

Assignment One: A Theology of Pastoral Care

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PAST316: Perspectives on Pastoral Care
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30.07.2020
Word count 2332

Introduction

In this essay I will describe three theological models for pastoral care; that which is centred on God's love and grace, pastoral care as gardening, and a model focused on the living human web. I will identify key strengths in each, and will answer the question, "what is pastoral care, and how can it be practised?" I will then describe my personal theology of pastoral care.

1) Pastoral Theology Centred on God's Love and Grace

I begin with a model based on God's love, because I agree this should be the starting point for all pastoral care. Karen D. Scheib states, 'a pastoral theology of love is a necessary foundation for an ecclesial practice of pastoral care that promotes growth in love.'¹

Followers of Jesus Christ are indwelt by God's Spirit, who empowers, motivates and guides them to engage in pastoral care in the environments they inhabit. The Spirit's activity distinguishes their ministry from that which is based on other belief systems. Christian pastoral care is not superior to that provided by carers from other philosophies. But it is unique, in the theological understanding that Christians are empowered by God, the supreme bearer of wisdom and love, and are supernaturally equipped to care for others in the way that Jesus did, as described in the Gospel narratives.²

According to this model, Jesus' life and teaching are the centre point, focus and motivation for all pastoral care. He was filled with God's Spirit, and appointed to bring salvation to the poor, freedom to prisoners, to open the eyes of the blind, release the oppressed, and bless

¹ Karen D. Scheib, "Love as a Starting Point for Pastoral Theological Reflection", *Pastoral Psychology*, 63 (2014): 705.

² Luke 4:18-21

all creation. The Messiah brought comfort, joy and hope to the broken and grieving, with the intention that those healed would then engage in caring practises themselves, with the purpose of bringing honour and glory to God's name.³

As Jesus revealed his love, grace, mercy and hope to humankind, so believers carry the same message.⁴ Scheib states, 'love, which is both a participation in the divine and a response to it, moves out in all directions towards friends, neighbors, strangers, enemies, all created beings, and the earth itself.'⁵ God's Spirit is constantly at work, and he invites believers to join with him in the process of bringing God's divine healing in the areas he calls them to.

Key Strengths of this model

A pastoral theology of love is Christ-centred, but directed towards all creation. Christ's incarnation was based on God's love, that humans might know God's grace, and be transformed into his image.⁶ This growth in love includes reaching out to those in need, demonstrating compassion and collaborating to alleviate pain and suffering.

Scheib postulates, 'Love is God's nature, our human vocation, and a central mission of the church. Created in God's image, we are created by and for love.'⁷ When we engage in love-based actions, we align ourselves with God's purposes for humankind, and experience his Spirit at work in us and those whom he calls us to connect with.

³ Isa 61:1-4

⁴ John 17:18

⁵ Scheib, *Love as a Starting Point*, 705.

⁶ John 3:16

⁷ Scheib, *Love as a Starting Point*, 716

2) Pastoral Care as Gardening

Through this metaphor, originating in the writings of Julian of Norwich,⁸ Margaret Zipse Kornfeld likens pastoral care to gardening, because people are impacted by the environments they live in. Barbara McClure confirms that ‘persons come into being in synergistic relationships with physiology, interpersonal interaction, cultural practices, dynamics of power, and institutional structures. These affect our experiences and development for all of our lives, both in ways that support our flourishing and in ways that impede it.’⁹ Children nurtured throughout their formative years develop greater resilience than those who suffer neglect. Adults are impacted by difficult relationships, challenging work situations, financial insecurity, corrupt systems, and traumatic events. These contribute to our wellbeing, and may threaten our progress.

Kornfeld’s model is a systems approach to ecclesial pastoral care, where the environment is considered first. She uncovers ‘the intricate connection... between individuals and the churches or communities in which they are formed and nourished. Strengths or problems in one cannot be adequately considered apart from those of the other.’¹⁰

Gardeners ensure that soil is fertilised, light and irrigation are adequate, and plants are placed where they can grow and multiply. Plants require regular care, to ensure that they are thriving. They may need to be placed in a more congenial position, in the shade or under the sun.

⁸ Robert C. Dykstra, “Contemporary and Contextual Images of Care”, in *Images of Pastoral Care*, ed. Robert C. Dykstra (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 158.

⁹ Barbara J. McClure, *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counselling: Reflections on Theory, Theology, and Practice*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 240.

¹⁰ Dykstra, *Images*, 158.

