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# THE SPIRIT, CHANGE, AND HEALING

## TOWARD A SPIRIT-CENTERED MODEL OF HEALING

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### Abstract

Spirit-centered counseling is an approach to counseling that makes full use of Spirit-centered spirituality as well as techniques and interventions used within Spirit-centered faith groups. An emphasis is always on the importance of being aware of, and experiencing, the Spirit and utilizing this awareness within the counseling endeavor. Three orienting assumptions are delineated to provide direction for the specific practices and methods of Spirit-centered counseling that prepare the way for Spirit-directed changes. Of special importance are the pneumatological imagination, Holy Spirit empowerment, and the development of a dialogical encounter, within which the counselor and the person seeking counseling experience the immanent nature of God through the Spirit's presence in the counseling endeavor.

### Introduction

There have been limited efforts among persons who counsel as pentecostals<sup>1</sup> to develop a clinical approach derived from a tradition in which the Holy Spirit is central to the counseling endeavor. Although some pentecostal clinicians have begun to reflect on their therapeutic tasks (Decker, 1996, 1997; Gilbert & Brock, 1985, 1988; French, 2017; McMahon, 1995; Parker, 2014, 2016; Serrano, 2003; Vining & Decker, 1996), Johnson, Worthington, Hook, and Aten (2013) note that

“a formal Pentecostal/charismatic model of psychotherapy has not been developed yet” (p. 339).

Although such an approach to counseling has not yet been developed, in a review of the counseling literature, Decker (2002) related that Christian counselors unanimously believe, although often tacitly so, that the Holy Spirit is available to clients and counselors to empower them for personal or spiritual growth, or service. This article goes beyond what appears to be a tacit acceptance of the Spirit in the counseling endeavor by identifying the contours of a Spirit-centered perspective of counseling and by articulating the pneumatological assumptions that frame the counseling endeavor.

## Assumptions

What is distinctive about Spirit-centered approaches to counseling is a set of orienting assumptions. These assumptions imply an openness to multiple ways of discerning the Spirit, consequently they also serve to guide the development of Spirit-centered counseling, and to define its methodology.

### An Ontological Assumption

The first assumption upon which our model of counseling is built is an *ontological assumption* that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, permeates all of creation. From the beginning, the world has been imbued with the presence of the Spirit (Genesis 1:2) who gives life (Job 33:4; 34:13–15; Psalms 104:29–30; Romans 8:18–27). This understanding suggests that followers of Jesus are to be co-participants in the Spirit’s work to transform creation into the dwelling place of God. There is intentionality to the Spirit’s activity: calling forth that which is best and granting grace and life—an abundant life (John 10:10)—to all.

### An Epistemological Assumption

Second, following our ontological assumption is an *epistemological assumption*. We believe that there are means by which human beings might know what the Spirit is doing in the world. This knowing is achieved by two means: discernment and participation. Discernment is grounded in the reality of human beings created in the image of God. It then proceeds as a dynamic engagement of the Spirit in the world, and as characterized by Howard Ervin (personal communication) as collegiality and consensus in the Holy Spirit. In the words of James in the book of

Acts (15:28) “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us . . .” (*Today’s New International Version*, 2005).

Discernment is an activity that is embedded in the larger framework of participation in the move of the Spirit in the world. Simply put, people who are Spirit-centered can discern what the Spirit is doing in the world because they participate in the life of the Spirit and the Spirit’s work in transforming creation into the dwelling place of God. This participation often results in a transrational, transformative knowing leading to encountering the Spirit in surprising ways.

## **A Functional Assumption**

Building on the previous two assumptions, our third assumption—a *functional assumption*—attests that the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world is bringing order out of chaos. One way in which the Spirit brings order out of chaos is to facilitate the ongoing narrative of God’s redemptive story. The patterns of God’s redemptive story are revealed in the macro-narratives of Scripture, especially in the ministry of Jesus.

## **Spirit-Centered Practices That Inform the Counseling Practice**

The assumptions identified above form what is distinctive about Spirit-centered counseling because they comprise the basis of the theology undergirding the entirety of the counseling process. These assumptions give rise to four practices that are essential to Spirit-centered counseling and provide the consistent lenses through which the counseling endeavor is viewed.

