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Monmouth Diocesan Board of Finance is a company registered in England and Wales.  
Company no: 003489945 · Charity no: 1067653

# Pastoral Assistant

Lay Ministry Training Courses - Groups

*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'.<sup>1</sup>

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.*<sup>2</sup>

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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> 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.



# Session 2: Being a good listener

## Introductory Reading

Key to pastoral visiting is the ability to be a good listener.

In the gospel of John (John 4:7ff) we read of Jesus meeting with a woman of Samaria and the conversation that unfolds with her at the well. In this encounter we discover the essence of listening as Jesus enables and encourages her to bring out into the open her personal thoughts and to reflect on her life and her faith. He brings to her, not only the gift of the water of life, but the gift of being listened to.

In a different context, in Luke's gospel (Luke 24:13ff) we read of Jesus walking with the two disciples along the Road to Emmaus. He meets them where they are, and from that place carefully answers the questions they puzzle over. We also read that Jesus spends time alone. He needs time away from the crowds to seek personal and inner refreshment and renewal before going back to give of himself, likewise, so do we – and more on this in a later session.

If we truly listen to a person, we offer them a sense of freedom and a sense of trust that grows out of that listening relationship. There is freedom in being able to say anything, and to be heard and accepted without being judged. It is the freedom to cry and to laugh. It is the freedom to share with another time and space in conversation.

To listen to someone is to give that person time and space in which to think, to speak, to ponder, to express the concerns and hopes they have and to chat. Most conversations that will take place in visiting will probably be simple conversations about day to day life. However, it is important to be ready and attentive in order to hear the unexpected and to discover something important that may only come to light as you are about to leave.

In all our listening, we need to enable the person we are visiting to trust us and to accept our ministry.



Therefore it is critical that we learn how to listen sensitively and effectively to what they tell us. In fact,

- we need to learn how to listen attentively and to know that we have 'heard' them correctly;
- we need to learn to listen with our eyes in order to recognise the emotion that is being shown;
- we need to learn to listen beneath the conversation so that we can hear what is not being said;
- we need to listen to the silences and to be aware that they might be comfortable, awkward, embarrassed or peaceful.

When we visit it is important to put our own concerns and worries to one side. We go to listen to the person that we visit and to make conversation which is focused on them. It is important to recognise that we go to listen and not to offload our own problems and issues. Indeed, it is important that we know ourselves well enough to know when we can and when we can't go visiting, and who we can and can't visit without raising real issues for ourselves.

To pay attention to others with the desire to make them the centre and to make their interests our own is a real form of self-emptying, since to be able to receive others into our intimate inner space we must be empty. That is why listening is so difficult. It means our moving away from the centre of attention and inviting others into that space. When our own life is stressed, it can be very difficult to become empty for another.

Simple, practical issues should not be overlooked. If you are going to put the person that you are visiting at ease then how you look, what you do and how you sit will all be important. Therefore it is important to dress appropriately, shake hands to introduce yourself at the door and be ready to show them your credentials. When inside, don't 'stand over' someone, or walk around. Where you sit will of course depend on where the chairs are, but never move a chair without asking, or sit before being invited, or first saying, "is it ok for me to sit here?". The best position is at right angles, and close enough to reach to touch an arm in comfort, but not close enough for knees to touch. If offered a drink, accept the offer, even if you don't really want one!

Body language is important. Sitting with arms and legs crossed can be seen as unwelcoming and defensive. Sprawling and leaning back can be seen as too casual, while leaning forward and staring can create tension. Be aware that some



people don't like others getting too close, or invading their 'personal space', though sitting too far away makes conversation difficult.

Eye-contact is important to help a conversation to flow as it shows that you are interested, and listening. It may help you to relax if you are able to focus your gaze on the person's nose or forehead rather than the eyes. Clues to how comfortable a person is can be gained from the way they look or avoid looking at you.

Moving hands, playing with hair, sniffing or wriggling around in the chair can be off-putting. Think about your own gestures and habits, or ask someone what they may be, and consider whether they might be irritating to someone on a visit.

