

**KNOX CENTRE**  
FOR MINISTRY  
& LEADERSHIP



# Pastoral Care Handbook



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### Foreword

Churches can be extraordinarily busy places. There are so many things to do and to organise. Yet the labourers are few. Many ministers, other church leaders and willing personnel seem stretched to the max, not only attending to all the usual administrative and organisational tasks, but also encouraging their churches to think and act more missionally. Something has to give. And that something is usually pastoral care. In my opinion it is one of the most neglected and least understood aspects of ministry today. Even churches that take it seriously through the appointment of a parish visitor or pastoral care worker often view it in one-dimensional terms.

This handbook is designed to help people think afresh about pastoral care, to view it expansively, and to reflect upon the skills that are needed to provide effective pastoral care across a range of contexts. The handbook is divided into four main sections. The first section offers a definition of pastoral care, encouraging reflection upon its scope and focus; the second section describes various dimensions of pastoral care, challenging us to see it as something more than visiting the sick and the elderly; the third section describes a variety of contexts in which pastoral care is commonly exercised; and the fourth section focuses on the health and wellbeing of those who exercise pastoral care.

The handbook is intended for use by anybody who exercises a ministry of pastoral care – ministers, elders, parish visitors, youth leaders, homegroup leaders, and so on. It can be a basis for individual reflection or group discussion. The various sections can be read sequentially like a book, or they can be appropriated independently of one another to suit the needs of the user. Each section has one or more questions for reflection. We have tried to produce something that is biblically and theologically robust, as well as being intensely practical.

This is the third handbook to be produced by the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership. The other two are on eldership and leadership. All can be ordered from the Knox Centre or downloaded from the Knox Centre web site: [www.knoxcentre.ac.nz](http://www.knoxcentre.ac.nz)

If you have any suggestions to make in regards to how the handbook might be improved, please email: [principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz](mailto:principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz)

*Graham Redding*

*September 2012*

## The cure of souls

### Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.*

Pastoral care within the Christian tradition is inextricably linked to the biblical image of the shepherd: “The Lord is my shepherd,” the psalmist declares (Psalm 23:1); “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus informs his hearers (John 10:11).

Whenever we join the company of saints in singing or reciting the “Shepherd Psalm” we are not merely giving intellectual assent to a series of propositions *about* God; rather, we are engaging in an act of personal and collective devotion *to* God, giving voice to something that wells up from the depths of the soul. The Lord is not just *like* a shepherd; the Lord *is* my shepherd – a subtle yet profound distinction. In the company of the Good Shepherd the human soul is nourished, restored, comforted, kept and guided.

At its most basic level, pastoral care is the outworking of this remarkable claim. It is about the cure or care of souls.<sup>1</sup>

It is precisely this dimension which most distinguishes pastoral care from social work, counselling and other helping activities and professions. It is not necessarily the case that pastoral care, or the cure of souls, has a spiritual dimension that these other activities and professions lack, but rather it is an active

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<sup>1</sup> An ancient reference to the “cure of souls” is recognised more in some church traditions than others. It comes from the Latin *cura animarum*, and means “care of souls”.

and intentional sharing, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the pastoral work of the Good Shepherd as he shepherds his flock, which is the church. As such, it has a clear and distinctive focus.

It is important to note, however, that a clear and distinctive *focus* for pastoral care does not constitute a *boundary* or limit of care. Although the ministry of pastoral care is inherent in the act of baptism, impelling Christians to care for one another as sisters and brothers in Christ, their duty of care extends beyond themselves in the manner of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The church is not a self-enclosed community. It is the first fruits of a new humanity. It is a community that extends to its non-Christian neighbours the same reckless love and compassion by which it has been formed in Christ.

This expansive ethic of care over the years has inspired countless acts of Christian mission, charity and compassion, and undergirds the work of Christian organisations such as the International Red Cross, the Order of St John, World Vision, Tear Fund, Christian World Service, Servants to Asia's Poor and the numerous food banks and Christian social service agencies in this country, including Presbyterian Support and the Methodist Mission.

*How would you describe the focus and scope of pastoral care?*

## Dimensions of Pastoral Care

### Worship

*In an earlier time, a pastor caring for his flock, engaging in the activities related to the cure of souls meant, in great part, leading them in worship. There is much truth to the Jesuit liturgical scholar Jungmann's sweeping statement that "for centuries, the liturgy, actively celebrated, has been the most important form for pastoral care".<sup>2</sup>*

The business of caring for *souls* (and not just tending to physical and psychological needs) reminds us that the ministry of pastoral care is grounded in the act of worship. When John Calvin wrote his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), he began by saying that knowledge of ourselves is utterly bound up with our knowledge of God: "It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinise himself." (*Institutes* 1:1:2)

Calvin's thinking on this subject is consistent with the vision of heavenly worship described by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8). The first thing the prophet observes as he sees the Lord on a heavenly throne is a scene of eternal praise as seraphs call to one another across the temple: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Then, as the prophet contemplates the glory of God in this act of unrestrained praise, he is moved to declare, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." The act of praising God leads to an honest scrutiny of his human condition, which we call confession. Note that it is his sinful state of being, not a

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<sup>2</sup> William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979, p.35

catalogue of sins, that the prophet is moved to confess. True confession occurs in the act of being turned outwards and upwards towards God in praise; it is not a naval-gazing, cataloguing exercise. Note too that the prophet declares not only that he is a man of unclean lips, but also that he lives among a people of unclean lips. Confession is both personal and vicarious.

Far from wallowing in his own sense of sin, the prophet is then moved to declare with joy, “Yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” This is followed by one of the seraphs touching his mouth with a burning coal and declaring, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Through word and symbolic action the prophet is assured of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Having looked upon the face of God and beheld God’s glory, having been brought to an honest assessment of who he is before God, and having been set free from the burden of sin and guilt, finally the prophet hears a call to mission. “Whom shall I send?” the Lord asks, “Who will go for us?” And the prophet replies, “Here am I; send me!”

Note the movement in the above vision of worship from praise to confession to forgiveness to sending. This same progression should be evident in every act of Christian worship, not only because it follows a biblical pattern, but also because it enshrines that insight which Calvin articulated so well, namely, that it is only as we contemplate God that we are brought to true knowledge of ourselves.

Such knowledge is integral to the work of pastoral care. Consider how each element worship in Isaiah’s vision says something significant about who we are: The act of praise tells us that, as creatures made in God’s image, we are at our most human in the act of praising our Creator; the act of confession confronts us with the uncomfortable truth that we are sinners and that we live in a world of sin; the act of forgiveness tells us that only God deals with sin at its deepest level, and forgiveness is an act of unmerited grace; the act of sending tells us that in worship we are being healed and restored not just for our own benefit but in order that we might participate in God’s mission. We are being shaped for something bigger than ourselves.

Traditionally, these and other elements of Christian worship such as prayers of intercession are placed within a structure of worship that falls into two main parts: the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the Table. This twofold division can be traced back to the early church, and is evident in the well-known story of the Emmaus journey, found in Luke 24:13-35. There we read of the risen Jesus interpreting himself to two disciples in their reading of the scriptures (ministry of the Word) and then sitting with them at table, whereupon, in a manner reminiscent of the Last Supper, he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them (ministry of the Table).

As people of the Word, we follow the example of the Emmaus travellers in listening for the voice of the risen Lord in and through the scriptures. This requires of us a certain attentiveness, teachability and obedience. We approach the Word in the same manner as the first disciples – in need of having our thoughts and actions recalibrated to reflect the logic of the Kingdom.

In Isaiah 55:10-11 an evocative image is given of God’s word descending from heaven like rain and snow, and then returning to heaven having accomplished that for which it is sent, namely watering the earth,

making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater. Our Scottish forebears used that image to talk about the role of elders in the church. Just as pastors, through their preaching, are sowers of the Word, so elders, through their ministry of pastoral care, must seek the fruit of the Word among those who hear it. This is a ministry of care, prayer and encouragement. Thus understood, preaching and pastoral care are complementary ministries.

As people of the Table, we follow the example of the Emmaus travellers in table fellowship with the risen Lord. Having interpreted himself to us through the scriptures, the Lord now hosts us at his table. He ministers to us. Through the power of Holy Spirit he enables us to share in his communion with the Father. At his table we discover that before we can give to others we must first receive from the Lord, and before we can minister to others we must first be ministered to. This is important to remember lest we reduce ministry to a checklist of tasks and obligations and forget that it is properly grounded in grace. Before ministry is a task it is a gift.

The meal we share at the Lord's Table is both a remembrance meal ("Do this is remembrance of me"), and an eschatological meal in which we eagerly await the day when "every knee shall bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." (Philippians 2:10-11) In other words, the meal is not just backward-looking or even present-looking; it is forward-looking. Yes, we remember the Lord's death, but as an ancient part of the communion liturgy reminds us, we remember the Lord's death *until he comes again*. Communion is thus a thanksgiving for what is and what has been, and a yearning for what is yet to come. Sitting at table with the risen and ascended Lord should prompt us to pray even more fervently, "Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This prayer should undergird all pastoral care.

*How does your experience of worship inform your understanding of pastoral care?*

### Prayer

*What a friend we have in Jesus,  
all our sins and griefs to bear,  
what a privilege to carry  
everything to God in prayer;  
O what peace we often forfeit,  
O what needless pain we bear,  
all because we do not carry  
everything to God in prayer!<sup>3</sup>*

As we get involved in people's lives and identify with their struggles, a prayerful yearning for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven will inevitably translate into specific prayers and actions. Many of the people we minister to and among will desire prayer.

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<sup>3</sup> Hymn by Joseph Medlicott Scriven, 1819-86



But what sort of prayer is appropriate in a given situation, and what do we hope will be achieved through prayer? To carry everything to God in prayer might indeed be a privilege, but what does it mean in practice? What we pray and how we pray will speak volumes about our faith and what we truly believe about God.

For many people prayer is primarily a form of self-expression. Carrying everything to God in prayer means praying whatever is on one's heart at a given point in time. There are some problems with this model of prayer, though. After all, Jesus didn't instruct his disciples just to pray what was on their hearts; he told them to pray in a particular way (Matthew 6:9). And more than that, he warned them against heaping up empty phrases (Matthew 6:7).

Jesus' teaching suggests that prayer is a learnt activity, aptly summed up in the title of a nineteenth-century prayer classic (by Andrew Murray): "With Christ in the School of Prayer". The prayer Jesus taught his disciples is still instructive for us. It is a model in succinctness. Every word counts.

At the heart of the Lord's Prayer is a yearning for the coming of God's reign (or Kingdom), which provides the basis for the remaining petitions. When prayer is detached from this core yearning it tends to be reduced to a rather arbitrary wish-list, directed at a wish-list-granting god. By comparison, when we yearn for the Triune God's reign then we find ourselves seeking the mind of the One who proclaimed and embodied that reign. To pray in the name of Christ is to seek his mind, to discern what the Spirit is saying, to pray as Christ would have us pray and to live as he would have us live. Yes, this is a daunting proposition, but it is precisely when we feel the weight of our own inadequacies that we are encouraged by the Apostle Paul's assurance that the Spirit comes to us in our weakness and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26). What a wonderful thing it is to discover that in prayer we are not left to our own devices, and that prayer, far from being a duty laid upon us, is nothing less than the "utterance of our participation in the life of Christ" (John McLeod Campbell).

If the Lord's Prayer has a lot to teach us about prayer, so too do the Psalms, which have sometimes been referred to as the church's prayer book. To pray one's way through the Psalms is to be drawn into a pattern of praise, thanksgiving, confession, lament and petition. There is a refreshing honesty about the Psalms. They cover everything from warm devotion to deep despair, from trusting in God to contending with God, from waiting on God to pleading with God, from cries of confession to calls for vindication. The world of the Psalmist is a volatile one in which faith is expressed in the context of suffering and struggle.

As important as it is to familiarise ourselves with the Psalms and even to commit many of them to memory, it is equally important that we allow them to inspire fresh prayers that speak more directly into our own context and experience. It is also important that, as Christians, we learn to read and appropriate the Psalms through the lens of the Cross. We might therefore ask ourselves, "What does it mean to pray this Psalm in, through and with Christ? In what ways has the prayer of the Psalmist perhaps been fulfilled, answered or extended in Christ? In the light of the Cross, would we want to add anything?"

Thankfully, we are not thrown back on our own resourcefulness in this task. There are some good resources available to help us. For example: Jim Cotter's three volume series *Through Desert Places* (A Version of Psalms 1-50); *By Stony Paths* (Psalms 51-100) and *Towards the City* (Psalms 101-150). And David Grant's *Grant Us Your Peace: Prayers from the Lectionary Psalms*.

Besides the Psalms there are many prayers in the Bible that lend themselves to being used as templates or inspirations for contemporary prayer. It is sometimes (wrongly) assumed that for prayer to be true and authentic then it has to be completely new and spontaneous. But consider Jonah and the prayer that he prays from inside the belly of the big fish. Every line of Jonah's prayer and every key image or phrase in it has its origin in the Psalms. It is fresh and creative, insofar as the words and phrases are put together in a new way to speak into a particular situation, but it is learned prayer insofar as the words and phrases are drawn from a source that has sustained many people before Jonah and will continue to sustain many people after he has gone.

Pastorally, it can be very helpful to encourage people to pray, not by casting them back on their own resources, but by putting them in touch with the Psalms and other biblical prayers. Some of the great pastoral Psalms like Psalm 23 and Psalm 121 serve this purpose particularly well. There are also many fine collections of prayers by people who throughout the history of the church have become renowned for prayer – people like Julian of Norwich, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Jim Cotter, Ann Weems, Joy Cowley and Eddie Askew.

