

METHODOLOGY OF PASTORAL CARE IN THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS

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Introduction

It is, perhaps, appropriate to begin this paper with a review of the meaning of pastoral care, so as to agree upon the scope of our topic. Clinebell defines pastoring as “the broad, inclusive ministry of mutual healing, and growth, within a congregation, and its community, throughout the life-cycle”.¹ A number of alternative definitions could naturally be cited, but Clinebell’s approach is suggestive of several headings that will be useful for our present discussions.

His use of “*broad*” and “*inclusive*” are a reminder that the Spirit pervades, and is concerned with, all areas of life, comprising mental, physical, emotional, social, religious, etc., and, therefore, that Christian pastoral care is likewise to be *holistic*.

Secondly, Clinebell’s mention of “*healing*” and “*growth*”, indicates that nurture is as much a part of pastoral ministry, as is caring for people, during their troubles. Indeed, we may be right to emphasise the positive, growth-oriented nature of pastoring, rather than allowing it to focus on “problems”. In the context of theological education, we might, for example, say that personal formation is, ultimately, more important than dealing with cases of “discipline”. Through Christian pastoral care, people should be encouraged, and enabled, to recognise the presence, and care, of God in their lives, and to make an appropriate response to Him.

Similarly, if pastoral care is to be “throughout the life-cycle”, then it is an everyday process, even if there are, naturally, certain occasions, which call for concentrated pastoral ministry. Such times will include the major events of life (graduations, marriages, births, etc.), as well as the circumstances, which lead to strain or crisis.

¹ Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, 2nd edn, London UK: SCM Press, 1984, p. 26.

Then, lastly from Clinebell, and particularly noteworthy for our discussions here, is the fact that pastoral care should be “*mutual*”. If this is true for a normal Christian community, then it should be especially so among those, who are in training for the ministry. This, then, will lead us to emphasise the involvement of the whole community in pastoring, along with the specific role of staff, and other leaders.

With these general points in mind, we may turn to consideration of pastoral care in theological institutions. Our attention, here, is given mainly to methods and approaches, although reference to pastoral issues, and examples, will structure the discussion.

Personal Growth and Spirituality

If we accept the suggestion that personal formation is central to pastoral care (and we may see a certain parallel here with “prevention being better than cure”), then we must face, again, the familiar issue of how to make theological education more than just an academic exercise. Honest intellectual inquiry is an essential element of ministerial preparation, but students and staff, alike, also have a continuing need to relate academic study to their own lives and faith. The road from the head to the heart is often long and difficult, but the journey is inescapable, if our spirituality is to be sincere, and our ministry effective.

The regular pattern of organised worship and fellowship are, of course, an important part of this process within our institutions. They provide, not only the experience of leadership, but also the opportunity, and encouragement, to reflect upon one’s studies. We may, however, need to assess the extent to which our patterns of worship and fellowship facilitate these processes of personal “digestion”.

Informal group fellowships often allow further expression of specific questions and needs, and so become significant occasions for growth. No doubt, our college programs include this type of grouping, with a variety of activities (socials, Bible study, times for prayer, singing and worship, etc.).

Similarly, friendships can lead to openness and growth. This important aspect of (mutual) pastoral care is being discussed in a separate paper, and need not be given further attention here. But its emphasis upon individuals leads us to consider the richness of each person’s prayer and reflection.

While it is probably true that Western Christianity has over-emphasised the individual, Melanesian traditions also had a place for personal spirituality. Leaders could have their own secrets, their own intimate relationships with the spirits, and their personal customs, or taboos. While Melanesian life may be essentially communal, we may consider whether our colleges give sufficient attention to individual prayer and reflection. Do the constraints of community, and academic, life give enough encouragement and opportunity to individual development?

For example, it has been interesting to note the positive response from Rarongo's final-year students, to the introduction of a one-week retreat, shortly before their graduation. In other MATS colleges, various opportunities are arranged, to encourage devotional life. For example, personal and family prayer times may be included in the weekly program, or regular days for reflection and prayer may be scheduled each term.

Family Enrichment

For married students (who form the large majority, in many of our colleges), Christian growth should specifically include their family life. We are aware of the pressures, which changing culture has brought to marriages, and of the many pastoral needs that arise in this area. Furthermore, as new graduates, our students will face the additional demands, which ministry places upon a marriage. It is, therefore, apparent that family enrichment needs to be a central aspect of pastoral care, in our theological colleges.

No doubt, our teaching in this area includes both practical and personal elements (again, further discussion of this will be taken up in another paper). Similarly, patterns of fellowship and community life will naturally include family activities.