Some people like to be hugged and some don't! There are times, if someone is upset, that you may wish to hug them, hold their hand or put an arm around the shoulders, to comfort them. If you know someone well, you will know what is appropriate and what isn't. If in doubt ask if it's ok, and if you don't feel comfortable to 'touch' then don't. They will sense your tension. The areas generally considered 'safe' to touch are the upper arm and the hands. To place a hand on their arm, to hold a hand can show that you share their pain.

Much of the above is common sense, and, although body language is important, it is essential that you are as natural as possible.

In order to build a relationship of trust with the person being visited it is important to be clear that you will treat the things they share with you in confidence. There are two exceptions to this; the first is if they specifically give you permission to share something they have said with another person or persons. This could be the vicar or minister, the prayer group, or the person who organises the intercessions in church so that prayers could be said for that person on Sunday. Second, if the person says something that leads you to think they or another person are at risk you have a duty of care to pass that on to the appropriate person or agency. This raises issues of safeguarding children and vulnerable adults that will be dealt with in more detail in Session 5.



## 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.

**Heavenly Father,  
you know both our needs and our ignorance:  
have mercy on our weakness,  
not as we ask in our blindness  
nor as we deserve in our sinfulness,  
but as you know and love us  
in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord  
who lives and reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and always.  
Amen.**

### 2. Reflecting

In pairs, undertake the following listening exercise:

- One person should be the 'storyteller', the other should be the listener.
- The storyteller should speak for 2-3 minutes about something that has happened to them in the past couple of weeks.
- The listener should listen as carefully as possible, remaining completely silent.
- When the time is up, the listener should repeat as accurately as possible the story that he or she has just heard. The listener is not trying to interpret what the story meant but simply to repeat what was said.
- When the listener has finished, the storyteller should reflect back on how well the listener has heard the story and should note any inaccuracies or omissions.
- Repeat the exercise, reversing roles.

Discuss the exercise together as a whole group, in particular noting how it felt to be listened to and affirmed, as well as any other insights into what makes for good listening skills.



### 3. Exploring

Discuss together as a group:

- What are the most important practical factors that aid in good listening?
- What do you find most difficult in listening well?
- Why is confidentiality important, and what are the limits of confidentiality in pastoral care?
- How, why and with whom is pastoral information shared in your Ministry Team?

### 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.



# 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.<sup>4</sup>*

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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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 "ahhhh" 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.



# Session 4: What might we encounter?

## Introductory Reading

When we make a visit on behalf of the church it is likely that we will encounter people who are experiencing difficulties in one way or another. It is possible that the person we are visiting may be elderly, or sick, or housebound or recently bereaved, or they may feel lonely and isolated. It is important for the visitor to understand the issues that are facing the person and to be sympathetic to their needs.

Some people that you will be asked to visit will be elderly and it is possible that they may be struggling with disabilities that are a consequence of age. They may have suffered a change in their physical, social or personal circumstances as they have gotten older and they may be experiencing a sense of loss and isolation. They may fear for a future in which they will be incapable of independent living. For many older people the familiar ways in which they have practised their faith may no longer be physically possible.

It is common for the elderly to experience a loss of hearing which may drastically reduce their ability to communicate effectively. Faced with deafness of people of any age there is a tendency for the visitor to raise their voice and over-exaggerate each word. However, this is rarely helpful. Rather, there are a number of simple but useful ways in which to make communication with the hard of hearing a little easier. This might include:

- making sure the person knows you are about to speak by signalling your intention or lightly touching their arm;
- letting your face be expressive and use your face, rather than the tone of your voice, to aid the conversation;
- making the subject of your conversation clear;
- using short, straightforward sentences;
- repeating what you have said without changing the words you have used;
- using hand gestures if appropriate;
- resorting to a paper and pencil if necessary.

It is also common for elderly people to be forgetful, and for a growing number this may signal the onset of dementia. The Alzheimer's Society predicts that there will be a steady increase in the number of elderly people suffering from dementia and that this may reach 1.7 million by 2050. Dementia is of course a degenerative condition with the symptoms becoming more severe over time. Typically, symptoms will



include a loss of memory and mood changes. Some may experience problems in communicating which may lead to a decline in the ability to talk, read and write.