*Is there someone who, for you, has been a role model in prayer? What have you learnt about prayer from that person?*

*Is there a psalm or other biblical prayer that has been particularly meaningful for you over the years? What is it about that psalm or prayer that makes it so?*

## Healing

*In this bread there is healing,  
in this cup is life forever.  
In this moment, by the Spirit,  
Christ is with us here.<sup>4</sup>*

One of the great concepts that Judaism has given to the world is that of *shalom*. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures *shalom* is used in a variety of ways. It has connotations of peace, wholeness, completion, harmony, prosperity, security, reconciliation and joy. The prophet Ezekiel, in a visionary passage refers to God establishing a "covenant of shalom" and providing "plantations of shalom" (Ezekiel 34:25-29a). *Shalom* is woven into the movement from chaos to order in the very act of creation, culminating in the peace and joy of the Sabbath (Genesis 2:1-4a). *Shalom* is intensely personal, as reflected in the Bible's most familiar Sabbath blessing, which ends with the words, "The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,

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<sup>4</sup> Song by Graham Kendrick

and give you *shalom*" (Numbers 6:26), and in the everyday Jewish greeting, "Shalom aleichem," which may be translated as "Well-being be upon you" or "May you be well."

Interestingly, in John 20:21 the risen Christ uses the greeting "Peace be with you," a translation of *shalom aleichem*. And in the Gospels Jesus is portrayed as the One who not only pronounces *shalom*, but also establishes *shalom*. In Mark 4:37-39, for example, we are told that Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" This command serves the same purpose as the hovering spirit of God in Genesis 1:2, namely to bring elemental chaos and disorder under God's liberating and life-giving rule. What Mark wants his readers to recognise in Jesus is the establishment of *shalom* in a universe that apart from God's rule is disordered, chaotic and unfulfilling.

This same dynamic is evident in the so-called healing miracles of Jesus. It is all part and parcel of the inauguration of God's reign, a sign of the Kingdom, the birth of a new creation in the midst of the old. The miracles are enacted pronouncements of God's victory over all earthly manifestations of the forces of sin and death. At Jesus' word sinners are forgiven, the blind can see, lepers are cleansed, and the lame leap for joy. His healing ministry, charged with eschatological hope, anticipates his resurrection. And it is precisely this which sets him apart from all the other itinerant preachers and charismatic healers of his day.

Why is this important? It is important because without this biblical backdrop we tend to view healing in very individualistic terms and to equate it with physical cure, whereas the biblical notion of *shalom* compels us to think more broadly and deeply about issues of wellness and illness.<sup>5</sup> Let me give an example. Some years ago I was involved in the pastoral care of a woman who was in the terminal phase of her battle with cancer. I was privileged to witness healing take place, not in terms of a physical cure, but rather in terms of the woman being reconciled with her estranged brother and reaching a point of internal *shalom* whereby she was able to declare with the Apostle Paul, "We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:7) This had a calming effect on those around her. The distress that her husband and children had been feeling up until this point was eased considerably, and the remaining time that they had together as a family was characterised by a deep sense of gratitude. Amidst the tears there was much laughter.

Here is another story that invites us to rethink our notions of wellness and healing from a Kingdom perspective. The late Henri Nouwen once described attending an Easter vigil in a community of severely

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<sup>5</sup> In his book, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*, Walter Brueggemann identifies three major dimensions of *shalom*: a vision of harmony that encompasses all creation, a human community in which the oppressed and disenfranchised have dignity and power, and personal well-being. These three aspects – creation, community and personhood – are inter-connected, which means the personal well-being that we seek cannot be isolated from commitments toward the well-being of creation and human community. These commitments constitute a direct challenge to the individualistic and reductionist secular worldview which tends to underestimate the extent to which people are not so much self-contained individuals as persons-in-relationship, not only with one another but with creation itself. In this context, sickness, like its counterpart *shalom*, is multi-dimensional. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, creation is in bondage to decay and is groaning in labour pains as it awaits the full revelation of God's glory (Romans 8:18-25).

handicapped people. The cry of “The Lord is risen!”, Nouwen said, was shouted in a multitude of languages, accompanied by bells, alleluias, smiles laughter and a deep sense of hope. Nouwen wrote:

While all this joy filled the chapel, I saw that Nathan stood up with Philippe in his arms and left the church. Philippe’s body is severely distorted. He cannot speak, walk, dress, or feed himself and needs help every second of his waking hours. . . .When I saw Philippe in Nathan’s arms I suddenly realised what we were proclaiming on this Easter vigil. Philippe’s body is a body destined to a new life, a resurrected life. In his new body he will carry the signs of his suffering, just as Jesus carried the wounds of the crucifixion into his glory. And yet he will no longer be suffering, but will join the saints around the altar of the lamb. . . .What a faith! What a hope! What a love! The body (even a deformed body) is not a prison to escape from, but a temple in which God already dwells, and in which God’s glory will be fully manifested on the day of the resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

If we are able, together with Paul, to say that our life is somehow hidden in God with Christ, who is our redeemer and intercessor, and that when Christ who is our life is revealed then we also will be revealed with him in glory (Colossians 3:3-4), then we have a basis for looking forward to the day when, in Christ, the old creation will have given way to the new, and the glory of God, glimpsed now only in part, will be fully revealed. Armed with this hope, we might, in the words of Paul, feel afflicted in every way in this life, but we are not crushed, we might be perplexed, but we will not be driven to despair, we might be struck down, but we will not be destroyed. For, by faith, we are always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

In this context, what role does prayer play? John McLeod Campbell, a nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, defined prayer as “the utterance of participation in the life of Christ,” through which we are directed by the Spirit to seek the mind of the One who continually prays for the world he has redeemed in suffering love, and join our prayers to his. Prayer anticipates a future in which Christ will be all and in all.

Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, suggests that this means “we do not build the kingdom of God on earth by our own efforts (however assisted by grace); the most we can do, through genuine prayer, is to make as much room as possible, in ourselves and in the world, for the kingdom of God, so that its energies can go to work.”<sup>7</sup> Thus understood, the time between the first and second coming of Christ is not a time for passivity but for prayer. Or, as Christopher Cocksworth puts it: “It is the time for intercession in which God’s people pray for the coming of God’s will. And as they pray they discover that their groaning and the groaning of the rest of creation is none less than the groaning of the eschatological Spirit who yearns for manifestation of the new creation and so ‘intercedes with sighs too deep for words.’”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Show me the way: Readings for each day of Lent* (New York: Crossroads, 1994), pp138-9

<sup>7</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p.105

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy: Worshipping the Trinitarian God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), pp.35-6

The reality of praying between the times – of the first and second coming of Christ, and the old creation and the new – means that prayer should not be reduced to a cause-and-effect formula. People who are ill should not have placed upon them the added burden of feeling that if only they had more faith then their prayers for a physical cure would be answered. Both the process of healing and the act of prayer are more complex than that, as is their relationship to one another.

One of my former mentors in ministry, the late Bill Temple, testified to a time when he suffered a major heart attack and was admitted to hospital. The prognosis was grim and Bill, feeling that death may not be far away, found himself plunged into despair. That evening a colleague in ministry visited him, anointed him with oil, and prayed for him. Immediately, Bill felt his body supported and bathed in God's love. It was a turning point. Not that there was any kind of miraculous cure on a physical level – Bill still had a long period of recuperation in hospital, and he knew that no amount of prayer would stave off future heart attacks if he didn't heed medical advice and attend to matters of diet, exercise and stress. But on a psychological and spiritual level, things had changed dramatically. Bill's testimony taught me two important things about healing: (1) That spiritual disciplines (including prayer) should be regarded as a supplement to conventional medicine (also a gift from God), not as substitutes for it; and (2) That ritual and symbol can be important elements of a healing process.

The practice of anointing the sick with oil dates back to biblical times. There are two references to the practice in the New Testament. Firstly Mark, in his account of the twelve disciples being sent out in pairs to Galilean villages, says that they "anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." (Mark 6:13) Then James, in his epistle, writes: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5:14)

What is the significance of oil? It is a biblical sign of God's redemptive work. Its use reminds us that all healing falls under the orbit of God's salvific work, and that God is the ultimate agent of healing. Indeed, one of the Hebrew names for God is Jehovah-rapha, which means, "The Lord who heals."

If oil is a powerful symbol of redemption and healing, so too, in the Christian tradition, is Eucharistic bread. There is a Graham Kendrick song called "Here is bread", which in the opening line of the refrain claims that "in this bread there is healing." This is a compelling affirmation. It is not that the bread contains some kind of magical healing agent (any more than oil for anointing), but rather in the act of eating together the symbols of Jesus' body, given and broken for the life and *shalom* of the world there is a sense in which the ancient declaration of Isaiah, spoken in reference to the Suffering Servant, becomes a present reality: "By his bruises we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5)

Insofar as Holy Communion embodies and conveys this eschatological promise and is grounded in the ministry of the crucified and risen Lord, by whose wounds we are healed, it is a powerful symbol of, and vehicle for healing in a broken and hurting world. There is much to be gained from exploring the issue of healing from a Eucharistic perspective. Through ritual and symbol it suggests that health or well-being is more than the absence of illness and a feeling of inner peace and contentment. It is about being fully human, understood in terms of sharing in the life of the one whom we confess as the true Human Being,

the Second Adam (cf. Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:45-49), and in, through and with him, giving glory to, and sharing in the life and mission of the Triune God.

Given all that has been said above, what advice would I give to those who feel called to participate in a ministry of healing?

1. Allow the biblical concept of *shalom*, in all its dimensions, to shape your understanding of wellness and healing.
2. Draw a distinction between healing and cure. The former may include the latter, but it is also far broader and allows for a wider range of outcomes. Communicate this clearly to those who ask for healing (but often want a miraculous cure).
3. Regard faith and prayer as being complementary to medicine and science and the body's innate healing properties, not as substitutes. Do not underestimate the power of prayer, but also do not over-spiritualise the healing process.
4. Resist the temptation to adopt a problem-solving approach to healing. Cultivate instead skills of listening and discernment: What is the Spirit saying? Where are the signs of the Kingdom in this situation? Where are the possibilities for *shalom*? For what should I/we be praying?
5. Do not underestimate the power of ritual and symbol to communicate deep mysteries of faith, to put people in touch with the affective and intuitive aspects of their psyche, and to cultivate an appreciation for silence and contemplation.
6. Allow the Scriptures to shape and inform your prayers for healing; don't simply bombard God with requests and petitions. Give voice to lament as appropriate, provide opportunity for thanksgiving, learn to wait on God in silence, and ground everything in the promises of Scripture and the intercessions of Christ and the Spirit.

*What has been your own experience of healing in a Christian context? What lessons have you learnt and what insights have you gained?*

*If you were to offer your own advice on the subject, what would you add or change in relation to the above list?*

## Hospitality

*So welcome home, I bid you welcome, I bid you welcome  
Welcome home from the bottom of our hearts  
Welcome home, see I've made a space for you now  
Welcome home from the bottom of our hearts  
From the bottom of our hearts<sup>9</sup>*

Much is (rightly) made these days of the significance of hospitality, of making newcomers feel welcome and of providing multiple opportunities for fellowship in our churches. Living as we do in a café culture, many churches are seeking to allow aspects of that culture to transform the way they do church. Rapidly

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<sup>9</sup> Dave Dobbyn, from his song "Welcome Home"

disappearing are the days of providing a packet of biscuits and instant coffee in draughty church halls and drab lounges after worship services. In their place we are seeing church foyers being transformed into warm, light and spacious hospitality hubs where good coffee and food are served both before and after the service, and in many cases during the week too. Some churches are going further by allowing the café concept to inform and change the very shape and content of their worship. Such services tend to be informal and interactive, and they make a lot of use of multimedia – PowerPoint, DVD clips and the like.

Hospitality serves important pastoral purposes of making people feel welcome and providing places of belonging. Interestingly, the root meaning of the Hebrew word for salvation in the Old Testament is “to be roomy” or “to make room for”, or “to create space for”. I was reminded of this a few years ago when I heard Dave Dobbyn’s song, “Welcome Home”, which includes a wonderful line, as he alludes to the settling of immigrants to this country: “See, I’ve made a space for you now.”

An integral part of hospitality from a biblical and theological perspective, then, is about making the stranger feel welcome, making space for those who are not like us. Indeed it even goes so far as to include the notion of being reconciled to those from whom we may have been estranged. The Apostle Paul made this a recurring theme in his correspondence to fledgling Christian communities – e.g., Galatians 3:28. It’s not just that Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, all have their place – a form of peaceful co-existence as it were – but rather, the very things that divide them, allowing one ethnic group or class of people to dominate another, dissolve, and in their absence a new reconciled and reconciling humanity has been born.

It is this radical, transformative dimension to God’s hospitality, on display every time Christians gather around the Lord’s Table, which sets the church apart from every other organisation. Other community groups may surpass the church in their ability to welcome newcomers and provide fellowship, but every time Christians gather for worship and receive the “holy bread of heaven which gives us life” (John Calvin), they are reminded of a deeper and more profound dimension to hospitality – a dimension that originates in God and overflows from the throne of Grace, overcoming sin, binding people together in a reconciling embrace and serving as a sign of God’s intention for the world.

Understood in this way, exploring ways of becoming more hospitable will involve more than adding a café experience to church attendance. In her remarkable book, *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles describes the experience of early one morning in San Francisco, for no earthly reason, wandering into a church, receiving communion, and finding herself transformed – embracing a faith she had once scorned. Before long, she turned the bread she ate at communion into tons of groceries, piled at the foot of the church’s communion table to be given away. Within a few years, she and the people she served had started nearly a dozen food pantries in the poorest parts of their city. Her story graphically illustrates the missional potential of Eucharistic hospitality. For those who feel confused or overwhelmed by all the talk around being a missional church, I would say, concentrate first on being a hospitable church. Properly understood, this will not make your church inward looking; rather, it will sharpen you for witness and mission.

