New Models of Pastoral Care for the 21st Century Church

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The Psalmist reminds us of the great character of God, of his eternal loving kindness or hesed

***5****Your love,(hesed) Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.****6****Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep.  
You, Lord, preserve both people and animals.****7****How priceless is your unfailing love (hesed), O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.****8****They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights.****9****For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.*

***10****Continue your love (hesed) to those who know you, your righteousness to the upright in heart.*

Across scripture we see faithful covenantal love (hesed) is foundational to God’s character and motivation. It is expressly declared by the LORD God as he passes in front of Moses in the great proclamation - “*The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*  (Exodus 34:6-7) For the LORD explains his character- driven by grace, compassion and mercy, slow to anger, overflowing with love and fidelity.

This is the same love that is described by Jesus after his explanation to Nicodemus- ***16****For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.****17*** *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him* (John 3:16-17).

Jesus’ command after the Last Supper denotes love as a marker of faith. Jesus says **3*4****“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.****35*** *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”* (John 13:34-35) For this is the love that Christians are called to live, commanded to express, demonstrating their response to God. It is this Christ-like, self-sacrificial faithful and covenantal love which undergirds Christian ministry and mission as we partake in God’s work in and for the world. This love that is the basis for the many forms of pastoral care which exist today.

Pastoral Care has been used as an umbrella term covering a range of different and often quite diverse ministries. Colloquially, parish ministry has often used the term pastoral care to describe ministry such as home visits, the bringing of Holy Communion to the sick and hospital visits. Pastoral care within a ministry context often assumes shared Christian faith, relationship, encouragement, listening and the provision of a safe space with some boundaries around appropriate confidentiality. This has become a particular subset of the ministry exercised by clergy and licensed laity. So in this context, pastoral care could be defined as providing emotional, social and spiritual care to those in need or in a time of crises. However, this definition may require some further tweaking.

With the formalization of Clinical Pastoral Education from the 1950’s, there has been a second more specific definition of pastoral care relating expressly to those in ministry and those in true crises which require appropriate supervision and an agreed space to reflect and regroup. Central to this pastoral care is the ability to place one’s own responses aside, to step back from emotional and spiritual triggers, to be present with the one receiving the pastoral care and to then have another space for internal processing. This all requires education and supervision by a trained supervisor. Yet some of these requirements present a heavy burden for the laity wishing to minister to fellow parishioners and others.

In response to the clear need within parishes for more pastoral engagement and care, we have developed a multi-staged approach which provides three levels of care. The first stage requires the most minimal training and the level one clearance from ADOM. The second level requires further clearances, WWCC and Police Checks and some further training. The third level is professional, with those offering this already qualified in CPE and with professional supervision already in place. This paper will focus on the first stage of pastoral care.

Firstly, all Christians are called to love and care for each other. We also recognize that this care does not need to be in response to crises. Ideally, a parishioner would have some peer support/connection/prayer they could turn to as well as with those in formal ministry. This mutuality is important because we have different relationships with different people. Sometimes we need a friend or a peer, sometimes we need someone a bit more professional. But we should never devalue the relationships we have with other Christians.

At the center of pastoral care is a relationship, which is best developed by interaction and discussion. Normally pastoral care is expressed in focused and intentional conversation and dialogue, which allow the person being cared for to raise personal issues.

So at the first level of care, lay leaders with minimal training could offer pastoral care to at most 2 or 3 others. There are some skills at the heart of pastoral care - firstly a genuine interest and care for the person you meet with and commitment to each other for a length of time - such as a year. Agreeing to regular contact - such as a monthly phone call, a meeting at a coffee shop or at church or contact via email, text or What’s App is then the next step. However, in person conversations are usually best with other models (phone/text/email) providing subsequent support.

Pastoral conversations are intentional, and most frequently use open ended, non-judgmental questions as encouragements to the participant. These conversations would create a safe and peaceful space to discuss the troubles or concerns of the participants. This would not be a place for gossip or critique. Pastoral Conversations are not a place for the leader to provide solutions but instead provide a space for the other to share and process. Ideally there would be trust between participants and as time progress, a willingness to raise more significant issues. There would also be a stated agreement that particular issues need referral either to the ministry team or perhaps other areas of professional assistance. These kind of pastoral conversations provide a safe space for self-reflection and personal growth, which in turn assists in our making sense of our lives and responses.

There is also a need to commitment to confidentiality unless issues beyond the scope of the carer are raised. For example - someone who is clinically depressed will need significantly more care and likely medical support than can be offered in regular pastoral care or an issue to be brought to trained ministers. However, this does not mean what is discussed is brought to anyone else. Privacy laws are significant so issues raised in a pastoral care session are not for public consumption or email.

A key skill in pastoral care is learning to be a calm and non-anxious presence. This means learning to set aside or on hold personal concerns that may be triggered by the discussion. For those of us who carry or hold anxiety, this is particularly important, so our own agenda/issues do not derail the conversation. Therefore people offering pastoral care also need a supervisor or coach to debrief those emotions and concerns raised internally.

It is also important to be open in the conversation to where the other person wants to go. This is neither Spiritual Direction nor a teaching space. So the pastoral carer is not there to instruct or tell the one cared for what to do or how to think.

Finally, those offering pastoral care need to commit to praying for that other person as even the simplest prayer signals your care for them. I’m always encouraged that God know so much more than we do, that God already knows what the person we are praying for needs. This means that we can trust that God understands better than we do.

Now if that all sounds too hard, let me encourage you by saying that the learning is often in the doing. Taking the time to slow down and recognize your own feelings and putting them on hold can be difficult but is vital to support and care for the other person.

It can be helpful to set time limits - to commit to a chat of no more than 30 or 45 minutes. And we all need wisdom to see when it is enough. We might also recognize that we all have different days, some good or some bad. We might have a plan and an arrangement to talk to someone and that particular day may just not work for them. Part of offering pastoral care is sufficient wisdom to recognize when we need a break or a time out from this ministry.

So in summary, leaders would need to commit to some training in listening and open ended questions, a confidentiality agreement, a commitment to group meeting with the cohort of leaders for some general supervision four times a year and prayer. These commitments are necessary hurdles for continuing in these roles.

Pastoral care in its many forms is one expression of Christian love. We must balance good ministry practice with legislative compliance in our care for others, particularly the vulnerable as we follow God’s command. -*And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.* (1 John 3:23)