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Company no: 003489945 · Charity no: 1067653

Pastoral Assistant

Session 3 – Group Course

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

Session 3: Managing a pastoral conversation

Introductory Reading

Any conversation that we have as a Pastoral Assistant has to be held within the context of a relationship which embodies the message of the gospel which embraces the love of God for all people. It is for the listener, although a guest in another's home, to ensure that the space they occupy is a space of peace and welcome, brought about by the general attitude and nature of the listener.

In order to do this it is important for the visitor to be comfortable and at ease, understanding the power of words spoken, knowing what to say and how to say it, and being able to respect appropriate silences. Therefore, although words are important in any conversation, sometimes, the absence of words is even more important. Active listening can allow a painful story to be told. Sometimes what is needed is a supportive silence that gives space in which the other can think the unthinkable before finding words to express what was previously inexpressible.

Researchers in counselling and psychology identify three core characteristics of all listening:

1. **Genuineness**, sometimes called congruence or realness. This is being true to our self and not pretending to be someone we are not, to be authentic, sincere. It is to be open to the one visited and equal with them in a way that enables them to be true to their self as well and so grow through the conversation and time together.
2. **Acceptance**, or unconditional positive regard. This is being non-judgemental, it gives space to explore both positive and negative feelings. Acceptance removes the fear of rejection, and ridicule over what is said.
3. **Empathy**. This is being able to sense and feel what the one talking is expressing, to be able to feel it with them and then to be able to communicate back through word or gesture that you have understood what has been said. It shows a deep level of caring. Empathy is a looking inwards to how we would feel in an experience described and told to us, but with the realisation that 'my feelings and thoughts' will not be the same as another person's. It involves a listening to the self as well as to the other. It should not be confused with sympathy. Sympathy can draw us in to a place where we cannot listen effectively as we become too caught up in sharing the same emotional response to the conversation as the person sharing and talking.



We can reflect on these three elements theologically and spiritually by looking at the Incarnation, the belief that God became a human being in Jesus. In David Lyall's book on pastoral care and counselling from a Christian context.

The Christian God is One who identifies with and enters into the suffering of men and women. Empathy, therefore, the attempt to enter into the mind-set of another human being, and the communication of that empathy, can be seen as something more than good counselling technique. It points to, and is an expression of, the God who in Jesus accommodated himself to us in the frailty of our humanity, and who in the midst of our frailty revealed his glory.¹

In practice we have conversations frequently. Therefore it should be easy to talk to and with someone on a pastoral visit. However, this kind of conversation asks more of us. The conversation needs to be one where the person we visit is encouraged through our words to deepen and develop and share their stories and thoughts. To do this means that time has to be given to build up a relationship of trust. How the conversation develops will also depend on the way in which we ask, or don't ask questions and the way in which we respond, or don't respond, to something they have said.

As always, practical considerations are important. Therefore, always open the conversation by introducing yourself and saying where you are from, even though they may already know this. Be careful not to ask too many closed questions. These tend to be quite specific questions which requires a simple yes or no answer. Although useful in gaining information quickly, too many closed questions can lead to a limited conversation. They can give a sense of being interrogated, and inhibit a deeper and wider conversation.

On the other hand, open ended questions are less direct and so encourage a longer response to be made. They cannot usually be answered with a single yes or no. Therefore most open questions begin with, 'How? Who? What? When? Where?' For example, 'What did you do then?', 'How did you feel on that day?', 'How does it feel to talk about it now?', 'Where did you go?', 'What else happened?'. 'Why' questions are also helpful but shouldn't be used as often as the others, as 'Why' can sometimes sound accusing, critical or aggressive, 'Why did you drop it?', 'Why are you fed up?' It all depends on the way the 'Why' is used, the tone of voice and the context of the rest of the conversation.

¹ Lyall, D. (2001), *The Integrity of Pastoral Care*, London: SPCK, 97.



As well as the open questions to enable the conversation to flow, simple expressions sometimes called 'encouragers' such as "mmmmm" and "ahhhhh" can be used, which show that you are still listening.

There are also a number of simple techniques that can be used to support a developing conversation. Different techniques can be appropriate at different times and they need not all be used in any one conversation. Initially these may feel unnatural and forced but over time can become a natural part of your pastoral practice.

1. The first is **paraphrasing**. This is simply trying to clarify what a person has said by rephrasing the words they have used and checking that these have been correctly understood.
2. Then there is **reflecting back**. This is again a way of feeding back to a person that you have correctly understood the way they are feeling i.e. 'You sound surprised ...', or 'I get the impression that you are really upset / angry about ...' To reflect shows attentive listening, and that you are interested in what is being said.
3. Then there is **mirroring**. To mirror is to use a word or short phrase that they have used, adding a question mark on the end. This can also help to clarify a meaning or give them the opportunity to explore further. E.g. 'So you said that you were 'heartbroken'?'
4. There is also **summarising**. This is a good way to end the conversation, by briefly telling them what they have just told you. It shows that you have listened and understood, and if not allows for any correction to be made.
5. There is also **silence**. Although people are not generally comfortable with silence, a time of quietness, as long as it feels comfortable, can provide the space to gather thoughts together. It may be that after a time of silence the conversation takes a different direction, or adds something important.



There is also a way to leave. It is often useful to say, in a nice and polite way, how long you can stay when you first arrive. This can put the person visited at ease to know you are not stopping for several hours! As the time draws close to when you need to leave you might make a reference to the time, and begin to bring the visit to a close. Don't make any promises to visit again unless you want to, and they want you to. It may be that another visit isn't needed or someone else will visit from the church, or you will contact them in a few weeks to arrange another visit. Be firm and say good-bye - and leave! If something important is said just as you are leaving, you will need to decide whether it can wait for another visit, perhaps an earlier visit than planned or whether you have time to stay a little longer. If you stay make it clear how much longer you can stay. Leaving isn't always easy!



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.

**God our Father,
in love you sent your Son
that the world may have life:
lead us to seek him among the outcast
and to find him in those in need,
for Jesus Christ's sake.
Amen.**

2. Reflecting

In pairs, undertake the following listening exercise:

- One person should be the listener and one the storyteller.
- The storyteller should speak for 5 minutes about a significant event in their life that they are happy to share.
- The listener should encourage and enable them to tell the story, using the various approaches discussed in this session's reading: Open ended questions, encouragers, paraphrasing, reflecting back, mirroring, summarising and silence.
- After 5 minutes, the listener should feed back what they have heard and the storyteller should comment on its accuracy.
- Reverse roles and repeat the exercise.

Discuss the exercise together as a whole group, in particular sharing the ways in which the techniques used by the 'listener' were either helpful or unhelpful.



3. Exploring

Discuss together as a group:

- What is the difference between being a Pastoral Assistant on behalf of the church and being 'a friend from church'?
- What are the similarities and differences between a pastoral visit and an everyday 'conversation between friends'?
- How might your existing relationship with church members change when you become a Pastoral Assistant? How might your relationship with the wider local community change?
- In light of all you've discussed, what qualities are needed in a good Pastoral Assistant?

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.