## **A Pneumatological Imagination**

The term *pneumatological imagination* is proposed by Amos Yong (2002) as a way of knowing that refers to the human imagination, shaped and formed in distinctive ways through the continued engagement of the Spirit with it so that it is adequate for “engagement with the world and with others in particular . . .” (p. 22). Unlike the traditional understanding of the word “imagination” that posits that the imagination is the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), Yong stipulates that “knowing as a pneumatic process” arises “. . . out of the experience of the Spirit . . . mysteriously [and] graciously received as a gift of the Spirit” (pp. 120–121). Smith (2010) considers this aspect of Spirit-centered

spirituality to be a specific construal of the world, an implicit understanding that constitutes a “take” on things (p. 79). For the Spirit-centered counselor the pneumatological imagination is a way to view the entirety of the counseling endeavor as the Spirit illumines, guides, and informs the counseling process.

## **Holy Spirit Empowerment**

It is our contention that for the Spirit-centered counselor the entirety of the counseling endeavor is infused with the presence and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Two scriptures support and substantiate this perspective: the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit “[to] live with you and [be] in you” (*New International Version*, 2011, John 14:17) and the admonition of Jesus that believers will “receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (*New International Version*, 2011, Acts 1:8).

In further clarification, Decker (1996) defines Holy Spirit empowerment *as the enhancement* [emphasis added] of understanding and interpretation of the person and the stories that are told as part of the counseling process. He further stipulates that this empowerment of the Spirit is present for both the counselor and the client and often seems to be an extraordinary intensification of the natural human abilities to make sense of what is heard and felt, and to derive new meaning from personal experiences as they coalesce into a meaningful dialogue (p. 63).

## **The Stories People Tell**

The Bible is a storybook. It is much more, of course, but the message of God’s grace and presence is told through stories. These stories tell of victories, defeats, detours, deep personal failures, of violence, confusion, and perseverance. They serve to ground people in families and communities. And often in biblical story, as the Spirit interacts with people, they feel encouraged for specific actions. New beginnings are suggested for them and comfort and support is provided.

Spirit-filled counselors help clients to begin to tell their stories. With the help of the Spirit, they begin to ask questions that result in opening an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual space for new stories and to provide a support system for a preferred story. These stories create meaning and understanding as people capture the dynamic sense that God is active and present in the world and in their personal experiences. As a result, people learn to “re-story” their lives in empowering ways (Parker, 2016, p. 62).

## The Integration of Faith and Science

Most problems that bring people to counseling develop out of a confluence of factors: the choices people make; the genetic and biologic codes that make people human; misplaced epistemological assumptions; and entrenched and habitual patterns of interaction. And human problems also develop because of outright evil.

This is because people are psychosomatospiritual beings. The psychological aspects of people (*psycho*) are indicative of the psychological mechanisms necessary to navigate human life and to develop and maintain relationships. The biological or bodily aspects of people (*soma*) identify that people live a creaturely life—flesh and blood, hair, and fingernails, all of this expressed in a physical body. The spiritual aspect of each person demonstrates that people are designed to maintain a relationship with God and that it is the Spirit of God that gives them life. But, when viewed through the lens of faith and science, each of the aspects of human life identified immediately above respond to the resources that enable a person to become a whole person: the caring of a Spirit-centered counselor, taking prescribed medication, and of course prayer. All are aided by the Spirit who enables each person to live fully as a human being.

## Methods of Spirit-Centered Counseling

Methods are procedures or techniques by which general practices are implemented. In this regard, four methods characterize Spirit-centered counseling. Relational interactions are methods that foster a relationship between the counselor and the client. Counselor dispositions frame the relational component of Spirit-centered counseling and foster a trialogical engagement during the counseling endeavor between the Spirit, the counselor, and the person receiving counseling. The second method, narrative structures, enables the telling of and listening to stories. They provide an opportunity for a client to reframe one's own story. Developing God's redemptive story provides a doorway through which Spirit-centered counselors can assist clients to connect with and participate in God's ongoing story of redemption. Instruction in the subversive wisdom of God provides a new perspective of what people perceive as the "correct" way to do things: the appropriate way to live one's life. It also enables people conceptually to enter God's story by reflecting its redemptive patterns in the context of their own personal challenges.

