

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH'S MINISTRIES OF ...

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WORSHIP

Papers and reflection questions prepared by
THE WELLINGTON INSTITUTE OF THEOLOGY
for ministers within
the Anglican Diocese of Wellington

Canon Deborah Broome invites you to send
responses to the questions for her comment, if
this would be useful for you.

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THE MINISTRY OF PASTORAL CARE

Introduction: the purpose of this paper

This paper is primarily to help those licensed Lay Ministers who are Pastoral Carers to understand their ministry theologically. Others may also find it helpful. Pastoral care is central to the life of the Church; indeed there is a pastoral dimension to most ministries within the Church. The subject of this paper is that pastoral care which is carried out by those formally called, trained and commissioned for the task, but it is important to acknowledge that there is also much quiet, simple caring that happens between individuals and communities within (and outside) the Church.

A useful 'definition' of pastoral care, which sets this ministry in the larger perspective of the relationships people have with God and with each other, forms part of the 'Specifications for Pastoral Minister' within the Licensed Lay Ministry Handbook for the Diocese of Wellington: 'The ultimate horizon of pastoral care is the protection and fostering of people's personal and corporate relationship with Christ and His Body the Church. This care involves active and informed concern for the well-being of those whose spiritual welfare is entrusted to pastors, ordained or lay. It includes concern for people's total situation and any problem they may have on the ordinary natural level.' Thus pastoral care goes further than aiming 'to make them feel better' – it is concerned with fostering lively relationships with God and with others.

Biblical Perspectives on Pastoral Care

The pastoral care offered within and by the Church is grounded on the life and ministry of Jesus. His ministry provides the pattern on which we can model our own pastoring, and the standard by which we (gently) judge ourselves. Yet the Gospels are not our only biblical source for models of pastoral care: we can discover something of the practice of the early Church in the epistles and in the book of Acts and there are lessons we can learn from the same place that Jesus learned, from the Hebrew Scriptures, which we commonly refer to as the Old Testament.

The **Hebrew Scriptures** give us a number of basic perspectives relating to the context within which pastoral care may be offered.¹ First among these is the theocentric character of biblical thought. The presence of a God who is active in the affairs of humanity is everywhere assumed. This God acts towards people and towards all of creation with *hesed*, usually translated as 'loving kindness'. The care of human beings for each other is therefore always within this larger context of God's care for us and all the world.² In addition, biblical care is communal and corporate, not individualistic. For the ancient Hebrews the

¹ Here I draw on a chapter entitled 'Biblical Narrative and Pastoral Care' in *Integrity of Pastoral Care*. David Lyall, SPCK. 2001. London., 89-107 esp 90-93.

² 'All subsequent understanding of ministry takes its starting point from the ministry of God to his people. Human ministry can never be more than a pale and partial reflection of that divine ministry.' Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds: an introduction to pastoral theology*. Inter-Varsity Press. 1986. Leicester., 33.

individual was never separate from the community: if one person suffered, the impact was felt throughout their community. This is explicit in the covenant, where God says to the Hebrews 'I will be your God and you will be my people': God related to Israel as a people, not as individuals. Pastoral care, even of individuals who are suffering, is corporate. The pastoral ministry that we exercise is offered on behalf of the community to which we belong. Not only that, but we need to recognise the support and healing that is extended by the community or congregation acting together.

- *What are the implications for our pastoral ministry when we say that care is communal and corporate, not individualistic?*
- *How communal is the ministry you exercise? How could it be made more communal?*

Care within the world of the ancient Hebrews was not abstract, general or merely 'spiritual' – indeed they did not recognise a distinction between 'spiritual' and 'physical', between the 'religious' and the secular. Care was practical: food for the hungry, welcome for strangers and aliens, comfort for the bereaved, justice for the oppressed. It is a reminder to us not to spiritualise pastoral care, caring for the souls of people while leaving their basic physical needs (for warmth, food, shelter) untouched. It is important to recognise and affirm the link between pastoral care and the search for justice and freedom. In addition, just as there is no distinction in the Hebrew Scriptures between religious and secular spheres of life, so we find no categorisation of emotions into those acceptable and unacceptable for expression within our relationship with God. Especially in the psalms, but also in accounts of human suffering elsewhere, we find the full and free expression of feelings, negative as well as positive.³ This demonstrates a valuing of honesty and openness: people are free to be themselves, to be real (and not simply 'nice'). So too in our own practice of pastoral care: we must beware of giving out (sometimes unspoken) signals that only some emotions are acceptable.