This model suggests that as pastoral carers we need to do the same, alongside parishioners and community members. We need to examine our faith community, to see if it is providing the conditions required for a variety of plants to flourish. Is there enough warmth, moisture and space for them to reach their full potential? Do we have a suitable place to transplant offshoots? When is the best time to separate them from their parents?

Mary Clark Moschella believes that through qualitative research of our faith communities 'we see what is really happening on the ground, we see how faith practices are both loving and flawed, both life-giving and life-limiting.'¹¹ As gardeners we need to be aware of the conditions present in our church and local contexts. We need to have foresight, wisdom, courage and flexibility, so that we are well prepared, should our plants become endangered by any disease, adverse weather, soil toxicity, overcrowding, or careless handling.

This model proposes that pastoral carers need to be alert to the wellbeing of care seekers, the environments contributing to this, the impact of systems and practises, and resources which promote growth and healing. The ideal garden is organic, a system where all parts work together to promote the welfare of the others.

McClure proposes that 'all expressions of human experience, whether desires, motivations, needs, or emotions, are formed in response to interpersonal communication, social patterning, familial and cultural practices, and institutional structures.'¹² Pastoral gardeners

¹¹ Mary Clark Moschella, "Practice Matters: New Directions in Ethnography and Qualitative Research", in *Pastoral Theology and Care: Critical Trajectories in Theory and Practice*, First Edition, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), 19.

¹² McClure, *Moving Beyond*, 241.

must pay attention to health and safety factors impacting on their nurseries, so their plants can bloom to full capacity.

Key Strengths of this model

Kornfeld's model emphasises relationships existing in faith communities, and impacts of environmental factors on growth. Understanding contributing factors is highly important, so these may be addressed appropriately, and strategies devised to improve wellbeing in care seekers.

This model is community-based, in that healing takes place through various ecclesial practices, such as worship and discipleship. Kornfeld states that it 'occurs instead through the *interaction* of minister and parishioner...with both rooted in and "sustained by the same community."¹³ Kornfeld believes that in caring for people, pastors should recognise their dependence on God and others.

3) Pastoral care as focused on the living human web, with the carer as healthcare professional

Healthcare professionals, such as doctors, help patients to access and maintain optimal health, taking into account their genetic and family background, socioeconomic status, work environment, values, and support systems.

Pastoral carers also need to be aware of these factors, so that they can support care-seekers to reach their full potential in a holistic way. McClure echoes this concept in the following statement, ' understanding the relationship between self and society and the suffering that

¹³ Dykstra, *Images*, 158.

results from unjust and oppressive systems can help us understand that the health of an individual is predicated...on the well-being...of all. This is a holistic understanding of health that extends beyond individual psyches or interpersonal relationships.¹⁴

This model of pastoral care is based on Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore's concept of the 'living human web', developed from Anton Boisen's 'living human document'.¹⁵ Like Kornfeld, who emphasises human contexts, Miller-McLemore sees the 'living human web' as 'the appropriate object for investigation, interpretation and transformation'¹⁶ in pastoral care. For Miller-McLemore, 'public policy issues that determine the health of the human web are as important as issues of individual emotional wellbeing.'¹⁷ This model values the role of economics and political science to help determine needs and solutions for improving the wellbeing of all.

Influenced by feminist and liberation theologians, Miller-McLemore 'stresses the delicate interweaving of multiple personal, social, and political strands that comprise every problematic situation and caring act.'¹⁸ Rather than focusing on the needs of the individual as a separate entity, she states that pastoral care must take into account 'the voices of the marginalised from within their own contexts.'¹⁹

The caregiver as healthcare professional needs to listen and observe carefully, empathically, and objectively to assess the condition of her patients, recognise contributing factors, offer

¹⁴ McClure, *Moving Beyond*, 213.

¹⁵ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "The human web: Reflections on the state of pastoral theology," *The Christian Century*, 110:11 (April 1993): 367.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dykstra, *Images*, 17

¹⁹ Ibid.

healing solutions, make referrals, ensure support is in place, and provide follow-up care. She may consult with others to verify that she is providing optimal health care. She will engage in professional development, and will be aware of health trends. Healthcare professionals need to forecast imminent epidemics, and they need to be given a voice.

