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Pastoral Assistant

Session 1 – Group Course

*Material adapted from 'Living and Learning: Pastoral Visiting'
published by St Padarn's Institute.*

Introduction

When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest of all, he replied 'Love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' and then he added 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself (Matt 22:37-40).

This response gives all of us, as Christians, an enormous responsibility – loving God hopefully makes sense to us and generally so does loving our neighbour, but our neighbour does mean everyone and that's where it's not always so easy....

The Anglican church has a long history of pastoral care and visiting has always been a key part of the work of any cleric – the decline in numbers of clergy has meant this is often proving more difficult but it's important not to think that lay pastoral visiting is by any means 'second class'. In recent years the Church in Wales has begun more and more to rediscover and value the importance of lay ministry and to recognise that there are many people in congregations with huge gifts that are not being well used.

Lay Pastoral Assistants

- Represent the love of God and God's care for the whole person and creation
- Listen to, pray for, and be present with the sick and the suffering
- Visit the sick and housebound on behalf of the church
- Play an important part in the life of the ministry of the church
- Work with clergy and licensed lay ministers
- May be asked to visit people who have had life events in church such as weddings, baptisms, funerals

We visit because all people are loved and valued by God and each of us has a responsibility to share God's love... So we begin by trying to base our relationship with our neighbour, whoever that neighbour may be, on our relationship with God. How we know ourselves is important in visiting – the better we know God and the better we know ourselves, the better visitors we shall be...

To be invited into the home of someone, often at really important times in their lives, is a huge privilege and to do it as a representative of God makes that privilege enormous. We enter a house as a guest of the owner and as a servant of Christ.



Traditionally there have been 4 main strands of pastoral care – healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling.

Healing – Helping people to come to terms with something either physical or spiritual

Sustaining – Something that helps people to grow stronger

Guiding – As visitors our job isn't to solve every problem but often by listening to people they will see a way forward

Reconciling – Again as visitors we are not the people who offer reconciliation but people very often need to know that they can be reconciled with God, and that they are loved and valued by him.

As a Pastoral Assistant it is important to recognise that we do not have all the answers, and we are not there for that. Most visits will be relaxed and informal. People who are housebound for a short or long term often just value someone to chat to or enjoy a cup of tea with. If that's what is wanted from the visit, it is a valuable visit. It is important, if any issues are raised with which you are uncomfortable or are uncertain about, that you ask permission to discuss this further with a member of the clergy.

This course will help to clarify the roles of the Pastoral Assistants as well as providing training and guidance on elements of pastoral visiting. Undertaking this course doesn't commit you to becoming a Pastoral Assistant. You may decide, either by yourself, or with your learning mentor, that this isn't right for you at this time. It is better to make that decision than to commit yourself to something you are not comfortable doing.

If you do proceed to becoming Commissioned as a Pastoral Assistant there will be certain expectations that it is sensible to consider now :

- You will need a clear DBS check and will need to undertake safeguarding training (Level A and Level B or E). These must be kept up to date as appropriate.
- There will need to be an agreement of the amount of time you are willing to give to this ministry – this must fit what you're able to do, but will also need to be consistent so that we can ensure that pastoral visiting is properly arranged. This agreement will be made with the member of clergy or lay person responsible for leading the pastoral visitors group.



- You must ensure that you clearly communicate any problems or concerns with any visits or worries you have yourself about this ministry, to the member of clergy or lay person responsible for leading the pastoral visitors group.
- As part of the wider ministry team, you will work together with other commissioned ministers, as well as licensed and ordained colleagues. Meetings will be arranged for this team and it is important to attend these.
- You should make every effort to attend any diocesan events for Commissioned Ministers.
- If you are experiencing pastoral difficulties in your own life such as bereavement, sickness of yourself or someone close to you, then it is advised not to undertake pastoral visits.
- You may be entrusted with personal information by the people you are visiting, and will need to demonstrate appropriate confidentiality in not sharing this with others in your congregations or community. Remember you should never promise complete confidentiality to a congregation member, as it may be that you need to share any pastoral concerns with a member of clergy, and any safeguarding concerns or disclosures must be reported to the Church in Wales Safeguarding Team.



Session 1: Pastoral care

Introductory Reading

In 'The New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies' pastoral care is defined as, 'Those activities of the Church which are directed towards maintaining or restoring the health and wholeness of individuals and communities in the context of God's redemptive purposes for all creation'.¹

At the beginning of her book, Margaret Whipp notes,

*The first thing we must acknowledge... is that caring in itself need not be terribly complicated. It is in the nature of most pastoral activity, in fact, to proceed by quite modest pathways, often stumbling along through chance encounters and half understood exchanges towards some first glimpses of human hope and healing. A stance of humility therefore, both intellectually and spiritually, seems to be an essential prerequisite for authentic pastoral care.*²

Traditionally, four main strands of pastoral care have been identified as healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling. These have spawned a range of activities which have included skilled advice and counselling, sacraments and healing rituals, charitable work and social action, and simple acts of comfort, support and encouragement. However, all of these activities have been grounded in an understanding of God's purpose for humanity and for the whole of creation.