- *What are your experiences of pastoral care being 'spiritualised'? And what are the consequences – what does it do to people?*
- *Find examples of being given the freedom in church life / pastoral situations to openly and freely express your emotions without any sense of judgement.*
- *What makes such freedom possible?*

Finally, we find within the Hebrew Scriptures a rich diversity. There is no single pattern of care: prophets were concerned about justice and mercy, priests conducted rituals, sages gave instruction and advice, and all of these were available to people who needed it. There are examples of good pastoral care, and also some that clearly come under the heading 'what not to do' – as anyone who remembers 'Job's comforters' will recall. People cared for each other and

³ See, for example, the psalmist glorying over the defeat of his enemies (Ps 18:38-43), fearful, despairing and angry with God (Ps 88), feeling despair, self-pity and godforsaken (Ps 22), and sarcastically mocking his enemies and encouraging God to punish them (Ps 94).

allowed God to care for them all – and there was no ‘one way’ or systematic method which fitted all circumstances.

In **the Gospels**, images of Jesus show even more clearly the pastoral concern of God for the whole person, physical, social and spiritual. The Gospels show Jesus curing sickness or disability, bringing healing to relationships and pronouncing forgiveness of sins. His ministry was inclusive, treating women with dignity and respect and drawing in those on the margins of his society: ‘sinners’, Samaritans, tax collectors and prostitutes. In many instances it is clear that Jesus’ care not only restored a person to physical health but also led to them being included again within the social and the worshipping community. Thus our pastoral care should not aim solely at deepening a person’s relationship with God (although of course that is important in itself): it should also help them to deepen their relationships within their community. These two aspects are linked: one cannot really deepen a relationship with God without that also affecting one’s relationships with others; we need both the horizontal and vertical dimensions.

The pastoral care we offer is grounded on the life and ministry of Jesus, and we can take as our model not only what he did but the manner in which he went about caring for others. It is clear that he saw each person he encountered as immensely valuable in God’s eyes. He took time for each one, and listened for the particular needs of each person: sometimes we see him not assuming, but asking the question ‘what do you want?’. Jesus did not coerce: he left people free to enter or leave a relationship with him. He was also willing to let the process of growth in an individual take its own time, without rushing things, and yet he often stimulated decisive change in those he encountered.

- *How is it for you (how do you really feel) when you offer extensive pastoral care to a nominal parishioner or a person who has no contact with the church and they never become involved in church life or come to worship?*
- *Is there a connection between evangelism and pastoral care?*

One of the most notable features of Jesus’ life and ministry is the compassion he had for those around him. There is an expression that appears only 12 times in the Gospels and is used exclusively of Jesus and his Father: to be moved with compassion. In Greek the phrase derives from the word for entrails of the body (or as we might say today, ‘in the guts’). This is the locus for our most intimate and intense emotions. The good news we share and that we are called to embody is that God is not a distant God, a God to be feared and avoided, a God of revenge, but a God who is moved by our pains and participates in the fullness of the human struggle. Jesus healed people for one major reason: because their pain created such an ache within his own heart that he suffered with them. Without this sort of compassion our care will have a hollow ring to it. Our helping will, at best, come across as a duty. It will lack sensitivity, and at worst, it can seem cruel and brash.

- *What is the difference between compassion and sympathy?*

Perhaps most important of all, it is clear that the pastoral care exercised by Jesus was grounded on and sustained by his personal private prayer. He cared for others out of his own close relationship with the Father, which gave him strength and kept him whole.

