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Ministry, Mission and the Social Sciences

(III) PASTORAL COUNSELLING

I. The ministry to persons

PASTORAL WORK, almost always, conjures up the image of personal work, the direct contact between the pastor and members of his congregation or those who come to him for aid. Two activities stand out as being normative: the visit to the home or hospital, whether in some systematic scheme or in response to news of sickness or distress, and the knock at the door with an appeal for help or advice. In point of fact any comprehensive view of the minister's task will see these as being a particular type of activity within a network of the whole life and witness of the Church. Spiritual growth and pastoral support is given in meetings formal and informal, in organisations and study groups, in administration and committee work. It is as important that the Christian community be functioning efficiently and fully as that individuals are met immediately. The two go together providing a total environment for the exercise of the three-fold work of the Church: healing, support and service.

Nevertheless pastoral work in this narrower sense is an essential link, one which our Baptist stress on personal faith in baptism makes central. It is the traditional work of the minister alongside word and sacrament and there is a long history of accumulated wisdom and steadfast example. It is the one function still widely, though decreasingly, recognised by society at large, as being a real contribution of the minister, while his other social functions have withered away. No wonder, therefore, that social casework method and counselling techniques have been seen as tools available for the ministry almost to the exclusion of everything else. Indeed it is often forgotten that many pioneers in social work method were Christians, frequently clergy, who saw this as an extension of their pastoral function.

A tension is expressed in the two areas of concern brought together in the phrase "pastoral counselling". The word "pastoral" comes from the Christian concern for care for those needing guidance and help, while counselling expresses the way in which the pastoral care is exercised and comes from social work theory. Counselling has become a method that has acquired its own expertise and principles, and while there are different approaches, it is felt that only those with specialist training can be called counsellors. It is perhaps this professionalisation of what the minister did as an amateur that has panicked some into demanding that ministers should be trained counsellors in order to have a parity with others in the field. Such an attitude, however, begs a number of important issues including the nature of ministry and the real status of professional expertise. Perhaps this can be enlarged on by taking each word separately.

II. Counselling

What is counselling? Is it to be described in terms of a highly skilled and professional function that can only be done by those so designated? If so this means that there can only be a limited number of counsellors, whose problems are defined by referral and appointments and whose whole function is limited to professional parameters. The model is of the clinic, with a patient and a therapist and a professional relationship. Or is counselling in its professional form an extension of what in fact we are all engaged in from time to time as part of normal relationships in families or the community? People ask for advice. People show signs of not being able to cope. People seek help. It is part of the way neighbours exist. Yet the professional is not out of place. He may be the extension of what we all have to do. There are occasions when the neighbour cannot cope, when the problem becomes too big. Nor are the skills and knowledge to be brushed aside, for those who are daily engaged in counselling have a special need to benefit from the insights thereby available. Excellence should be striven for. It is true that the insensitive and untrained can be foolish and even damaging, harming where they had intended to help. We all also need to be able to recognise our limitations.

Yet there is a distinction between the caseworker and the neighbour which is vital apart from the level of training. The neighbour is involved with the person at many levels. He may be teacher or policeman, uncle or deacon. In this relationship there can be many overlapping roles reflecting the complex nature of human social life. Perhaps because this relationship is more real it can be more fruitful, or even potentially more dangerous. Most of us are neighbours in our caring relationships, explicit helping being only one occasional element. The caseworker, however, has another role to play, depicted by his reflective relationship with the client. Whether it is a domestic visit or an appointment in a consulting room, the counsellor is stepping into the situation. He is a catalyst or mediator who hopes to provide a means whereby the client can rediscover and adjust himself. He is anonymous. The relationship is isolated and thereby should enable the hidden things to remain hidden to all but the client. The counsellor is also there as the recipient; not only the ear but also the scapegoat on which the burden can fall without destroying the rest of life. So there is a professional relationship of confidentiality and responsibility, dealing with a particular area, at least initially, and allowing escape. Above all the client is encouraged to become self reliant to accept reality in the belief that the human psyche has powers of wisdom and healing to be released.

In all this the minister, along with many others (some of whom are professionally involved, such as teachers and nurses, while others may perhaps be described as "community aunts and uncles"), finds himself both as a neighbour and counsellor. It will vary from situation to situation. At the same time individuals will find themselves, according

to inclination and talents, stressing one function over the other. There is certainly room for professional counselling in the ministry of the Church.

Seward Hiltner finds three levels of counselling. The first is guidance, that is helping people to see their way forward. This will include supplying information, suggesting and weighing possibilities and responding to questions. At its lowest it is giving advice but at all levels the other is left free to respond, to receive it or reject it, and in such a way that whatever the response it does not cause a rupture in the counselling relationship. In the end only this is effective because forced compliance is never the actor's responsibility. Complete commitment must be the considered decision of the actor.

