

# The nature of pastoral care theology



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Pastoral care in ministry is one of the most critical ministries found within the Church. Churches are full of individuals who have or are experiencing crisis, anxiety, devoured, loneliness, lost, grief, sadness, and family issues. These prevailing crises make available to pastors opportunities to assist these individuals mostly by just encouraging and listening to those within their faith community. In many cases, pastors' involvement in these crises may only require of them to listen whereas in other the need for trained pastors in specialized ministry of counseling is required.

Many individuals now-a-days continue to turn to their pastors as a first source when face with a crisis. Pastors are usually more immediately and directly accessible than some other counseling professionals they do not charge a fee, and they are every so often known and trusted within a community. Since pastors are perceived as generalist, parishioners as well as community residents often look to them for assistance in a wide range of needs, including counseling. A skill acquired by pastors from some useful classes in the area of counseling during their training in seminary as well as an important basic quarter in C. P. E. (Clinical Pastoral Education).

Personally, my study in pastoral counseling has given me the necessary tools to effectively counsel my congregants. Such training has led me into the following concepts: Clinical Pastoral Periderm, which focuses on relationship and individuals; the different kinds of Listening Skill introduced by Salvage; the dynamics of Loss & Grief with grief being the emotional reaction to loss; Family System Theory a self-regulatory system maintaining its own status, as well as the Family as an Emotional System along with the Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory; Congregational System Pastoral Care; Crisis Counseling

which includes the A-B-C Method; Pastoral Issues in Illness; Pastoral for Domestic Violence and Child Abuse; Multi-Cultural Pastoral Care; Gender Difference in Pastoral Care; and finally, Pastoral Intimacy, Power and Professional Boundaries.

Pastoral care is the foremost task of ministry by most pastors as well as a majority of congregants, yet, there is a difference relating to pastoral care and the professional discipline of counseling. Some pastors are members of the American Association of Pastoral Counseling which has what one may refer to as an expressed Code of Ethics. The same is true of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, American Psychological Association, etc.

There are certainly many potential similarities in the relationship between pastors and professional counselors and the people they serve. All these relationships involve issues of exposure, familiarity and trust. There is an intrinsic disparity of control which some, particularly pastors, is uncomfortable acknowledging, but which exists whenever a person in distress seeks help from one viewed as more experienced. Healing is mostly a main concentration in any aiding relationship.

Likewise, borderline concerns must be taken care of so as to construct the safest likely environment in which a counselee or congregant can deal with his or her pain. Nevertheless, there are a number of possible distinctions between pastoral care and professional counseling. Professional counselors are trained to understand the transference and countertransference

phenomena, double task tensions, and the boundaries of our trained competency.

Like professional counselors, pastors also have codes of conduct to guide our activities, which are spiritual in origin. These codes are based on religious beliefs except for exclusions concerning sexual wrongdoing; pastoral codes usually are more generalized in nature than professional counseling ethical codes of behavior.

In contrast to professional counselors, pastors often engage in their ministries in a variety of informal settings with a multiplicity of roles with parishioners. Our core functions as pastors are embedded in a spiritual restraint that touches on many facets of life and society. Although training in counseling can aid pastors to work more effectively with church members, yet our calling to such profession is very distinct. In one of his many writings, Eugene Peterson called on pastors to return to our distinctive, ancient calling which states that our pastoral work is a “ ministry of Word and Sacrament.”[1]

People believe counseling is a great remedy. Yet many are reluctant says Hansen to see a professional counselor. Perhaps their reluctance is due to the costs of such visit besides, professional counselors ask hard questions.” He continues, “ For me, trying to be a counselor is a mean of saving time and effort. It is a go between my people’s needs to have me do unspecific things for them rather than cautioning them to live through the thick forests of their lives by following Christ in discipleship.”[2]

This means that pastoral care is rooted in 'word and sacrament' not having its origins in various scientifically grounded personality theories but prayer, proclamation, and the word of God. Again, Eugene Peterson emphasizes, "pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God." [3]

Like pastoral care, professional counseling by a pastor is a serious business. Pastors who engage in professional counseling without being trained are treading on dangerous ground, because such is not included within the authority of their ordination. When we do away with what is the ancient activities of pastoral care and engage in professional counseling methods without the necessary training, we are then held to the same standard to that of a licensed counseling professional. Standing before the law, pastors will not have the benefit or protection they have within the ancient practice of pastoral care.

