

# Pastoral Care

## Introduction

Pastoral care is one of the most fundamental activities undertaken by the Christian Church. A church can be healthy and grow without a good preacher or a talented worship leader, but it is unlikely to thrive without good pastoral care.

Much of the literature about pastoral care is instructional, telling people how to do it properly. Built into most of the content are a number of common assumptions.

- It is aimed at people who provide pastoral care to others.
- It is aimed at people who are fundamentally okay.
- It is aimed at the members of a small elite.

Pastoral care is usually seen as the job of a select few: people such as ordained ministers, youth group leaders and homegroup leaders. Within this model, there are two groups: those who provide pastoral care, and those who receive it.

We need a better model. Yes, we do need to provide good pastoral care, but we also need to receive pastoral care – and this, too, is not without problems. Both the giving and receiving of pastoral care needs to be within a framework which enables everyone to be cared for and grow.

## The Basics of a Pastoral Care Framework

What do we need, as a minimum? Here are seven or eight aspects.

A shared **understanding** of pastoral care. A shepherd provides the sheep with food and protection, but the pastoral care of people is less straightforward: a pastor needs to ensure their flock not only has support when they need it, but also has what they need to grow – such as teaching and opportunities for effective service. The overarching objective of all Christian ministry is to ‘equip the saints’ to exercise the ministry themselves and bring them to the point where they no longer need you.

A **system**. It almost doesn't matter what the system is, as long as you have one, and it is both explicit and public – people need to know what the system is. Pastoral care is too important to leave to chance, and too difficult to expect people to do it well without adequate training, effective support and the Holy Spirit's guidance and power.

A **list**. You need to know who cares for you, and every pastor (or group of pastors) needs to know who they care for – and in what ways they are expected to care. Pastoral care is a relationship, and both sides need to recognise the relationship if it is going to work. In this complex world, it will often not be a simple ‘all-or-nothing’ arrangement, but both sides need to understand the system and recognise both a commitment and obligation to the other if it is going to work.

Clear **expectations**. There are many details to work through here, which can't all be spelled out, but some details need to be made explicit. Problems often arise when assumptions are disappointed. So, for example, how much work do you expect the other party to put in on your behalf? What sort of activity do you expect of them? What do you expect when things are going well, when there is a crisis, or when there is a long-term ongoing problem? Some people have very low expectations of pastoral care, some have very high expectations, and both can lead to problems.

Some **activity** which enables the pastor to identify pastoral need. Ideally, you will be talking about life, about what you are doing and what is happening, what you are planning, what you are expecting and what you are experiencing, and relevant questions will be asked: is that a problem, do you need help, how do you feel about it, do you want to talk some more about it?

Easy **access**. People need to know how to ask for help when they need it. Often, it will be sufficient just to mention something the next time you bump into your pastor, but occasionally you have an emergency and need to reach out at an antisocial time. When you need urgent support, you have to know how to make contact.

A **context**. Pastoral care always takes place in a clear social, economic, political and spiritual setting, which shapes what is expected, what is acceptable and what is allowed. The pastoral care relationship is personal, but not private.

And finally, we need a plan to **avoid** pastoral needs from arising. Teaching (corporate, small group and one-to-one) will help to set reasonable expectations and provide ways to avoid unnecessary problems. The experience of pastoral care must inform the teaching plan and other church activities and structures, so that future pastoral care problems can, where possible, be prevented. A wise person learns from their experiences; a wise church enables people to learn from the experiences of others.

## The Pastoral Care Team

Most churches will have someone who is recognised as the Pastor, whether they are called 'Pastor', 'Minister', 'Vicar', 'Priest' or something else. It is helpful to have at least one person who has the public role of pastor, whatever their title or formal job description.

It is the responsibility of the church leadership to ensure that people are cared for, which means that the people must know how to access the support they need – recognising that some people who have the formal position of Pastor (or Minister, Vicar, etc.) do not necessarily have strong pastoral gifts. It matters that the job is done, and it is done well; it is not so important who the job is done by.

So when we talk about a pastor, we mean a person who is recognised as having a pastoral care role of some kind: the term doesn't imply that the person has a unique position, or that everyone with that title will do the same things.

Each pastor must function alongside others as part of a team. The role of the team is not to provide all the pastoral care for a church or community, but to encourage others in this work and to provide a backup service and specialist support when it is needed. There are several reasons why this work requires a team.

