

Care and counseling

by [Rodney J. Hunter](#) in the [October 6, 1999](#) issue

*Cultivating Wholeness*, by Margaret Kornfeld

The discipline of pastoral theology has been in ferment for more than a decade. Scholarly works offering new vistas have broadened the conception and practice of pastoral and congregational care. Though many features of the old clinical model remain—the emphasis on nurturing empathic relationships, the attentiveness to "lived experience" and to dynamic and developmental process—the new outlook rejects or modifies the individualism, clergy-centeredness and attention to intrapsychic conflict in that approach. It focuses instead on social and cultural diversity, inclusiveness, gender, race, class and ethnicity. Increasingly, the recent material is also more explicitly and significantly theological.

Margaret Kornfeld brings a wealth of professional experience, wisdom and authority to the subject. An American Baptist pastor, she teaches pastoral theology at Union Theological Seminary and Blanton-Peale Institute in New York, practices pastoral psychotherapy and is a recent president of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. Her ambitious book is one of several recent attempts to provide a comprehensive text.

The challenge for contemporary writers is to integrate the wide expanse of topics and perspectives that must be considered in such a text today. It must take into account new information and theory in psychology, sociology, social psychology, cultural anthropology, cognitive science and brain research. It must be based on a substantial historical and theological foundation and relate effectively to the practice of parish ministry. It must present up-to-date treatments of lay caregiving, gender perspectives, sexual orientation, family breakdown, violence, clergy sex abuse, legal liabilities in counseling, and much more. And it must teach contemporary forms of family theory and brief counseling, and attempt a rapprochement with the historic pastoral arts of spiritual direction and formation.

Clearly, this is a high peak for any one author to scale, and the slopes are slippery indeed. But Kornfeld makes the ascent with remarkable success. Even her

shortcomings help to reveal the interesting, urgent and fundamental questions now facing pastoral care and counseling. Within its own clearly defined orientation, her book is a tour de force. Kornfeld writes in a clear and refreshingly personal style, illustrating her points with pastoral vignettes. Chapters include helpfully annotated reading suggestions, and the book ends with a fine general bibliography. A hefty set of appendices provides useful information, charts and sample document forms for pastoral record keeping and referrals.

Kornfeld's central organizing principle is her conviction that religious caregiving aims for the holistic healing and enhancement of individuals, families and communities. A corollary of this view is her rejection of all mind-body, self-other, this world-other world dualisms. Mental, physical and spiritual healing and well-being are of a piece.

In addition to skillfully using this holistic growth metaphor, popularized by Howard Clinebell a generation ago, Kornfeld brings fresh language to her task. In place of "pastor" or "rabbi" she uses the term "counselor in community," signaling her commitment to religious inclusivity and to lay caregiving. The term also distinguishes counseling done by leaders of faith communities, who have multiple roles and obligations, from that done by clinical specialists in other institutional settings. One wonders, however, whether something important to the meaning of ministry is lost when the biblical language of "pastor" and "care" and "cure of souls" gets transmuted into the blandly inclusive language of "counselor in community," or when congregations are seen as "communities," with only slight regard for their organizational life, with its programs, budgets, politics and personalities that direct, empower and often frustrate practices of care.

However, Kornfeld's treatment of listening, women's needs, clergy confidentiality, unemployment, fee-taking, and the health and spirituality of the "counselor in community" are brilliant. Though she is appropriately cautious in her treatment of formal counseling by parish clergy, pastors will find stimulating her proposal for a cognitively and behaviorally oriented "solution-focused" method of formal counseling.

I agree with Kornfeld that care and counseling should be profoundly committed to healing and well-being, and that the enhancement of personal and community life is integral to the church's theological conception of itself, the world and God. But it seems more clear to me than it does to her that the purpose of church and ministry has to do with—to put it crudely—religion, and that religion is chiefly concerned with

the meanings and ends by which people and faith communities live.

To speak of religion as a potential "resource" for health and well-being is not wholly inappropriate, since religion is an influential factor in health, and since a valuing of human wholeness is integral to Christian faith. But wholeness defined as historical, functional well-being is not the exclusive or principal point of religious life. Kornfeld's book remains rooted in the "therapeutic paradigm," where healing and wholeness finally claim priority over the search for meaning, commitment and moral purpose. In this paradigm the long and rich history of pastoral practice can be ignored, and "spirituality" can operate as a vague generic concept. God can be portrayed as an ever-flowing fount of healing and hope—saddened by sin and evil but never wrathful or punitive. And the great boundary experiences of life—failing, grieving, dying—can be treated solely as clinical problems rather than also as mysteries to be questioned, suffered and lived through.

Will I teach from this book myself? Absolutely, and eagerly. But to it I will add Charles Gerkin's less comprehensive and practical but more profoundly religious text, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Abingdon, 1997). Gerkin's text, rich in history and pastoral theological wisdom, teaches a hermeneutical "re-visioning" of pastoral care and counseling oriented to the telling and creative retelling of personal stories in relation to "God's story." It envisions the ministry of care as a fundamentally religious enterprise, embracing but not reducible to the quest for health and wholeness. It thus provides a fine and necessary context for Kornfeld's otherwise splendid work.