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The Future of Pastoral Counselling

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Rachel sat and cried. She looked up with black smudged, red-rimmed eyes and asked "Why? Why do I feel this way?" What happens next depends on who Rachel is talking to. A friend might sympathise, her minister might offer a pastoral visit involving listening and prayer, her G.P. might suggest she see a practice counsellor, other Christian friends might suggest she go for Christian counselling, as all Rachel needs is a fresh encounter with the Holy Spirit to go back and heal these memories. In this scenario where does pastoral counselling fit? In this paper I will examine what pastoral counselling is; where it has come from; what threatens pastoral counselling; and explore its future.

DEFINING PASTORAL COUNSELLING

Pastoral counselling can be viewed as

a specialised form of the Church's ministry of pastoral care... [it] may be defined as first: a practice of the faith community that is rooted in the old, the traditional wisdom of that community, and that is enriched by the new and particularly the learning of the behavioural sciences; secondly, the context of pastoral counselling is ultimate meanings and concerns together also with the values of the particular faith community; and thirdly, pastoral counselling is a ministry of representative persons 'who bring to bear upon human troubles the resources, the wisdom, and the authority of Christian faith and life' though not necessarily people who hold specific offices in the Church.¹

This definition, comprehensive and valuable as it is, demonstrates one thing – that pastoral counselling does not fit neatly into any convenient category - and hereby lies the greatest threat to its existence. Before we look at these threats, it would be helpful to describe the origin of pastoral counselling.

THE ORIGINS OF PASTORAL COUNSELLING

The American pastoral theologian Tom Oden writes, "Therapeia...means a helping, serving, healing relationship. A therapon (from which...'therapist' comes) is one who helps, serves and heals. The Latin translation ... is ministerium, from which...'minister' comes. Thus the roots of therapy and ministry are closely intertwined ... The pastoral office has from the beginnings been thought of literally as a therapeutic relationship."² Drawing on an extensive knowledge of church history, Oden demonstrates that, "Long before psychology was a distinct profession, pastors ... required psychological wisdom. Pastors have struggled for the health of persons and the life of souls in ways that anticipate and resemble contemporary psychotherapy."³ In the current church climate where the emphases are

on worship, preaching or experience, accompanied by (in some cases) a suspicion of counselling, Oderi's reminder of the traditional wisdom of the church, expressed in pastoral counselling, is an important one to hear.

THREATS TO PASTORAL COUNSELLING

The major threats to pastoral counselling come from secular trends in counselling and the emergence of Christian counselling.

Pastoral counselling has recently been excluded by an important body negotiating with the Government over the future of counselling, as it belongs in the realm of "religion". Contemporary counselling is in turmoil as it copes with issues of a burgeoning demand for accreditation; a national register; the advent of personal liability insurance; the relationship between psychologists, psychotherapists and counsellors; and the huge theoretical differences that underpin the practice of counselling. It seems that the water is murky enough without adding further confusion by allowing a place for pastoral counselling. It is easier to relegate this to the realm of religion, the "private" domain, which demonstrates that within strands of our society, modernist assumptions are still a dominant influence. Just as the prodigal son squandered his inheritance, contemporary counselling is squandering the centuries of traditional pastoral wisdom and fails to see that one day the prodigal will perhaps become a father with nothing to pass onto his children. The process of secularisation, which in some areas has been vigorously challenged by post-modernism, is still alive and well in counselling where the pastor has clearly been replaced by the psychotherapist.

Yet this is not the complete picture, because in contradiction to this rejection of pastoral counselling, a growth area in counselling is the embracing of the transpersonal, where resources, meanings and values are sought in a higher Self, the Cosmos or god. Transpersonal counselling⁴ is filling the spiritual void left by the implicit and explicit rejection of Christian faith. If there was ever a time when pastoral counselling was needed as a healthy, growing part of the Church's life, it is now, when it should be able to offer counselling in the context of beliefs and values and the satisfying of a spiritual hunger in people.

The second challenge to pastoral counselling comes from the development of Christian counselling. The Association of Christian Counselling (ACC) is a collective of individuals and agencies concerned to improve standards of counselling within the church. This can only be a good development. The ACC has adopted standards that reflect those required by the British Association of Counselling (BAC), and this gives some credibility to counselling that is offered in the church, much of which is amateurish and open to exploitation. The increasing professionalism offered by the ACC could help minimise the problems caused by well-meaning but pastorally inept practises that currently pass for counselling in the Church.