Then comes sustaining, which is much more demanding. We often find that what is wanted, and indeed all that we can offer, is to sustain a person through a crisis or a problem by listening, by taking some of the burden, by helping to discard some of the irrelevant worries. Here the counsellor is more or less passive, taking what comes and not going away. Yet he is only sharing the task of the doctor or the wife or husband who have to sustain this in more open ways in some circumstances.

The end of the journey is healing. The immediate and casual needs are only met in order to enable the other to grow into a greater wholeness. Healing of all kinds comes from the one who has to be healed, from the will to be whole, however dim the desire. Thus all counselling, all neighbourliness is healing in that it frees the other from a burden, protects him under stress, to allow the healing processes to work. Sometimes, however, it requires surgery to cut away the diseased part. The technique in counselling is to help the client see himself beneath the surface, to face the need for personal acceptance and change. This requires the most skill for it can be dangerous for both helped and helper, especially if undertaken for any length of time or at any real depth. Yet it is at the same time something we all do for each other even if it is the casual remark or a sustained friendship.

In all forms, counselling is based on personal relationships. It is the relationship between the helper and helped which must be wholesome in itself, and within it the use made of the understanding of human relationships must be equally wholesome. This means that we should become ever more sensitive to the reality of relationships, not only knowing about the other, but also about myself. This is the remarkable thing about the caring relationship. In the end it can only be known in the experience of finding that it is in the coming to the other that I am healed, for we are not two but one humanity, bound in a single peace.

III. Pastoral

The designation of counselling as "pastoral" counselling brings with it two questions. Normally it would be assumed that pastoral care is the work of the pastor. As, in any sense, a specialised activity, the

pastor is the obvious person to be so engaged. But it is always recognised that the ministry is a function of the whole Church and that therefore the minister is only one of many brethren. It is a matter for discussion as to how far the pastoral work of the minister should relate directly with his ministry of word and sacrament. In so far as he is meeting personal need then he represents the Church, as do, in their own way and less explicitly, all Christians engaged in personal service. It is one of the tasks of the Church corporate to recognise and sustain its members in this task. Pastoral counselling is Christian counselling.

The second question is whether there can be such a thing as Christian counselling, or only Christians engaged in counselling. The ideal is supposed to be to work free from ideological presuppositions. The client must not be bullied, coerced or persuaded in any way. This is a useful corrective to a glib prescriptive attitude which can so easily force another to conform to my expectation. It is a proper tribute to human dignity that the client has the time and space to make his own judgement. Yet we know that there can never be a completely free situation. The pressures of society and prejudice, limitations of organisation and resources do in fact mould the outcome. What the Christian wants to say is, first, that it is better to be explicit with the presuppositions than covert; second, that some people want to know that they are being cared for by Christians; and, third, that a Christian perspective does, in fact, offer the proper view of man. Such an attitude does not necessarily prescribe or restrict but offers a goal and a yardstick to both the counsellor and client.

Indeed, as has already been stressed, counselling is about normal human relationships from the point of view of the need for care. "Pastoral" describes the perspective from which a Christian comes to his concern. Care for people and the love of God meet in the Gospel. The Gospel may illuminate the exercise of pastoral counselling by offering an understanding that is only partially grasped by the professionalised description of the casework relationship, itself an attempt to overcome the worst extremes of unskilled care.

The pastoral relationship is under grace. The power to be free for each other without pride or domination is that we live before God whose grace is needed by us all, before whom all are sinners and all are justified. Yet the task of the counsellor is to offer himself to the other. This can only be sustained in terms of sacrifice, comfort (*Paraclete*) and identity (fellowship). In the end God is such that he acts to set us free as Sons of God. As St. Thomas Aquinas said: We love God first of all for what we can get out of him; then for what he has done for us but finally and supremely for what he is himself.

NOTES

(This article is a revision of a paper given to a conference of the Institute of Religion and Medicine, Swansea, June 1973.)

(i) *Casework and counselling method:*

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(ii) *Casework and Ministry:*

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(iii) *Pastoral care in parish and church:*

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(iv) *Knowledge of persons:*

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(vi) *Special areas:*

Matti Joensuu, *For the Family* (W.C.C., Geneva, 1968).

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H. Faber, *Pastoral Care in the Modern Hospital* (S.C.M., London, 1971).

Norman Autton, *Pastoral Care in Hospitals* (S.P.C.K., London, 1968).

Norman Autton, *The Pastoral Care of the Mentally ill* (S.P.C.K., London, 1963).

Kenneth Leech, *Pastoral care and the Drug Scene* (S.P.C.K., London, 1970).

Kenneth Preston, *Marriage Counselling* (S.P.C.K., London, 1968).

Note should be made of The Library of Pastoral Care (S.P.C.K.) titles, some of which are included above. This is a comprehensive, if uneven, series in personal pastoral work.

PAUL H. BALLARD