*What would becoming more hospitable entail for your church?*

## Care

*Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still  
Even among these rocks,  
Our peace in His will  
And even among these rocks  
Sister, mother  
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,  
Suffer me not to be separated  
And let my cry come unto Thee.<sup>10</sup>*

Christians do not have a monopoly on acts of care and compassion. But such acts do lie at the heart of our calling to follow the One who “went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness” and “when he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:35-36) It goes without saying that Christians care and that the communities of faith to which they belong will be communities of care. This is part and parcel of living out the Jesus-commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves. This is what we sign up for when we respond to Christ’s call upon our lives, knowing that such care will at times demand deep and costly commitments.

That said, we might ask: Of what does the Christian duty of care consist? In the section on prayer above we noted that prayer is a learnt activity. Could the same be said of care? This was a question posed by T.S. Eliot who, in his famous “Ash Wednesday” poem, written shortly after his conversion to the Christian faith in 1927, penned this remarkable prayer-line: “Teach us to care and not to care.”

What might this prayer be important for us today?

Firstly, teach us to care. Perhaps the first thing to note here is the distinction between kindness and care. If you have watched the Ellen DeGeneres television talk show you might have noticed that she always signs off her show with the exhortation to “be kind to one another.” But being kind to one another does not carry the same weight as caring for one another. Caring implies a relationship and an ongoing commitment in which lives become inextricably linked. Whereas pity and beneficence tend to be the primary motivators for acts of kindness and charity, it is compassion that sparks our motivation to care. We can be kind to one another yet still live autonomous lives, largely isolated from, and even indifferent towards the suffering that is evident all around us.

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<sup>10</sup> T.S. Eliot, from “Ash Wednesday” (1930)



When we pray, “Lord, teach us to care,” we are not only voicing our determination to allow compassion to break down the walls of indifference that exist between us; we are also resisting the professionalization of care that has become a feature of our age. Have you noticed that in the case of a public tragedy, for example, one of the first things usually to be reported is that counselling has been offered to the victims and their families? It seems that we can no longer rely on local communities and family networks to provide the requisite networks of care and support. Care has become something that we expect the health sector, not-for-profit organisations (including Christian social service agencies) and specialists to deliver on our behalf. On the one hand, this makes perfectly good sense, as most churches lack the resources and expertise to provide the level of care that is required in many situations; on the other hand, though, it absolves us of the need to become personally involved in the provision of care for our fellow human beings. We show we care by referring people to the right agency or organisation or by sending them on their way with a food parcel or supermarket voucher. Persons made in the image of God are reduced to clients, healthcare consumers, welfare beneficiaries and recipients of charity.

“Lord, teach us to care,” constitutes a plea for this distorted thinking to be corrected and to take responsibility for those aspects of care that are best located within those grassroots communities of care and worship that we call the church.

And so now to the second half of the prayer: “Teach us not to care.” At first glance this appears to be a contradiction, but perhaps at a deeper level it constitutes something of a reality check for us. Such is the scale of need in our world that it can be likened to a huge sponge soaking up every ounce of care we throw at it. Not only is it never satisfied; the more it is fed with care the more it appears to grow, as evidenced by the ever-expanding health care system and the ever-growing list of charities, not-for-profit organisations and community initiatives. Society’s provision of care, well intentioned and practical, can inadvertently encourage self-pity and a sense of entitlement. American author Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

There is a great irony here – that so much of our caring nurtures sin. The only group in our society who show any sign of acknowledging this is parents of young children. Parents know that there is nothing less innocent than childhood. After a few weeks, months at most, of responding unquestioningly to every sign of need, mothers and fathers start getting smart, start filtering the requests, cross-examining the wails. If they don’t, they realise in a few years, and with a sense of dismay, that it might be too late to do anything about it, because as they have been bandaging knees, wiping away tears, buying designer jeans, running interference for break-away emotions, they have at the same time been feeding pride, nourishing greed, fuelling lust and cultivating envy. But outside the circumstances of child-rearing, there does not seem to be much awareness of this deviousness. The moment any one of us says, “Help me!” and discovers how quickly others are in attendance on us, making us the centre and confirming our importance, a vast field for the exercise of sin – that is, getting our own godless and neighbourless way – opens up. It is really quite incredible the amount of illness, unhappiness, trouble, and pain that is actually chosen, because it is such an effective way of being in control, of being important, of exercising God-like prerogatives, of being recognised as significant, without entering the

strenuous apprenticeship of becoming truly human, which always requires learning the love of God, practising the love of neighbour.<sup>11</sup>

The prayer, “Lord, teach us not to care,” counters this tendency to indulge those manipulative impulses that sometimes accompany expressions of need. Part of caring is to exercise discernment and to develop models of care that go beyond do-goodism and activism. Perhaps this is what T.S. Eliot had in mind when he followed his plea to be taught to care and not to care with another plea: Teach us to sit still and to find our peace in the Lord’s will. In the midst of all our caring deeds, never let us neglect the task of encouraging one another to be still, to contemplate the deep mysteries of faith and to find our peace in God.

*What might be entailed in your church learning to care more fully in the manner of Christ?*

*Do you see any differences between the duty of care that is laid upon the church and the duty of care that is exercised in society?*

## Counselling

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.<sup>12</sup>*

Many pastoral encounters will entail some form of counselling. But few parish ministers, elders and pastoral care workers will be accredited counsellors or indeed have had any formal training in counselling. That is okay, provided that they operate strictly within the parameters of their own clearly defined roles and levels of competence. To this end, it is helpful to make a distinction between pastoral counselling and professional counselling. Pastoral counselling takes place in the context of a pastoral relationship, which itself is imbedded in the life of a pastoral community, which we call the church. It will utilise the tools of scripture, ritual, prayer and community support as appropriate. It will have a strong faith component, consistent with its focus on the “cure of souls”. By way of comparison, professional counselling is more interventionist, specialised and contractual. A key lesson to learn for those engaged in pastoral counselling is when and under what circumstances professional counselling should be recommended.

Some people who are referred to a professional counselling service will indicate a preference for a Christian counsellor. This usually reflects a desire to meet with someone who will respect and perhaps even share their own faith-based worldview and who will not regard as irrelevant certain tools of faith like prayer.

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<sup>11</sup> Eugene Peterson , *Subversive Spirituality*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, pp.158-9

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 139:1-3

What are the basic skills of pastoral counselling? Most people involved in this area of ministry are likely to list the following sorts of things:

1. Deep listening: This involves not only hearing the words that are being spoken, but reading body language, hearing what is not being said, interpreting what you are hearing, and discerning what underlying issues there might be. It means listening with respect, focusing totally on the person who is speaking to you, and not jumping to conclusions.
2. Deep questioning: This will include asking questions of clarification and questions that encourage self-reflection and the expression of thoughts and feelings associated with the matter(s) being talked about. It does not mean that you can only ever ask questions and never offer advice or share from your own experience, but do so sparingly and never to the point of dominating the conversation and making it all about you. Sadly, there are far too many occasions where people being counselled have come away from such conversations saying that they seemed to be more about the counsellor's agenda and issues than theirs.
3. Being self-aware: This includes: (1) Knowing your own value and belief system (there is no such thing as value-free or belief-neutral counselling); (2) Knowing (as far as you are able) your own needs, limitations, vulnerabilities and unresolved issues, and being able to say when a line of conversation is taking you outside your comfort zone and beyond your area of experience and competence.
4. Respecting the sanctity of the pastoral conversation: This might necessitate assuring the person with whom you are talking of the confidential nature of the conversation, and at a certain point in the conversation seeking their permission (for specified reasons) to disclose to the minister or some other appropriate person the nature of the conversation.
5. Offering prayer as appropriate.
6. Keeping safe through: (1) Supervision; (2) Adhering to a code of pastoral ethics; (3) Maintaining appropriate distance and avoiding emotional co-dependence; (4) Not allowing yourself to be in a situation where you might be compromised or lay yourself open to accusations of ethical misconduct.

*In your experience, what makes for effective pastoral counselling? What would you change or add to the above list?*

### **Faith Formation**

*You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.<sup>13</sup>*

In the section on worship as pastoral care, we identified pastoral work with the task of seeking the fruit of the Word among those who hear it. There is a presumption here that those who hear the Word of

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<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 11:18-19

God do not receive it passively; rather, they are being formed for discipleship in much the same manner as the very first disciples who followed Jesus and listened to his teaching. What we are talking about here is a lifelong process of spiritual growth and faith formation, or as the Apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

Faith formation takes many forms. It occurs in worship, not only as we attend to the Word of God, but also as we pray and sing and gather around the Table. Faith formation thus consists of didactic (preaching/teaching/instruction) and doxological (praise/worship/prayer) elements. We are formed in mind and spirit. It is important to hold these two things together. Faith formation that focuses on the didactic and neglects the doxological risks becoming impersonal and theoretical. Conversely, faith formation that focuses on the doxological and neglects the didactic risks being superficial and sentimental.

A key aspect of pastoral care will be the encouragement that is given to people to keep growing in the Faith, personally and in community. In 1 Corinthians 3:2 a contrast is drawn between infants in Christ who are fed with milk and spiritually mature people who are ready for solid food. Some people show no desire to move beyond the infant stage; however, allowing people to stagnate in faith is not good pastorally. A stagnant or underdeveloped faith will be less able to cope with challenge and change. Opportunities for growth might include home-groups, Christian education programmes, baptism and confirmation classes, prayer groups, personal mentoring, spiritual supervision, spiritual disciplines, journaling, personal devotions, reflective reading of scripture, pastoral conversations, spiritual retreats, mission and outreach activities, and courses in biblical studies and theology.

Behind this range of opportunities is a wide range of people involved in the task of faith formation. It is not just the task of ministers, paid professionals and volunteer leaders. In recent decades, one of the most neglected contexts for faith formation and pastoral care has been the home. Within Christian history marriage and parenting have been considered vocations. The home is to be a sign of the kingdom, a place where faith is nurtured and disciples are formed.

What this means in practice today will, of course, vary from home to home and will be contingent on a whole range of factors; the main point to note is the significance of the home for faith formation and pastoral care. This has always been a characteristic feature of the Reformed tradition. In his manual on Christian piety, for example, a seventeenth-century Puritan, Lewis Bayly, recommended that families, upon their return home from church each Sunday, discuss the sermon and account for what they have learned, integrating their learning throughout the week with daily readings from a catechism. Moreover, Bayly and other Puritan leaders strongly advised that every family read a full chapter of scripture at the beginning and ending of every day and at noon, thereby enabling the whole Bible to be read in a year.

More recently, some readers will be familiar with the names of Tom and James Torrance, two Scottish ministers and world-renowned theologians who died just a few years ago. James' son, Alan, taught systematic theology at the Theological Hall in Dunedin in the late 1980s and early 90s. In 2007, *An Introduction to Torrance Theology* was published. It included a personal statement by Tom's and James' brother David about their family background. David wrote: “Our love for the Scriptures and our

theological education started from a very early age with our parents' teaching. ... Our parents had a steadfast faith in God, a love for the Word of God and a firm belief in the power of prayer. Every day we met for family worship which was led by one of our parents. This continued from our earliest days of infancy until one by one we left home. ... As children, our parents expounded to us the Scriptures. They inspired us with a love for the Lord and a love of God's Word. From our earliest years they encouraged us to read the Bible every day for ourselves and to read it through each year, which we have continued to do. ... They encouraged us to memorise fairly large portions of Scripture, particularly the Psalms, which we have always appreciated. ... Our parents also guided us in our Christian reading, and introduced us to various commentaries like Luther's *Galatians*. ... While still at high school we were introduced to Calvin's *Institutes*."

Whilst few families today would achieve this level of Christian guidance and encouragement in the home, we do need to ask what can be done to combat the rising tide of biblical and theological illiteracy in our churches. How might we better encourage and resource parents for the task of faith formation in the home? Do we even regard this as an important thing to do?

One of the difficulties we face in this regard is the individualistic mindset that pervades much of Western culture. According to this mindset, anything that threatens the autonomy of the individual is regarded with suspicion. Many parents want their children to develop their own personal spirituality, and they shy away from anything which they might regard as indoctrination. Spirituality, yes, religion, no; exposure to a range of spiritual experiences, yes, commitment to a particular faith community and a set of practices and beliefs, no.

This helps explain the reluctance of many parents today to have their children baptized. Not wanting to "impose" their beliefs on their children, they adopt a position of "practical agnosticism": "Let our children decide for themselves when they're old enough to do so," they say.

There are two major problems with this reasoning though. Firstly, it presumes that we can raise our children in a belief-neutral environment, which clearly is not possible. Every home functions in accordance with an implied set of beliefs and an underlying worldview, which will include certain assumptions about what it means to be human and what the purpose or meaning of life might be. Secondly, it is contrary to the biblical notion of being part of a covenant community that consists of entire households and families, not just consenting adults. Freedom, understood biblically, is not freedom *from* commitment and community, but rather freedom *in* commitment and community.

If you are committed to intentionally ministering to children and families, we encourage you to join the Kids Friendly Network, of which Jill Kayser is the national coach. Kids Friendly offer a wide range of training events and resources for churches, including the following:

1. A "Partnering with Parents" workshop, which will:
  - Transform parents' thinking on faith development and help them embrace their role as spiritual nurturers.
  - Equip parents to share and practise their faith with their children
  - Encourage churches to be more inclusive of young people and to intentionally disciple them.

2. A “Sharing Faith@Home” workshop designed to inspire parents to share their faith with their children and explore ways of doing that. A “faith@home” flyer reminds parents of the important role they play in faith development and gives practical tips on sharing faith, reading scripture and praying together. It includes recommended books, websites, family devotions and other resources.
3. Family devotion resources that follow the church year, including Advent, Lent, Easter and Christmas.
4. All-age faith-sharing resources for use in church services.
5. A Kids Friendly library consisting of many books and practical resources.