- *What sustains your pastoral care?*
- *Have there been times when your own closeness to God has helped you to help someone else? Or when your own distance from God has left you without the resources to reach out to someone?*
- *What echoes of Jesus' practice of pastoral care do you find in your own ministry? Are there things that Jesus did that you haven't done? Is there anything in the way Jesus cared that you want to add to your own practice of ministry?*

Within the rest of the New Testament, the book of Acts and the Epistles, we see two patterns of pastoral care. There were the specialists – the orders of deacons and of widows⁴, providing social support and caring – and there was the ordinary care of Christians for one another. 'Pastors' are listed amongst other areas of ministry (the others, in Ephesians, are apostles, prophets, teachers and evangelists), for which Christ gave gifts to the Church 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up of the body of Christ'. We see the early Church setting up ways in which Jesus' farewell command to Simon Peter to 'feed my sheep' (John 21:15-17) could be carried out.

Theological Foundations

Any theology of pastoral care-giving must start from what we understand about God, this God whom we worship and in whose name we minister. Our pastoral care must be grounded in what we believe about God and what we believe about what it is to be human.

Trinity We worship a Triune God; we believe there is a relational dynamic to the being of God, in whom are three persons. What we see in the Trinity is a sort of continuous and indivisible community: the concept of God is for us inseparable from the concept of communion, of a relationship of love between the three Persons. Being centred in love, this relationship is therefore vulnerable, open, self-giving and self-revealing. That is a good image on which to model our own practice of pastoral care-giving. The Trinity which is at the heart of our worship reminds us that we are made for responsible dependency on one another. Just as community is at the heart of God, community should be the basis of our Christian lives, a community within which difference is valued and everyone is welcomed.

- *How do you actually express such vulnerable openness – are there limits to it (if so, what are they)? How can you be self-giving without becoming self-destroying? Can you set out some guidelines for this?*

⁴ For the latter, see for example Acts 9:36-43.

Imago Dei Humanity is created in the image of God, *imago Dei*, and thus human beings have intrinsic worth, with a value in and of themselves, not based on what they may have achieved in the workplace or in public life. Our caring for others is therefore based on the value they having because of being created – like ourselves – in the image and likeness of God.

- *In whom do you find it hardest to discern the image of God?*

Incarnation A central belief of Christianity is that in Jesus God has become embodied in a human being: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. Here is a God who loved humanity enough to become human. Just as God cares for the whole of life, pastors too should express that concern for the whole person and for all people. God in Christ identifies with and enters into the suffering of human beings. This is the theological foundation for empathy, that when we attempt to enter into the suffering of another, and to communicate that to them in a way that is helpful, we are following in the footsteps of Christ who took on our human frailty and in the midst of that very frailty revealed his glory. After all, 'empathy' is walking long enough in another's shoes so that we know where it rubs, and incarnation is the ultimate expression of empathy – God's empathy with humankind. Moreover it is the Word in flesh, the incarnate word, that we serve. We communicate by who and what we are, as well as, and even more than, by the words we say. Saying the right thing at the right time is an important part of our pastoral caring for others, but we should never underestimate the simple value of our presence, for in that too we are following in the footsteps of Christ.⁵

- *Explore how you can simply be present with another. How do you do this? What helps and what hinders this?*
- *Recall experiences of another being empathetic with you. What did they do/say, and how did you feel?*

Crucifixion and suffering The cross is a reminder to us (if we were ever likely to forget it) of the destructiveness of human nature, of the evil that people can do to each other and to themselves. But it also tells us that pain and suffering can have meaning, can even be salvific. The knowledge that wisdom, healing and yes, good, can come out of pain and suffering can help us not to fear it when it happens, to us and to those for whom we care. The remembrance of the 'godforsakenness of God' at the heart of the cross can help us to be alongside and to speak into the loneliness of those whose suffering we are invited to share. To offer pastoral care in the light of the cross, as David Lyall notes, is to do so 'in a context in which human vulnerability and brokenness can be expressed, contained and transformed.'⁶

- *Have you ever offered pastoral care 'in the light of the cross'? In what circumstances?*

