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## The pastoral church as a space for healing and reconciliation

### ABSTRACT

People experience healing and reconciliation in spaces outside of their congregations. This causes them to grapple with the question: Why they do not experience healing and reconciliation within their own local congregations? Another important question people raise is: What is pastoral about pastoral counselling? Both these questions indicate that congregational leaders and the congregations itself are struggling to create spaces within their ministry to assist people in need of healing and reconciliation. This contribution will therefore try to indicate whether pastoral care and counselling are experiencing an identity crisis in terms of its calling. I will further argue that it is essential for a pastoral theology to be rooted in theology. Link to this I will share some thoughts on the congregation as a space for healing and reconciliation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

I had the privilege of attending many healing of memory workshops over the last 15 years. The goal of these workshops is to engage people from different racial backgrounds to journey with one another on the road to healing and reconciliation. At these workshops we try to create a safe space whereby people can deal with reconciliation in a sensitive and active way within their own contexts.

The journey is an individual and collective experience exploring the effects of the apartheid years. The emphasis is on dealing with these issues on an emotional, psychological and spiritual level, rather than an intellectual level. During the journey, time is given for individual reflection, creative exercises, and opportunities to share in small groups. We end off the workshop with a liturgy created by the participants to represent their journey thus far and to symbolically assist them on their future journey. This liturgy is filled with symbols, created contributions from participants, readings, rituals and end off with a communion.

I am always amazed how victims and perpetrators move into the safe spaces of the small groups to share their stories, expose their hurts, pain, fears and anger of the past. I am even more amazed by the power of this healing liturgy and the effect it has on the participants participating. In trying to explain this to myself I thought that this must be because people feel safe within the space created to share their brokenness with one another.

I was further puzzled why participants, after workshops, frequently ask why they struggle to see and experience their congregations as a safe space to deal with their brokenness. Instead, their experience were that their congregational leaders<sup>1</sup> (Osmer, 2008:15) and the way the congregation practices are performed does not take their pain seriously and do not help them on their journey towards healing and reconciliation. The point is: It they want to address the pain of the past they need to look for spaces outside the church to deal with their pain.

With this in mind I was challenged with the term pastoral church. What does pastoral mean?

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1 In this contribution I will use the term congregational leader instead of pastor or minister.

What is the meaning of pastoral church? Does the pastoral church create a space for healing and reconciliation? Is pastoral care and counselling still part of the primary tasks of the church? Is there an identity crisis within pastoral care and counselling within the church?

In this contribution I will therefore try to indicate whether pastoral care and counselling are experiencing an identity crisis in terms of their calling. I will further argue that it is essential for a pastoral theology to be rooted in systematic theology. Link to this I will share some thoughts on the congregation as a space for healing and reconciliation.

## 2. IDENTITY CRISIS IN PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELING

There has been a shift in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, within the field of pastoral care. It can be described as a move away from the theology frame of pastoral care to a psychological frame for pastoral care. It is almost as if pastoral care has lost its plot in terms of its true identity. Gerkin, as quoted in Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger (1995: 2) already stated in the mid nineties that through the first four decades of the modern period in pastoral care and counselling, psychological and psychotherapeutic concerns have unquestionably been dominant within this field. She continues to state that the theological competency have more or less been taken for granted while the primary focus has been on developing the theoretical (i.e. psychological) and clinical competence of the pastoral care practitioner.

In an address by Dr Loren Townsend to the Convocation of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Louisville, in the beginning of 2009, he reflected on the following essential question (closely linked to identity): What's Pastoral about Pastoral Counselling? "If you had asked me in 1979 what pastoral counselling was, I would have had a swift and certain answer. Historically, pastoral counselling was what clergy did with folk in their congregation. By the mid-twentieth century this had expanded to mean the counselling provided by specialized clergy who had extensive training in psychotherapy" (Townsend 2009).