To find out more, just visit the Kids Friendly web site: <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/national-ministries/kids-friendly>

*Why is faith formation an important dimension of pastoral care? How can you and your church be more intentional about the task of faith formation?*

### Discipline

*Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.<sup>14</sup>*

In John Calvin’s day in Geneva, a group of elders called a Consistory (in effect a session) met weekly and ruled on matters of personal morality, business practice and public ethics. This proved to be the most controversial aspect of Calvin’s reforms, but it did lead John Knox to observe that Geneva was the “most godly city ever established on earth.” Discipline “rightly administered” came to be regarded as a mark of the Scottish Church, alongside preaching and celebration of the Lord’s Supper. While the notion of discipline has negative connotations nowadays, it should be remembered that *discipline*, in a church context, is concerned with the formation of *disciples*, of people whose lives are ordered by the gospel. Nurture, encouragement and even correction, sensitively and prayerfully exercised in the context of pastoral care, and determined always by love, might be deemed an appropriate means of strengthening faith and forming disciples within the Christian community.

People might find it more helpful these days to talk about accountability rather than discipline. In the absence of any form of accountability there is a very real danger of “spiritual narcissism”, whereby people simply do whatever is right in their own eyes. Forms of accountability might include spiritual supervision, prayer partners and personal mentoring in ministry. Many people have experienced great value in committing themselves to time-honoured personal spiritual disciplines, adapted to fit today’s context and consisting of daily habits of faith, including regulated prayer and Bible study.

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<sup>14</sup> Philippians 4:8-9

*What are the means in your church by which people hold each other to account for the faith they profess?*

### **A Code of Conduct**

The fact that most professions these days have codes of ethics is indicative of the importance that is attached to maintaining professional standards, the integrity of behaviour and a proper duty of care towards others. We must do whatever we can to safeguard ourselves and others from breaches of trust, moral lapses and exploitative practices. Codes of ethics on their own will not do this of course, but they do articulate a basic set of expectations and requirements by which people may be held to account.

The 1996 General Assembly commended to the church the following Code of Ethics as an agreed minimum standard of practice for those who share in the ministry of pastoral care:

#### ***Introduction***

This Code is a statement of how the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand understands the standards of conduct of those members who undertake the work of pastoral care in its name. In this context the term minister will include all, clergy and lay, who undertake the work of pastoral care.

Pastoral care involves the formation of special relationships characterised by openness and trust. These relationships are developed in a variety of settings and a variety of ways, from informal pastoral care to structured counselling situations.

This Code indicates acceptable ethical behaviour for those offering pastoral care. While its focus is pastoral care, it is also applicable wherever there is a ministry relation between people. By the grace of God we are called to serve, and through the power of the Holy Spirit we are sustained and encouraged to keep within this code.

#### ***Responsibilities to Those to Whom We Offer Pastoral Care***

- 1) Ministers will deal truthfully with people, encouraging free and open discussion, upholding their best interests, rights and well-being.
- 2) Ministers will respect the right of people to privacy and confidentiality of information except when there is a clear and imminent danger to those people or others, at which time they will be informed of those limits.
- 3) Ministers will recognise the dignity and worth of every person and will offer pastoral care without unfair discrimination.
- 4) Ministers will not abuse their position by taking advantage of people for personal, financial or institutional gain.

5) Ministers will recognise that sexual intimacy in the pastoral situation is unacceptable and will not subject people to sexual exploitation, sexual harassment or sexual abuse.

6) Ministers will recognise that there are limits to their competence and will refer people to others when this proves necessary or desirable. They will not attempt counselling without training.

7) Ministers will recognise that there is a cultural context for pastoral care and will act with awareness and sensitivity.

### ***Responsibilities to the Church***

1) Ministers will uphold high standards of practice in ministry and work for the advancement of those standards.

2) Ministers will exercise stewardship in the time given to ministry, guarding against both over commitment and avoidance of responsibility.

### ***Responsibilities to Colleagues and Other Pastoral Workers***

1) Ministers will promote co-operation with colleagues, pastoral workers and members of other helping professions, treating them with consideration and respecting professional confidences.

2) Ministers will seek mediation through the courts of the church when conflicts with colleagues or others within the church community arise.

3) Ministers will take action through the proper channels concerning unethical conduct by colleagues or other pastoral workers.

### ***Responsibilities to the Wider Community***

1) Ministers will act to prevent and eliminate unfair discrimination in the wider community.

2) Ministers will encourage as part of their pastoral task, participation in the shaping of social policies, advocating the promotion of social justices, improved social conditions and a fair sharing of the community's resources.

### ***Personal Responsibilities***

1) Ministers will use regular approved supervision to maintain accountability and a high standard of pastoral care.

2) Ministers will use regular opportunities for spiritual growth, personal recreation and refreshment.

3) Ministers will seek to extend and enhance their knowledge.



*The above Code of Ethics is described as an agreed minimum standard of practice for those who share in the ministry of pastoral care. What sorts of things would you add to raise it above the minimum standard?*

## **Contexts of Pastoral Care**

### **Routine parish visiting**

There are two ways of viewing the discipline of visiting people associated with a particular church or congregation: organisationally and theologically.

Organisationally, it's about providing a network of care that builds community, cultivates a sense of belonging and encourages personal involvement. The value of this should not be underestimated. The extent to which people support and contribute to the life of any organisation will in many cases be closely related to the extent that they identify with the ethos and purpose of that organisation and feel valued by it. Churches that neglect this basic pastoral task and opportunity are likely to struggle with fragmentation and declining membership.

Consider the following scenario: John and Beth have been involved in their local church for many years, giving generously of their time and talents, but as age has caught up with them they have gradually withdrawn from the various committees and duty rosters that used to demand so much of their time. Their involvement is now largely restricted to attending worship on Sundays, providing modest ongoing financial support for the church, and supporting occasional parish activities. One thing they notice, however, is that, since pulling back from active involvement, they not only feel out of the loop in terms of what is going on in the church, but nobody visits them. It seems to be the case that if you're not a newcomer or a major contributor to the life of the church, or if you're not going through a crisis of some sort then you tend to "fall off the radar". Even when John and Beth's church attendance becomes sporadic rather than regular, nobody makes contact. It is only after they cancel their automatic payment to the church that the minister phones them to ask if everything is alright.

Stories like this are not uncommon. After prioritising the welcoming of newcomers, the pastoral care of their leadership team, and responding to pastoral crises, many pastors and ministers have little time or energy left for routine parish visiting. Nor do elders. With the move in recent decades towards smaller Sessions and the substitution of Parish Councils for Sessions, the old Presbyterian concept of elders' pastoral districts has all but had its day. Churches that have retained the position of elder often define the role in terms of fulfilling a governance role to the exclusion of pastoral responsibilities. In many churches, the responsibility for routine pastoral care has been transferred to pastoral care workers (paid and unpaid), pastoral visiting teams, home groups and the like. A major challenge for these alternative structures, though, is one of coordination; without it, the pastoral care coverage can be patchy, resulting in many people like John and Beth falling through the gaps. Managing expectations can also be problematic, insofar as some people feel that they haven't really been visited unless it's by a minister or

elder. In many churches there appears to be very little structure and intentionality around routine pastoral visiting.

It is instructive to note that when the office of elder was developed in Scotland in the sixteenth century, the Church of Scotland's *Second Book of Discipline* (1578) said that "as the Pastors and Doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the Seed of the Word, so the Elders should be careful in seeking the Fruit of the same in the people." Eldership, thus described theologically, bore a strong spiritual and pastoral component, which we in our day might say should consist of a ministry of prayer, care and encouragement in the Faith.

Whether it is the eldership that takes responsibility for this role today, or some alternative pastoral system, the key thing is that it is done.

In my first parish I visited a parishioner whose sister was visiting him from overseas. His sister was an artist. She worked with stones that she picked up on her daily walks along the coastline. She would bring the stones home, clean them, and let them sit for days and in some cases weeks in her room. Each day she would hold one of these stones in her hand, look at it from a variety of angles and in different lights. After a period of contemplating the stone in this manner she would use a pencil to gently highlight and enhance certain features— a seam, a flaw, a colour variation, and so on – until such time as a picture emerged. Some of her pictures were simply stunning.

I recall thinking at the time what a wonderful metaphor for pastoral visiting this artistic process was. The artist did not impose her own will on a given stone. Rather, with a creative eye she patiently discerned that which was latent in the stone and brought it to the surface in order that it might shine. I was reminded of the Apostle Paul's words to the Corinthian church: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord a though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Knowing that we are works in progress, I do like the following prayer, the authorship of which is unknown but which is often attributed to the Iona Community:

*O Christ, the Master Carpenter,  
who at the last, through wood and nails,  
purchased our whole salvation,  
wield well your tools in the workshop of your world,  
so that we who come rough-hewn to your bench  
may here be fashioned to a truer beauty of your hand.  
We ask it for your own name's sake. Amen.*

*Seeking the fruit of the Word among the people of God. What are ways in which this happens in your context?*

*Who is involved in routine parish visiting in your church? Is there scope for improving the coordination and coverage of this aspect of pastoral care?*

## Relationship counselling

As persons made in the image of the Triune God we are relational beings. The quality of our relationships has a direct bearing on our personal wellbeing. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “A person is a person only through other persons.” Within a family there are multiple relationships – spouse to spouse, parent to parent, parent to child, sibling to sibling, as well as multiple extended family relationships involving grandparents, in-laws, uncles and aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces. Add to these the complexities of prior relationships, remarriage, de facto relationships, merged families, adopted families, same-sex relationships and cross-cultural relationships, and one begins to appreciate the huge range of contexts in which personal and family relationships function, often very positively, but sometimes problematically. Relationship difficulties can cause huge emotional wounds which, if left unattended, can lead to all kinds of dysfunctional and destructive behaviour. Examples are not hard to come by: The teenager who rebels against parental expectations; the bitter and vindictive divorcee; the high achieving workaholic whose life is dominated by his father’s angry denouncement, “You’ll never amount to anything”; the abandoned child who, as an adult, seems unable to commit to a long-term relationship; and so on.

Given the extent of emotional baggage that we carry as human beings, we should not underestimate the therapeutic value of prayer and worship as vehicles for the Gospel assurances of forgiveness and healing. Nor should we underestimate the restorative value of being part of a faith community that places healing and reconciliation at the heart of its life together. The person who is in Christ is not to be regarded as a victim of circumstance or to be defined in relation to their past, but rather to be regarded as a child of God and to be defined in terms of what God desires for them.

Relationship counselling, from a Christian perspective, should bear in mind this sort of interpretive framework. It will encourage a process of *reflection* (“What are the key events and experiences that have a bearing on my situation, and what have been their effects?”), *interpretation* (“How might I interpret these events and experiences biblically and theologically, as well as personally?”) and *discernment* (“What might the Spirit be saying in the midst of all this?”).

Here is an example of how this might work in practice. During the course of a pastoral conversation, the person you are seeing discloses that they’ve always had a problematic relationship with their father. You encourage some reflection on this, and discover that at the heart of the matter is a drinking problem that the father appears to have had, and which manifested itself in a number of ways in the home, impacting significantly upon the husband-wife and father-child relationships. After a period of further reflection on these family dynamics and their effects, you introduce Matthew 23:9 into the conversation, and ask, “How might you interpret your experience of relating to your father in the light of this instruction by Jesus to call no man on earth your father, for you have one Father – the one in heaven?” Further conversation leads to a conclusion that, in Christ, we discover the true and full meaning of fatherhood by relying not on our own flawed (and often hurtful) experience, but rather on the One whom Jesus called Abba, Father. And what might the Spirit be saying in the midst of all this? Perhaps as we learn to rest in the fatherhood of God, so we are able to put our human experiences of fatherhood into perspective, and even come to a point of forgiving the failures of our earthly fathers.

*Can you think of other examples where a process of reflection, interpretation and discernment either has led or might lead to a situation of a damaged relationship being healed?*

Having talked a little about relationship counselling in general, I now want to focus on two forms of relationship counselling that are especially common in parish ministry: Premarital counselling and marriage counselling.

### **Premarital counselling**

The fact that most churches require engaged couples to undergo some form of premarital counselling is indicative of the high value placed upon marriage in the Christian tradition. Most churches leave the form and content of premarital counselling up to individual ministers or appointed premarital counsellors. One of the most common approaches takes the form of having the couple fill out various questionnaires or “inventories” that probe certain aspects of a marriage relationship, and which form the basis for discussion, with the aim of helping couples to improve their relationship skills. One of the most established of these programmes, *Prepare/Enrich*, for example, promises to help couples:

- Explore strength and growth areas
- Strengthen communication skills
- Identify and manage major stressors
- Resolve conflict
- Develop a more balanced relationship
- Explore family of origin issues
- Discuss financial planning and budgeting
- Establish personal, couple and family goals
- Understand and appreciate personality differences<sup>15</sup>

Whilst programmes such as these help couples think through many practical aspects of relationships in general and marriage in particular, many ministers and Christian marriage counsellors choose to supplement them with a more biblically and theologically grounded view of marriage that helps inform the couple’s understanding of a Christian wedding ceremony. For example, a word that features prominently in a Christian wedding ceremony is “covenant”, which begs the question: What is a covenant, and why is it so important?

In the Bible, parties to a covenant are bound together in an enduring relationship of steadfast love and faithfulness. The primary covenant relationship is one which God establishes, firstly with all living creatures through Noah (Genesis 9:8-17), then with all humankind through Abraham (Genesis 17:1-22), and then with ancient Israel through Moses (Exodus 19 – 24 & 34:27). Seen in this context, a covenant can be seen as a relationship that is forged via a set of freely given promises and declarations. That relationship is both binding and freeing. So when we talk about a “covenant of marriage”, we are not talking about a contractual relationship defined by a mutually agreeable set of conditions; we are talking about an exchange of vows to love one another unconditionally, or to put it in the form of a traditional

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<sup>15</sup> [www.prepare-enrich.com](http://www.prepare-enrich.com)

wedding vow, “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance.”

Premarital counselling should help couples explore the significance and implications of these vows and the covenant relationship to which they give expression. Defined in terms of covenant relationship, marriage cannot be regarded as a temporary or private living arrangement or a marriage of convenience or a so-called “open marriage” in which partners agree that each may engage in extramarital sexual relations. Steadfast love and faithfulness preclude these sorts of things.

