Pastoral Theologian of the Year

Among the more pressing needs in pastoral care is the one for men and women who are statesmanlike in their conduct, open with their points of view, and capable of perceiving theological and professional issues clearly. Our Pastoral Theologian of the Year is just such a man. John Patton is the Executive Director of the Georgia Association for Pastoral Care in Atlanta. He administers and participates in a program which provides clinical pastoral education for seminary students and graduates, private pastoral counseling for clients, and functions to supplement the work of the various theological seminaries in the area. He is called upon daily to interpret the work of pastoral care and the more specialized ministry of pastoral counseling to secular therapists, to students, to theological colleagues, and to denominational leaders and boards of ministry.

Patton's ability to make his way through this maze and at the same time to contribute towards the clarification and resolution of the issues facing those who specialize in pastoral counseling ministries is impressive. From positions of leadership in both pastoral counseling and clinical pastoral education, Patton has begun to articulate a point of view which is serving to illuminate complex questions and to encourage conversation among pastoral counselors and between the counselors and their church groups. He insists upon being a theologian, a churchman, and a skilled practitioner and his reflections on pastoral counseling out of these commitments are helping to move the field along.

Those who know John's history know that his present work is simply a reflection of the path he has walked all along. For example, in arguing that a pastoral counselor should be literate theologically and competent clinically, he is advocating a position his own career demonstrates. A native of Georgia, he received both his undergraduate and
his theological education at Emory University. He then went to the University of Chicago to study Pastoral Theology with Seward Hiltner and received his doctorate after completing a dissertation on Paul Tillich and Harry S. Sullivan. During the same period, John was pursuing clinical work at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, at the South Carolina State Hospital in Columbia, at the Counseling Center of the University of Chicago, and at the University of Chicago Clinics. The culmination of this period was certification as an ACPE supervisor and as a Diplomate of the AAPC.

John's insistence that pastoral counselors maintain close ties to the church also reflects his own history and commitments. He was ordained an Elder in the United Methodist Church in 1957, and he served Methodist Churches in Georgia and Illinois for four years. He worked for two years as Wesley Foundation Director at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Since 1961, he has held a series of increasingly responsible positions in the Atlanta area, first as Director of Chaplaincy Services at Emory University Hospital, Egleston Hospital for Children, and Wesley Homes Inc., then, as Director of Pastoral Counseling for the Georgia Association of Pastoral Care, and now in his present position as Executive Director of the Association. He is an Adjunct Professor of Pastoral Care at Candler School of Theology and has on occasion served as a visiting professor at both Columbia Theological Seminary and at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

John Patton is not a belligerent man. Instead he is a gentle man and a kind one. The questions he raises as President of AAPC and as an Editor of the Journal of Pastoral Care grow out of his own sense of what is needed now. He knows that many of his colleagues do not agree with him. But he also knows that questions of definition and boundary setting are crucial. He seeks to encourage others to think with him about whether pastoral counseling is ministry and whether it is competent. And he invites conversation as he attempts to describe what a pastoral counselor is, who one is, and what his/her method is.

The response that he makes to these questions grow essentially out of his ecclesiology. Thus, pastoral counseling is a ministry of the church. It is one of the ways the church brings her full impact in thought and action to society. Pastoral counselors "may not be offering Word and Sacrament in traditional ways, but the secular society needs the full representative and symbolic power of the Word and Sacrament ministry to stir a Christian awareness of the sacred in secular life." This to Patton means that pastoral counselors are "ministers under authority." Each needs knowledge of the faith and must serve as its interpreter. It also means involvement in the faith community so that