Townsend continued to argue that from the very beginning of specialization (mid- 1950s) there were intense debates about how close pastoral counselling specialists should be to parish ministry. One could make the assumption that there were basically two views on this. The one view is that it is impossible to think of pastoral care and counselling as something that happens outside of a church. He refers to the Presbyterian Seward Hiltner (1964) and Southern Baptist Wayne Oates (1962), who believed that pastoral counselling by definition must be anchored in congregational ministry. To them the idea of "pastoral" counselling outside the walls of the church made no sense--it was a violation of the basic character of ministry, and was probably unethical.

The other view is that pastoral counselling is professional counselling and therefore does not belong to the church. This is confirmed by Kuether (1963), in Townsend (2009), one of the founders of AAPC (the American Association of Pastoral Counsellors). For them counselling was not about an institution but about the caring for the inner lives of individuals and families. This view was further support by Clinebell (1964), in Townsend (2009), who claimed that a pastoral counsellor was known by their personal identity and not by their church affiliation. This school of thought made it very clear that pastoral counsellors were highly trained therapists who stood on equal footing with psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapists. For them pastoral counsellors, after all, were trained in exactly the same theories and therapy methods as other professionals.

Based on the strong emphasis on professionalism there is a trend to segregate pastoral care and counselling from congregational life. They are convinced that people in need were more likely to be honest outside the walls of the congregation as within, confidentiality is easier to

protect outside as within, and counselling could be unconstrained by theological, ideological, or practical boundaries usually associated with the congregation and its congregational leaders. This view contributed largely to pastoral counsellors becoming highly professional counsellors. As one can imagine, this fast growing clinical sector of specialists within pastoral counselling created the need for accreditation, certification and minimum qualification standards for training to manage this fast growing sector.

This emphasis on the professionalization of pastoral counselling resonates well within the pastoral care and counselling context of South Africa. The emphasis on specialized pastoral counselling training has developed into clinical masters programs such as the program in Stellenbosch, the ITD narrative program etc. Many congregational leaders have followed and still follow these programs with the goal to specialize in one way or the other. As more and more people want to specialize the need for accreditation, certification and minimum qualification standards for training has come into play. The battle for accreditation has been a long, difficult and challenging process. At present there is a process-taking place for the professionalization (and legalization) of pastoral workers in South Africa, driven by the SAAP (The South African Association for Pastoral Work). The dream and mission of SAAP is to work for rightful recognition of pastoral work that can be done and fully involve all aspects of health care.

Another concern is: because of the professionalization of pastoral counselling the training of congregational leaders in pastoral care and counselling have been more and more scaled down, just enough to know how to refer congregants to pastoral counsellors. As a result of this many congregational leaders has put their emphasis on becoming good managers, planners, visionaries, organizers, preachers and multimedia presenters. Congregational leaders are therefore less and less focused on attending to the need of congregants. The focus on pastoral counselling as indicated in scripture is less and less evident in the ministry of pastors within the church today.

### 3. THE NEED FOR PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELLING TO BE WELL GROUNDED

From the above it is clear that the development within pastoral care and counselling has lost its plot in terms of its scriptural calling, its connectedness to the calling of the church to those in need. One could say there is an identity crisis because of the expansive development to specialized counsellors. This is echoed by Louw (1998:18) when he warns that when pastoral care is identified exclusively with the professional pastor consulting from a professional office, there is a real danger that pastoral care will become removed from the life of the congregation and isolated in the study of a so-called informed and trained pastor.

One could also say that practical theology, under which the focus area of pastoral care and counselling is situated, has neglected its normative intellectual operation whereby it enters in dialogue with dogmatic theology, Christian ethics etc (Osmer, 2008:241). Therefore it is essential that we realize that pastoral theology is closely linked to systematic theology. In other words systematic theology forms the basis for pastoral theology.

This is in a sense illustrated by Naude (1990:110) when he calls the dogmatic of our very own, Stellenbosch theologian Willie Jonker, as pastoral dogmatic. His dogmatic is pastoral because his theology is: (i) is firmly rooted in Scripture and derives its rationality from faith, (ii) is essentially a hermeneutically endeavour (iii) and the ultimate aim of theology as *Scientia eminens practica*, is the pastoral reality of the church, and specifically the preaching of the Word.