Not all people who are confused will be suffering from dementia but it is as well to recognise that communication with confused people will be easier if you make sure that you:

- identify yourself clearly giving your name and where you are from;
- sit on the same level as the person you visit, preferably with the light on your face;
- understand that the confused can be very sensitive to body language;
- use short and simple sentences that are easy to follow;
- use names all the time (pronouns like 'I, they, she, him 'may be difficult to follow);
- be aware of the background environment (the TV can make concentration difficult);
- avoid asking questions that can create anxieties.

Some that you are asked to visit will at some time or another have been bereaved. This may have been the death of a partner or parent or child. It may have happened quite recently or several years ago. And although there are experiences common to all bereavements, each grief will also be unique. Therefore, although we can show sympathy and empathy, it is impossible to know how any bereaved person actually feels. Visitors will encounter those who have cared for a loved one through terminal illness and others who have been faced with a sudden death. They may therefore visit a person who is grieving in the first few weeks after a death and another who is still trying to come to terms with a death that happened months or years previously.

CS Lewis began his own personal account of grief and loss after the death of his wife Joy in his book, 'A Grief Observed' with the words,

*No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing...There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what everyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be around me. I dread the moments when the house is empty.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/649744-no-one-ever-told-me/>.



It is tempting to refer to textbooks on bereavement and to 'stage models' of grief as set down by authors such as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. In her book, 'On Death and Dying' she identified six stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance and hope.<sup>6</sup> However, there is a recognition today that people are individuals who do not always behave like textbooks. There is therefore less emphasis given to 'stages' of grief and more emphasis placed on the broad 'process' of grief. Indeed, it is generally recognised that there is no single way to grieve. Everybody is different and each person grieves in his or her own way.

However, there is a process that many will experience. Feeling shock and being emotionally numb may be replaced by a deep yearning for the person who has died. The bereaved person may feel agitated or angry and find it difficult to relax and to sleep. There may also be feelings of guilt. These strong emotions often give way to bouts of intense sadness, sudden outbursts of tears and a withdrawal from family and friends. Over time, pain, sadness and depression lessens and life can be seen in a more positive light again. Finally the person may find a way of 'incorporating the loss' of the person who has died and move on to a new stage of life. It takes on average about two years to go through this process but for many it is never completed and many people repeat parts of the cycle or go through the stages in a different order.

Therefore, if you are visiting a bereaved person you may encounter strong emotions of anger, fear, guilt, self-pity, depression and denial, or hear of vivid dreams of the dead person and tales of seeing or hearing or sensing the dead person close to them in their grief.

Ian Morris, a chaplain in London, has suggested that the '5Ts' may help us when we visit bereaved people, especially in the very early stages of grief. They are:

- **Touch.** If a person has recently died it can help to touch or hold them.
- **Talking.** This can be very therapeutic as people go through grief.
- **Tears.** This helps the body to release chemical agents that induce calm and relaxation.
- **Tea.** This is good for shock and it can help to undertake an ordinary task.
- **Time.** Giving people time helps show them their worth and value.

Sometimes we will be asked to visit people who are themselves close to death. It is important to remember that such a person may be dealing with many conflicting and contradictory thoughts and emotions at this critical time.

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<sup>6</sup> Kubler-Ross, E. (1973), *On Death and Dying*, Taylor and Francis Ltd.



It is also worth acknowledging that there will be no easy answers to the questions that the person may be asking and to which they must seek answers for themselves. In visiting such a person we may feel that we are called to a ministry of support, comfort, presence, and reassurance. It is important for the visitor to recognise that:

- helping people to explore their stories may help them to make sense of their lives;
- difficult and awkward questions may need to be explored rather than answered;
- there is a need to be comfortable with silence as concerns over what to say and how to act are common;
- touch may be important if that is acceptable to the person and appropriate;
- they need to be prepared to convey the Christian hope simply and without preaching;
- people who appear to be unconscious and on the point of death may well be able to hear what is being said around them though unable to respond.