The other thing about defining marriage in terms of a covenant relationship is that it implies that the covenant-making God is in the mix. In other words, it's not just about the couple. They exchange their vows *in the presence of God*. This has significant implications. Take God out of the equation, and the wedding ceremony and indeed marriage itself become all about the couple – their big day, their feelings for one another, their aspirations, their vows, and so on. Put God into the equation, and we're bound to think more deeply about where marriage fits within the purposes of God.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the Bible seems to have little regard for the romantic ideal that tends to drive the modern wedding ceremony. Not only does the Bible have very little to say about marriage and about wedding ceremonies as such, but what it does say is often described in very functional language. To put it bluntly, marriage in the Old Testament – and to a certain extent in the New Testament as well – was largely an economic matter. Women were property. They had very few rights. For a thoroughly unromantic view of marriage, read the parts of Deuteronomy that regulate ancient marriage, especially 22:13-20. Moreover, few of the passages in the Bible that we cherish for their commentary on love and commitment were written with marriage in mind. 1 Corinthians 13 is the classic example.

Properly understood, a Christian wedding service will put marriage in the context of discipleship. In Luke 9:57-62, when Jesus tells his would-be followers to let the dead bury the dead and to not look back, he is effectively saying that even our most pressing family obligations and social institutions are now subordinated to the call to discipleship. It's not that they're suddenly rendered unimportant; it's just that they no longer exist in and for themselves; the claims which they make upon our lives must now give way to, and be informed by a higher allegiance, a deeper calling.

It is for this reason that the church considers the institution of marriage to serve not only the emotional and physical needs of the couple and the wellbeing of society. It has effectively been commandeered by our Lord to advance the Kingdom of God, to be a sign of the Kingdom.

How might it serve this purpose?

First and foremost, I would suggest that the Christian home is meant to be a place where faith is encouraged, nurtured and strengthened, where husband and wife encourage one another in their respective and mutual calls to serve God with heart, souls and minds.

Understood in this way, love does not draw a circle around the couple, isolating them from the needs of others, turning them in upon themselves. Rather, it turns them towards the world with a generosity of spirit, confident that the love which they share is grounded in, and flows from a God who so loved the world that He give His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

To this end, the Christian home is meant to be a place of hospitality, a place of welcome, echoing the hospitality of our Lord, who dined with sinners and ushered people into the Kingdom without discrimination.

Such is the hospitality of God, experienced afresh each time we gather around the Communion Table. At its best, the Christian home is an extension of this Eucharistic hospitality, a sign of God's Kingdom.

One of the benefits of placing marriage in the context of discipleship is that it levels the vocational playing field between marriage and singleness, and between having children and being childless. The call to discipleship can be heard and responded to whether one is married or single, with children or without children.

The other major benefit of placing marriage in the context of discipleship is that the romantic ideal associated with the modern wedding ceremony is put in perspective. Yes, romance is important both on the wedding day and in a marriage relationship; but it is not the most important element. The Christian wedding ceremony is a service of worship which bears witness to God's love and faithfulness, not just to the couple's personal sentiments, feelings and aspirations.

As our society has become more pluralistic, so more lifestyle options have become evident and in many cases normalised. Pre-marital sex, even among Christian couples, is more prevalent than in previous generations; the majority of couples now live together before getting married; many couples come to their wedding day with children, either from their current relationship or from previous relationships; divorce and single parenting no longer carry the stigma they used to; gay and lesbian relationships have been legalised and can now be formalised through civil union ceremonies. The modern definition of 'family' has changed to accommodate these variations.

Our churches are not immune from this pluralism. Many of the variations described above are likely to be represented in your congregation and/or the families of congregational members, even though the details of individual circumstances will not always be widely known. You will have people who are sexually active outside of marriage, de facto couples, divorcees, single parents, children or grandchildren of congregational members who are gay, and so on. These variations call for sensitive and skilled pastoral care.

*In your ministry context, what form does premarital counselling take? To what extent does it prepare couples not just for the practicalities of living in a long-term relationship, but also for a specifically Christian view of marriage?*

### Marriage counselling

Statistics New Zealand has a web page on marriage and divorce rates.<sup>16</sup> It makes for sobering reading. Amongst other things, it confirms that since the 1960s the marriage rate in this country has been falling and the divorce rate has been rising. Nothing too surprising there. But what is possibly of greater interest is the fact that a significant proportion of marriages last for a relatively short time – 14% under five years, and a whopping 25% between five and nine years. For many couples, it would appear that it does not take long for the marriage ideal to come to grief on the jagged rock of reality. Sadly, this is as true for Christians as much as it is for the rest of the population.

One response to these statistics might be to put forward an argument in favour of living in a de facto relationship prior to marriage – the logic of “try before you buy!” However, there is no evidence to suggest that those who have lived in a de facto relationship prior to marriage are any more prepared for, or successful in, marriage than those who haven’t. In fact, the opposite could be argued. People that choose to live together in a de facto relationship seldom opt for any form of relationship counselling – they just move in together – and should they subsequently decide to formalise their relationship through marriage, then they tend to assume that they’ve learnt all there is to know through their experience of living together. Meanwhile, any bad habits, distorted perceptions and dysfunctional ways of relating, which the couple may have fallen into, can go unexamined and unchecked, and carried forward into the marriage relationship.

The fact is, marriage is less about a static state of being than it is about a process of growth. Philip Culbertson is right when he says, “In actuality, marriage is best viewed as a developmental process full of challenges, transitions, and accomplishments, and in need of frequent renegotiation.”<sup>17</sup> There are many things that impact upon a relationship, including: personalities; personal character; core beliefs and outlook on life; family backgrounds; previous relationships; hopes and expectations; emotional and physical needs; abilities to express affection, relate sexually, deal with conflict, and communicate; health, employment and financial pressures; age and stage in life; support of friends and families; and so on.

The statistics suggest that a disturbingly high proportion of married couples fail to navigate their way through this myriad of factors and influences, and often by the time they realise the importance of doing so it is already too late. Holding to the adage that prevention is always better than cure, marriage enrichment programmes and marriage counselling can be beneficial in helping couples to “renegotiate” their relationship, to manage transitions from one phase of their relationship to the next, to reflect upon and enhance basic relationship skills, and to address problems before they become insurmountable.

If your ministry involves some relationship and marriage counselling, you might want to bear in mind the following pieces of general advice:

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<sup>16</sup> [www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/people\\_and\\_communities/marriages-civil-unions-and-divorces/marriage-and-divorce-in-nz.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/people_and_communities/marriages-civil-unions-and-divorces/marriage-and-divorce-in-nz.aspx)

<sup>17</sup> *Caring for God’s People*, p. 146

1. Remember, there are always two sides to a story. That doesn't mean that both sides are equally true or valid, particularly if one party has a vested interest in portraying something in a particular way, but it does mean that you should seek to hear both perspectives. Don't jump to conclusions or act prematurely on the basis of hearing one side only.
2. Meet with couples together, not separately, and encourage them to communicate with each other directly, not through you.
3. Identify as best you can the key issues that need addressing. Remember, the presenting problem is not always the real issue. Don't get sidetracked by peripheral issues.
4. Don't get drawn into playing the role of judge and having to decide who is telling the truth and who isn't. And don't get bogged down in the detail of disputes, of who said what and to whom. Keep the focus on the heart of the conflict, its effects, and the process for dealing with it constructively.
5. Encourage couples to talk about their own perceptions and feelings and to refrain from making personal accusations against one another. Also encourage them to speak for themselves, not for the other person.
6. Encourage couples to identify their own solutions rather than look to you for answers.
7. As well as listening carefully to what is being said, observe body language and other forms of non-verbal communication. Where there is a lack of alignment between the verbal and the non-verbal, ask yourself why this is. What does it suggest to you? Be alert to hidden agendas and imbalances of power in a relationship.
8. Holding to the maxim that in situations of conflict we often need more light and less heat, develop strategies for taking the heat out of a situation. But don't be afraid of conflict. Conflict, properly managed, can be a catalyst for growth and reconciliation.
9. Compile some marriage and relationship resources that you have confidence in, and make these available to couples as needed. Good resources can help us see things differently, put our own problems and struggles in perspective, and put us in touch with options that we might not have come up with by ourselves.
10. Know the limits of your own expertise, and when it might be necessary to refer the couple to a specialist relationship counsellor. Also be aware of your own vulnerabilities. Personal matters disclosed in the context of a counselling relationship can trigger reactions in you, including feelings of emotional and/or physical attraction towards one of the parties in the marriage. Regular supervision can be a helpful way of processing these feelings.

*What experience have you had of relationship or marriage counselling? What would you change or add in relation to the above list of things to think about?*

*Think about some of the major stages or phases in a marriage relationship? What sorts of adjustments in a relationship are necessary to negotiate the transition from one phase to the next?*

Because the church has such a high view of marriage, it is obliged to do whatever it can to support married couples in their relationships. This is especially important in a culture such as ours where married couples often have to work out their relationship on their own without the sort of support and mentoring that in previous generations might have been found within extended families and local



communities. Conscious of this lack of support, some churches run marriage enrichment seminars and weekends. Some even provide marriage vow renewal ceremonies.

These sorts of initiatives can have a hugely positive effect. But they cannot guarantee success. And in some cases, such are the circumstances and dynamics of the marriage, it would be irresponsible to exhort a couple to stay together – for example, if it meant the continued abuse of one or other of the parties in the relationship. Some marriages are deeply dysfunctional, loveless and destructive.

*In such tragic situations, what do you think is the church's duty of pastoral care?*

### **Divorce counselling**

Statistics tell us that approximately one third of marriages (including Christian marriages) will end in divorce. For Christians, this will always be a matter of considerable regret since we believe, based on the teaching of Jesus in scripture, that divorce is not God's intention for persons in marriage. In Matthew 19:6, for example, Jesus quotes the words from Genesis about a man and woman becoming "one flesh". God desires that marriage be a permanent and indissoluble relationship.

But we live in a fallen world. We are seldom the people God has called us to be. Often our most serious failures come in the relationships that are most important to us. And no marriage is immune from this risk. Just because some married couples have managed to avoid divorce doesn't mean that their marriages are all that God intends them to be. We can probably all think of situations where the marriage is intact but is hardly life-affirming and God-honouring.

From a pastoral point of view, divorce is one of the most difficult situations there is to deal with in the church. When church members are sick or facing surgery, their names might be mentioned in worship and prayers invited for them. A network of love and care seems to appear automatically. We seem to know what to do. When church members are in crumbling marriages, however, our responses are anything but instinctive. Too often we appear helpless and act as though we're paralysed. Even though prayer would be as appropriate as it is in a situation of illness, we work hard to keep the identity of those involved confidential.

The decision to divorce is seldom made lightly. It usually follows a long period of decline in the marriage relationship. Everett Worthington says that many marriage breakdowns pass through the following five stages:<sup>18</sup>

1. **Watch out:** Early warning signs include feeling that closeness has declined – either slowly or precipitously. While intimacy is declining the couple may maintain public behaviour suggesting the marriage is fine. Privately they become increasingly disillusioned with each other. With the decline in closeness communication suffers. Sometimes the couple may 'snipe' at each other, initially at home then more publicly as communication deteriorates.

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<sup>18</sup> Everett Worthington, *I Care About Your Marriage*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1994, pp. 52-3

2. **Noticing more differences:** As normal communication falters differences that were previously glossed over as unimportant cry for resolution. Partners score points trying to win arguments. Conflict resolution grinds to a standstill.
3. **Whose fault is it?** As marriage dies, spouses try to explain why the relationship is troubled. They blame the partner, telling their tale to family and friends. Friends and family can hasten divorce by polarising spouses.
4. **Commitment wanes.** Spouses consider the alternatives: the single life or remarriage. Spouses may flirt with eligible partners and try to further relationships with co-workers and friends. Sometimes one spouse may try to re-establish the relationship, even when the other spouse has completely withdrawn from it. Still legally-married-but-emotionally-divorced people are often uncertain about their future.
5. **Physical separation.** One of the most painful points in the divorce process, and a giant step toward it. While some couples do mend this tear it is only possible with mutual effort and hard work. Most people who separate eventually divorce. Research indicates that even when reconciliation does occur, subsequent separation is likely.

Jason Goroncy correctly observes that most people rate divorce as extremely stressful: “In one long-term study divorce was described as an explosion that usually sent recurring shock waves throughout the marriage and family for up to 15 years. It is a life-changing event to which some never adjust remaining stuck for a lifetime bemoaning the loss and clinging to the past. Sequentially the following challenges are likely to be encountered:

1. **Denial** is one of our basic defences when we feel threatened and is understandably commonly used when people face the ending of their marriage. Coming to accept reality requires courage and faith, and acceptance of divorce is necessary before further adjustment can occur.
2. **Loneliness.** Divorce brings home vividly the awareness of one’s existence as an individual. The challenge is to learn to bear the sense of alienation and loss, while discovering a sense of comfort and peace in solitude. Though there may be an initial flight into frenzied activities and social involvements, ultimately the process calls one to face oneself.
3. **Guilt and rejection** are closely tied to acceptance and loneliness. Often the one who initiates the legal action struggles with the guilt of hurting someone s/he has cared for, of going against deeply felt values and beliefs about marriage. And the one who is left struggles with a strong sense of rejection, self-doubt and pain.
4. **Grief.** The process of mourning the losses in a divorce is painful yet necessary. The complex and multiple losses must be faced and mourned. These losses have been identified by Stanley Hagemeyer as:<sup>19</sup>
  - a) loss of the dream
  - b) loss of intimacy and companionship
  - c) loss of physical accessibility
  - d) loss of parenting role
  - e) loss of legal standing

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<sup>19</sup> Stanley Hagemeyer, 'Making Sense of Divorce Grief', *Pastoral Psychology* 34, no. 4 (1986), 237–50

- f) loss of money and property
- g) loss of community
- h) loss of attachment

Each of these losses calls for courage to grieve and move on. The losses may not all occur separately and not necessarily in the order given. Research indicates a bewildering array.

