Growing pastoral care

of the whole church

Today’s starting point
Pastoral care today needs re-thinking. The church has become used to a restricted experience of pastoral care; namely the comfort of those in painful circumstances (such as being bereaved or hospitalised). The notion that pastoral care is about nurturing the whole church in discipleship, with the practical implication that the ‘healthy’ – that is, the fit, able, happily married, gainfully employed - need pastoral care, would strikes most church members as a novel, even dubious, notion. Moreover, inherited pattern were based on a hierarchical model in which the ‘elders’ taught the ‘younger’ what to believe and how to behave. In an individualistic and non-directive culture, such ‘pastoral care’ is more likely to be seen as intrusion than care. In short, the widespread, though usually unconscious, understanding in the church about pastoral care, that it is about keeping people happy rather than making people holy, needs to be replaced. This paper explores ways in which a more whole approach to pastoral care can be developed.

Today’s goals for pastoral care
In view of the above, there are several clear goals for the development of pastoral care today. The first is to communicate and establish that the purpose of pastoral care is help people grow as followers, or disciples, of Christ. It is essentially about mentoring one another into the wholeness of life and personhood that faith in Christ calls us into.

This is a much richer understand of the scope of pastoral care. It is for all and it is about the whole of life, not just about our involvement in the life of the church. It addressed the development of Christian character not just relief in painful circumstances. However, there is a particular application to church life in that the goal, as spelt out by Paul, of us all coming to maturing in Christ, is not just about each of us individually doing so, but about full maturity being found only in a community of faith. A further essential goal for the re-working of pastoral care is that it is essentially a two-way process of mutual care.

So purpose, scope, character, community and mutuality are key concepts in re-thinking and re-shaping of pastoral care today.

Outline of proposals
What follows is in two parts. First is the outline of a structure that a church, seeking a contemporary expression of pastoral care, might adopt. Second, and the greater part, concerns the means by which such structures might be developed. Here the key concept is that of growing new structures. Pastoral care is about the care of people and their relationships. New structures can only work when they are under girded by relationships that give integrity and reality to those structures.

A working definition: Helping one another grow in the love of God, likeness to Christ and fruitful service in the whole of life

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1 Terminology: Two key terms are used in this paper. Lay pastor describes someone involved in pastoral work. Pastoral Team describes a group of such people. However, these technical terms will probably not be the right ones to use in a church. Each church will need to work our terms that suit its situation best.
The basic structure of a Pastoral Team

The following are the key elements of the proposal to develop a Pastoral Team:

- **a lay visiting team**: the first step is to draw together of a team of people. This may initially be a team of only two or three and not sufficient to pastor the whole church. However, as they begin to work, others will be identified and drawn into this Team. Growing a Team to serve the whole church is the long-term goal rather than the right starting point in many churches.

- **termly visits**: each member of the team would be asked to visit a few people three times a year. How many would depend on what they felt able to take on. It might be anywhere between three and twelve depending on circumstances.

- **listening as the starting point**: a vital element in the design is that initial visits would be on the basis of information gathering, listening, and ‘pastoral market research’. The starting point for such visits would be to gain insights, seek advice, and obtain feedback on church life – joys and struggles. This is something that those visiting and those visited can be expected to feel comfortable with.

- **faith development the goal**: as relationships develop over the course of visits, and with appropriate training, it should be possible to move towards the pastoral agenda - defined in the Pastoral Care paper as ‘companionship into wholeness’.

- **mutuality the method**: it is good that we have moved beyond an hierarchical way of operating and important that those doing these visits develop an ability to operate from the perspective of mutuality rather than through control or direction.

- **growth as the means**: the whole structure of the Pastoral Team is build on the principle of growth. This involves the growth of visitors into pastors and of church members into disciples. In particular the expectation is that these Teams will growth in numbers and scope. It is better to start with two or three visitors going to half a dozen people each than to cover the whole church in initial design that fails because people were ready neither to give nor receive such ministry.

- **regular Team meetings**: essential to this proposal is that the Team meet at the start of every six-month period (or term, if that is how frequently they are visiting) to report back what they have been hearing, give and receive mutual support, have skills training and be briefed about the agenda for the next set of visit (see below).

- **integrity an essential**: using ‘consumer research’ as the starting point needs to be matched by real listening and learning. The more evidence there is that real listening has taken place, the more likely it is that the process will be accepted. That evidence will be seen in changed actions and attitudes of leaders.

- **possible starting point**: in some churches the right starting point may be for the incumbent to visit half a dozen or more (once a term) so that people experience this pattern first as recipients before ever they become part of a Team that delivers such pastoral care.

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2 *Pastoral care is grounded in mutuality, not in expertise; it is possible because we share a common humanity with all the splendour and all the fallibility which that implies*. Alastair Campbell, *Rediscovering Pastoral Care*, p.15
The Pastoral Team’s way of working

The approach is designed to address two issues about pastoral care to the whole church. The first problem is that it has not been around for so long that church members need to be helped to accept something that may appear a novelty today, even though it has been a norm for much of the history of the Church, namely a ‘pastoral visit’. The second problem is that in our culture of both individualism and suspicion, the notion of someone coming to talk to me about my relationship with God and how I live out my faith, may well seem like unwarranted intrusion into my personal life.