Here are several shielding legal guidelines for the practice of ministry:

Pastors are to be clear about the expertise offered. We are to refer to our activities in clearly religious terms, not professional counseling terms. Unless we are trained and are willing to adhere to all of the professional standards of licensed professional counselors, pastors are to stay with practices that we can identify as pastoral care. For if we hold ourselves out as "professional" or "psychological" counselor, the law of the land will treat us as one. Pastors are not to assume broader duties, which are not part of our competence or calling.

Although, the distinction amid pastoral care and professional counseling are clear in many situations, in others they appear less distinct. Yet a process of

reflection and discernment is needed most to identify the pastoral role. So the following need to be addressed: Whom am I called to be in this particular ministry setting? What are my sacred functions as one who has a “ set-apart” ministry? What distinguishes my role and relationships from those of psychologists, family therapists, and specialists in pastoral counseling? Where do I set the limits and boundaries to my pastoral activities?[4]

Pastoral Care in ministry in my estimate is the most important ministry next to the ministry of preaching of the Gospel. People who are hurting is seeking through the pastor from the Gospel a healing balm for their wounds. The Gospel itself addresses the totality of humanity: spiritual and body. When one part is addressed to the negligence of the other the total needs of that person will not be met. Pastors who are sensitive to, and addresses the hurts of members in their congregation through the appropriate counseling technique, are more likely to be successful in ministry then those who neglect these needs.

To conclude, Pastoral care is a vital resource that extends to a broader spectrum of individuals with a variation of needs. This opportunity comes with what I will refer to as a “ wonderful challenge”, however; it is necessary for those ministering to such needs, to reflect wisely on their gifts as well as to recognize their limits of their profession.

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## **An Incident in Ministry that illustrates my Approach to Pastoral Care**

Luke and Nancy was the first inter-racial couple that sought membership at my present pastoral appointment, Spencer Memorial United Methodist Church. For eight years of being their pastor, I have watched them grow diligently in their spiritual walk with the Lord, but something always seems to be lacking within their relationship especially around the Thanksgiving holiday, something that they couldn't get around to talk about but was bothering them. On one Wednesday after Bible Study Nancy asked if she could schedule an appointment so that she could meet with me. Sure I responded to her, so we went ahead and set an appointment to meet an hour earlier on the next Wednesday before Bible Study.

When we met following prayers on that Wednesday, Nancy begins by saying that they came to see me to discuss about the death of her father which loss she cannot seem to get rid of. The presenting problem is one in which Nancy's father passed away almost immediately when she became a member of Spencer. This occurred rather suddenly after her father was diagnosed of cancer. When word reached her that her father was terminal and the doctors have given him up, she immediately went to be with her mother to assist her while they prepared for the inevitable. Two weeks later after her arrival on Thanksgiving Day, her father passed away leaving her with a sudden stricken grief that after seven years she is finding it very difficult to dealing with her feeling of loss.

Recently Nancy went back home to visit her mother because her visit back home had been infrequent since her father passed away. During her visit she was beset with her feelings of loss and now she tells me that she it has been such a long since the death of her father but the pain do not seem to go away. She and her father became close after a long period of estrangement between them and she describes their relationship developing over the years into more unique friendship than that of father and daughter. She tells me that the mode of her grief varies from day to day. On those days when she is so stressed up, she feels the pain of her loss strongly especially when she cannot pick up the phone and dial her father; for her father had grown to become her best friend in spite of their past history and he had been there for her over the last few years of his life. During this whole session, Nancy pattern of speech appears normal yet she wept throughout it. But what was helpful is that we kept good eye contact during our discussion until she



became emotional which minimize it. Below are statements showing that during one point of the session empathy was for the most part effective:

Nancy: I guess this may sound crazy, but this past Thanksgiving, I went home and my Mom was able to convince me so that we can get rid of his clothes. Something that I said out loud to Mom that we were never ever going to get rid of his clothes because it was the only physical memory that I had of him. On Thanksgiving Day while going through his closet I could smell his distinct cologne (Kouros) on his clothes. It was too difficult; I broke down in the closet crying.