5. **Self-concept and self-esteem** are intricately involved in the divorce process. Some have suggested that there is no crisis that calls for more confidence and integration of the self than divorce. At the same time there is, arguably, few crises more destructive to self-concept and esteem.
6. **Friendships** do not avoid the impact and stress of divorce. Maintaining solid friendships and a support network is critical for making it through the process; however, many old friendships get lost. Most persons going through the process are challenged to build a new friendship network.
7. **Disentanglement** from a former love relationship is a complex task. The often subtle and intricate ways couples intertwine their lives makes letting go difficult. Particularly for parents, the challenge is to separate out the marital and parental relationships and to work together in the best interest of the children.
8. **Anger** is one of the strongest feelings divorcing persons experience. Rooted in feelings of hurt, abandonment and helplessness the rage some experience is frightening and unlike any anger they have felt before.
9. **Sexual identity** and relating sexually as a single person are issues raised by the divorce process. It is often a period of initial disinterest. Sometimes hypersexual activity occurs as a way or re-establishing a sense of worth as a man or woman, or a way of coping with loneliness, or seeking revenge. The challenge is to reconcile one's belief and values with the single lifestyle.
10. **Trust and intimacy** in social relationships usually come late in the process. Persons going through the process are generally cautious and tentative, avoiding new wounds. Significantly though, many divorced persons remarry within the first year. Not surprisingly, second marriages have a higher casualty rate than first ones. Without allowing time to heal and learn from the ending of a love relationship the possibility of repeating the earlier unsuccessful pattern is high.<sup>20</sup>

Pastoral care will be sensitive to all these dynamics. It should be extended to the couple as a whole as well as to individual persons. It will be mindful of the impact of divorce on the family and families of the couple (including dependent children), as well as their circle of friends, and respond accordingly. It will seek a way to end a marriage that encourages cooperation, civility, and even healing. It will consist of a variety of initiatives, including friendship, counselling and perhaps a liturgy designed to mark the end of a marriage.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jason Goroncy, *Pastoral Ministry: Module 6: The Practice of Pastoral Care: (B) Contextual Realities*, Lecture Notes, pp. 108-111

<sup>21</sup> The Uniting Church in Australia has developed 'A Service of Healing for those whose Marriage is Ending or has Ended': Theology & Discipleship National Working Group on Worship, The Uniting Church in Australia, 1999 (cited 27 May 2011)]; Online: <http://assembly.uca.org.au/worship/resources/pastoralservices/13-marriageending.html>

*In your experience of providing (or receiving) pastoral support for persons whose marriages have ended in divorce, what have you learnt, and what advice would you give?*

## Hospital visiting

A significant aspect of pastoral care is visiting people when they are in hospital. Such visits are seldom straight forward. In many hospital wards visitors, including clergy, will be expected to observe visiting hours. Often the person you are visiting will be in a room with other patients, making private conversation and prayer very difficult. Often your visit will be interrupted by nurses, doctors and other medical specialists doing their rounds. Sometimes you will arrive for the visit only to find that the person you have come to see is away having tests or is asleep. Sometimes the capacity of the patient to receive a visit will be compromised by the medication they are on or by their physical and mental state. Sometimes the patient's control over their bodily functions will be limited, and you will be exposed to sights and sounds that are embarrassing for you both. In sum, you need to approach hospital visiting with flexibility and sensitivity. Respect the context!

In his book, *Pastoral Care in Hospitals*,<sup>22</sup> Neville Kirkwood, provides a helpful list of temptations to avoid, including the following:

1. The temptation for the visitor to become the focus: Visitors often make the mistake of talking too much about their own periods of hospitalisation, sometimes to keep the conversation going or to show that they understand what patients are going through, but great care needs to be taken not to make oneself the main object of attention.
2. The temptation to out-talk the patient: Some visitors are uncomfortable with pauses in conversations and long silences, and fill them by talking. It is tempting to take the lead in conversations where patients are having difficulty conversing, but they may become distressed and anxious when they are not being heard because visitors are talking over them all the time.
3. The temptation to provide solutions: A visitor's job is not to identify a problem and then to suggest a solution. Nor is it to organise the patient. Enfeebled by illness, the patient often presents a picture of helplessness. This can trigger in the visitor maternal or paternal instincts that lead to smothering the patient with over-concern or trying to "sort out" their problems.
4. The temptation to take over the role of relatives: Where patients have no interested relatives or friends, offers of help can be much appreciated, but in other situations offers of help can usurp the role of relatives and lead to friction. Before offering to help, find out what support network the patient already has, and think about how your offer to help will fit within that context. Respect the wishes of the patient.
5. The temptation to give pat answers: Don't be like Job's friends who offer simplistic responses to his plight, including the old chestnuts about it being the Lord's will or some sort of punishment for sins committed. Even when the patient is wrestling with deep personal questions such as, "Why me?" an immediate answer is not necessarily being called for. Listen for what lies behind

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<sup>22</sup> Neville A. Kirkwood, *Pastoral Care in Hospitals*, New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2005, Chapter 8

the question. Often it will be a plea for understanding and compassion, in which case your mere presence and empathy will speak more loudly than any answer you might be tempted to give.

6. The temptation to stay too long: Hospital patients will often be tired as they suffer from a lack of sleep and their bodies adjust to whatever surgery or treatment they are undergoing. They might also have had a stream of visitors already. Be alert to their energy levels. Generally speaking it is better to aim for a short visit, but to be available to stay longer if asked to do so.

*In your own experience of visiting people in hospital, have you experienced any of the above temptations?*

*What other temptations might you want to add to the list?*

### Ministering to those who grieve and mourn

In her book *Necessary Losses*,<sup>23</sup> psychologist Judith Viorst reminds us that mourning and grief are not just things that we experience following the death of a loved one; rather, they are natural processes by which we adjust to living with any significant loss in our lives, including such things as a relationships, independence, health, employment and personal ambitions. As Philip Culbertson rightly points out, "We grieve whenever our equilibrium is upset and our customary coping mechanisms are thrown out of kilter."<sup>24</sup>

Although grief and mourning are similar in meaning, it can be useful to distinguish them. John Patton puts it well when he writes, "The term 'grieving' can best be used to refer to all of the possible ways that persons respond to the losses that occur in their lives. Mourning is a somewhat narrower term that refers to what persons do individually and socially to cope with loss and to transform the relationship to what or who has been lost."<sup>25</sup>

The more acute the experience of grief or mourning, the more intense the emotional reaction is likely to be. In her pioneering work *On Death and Dying*,<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified five phases of grief reaction among terminally ill patients: shock/denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.<sup>27</sup> Subsequent authors like Granger Westberg, Erich Lindemann, John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes have either added to this list or condensed it into three or four major phases. Although there is a lot of commonality between these lists, clearly there is not one definitive list upon which everybody agrees.

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<sup>23</sup> Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003

<sup>24</sup> Philip Culbertson, *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 218

<sup>25</sup> John Patton, *Pastoral Care: An Essential Guide*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005, p. 51

<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1970

<sup>27</sup> Denial: "This can't be happening, not to me." Anger: "Why me? It's not fair!"; "Who is to blame?" Bargaining: "I'll do anything for a few more years."; "I will give my life savings if..." Depression: "I'm so sad, why bother with anything?"; "I'm going to die soon so what's the point?"; "I miss my loved one, why go on?" Acceptance: "It's going to be okay."; "I can't fight it, I may as well prepare for it."

It used to be assumed that the stages of grief were sequential and that the role of the minister or pastoral worker was to help move people through them. However, we now know that the grief process is more varied and contextual than previously thought, and it will be influenced by a range of factors such as personality, circumstances and cultural setting. Moreover, rather than moving sequentially through the various phases, mourners may oscillate between them, sometimes wildly, especially in the early stages. The grieving process can be likened to a roller coaster ride which, hopefully, becomes less turbulent as time passes and as the mourner's coping mechanisms and support structures build resilience. In these situations, the primary role of the pastoral care worker is to accompany the mourner on this ride of ups and down, twists and turns. Thomas Attig has coined the phrase "relearning the world" to describe the pastoral task here. He does not mean learning information *about* the world, but rather learning *how to be and act in* the world differently, in light of the mourner's loss.<sup>28</sup>

Ministers and pastoral workers should be generally familiar with the major grief phases identified by Kübler-Ross and others, and develop pastoral tasks and responses that are appropriate for each phase.

*Think for a moment about Kübler-Ross' five phases of grief reaction: shock/denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Now identify one or more pastoral tasks and/or responses that might be appropriate for each phase. Rather than think in the abstract, it might be helpful to recall particular situations. Can you think of any pastoral tasks and/or responses that would not be appropriate?*

Nowadays, a lot of useful information about the grief process can be found online. But information is not enough. As Philip Culbertson rightly points out that, if ministers and pastoral workers "have not addressed their own fears, anxieties and insecurities about death, they will be ill-equipped to judge correctly whether others are dealing with mourning in a healthy manner."<sup>29</sup> Nowhere is the exhortation to "know thyself" more relevant than in the context of ministering to those who mourn.

If your ministry includes the conduct of funeral services, you will probably already know that few things in your ministry will challenge your theology as much as fulfilling this role. It is here that the tension between pastoral sensitivities and theological convictions is thrown into sharpest profile. You will often find yourself walking on eggshells as you seek to maintain your integrity as a representative of the Gospel whilst managing a grieving family's expectations concerning the funeral service. These expectations can, at times, be quite unreasonable and theologically questionable.

Funeral services these days are much more personalised than in the past. On the whole, this is a positive development, but it does generate some problems, not least of which is the fostering of a consumer mindset. Many people want to pick and choose which elements of a traditional funeral service they want, and may want to include some things in the service which to you seem either unnecessary or inappropriate or both. Too many services nowadays are effectively taken over by rambling eulogies. Others degenerate into mere sentimentalism.

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<sup>28</sup> Cited by Philip Culbertson in *Caring for God's People*, p. 224

<sup>29</sup> *Caring for God's People*, p. 232

Thomas Long says that often today two rival theological understandings battle it out for the soul of the funeral. He writes:

To put it starkly, on the one hand there is the gospel. The one who has died is an embodied person, a saint 'travelling on' to God, continuing the baptismal journey toward the hope of the resurrection of the body and God's promise to make all things new. On the other hand, there is a more 'spiritualised', perhaps even Gnostic, understanding of death. The body is 'just a shell', and the immortal soul of the deceased has now been released to become a spiritual presence among us, available through inspiration and active memory. In this view, the body, no longer of any use, is disposed of, but the 'real person' is now a disembodied spirit. It is therefore not the deceased who is travelling, but the mourners, on an intrapsychic journey from sorrow to stability.

A funeral governed by the gospel is built upon the eschatological hope that the deceased is not a static corpse or a gaseous and disembodied spirit, but an embodied child of God moving towards the communion of saints. Thus, in the drama of the funeral, the whole congregation follows the deceased from the church to the cemetery or crematorium, travelling with the deceased all the way to the end and completing the dramatic action. By contrast, in a funeral governed by the more spiritualised understanding of death, the congregation sits still and reflects upon the life of the deceased, seeking comfort in the claim that, though the body is dead, the soul lives on. Many contemporary funerals limp haltingly between these two theologies...<sup>30</sup>

God seems to have a particular concern for those who mourn. "Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus declared, "for they will be comforted."<sup>31</sup> And then in the book of Revelation a day is envisaged in which God will be at home among mortals, dwelling with them as their God, wiping every tear from their eyes. Indeed, we are told, "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."<sup>32</sup> Christian worship services in general, and funeral services in particular, should give full expression to this hope and promise. Whatever grief and mourning that we experience must be put in a larger context that allows us to put our experience in perspective and to draw strength from the comfort that Jesus declared and which God gives.

As the officiant or Minister, it is important that you are both professional and pastoral. Being professional involves exercising a calm authority and making sure that everything is done properly and on time. In the midst of their grief and confusion, people will take great comfort from knowing that you are in control and know what you're doing. There is no room for being casual and disorganised when it comes to funeral services. Having said that, being professional does not mean being clinical and detached. People will look to you for consolation and encouragement, for understanding and sensitivity – for pastoring.

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<sup>30</sup> Long, T., *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, pp. 96-7

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 5:4

<sup>32</sup> Revelation 21:3-4

As you organise and conduct the funeral service you will have to work alongside other people, including the Funeral Director. It is important that you understand your respective areas of responsibility. The Funeral Director is responsible for all funeral arrangements, including the placement of a funeral notice in the newspaper, booking the cemetery or crematorium, liaising with the family about such things as casket and flowers, etc. You are responsible for the funeral service and the organisational details surrounding the service, including: (a) checking the availability of the church organist or musician (if the funeral is to be held in the church); (b) checking the availability of the church hall (if this is to be used for serving refreshments after the service); (c) liaising with the church florist about flower arrangements for the service (this might involve replacing or freshening up last Sunday's floral display); (d) making sure that someone is on hand to operate the sound system during the service (including monitoring microphone levels and playing CD or DVD tracks as required); (e) checking the availability of the church's catering team if such a team exists.

The one exception to this is the printing of the Order of Worship – it is often best to leave this to the Funeral Director because the standard of production is generally better than that which can be accomplished on a church photocopier. But if you go down this track, make sure you proofread the Order of Worship before it goes to print. Take special care checking the words of the hymns/songs and the spelling of names. Even though the Order of Service might be printed by the Funeral Director, its content is your responsibility.

From the moment you visit a family to discuss the funeral service through to the actual conduct of the service, you are building a relationship. It is a very intense relationship, insofar as it is forged in the midst of heightened emotions and you might become privy to knowledge that few people outside the grieving family have. The relationship doesn't cease when the funeral service ends. A phone call the day after the service, followed by a pastoral visit a week or two later will almost invariably be appreciated and can lay a foundation for a long-term pastoral relationship.