The question would then be. How will we define a pastoral theology based on the above?

In his quest for defining pastoral theology Purves (2004: xii) distinguishes between Pastoral theology and a theology of pastoral care. Although I think this distinction is a little forced it does

in a way emphasize the importance of connecting systematic theology to pastoral theology and then to pastoral care. According to him Pastoral theology is principally concerned, first with the practice of God that is with what God does as a result of who God is. Secondly, it moves to reflection on the participative practice of the church within that theological perspective through our own union with Christ.

According to Purves (2004:xviii) Christian pastoral theology must be developed in a Trinitarian way, "insofar as we must speak concerning God and Christological, soteriological and eschatological, insofar as we must speak concerning God with us and for us in the flesh of Jesus, son of Mary, Lord of all." This will enable us to understand pastoral theology as theology of the care of God for us in, through, and as Jesus Christ. This is according to him an expression of the gospel of revelation and reconciliation. He further emphasizes that Jesus Christ, as the mission of God forms the basis for the church ministry of care. When we therefore define pastoral theology in this way, the interconnections among the Christian doctrine of God, the person and ministry of Jesus Christ and the life and ministry of the church are demonstrable.

He therefore argues that pastoral theology guides the practice of the church in speaking forth and living out the gospel by bringing to expression the meaning of our life in union with Christ, who is both God's word of address to us and the fitting human response to God. As such pastoral theology has both a perspective and a self-critical responsibility explicitly in the light of the gospel (Purves 2004:xx).

With his understanding of pastoral theology in mind Purves defines a Theology of pastoral care as follows: it is principally concerned with theological reflection on actual churchly practice, and to that end is likely to move into appropriate conversation with auxiliary disciplines like psychology, psychotherapy, sociology, anthropology, and so on. It is not purely practical or just applied theory.

What is clear from the above is the fact that the church plays a significant role within pastoral theology. The body of Christ must not be idealized in the sense that it is an almost perfect community that just needs to be well managed, planned, organized, preached and well presented to attract people. It is also not only a space for communion with each other. It needs *communio* of Christ according to Berkhof (1979:395), because without this *communio* the communication would remain body-less, individualistic and no more than an inner experience. But without the communication of Christ as its basis, the mutual communion becomes purely that of a religio-social club. Christ does not live apart from his church. And the love of God-in-Christ and that to the neighbour are one and indivisible. The body of Christ is for the love of God and the love for humans.

The body of Christ always needs to guard against being exclusive. Berkhof (1979:396) reminds us that the community of the body of Christ lives in a state of high tension. On the one hand it must be all-inclusive and on the other hand all the members must be inspired to act communally through their obedience to the one head. Christian community can exist only as a purely gratuitous gift from the Spirit. For one can endure this tension only if he stands in the love by which central and marginal groups vanguard and rearguard, extremists and conciliators take each other seriously as members and thus do not neglect each other. Swinton (2007: 243) reminds us to offer hospitality to all, not only to the church members when he says, "The price we pay for offering hospitality can be rejection, hurt and sometimes even violence. The epistemology of the broken body of Christ informs us that this was so, for God has offered his hospitality to the world in Christ." This has to do with negotiating the space between us.

The body of Christ is a moral community whose goal is the common good of all. In this regard Ackermann (2001:24) rightly says, "Such a community upholds the integrity of life values the dignity of the human person, includes those who are on the margins or excluded, while not avoiding the reality of structural sin."

#### 4. THE CONGREGATION AS A SPACE FOR HEALING

The congregation is therefore a place and a space where we need to accept each other for Christ's sake and where precisely the "weak" in which we recognize ourselves, are treated with consideration (Berkhof, 1979:395). This space is life-giving to people. Louw (2004) helps us when he states: "Where two or more people encounter one another within a spirit of availability, acceptance (unconditional love) and appreciative awareness, a space of intimacy occurs. This is the kind of space, which human beings need to be healed and to grow to maturity. Within this space human dignity is safeguarded and fostered. The occurrence of space (intimacy) can be called the sacred space of encounter and the soulfulness of embracement. Within the space of intimacy (belongingness), meaning is discovered". Therefore we can agree with Berkhof (1979:395) when he says, "We are accepted as we are, but not left as we are".