Indeed, as a Pastoral Assistant, you are likely to encounter situations that you find challenging and difficult. Understanding how people with a range of difficulties and challenges might be feeling and how best to communicate with them will be important.

It is also vitally important to be aware of how their experiences may trigger reactions in yourself. For example their bereavement may bring back a bereavement that you have experienced in a fresh and surprising way, or their illness may remind you of a current concern you have for a loved one. In these situations it is possible that your insight will help you be open to what they are experiencing and will help you empathise.

However it is important to remember that everyone's experience is different. You should not project your experience on to them; assuming that you 'know what they are going through'. You should also be aware of the danger of telling them your experience, making the visit about your experience rather than theirs.

Nonetheless some people, at the appropriate moment, might find comfort in knowing they are not alone in their thoughts and feelings and that others have survived similar events. Finally, it is important to make time, before and after a visit, to deal with any personal emotional consequences the visit has had for you, and to find support if you need it.





## 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 of love,  
passionate and strong,  
tender and careful:  
watch over us and hold us  
all the days of our life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.**

### 2. Reflecting

On a plain piece of paper, map out a 'river of life', which charts your own important life events from birth to now. Map out the different events, perhaps drawing in the times:

- when the river has flowed smoothly;
- when there have been unexpected twists and turns;
- when it has been flooded or dried out;
- when there have been obstacles across the stream.

Share your rivers in twos or threes, and reflect together on them.

- How might these various experiences help you in your pastoral visiting?
- How might you these experiences have a negative impact in your pastoral visiting?

As a whole group, discuss together:

- How do our personal experiences help and hinder our pastoral visiting?
- What support might you need from your ministry area and/or others to sustain you in this role?



### 3. Exploring

As a group, read Ruth 1:1-22 from the Bible:

- Identify and explore the various losses and causes of grief for each character in the story.
- What are the consequences and responses to these losses and causes of grief?
- What forms of loss and grief might you encounter as a 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.



# Session 5: Undertaking a visit

## Introductory Reading

You will be asked to undertake your visits on behalf of the local church. Some of those you visit may be members of the church and some may have little or no connection with the faith at all. Either way you are representatives of the Christian faith and have undertaken a visit because you are obeying a call to care for people as Christ cares. Some may wish to talk about their faith but others may not. In truth, the person that you are visiting may have a very different perspective and understanding about God and the church. Inevitably this is because everybody has different experiences of the presence of God in their lives.

Therefore it is possible that those you visit may want to know about your own faith. As a consequence, it is important that you are prepared to talk about your faith and how you understand the Bible, the church, the salvation that God brings through Jesus Christ, and what this has meant for you in your life. Although it is not appropriate for any of us to appear to have all the answers, it is important that Pastoral Assistants are honest about their faith and the limitations of their knowledge and experience and to have the confidence to say 'I don't know, but will try and find an answer'. Indeed, it is far better to acknowledge that you do not know the answer to a question than to attempt to answer incorrectly! It is also important that the views of those who are visited are respected.

We are all called to be in relationship with God which means that we need words and images through which this relationship can grow and develop. Because we are all unique, and because our faith has been shaped by our particular journey through life, this will have an effect on the ways in which we understand God and the words we use to describe that experience. It is therefore important for every Pastoral Assistant to reflect on their own life of faith and to explore the ways in which they can describe their relationship with God and explain why they want to visit others in Christ's name.

It is of course a natural part of our life of faith to come before God in quietness and prayer, to converse and bring before God all that concerns us and all that is important to us. We gather corporately as Christian community to meet with God and to pray. It would therefore be natural to us to hold those we visit in our prayers, to pray before we visit them, to keep them in our prayers after the visit is over, and with their permission, to pray for them in Sunday worship. However, it is less clear whether we should pray with a person on a visit.



There are three options:

1. If you feel comfortable and confident enough, and the person you visit agrees, then offer a prayer aloud, a prayer that you have taken with you, or a prayer in your own words. Use either a general all-purpose prayer or one that brings to God names and issues that have been discussed. It is good to keep it short.
2. Offer a moment of silence for each of you to pray for each other and all that has been discussed. This is sometimes best done in quietness without using any spoken words. Agree to bring the quiet prayer to end by saying 'Amen'. Keep the time of silence short so that it doesn't become uncomfortable.
3. You might like to leave a prayer on a card, and ask the person if they would like to use the prayer after you have left and that you will offer a prayer for them once you get back home.