## Relational Interaction

Asay and Lambert (1999) state that 30% of beneficial counseling outcomes can be attributed to the therapeutic relationship—aspects of the counseling relationship over which the counselor exerts the most influence. Pope and Kline (1999) identify those personal characteristics as empathy, acceptance, and warmth. Writing about personal characteristics that grow out of a Spirit-filled person, Land (1997) refers to *abiding dispositions* [emphasis added], those enduring and prevailing tendencies of one's personality and interaction in the world, that dispose a person (emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally) “toward God and . . . neighbor” (Land 1997, p. 128). Maddox (1994) refers to Charles Wesley when he cites that “these dispositions, in true Christian action are not inherent human possessions. They emerge in conjunction with the empowering Presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives” (p. 132). Four facets of relational interaction central to Spirit-centered counseling are godly love, compassion, courage, and a trialological encounter, an engagement of the counselor, the client, and the Spirit.

### Godly Love

The New Testament reminds us that the Holy Spirit was given to remind believers of all that Jesus taught (John 14:26), most notably, to “love each other as I have loved you” (*New International Version*, 2011, John 15:12). It is the human experience of the “living flame of love” —the Holy Spirit—that produces what Paloma and Hood (2008) have called *godly love* [emphasis added], defined as the “dynamic interaction between divine and human love that enlivens benevolence” (p. 8). “Godly love” emerges from the lived experience of “loving God, being loved by God” and ultimately being motivated by this dynamic interaction to engage in selfless service to others (Lee & Paloma, 2009, p. 1). The love of God extended by Spirit-centered counselors is the ultimate relational dynamic.

### Compassion

As the Spirit empowers compassion within the heart of a counselor, she, or he, as Reichard (2014) has stipulated, is able to “fully and enthusiastically embrace the ‘other-oriented nature’ of God’s persuasive love” (p. 226), acceptance, empathy, and warmth. In support of the research cited earlier by Pope and Kline (1999), who identified acceptance, empathy, and warmth as influencing fully one-third of counseling outcomes, research conducted by Sutton, Jordan, and Worthington (2014) found that among a student population (n=265) of a small midwestern

university affiliated with a Pentecostal denomination, that “Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality . . . made a significant and unique contribution to understanding the compassionate dimension of benevolence beyond that explained by other variables” (p. 120). This finding is consistent with the biblical definition of compassion as “value others above yourself, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of [the] others” (*Today’s New International Version*, 2005, Philippians 2:3–4).

## ***Courage***

Courage is spirituality expressed as confidence and hope that is “borne out of confidence in God” (Land, 1993, p. 156). For the Spirit-centered counselor, the confidence in God cited by Land comes from biblical narratives following the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit “[to] live with you now, and later to be in you” (*New Living Translation*, 1996, John 14:17), together with the concomitant acts of healing (Acts 3:1–9; 28:8–9), exorcism (8:7), and escape from prison (Acts 12:3–19) experienced by the early believers.

Courage is also an aspect of discernment. It can be equated to enablement, “knowing what to do, or say, and when and how to do it or say it” (Decker, 2015). Spirit-directed counselors realize that discernment, in this respect, is not so much a matter of persuading the Spirit to provide answers as much as it is asking the Holy Spirit to sharpen and unblock their inner vision.

## ***A Trialogical Encounter***

A relational interaction also describes the immanent nature of God through the Spirit’s presence in the counseling endeavor. Spirit-centered counseling has been developed from an understanding of the Trinity that emphasizes the relational nature of God—God within God’s self, God relating to Jesus, God relating to the Spirit, each relating to the other in coequal hypostasizations.

