

## Focus on conflict management

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

"I enjoy my work — seeing persons freed up from the burdens, or anxieties, or hardships they are carrying," said Holy Name Sister Carol Ries. She was talking with me about her vocation, her way of "being Christ to others." Sister Ries is a psychotherapist with the Consultation Center for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.

Psychotherapists help "individuals reach greater potential by coping with and understanding life situations which are causing conflict," Sister Ries said. She helps people handle situations that are "hindering their personal and spiritual growth."

Some people go into counseling because they "aren't satisfied with the way they are relating" to others, Sister Ries said. Other times it's a "self-esteem issue. They don't like the way they are feeling about themselves."

Often they seek her out when a superior or a friend pressures them to get some help.

The clients she sees may be in "pain from a broken relationship, pain carried over from childhood or because of something perceived as a failure."

Sister Ries said.

She finds that an individual's community life, spiritual and family life are closely interrelated. When a person grows in one area, it affects the other areas too, she finds. "I see an integration of a person psychologically and spiritually," she explained.

But when someone experiences a conflict in one area, that conflict is likely to spill over into other relationships too, even the relationship with God, Sister Ries said. Conflict can be a burden which "prevents us from seeing God's presence and God's beauty," she continued. "It can stand in the way of deepening our relationship with God and can affect prayer life and ministerial life too."

That is where she often comes into the picture for clients — not to eliminate all conflict from their lives, but to help them manage it.

A common relationship crisis she deals with is the "empty nest" distress felt by a parent whose child is about to leave home. Wherever possible in such a crisis, Sister Ries "brings both parent and child in to see what's happening." Often she finds a "lack of communication." In the counseling session, she checks out the particulars of the situation, for instance,

"how the parent feels about the child leaving."

"It helps both parent and child to see that this is a normal thing," Sister Ries said. She helps them learn "how to maintain a relationship that's healthy for both."

Then there's the man fired from a job. When this happens, Sister Ries works with the individual on a number of issues: how he perceives the situation and how he feels about it; whether he confronted his employer about it or simply accepted it and left; whether he has experienced a similar situation previously.

Her aim, she explained, is to "help the individual become aware of himself and his behavior" and how to manage the situation. Then she tries to help the person determine a course of action.

Asked what the rewards of her profession are, Sister Ries responded: It's a joy to see persons becoming "more aware of their own value, that they are lovable." Sister Ries said that she went into this profession because she was "drawn to a one-to-one relationship aimed at enhancing another person's growth."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

## What's a pastoral counselor to do?

By Theodore Hengesbach  
NC News Service

"My parishioners want individual help to develop their spiritual lives," a parish priest told me recently. "It's really the one biggest need. My parish is growing so fast. I can't keep up."

As a way of easing the pressure on his schedule, I suggested that the priest try meeting with small groups of parishioners to examine their spiritual life.

"Small groups are fine," he agreed. "But many people really want individual attention."

As this priest made clear to me, individual pastoral counseling is a growing field of ministry in parishes. Parishioners feel they need all the help they can get to make sense of their lives and to plan for the future.

And this help needs to be tailored to individual specifications. There are no "quick fixes."

Parishioners seek out a pastoral counselor for different reasons.

Some people seek out a counselor because they need help in figuring out answers to the basic questions of life: Who am I? What does the future hold?

What pastoral counselors do is help individuals relate the Chris-

tian message to their own lives. This involves more than spiritual direction.

It means finding ways to bring the Christian tradition to bear on all of life. It means looking at an individual's background, present situation and hopes for the future.

A counselor can help a person explore new possibilities and gain renewed enthusiasm about living the Christian life.

Just what kind of person performs this ministry?

•A pastoral counselor is a mature professional who is sensitive to the needs of adults. Often this is a priest, a parish staff member or some other professional asked to do counseling on the parish's behalf.

•A counselor needs to be knowledgeable about community resources in order to refer people elsewhere when an area of need is uncovered that the counselor is not competent to handle. Sometimes counseling sessions turn up a person's need for medical care or more intensive counseling.

•The counselor is committed to confidentiality.

•Pastoral counselors need a positive sense of self and the ability to see and to accentuate the positive in others.

•Counselors need to be good listeners and genuinely interested in others. Through warm, open dialogue, a counselor facilitates and encourages self-disclosure. But counselors need to be comfortable with disclosing relevant information about themselves as well.

•Pastoral counselors are like other professionals in the helping fields. But to professional skills, the pastoral counselor adds knowledge, understanding and commitment to a religious tradition.

Together, counselor and parishioner focus on bringing the life and words of Jesus to bear on life planning. A counselor helps individuals to be committed to a vision which sees that life has ultimate value and significance.

I think that pastoral counseling is a way of realizing what Belgian Cardinal Leo Suenens once wrote: "To hope is not to dream, but to turn dreams into reality. Happy are those who dream dreams and are ready to pay the price to make them come true."

Perhaps the pastoral counselor serves as a kind of spiritual midwife, helping an individual "to turn dreams into reality."

(Hengesbach teaches at Indiana University, South Bend.)



## Biblical in

By Father John O'Connell  
NC News Service

The science of psychology is a modern phenomenon, yet many people find in the Bible's pages profound, remarkable psychological insight and skill.

Take the 10th-century B.C. author of the earliest creation account. This person, known as the Yahwist, composed stories which reveal keen knowledge of the human mind and heart.

In the story of the parade of animals before Adam, the Yahwist subtly portrays the need of a man for feminine companionship, for someone just like himself with whom he can share.

As the animals go by, Adam cannot help noticing that they go by in pairs. And Adam becomes painfully aware of his loneliness.

His anguish is sharpened by the realization that he will not find the companionship he wants among these creatures. At this point the author tells the story of the creation of the woman, the answer to the man's deep longings.

Adam exclaims: "This one, at last, is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). The man is now complete, a human being who can love someone besides himself. He can share with another and, in the process, be fulfilled.

The Yahwist also wrote of