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Stories of pastoral care

We have emphasized at the start this chapter that pastoral care is always provisional and contextual. It will be instructive, then, to look back over the history of the Church to see how certain patterns of pastoral care from earlier generations have become especially influential in later times. Some of these patterns are still very much alive in our imaginations, shaping and colouring some very powerful conscious or unconscious images of the 'pastor in the mind' (see Chapter 1).

The one – and arguably the only – constant in a remarkably diverse history is the teaching and example of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who calls his ministers to take their share in the shepherding his people (1 Peter 5.1–4). We shall not attempt within the scope of this book to present a detailed history of practices which have evolved over more than 2,000 years. Instead, we shall present a series of snapshots in order to illustrate some of the classic themes and practices, which continue to shed light on the pastoral task today.

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Koino¯nia

The Greek word *koino¯nia*, variously translated as 'communion' or 'fellowship' or 'community', occurs over a hundred times in the pages of the New Testament. It describes the key theological idea of participation in a common life which makes a palpable reality of pastoral care.

In the early years of the Church, *koino¯nia* was a favourite term to represent the organic, living bond which unites faithful believers in Christ, drawing together the vertical and horizontal dimensions of Christian love (1 John 1.2–4). This spiritual reality is sacramentally enacted in a shared participation in the bread and the cup of communion (1 Cor. 10.16). As partakers of this intimate communion, worshippers are incorporated together as members of Christ's own Body in the world. The communion of God's people also points forward, in eschatological hope, to the fullness of life in which all people will come to participate in the unity of God's love (2 Peter 1.3–4).

For the early Church, this emphasis on the common life of fellowship was fleshed out in practical patterns of mutual care. The most radical, and probably idealized, examples of *koino¯nia* care entailed a kind of primitive communism in which money and goods were held in common (Acts 2.44–45; 4.32–37). More broadly, Christians

sought to be of one mind in mutual love (Phil. 2.1–4) and, especially within the household of faith, to take every opportunity to do good (Gal. 6.10).

These early evangelical ideals came to be powerfully enshrined in the classic tradition of the monastic communities which spread rapidly throughout Europe in the medieval period, providing a basic infrastructure for pastoral care over hundreds of years. These widely distributed praying communities of lay and religious, women and men, administered parishes, taught and preached, supplied food to the hungry and medicine for the sick, care for the needy and education for the poor. As centres of learning they also distilled the wisdom of Christendom and dispensed counsel and advice to spiritual and temporal leaders of the highest rank.

The common life of the monasteries was ordered by the gospel imperatives of love of God and service of neighbour. The outworking of these two poles in a spirit of deeply pastoral integration can be seen in the rhythms and disciplines of mutual accountability in prayer, work and rest laid out in the sixth-century *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which remains a touchstone for the practice of *koino¯nia* to this day.

It is interesting to note how the foundational theme of *koino¯nia* has resurfaced in many ecumenical deliberations in the twentieth-century Church.[45] In

the face of stark divisions and impaired communion within and between the churches themselves, and in response to a strident individualism in contemporary economic life, the vision of *koino¯nia*, however imperfect in its embodiment, still speaks to recall Christian people to the pastoral priority of building the kind of life together where all may taste the fullness of life for which we are created.

Cura animarum

Another classic theme in the history of pastoral theology is the *cura animarum*, a Latin phrase which suggests a commitment to both the 'cure' and the 'care' of souls.[46] As Christianity began to establish itself amid the changing fortunes of the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, a concern for care and nurture of individuals and communities came to focus on solid teaching, spiritual guidance and effective discipline.

The finest exemplar of this tradition of pastoral care is Gregory the Great, whose sixth-century *Book of Pastoral Rule* is still widely read today. Gregory's counsel covers topics which today might fall under the heading of discipleship or spiritual direction. He sets a high standard of discipline and personal study for the pastor who is called to take on this 'art of arts'; and with all the psychological sophistication of one who has delved deeply into his own soul, he

sets out to teach other spiritual leaders how to pay individual attention to the nurture and guidance of diverse Christian disciples.

Gregory's high ideals for the cure of souls live on in many thoughtful traditions of pastoral care today, though nowadays in a context where the role of the priest is seen in a less authoritarian and more critical light. Perhaps the greatest difference between Gregory's approach and contemporary spiritual direction would be the more muted emphasis on disobedience and sin. Although Gregory's language can sound insensitive to modern ears, it is nonetheless salutary to observe the seriousness with which sinful attitudes were challenged and conditions of spiritual health and sickness were uncompromisingly addressed.

A later development in the tradition of the *cura animarum* links the practice of pastoral care to geographically defined communities. The canonical ordering of parishes under the care of a 'curate' – that is someone authorized to exercise the cure of souls – became formalized in the Western Church in the early medieval period. The ideal of a pastoral presence which is rooted in community life is harder to sustain in a more mobile society, but persists as a telling witness to an abiding human sense of place and the value of local bonds of relationship.[47]

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Discipline

The theme of discipline is scarcely fashionable in the modern Church; but it was regarded as an essential feature of pastoral care in earlier periods. A fourth-century sermon from Saint Augustine typifies the delicate balance which pastors were expected to uphold.

