

Creating a Personal Theology to Do Spiritual / Pastoral Care

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Why do pastoral care? What motivates a person, presumably a religious person, to care for another human being? In today's predominant culture—at least in the American marketplace / workplace—of materialism, competitiveness, amassing and utilizing wealth and power, the very act of taking the time, effort, and emotional energy to help another human being is counterintuitive. It is contrary to the culture. Yet, every year thousands positively respond to a sense of “call” and matriculate to seminaries of many faiths, rabbinical schools, and so on. They enter residencies, apprenticeships, internships, and the like. They often go into debt and suffer from inadequate material support, and their lives and schedules put a strain on both their own sensibilities and bodies and those of their friends and families. Yet they *choose* to respond affirmatively to this call. Why?

For me, the answer is a simple: “Because we are made in the image of God.” I believe that God cares about and for the world that God created. Inherent in that creation is an expectation of a partnership with humanity for the maintenance of and stewardship with the creation. Some people seem to hear clearly that call to partnership. Others, it would seem, do not hear that call at all. Still others not only do not hear the voice of the One who calls, but also do not believe in the very existence of the One who calls. So, for me, creating a personal theology of doing pastoral care starts with hearing the voice of the One who calls, then choosing to respond affirmatively to the call.

What next? Now that I the author, or you the reader, has heard the call and responded with “yes” to God, what does that response entail?

A few months ago, a former graduate student counseling intern under my supervision (and presently a clinical pastoral education supervisor-in-training) asked me about my own philosophy or theology of pastoral care. My response was that I did not know, but if she asked me a specific, practical question, I could probably respond to it in a meaningful manner. Hearing my own curious response, I exclaimed, “My, isn’t that odd! I have some core values and beliefs that are clear to me, but I will have to think about them, as I am not consciously aware of what they are.” I have been pondering the question and response ever since.

In reflecting on the question for several months, I found that there are several core values that are key to me in my personal theology for doing pastoral care—all values that are seemingly reflected from the image of God. I suspect that the core values may also be helpful to other caregivers creating their own personal theologies: honesty, integrity, and consistency. Additionally shaping my personal theology are the human qualities of advocacy, relevancy, and understanding of the human condition and understanding God’s grace, and—of course—a desire to be found pleasing to the One who calls and found faithful and attentive to that call.

In the application of these values and qualities, I have found that for myself, there is no specific methodology in creating a personal theology of pastoral care. In fact, it really seems like a dynamic swirl as these values and qualities come into implementation in different ways, at different times, and in differing emphases with each caregiver and the context(s) in which the caregivers find themselves.

Honesty

Honesty involves operating in the truth regardless of circumstances and political climate or consequences of the same. And this is especially true when developing one’s theology of doing pastoral care. For instance, a number of pastoral caregivers, particularly from my faith community, like to base their theology of care and their pastoral identity and practice on a number of favorite biblical passages. And to me, this is generally acceptable.

However, there is often a problem or two with this approach. The problem is that when these pastoral caregivers use scripture, they often do so independent of the historical context of the passage, independent and uninformed of the cultural context of the passage, and sometimes independent of the proper and clearly intended linguistic meaning of the passage. The caregiver is not being honest to the biblical text. And if the use of the passage is inappropriate, then the theological underpinning that the caregiver is (mis)using this passage for is equally inappropriate.

Personal Integrity and Pluralism

Without integrity, ultimately one has little to say or ministry to do. If one lacking integrity does attempt to provide pastoral care, it is (or ultimately will be) rejected and disrespected—sometimes quietly and covertly and sometimes very openly. Yet, it is unfortunately common to see professional pastoral caregivers from all traditions succumb to not honoring pluralism. Although all the major professional pastoral care certifying organizations in North America (American Association of Pastoral Counselors, Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Association of Professional Chaplains, Canadian Association for Spiritual Care / Association Canadienne de Soins Spirituels, College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy, National Association of Catholic Chaplains, National Association of Jewish Chaplains, and National Institute of Business and Industrial Chaplains) have codified and strongly worded statements of ethical practice that require the caregiver to care for all without prejudice (and to do the same when supervising subordinate pastoral caregivers), the statements are often violated. Stereotypes and presumptions continue. Integrity is also violated when the pastoral caregiver affirms a commitment to religious pluralism to gain employment and be placed in a position of trust, only to betray that trust by attempting to proselytize to the caregiver's belief system and / or cultural values.

I look forward to the day when, in the spirit of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., people will be offered pastoral care or supervised by pastoral caregivers based not on the color of their skin, or on the practices of their culture, or on their ethnicity, or on the content of their faith—or lack thereof—or on their affluence, or their gender, or their sexual orientation and practices. They will be offered pastoral care because they are human beings in need of care—simply and purely.