*Think about funeral services you have conducted and/or attended. What makes for a good service from a Christian perspective? What elements of the service would you expect to see regardless of context? Which parts would you regard as 'negotiable'?*

### **Crisis intervention**

A crisis might be described as an event (usually unexpected) that generates a high degree of uncertainty and may even threaten to overwhelm us. It almost invariably produces heightened levels of anxiety, and may induce panic. As these and other strong emotions are unleashed, the capacity to think rationally can be severely compromised. Moreover, the stress that one feels internally can have physical symptoms, including sleeplessness, irritability, exhaustion, panic attacks, skin rashes, diarrhoea, and chest pains.

What does ministering to a person or persons in crisis involve? While it is difficult to come up with a process that covers every crisis that one might encounter, we might identify the following 10 general elements:



1. **Providing a non-anxious presence:** Inviting the person to talk over a cuppa, listening deeply to what is said, responding empathetically, asking appropriate questions, offering to pray – these are all things that can help ease crisis-induced anxiety.
2. **Knowing the person(s) you're dealing with:** Are they known to you? Are they generally credible? Is there anything in what they are saying or in how they are presenting themselves that indicates a possible mental breakdown or mental health problems? Is there anything in what you are being told that you feel you ought to verify?
3. **Analysing the crisis:** What are the contributing factors? What are the real issues, not just the presenting issues? What are their effects? Who is affected?
4. **Identifying and assessing risk:** Are there issues of personal safety at stake? Does the crisis potentially involve criminal proceedings? Is it something that is likely to attract media attention? Note: If criminal proceedings and/or media attention are a possibility in relation to a crisis involving somebody with a significant ministry role or profile in the church, advice should be sought from the Assembly Office as soon as possible.
5. **Formulating a response to the crisis in consultation with the person(s) suffering it:** What needs to be done right now, and by whom? What strategies need to be put in place for dealing with underlying causes and longer-term effects? Is a plan for managing risk needed? What might the Spirit be saying in the midst of all this?
6. **Involving others:** Who needs to be consulted or involved? What specialist help might be needed? What support structures (including prayer support) need to be put in place? How might the church, as a community of faith and pastoral care, help?
7. **Integrating faith and action:** What prayers, scriptures, symbolism and rituals might be helpful in providing a biblical and theological framework for interpreting what is happening and for processing feelings associated with the crisis?
8. **Communicating:** Which persons, agencies and/or stakeholder groups need to be informed? What do they need to be told? What should they *not* be told?
9. **Following up:** Regular contact throughout the period of the crisis and subsequent to the crisis affirms the importance of a relational approach to crisis management. But avoid so much contact that you create a dependent relationship.
10. **Looking after yourself:** Be aware of the toll that crisis-ministry can have on your own emotional wellbeing and energy levels, especially if your involvement is likely to be ongoing. Take appropriate steps to look after yourself.

One of the unfortunate things about crises is that they often come upon us at the most inconvenient of times, sometimes in the middle of the night. In these situations the immediate focus of your care (often over the phone) will be on providing that non-anxious presence, assessing the urgency of the situation, ensuring the person is safe, possibly referring them to the police, hospital or an emergency counselling service like Lifeline, and setting up a process for dealing with the situation the following day or week. It pays to have a list of emergency numbers on hand.

For further reading: Howard Stone, *Crisis Counselling: Caring for People in Emotional Shock*, Revised Edition, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993

*Have you any experience of ministering to someone suffering a crisis? What lessons did you learn? What would you add or change in relation to the above list?*

Much of what is covered above relates to handling crises of a personal nature. Occasionally, however, church ministers and leaders will be expected to respond to crises that involve entire communities, as with the Canterbury earthquakes or the Pike River mine disaster. In such situations, the following checklist of things to think about might be helpful:

1. Assess as best you're able the scope and initial impact of the crisis on (a) yourself and your family; (2) your church community; (3) the wider community. Begin to think about appropriate responses of care and support for each of those groups. Be aware that if your own family is affected by the crisis you will have a difficult balancing act between attending to personal needs and fulfilling your vocational and professional role in ministry to and for the church and the wider community.
2. Call your church leadership team together as soon as possible to help you reflect on the above and to formulate suitable responses. Such responses might include an immediate phone around and/or visit of all parishioners to see how they're doing and to set up a network of communication, prayer, care and support.
3. Consult with ministers and leaders of neighbouring churches, as well as denominational colleagues (including Presbytery Moderator), to see how their communities of faith are faring and to explore the possibility of a combined (ecumenical) network of prayer, care and support for the wider community.
4. Consult with Civil Defence, local government officials and government agencies as needed.
5. If your church buildings are usable, consider making them available as community centres and sanctuaries of prayer. Organise prayer vigils and services of worship as appropriate.
6. Determine what channels of communication need to be established and maintained. If media interest is a possibility, appoint a media spokesperson, consult with the Assembly Office's communication department about a media strategy, and keep your Presbytery Moderator informed.
7. Be aware that a crisis will likely have immediate, medium-term and long-term phases, consequences and dimensions. Pace yourself accordingly. As the urgency of the initial crisis passes and your heightened adrenalin levels return to normal you are likely to experience delayed exhaustion, and as you look at all the things that have to be done to recover from the crisis and build for the future you will possibly feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. Self-care strategies, including supervision, collegiality, regular time out and perhaps a holiday, are vitally important during this transitional stage.

*As you reflect on ministering in a context of a community crisis, is there anything you would change or add in relation to the above list?*

## **Ministry to the mentally ill**

Mental illness takes many forms.<sup>33</sup> Generally speaking, a mental disorder or mental illness can be understood in terms of persons suffering from psychiatric or psychological distress. This may manifest as difficulty with emotions, thinking (cognition), behaviour and abnormal experiences of the world. Mental illness can occur as the result of biological factors, psychological factors, and/or social factors. Its impact is wide-ranging and can include impairment in functioning in multiple areas, including social, recreational, relational, cognitive, and employment. It can be short-term or long-term in its duration. It can affect people at any age or stage of life. Psychiatric and psychological difficulties can co-exist with other disorders. Treatment may be required, which may include short term or long term medication use and/or various therapies, as well as a range of initiatives for attaining personal and social wellbeing.<sup>34</sup>

Mental illness no longer carries the stigma that it once did. Not only do we know more about mental illness these days, we also are more aware of its prevalence. For example, approximately one in five people will become depressed at some stage in their lives, as depression is one of the most common manifestations of mental distress. Persons with depression may have relatively mild symptoms, where they are able to struggle on with their normal lives and relationships, although their quality of life suffers. Or, with severe depression, their ability to function in any normal way is completely undermined.

We are also more aware these days of the extent to which many people in society struggle with various forms of addiction, including alcohol, drugs, gambling and sex. Many people are familiar with the twelve-step recovery programme pioneered by Alcoholics Anonymous in 1939 and adapted to provide therapeutic treatment to other forms of addiction. Places like the Ashburn Clinic in Dunedin provide an individualised combination of medical, educational and therapeutic interventions to break the addiction cycle and guide a person towards recovery.

Although pastoral responses will vary considerably according to the nature of the mental disorder, there are some things to think about if you are ministering to somebody with a mental illness:

1. Find out as much as you can about the nature of the illness and the person so that you can develop a pastoral response that is both well informed and appropriate to the situation.
2. Consult with others who have a pastoral relationship with the person. Work collaboratively wherever possible. At the same time, respect the privacy and dignity of the person you're dealing with. Don't allow collaboration to descend into gossip.
3. Identify the key pastoral relationships, and develop strategies for each. In many situations, for example, there might be a pastoral relationship not only with the person suffering mental illness, but also with their primary caregiver(s) and their family (including dependent children).
4. Map out short-term and long-term strategies.

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<sup>33</sup> The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (a standard reference for the American Psychiatric Association) lists over 400 types of mental disorders. These range from various forms of dementia to clinical depression to eating disorders to anxiety disorders to bipolar disorder to schizophrenia to mental retardation to paranoid personality disorder to addictions to autism to psychotic disorder to Huntington's disease.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Dr Megan Bryan for this definition of mental illness (email correspondence, 12.9.12). Dr Bryan is a Consultant Psychiatrist at the Ashburn Clinic in Dunedin.

5. Make sure that pastoral strategies support and dovetail in with whatever professional health services the person might be receiving. Find out what health services (public and private) are available for persons suffering from this particular condition. Know the limits of your own expertise, and refer to health professionals sooner rather than later.
6. Do a risk assessment. Is the person a danger to themselves? Are they a danger to others? If the answer to either of these questions is 'yes', what safety measures need to be put in place? Who needs to be notified? If in doubt, seek professional advice.
7. In your communication with a person suffering from mental illness, always bear in mind the extent to which their ability to understand or perceive things accurately might be compromised. Tailor your communication accordingly. By all means listen and express sympathetic support, but don't get drawn into feeding delusions or condoning bad behaviour. Be honest.
8. Be alert to the dangers of the person to whom you are ministering becoming dependent on you. Set boundaries. Let them know that you are not at their beck and call. Ensure other support structures are in place.
9. Don't underestimate the role that a congregation can play in providing a supportive and healing environment for the mentally ill. It's not just the network of pastoral care; it's also the prayer, worship and fellowship. Having said that, be aware that some forms of mental illness render their sufferers particularly prone to religious delusions. One of the most common indicators of this occurring is when the complex task of spiritual discernment is reduced to a simple declaration that, "The Lord has told me..."

*Have you suffered personally from mental illness or known somebody who has? What has your experience taught you about pastoral care in these situations? What would you add or change in relation to the above list of things to be aware of?*

### **Ministry to the elderly**

The problems associated with growing old are well known: loss of independence; frailty of mind and body; reduced mobility; downsizing of accommodation; death of friends and loved ones; loneliness; financial vulnerability; coming to terms with one's own mortality; and so on. A good deal of pastoral care will be about helping folk come to terms with some or all of these realities and to make necessary adjustments to their living situations.

However, pastoral care to the elderly need not be cast solely in terms of problem-solving. From a biblical perspective, old age is not so much a matter of coping as best one can with all the problems associated living in one's "twilight years", but rather a matter of remaining faithful to God and being called to even greater acts of faithfulness and obedience. Abraham and Sarah are a case in point (Genesis 15 – 21), as are Anna and Simeon (Luke 2:21-38). From a faith perspective, we are compelled to think of our humanity not simply in terms of a product of biological processes (a kind of biological determinism), but rather in terms of who we are becoming in Christ. When perceived through eyes of faith, the future is open, not closed.

What does this mean in practice?

When we regard the future as being open rather than closed, then we have a basis for challenging the view that death is the final (tragic) word of human existence. The resurrection of Christ from the dead is our assurance that we no longer need fear death. For how does the Apostle Paul put it? "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"<sup>35</sup>

If we are able to affirm that death has been overcome by the raising of Christ from the dead, then we are able to hold on to the biblical assurance that sin too has been overcome, and that in and through Christ we have indeed been forgiven. This can be a vitally important truth to inhabit at a time in our lives when griefs, regrets and sins which we thought had long receded into the mists of time, can return to haunt us. Seen in this context, old age can be a time when we not only recall the past with a sense of nostalgia, but when we also deal with all our unresolved stuff. It can be what some people describe as a journey towards integration, wholeness and even reconciliation. Good pastoral care will encourage and enable this journey to be taken.

A key part of this journey towards integration might involve revisiting certain events and periods in our lives and allowing the light of the Gospel to shine upon them. What does that light reveal? What fresh insights does it generate for us? What opportunities for healing does it provide? I recall in a parish in which I served, a returned serviceman wanting to talk with me about an incident that had occurred during his time of military service, and which many years later continued to weigh heavily on his conscience. More than anything else, he needed to hear afresh the assurance of pardon that only the Gospel can give. I still recall seeing his tears of joy as he came to the realisation that he truly was forgiven, and that the burden of guilt which he had been carrying all those years had finally been lifted from his shoulders.

We are very much aware these days of the power of storytelling. Storytelling is not just a matter of taking a trip down memory lane; it's a potential means of interpreting our history, addressing our past and deriving meaning and significance from our lives. Storytelling can perform a therapeutic function. From a pastoral perspective, there is often scope to encourage our elders to "tell their story", and if we're particularly attentive to what they say, we might even help them make deeper connections between their own life-story and that larger, open-ended, life-giving story which we call the Gospel.

I mentioned above the example of the returned serviceman dealing with the burden of guilt that emanated from a particular period of his life. In another pastoral situation, I was privileged to hear a man reflect on certain aspects of his life. He was the typical self-made man who took great pride in his success, achievements and self-sufficiency, but now in his final days so much of what he had built up over many years had been whittled away. He had lost much of his savings in the share market crash of 1987, his wife had died some years ago, and his family were scattered far and wide, offering no practical support at a time when, due to deteriorating health, he had become entirely dependent on the semi-hospital level of care provided by a local rest home. When I saw him, he was trying to make sense of it all. Interestingly, he had started to read his Bible again, and it just so happened that the day before I visited him he had read the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21. What was a most difficult passage,

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<sup>35</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54-55

because it's one where Jesus pulls no punches, became for this man a catalyst for looking at his life differently and putting things in perspective. Rather than lament what he had lost, he chose to focus on what it meant to be "rich toward God". Not only did this include a renewed appreciation for prayer and worship; it also included a realisation that although he was denied the close proximity of his natural family, through baptism he was part of a non-biological family, a community of faith, a communion of saints. The pastoral care extended to him by this family was deeply affirming.

One final story. I recall hearing one of the "saints" of our church reflect on her experience of growing old. She said that despite all the problems associated with old age, she had discovered the priority of being over doing. Rather than decry the fact that she could no longer support all the church and community activities that she once had, she had learned to "rest in God", to contemplate the mystery of the Gospel, to uphold people in prayer, and to see that life-as-gift precedes life-as-task. She became one of our church's great encouragers and intercessors. Many of our youth and young adults were drawn to her, not because she was part of their social world, but because they sensed in her something that was authentic, grace-filled and wise.

