needing salvation,” and “If you accept Christ as Savior, things will improve for you.” However, many inmates are not ready or interested in discussing life and death issues immediately after sentencing.

If the chaplain understands the nature of the crisis and how to respond to it, they will quickly realize why certain responses to incarceration might be ineffective at the initial point of contact. Instead, the chaplain must meet the inmate where they are on their spiritual journey and respond accordingly.²

Allowing the Holy Spirit to lead and direct these initial contacts is essential. Most inmates are not ready for the invitation to eternal life at first contact. However, over time, and after the chaplain demonstrates sincere concern and compassion, the Holy Spirit prepares their ears and hearts to receive the message.

The movement of the inmate within the judicial system, including sentencing and placement, necessitates that the chaplain be an effective counselor at every encounter. Short-term biblical counseling has proven to be the most effective method, primarily because the chaplain often does not know how long the inmate will remain in their facility or how much time can be devoted to them.

Secular counseling professionals in the prison system have also recognized the need to optimize time when counseling inmates. They recommend the short-term approach to intervention as the most effective counseling method.

The short-term crisis intervention model is by far the most cost effective and, thus, the approach sought after by most health maintenance organizations (HMOs), preferred provider organizations (PPOs), and other insurance carriers in today’s mental health treatment community. Community mental health and nonprofit organizations also use the brief therapy model. Utilization review committees often limit treatment to four professional sessions and encourage completion of therapy in such community resources as twelve-step programs, and other support groups. The brief therapy method fits well with the crisis intervention approach for both professional therapists and paraprofessional counselors working in community agencies.³

A compromise between first time confrontational witnessing and a brief therapy counseling approach would be the ideal situation for all professional counselors in corrections.

Based on these considerations, it seems that pastoral counseling is best positioned as brief counseling. Long-term intensive therapy is not an effective use of the limited time of most pastors, not do most pastors possess the necessary training for this type of therapy. Short-term counseling also allows a pastor to avoid the most intense transference reactions that may accompany long-term counseling relationships. Finally, short-term counseling is more appropriate for pastors who have many pastoral ministry responsibilities.⁴

Without the need to approach the inmate with the aspects of long-term counseling, such as intense life examination or exploring the current patterns of behavior, the chaplain is free to use the bible to provide some direction for the inmate to find his own answers.

Solution focused pastoral counseling (SFPC) teaches that the counselee has all the resources he needs in God. The priority is to help the counselee get unstuck, not to generate personality change. True change occurs as a natural process of the sanctifying work of the Spirit. As we have seen, a question such as, “What is the root of the problem?” assumes that the solution is to be found somewhere deep within the problem. A question such as, “What maintains the problems?” assumes that the answer lies in present patterns that need to be analyzed,

understood, and departed from. The question that underlies a solution-focused approach is, “*How do we create solutions with the counselee?*”⁵

Creating solutions in the prison environment is limited but possible. There are many programs in the prison setting including educational, social services, and vocational training along with the religious programs to provide the inmate with the situations to implement the new lifestyle solutions. The key is permitting the inmate to discover their own solutions to changing their attitudes and actions.

During the initial meeting of the offender the chaplain should seek to answer three basic aspects of the offender’s current life; (1) Find out what the counselee wants. (2) Look for what God has already placed into the counselee’s life that is working and encourage him to do more of that. (3) Do something different.⁶ The counselor will discover that most inmates really do want to live a different life that will keep them out of prison.

One way of protecting the chaplain from frustration and a sense of failure is to recognize that the inmate will never be able to meet the expectations placed on them by the prison, by society or by the church. Most inmates will not follow the timeline that is expected for true spiritual transformation. The prison environment, the past dysfunctional life, and the current culture are just some of the huge barriers to success. The chaplain must be able to allow the inmate to move at their own pace to reach their goals.

There are some assumptions that are applied to solution focused counseling that will help the chaplain to keep a fair and balanced approach without applying too much pressure for change in the inmate.