This context is addressed in two ways. First, through a conscious policy of working across of a spectrum from ‘market research’ and ‘opinion gathering’ at one (familiar) end, to pastoral care (the unfamiliar) at the other end, over a period of visits probably lasting several years. Essentially this allows a relationship of trust to be developed that is the necessary basis for true pastoral care to work. Second, by defining pastoral care as ‘companionship into wholeness’ the essential mutuality of pastoral work is recognised. In a post-hierarchical culture it would be difficult to re-establish an hierarchical model of pastoral care. However, the perspective here is that mutuality is a more biblical, and psychologically, whole understanding of pastoral work.

So the way a Pastoral Team is designed to work is on the basis of growing pastoral relationships, starting with the more culturally familiar, seeking opinions and advice, and moving towards the more whole approach of mutual companionship into whole of life as defined by the person and ministry of Christ.

In practice what is proposed is that each person in the team is assigned a certain number of people to visit, as a norm, once a term – though where particular things happen in people’s lives it is good to make additional visits. Initial visits would be set up on the basis of seeking people’s views about some clearly defined aspect of church life and Christian living, as set out on page two above. Over the period of these visits the shift is to a more recognisably pastoral agenda.

The hope and expectation is that, by the end of this period of visiting, a relationship will have been established that will enable effective pastoral care to be taking place and able to continue. However, there are two ‘constraints’ that need to be recognised.

The first is that where people are visited on the basis of discovering their views, those views need to be taken seriously and reported back with a view to letting them shape the aspect of church life explored. That ‘reporting back’ needs to be on the basis of respecting confidentiality but can be done by sharing trends and by reporting comments without identifying from whom those comments come. For this to happen there needs to be a meeting between the church leaders and the members of the ‘In Touch’ team every six months for a reporting back session of the issue explored and for briefing about the next area for the visits in the next half year.

The second ‘constraint’ is that, at any time in the process that those being visited make it clear that they do not wish to be visited (either at all or by ‘this person’) the visits should stop. Also, at the end of the initial six visits some independent person should visit those on the receiving end of such visits to establish if they wish to continue such visits. Some will be happy to continue the relationship that has been established, others will welcome someone else visiting them, and others will make it clear that they do not wish anyone to visit them. Such wishes are to be respected.

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3 See the Pastoral Care paper, page 1
The Pastoral Team agenda

This process will work best if those involved in such a Pastoral Team meet at the start of each term. The tasks needing to be done in such a meeting are:

- **reporting back**: on the area of enquiry of their listening in the previous round of visits. If this is to be a genuine listening exercise it should have a two-way impact in the life of the church. The leadership may well need to re-work certain aspects of church life that comes up for negative scrutiny. Equally, the congregation may need clearer explanation as to why something is being done, or not done, in a particular way. The members of the Pastoral Team are ‘middle management’ in the life of the church. As such they have a vital role of communicating vision from the leadership to the membership; and also in communicating the concerns, responses and vision of the membership to the leaders of the church. It may be right to produce a brief (one sheet of paper?) summary for responses and insights gained and making it widely available. In this way the church can see the value of the exercise.

- **next phase briefing**: at this meeting the subject for the next six months needs to be given and explained. It may well be suitable to provide a (A5?) summary sheet of possible questions to explore.

- **networking**: There is great value in having the opportunity for team members to share with others the joys and struggles they have experience in their visits. Doing this with those involved in the same work can be both supportive and instructive. It is important to make time for this element at each meeting. It should, at best, involve prayer for one another. It may well also, in so far as time allows, be appropriate for team members, perhaps in groups of three, to ‘try out’ the questions on each other as part of the support element of the session.

- **skills training**: at its heart the work of the ‘In Touch’ Team is a pastoral work. There is much that can be done to provide training for those involved in this work – however long they have been doing it for. Both the paper on *Pastoral Care* and the *Discipleship 2* paper with its various frameworks for disciple-making are sources from which various skills can be identified and explored further.

- **home groups**: where home groups are in existence, a church will need to consider how to relate this structure to the those groups. It may well be that Home Group leaders should be considered pastors to their group. Equally it may well be that some other person, either in the group or from beyond the group membership would be best placed to give pastoral care to the members of the groups.

Communication as a possible basis

One of the most frequently expressed concerns in churches is about a lack of communication, not least with the leaders. The proposed visits can be seen as a way of addressing the issue. As long as good communication is delivered, it might well work for a church to introduce such a structure simply out of concern to improve communications.

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November 09

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4 It is important that this reporting back respects confidentially. So ‘some are unhappy with…’ rather than ‘Mrs Bloggs and Jo Smith are really cross with the vicar about…’!

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