Key Strengths of this Model

This model emphasises the myriad of factors which influence care-seekers. In Miller-McLemore's words, 'never again will a clinical moment...be understood on intrapsychic grounds alone.'²⁰ Interconnectedness is a strength of this model. People are seen in relation to their context, their past experiences, cultural and spiritual background, support systems, and community structures. This ensures that a more rounded picture is obtained, so that pastoral care can take place in a collaborative way uniquely appropriate for each care-seeker. Regarding the living human web, Miller-McLemore advocates 'socially-transforming engagement as a primary sign of health and mode of healing.'²¹ This is the greatest strength of her model.

What is pastoral care and how can it be practised?

Drawing on the models described above, I see pastoral care as emanating from the love of God outwards towards all who are seeking care. Pastoral care is a community activity, in that it is not just the work of one individual with another, but may be seen instead as a network of activity oriented towards promoting growth and healing in human beings. It is a

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

²¹ McClure, *Moving Beyond*, 241.

wholistic healing practice, in that it incorporates all aspects of life, physical, psychological, relational and spiritual, in the same way that Mason Durie's Maori health model operates.²²

Ideally, pastoral care within congregations is practised in a variety of ways by all parishioners. As Henri Nouwen expressed it, 'Every human being has a great...gift to care, to be compassionate, to become present to the other, to listen, to hear and to receive.'²³

Pastoral caring is about coming alongside others in their joy and their pain, to celebrate and to express sorrow. It is not so much about having the right words, as feeling the appropriate feelings together with the care seeker.

At times pastoral care is about taking action, speaking up on behalf of a vulnerable person, advocating for truth and justice, sitting with a victim or a perpetrator of violence, making a referral to another agency, or running a community workshop. Pastoral care attends to the needs of the communities we live in. It has listening ears, observant eyes, and open hearts and minds. Most importantly, it is discerning, and listens intently to the voice of the Spirit for guidance and strength.

My personal theology of pastoral care

Drawing on the insights gained from the work of theologians such as those mentioned above, along with those of other writers such as Alastair V. Campbell, Donald Capps, and Allan Cole, my theology of pastoral care is evolving. This research has been immensely helpful in the development and expression of my views, but these have also been shaped by my lived experience of pastoral care, both as a care-seeker and a care-giver.

²² M. H. Durie, "A Maori Perspective of Health," *Social Science & Medicine*, 20:5 (1985): 483.

²³ Henri Nouwen, "Care", *Cornerstone*, 26:111 (1997): 8.

I have a childhood memory of an elderly Christian neighbour reading to me after I experienced traumatic injury. I remember her kindness, inviting me in for refreshments and a chat, whenever I knocked on her door. Knowing that I came from a non-Christian family made no difference. I felt loved and accepted whenever I was in her presence.

This is pastoral care at its best. It is about sharing God's love in simple, practical ways, being generous, smiling, listening empathically, speaking kindly, and taking action when needed.

I remember the counselling client in a violent relationship, who urgently needed somewhere to stay. I arranged for her to stay with a church member, until suitable accommodation could be arranged. Sometimes God asks us to step outside our comfort zones and our normal routines to come alongside someone, network with others, and ensure that the care-seeker's needs are being met with respect and kindness.

The Biblical model of the Good Samaritan is pertinent here.²⁴ We need to be willing to look carefully and really see what is going on around us. When we hear screams coming from a neighbour's house, we should not block our ears, but instead take appropriate action. When we observe that someone is being emotionally or physically abused, we have a responsibility to support them. I agree with Moschella that 'if pastoral...theologians cannot "see" what goes on in living human faith communities, we cannot hope to challenge the structures that hold white privilege and other forms of injustice in place.'²⁵

Sometimes God calls us to engage in action at a systemic level. In 2019 our church made a submission to the district council, requesting that a community Plan be developed for our

²⁴ Luke 10:25-37.

²⁵ Moschella, *Practice Matters*, 17.

suburb, a community centre be established, and free counselling provided for residents.

This eventuated because of our concerns for the wellbeing of our neighbours, many of who are impacted by poverty, family harm, mental health concerns, addictions, homelessness, isolation, and suicide.

According to Scheib, 'the church does have a particular role in proclaiming divine love and fostering the formation and growth in love, as well as healing the consequences of the failures of human love in both individuals and communities.'²⁶

Conclusion

Pastoral care means collaborating with parishioners and people from a wide range of community groups, sharing skills and resources, and collaborating to promote health and wholeness. Ultimately, it is about expressing God's love for humankind in creative and relevant ways, so that his shalom peace may be experienced by all. We may be called to get involved in education, politics, research, conservation, or town planning, but this is all a part of God's unique purpose for us as pastoral carers.

²⁶ Scheib, *Love as a Starting Point*, 716.

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