1. God is already at work in the counselee.
2. Complex problems do not demand complex solutions.
3. Finding exceptions helps create solutions.
4. The counselee is always changing.
5. The counselee is the expert and defines the goals.
6. Solutions are co-created.
7. The counselee is not the problem, the problem is.
8. The counseling relationship is positional.
9. The counselor’s focus is on solutions.⁷

The one major presumption of this type of therapy is that the person wants help quickly and is sure it can happen like most people seeking help. “When people come to counseling seeking quick change and expecting it, they often find it.”⁸

Hope focused counseling provides great insight for the chaplain when meeting one on one with the inmates to provide solutions. “Like most brief counseling, it is a new way of conceptualizing marital counseling, its purposes, and its methods. It requires quick relationship formation, powerful overarching strategy, dynamic active methods that make change apparent and a focus on the hope of continued improvement.”⁹

The chaplain to inmate relationship will be quick to form based on the urgency for change inside prison. Both will agree that the overarching need is to halt the criminal lifestyle. But action must be taken to halt, not simply stopping criminal behavior. It is the chaplain and church volunteers who will make the change evident to the inmate and who will need to encourage and enable them to move forward in their new life.

Based on the concepts of brief short-term counseling that produce solutions for future change and hope I have personally developed a five-step method for the prison setting. They are, Re-Focus, Re-Direct, Re-Frame, Re-Work and Re-Ward.¹⁰

When re-focusing the inmate, the counselor becomes a “prism of hope” for the inmate. They direct the inmate refract their understanding of crime. The goal is to re-focus on the key areas needed to develop while incarcerated. The counselor slides the prism into the zone most needed to develop a strategy for change and a strategic intervention to develop that change. By building hope that the inmate can reach their own targeted destination. The chaplain does not define success for the inmate but simply refocuses them by building faith and hope in future choices.

The chaplain to inmate relationship will be quick to form based on the urgency for change inside prison. Both will agree that the overarching need is to halt the criminal lifestyle. But it acts to halt, not simply stopping criminal behavior. It is the chaplain and church volunteers who will make the change evident to the inmate and who will need to encourage and enable them to move forward in their new life. Refocusing the inmate away from their failures to their successes motivating them to change is a key to successful interventions. The prism or counselor instills incentive in the inmate to provide the courage to work on a strategy that builds faith in the antithesis of the prison surroundings.

To effectively guide inmates towards increased faith and willingness to work through their relationship with Christ, the following approach is recommended:

1. **Reframing:** Help inmates identify what is most important and relevant to them, aligning these values with their faith in Christ.
2. **Reworking:** Encourage the development of faith and love for Christ and ministry. While rewards may not always be immediate, providing encouragement is crucial for motivating inmates to strive for positive change.
3. **Respect and Communication:** Chaplains should not assume that inmates share their theological values and Christian worldview. This assumption can lead to confusion or resistance. Instead, chaplains should demonstrate respect for the inmates’ views and choices, fostering open communication and encouragement.
4. **Realistic Expectations:** Recognize that inmates may not be at the same theological or spiritual level as the chaplain or seasoned volunteers. Establish realistic expectations and communicate them clearly to avoid mistrust or misunderstanding.
5. **Goal Setting:** Avoid imposing specific targets on inmates. Instead, provide hope and support for them to reach their own goals. This approach allows counselors to identify both successes and areas for improvement, creating options and assisting inmates in making their own choices.

An illustrative example of hope and faith can be drawn from a personal experience: During our daughter’s brain surgeries, my wife, Denise, asked God for a sign of hope—a rainbow in a clear blue sky. This rainbow did appear and became a symbol of possibility for us. In times of conflict, we refocus our perspective through this “prism of the rainbow,” seeing challenges as opportunities for God’s answers and promises. We reframe our experiences and rework our actions based on what God expects from us, rather than our own needs and interests.