At Rarongo, we have two particular ways of encouraging partnership in marriage. Firstly, there is the wives' study program, by which the role of women in ministry is taken seriously. As a recent development to this, student wives, who have completed high-school education, are encouraged to join the main academic programme. Their involvement here is working out well, and, naturally, enhances the sense of partnership with the men.

And then, secondly, as an encouragement of marriage partnership, on one afternoon each week, the husbands are expected to look after the children.

Some male students take this as a positive opportunity (and may also prepare the family's evening meal), while others seem to have a more-reluctant attitude.

In Times of Trouble

Since most students are away from their own home communities, they are without the immediate support of those natural relationships, and are also unable to assist some of the people, for whom they have a special responsibility. Both "ends" of student dislocation thus create special pastoral needs, on hearing of problems back home, they will feel a heightened sense of concern, or homesickness, and when difficulties arise in their own lives, isolation can become an added burden.

It is here that the "mutual" aspects of pastoral care come to the fore, in our communities. Probably common to all of our institutions, is a network of "pastoral-care groups", perhaps organised within linguistic, or provincial, boundaries. When such traditional support groups are enriched with Christian caring, there will be no shortage of visitors to the sick, or fellow-watchers, during a wake. Food appears, and is prepared, without even a mention, while prayers and "presence" are automatically shared, all through the genius of Melanesian community.

And yet, there are also some measures of support, which can be taken at the institutional level. Adequate medical care is presumably available in all of our communities, but, on the more-general level of facilities and finance, is our provision always adequate? Holistic pastoral care includes the needs for housing, food, and health (partly, again, as the wisdom of prevention), even if there is a sense in which trainee church leaders should "learn to be content" in poverty, as in abundance. And again, since self-reliance is an important virtue to be learnt, gardening, or fishing may rightly be included in the demands of college life, and yet uncertainties remain, as to whether the church is fulfilling its responsibility of care towards its students.

Here is, perhaps, not the place for lengthy discussions on financial support of theological institutions, yet this remains an unavoidable issue, in our pastoral care. We may note that a few MATS colleges are able to attain a measure of self-support, through various "projects", while some others are now looking more in this direction.

The Role of the Staff

In emphasising the mutual aspects of pastoring within our communities, we will want to acknowledge, also, the importance of specific leadership in pastoral care. The more-senior students may be given this responsibility (perhaps as “elders/deacons” within their pastoral care groups), but it is probably usual and good for staff, also, to be involved here (again, perhaps, within a structure of pastoral care groups, although not confined to it). Staff experience can add insights and maturity to the care, which is offered, and also, of course, provide a practical example of ministry, from which the students will learn.

Ideally, of course, such staff responsibilities would be set within open relationships of knowing, and being known, through a shared life of both informal, and more formal, occasions. But the reality is, perhaps, often rather different, in the face of teaching and administration, which is expected of most staff.

The solution, adopted by other types of institutions, is, of course, the appointment of chaplains, who can give more time to counselling, spiritual direction, and other aspects of pastoral care. Some overseas theological colleges have also found the role of chaplains to be helpful, but this pattern may not be so appropriate in Melanesia. Pastoral involvement, by the staff, is probably an important part of the relationships, through which teaching-learning takes place most effectively, and a withdrawal of staff from pastoring could adversely affect the overall education process of the institution.

Finally, we should consider care for the staff, which raises the difficult question of “who pastors the pastor?” Despite an ideal of mutual care, the pastor of a local church is often left to his own devices, by which he may, or may not, develop suitable relationships that provide appropriate support. Pastoral care groups, within our institutions, can offer a genuine fellowship, but the nature of staff-student relationships is not easily favourable to two-way support, in all circumstances. Mutual care, among the staff, perhaps including a pattern of fellowships and retreats, would seem to be the most helpful approach.

One MATS college holds a weekly faculty prayer meeting. Another has a weekly staff fellowship that is both social and devotional. In a third college, there is a staff retreat at the beginning, and end, of each academic term. No

doubt, it is never easy to give the time for such activities, but, if we see staff relationships as a priority, then these three examples indicate some of the possibilities.

And, indeed, we may regard this as of particular importance, here in Melanesia, where a person's words are compared carefully with their actions. If a theological teacher's lifestyle is to fit with what is presented in the classroom, then inter-staff relationships need to demonstrate a fair measure of that openness, and mutual caring, which is our Christian ideal.

Bibliography

Clinebell, Howard, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, 2nd edn, London UK: SCM Press, 1984.