

Week #3b: Confidentiality and Disclosure in Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Direction

(a) You have recently moved to Western Michigan to become the pastor of Puddle Point Baptist Church. John, a member of your congregation, drops by the church office and wants to talk. He is depressed and having trouble sleeping at night. He asks to speak to you in confidence about a private matter. You agree and invite him into your office. He talks in a rambling way about his wife Karen, from whom he has recently separated: "You know, pastor, I still can't believe she left me. It was all the financial problems that started after I got laid off at the furniture factory. She just kept screaming at me, like it was all my fault! You know every time I think about it, it makes me so mad! I just feel like going over to her mom's place, where she's staying, and having it out with her! And if she won't listen,," he adds ominously, "by God I'll make her listen!"

You are deeply disturbed by the direction this monologue is going. In this situation how would you assess the risk of physical harm to Karen? At what point would you feel that it was not appropriate to maintain confidentiality? At what point would you feel yourself morally obligated to disclose the content of this conversation to Karen and/or the police?

(b) You work in your church's after-school tutoring program helping kids from the community who are in danger of failing out of high school. This school year you have been meeting twice a week with Laurie, who is 16 and in danger of failing both English and history. The tutoring seems to be the one bright spot in Laurie's week, which otherwise consists of staying at home watching her two younger brothers while her mom (single mother) is at work. After several months, Laurie admits to you that she has become increasingly depressed. She asks, "Can I ask you a question? Can I trust you to keep a secret?" You agree. She tells you that she is in a downward spiral and is beginning to wonder whether it would be easier to end her life. On one occasion recently when she was severely depressed, she cut her skin with scissors and contemplated swallowing the bottle of sleeping tablets her mother keeps in the medicine cabinet. You suggest that this is really serious, perhaps more serious than she realizes, and she needs to talk to her mother and/or a counselor about these feelings. She refuses. You tell her that you would be happy to go with her to talk to her mother and phone a counselor to set up an appointment. She explodes with anger, "You said you wouldn't tell! I thought I could trust you! I may be depressed but I am not crazy!" and storms out of the tutoring center.

What do you do now?