The trialogical encounter is modeled after a dialogical encounter in which two people become fully able to understand each other because they have given themselves to “entering another’s worldview, sharing that consciousness, exploring its interior, [and] looking out at the wider view through its windows . . .” (Augsburger, 1986, p. 39). In much the same manner the counselor seeks to relate to the client, and vice versa, to the extent that they enter the other’s worldview, and both commune with the Spirit as the Spirit communes with them. This relationality is central to the Spirit-counseling endeavor.



## Narrative Structures

Narrative methods are used in Spirit-directed counseling to encourage those seeking counsel, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to deconstruct the socially constructed narrative by which they have been living their lives, in order to create a new story.

Any number of narrative structures are part of any counseling endeavor. But, in speaking of the narrative structures that inform Spirit-directed clinical practice, there are two that deserve particular attention: narratives regarding Scripture and healing prayer.

### *Reading Scripture through the Eyes of the Spirit*

The expansive grace and mercy of God is revealed throughout Scripture. Scripture also reveals the work of the Holy Spirit in and among all of creation, including humanity. Based on their understanding of Scripture, human beings who wrote the early creeds of the church refer to the Spirit as “the giver of life.” For these reasons we believe that Scripture is vitally important for Spirit-centered counseling

What is different, however, in Spirit-directed counseling is the reading of Scripture through the “eyes of the Spirit”—a metaphorical way of identifying how the Spirit influences the reading of the Bible. We believe that reading Scripture in this way increases one’s ability to expect the Spirit to apply biblical truth and promises to every-day experiences and circumstances. In this regard, reading Scripture may be assigned prescriptively as homework, taught didactically during sessions, used in meditation, and metaphorically. As Green (2020) stipulates, Scripture is the instrument of the Spirit so that “the reading of Scripture has a purpose, and that purpose is the making-present of the works of God” (pp. xii–xiv). The result is a conversation with God, through the Scripture, as mediated by the Spirit, that changes us for life in this world, this place, this time, these circumstances, in these contexts.

### *Healing Prayer*

Prayer is a narrative practice that is central to the life of the Spirit-filled believer, and it is central for the practice of Spirit-centered counseling. Spirit-centered counselors pray privately for their clients. They pray for their own continual transformation into the image of Christ. Prayer is offered as part of the counseling hour, and prayer is encouraged as homework as a continuation of the

conversation during the counseling hour. At other times persons are encouraged to pray in the Spirit—“pray through”—for help in developing a new story and to participate in the new story as a movement toward personal wholeness (Dobbins, 2000; Decker, 2001).

Because the words of prayer are “bite-sized pieces of one’s personal experience,” it is often in prayer that meaning is made and meaning is discovered, that a new meaning of the self in relation to the world and God emerges. The new order of meaning alters or replaces an old frame of reference and reorders damaged or inappropriate elements of self-understanding. In support of the importance of the benefits of prayer narratives, Wilkinson and Althouse (2014) surveyed 258 participants in 25 locations and found that prayer—“soaking in the presence of God”—produced palpable feelings of forgiveness of others, self, and God, as well as a greater sense of compassion and hope.

## **Developing God’s Redemptive Story**

Distinctive of the Spirit-centered model is the conviction that the on-going task of God’s redemptive story is to bring order out of chaos by imbuing all of creation with the Spirit. In Spirit-centered counseling clients are invited to reflect upon God’s redemptive story by conceptually entering God’s story by reflecting on its redemptive patterns in the context of their own personal challenges. Three methods enable clients conceptually to enter God’s ongoing story of creation: utilizing a relational epistemology, pointing out the patterns that connect, and receiving instruction into the subversive wisdom of God.

### ***A Relational Epistemology***

People acquire knowledge and information about themselves from a variety of sources and they “make meaning” of that knowledge and information. We believe, along with Wilkinson, Shank, and Hanna (2019), that people uniquely construct, rather than simply gather, or acquire, knowledge about themselves and the world in which they live. This knowledge is essential to develop a perspective of the kind of person one wishes to be, but it is also important to the task of solving human problems.