> Disturbers are to be rebuked, the low-spirited to be encouraged, the infirm to be supported, objectors confuted, the treacherous guarded against, the unskilled taught, the lazy aroused, the contentious restrained, the haughty repressed, litigants pacified, the poor relieved, the oppressed liberated, the good approved, the evil borne with, and all are to be loved.[48]

The infant Church, in an age of sometimes violent persecution, had to establish clear boundaries of behaviour for its baptized members. Those who fell short faced the discipline of the community which was maintained through firm procedures of penitence and reconciliation. The role of church leaders was central to this disciplinary authority, which drew its mandate from the charge given to Peter for the binding and loosing of sins (Matt. 16.19).

As church life became more sophisticated, so did the preoccupation with increasingly elaborate systems of moral guidance. By the medieval period, monks and priests had assembled detailed catalogues of sins and penances

in the widely circulated *Penitentials*, whose moralistic excesses make depressing reading today.

The Reformation saw a reaction against both the hierarchical role of the priest and the centrality of sacramental confession. But a similar concern for moral rigour as evidence of personal salvation continued in the churches of the Reformation, especially those of a Calvinist inclination. While Protestants in a more individualistic age no longer looked to the priest to administer discipline within the community, with the rise of Pietism there was a strong emphasis on mutual discipline, which came to particular prominence in the Methodist class system.

With the exception of fringe groups exercising 'heavy shepherding' it is rare to find strong patterns of discipline in the contemporary Church. In an age of moral liberalism, where church membership is seen as a matter of voluntary association, the pastoral accountability of previous generations has been privatized almost out of existence. In this context, it is not surprising that many Christians wonder if pastoral discipline – at least in the churches of the affluent Western world – has been relegated to a 'lost art'.[49] The historic tradition of Christian discipline reminds us that there is always a place for appropriate challenge within pastoral care.

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Counsel

Closely allied to the theme of discipline is the ancient ministry of spiritual counsel. It is something of a modern conceit to imagine that understandings of human nature have only attained sophistication with the rise of the psychological sciences. To read Gregory's *Book of Pastoral Rule*, for example, is to be treated to the most incisive analysis of the polarities in human experience which may come to the pastor's attention. Gregory's detailed compendium shows the teacher and spiritual guide how to touch the hearts of his people 'with the same common doctrine but by distinct exhortations'.[50] Thus he distinguishes between the counsel appropriate to men and women, young and old, poor and rich. More subtly, he explores what we might term the 'winners and losers', the 'actively guilty and passively guilty', the 'protectors and competitors', the 'nonstarters and nonfinishers'.[51] Different cases are understood differently, and each is counselled accordingly.

It would be easy to underestimate the depth of accumulated wisdom which has been handed on through traditions of spiritual counsel – and, one might add, not only within the Christian tradition – down to the present day. Later examples of particular importance include the Puritan tradition of household religious education, which has strongly

influenced the Reformed Protestant movement, and the Ignatian tradition of spiritual direction, which continues to be immensely fruitful within the Catholic wings of the Church.[52] In both traditions, a seriousness of engagement with Scripture and doctrine is matched by a thoroughgoing attention to everyday relationships and responsibilities in the world.

The dawn of the modern era ushered in a powerfully humanistic approach to counselling which has grown, through the burgeoning of psychological therapies, to achieve a dominant position in popular discourse. Pastoral theologians have responded to the phenomenal rise of counselling in somewhat divergent ways. Some, especially in the United States, have eagerly embraced the new learning, promoting psychological studies to pride of place in the education of pastors for ministry in the Church. Leaning heavily on the work of theologians such as Paul Tillich, they sought to correlate the insights of modern psychology and existential philosophy with the vision of the Christian gospel, reworking traditional understandings of sin and justification in terms of guilt, anxiety and unconditional acceptance.[53]

A more measured response seeks to deconstruct the 'faith of the counsellors'[54] and to engage with some of the underlying assumptions of psycho-

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therapy as a fundamentally humanistic enterprise. Beyond the positive and powerful agenda of regarding human beings as people of immense value and worthy of acceptance, theologians have criticized the excesses of individualism and detachment from moral concerns which place psychotherapeutic frameworks at some remove from a traditional Christian anthropology.

