



March 4, 2022

**Senator Kathy Harrington
300 N. Salisbury St., Room 300-B
Raleigh, NC 27603**

**Representative Sarah Stevens
300 N. Salisbury St., Room 419
Raleigh, NC 27603**

Senator Harrington, Representative Stevens, Mr. Saunders, Members of the Joint Legislative Administrative Procedure Oversight Committee and Staff,

Thank you for the invitation to present information about the work of the Board of Examiners of Fee-Based Practicing Pastoral Counselors. I was present for meetings of the Joint Legislative Administrative Procedure Oversight Committee in 2017 when there was a movement to sunset the Board of Examiners of Fee-Based Practicing Pastoral Counselors and other Occupational Licensing Boards. I remember my relief when I viewed the Power Point presentation that compared the merits of licensure and certification. I thought that the Certification provided by Board of Examiners met the recommendations of the presenters perfectly. I remember a conversation about that with you, Representative Stevens, and Debbie Clary (the lobbyist for the NC Association of Pastoral Counselors at that time), after one of the Committee meetings. Five years have elapsed. A lot has happened in that time. The Board of Examiners and I thought that the matter before the APO Committee had itself sunseted. We were surprised to receive the email from Mr. Chris Saunders inviting us to make a presentation at the March 8, 2022 meeting of the APO Committee. We are, however, grateful for the opportunity to update you on the activities of the Board of Examiners since 2017.

In the intervening years, the Board of Examiners has been busy. A summary of that work, compiled by Dr. Stacey Watkins-Griffith, NCFBPPC, Vice Chair of the Board of Examiners, is included in the materials you were given for the March 8 meeting. Board members asked me to report that they have made extraordinary improvements since 2017. Since there is not time to explain the changes in the oral presentation, I will list them here.

They include:

- All of the former Board members have been replaced by representatives from a younger generation. For the first time in a long while, every position on the Board is filled, including having a Pastoral Counselor Associate as a member. Two members are African-American. Three are women. Two are retired. Five are employed full-time as Pastoral Psychotherapists.
- Since the pandemic began, members usually meet online, a major shift.
- Finances are stable and sufficient to sustain daily operations. The Executive Director, Carleton Irving, M.A. is a licensed therapist (LCMHC). Since his salary and Board expenses are completely supported by application and renewal fees, and since Board Members donate their time and resources, the Board operates at no cost to the State.
- Board Members are intent on making certification more accessible, so the number of meetings per year has been doubled to enable candidates to apply more frequently.
- At present, there are 57 pastoral Counselors at Practicing or Associate level; there is an informal goal of reaching 75-100.
- The Board has amended Administrative Rules to include qualified supervision from other disciplines and Clinical Pastoral Education.
- The Board asked the NCAPC to move legislation to raise renewal fees in order to have more of a financial cushion and to upgrade services like the Board's website.
- The capacity to submit applications, renewals and payments online has been added to the FBPPC Board's website. A FAQ page was also created; an excerpt has been included in the materials for the March 8 meeting. There is a form where candidates can email questions about equivalencies (Questions are addressed by the entire Board).
- The Board and Attorney Kenneth Haywood have compiled an update for Article 26 that would open the door wider to applicants while maintaining standards for education, experience and practical skills. It has not yet been introduced to the Legislature.
- Finally, it recently came to the Board's attention that the Divinity School at Wake Forest University is designing a degree that will lead directly to certification for Fee-Based Practicing Pastoral Counselors.

The story of Pastoral Counseling in NC entails more than the actions of the Board of Examiners. It is better told by the work of the Pastoral Counselors themselves. Please understand that we are not pastors doing therapy with and charging our own church members. I like to call us Pastoral Psychotherapists because we minister to patients with clinical mental health issues that require weeks, months, or years of specialized treatment and supportive maintenance. Few pastors have time or skills to do this intensive work, so they refer members

of their congregation, friends and family to us. They also come themselves to deal with personal, marital and congregational issues.

As a Community Representative on the Board, Larry Gabriel recently wrote: "Pastoral counseling is a very unique profession that provides a faith-based service to the citizens of North Carolina regardless of their religious status. This cannot be provided by most mental health clinics, a psychiatrist or a psychologist." Larry is right. Most mental health providers avoid conversations about faith and spirituality. A specialist in treating addictions recently asked me, "I was trained to avoid questions about faith. How do you manage them?" I replied, "I just consider all of counseling to be about spirituality." He later thanked me for changing the way he does therapy! I regularly see clients who are social workers and mental healthcare providers, as well as doctors and nurses, because they want therapy that takes faith into account.