Hope is not just a concept but a way of life. For counselors, building hope through faith, love, and work is essential for supporting inmates in their journey towards positive change.

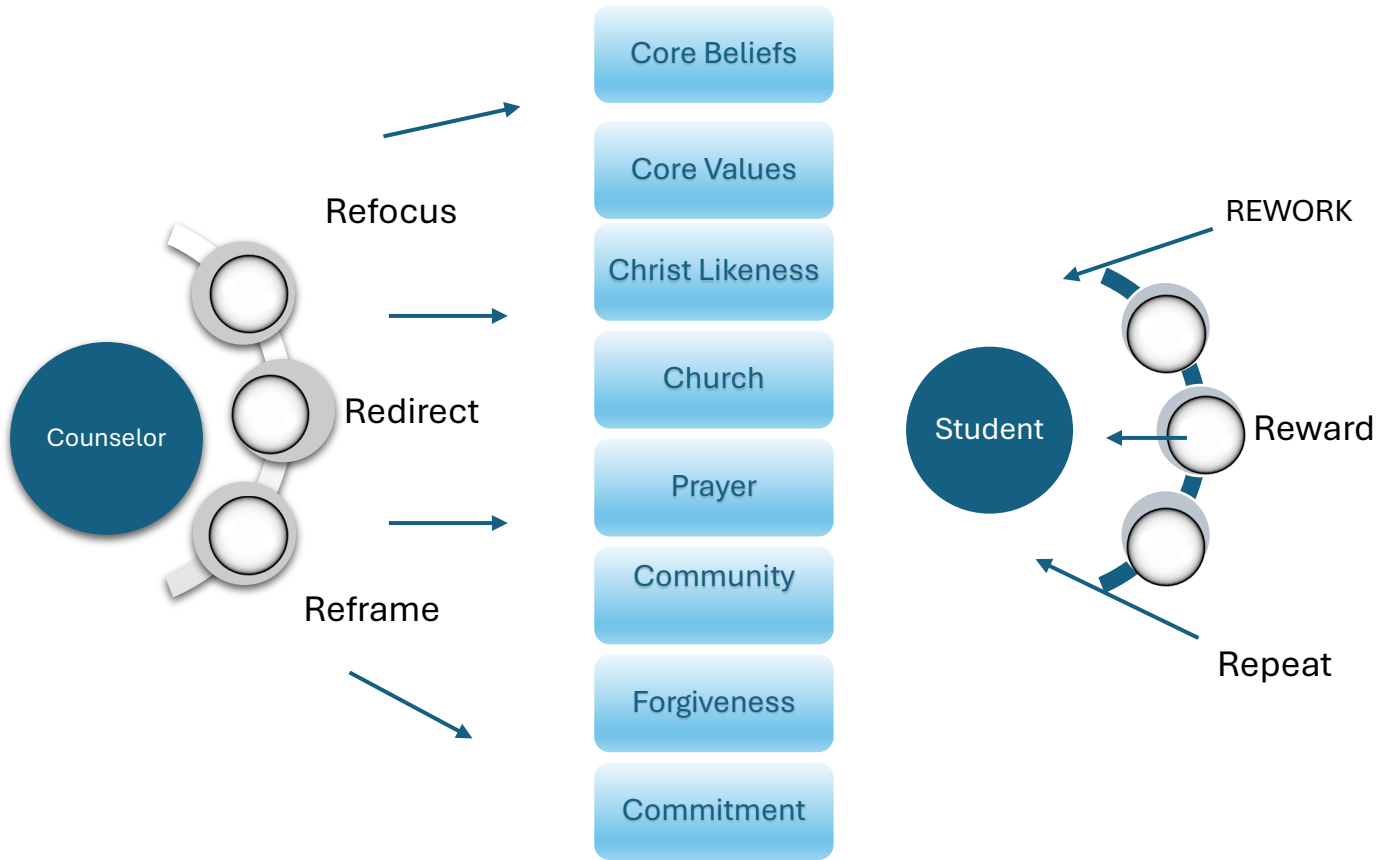
Some practical actions and activities for the chaplain to apply to the inmate in the counseling sessions are:

- (1) Using handouts develop improvement strategies that have proven successful.
- (2) Using current correctional assessment apparatus develop a written assessment from the inmate.
- (3) Show a video of inmates who have successfully transitioned.
- (4) Develop a strategy that builds hope for successful transition into community and Christ.