Each ministry area will organise its visiting in a different way. Ideally you will be part of a visiting team that will meet together regularly to pray and to share experiences and issues. This will also be a place where you can find mutual support and encouragement. You may find that there is no team of visitors and that it is a member of the clergy team or LLM who asks you to undertake certain visits. If you have a team of Assistants it may be that the visits are organised by a lay team leader. Either way, practicalities are important.

The following points need consideration.

1. Each visit will almost certainly come from, or be connected to your own ministry area. However, if the person lives outside your parish it is accepted practice to inform the vicar of the parish in which you will undertake your visit, and the reasons for doing so.
2. Try to determine if this is a visit you feel safe undertaking alone, or whether it is better to meet in a public place or to take someone else with you or arrange to visit when a family member or professional person, such as a support worker, is present. Never put yourself in a vulnerable position.
3. If you are asked to undertake a visit, be certain of the time available to you. If you don't have the time to undertake the visit, it is better to say so and avoid difficulties at a later stage.



4. If at all possible arrange the visit by phone. Make sure to be punctual.
5. When you visit ensure the person you are visiting knows how long you can stay. Those who are ill or unwell will probably appreciate a shorter rather than a longer visit.
6. Make sure that you have an ID card (with a photograph, the name of the church and/or ministry area, and a contact phone number) giving authorisation (usually from the Ministry Area Leader) signed by you and them.
7. Always make a note of the date, time, place and person visited.
8. Never give out your home phone number or address unless it is to someone you know well and trust.
9. Do not agree to visit the person again unless you are able to keep the arrangement. Be aware that lonely people can be very demanding.
10. Confidentiality is important. Never talk about the person you have visited. If you feel it is necessary, ask the person you visit if they will give you permission to tell another person about their situation.
11. If visiting a care home, do not forget to sign in and out and be courteous to staff at all times.
12. If visiting a hospital, make sure you inform the Hospital Chaplain that you intend to visit, always observe visiting hours and check with the nurse in charge it is ok to visit. Observe all infection control measures including sanitising your hands before and after each visit, and never sitting on the bed.

Most importantly of all, know your limitations and keep appropriate boundaries. Do not allow people to become too dependent on you as a Pastoral Assistant. Be clear what you are able to offer and what is beyond your competence.

In truth, most visits are happy, comfortable occasions when everybody feels safe. However, it is important to recognise that visitors are vulnerable. It is important to let a third party know where you are going and how long you expect to take over the visit. In the house, identify the exits and make a quick risk assessment of any dangers to your person. Keep your keys with you and where possible carry a mobile phone.



If you do not know the person you are visiting, try to find out as much as you can about their history and state of mind.

It is also important that you are fully aware of safeguarding issues. Safeguarding is about the prevention of the abuse of children and vulnerable adults. The ecumenical church's 'Forum for Safeguarding' has adopted the following definition of a vulnerable adult as being one who may be at risk and in need as a result of:

- sensory impairment;
- a learning disability;
- a physical illness;
- a mental illness, chronic or otherwise, including dementia or addiction to alcohol or drugs;
- a reduction in physical, mental or emotional capacity or, who has for any reason become unable to protect him or herself from significant harm or exploitation.

It is clear that many of the adults that a visitor will encounter are in this category. Indeed all of us can be vulnerable at different times. Also, if you are asked to visit a family with children, you may be confronted with a situation where you feel it is possible that a child is suffering abuse. If you are concerned following a visit that a child or a vulnerable adult may be suffering abuse it is important that you:

- do not delay reporting your concerns;
- do not attempt to investigate for yourself the truth of any allegations, only report them on;
- do not contact the alleged abuser;
- consult with the Provincial Safeguarding Officer for our diocese, who will log your concerns and instruct you in the next steps.