Cilliers (2007:15) describes space in a special way by defining the Greek word Chora, which "means space or place and could also be interpreted as the attitude through which humans fill space with values, perceptions and associations, resulting in a created relational environment, a systemic and hermeneutical arena for living with meaning and dignity. Chora represents a nourishing and maternal receptacle, a womb that defines the quality of the places (topoi) where we encounter one another. Indeed it is a space we cannot exist without one another; it is where we meet in our diversity and unity, but also as perpetrators and victims".

Congregations need to offer a supportive and empathetic space for all members to search for meaning in life. This is possible because the body of Christ is a healing community where everybody will experience koinonia in the form of unconditional love. The congregation as body of Christ is therefore a space of being. When people suffer and are in desperate need of healing they are vulnerable and can easily experience isolation or be ostracized by the community of believers. Because of this, the body of Christ as Christian community needs to create a space where those who suffer can voice their need and can grow towards healing.

Based on the above I especially want to argue that the key to form a pastoral space whereby people could find healing and regain meaning in life is compassion. Pastoral care and counselling need to embody a hermeneutics of compassion.

In this regard Louw (2008:14) explains that one of human's deepest needs is compassion. The word compassion is derived from the Latin words *patior* and *cum* which together mean 'to suffer with' (Boyle & Smith 2004: 9). It implies that caregivers not only need to understand the suffering of others, but also must allow themselves to suffer with those suffering, and stand alongside them. Van der Ven (2003:37) rightly states that compassion does not come naturally to human beings. We need to learn to be compassionate. Therefore caregivers need to learn to present compassion in a genuine, unselfish and loving way. To make sure that caregivers understand this quest, it is necessary to unpack the meaning of compassion.

Compassion is a truly biblical term. Although the Hebrew word for compassion means love and mercy for a person in need, it is also deeply rooted in God's covenant with his people. The meaning of this covenant is based on the relationship God has with his people. As the story of the Old Testament unfolds, God's compassion for his people is clearly indicated in Scripture, and only becomes a reality within God's relationship with his people. God's compassion is consistent and continuous.

Within the New Testament the term compassion means stressing mercy by assistance. This is also based on God's covenant with his people and acted out by his holy begotten son, Jesus Christ. His ministry to the ill, marginalized and others bear witness to his compassion for the people of God. The life of Jesus is a true model of the compassion of God for his people. This is illustrated in Matthew 9:36: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were

harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Literally, the meaning of compassion in this text has to do with the functions of the inner body being distressed. One could paraphrase this by saying that the organs inside his body were distressed when he saw them. This is a clear indication of the compassion of Jesus Christ for us as human beings. It is about remembering the story of the compassion of Jesus Christ. In this regard the theology of the cross reveals the passion and compassion of a suffering God (Louw 2008: 441). It is therefore our duty as Christian caregivers to continue to pass the compassion of God on to his people.

The meaning of compassion has to be defined and understood against the backdrop of the biblical meaning. Louw (2008:281) helps us understand when he defines it as follows: “compassion indicates sensitivity. It describes the virtue of unconditional love and the willingness to become involved. Part and parcel of compassion is empathy, the capacity to enter, understand and respond to another’s frame of reference.” This is echoed by Johnson (Johnson 2001:35) when she states that the key component to compassion is empathy. Empathy is to try to feel what the other person is feeling, to climb into his/her shoes and look at the problem from his/her point of view. This kind of communication is concerned with loving community, sensitivity and listening with understanding. Consequently, compassion cannot be separated from community. Compassion happens within community. In compassion people support each other, and by doing so they create freedom (Lanser, Van Nijen, Stark, Stoppels 2003:118).

