

Pastoral Counseling Conversation Guide



A structured, non-clinical guided-discovery tool for using the SDSA™ domain profile with a church member.

How to use this guide

Begin after reviewing the church member's SDSA™ domain profile. Select a meaningful domain to explore. Your role is not to tell the member what their score means about them. Use questions, reflection, clarification, and summarizing to help the member examine their own experience, put language around it, recognize patterns, identify needs, and establish goals for pastoral care.

Guiding posture: Curiosity before conclusions. Reflection before interpretation. Collaboration before advice. The pastor does not have to fill silence with an answer.

EXPLORE → CLARIFY → CONNECT → IDENTIFY → GOAL → PLAN

Non-Clinical Pastoral Counseling Skills

Open-ended inquiry

Ask questions that invite description, meaning, and reflection rather than yes/no answers.

Reflective listening

Reflect back what you heard without adding your own explanation: "It sounds like..." or "What I hear you saying is..."

Clarification

Ask what the member means by important words, beliefs, experiences, or conclusions rather than assuming shared meaning.

Summarizing

Periodically gather key themes and ask, "Did I understand that correctly?"

Prayer & Scripture with participation

Ask what kind of spiritual support the member welcomes. Do not use prayer or Scripture to bypass the member's questions or prematurely resolve distress.

Collaborative goal setting

Help the member name what they want to understand, change, experience, decide, or practice rather than assigning a goal to them.

Church Member / Client Name	_____	Conversation Date	_____
Pastor / Ministry Leader	_____	Church / Organization	_____
SDSA™ Domain Being Explored	_____		

Divine / Spiritual Relationship Struggle

Use the questions selectively. Follow the church member's language and experience through the guided-discovery sequence.

EXPLORE — What is happening?

1	Tell me more about what has been happening in your relationship with God or the Divine.
2	When did you first begin noticing this struggle?
3	What experiences seem most connected to what you are feeling now?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CLARIFY — What does it mean to them?

1	When you say you feel abandoned, angry, punished, or disconnected, what does that mean to you?
2	What are you making sense of differently now than you did before?
3	What would you want me to understand about your experience before we talk about what might help?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CONNECT — How is this affecting their life?

1	How is this affecting prayer, worship, Scripture, church, relationships, or your view of yourself?
2	Where do you notice this struggle showing up most in everyday life?
3	Has this changed the way you relate to God, other people, or your faith community?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

IDENTIFY — What do they need?

1	What do you feel you need most in this season?
2	What kind of pastoral support would feel helpful rather than pressuring?
3	Are there spiritual practices, relationships, or resources that currently feel supportive—or difficult?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

GOAL — What would they like to be different?

1	If our conversations were helpful, what would you hope to understand or experience differently?
2	What would progress look like to you?
3	Is there something about your relationship with God or your spiritual life that you would like to explore without forcing an answer?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

PLAN — What happens next?

1	What is one step you feel ready to take before we meet again?
2	What support would you like from me?
3	How will you know whether that step was helpful?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

Faith & Doubt Struggle

Use the questions selectively. Follow the church member's language and experience through the guided-discovery sequence.

EXPLORE — What is happening?

1	Tell me more about what has been changing for you spiritually.
2	When did you first notice yourself beginning to question these beliefs?
3	Which questions feel most important to you right now?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CLARIFY — What does it mean to them?

1	What does having these questions mean to you?
2	Is the questioning itself troubling you, or are you more concerned about what might happen if your beliefs change?
3	What are you afraid you might lose?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CONNECT — How is this affecting their life?

1	How has this affected your relationship with God?
2	Has it changed how you experience church, prayer, Scripture, relationships, or yourself?
3	Where are you noticing this struggle most in your everyday life?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

IDENTIFY — What do they need?

1	What do you think you need most right now?
2	What would feeling supported through this look like for you?
3	What would you not want me to assume about what you're experiencing?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

GOAL — What would they like to be different?

1	If our conversations were helpful, what would you hope would be different for you?
2	What would progress look like from your perspective?
3	Is there something you would like to understand, decide, experience, or be able to do differently?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

PLAN — What happens next?

1	What is one step you feel ready to take before we meet again?
2	What support would be helpful from me?
3	How will you know whether that step was useful?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

Moral & Values Struggle

Use the questions selectively. Follow the church member's language and experience through the guided-discovery sequence.

EXPLORE — What is happening?

1	Tell me more about the guilt, shame, conflict, or moral concern that feels most important right now.
2	What happened—or what are you wrestling with—that brought this concern forward?
3	What values or beliefs feel involved for you?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CLARIFY — What does it mean to them?

1	What does this situation say to you about yourself?
2	How are you distinguishing guilt about something you did from shame about who you are?
3	Whose expectations or standards feel most present in this struggle—your own, God's, your family's, your church's, or someone else's?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CONNECT — How is this affecting their life?

1	How is this affecting your spiritual life, relationships, decisions, or sense of worth?
2	Are there places where this struggle is keeping you stuck, avoiding something, or repeatedly punishing yourself?
3	How has this affected the way you receive grace, forgiveness, accountability, or restoration?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

IDENTIFY — What do they need?

1	What do you need in order to face this honestly without being overwhelmed by it?
2	Is there anything you feel needs repair, accountability, forgiveness, grieving, or acceptance?
3	What kind of support would help you work through this without me deciding the answer for you?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

GOAL — What would they like to be different?

1	What would it look like to move toward integrity or peace in a way that fits your values?
2	What would you like to understand differently about yourself or this situation?
3	What would tell you that you are moving forward rather than simply carrying more shame?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

PLAN — What happens next?