It is vitally important that you are familiar with the Church in Wales Safeguarding Policy. Alongside this training, you should have both completed a safe recruitment process within your ministry area and undertaken the full Church in Wales Safeguarding Training, before you are commissioned and/or make any pastoral visits on your own.



## 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,  
who in your tender love towards the human race  
sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ  
to take upon him our flesh  
and to suffer death upon the cross:  
grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility,  
and also be made partakers of his resurrection;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen.**

### 2. Reflecting

As a group, read and discuss this scenario:

*A Pastoral Assistant has called to see an elderly member of the church who has just moved into a nursing home following a fall. The visit takes place in the home's day room. At the end of the visit, having listened to the parishioner's concerns and experiences, the Pastoral Assistant asks "Would you like me to pray with you now, or to light a candle for you in church or to remember you in the intercessions on Sunday?"*

- Why might the Pastoral Assistant have asked this question in this way?
- Why might a person choose, and not choose, each of the options for prayer offered?
- What might be the content of your prayer in each case and where might you find appropriate resources?



### 3. Exploring

Discuss together as a group:

- What practical arrangements do you need to make before undertaking a pastoral visit?
- What practical steps should you will take to ensure your own safety while pastoral visiting?
- Examine the safeguarding and vulnerable adult protection procedures that are in place in your ministry area.
- Determine the practical arrangements that need to be in place to ensure that you are able to respond to any pastoral situation you may encounter.

### 4. Responding and Concluding

Over the next three months, you will begin to undertake pastoral visiting in your ministry area on a probationary basis:

- Ideally, your first few visits should be accompanied by a priest, licensed minister or other experienced Pastoral Assistant. Make plans to enable these visits to happen.
- Schedule the date for your final follow up session in three months' time, when you will reflect on your initial experience and discuss the final steps to full commissioned ministry.

Before you finish:

- a. Each share briefly one particular thing you have learned in this session.
- b. Finish by saying the Grace together, or some other form of prayer.





# Session 6: Reflecting on your experience

## Pastoral Assistant Training Course

One of the important ways in which we learn as disciples of Jesus Christ and ministers of the Gospel is through a process of reflection. We learn by reflecting on our practice and making improvements to the way we undertake our work. This process of reflection is often represented by the 'pastoral cycle'.



In this cycle, **experience** (of a situation or event) is explored so that the various elements can be better understood. A number of questions can help this **exploration**. They can be used as a checklist, although not all of the questions will be helpful for each visit.

1. There are questions about the situation.  
How was the visit set up? Was I well prepared?  
What happened a) at the beginning b) as the visit progressed c) at the end?  
Who was present? How long did the visit last? Did anything unexpected occur?
2. There are questions about those involved.  
What did the person you visited do? Why did they act the way that they did?  
What do you think they wanted? How were they feeling? What did their body language signify?
3. There are questions about the visitor.  
What did I do? How did I feel? What were my expectations? What role did I fulfil?  
Did I listen effectively? Did I know my limitations? Did I do what I intended to do?
4. And there are questions about the interaction.  
What was happening between the people present? How did we interact? Did we both know why the other was present? Was there a common purpose and mutual understanding? Was there anything I omitted to do?



Once we have a clear idea about what happened at the visit, we transition into **reflection** on our own practice. We ask the questions:

What can I learn from reflecting on the behaviour of the person I visited? What can I learn from the way I managed the visit? What can I learn from the way we reacted to each other? Is there anything I need to do as a result of the visit?

And because this visit was undertaken on behalf of the church and as a disciple of Jesus Christ there will be a need to address the questions:

How did I serve Christ during my visit? Are there ways in which I could have done that more effectively?

The **response** can then be formed by asking:

What have I learned from the visit? How might I do things differently in the future? Are there skills or knowledge that I lack? Who might help me develop my skills and/or increase my knowledge?

The Pastoral Cycle is arranged as a spiral simply because each new experience is changed in the light of previous reflection. Variations on this model are common and can be helpful in exploring how the reflective process works.