The space within the body of Christ or the community of believers where compassion is embodied is not confined to a church service or a prayer meeting. This space must be created on all levels of ministry within the congregation. It could be in the liturgy in a Sunday service where people in need for healing can experience the therapeutic value of the Holy Communion. Serving Holy Communion is a therapeutic event, which provides comfort in the midst of disruption and crisis. It confirms peace and harmony, which also have a positive physical and psychological effect (Louw, 2008). It could also be via the preaching within a service. In this regard Theron (1990:586) describes the dogmatic of Noordmans, the well-known Dutch theologian as pastoral dogmatic. Although he refers to his dogmatic as pastoral within the context of the preaching he explains the space created by preaching as “ ‘n uitbeelding van die Heilige Gees op heterdaad betrap, besig om ‘n gemoed te troos.”

It could also be space created by the community of believers within a small group meeting. It could also be in space created in the office of the congregational leader. The emphasis here is that pastoral care wishes to link believers by means of Scripture to God’s fulfilled promises (promissiotherapy) so that, out of gratitude, they can accept their suffering as a challenge to exercise faith. The distress of suffering becomes an opportunity to live God’s victory and to demonstrate faith, hope, love and joy (Louw, 2008).

It is within this space that the purpose of pastoral healing takes place and that is to understand our new being in Christ. Through faith we can partake in the dimension of victory in our new spiritual being. Those that suffer are only ‘cured’ when they discover what their position already is through the reconciliation and resurrection of Christ. The Holy Spirit convinces those who are in need of healing of this by means of certain Scriptural passages (Louw, 2008). Congregational leaders are merely an instrument of the Spirit.

This contribution began to with the story of people attending a healing of memories workshop where they experienced healing and meaning and at the same time grappling with the fact why they do not experience healing within their own local congregations. I also discussed the question raised by Townsend: What is pastoral about pastoral counselling? In both these narratives they try to raise the same issue. The fact that the congregational leaders and the congregations itself are struggling to create spaces within their ministry to assist people in need of care, healing and reconciliation. It is easier for the congregation leader to refer people in need to workshops or

counselling outside the congregation as to develop these spaces within the congregation.

I want to argue that the congregational leader needs to rediscover the importance of practicing a responsible practical theology or as Omer (2008:4) says, a practical theological interpretation. According to Omer (2008:4) the four tasks of practical theology is able to assist the congregational leader practice practical theological interpretation. The four tasks are:

- Descriptive-empirical: gathering information
- Interpretive: drawing on theories to understand
- Normative: using theological concepts
- Pragmatic: determining strategies of action.

These four tasks explain the essence of what needs to be done in all fields of the practical theology, especially within the field of pastoral care and counselling. This places a huge responsibility on pastoral care and the congregational leader who needs to practice and integrate these tasks within the congregation who are embedded within the web of life where ministry takes place. Therefore Osmer (2008:19) proposes that the congregational leader needs to be a pastoral interpretive guide that can practice and integrate these tasks in order to take the congregants on a journey into new territory. The congregational leader travels with congregants on their journey towards healing and wholeness. In this way the congregational leader is able to regain and reclaim the calling to care for all as a body of Christ.

## 5. CONCLUSION

For pastoral care and counselling to regain the plot in terms of its spiritual calling, its connectedness to the calling of the church to those in need of healing and reconciliation, it needs a clear identity. This is possible if pastoral care will take its normative intellectual operation seriously whereby it enters in dialogue with the systematic theology. When pastoral theology is firmly grounded within systematic theology it will be able to be church. It will be able to create spaces for healing and reconciliation. Congregational leaders will need to become pastoral interpretive guides that are able to assist those in need of healing and reconciliation on their journey towards healing and wholeness. This will pave the way for congregants, families, groups, communities and nations to enter into the healing space without fear and resentment. The pastoral church is the vehicle that allows human beings to go on a journey from despair to healing and from brokenness to wholeness.

Creating spaces for healing within the congregation as the body of Christ is nothing new. It essentially belongs to the *being* of the church. If we are true to being church we will realize that we are all broken and on a journey towards healing and reconciliation.

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