A relational epistemology emphasizes the transactional nature of the assumptions made by a person to form their core self. It examines how an individual is embedded in their social context, at home, at work, at play, and in worship. Social anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1978) refers to the relational

epistemology as the “patterns that connect.” The habitual assumptions a person makes in one context often are carried over to the other contexts of the person’s life. Spirit-directed counselors use these “patterns that connect” to help each person look at their life from a variety of perspectives.

### ***Pointing out the Patterns That Connect***

Spirit-directed counselors view meaning for each person as emerging from the relation of the individual to his or her environment. They see the person and the situation-at-hand in context. Particularly, Spirit-directed counselors demonstrate how this joint interaction of counselor and client, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, searches for patterns that emerge from the relationship of the individual to him- or herself, to her or his environment, and to the various contingencies of their lives. And Spirit-centered counselors relate the person’s assumptions and behaviors—the patterns that connect—to the narrative stories of Scripture, to what is known at the intersection of faith and science and to God.

### ***Instruction in the Subversive Wisdom of God***

Jesus, through his life and ministry, introduced a counterculture known as the Kingdom of God based on the subversive wisdom that directly contrasted the conventional wisdom of his culture (Borg, 1994). Based on radically altered values that lent themselves to significantly different patterns of perceiving and relating to oneself, to others, and to the world around them, the wisdom of Jesus offered a new way to live one’s life.

However, it is difficult to extract oneself from conventional wisdom—cognitions and behaviors consistent with one’s perception of reality as well as the underlying assumptions, rules, and values that inform it. To do anything different than what is currently being attempted often seems irrational. And yet to admit to oneself that what has always seemed like the correct way to do or say something is no longer working, to become fully aware of the wisdom of God that “passes all understanding,” is healing in and of itself (Buker, n.d.).

## **Spirit-directed Change**

We believe that Spirit-directed change is possible as God, through the Spirit, guides the process of personal growth and healing by enabling persons actively to determine what needs to change and to make the changes. Paul, writing to the Philippians, says it clearly, “It is God who works in you *to will* and *to act*” [emphasis

added] (*New International Version*, 1978, Philippians 2:13). Putting it another way, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (1996) has written, “would it be so strange to consider that the omnipresent God pervades us without displacing us? God’s pervasive presence is no stranger to our psyche” (p. 9).

Specifically, what needs to be changed, and the steps toward change, occur in what we have referred to earlier as a trialogical encounter. The trialogue is the ongoing three-way engagement of the counselor, the client, and the Spirit, as each session of the counseling endeavor is imbued with the experiences, the richness, and intensity of feeling associated with the Spirit. Each person involved in this experience becomes filled with the Spirit such that it becomes possible for both the counselor and the client to become more fully aware of—discern—the patterns that connect in the specifics of the narrative being told. The resultant discernment points to the correspondence between thought and external reality, and the comprehension so necessary to change occurs.

The elements of this discernment seem to be, as stated earlier, an enhancement of understanding and interpretation: extraordinary insight, perception, awareness, or the ability to derive meaning. It is an enhancement or intensification of natural abilities. It is an extraordinary enablement. This divine discernment also seems to involve more than a complete comprehension of the situations and contexts of the client’s life than previously understood. The Spirit enhances their desire to understand where previous lassitude or human abilities seemed to hinder the perception or observation necessary to comprehension. Illumination occurs such that either the client or the counselor develops a heightened clarity and a sharper focus. Revelation occurs in which the Spirit reveals directly to the mind or senses what needs to be understood or interpreted. The result is that they know more than they know and understand more than they realize. Anderson (1990) refers to the results of this divine dance as an agogic situation within which a kind of motive power is released that generates change. Below we discuss what we believe are some mechanisms of change and some common results of Spirit-directed change.

## **Mechanisms of Spirit-directed Change**

With the help of the Spirit, Spirit-directed counselors develop a sensitivity to change so that the expectancy of change is always present and a context for change is created. Listening to the Spirit is vital to the change effort, as is the development of attitudes and skills as a counselor. When placed at the disposal of the work of the

Spirit, these attitudes and skills, and the creation of an expectancy of change, create the atmosphere within which both participants in the change effort become able to sense what is necessary for the way forward.