Pastor: I know that it must have been hard for you, because I also lost my father to sudden stroke.

Nancy: Pastor Morris, it was the hardest thing for me to do.

Pastor: It takes a lot of strength to carry that through.

Nancy: You can say that, it does. I break down whenever I begin to talk about him.

Pastor: You miss him

Nancy: Yes Pastor, I miss him so much (she begins to openly sob).

Nancy was referring to the feelings of her loss that never seems to go away after seven years. My intent during this session was to reflect on those feelings. In addition, she was critical of herself in the early part of our session for not having moved beyond her feelings of loss.

At this point in the session, I became aware of how much she was hurting. It is very important that pastoral wisdom include some general knowledge of grief and mourning process that is informed by those who have done researched and written about it. One of the most influential interpretations of the grief process for me has been Erich Lindemann's study called "Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief,"[5] in it he affirmed grief as "work," something necessary for life rather than something pathological that should be avoided. He also described five things that he had observed in acute grief: (1) guilt, (2) anger, (3) bodily distress, (4) being preoccupied with the deceased image and, (5) loss of customary patterns of conduct.[6]

Lindemann theorized that there are discernible stages in the grief process that the grieving person and those who care for that person should be aware of. Recently when Nancy visited her parent home she was overwhelmed with renewed emotions of loss, perhaps as new as they were seven years ago when her father passed away. Furthermore, she expressed her frustration in still undergoing such strong feeling of grief when so much time has passed. This displeasure could be viewed as her inclination to move in an affirmative direction toward healing, and it was her self-actualizing tendency that was seeking to express it.

A likely hypothesis as to why Nancy has not moved past her present stage of grief might be that in her societal system the essential conditions that would allow her to discover the know-how in order to process her grief does not exist. She may also have family members in her family that deal with pain differently by discouraging open expression of emotions. If such be the case,

then providing empathy might permit her to move past most of the pain that she was experiencing.

The below example shows during the session, where the grief focus was shifted:

Nancy: I was in denial when the news first hit me that my father was terminal. I got on the next available flight for Dallas. I went down immediately to be with him. Two weeks after my arrival he passed away.

Pastor: That was fast. And it seems that you possess lots of pleasant memories of your father

Nancy: Yes I do have a lot of good memories, but the hardest thing is the emptiness brought about by the loss.

In this example, she described her experience of losing her father. In response, I attempted to direct her focus on the good memories that she had of her father, rather than she dwelling on her loss. However, it seems to me that her focus was on her feelings of emptiness; it was when I regain control of the situation and said....

Pastor: Nancy, as a pastoral counselor, I certainly am open to the grieving process for those who had lost a loved one but not for such a long period. However, I must honestly say that there is more to the grief that you are undergoing. Even though you have not explain what brought about your estrangement with your parents which may have something to do with prolonged grief.

Nancy: (Sobbing again...) you are right pastor. 17 years ago after falling in love with Luke in College I took him to ask for my parents blessing because we had decided to get married since we were three months pregnant. Not telling them that he is an African American, we drove to my home time in Dallas Texas during our Christmas break. When we arrived, my parents did not receive Luke and forbid me to get marry to him. Because we love each other and were caring a child I went against their decision and got married to Luke thus being banished or ostracized by my parents. In view of this new revelation, I decided to reference the family- systems theory which offers better ways to understand and resolve such problem.

For instance: From a Bowenian family-systems perspective, there have been some key emotional cutoffs[7]in Nancy family system when she was banished. It's not entirely clear how these things work, but family-therapy research indicates that Nancy present dilemma is somehow connected to this cutoff; moreover, it is only by repairing it and reconnecting with the long-lost, left-behind, and thrown-out members of her family that her " presenting problem"[8]will resolve itself. Therefore, one aspect of a " treatment plan" recommended would involve my " counseling" her toward a " self-differentiated"[9]balance between these two extremes (guilt and grief).

Finally, Nancy realized that her prolonged grief was because of her guilt after shifting her guilt back and fro.[10]I believe my ability to provide empathy[11]through reflection was my strength. What was of greater substance was my ability to offer advanced empathy, moving away from her stated words to the indirect emotions beyond her words.