The ACC has a statement of faith and practice that is both Christian and evangelical.⁵ Some see this as providing a rationale for a superior form of counselling. As one Christian agency explained to me, "we provided counselling with an added dimension and reach the parts others cannot reach." This sounded too much like an advert for a rather insipid tasting form of lager to carry any credibility for me. For Christians in a post-modern, "anything goes except absolutes" world, this statement of faith is helpful for some. However the assumptions and aims developed by the ACC need to be held in tension with what people outside the church, looking for counselling and wanting to explore "ultimate meanings and concerns", might understand these to mean. So what do the terms "fallen and sinful" convey to people struggling to make sense of their lives? If one were working with someone who has been sexually abused, often they already blame themselves, and these categories reinforce their distorted view of themselves.⁶

Many non-Christians understand "evangelical" to mean Bible-thumping American evangelists ranging from the benign, in the form of Billy Graham, to the woeful, in the form of Morris Cerrullo. Understanding where other people are and making it easy for them to meet with us should be as important to us as it was to Jesus. Is Christian counselling, counselling with conditions or "strings"? My experience of some Christian counselling agencies is that they refuse to see non-Christians. This issue concerns me for another reason. The church has always been in danger of living in a ghetto and of shutting itself away from the outside world. In the post-modern sea of faith, Christian counselling can become a life-boat that the survivors bravely

cling to in the hope of rescue.⁷ If there was ever a time for bridge-builders, it is now. The modernist and post-modernist agenda, and the confusion these generate in our society need to be challenged. This challenge needs to come in a language and style that meets contemporary people where they are. Alister McGrath proposes that we need to "adopt a tactical approach, in order to gain a strategic advantage. No Christian will wish to abandon a passionate commitment to the truth" but this can be temporarily "relegated to the background"⁸ in order to commend one's claims that are acceptable to the world view of those with whom we are trying to communicate. It seems to me that the danger of specifically identifying Christian counselling is that it fails to build bridges and pulls up the drawbridge of the castle. Pastoral counselling allows an interface to take place in a way that is creative and open ended but that is ultimately risky and vulnerable to criticism.

THE FUTURE OF PASTORAL COUNSELLING

It would be a tragedy for the church if pastoral counselling were to become extinct, usurped by a market driven form of Christian counselling or relegated to the obscure hobby category on the same level as breeding Koi carp. It seems to me that there are three ways in which pastoral counselling can make a claim for its continuing value and existence.

Firstly, pastoral counselling can recall its roots. Oderi's plea is that the Church needs to become pre-modern, recognising that there were valid truths in operation before the period of modernity. Oderi's work makes fascinating reading and reminds me of Ecclesiastes 1:9 'There is nothing new under the sun'.

Secondly, pastoral counselling needs to establish a clear theological basis for itself. Pastoral counselling has not always been its best advocate and has failed in this area in particular. At times it has so assimilated secular insights that any distinctive Christian insights have been lost. A call for the return to a real theological perspective has been championed by such figures as Frank Lake⁹, Tom Oden¹⁰ and more recently by David Atkinson.¹¹

An important place to begin is with the Trinity¹² where God exists in triune relationship. It is to the Christian experience of God what grammar is to poetry or writing - it establishes a structure, a framework, which allows us to make sense of something which far surpasses it. It is the skeleton supporting the flesh of Christian experience'.¹³ In encountering the Trinity we encounter the basis and source of all relationship. God is independent and interdependent, and out of this relational life of God there flows love. So God calls us to relationship with him and displays in us the love that is expressed in the Trinity. This gives pastoral counselling a substantial theological basis, which may be developed in a variety of ways. It could be linked to the object relations theories of Fairbairn and others that see all people as relationship-seeking. This I believe stems from the image of God within each person, and the counselling process is geared to pointing to someone beyond ourselves as a counsellor, but respecting the person's integrity to allow them to be 'adult' enough to make the connection for themselves. Pastoral counselling then can build more bridges by working from a theology of relationship rather than one that is purely confessional.

Thirdly, if our theology is really trying to engage with where people are here and now, then we need to make a greater use of narrative theology, that focuses on the "story" of God's revelation as it relates to the "story" of our lives. The American theologian Millard Erickson writes

Theology is not simply to be learned, understood and appreciated ... There is the additional issue of communication of the message ... In attempting to walk the tightrope between the timeless essence of doctrines and a particular contemporary expression ... Sometimes a story communicates it better. Jesus demonstrated this repeatedly ... Narrative theology has communicated profound truth with dynamic effect.

Alister McGrath comments "Often systematic theology creates the impression that God has presented us with a set of ideas, as if revelation were some kind of data bank. Narrative theology enables us to recover the central insight that God became involved in our history. God's story intersects with our Story as we read it in Scripture."

Pastoral counselling, in beginning with a person's "story" in the context of the wider "story" of faith, can build bridges into a needy world where people long for meaning and search for values but will not engage with the Christian church or its equivalent in Christian counselling. Yet this needs to be held in tension with the fact that pastoral counselling works with people in their frailty and failure. It does not come with easy, quick-fit answers but it does address them in the context of faith. The challenge that pastoral counselling brings to us is to hold together theology and persons in a way that they encounter a psychological and spiritual wholeness and an experience of grace.

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