### *Becoming Change Focused*

Becoming change focused requires skill. In a discussion of counselors who can facilitate change, Hubble et al. (1999) indicate that this occurs as counselors become change focused. In becoming change focused, Spirit-centered counselors become aware of the ability of the client to change and his or her openness to change. They accommodate treatment to what is presented during counseling sessions, and they tap into the client's outside world—safe persons, support groups, availability for medical care—always focusing on the possibility that things can be different.

### *Listening to the Spirit's Leading*

Believing that God desires to communicate with people, effective Spirit-directed counselors ask God to lead them. These counselors learn to listen to inner promptings of thought and images they receive, recognizing that the prompting of the Spirit comes in many and sundry ways, often involving the human sensation and perception systems, and at other times through thoughts and feelings that occur at particular points during counseling. And they teach clients to do the same. They encourage the setting aside of preconceived ideas, trusting that the Spirit will direct, and that the response of the Spirit always surpasses expectations. This belief enables them—the participants in the counseling endeavor—to act, in faith, on what they believe to be true, trusting that they will know what to do or to say or how to imagine being different.

### *Counselor Characteristics*

Spirit-filled counselors are representatives of God who are continuing our Lord's ministry of healing. They are people who, with the help of the Spirit, seek to be "salt and light" to the world as the Bible instructs us (Matthew 5:13–16). They develop the competencies necessary to working with private, personal spirituality (Richards & Bergin, 2000; Vieten et al., 2013). They also exhibit the godly love, compassion, and courage, cited earlier, as well as empathy, acceptance, and warmth. And Spirit-centered counselors allow clients to maintain autonomy by being tentative about what the Spirit may be impressing on them. These characteristics

are representative of godly love mentioned earlier in this discussion as the love that is central to Spirit-directed counseling.

## **Common Results of Spirit-Directed Change**

What changes as a result of successful counseling is related to what was, or is, needed by the person seeking help. Often reported is self-transformation identified as moving from irresponsible to responsible behavior, a recognition that the old way of being in the world was wrong and that the new way is right. Enhanced decision making is reported in which there is a witness to the Spirit as evidenced in a resonance of thought and affect, and, often in retrospect, a peaceful sense of calm (Parker, 1996).

### ***Meaning Making and Meaning Discovery***

The creation and discovery of meaning in counseling is what is often referred to as a first level change (Fraser & Solovey, 2007). Buker (in-press) identifies this first-order change as “commonsense change,” primarily concerned with changing behavior while not addressing the deeper assumptions behind that behavior. It is the most superficial of change efforts. During the process of meaning making and meaning discovery a given situation or context is considered and compared to previously encountered situations or contexts or potential contingencies. Sometimes what is considered is a new way of being in the world, one for which the person in counseling has no previous context. Consequently, new ways of thinking and feeling are created that provide a new way forward. One way in which this seems to occur is to help people re-story their lives to see themselves and the situations they face in new ways.

### ***Changing Epistemological Assumptions***

What is described immediately above is changing the way someone looks at his or her experience. But there is a second level of change at which a person changes conscious assumptions—the discovered premises that underlie behavior. The conviction is that if these deeper presuppositions can shift, the desired behavior will naturally follow. Such a process is epistemological in nature and is what is meant by second-order change (Buker, in-press).

Although not displayed in extant counseling literature, Buker (2015) postulates a third level of change in which the unconscious premises and presuppositions—the assumptions—that unconsciously influence the

interpretation of experience become conscious. When this happens, a complete paradigm shift occurs. As this occurs, Spirit-directed counselors, with the help of the Spirit, enable clients to look more closely at the assumptions that have ruled their lives, and help them to develop new assumptions. In doing so, the truth of John 10:10 becomes evident when Jesus says, “My purpose is to give life in all its fullness” (*New Living Translation*, 1996, John 10:10).