This critique of the therapeutic paradigm has been played out in professional rivalries between ministers who have sought formal training and accreditation as 'pastoral counsellors' and those clergy and lay ministers, more typically in a British context, who have chosen to remain determinedly community-based, non-specialist and focused on the normality rather than the crises of human life. The best fruits of this sometimes unholy wrangling can be seen in the routine integration of counselling skills into training for pastoral ministry, as we shall see in the following chapter.[55]

Liberation

Some of the fiercest critiques of the psychological individualism of the modern pastoral counselling movement have come from advocates of liberation theology. A powerful line of argument insists that the pursuit of fullness of life and the alleviation of human sorrow and sin demands analysis and

intervention on a socio-political scale. This goes far beyond the individual care and consolation which has often passed for traditional pastoral care. As Pattison complains, 'Psychologically-informed, individually-focussed pastoral care has become unnecessarily narrow and straitened, sometimes with consequences bordering on the disastrous.'[56]

The rise of liberation theology in the 1960s and the growing influence of feminist theology since that time have brought new and more critical issues to the forefront of pastoral theological thinking and practice.[57] The oppressive interrelationships between personal and social, economic and political, institutional and ecclesial evils have been named and exposed. A trumpet call has sounded: we know that it is no longer good enough to tackle the individual or domestic levels of human suffering without paying serious attention to the structural dimensions within which their problems arise.

Several crucial emphases have contributed to this wider understanding of the remit of pastoral care. The first is a refusal to collude with the easy separation of public from private spheres of engagement. The mass unemployment of the 1970s and 1980s in Britain, for example, drove many church leaders to question the social forces which gave rise to such large scale misery and disadvantage. Merging prophetic critique

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with pastoral action, churches learned to engage in critical political and economic analysis at the same time as providing individual and collective support.

A second factor is the deliberate uncovering of historic abuses which have been perpetuated under the tacit protection of powerful groups in the Church. The most shameful example which has still to be fully rectified is the collusion of church authorities in the cover-up of ministerial sexual abuse. Equally distressing, though less scandalous at a public level, is the extent to which church teaching and behaviour has contributed to a culture in which intimate domestic abuse has been tolerated and its victims silenced.

A third area of far-reaching importance is the application of critical theory to the power imbalances in the social construction of human difference. The experience of those who are *not* men, *not* white, *not* able-bodied or *not* heterosexual is being given fresh voice within the churches, not for reasons of fashionable political correctness, but out of a passionate concern to extend the solidarity and salvation of the gospel to all God's people.

This brief summary illustrates the distinctive challenge and contribution that liberationist perspectives have brought to the ongoing development of pastoral care. Not everyone will be com-

fortable with the issues raised by this vigorous and sometimes tough-minded approach to Christian discipleship. But it is vital for the integrity of pastoral care that questions of justice as well as mercy, truthfulness as well as kindness, should not be politely ignored. The alternative of a tame and domesticated pastoral 'niceness' is a deep affront to the radical challenge of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Hospitality

The final motif in our survey of stories of pastoral care is one which has recently returned to prominence. Hospitality, as a building block of community, was a central feature of life in the early Church and a natural expression of the grace which believers had discovered in Jesus – welcoming one another as God in Christ had welcomed them (Rom. 15.7). But this hospitality was about more than cosy collective self-interest. The radical hospitality of early Christians reached out to the margins to draw in the poor, the needy and, most audaciously, the uncircumcised into the common life of the household of God.

It is surprising to note how little attention has been paid to hospitality in modern writing about pastoral care.[58] Yet, open-door policies of welcome to friend and stranger were essential to earlier expressions of Christian life together. The monasteries were renowned

for their practice of hospitality. In an age of journeying the European orders of Hospitallers provided a welcome and protection together with medical care, ambassadorial negotiation and spiritual sustenance to countless medieval pilgrims along their way.

A theological retrieval of the practice of hospitality is a timely development in our own age of social fragmentation and cultural, as well as religious, pluralism. We live in a fearful world and one which is full of strangers. In such a context, it is not sufficient for Christians to play the bountiful host. As individuals and communities we are also called to humbly receive by sharing in other people's lives as their guests.

This rediscovery of the pastoral significance of hospitality finds many echoes in the contemporary resurgence of trinitarian theology. The mutual indwelling and hospitality which characterizes the exchange of love within the Trinity spills out through our lives in a gracious embodiment of openness one to the other. It is a matter of creating space, of making room, so that the other – who is genuinely different – can be embraced and accepted, made welcome and truly at home.

The challenge of this hospitable vision is especially keen where Christian communities engage with those of other faith traditions – both giving and receiving the treasures that have been en-

trusted to each to share. Henri Nouwen characterizes this dynamic as a move from hostility to hospitality, generating the kind of space where strangers can disarm their fear and defensiveness, claiming the freedom to 'sing their own songs, speak their own languages, and dance their own dances'.[59]

In our survey of pastoral practices, each lively and engaging in its own socio-historical context, we have come full circle back to the primitive Christian enactment of *koino¯nia*. Where that communion is broken open to include the stranger as both host and guest, we enact a hopeful foretaste of the final messianic banquet in which Christ himself prepares the great heavenly feast for the healing of the nations.