1	What is one realistic step you want to take?
2	Is there a conversation, practice, boundary, act of repair, or reflection you want to consider?
3	What support or follow-up would be useful from me?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

Religious / Interpersonal Struggle

Use the questions selectively. Follow the church member's language and experience through the guided-discovery sequence.

EXPLORE — What is happening?

1	Tell me about what happened with the religious leader, church, or faith community.
2	What part of that experience has stayed with you the most?
3	When did you begin noticing that it was affecting you spiritually?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CLARIFY — What does it mean to them?

1	What did that experience mean to you at the time, and what does it mean to you now?
2	What felt hurtful, unsafe, rejecting, controlling, disappointing, or confusing?
3	What do you wish someone had understood about what happened to you?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CONNECT — How is this affecting their life?

1	How has this affected your ability to trust pastors, leaders, churches, or other people?
2	Has it changed your relationship with God, your beliefs, or your willingness to participate in church?
3	Where does this experience still affect your choices, emotions, relationships, or sense of belonging?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

IDENTIFY — What do they need?

1	What would help you feel respected and supported in this conversation?
2	Are there boundaries you need in order to feel safer in religious spaces?
3	What do you need from pastoral care that you did not receive before?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

GOAL — What would they like to be different?

1	What would healing or greater freedom from this experience look like to you?
2	Is rebuilding trust a goal for you right now, or is something else more important?
3	What would you like to be able to do, feel, understand, or choose differently?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

PLAN — What happens next?

1	What is one step that feels safe and realistic for you?
2	What boundaries or supports should we honor as we continue?
3	How would you like us to follow up on what we discussed today?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

Meaning & Purpose Struggle

Use the questions selectively. Follow the church member's language and experience through the guided-discovery sequence.

EXPLORE — What is happening?

1	Tell me more about where life feels difficult to make sense of right now.
2	What has changed in your sense of purpose, direction, or identity?
3	When do you notice the questions about meaning most strongly?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CLARIFY — What does it mean to them?

1	What does 'purpose' mean to you at this point in your life?
2	What feels lost, uncertain, unfinished, or disconnected?
3	Are you trying to recover an old sense of meaning, or do you think something new may need to emerge?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CONNECT — How is this affecting their life?

1	How is this uncertainty affecting your motivation, relationships, spiritual practices, decisions, or daily life?
2	What parts of your life still feel meaningful, even if only a little?
3	Where do you feel most disconnected from the person you want to be?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

IDENTIFY — What do they need?

1	What do you need space to grieve, reconsider, discover, or rebuild?
2	What people, practices, responsibilities, or experiences still give you a sense of connection?
3	What kind of support would help you explore meaning without forcing an immediate answer?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

GOAL — What would they like to be different?

1	If you began to regain a sense of direction, what might be different?
2	What would you like to understand about this season of your life?
3	What is one area in which you would like to feel more purposeful or grounded?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

PLAN — What happens next?

1	What is one small action that would move you toward that goal?
2	What would you like to pay attention to between now and our next conversation?
3	What support would be useful from me as you explore this?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

Demonic / Spiritual Influence Struggle

Use the questions selectively. Follow the church member's language and experience through the guided-discovery sequence.

EXPLORE — What is happening?

1	Tell me what you have been experiencing that you understand as spiritual attack, oppression, possession, or harmful spiritual influence.
2	When did these experiences begin, and what was happening in your life around that time?
3	What happens during these experiences, in your own words?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CLARIFY — What does it mean to them?

1	What leads you to understand these experiences as demonic or spiritually harmful?
2	Are there other ways you have wondered about or tried to understand what is happening?
3	What would you want me to understand before I make any assumptions about your experience?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

CONNECT — How is this affecting their life?

1	How are these experiences affecting your sleep, relationships, work, daily functioning, faith, or sense of safety?
2	What happens emotionally and physically when you believe the experience is occurring?
3	Have these concerns changed what you do, where you go, whom you trust, or how you participate in church?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

IDENTIFY — What do they need?

1	What kind of help or support are you hoping for from pastoral care?
2	What has helped you feel safer, calmer, clearer, or more supported so far?
3	Are there forms of prayer or spiritual support you welcome, and are there any you do not want?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

GOAL — What would they like to be different?

1	If our pastoral conversations were helpful, what would you hope would change?
2	Would you like greater understanding, less fear, stronger coping, spiritual support, or something else?
3	What would feeling safer or more grounded look like to you?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

PLAN — What happens next?

1	What is one supportive step you feel comfortable taking before we meet again?
2	What kind of pastoral follow-up would be helpful?
3	What other support, if any, would you be willing to consider as we continue understanding what you are experiencing?
Pastoral notes / member's own language	

Collaborative Session Summary

What did the church member identify or understand more clearly?

Goal stated in the church member's own words

Agreed next step / pastoral support plan

Follow-up date or plan

Before closing: Summarize what you heard and invite correction: "Here is what I heard you saying today. What did I miss or misunderstand?"

Scope & Safety Reminder

This guide supports non-clinical pastoral counseling and guided discovery. It is not a mental-health diagnostic, crisis, suicide-risk, violence-risk, abuse, or safeguarding assessment. If concerns emerge that exceed pastoral scope or raise immediate safety concerns, follow your church's applicable crisis, safeguarding, consultation, collaboration, referral, and emergency procedures.

Additional Pastoral Counseling Notes 1

Additional space for documenting the pastoral counseling conversation.

Additional Pastoral Counseling Notes 2

Additional space for documenting the pastoral counseling conversation.

Completed By: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____