**Availability.** Nobody can be available all the time, but when people need this help, they often need it quite urgently. Holidays and the occasional period of sickness should not limit the availability of pastoral care.

**Support.** If one person provides pastoral care to everyone else in the group, they cannot fully share their own needs and weaknesses without making others feel unsettled, so they inevitably become isolated and unsupported.

**Responsibility.** Most of us avoid approaching people who are struggling: I don't want to stick my nose in where it is not wanted (and risk rejection), and I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing, so I usually wait to be asked. Being part of a pastoral care team gives me a reason to overcome my reluctance to reach out: I see the need, so it's my responsibility to make the offer – not to solve, but to be present and listen.

**Accountability.** Whatever formal accountability structures are in place, people generally only feel accountable and behave accordingly if they are in a real relationship with others who have a genuine knowledge and understanding of what they are doing. In practice (even within the Christian community), it is the existence of a functioning team which most significantly increases the chances of everyone acting according to the highest moral standards.

**Workload.** Pastoral care can, at times, demand a good deal of concerted effort. If another significant need occurs at these times, it is unrealistic (and unfair) to expect one person to juggle all the competing requests.

**Perspective.** If you genuinely care for people – if it is not just a job or a role you are playing – then you want to help, you want to do the best you can for them, you are going to be emotionally involved. You cannot be objective in this situation – nor should you be. So you need other people who know you and know what you are doing, to help you gain more perspective on what you are doing and what you should be seeking to do.

Alongside the pastoral care team are the remaining members of the church: each one of them is called to love, encourage and serve their fellow members, which means everyone is called to some involvement in frontline pastoral care. Love is the only universal command, so nobody is excluded from this call – but in practice some people will focus on it more than others, and some will need more direct guidance and immediate supervision in this role than others.

## The Goal of Pastoral Care

We need to be clear about our goal, what we are seeking to achieve through the pastoral care activity: pastoral care may be essential, but it is not an end in itself. We are not explicitly given a goal, but Paul's summary in Colossians 1:28 seems to say what is needed: we aim to present everyone complete in Christ. The original word is *teleion*: fully developed, mature, complete – in other words, fully themselves, all they were intended to be.

This does not mean that we can only provide pastoral care to Christians, but it does mean that we are accountable to Jesus for the impact we have on the lives of the people we interact with, and the most important aspect of our interaction is whether it helps them grow into mature people.

Having the right goal matters here. Growth is a risky business, and one temptation of pastoral care is to work towards the goal of keeping people safe and happy. Being safe and happy is not, in itself, a bad thing, but safe and happy without growth, for most people, is at best a wasted opportunity.

Safety, as a goal, draws us towards passivity and complacency: if we don't attempt anything and are content to stay where we are, then we risk nothing and learn nothing. Happiness as a goal draws us towards hedonism and self-centeredness. If the people are safe and happy, it may seem the pastoral care is working well. The problem is this: if people are unhappy, it will usually be very obvious; but if they fail to achieve their potential, the chances are that nobody will notice.

Of course, you don't want people to be unsafe and unhappy – not too much, anyway. But a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the status quo is often needed before we will embrace change, and change is inherently risky. And: without change, we cannot grow – we can only get old.

It is tempting to dismiss talk about goals and growth as pie in the sky, only relevant when people are fairly secure and content: when they are in the middle of trauma or crisis or serious mental health problems, the immediate challenge is simple survival. But crises rarely arrive completely out of the blue: most of them are fairly predictable, even if the precise timing and the details are unexpected. Helping people survive without helping them grow is simply a way of setting them up to fall at the next fence.

## **The Activity of Pastoral Care**

Good pastoral care is both proactive and reactive: we generally think of it as providing something which is done when people reach out for help, but people don't always reach out when they need to. We may be afraid or ashamed, or simply not recognise when we need help or when we have the opportunity to grow in some way.

Pastoral care takes place in a context, and the context matters. It involves knowing one another and trust, and these things are generally built through the things you do together within that wider context. Does your context help to develop relationships and build trust?

Pastoral care is about loving people, about helping them feel they are cared for – it is not about solving their problems. You may get involved with helping them solve their problems, emotional, relational and practical, but don't get side-tracked into becoming a problem solver. Apart from anything else, if you simply solve their problems, they learn that they can get their problems fixed by coming to you, when you want them to learn how to live well and handle the challenges life throws at us.