- (5) Frame successes and failures of transformation in terms of problems in love, faith and work towards Christ, therefore Hope.
- (6) Have the inmate reflect on your assessment and strategy.
- (7) Narrow and focus areas of agreed upon needs for development and set some goals.
- (8) Each session should be a single theme, forgiveness of victims, closeness to Christ, core visions of crime to Christ, etc.
- (9) Demonstrate how increasing love, faith and work in their relationship to Christ will keep building hope and create a new self-value.
- (10) Make change not only sensible but realistic and practical.
- (11) Use of homework is essential and for inmates plenty of time to accomplish.
- (12) When completed, the strategy should be used as a guide for pre and post release

In the following diagram the counselor can move the prism into the area most needed for change. Although the topics are not extensive it demonstrates how hope focused counseling refocuses and redirects the inmate's view of :

What Is and What Could Be



Counseling Process for Correctional Settings

9	<p>Reading Assignment:</p> <p>Short Term Counseling, Looking Through the Looking Glass</p> <p>Research</p> <p>Research web sites that interact with short-term and long-term counseling to better understand the significance of short-term counseling in prison.</p> <p>Discussion Question:</p> <p>Do you believe that short term counseling can be effective? Why or Why Not?</p>	<p>Brief essay of assigned reading</p> <p>Write a brief reaction paper of 250 words or less containing the pros and cons of short-term counseling in prison.</p> <p>Internet Resources</p> <p>Find at least five internet resources that champion the short-term counseling method. Explain why each one places short-term counseling on a high level of success and benefits.</p> <p>Discussion Question</p> <p>Provide a short essay of 250 words or less of the discussion question</p>
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END NOTES

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solution_focused_brief_therapy

² <http://www.internetevangelismday.com/engel-scale.php>

This model as presented here has undergone an interesting history. In rudimentary forms, it was first suggested by Viggo Sogaard while he was a student in the Wheaton Graduate School. It later was revised by James F Engel and published in such sources as Church Growth Bulletin and elsewhere during 1973. Since that time, modifications have been introduced as others have made suggestions. Particularly helpful comments have been advanced by Richard Senzig of the communications faculty at the Wheaton Graduate School and Professors C Peter Wagner and Charles Kraft of the Fuller School of World Mission. (From What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 1975, p. 45.)

³ Kristi Kanel, *A Guide to Crisis Intervention*, Belmont, CA: Cenage Learning, 2007, p. 16

⁴ David G Brenner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, (Grand Rapids MI : Baker Book House 2nd ed. 2003) p. 44

⁵ Charles Allen Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997) p. 44

⁶ Ibid. p. 45

⁷ Kollar, *Solution-Focused*, p. 69-93

⁸ Everett L. Worthington Jr., *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999, p. 22

⁹ Ibid. p. 27

¹⁰ Worthington, *Hope-Focused*. This five-stage strategy used for prison counseling is an adaptation of the strategy found in Worthington's Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling. However, these concepts have been used in many cognitive changing programs in the counseling fields for those in prisons. Programs like Thinking for a Change. Thresholds of Chester County Decisions Courses, <http://www.thresholdschesco.org> both use the concepts of refocusing the inmate to see the reality of the situation, redirecting the inmate to see a new solution, reframe the choice with all of the possibilities, rework the choices to the best possible choice for the inmate and then reward them for their efforts of change.