In 1 John 4:19 we read that 'We love because he first loved us' and our scriptures abound in examples of the ways in which God shows his love for us. It is God's love, overflowing from the heart of the Trinity, that calls human beings into a loving relationship with him. And in doing so he demands that we care for each other.

Therefore when Jesus is asked which of the commandments in the law is the greatest he responds by saying, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'. This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. (Matthew 22:36)

There are many important images in the Bible, which emerge from the ancient narratives of our faith, that can help us to understand the work of pastoral care.

¹ Eds. Carr, W. et al (2002), New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 252.

² Whipp, M. (2013), Pastoral Theology, London: SCM Press, 1.



Therefore, from the Old Testament we have the image of Exodus, a moment in the history of the people of God when they are led out from captivity in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Words like 'captivity' and 'freedom' are used by those in our world today who suffer trauma, mental or physical illness, abuse or bereavement.

From the Old Testament also comes the image of 'wilderness', a time of testing when the people find God through hardship and suffering in the desert. The wilderness was a place in which the familiar supports of life were removed and the wanderer was left vulnerable and open to an encounter with God.

Close to this is the image of 'exile'. When the people were carried off into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon they were forced to live with a sense of being 'forsaken' and cut off from their roots and identity as a people. In exile they needed to learn how to discover a new vision of what it might mean to be God's people. And exile was followed by homecoming. The people returned in joy to rebuild their nation, rebuild their lives and rebuild their temple.

In the New Testament we have the image of the Kingdom. In Christ, God's Kingdom is revealed as the poor hear the good news, captives are released, the blind see and the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18-19). Kingdom values challenged the first disciples as they challenge us to live and act with compassion, with justice and with love. All these are rich biblical images that help us to reflect prayerfully on the work we are called to do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

As Christian disciples we are sent out, as the first disciples were, to tend to the needs of the people, as witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ. As Pastoral Assistants we are asked to spend time with people, to listen to them and to attend to their needs. This is primarily the work of pastoral care identified above as an 'act of comfort, support and encouragement'. This is often called a ministry of presence. We are called to serve Christ by simply being present with another, willing to give time to be with them and stand alongside them. Indeed, it is often true that our 'silent' witness can be as effective as any word spoken.

In Matthew 5:13-15 disciples are called to be salt and light. To be salt is to be genuine, authentic and honest and to live with integrity. Integrity is important if we are to go out and visit. It is to be true to our self and to realise that this kind of pastoral care is grounded in sharing as equals and not in 'being the expert'. We don't need to know all the answers, but we do need to acknowledge when we get out of our depth and need to call upon the knowledge and expertise of others, both in the



church and in the secular world. In fact we need to be humble to be effective as pastors and to be earthed in the complex experience of ordinary human life.

We are called also to be light, or rather to reflect the divine light of Christ through our lives and our actions. We cannot reflect the light of Christ unless we are aware of ourselves, of our weaknesses and of our needs. When we visit we take with us the whole of who we are, and the whole of our life experiences. Before we can effectively listen to another we need to listen to our self, to understand our own feelings and emotions, how the experiences of our lives have affected us and where our limitations lie; and perhaps to have experience of what it is like to be listened to. It is to think about how integrated we are as a person, how we hold our life in balance.

In the words of Alistair V Campbell, from his work on pastoral care,

In offering care to another we begin to touch upon those ineffable experiences where life and death meet, where the values upon which human existence depends are under question, where the edges of our individual lives seem to merge with those of others.³

³ Campbell, A. (1986), *Rediscovering Pastoral Care*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 15.



Group Work Discussion

1. Gathering

Spend a few minutes in silence, offering any worries or concerns from everyday life to God, and acknowledging God's presence among you as you meet together.

**Almighty and everlasting God,
by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church
is governed and sanctified:
hear our prayer which we offer for all your faithful people,
that in their vocation and ministry
they may serve you in holiness and truth
to the glory of your name;
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.
Amen.**

2. Reflecting

In this exercise, feel free to share only what you are comfortable sharing, and be careful to observe confidentiality both in the stories you tell and after the session.

In groups of 2-3, share an experience of having received pastoral care that was positive, meaningful or significant to you. What made it so? How did you respond to it? What made you respond that way?

Then, if you are comfortable, share an experience of having received pastoral care that was unhelpful or unsuccessful. Again — what made it so? How did you respond to it? What made you respond that way?

Come together again as a whole group, to reflect on what makes an experience of pastoral care 'helpful' or 'unhelpful'.

Consider the importance of:

- practical considerations;
- personal experiences and preferences;
- the ways in which God is reflected and portrayed.



3. Exploring

Pastoral care has been described as encompassing four functions: healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling, both for individuals, as well as for church and community.

As a group, explore each of the passages below in turn:

- Romans 12:9-21
- Mark 2:1-12
- Luke 24:13-35

How does each of these passages express a) healing, b) sustaining, c) guiding and/or d) reconciling?

In what other ways might these passages inform our understanding of pastoral care?

4. Responding and Concluding

- a. Each share briefly one particular thing you have learned from this session.
- b. Plan your preparation for the next session.
- c. Finish by saying the Grace together, or some other form of prayer.