⁵ See David Lyall, *ibid.*, 96-97.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

Resurrection

The resurrection of Christ proclaims new life and new hope for a damaged world and for suffering people. This possibility is always present during our encounters with those for whom we care, yet we should be wary of rushing too quickly towards 'Easter Sunday': sometimes we need to sit with people in the darkness and the emptiness of Holy Saturday while the signs of transformation are as yet unseen. Our belief in the resurrection provides both content and context for our pastoral relationships. Speaking sensitively of the defeat of suffering and death, and the dawn of new life, can bring hope in the midst of despair to those who are suffering, and our journey alongside people is always in the context of the new life of Christ and the new life we share in Christ.

- *When is it appropriate to speak of hope?*

Ascension and Pentecost

The Christ in whose name we minister is the ascended Christ. As St Teresa reminded us, Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no hands or feet but ours, and ours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion cares for the people of the world. And so when we offer pastoral care, it is our privilege to be Christ to others. We care as ourselves – the words of healing and peace are incarnate in us – but we care not only as ourselves but as Christ also. And when we minister we have the guidance and the power of the Holy Spirit: learning to open ourselves to the Spirit's promptings and remembering that we do not rely solely on our own energy and strength are important aspects of the ministry we offer.

- *Recall a time when you tried to rely on your own strength and a time when you felt the leading of the Holy Spirit: what was different?*

Images for Pastoral Care

Shepherd Perhaps the central image of pastoral care-giving is that of the relationship between a shepherd (Latin, *pastor*) and the sheep under his (and in the literature, biblical and otherwise, it usually is 'his') protection. Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18); and pastoral imagery appears throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, not least at Psalm 23. There are, however, some problems with this image for the urban, industrial environment which is the setting for much of today's pastoral care and where most people have no acquaintance with shepherds (and in any case the modern high country farm worker has little in common with the biblical figure): their experience with sheep is likely to focus on roast lamb or woolly jerseys. The model is also inherently hierarchical: the brave and wise shepherd who knows best and the silly sheep, spending their lives eating, drinking and wandering off. There are two things which save this image for us, however. The first is that it is the example of Christ that we who pastor are called to follow: Christ was the shepherd with an intimate knowledge of the sheep, who guides them and looks out for their welfare. The good shepherd too is one who does not, like the thief, climb into the pen but who enters properly by the gate, being fully authorised to do so.⁷ The second thing that saves the image is the knowledge that we and all who 'pastor' are fellow sheep who follow Christ, the shepherd of us all.

⁷ Thomas C Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry*. HarperCollins. 1983. New York. 51.

Wounded Healer This is a model of the pastor not as professional expert (with the level of emotional detachment thus implied), but as wounded healer, aware of the areas of pain in his or her own life. The pastoral caregiver is not a being set apart from the pain of ordinary human existence: 'If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh?'⁸ There is a mutuality here, between the carer and the one who is being cared for, and an acknowledgement that only those who have experienced suffering themselves can be of help to others. This element of mutuality prevents a one up / one down dynamic occurring, ie 'I'm more powerful/stronger than you, therefore I'm better than you'. Healing can begin when the wound, and the weakness, is acknowledged, and the wounded healer can then go on to bring healing to others: 'For a deep understanding of his own pain makes it possible for him to convert his weakness into strength and to offer his own experience as a source of healing to those who are often lost in the darkness of their own misunderstood sufferings.'⁹ There are two cautions inherent in this image. The first is that the fact that carers have come through suffering themselves should not lead to a simplistic sharing of experience ('I know exactly how you feel: I have been there too and this is what helped me'). The second is that those who would offer care to others can really only do so when their own wounds have healed – or in Nouwen's words 'open wounds stink and do not heal'.¹⁰

It is worth remembering that Christ was perhaps the original 'Wounded Healer'. He is the one who 'was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.' (Isaiah 53:5) Through Christ, and 'the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1:20) God and everything else were reconciled. Christ himself suffered on the cross, and 'by his wounds you have been healed' (1 Peter 2:24) It is in this weakness and vulnerability that the power of God is found – just as it is in our own vulnerability. Making one's own wounds a source of healing implies a willingness to see one's own suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition itself, which is shared by all people: we too are human, we too suffer – but out of this mutual humanity we need not judge.