May I share what my counseling practice looks like? Since I joined Triangle Pastoral Counseling (now "TPC: Integrated Psychotherapy and Pastoral Counseling") in 2017, my patients have included college students, school teachers, attorneys, members of a biker church, teenagers with problems at school, adult survivors of childhood abuse, self-employed electricians, contract workers for IT companies, technicians in the pharmaceutical industry, swim class and yoga teachers, parents mourning the death of children by suicide, men (usually) adjusting to retirement, a woman who confided she was living in her car in a WalMart parking lot, adults with life-long schizophrenia, a mother exhausted from caring for a disabled teenager while getting a divorce, and a family of four struggling with the sudden death of their husband and father. I have seen two *pro bono* clients for over 10 years and will likely see them until I retire. My work represents a hybrid of counseling and ministry. Since I speak Spanish, I interview immigrants whose English is limited and write immigration evaluations for them. As an ordained minister, I conduct bilingual weddings. After spending years with a patient as her health declined due to breast cancer, I conducted her funeral (She was thrilled to have found a burial plot just yards away from where Jimmy Valvano was buried!). On Sunday, February 27, I participated in a memorial service commemorating the two year anniversary of the death by suicide of a gifted young man from Long Island, whose parents live in Durham. I have also trained Stephen Ministers for six local congregations; I usually present the units on "Suicide" and "Referral." On March 7, the evening before the APO meeting, I will have presented an online seminar on "Loneliness" to the Stephen Ministers at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Raleigh.

One of the important benefits of certification as a Fee-Based Practicing Counselor is that it gives standing to receive payment from insurance companies. This allows NCFBPPCs to provide thousands of hours of therapy to State Health Plan Employees all across the state. These are county and state workers, teachers, fire and rescue personnel, police and other government employees, including some retirees. Being on the TriCare insurance panel allows us to work with veterans in partnership with their VA caregivers. As a result, I can afford to

take on low fee and pro bono clients. If the Board of Examiners is dissolved, many of the patients who pay with insurance would leave my practice since I would no longer be eligible to receive insurance payments. If I then chose to continue providing therapy, I would have to charge higher fees, cut back on low-paying clients, and provide fewer *pro bono* hours. I would consider going back to school to prepare to earn licensure in another counseling discipline, but at 64 years of age, already having earned two Masters degrees and a Doctorate in Pastoral Counseling, I wonder if the cost would be worth it. My wife says, "No more school!"

In a recent conversation with Dr. Stacey Watkins-Griffith, Board Vice-Chair, I mentioned that I had considered taking the national LCMHC exam "just for fun." She confided that she had taken the exam several years ago and passed it. She also reported that there were courses required in the LCMHC law that were not in the curriculum she had studied, so she would need more graduate courses to qualify. Furthermore, none of the supervision she had done would count, so it would be necessary to pay for more supervision hours. We figured that becoming fully licensed as LCMHCs would cost over \$10,000 and could take as long as 5 years.

I heard about the North Carolina Fee-Based Practicing Pastoral Counselor certification at meetings of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors in 2005. I was struck by the similarity of the provisions to requirements of AAPC for Fellow and Diplomate. They involved clinical work with patients, meetings with supervisors, verbata, papers on Psychology and Theology, a unit of hospital chaplaincy called "Clinical Pastoral Education," and in-person meetings with certification committees. I later learned that AAPC members, aware of how influential the process of professional formation offered by the Association was for them, decided to bring it to North Carolina. They formed the NC Association of Pastoral Counselors. The Legislature passed Article 26 at their request in 1991 and thereby created the Board of Examiners of Fee-Based Practicing Pastoral Counselors. In 1995, the group was awarded vendorship, which provided parity with other disciplines to accept insurance payments. The new law, however, had a provision that dissolved the Board in two years. Before that took place, representatives successfully lobbied to have the sunset clause removed, in 1997.

According to estimates by the Board's Executive Administrator Carleton Irving, Practicing and Associate Pastoral Counselors provide over 100,000 hours of counseling per year. That represents therapy with thousands of persons with minor issues as well as those who face very serious mental illness, including clinical depression, anxiety, grief and PTSD. Five other states, Arkansas, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire and Tennessee, also have Pastoral Counseling laws. A former member of the Board of Examiners, Russell Williams, who served on the Board for over 24 years as Member and Consultant, has documented that rates of suicide are lower in these six states! North Carolina needs Pastoral Counselors.

In discussions with the Board of Examiners and the Officers of the NC Association of Pastoral Counselors, since receiving the emailed questions from Mr. Saunders, participants recognized that many NCFBPPCs are close to retirement. There are not enough students in

development to replace them. In five to ten years, unless there are major changes in Article 26, the Board of Examiners will struggle to make ends meet. For this reason, both groups are in favor of discussing consolidation with a cognate mental health board. We hope that someone will represent Pastoral Counselors in the negotiations and legislative processes that take place. We recognize that restructuring the boards into one will be expensive and lengthy. We also hope to maintain the expectation of high standards of care for which the Board stands.

Thank-you for the opportunity to share my thoughts.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rev. R. Robert L. Cooke". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Rev." written in a smaller, more formal script than the rest of the name.

Rev. Robert L. Cooke, D.Min.

Chair, Board of Examiners, NCFBPPC