*What stories of your own can you tell about ministry to the elderly, and what lessons would you draw from them?*

### **Ministering to those who pose a risk to church and community**

Just how inclusive and welcoming should a church be? How should it relate to a paedophile in its midst, or a rapist or a drug dealer or an abusive husband or a fraudster? On the one hand, if we accept the many biblical examples of grace, repentance and personal transformation, including that of Saul in Acts 9, then do we have grounds to exclude anybody outright? Moreover, doesn't the Bible say that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God? Are any of us truly in a position, then, to cast the first stone?

On the other hand, stories abound of financial and sexual predators using their position in the church to win trust, to take advantage of the vulnerable and to perpetuate their immoral and sometimes criminal behaviour. What are we to do? What is our pastoral responsibility?

The first thing that needs to be said is that prevention is always better than cure. Every church should have in place a set of safety protocols. These will include such things as: (1) Doing police checks on anybody that is being considered for a position that carries pastoral and leadership responsibilities, paid or unpaid, including elders, Sunday School and youth group leaders and pastoral visitors; (2) Holding training sessions on pastoral ethics; (3) Having clear safety policies that define conditions for counselling and home visits (e.g., women being counselled and visited by women; having a designated counselling area that is suitably private yet in view of a general office area; etc); (4) Having clear safety policies in relation to children and youth activities and events, including weekend camps, sleepovers and holiday programmes (e.g., not allowing adults/leaders to sleep in the same room or to share the same shower and toilet blocks as children and youth); (5) Not appointing anybody with a criminal record to a position where they might be tempted to reoffend (e.g., a convicted fraudster should not be appointed to the

position of church treasurer); (6) Setting up appropriate forms of monitoring/supervision for anybody who is deemed to be a risk to themselves and/or to others.

In one church I was in, in the course of visiting a newcomer to the church I was informed (by the newcomer and his wife) that he had a history of sexual offending for which he had done time in prison. It was to the man's credit that he brought this to my attention. We were able to talk about the nature of his offending, the counselling programme that he had undergone in relation to it, and the strategies that he had in place to minimise future risk to the community. He gave me the names of people I could contact to verify his story. I told him that, with his permission, I would like to inform the church's elders about the situation, to seek professional advice, and to develop a strategy for keeping both him and other members of our congregation safe. Even though there appeared to be no recent history of sexual offending, given that this previous offending had involved young people, we deemed it necessary to notify youth and Sunday School leaders and kindergarten staff. Although the man was welcome to attend worship and enjoy the fellowship of the church, there would be certain conditions attached to this, including no direct personal contact with our children and youth or the kindergarten. He could also expect an elder to be rostered on duty each Sunday at church to discreetly monitor his movements.

We were fortunate in this case that the man was so obliging and that a strategy was able to be put in place with his consent and cooperation. Other cases I know of have not ended so well. Many people who pose a risk to others are sly and manipulative, some have mental health problems, and in some cases they are pathological liars. Some can sound utterly contrite and make all kinds of promises that subsequently prove worthless. Others can weave the most plausible of stories to justify their actions. Many are adept at playing on the sympathies of ministers and others who exercise a ministry of care and compassion. It is easy under these circumstances to become cynical and to fail to distinguish between a con and genuine need.

Most ministers will be familiar with the experience of having persons come to their church or manse with a hard luck story of one sort or another. Sometimes these folk can be quite menacing, particularly if help is refused them. I recall one man asking for some petrol money so that he could drive up north to attend his father's funeral. I accompanied him to a local gas station and filled up his tank. About a year later he was back, but he clearly couldn't remember our previous encounter, because he was peddling the same story about having to attend his father's funeral. When I pointed this out to him, he became verbally abusive.

It is good for churches to have procedures in place to cover such situations. I have found the following to be helpful:

1. As a general rule, do not give out cash. Have a small supply of supermarket and petrol vouchers on hand.
2. Keep on hand a list of welfare providers, food banks, social service agencies, community ministries, help-lines, counselling services and charities to which people can be referred. Phone them while the person is with you, so that they know to expect them. Only give out vouchers if

the referral system doesn't work (e.g., if it's outside normal work hours and the relevant agency or food bank is closed).

3. Keep safe. If a stranger wants to talk with you, or asks for prayer, choose a place and a time when somebody else will be in close proximity. Should you choose to let them into your home (not recommended), make sure you have first verified their story and that you are confident they don't pose a threat. Do not leave them unattended. If you are worried about your own safety or the safety of others, call the police.
4. Establish a telephone or email network with ministry colleagues, and use that network to keep each other informed of encounters of this sort. Some folk are known for moving from one church to the next. Share information. If you feel that a person has been trying to con you, inform the police. Even if they can't do anything, the person might be known to them, and they may have information and advice to share with you.

A final word about ethical misconduct and allegations of criminal activity within the church: Deal with these situations in a professional and proactive manner. Yes, there must always be a presumption of innocence until proven guilty, but don't allow this principle to block appropriate investigative action, either by the appropriate church court or, in cases of alleged illegal activity, by the police. Once you have information about a particular situation or an allegation has been made against somebody, you must act. This can be difficult if the person concerned is an esteemed elder, minister or leader in the church, but should it come to light later that you knew something was amiss and did not act then you will be culpable. If the person being accused of a misdemeanour holds a position of responsibility in the church, then they should be relieved of their duties immediately while an investigation is carried out. Thought must also be given to the wellbeing and, possibly, safety of the alleged victim and/or accuser. Often attempts will be made to discredit and/or pressure the accuser into keeping silent lest they bring the church into disrepute or sully the good name of the accused. If in any doubt about the right process to follow when an accusation is made or rumours begin to circulate about inappropriate or illegal activity, seek advice. The Assembly Office is only too willing to help in this regard.

*Have you observed or experienced a situation of ministering to somebody who might pose a threat to the church or to the wider community? How was the situation handled? What lessons can be learned from it?*

### **Maintaining personal health and wellbeing**

Pastoral care ministries can be very demanding – physically, emotionally and spiritually. The weight of human need constantly bears down on us, and there is nearly always more that we feel could or should be done to alleviate that need.

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence to suggest that low morale, fatigue and burnout are all too frequent experiences for people in key ministry and pastoral positions. There are many contributing factors. Some are internal; some are external.



Internal factors can include:

- i. Personality type: People who are competitive, driven, ambitious, task and achievement-oriented and recognition-dependent can also have fragile temperaments and can be less able to cope with criticism, stress and failure.
- ii. Lack of self-care: This can include poor hygiene and diet and a lack of exercise, not having any interests and friendships outside of work, not spending sufficient time with spouse and family, not building some form of Sabbath rest into weekly routines, and not being able to relax without feeling guilty.
- iii. Personal insecurities: Beneath the outgoing and cheerful demeanour of a leader can be a wounded soul plagued by lack of confidence, loneliness and unresolved feelings of hurt and anger (sometimes associated with past relationships, including one's parents).
- iv. Spiritual barrenness: Behind the public persona of some religious leaders there can be a spiritual emptiness and a private life riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies. There is no shortage of Christian leaders being exposed in the courts and through the media as having feet of clay.
- v. Vocational crisis: For some ministers and leaders this takes the form of uncertainty and confusion about their role and calling in the midst of rapid societal and organisational change and institutional decline. A real but generally unspoken expectation that they will be agents of church growth rather than ministers of the Gospel can be a heavy burden to bear. For others it takes the form of disillusionment with the church as an institution that is too often rocked by scandal, internally divided, and can often be a bad (and even exploitative) employer.
- vi. Life transitions: Movements from one stage of life to another can be unexpectedly stressful. We often focus on the so-called "mid-life crisis" but other transition times can be equally challenging. During such transitions we may have to cope with physical and emotional changes, as well as changes to some of our closest relationships (including with parents, spouses and offspring). These changes can trigger spiritual crises, wherein forms of spirituality and patterns of piety which served us well in younger days no longer sustain and nourish us.

External factors can include:

- i. A stressful or negative work environment, including ill-defined or unrealistic expectations, an unacceptably high workload, and a lack of training, support and collegiality.
- ii. A lack of job security. As many churches continue to decline, their annual budgets come under increasing pressure, and the funding for many paid ministry and leadership positions is under threat. In some cases, full-time positions are reduced to part-time positions, but with no corresponding reduction in expectations around workload and results.
- iii. Stress-inducing events and circumstances, including the breakdown of relationships, the death of a loved one, financial problems, sudden and dramatic lifestyle change, significant health problems, sexual dysfunction or frustration, and social isolation.
- iv. A prevailing (western) culture and global economic system that makes living an authentic Christian life incredibly difficult. Leaders often feel more acutely than others the tension

between cultural conformity and the radical call to discipleship because of the expectation that they will successfully model the life of discipleship.

Of course, not all stress is bad. Good stress, properly channelled, releases adrenaline and can motivate and enable us to reach optimum levels of performance. But unrelieved and compounded stress can lead to depression, with accompanying physical symptoms. It is tempting, under such circumstances, to relieve this sort of stress through the use of chemicals, whether in the form of tranquillisers, pain relievers or alcohol. However, while these might mask the symptoms in the short-term, they usually prevent us making the necessary changes to deal with the stress properly.

A significant step on the path to wellness is to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy forms and levels of stress, and to find appropriate ways of addressing the latter. Rigorous self-assessment, prayer, regular supervision, a doctor's visit, and in some cases specialised counselling, can each play a part in this regard. Other positive steps one can take to understand, manage and ease stress can include the following:

- i. Drawing sustenance from your relationship with Christ. At the beginning of this handbook we talked about the importance of *abiding in Christ* – personally and in communion with others. The more you have developed a spiritually balanced life and nurtured your relationship with Christ the better placed you will be to cope with stress and difficulty.
- ii. Listening to your body. While such things as constant headaches, chest pains, sleeplessness, irritability, uncharacteristic outbursts of anger, skin rashes and bowel problems can be symptomatic of all sorts of ailments, including organic disease, they can also be symptoms of stress. They can be likened to messages that our body is trying to send us. We need to learn to ask not only “What is wrong with me?” but also “Why do I have this symptom at this time? What is my body telling me?”
- iii. Undergoing a personality assessment like Myers Briggs or Enneagram can help you understand more about your personality type and the impact it has on the ways you think, act and react. Armed with this information, you are better placed to develop a leadership style that suits your personality and develop stronger coping mechanisms. Understanding different personality types can also help you work out what makes other people tick and how to work constructively with colleagues who are of different personality types to your own.
- iv. Finding strength and solace in the scriptures. Psalms of lament, for example, not only give voice to the despair, loneliness and hurt that many leaders feel from time to time; they also serve as a vehicle for processing these raw emotions and reminding the stressed leader of God's prior faithfulness and steadfast love. They give us words to pray when our own words fail us. Then in the stories of Saul and David and the like, we read of flawed characters who, like leaders of every generation, are often burdened by failure and plagued by doubt, yet whose lives have been claimed by God for a purpose and become powerful witnesses to God's grace and power. These sorts of stories become for us sources of encouragement and hope.
- v. Doing an inventory of your strengths, gifts and competencies and comparing these with the requirements of your ministry/leadership position or job. Do they constitute a good match? How significant are the differences? Can they be addressed through normal processes of

personal and professional development or are they indicative of a fundamental mismatch? With the right support and encouragement can you grow into your role, or are you like a square peg in a round hole? Should you be thinking about a growth or an exit strategy?

- vi. Implementing a proper regime of self-care, including healthy eating patterns, regular exercise, plenty of sleep, spiritual disciplines, Sabbath rest, and taking up a sport, craft, hobby or community involvement can dramatically improve your mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing.
- vii. Identifying root causes of workplace stress (not just reacting to surface symptoms), keeping things in perspective, handing things over to God in prayer, learning how to manage conflict, following the right process(es) for raising concerns, and addressing issues without personalising them (or demonising particular persons).
- viii. Confiding in someone. Professional supervision can prove very helpful and should be a given for anyone in a significant ministry or leadership position. It can also be helpful to talk things through with a close friend or confidante. But be careful who you choose. Do not choose someone who may have a conflict of interest or who may not be particularly good at keeping confidences. Search your own heart. Always be mindful of the Apostle James' warning about the immense damage that can be caused by a loose or bitter tongue (James 3:1-12). Do not use the need to confide as a means of winning people over to your point of view.

There are lots of excellent resources on the above and related issues. Lynne Baab has written some really helpful books, including the following:

- *Beating Burnout in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2003) looks at causes of burnout among congregational volunteers, with ideas for prevention and healing.
- *Personality Type in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 1998) gives an overview of ways the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator can be used in congregations.
- *Fasting* (IVP, 2006) is a practical book with stories of people who fast both from food and from other things, such as media, shopping, and technology.
- *Sabbath Keeping* (IVP, 2005) is an introduction to ways to keep the Sabbath with stories from many people who observe the Sabbath.
- *Sabbath: The Gift of Rest* (IVP, 2007) explores eight biblical passages with their theological and practical themes that undergird the practice of Sabbath keeping. The studies in this guide cover what Sabbath is and how to practice it. The guide may be used for individual or group study.
- *A Renewed Spirituality* (IVP, 2002) discusses patterns of midlife spirituality, along with six spiritual paths that people at midlife find helpful.

Books and articles by well known American author, Eugene Peterson, are always worth reading. On the subject of retaining one's vocational integrity in the midst of hostile cultural forces and institutional pressures, the following book is highly recommended: *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Eerdmans, 1987).

*Have you ever suffered personally from ministry-related stress, poor health and a lack of wellbeing? What were the symptoms? How did you deal with it? What have you learned?*

*Does the above list of internal and external stress factors, and the things you can do to address them, resonate with anything in your experience? Is there anything you would add?*