### ***Spiritual Development***

According to Buker’s (2021) CPR model of Spirit-centered change, spiritual development grows out of a similar shift in assumptions about the world as those identified above. The changed assumptions involve a complex interplay of behaviors, cognitions, and values that can be felt individually, experienced relationally, and applied culturally. Ray Anderson (1990) describes this process as becoming more competent in being human, the result of which is that the person becomes more competent in relating to all aspects of himself or herself, becomes more competent socially by expressing concern for others while maintaining a clear sense of self, and by developing a deep faith in God despite losses, challenges, and tragedy. Equally important, the result of changed assumptions is growth toward embracing the themes of the kingdom of God—“righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (*New International Version*, 1978, Romans 14:17).

### ***Developing Relapse Strategies***

The new ways of thinking and acting in the world described above are often met with resistance from within the person from an unconscious and habituated sense of self that resists change. They might also be met with resistance from the systems within which the person is embedded: families, communities of faith, and other situations and contexts the person encounters. Developing clearly defined ways to prevent returning to previous ways of being in the world requires specificity. These include purposefully anticipating the most difficult situations the person may encounter and pre-planning healthy responses. This specificity also includes the identification of communities of support: churches, community support, and self-help groups.

Perhaps foremost among these strategies to prevent returning to old patterns and situations is the destigmatizing of relapse. Sometimes the change is not as deeply defined as they wish, and viewing what could be, can be defeating, consequently, people often need to return for counseling. As Richard Dobbins would often say when talking about relapse strategies, “sometimes helping people settle for

improvement (symptom reduction and functional improvement) rather than the total victory that is the best way forward” (personal communication). This attitude enables clients to recognize the changes that have been made, gives them permission to return to counseling if necessary, and provides hope.

## *Hope*

Hope is created by the recollection of the past and the re-visioning of the future—those elements of Spirit-directed change detailed above. In this respect, Lester (1995) identified two types of hope: finite hope and transfinite hope. Finite hope is the ability to anticipate the presence of specific content or results in the future by way of concrete objects, events, and relationships (p. 63). Examples include anticipating the birth of a child, a marriage, or, within the context of counseling, encountering a situation or context that previously would have triggered old, dysfunctional ways of responding with a new way of thinking and/or behaving.

Transfinite hope is the ability to embrace the mystery and excitement of an open-ended future and the as yet unseen options. These are subjects and processes that go beyond physiological sensing and the material world. Two examples are freedom and deliverance. Another, most often within Spirit-centered communities of faith, is “to follow the leading of the Lord.” As the old gospel song says, “Many things about tomorrow I don’t seem to understand, but I know who holds tomorrow, and I know who holds my hand” (Stanphill, 1950).

## **Summary**

Spirit-centered counseling is not an accommodative approach to counseling where specific techniques are overlaid on a particular theological understanding or on a set of biblical propositions. Rather, it is an approach to counseling that makes full use of Spirit-centered spirituality as well as techniques and interventions used within Spirit-centered faith groups. An emphasis is always on the importance of being aware of, and experiencing, the Spirit and utilizing this awareness within the counseling endeavor.

A Spirit-centered approach to counseling emphasizes a set of assumptions that postulate that the Spirit is always at work in the world, most notably bringing healing and restoration to all of creation. These assumptions lead to practices that inform the entirety of the counseling endeavor. It is by way of the pneumatological imagination, for example, and Holy Spirit empowerment, that the central practices utilized in Spirit-centered counseling encourage an ongoing interaction between the



Spirit and participants in the counseling engagement. It is within this trialogical encounter that stories are told and meaning is discovered as the Spirit leads the counseling participants into all truth; the truth of God's ongoing acceptance, love and grace; the truth of the subversive wisdom of Jesus; personal truth that encourages new ways of thinking and behaving that encourages change. Further, we understand that personal growth and change are led by the Spirit, for it is in and through the Spirit of God that "we live and have our being" (*New International Version*, 1978, Acts 17:28).



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## Notes

Unless indicating a specific religious denomination, we use the lowercase *pentecostal* to refer to the diversity of people who "are radically open to the continued operations of the Spirit" (Smith, 2010, p. xvii), no matter the group in which they worship.

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