Searching Something else which could be drawn on in constructing a theology of pastoral care-giving for today is the image of searching: from God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening and calling to Adam 'where are you?' (Genesis 3:8-9), to Jesus as the Son of Man who 'came to seek out and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10) . It is always God who takes the initiative to restore the relationship with humanity, but we humans are left free to respond in our own way, or to hide if we wish. So too, the pastor can be one who takes the initiative, who seeks out the person and is focused on them, not distracted by other things (including the pastor's own needs), while still leaving the person for whom we care the freedom to walk away. Thus we may express both the divine concern for humanity and the autonomy we have been given to make our own choices and to live by them.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, III.1 (the speaker is the Jew, Shylock).

⁹ Henri JM Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. Image Doubleday. 1990 edition. New York., 87.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

Midwifery This is an image of pastoral ministry as a process of co-labouring with people to bring forth new life.¹¹ The midwife does not do the work herself; she does not take over the birthing process but offers guidance and assistance to the mother as she brings forth her child. The midwife, like the pastor, creates the environment within which the process can take place. She can provide the security needed for the one for whom she cares to go through the pain and out into the joy of new life.

Friendship, hospitality and the eucharistic community Just as Christ's body broken on the cross made us whole, so too does his body broken again in the Eucharist bring healing. Thus any theology of pastoral care-giving must incorporate this liturgical dimension and take account of the role of the church, as the 'body of Christ', ministering to one another. As we know, pastoral care is not given only by ordained pastor to parishioners, but from any Christian to any other Christian (Galatians 6:2), or indeed, to any other person made in the image of that same God whom we worship and serve. Images (in the Scriptures and elsewhere) which best express this are those relating to friendship. God, we are told, was accustomed to speak to Moses 'face to face, as one speaks to a friend' (Exodus 33:11), and Abraham is described as God's friend (2 Chronicles 20:7). Jesus calls his disciples not servants but friends (John 15:13). Moreover, Jesus' inclusive friendship with the outcasts of society was a source of scandal: 'the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" ' (Matthew 11:19)

In these shared meals, and particularly in the post-Resurrection appearances at Emmaus (Luke 24:28-35) and on the beach of Tiberias (John 21:4-14), Jesus was taking part in the oldest ritual of friendship, the shared meal¹², one that is continued today in the Eucharist. In our worship we nurture the bond of friendship, between God and humanity, and between men and women and children who share meals together. Sallie McFague suggests 'friend' as a model of the sustaining activity of God, and points to the inclusiveness of the friendship bond and of the shared meal in particular. It is from this friendship that the giving and receiving of pastoral care between members of the body of Christ proceeds, with an inclusiveness that takes in those outside the church.

- *Which of these images do you find most attractive at this time for you (as a care giver)? Why?*
- *Give a concrete example from your experience of each of these images – reflect on the ministry of pastors (lay and ordained) that you have known.*
- *Are there other images that you can find in Scripture?*

¹¹ See Kathleen D Billman, 'Pastoral Care as an Art of Community' in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist – Womanist Approaches*. Ed Christie Cozad Neuger. Westminster John Knox Press. 1996. Louisville Kentucky., 10-38, esp 21.

¹² Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Fortress Press. 1987. Philadelphia., 172.

And so we remember that the God who ministers to us is a God interested in all aspects of our lives. Pastoral care, or 'the cure of souls' as it is traditionally called, should not be understood as care for disembodied souls, quite apart from their physical and emotional needs. Pastoral care-giving is the means by which we express that concern for the freedom, integrity and health of the whole person which we have ourselves experienced from God. 'Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.' (1 John 4:11)

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2005

Final Questions

What is

- *one key thing that you would want to change in the way you pastorally minister.*
- *one thing that you are affirmed in – that is, in the manner in which you pastorally minister.*
- *one thing that you need to explore and learn more about.*