Pastoral care is about building community, not developing independence. We cope with things on our own if we have to, but the best way to handle the challenges life throws at us is not by being totally self-sufficient, but by being part of a loving and supportive community.

Pastoral care is an act of love and service: you are doing it to help other people achieve their goals, not to help you achieve yours; you are doing it to help them fulfil their purpose, not to help you fulfil yours. Of course, it may help you too – it probably will – but that is a by-product, not your reason for doing it.

Cooperation is not just about working together: it is also a process of discovering how our corporate goals and our personal goals can support and enrich each other, of learning how each of our goals fit together into the greater goal of building the kingdom of God. You need to understand the goals of the people you care for.

You can't help people if they don't want to be helped, but you can offer even if you have not been asked. However, when offering, remember there is always a power imbalance in pastoral care, and an offer made by someone in power is never a simple thing to process. Pastoral care is about love, and love is unconditional: I will love and support you, whether or not you accept my help or take my advice.

Pastoral care is not a form of counselling. In counselling, you don't normally tell the client what they need to know: you help them discover it for themselves – but the client normally knows that they are searching for an understanding that will change their lives, and they have committed themselves to work for it. In a pastoral care situation, the 'contract' is different, and you often don't have the luxury of being able to take a long journey of discovery. Personal insight is wonderful when it happens, but sometimes the loving thing is simply to say what needs to be understood.

Both parties need to be clear how confidentiality works: in normal circumstances, nothing will be repeated, but you cannot promise total secrecy as there are legal and practical limits. People providing pastoral care need to be cared for themselves, and some of that care will involve sharing the stresses and checking the wisdom of the care they are providing to others. One of the skills you develop as a pastor is you learn how to articulate the key aspects of a situation in a way that doesn't identify the person or the details of the situation, but still enables you to get the perspective and support you need.

Pastoral care is not a professional service, delivered by someone with no personal commitment to or involvement in the life of the person being cared for – which means that it can be difficult to work out where the boundaries ought to be. A common struggle is to determine how involved the pastor should be in providing or helping to arrange practical help. Financial help is particularly difficult, but is much easier if any money comes from – or, at least, through – the group, with all the necessary checks and oversight which this involves.

Pastoral care groups will normally meet face to face every now and then, and they often find that one of the main things which is helpful to talk about when they meet is where to set boundaries in the different situations they each face.

## Some Building Blocks

There are a number of common building blocks which make up good emotional and mental health: common sense, but not as common as we may wish.

**Reasonable expectations.** If I expect everyone will be completely honest with me, I will be disappointed. But, equally, if I expect that everyone is always out to cheat me, I will refuse genuine help even when I desperately need it. I can't be healthy and happy without reasonable expectations – of myself and others. One key area where I need reasonable expectations is in understanding my capacity, and how my circumstances change what I'm able to do.

**Honest communication.** We are all tempted to lie and hide, but we also have a deep need to be known and accepted: if I don't tell you the truth about what I do and how I feel, you cannot know me – however it feels to me, the truth is that I'm the only one who loses out in this situation.

**Cause and effect.** I would like to live in a world where I could eat as much as I like without putting on weight, but I don't. If I eat too much, I put on weight, if I lie to people they won't believe me, if I let people down they won't trust me. My behaviour has consequences.

**Personal responsibility.** I have to accept ownership of my own actions, and responsibility for the consequences of my actions. The tricky part is to accept a reasonable level of responsibility for the choices other people make as a consequence of my actions. I may influence your behaviour, but I don't make you act the way you do. I am responsible for my actions, and the impact of my actions on other people; you are responsible for your actions and for their impact.

**Self-acceptance.** This is essentially a question of honesty again – honesty about myself, who I understand myself to be. I have likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses; I cannot fully be myself without understanding what they are, and I cannot successfully be anybody else.

**Embrace change.** Change is inevitable: things get worn out and break, people get old and die. But change can also be for the better, and change, good or bad, brings opportunities: through it, we can grow and learn, we can love in new ways, create wonderful things and build meaningful relationships.

**Risk hope.** If you hope, you can be disappointed – but if you don't risk hope at all, you have no future. We can't live without hope of some kind. Christian hope is rooted in the character of God, Who promises to transform us to be like Jesus, but everyone, whatever their beliefs, needs to find some basis for hope.

## ***Next steps***

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
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