The best reflections are often undertaken as prayer. Reflection on the visit can lead both to meditation and intercession as we offer the whole experience to God and place before him the needs of the person we visited. Reflection can lead to confession as we recognise our own inadequacies and the desire to improve our practice can lead to thanksgiving and supplication as we give thanks for the opportunity to serve Christ and seek God's guidance as we move forward.

God calls us to service in many different ways. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to witness to his life, death, resurrection and ascension in every part of our lives. Through our baptism we are called to explore the way of Jesus, to grow in friendship with God and in love for his people and in service to others. As disciples of Jesus Christ we do this in our homes, in our places of work, in our times of leisure and through the membership of his church.

There are many ways in which God calls us to serve, and helping with pastoral visiting is one of those ways. It is a ministry that grows out of our journey of discipleship and is part of our Christian witness. It is sometimes difficult to know quite what God is calling us to be and do during the next part of our lives and we often discover the right way forward for us by trying different avenues of service.



This session is designed to help you to discern whether pastoral visiting is right for you at this point in your life. In order to do this we will ask you to honestly and prayerfully reflect on the work that you have done on this course and the visit(s) you have made in your ministry area. It may be that you are busy with other duties that you feel are more pressing either in the church, at work, or in your family. It may be that you feel that this new work is so rewarding that you decide to give up other forms of service to concentrate on this area of ministry. It may even be that God is calling you to explore this ministry further and you would like to go on and explore Licensed Lay Ministry or ordination as a deacon or a priest.

Indeed, the life-long journey of faith demands that we constantly seek God's guidance on the path that he wants us to take so that we can become the person he wants us to be.

When we undertake a task on behalf of the church, the discernment for that task is the responsibility of both the individual who takes on that work and the church in whose name the ministry is undertaken. Therefore, at this stage it will be important for others to engage with you in a discernment process to prayerfully identify whether pastoral visiting is right for you at this time. You will have thought about this before undertaking this course of training and others in the church will have supported you on this journey.

However, you now need to reflect on the work that you have been undertaking with those responsible for pastoral care in your church and need to come to a joint decision about the way ahead.



## 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, Lord of all the world,  
through your Son you have called us into the fellowship  
of your universal Church:  
hear our prayer for your faithful people  
that in their vocation and ministry each may be an  
instrument of your love,  
and give to your servants the needful gifts of grace;  
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,  
who is alive and reigns  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever.  
Amen.**

### 2. Reflecting

Take 20 minutes in silence to undertake a reflective exercise based on a form of meditative prayer called the 'Examen':

*Step 1: I relax and find stillness:*

- I remind myself that I am in God's presence.
- I breathe in my desire to feel God's love. I breathe out to fill the space around me with God's loving presence.

Slowly and in silence, work through the following reflection on the pastoral visiting you have undertaken:



*Step 2: I ask God to bring to my heart the moments in my pastoral visiting...*

- When did I feel the presence of the Spirit most closely?
- When did I sense that I had lived out my faith and commitment to love God and my neighbour?
- When did I feel that something I said or did, or did not say or do, made a real difference?
- In my heart, I re-live those moments.

*Step 3: In God's loving presence, I ask to be made aware of the moments in my visiting when I failed to love God and neighbour...*

- When did I feel that my words or actions were most distant from my faith and from the training on this course?
- When did I feel uncomfortable or ill-equipped or prepared?
- When did I feel least loving towards myself or others?
- Do I have any other feelings I need to release?

*Step 4: I give thanks and pray for wisdom...*

- I thank God for graciously enabling me to be a disciple, to know love and share it with others.
- I pray for the grace to love and be loved.
- I pray for the wisdom to know the gifts I have and do not have and for help discerning the best path forward for me and for pastoral work in my ministry area.



### 3. Exploring

Continue reflecting together, now sharing as a group:

- Reflect together on the experiences you have had of pastoral visiting.
- Share your positive and negative experiences, and explore what made them so.

### 4. Responding and Concluding

- a. Each share briefly your one most significant piece of learning from the whole training process.
- b. Make arrangements for each member of the group to have a conversation with the appropriate member of the Ministry Team, to agree whether you will go forward to be fully commissioned as a Pastoral Assistant.
- c. Finish by saying the Grace together, or some other form of prayer.