Consistency

Closely related to honesty is consistency. It is amazing how, as flawed human beings ourselves, pastoral caregivers seem to be very inconsistent (especially when political and relational circumstances seem to call for it). If a principle is truth, it is true all the time. If a practice is authentic and good and applicable to all, it should be so all the time. Hence, is there ever a time to ignore the truth or to choose to refrain from doing the right thing? Obviously the answer is “no.” It is my hope that all caregivers will realize this and will seek to be consistent, always.

An Understanding of People, the Human Condition, and God’s Grace

All people are flawed (including the pastoral caregiver!). Yet, it is not the caregiver’s place to judge or punish. Being made in the image of God, the caregiver accepts people as they are. Pastoral caregivers only want to see their clients whole and healthy—body, soul, and spirit. For those who may be enmeshed in guilt and regret, perhaps the caregiver will have the opportunity to offer them a glimpse—and maybe more—of the relief that comes with forgiveness and grace. And the caregiver may also offer an acceptance of the person that is unconditional. It grieves me greatly when I hear professional chaplaincy colleagues speak of this grace and acceptance and then, almost in the same breath, pass harsh judgment toward others who may not believe or behave as they do, or who have personal flaws that these colleagues do not understand. Sometimes it is a matter that “others” are just different in some way.

For instance, the U. S. Congress has voted to repeal the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and the president has signed this into law. Since I am an endorser, many have expressed to me deep upset by this change, in the chaplaincy community in general, and within the military chaplaincy community in particular. As I reflect upon my own personal theology as an Evangelical Christian and as an endorser for chaplains, I ask myself, “How can pastoral caregivers preach and practice grace and unconditional love and then act as though some people are unforgivable and should never receive acceptance for being who they are?” As I write, the military chaplaincy endorsing community’s primary organization very recently wrestled with amending their statement of professional

ethics that calls for military chaplains to minister to all. Specifically, “I will defend my colleagues and all persons in my pastoral care against discrimination that is based on gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, or national origin.” While it is clear that individual chaplains will have reservations (e.g., personal, theological, denominational) with the statement, it is equally clear that, as professionals, chaplains are there to provide pastoral care to all—no exceptions. In my faith tradition there is a scripture that seems to address this inconsistency in practice: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20, New International Version).

Orthopraxy

Because so much of pastoral caregiving focuses on being “present” with the recipient(s) of the care, it seems appropriate to discuss doing the right things (orthopraxy). Hence, in creating a personal theology *to do* pastoral care, we must also include some activity.

Namely, *advocacy* is one act of orthopraxy—being an advocate for those unable to speak for themselves. This failure to speak up may be due to political conditions where to speak for oneself is dangerous personally and / or professionally, or perhaps due to prejudice, where any such communication will be ignored or, worse, attacked.

Social justice is another act of orthopraxy. From my religious tradition (Evangelical Christian), one of my favorite professors had a saying that “a personal gospel has social ramifications.” We are to care for and about others and to communicate the great truth that God loves us all. No one is sinless. No one is better than another. As such, no one is to be treated with preference. It seems to me that pastoral caregivers should and often do understand this better (relatively speaking) than those in other professions. And as such, many pastoral caregivers are motivated to do what they do in order to be instruments of social justice in a world that often does not place a lot of emphasis on the same.

One last act of orthopraxy that comes to mind is *being relevant*. While the element of relevancy may seem a bit odd in developing a personal theology to do pastoral care, it perhaps can be better understood within the context of the presumed role of God in the affairs of humanity. Public Religion Institute in conjunction with Religion News Service

conducted a poll the week after the March 11, 2011, earthquake and subsequent tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan. Among the findings of this poll were that 84 percent of white Evangelical Christians and 76 percent of minority Christians believe that “God is in control of everything that happens in the world.”¹ Implicit in that belief, for some, is that “God can use natural disasters to send messages.”² Hence, in my opinion, it is important for caregivers developing their own personal theologies for caregiving that they do so with a view that they are, perhaps, a part of God’s loving response to the needs and needy of this world. Otherwise, we might turn an intentionally blind eye and deaf ear to the cries of the needy in our community or around the world—thinking that the needy and victimized were destined to be the objects of God’s warning messages or, worse, wrath.

Final Words

Creating a personal theology to do pastoral care starts with an understanding that humanity is indeed made in the likeness of God. The God I seek to reflect by my own life is a beneficent Being who cares about and for the needs and needy of the world. In my theology as a pastoral caregiver, I have sought to adopt the values of the One I love and worship—honesty, integrity, consistency—along with a very human desire to develop a better understanding of people and a better comprehension of the human condition and God’s grace, and then apply these qualities in a very practical way with life-changing deeds. This is my approach to creating my personal theology for doing pastoral care. Now it’s your, the reader’s, turn!

Notes

1. Nicole Neroulis, “Most Americans Don’t Blame God for Natural Disasters,” *Religious New Service*, March 24, 2011, p. 1, www.religionnews.com/index.php/?polls/americans_divided_on_whether_god_causes_disasters1.
2. Ibid.

About the Contributor

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