

training materials

the bible and pastoral care for elders

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Sometimes Elders ask themselves what it means to offer pastoral care within the Church. They might have done a course about listening skills and had long years of experience in giving attention to the spoken and sometimes unspoken concerns of those for whom they care. They might find visiting a delight or be those who have to screw up their courage to knock at someone's door. They might find it easy and natural to pray with others or feel uncertain about introducing prayer into a conversation or encounter. They might be questioning the models of pastoral care we have inherited, they might just be ignoring them, or they might be loving them. But many of the Elders in our churches are asking questions like, 'What does it mean to offer pastoral care within the Church?' or 'What is it that I can bring that makes this different from friendship?'

One resource which we all share in the Church is God's gift of the Bible. Of course some of us are as afraid of this as we are of pastoral care or visiting! But could it be that these two things, brought together, could transform our practice of care for one another? This is not about Elders quoting pieces of the Scripture appropriate for a particular need, so that Elders ought to feel they have the whole Bible at their finger tips ready to 'apply' in any situation. The Bible doesn't work like that and neither does pastoral care. However,

- the Bible carries to us the witness of the first Christians that 'Christ is risen'
- the Bible offers us a wealth of stories and testimonies of people who have lived, as we do, human life before God
- the Bible is something we can gather around together, believing that God will speak to us, wherever we find ourselves

In pastoral care, we are not presuming that one (wise and sorted) person will deliver answers for another (needy) person, but that two or more Christians, meeting together, will wait upon God and that Christ will be present. This is what happens as we read the Bible together. This is one of the great resources and strengths of pastoral care in the Church. We do not have to supply 'answers' or 'wise words', but trust what God has already given us.

AN EXAMPLE:

One piece of the Bible that is often shared in pastoral visits or conversations is Psalm 23. It is well known (sometimes even partly or wholly by heart!), is well loved and in many different situations it can be shared by being read aloud or prayed together. You don't have to make up a prayer from scratch yourself or choose from a wide range of passages or work hard to make a connection with experience. You can simply read it or share it together and wait in the silence. But you could also begin a conversation about it and what it means or might mean. You can ask from what kind of human experience it might have been written. You can reflect on why it is so popular. You can think about what it says to you, read in the particular place and circumstances of your meeting. You may find yourself talking about very profound things in a way that does not leave anyone feeling unprotected or vulnerable and in such a way that new hope may be found.

One way of beginning a conversation, having read the Psalm, might be to ask whether you think the psalmist has a 'sunny' outlook on life or a 'dark' outlook. Is the psalmist a 'glass half full' person or a 'glass half empty' person? Does the writer say that 'all is well' or that 'things are as bad as they could be'? And what is the psalmist saying about God?

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Though this psalm is very well known, there remains a great deal of debate and conversation about how to read it. Within the tremendous variety of ways of reading this psalm there is even something like a fundamental split in opinion about what faith and religion are all about. And it's not that either is right or wrong, but sometimes maybe it depends on where you stand when you read. There's a beautiful description of this Psalm written by Henry Ward Beecher, who was a famous nineteenth century American preacher. He wrote of this Psalm that:

'It has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophy of the world... Nor is its work done. It will go on singing to your children and my children, and to their children, through all the generations of time.' You might see his as a 'sunny' reading of the Psalm. Read in a certain way Psalm 23 sounds as though 'everything in the garden is lovely'. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall want for nothing. The world with God is green pastures, gentle streams, plenty and happiness.

But there are other ways to read this psalm. Jonathan Magonet in his book about the Psalms quotes someone called Daniel Jeremy Silver, an American Reform rabbi. He argues that Psalm 23 is not as sunny and straightforwardly optimistic as some of its readers believe. He says,

'I may be wrong, but I know something of the author. I know him as a deeply disturbed man whose faith does not run on as serenely as these verses seem to indicate. We speak of faith when we need faith. When the sun shines we take faith for granted.'

There is no promise here of endless health, unbroken pleasure and a guaranteed income. There is only the promise that God is near. So, in this way of reading it, the psalm shows all the signs of being written by someone who has suffered. It's not saying that everything in the garden is lovely. This psalm testifies not to the natural sunniness of life, but to the possibility that even in the midst of our worst days we will know that God is with us, and that this will count for everything.

One Christian sharing this Psalm with another could simply ask,

- 'Which of these ways of understanding the Psalm seems right just now?'
- 'What do we imagine the psalmist's experience must have been to write such words as these?'

And the conversation will go on....

DEVELOPING THE USE OF THE BIBLE IN PASTORAL CARE

Sometimes it is 'easier' to talk about our deepest feelings, beliefs and experiences through talking about something else. We like to tell the truth, but 'tell it slant', as the poet would say. Talking about a Bible text enables us to do this. Bible passages also have great power to speak to us because they carry with them, in some sense, the many times that God's people have shared them and reflected upon them and known God through them. They tell us that we are not alone, that we do not have to struggle to face anything with only our own resources, that there is wisdom for us to hold on to and a tradition in which we stand. We may want to argue with Bible passages, with their authors or interpreters, or with someone who dares to read them to us at a particular time, but these are honest reactions born of our lived experience and they are valuable in themselves.

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Very few of us can call great chunks of the Bible to mind immediately and use them wisely. But we all have passages that we know have helped and sustained us. It might be helpful to 'collect' in your mind or your notebook particular passages that you would find it possible to share with others and with which to begin a conversation.

Why not discuss this at an Elders' meeting or training session? You could share with one another suggestions for particular passages to take with you as you meet with people. You could decide to make a point of choosing one of the passages set by the lectionary for the coming week. You could work closely with the Psalms, for example, since they give expression to such a wide range of human experience. You could focus on the parables of Jesus or on one of the letters of Paul.

Many of us feel ill equipped to face the range and depth of human experience we meet as we care for one another in the Church. And God preserve us from ever feeling that we have everything we need! But to take the Bible, its stories, prayers, poems, testimonies and wisdom into every conversation, and to read it with openness and honesty in the place where people really are, may bring nothing less than the blessing of God.

SOME RESOURCES FOR A DISCUSSION

In your Elders' meeting discuss the following questions: (emphasise first that confidentiality should always be kept and no personal details revealed or discussed)

What do people talk to you about when you meet with them as their Elder?

(gather a list together, noting similarities and common themes – and let it be an honest discussion rooted in reality!)

How do you respond?

(keep silent, or pray, anything at all...)

What resources do you draw upon as you listen to people and talk with them?

(counselling skills, the Christian tradition, not sure....)

Choose one thing that people commonly speak of to their Elder

(loneliness, bereavement, loss of faith, the demands of life, anything..)

What Bible stories or passages might have something to say to that area of life and discussion, and how?

(it could be a story about loss, or a psalm about anger, or a parable or a letter to a church... it could be many things)

In what ways is the Bible already a source and resource for pastoral care for you?

What could help you use it more?

What can you do as Elders to open up the Bible for God's people?

CLOSE YOUR TRAINING SESSION WITH PRAYER.

You could make use of one the passages you have used or discovered together in the questions above, as a focus or stimulus for your praying.

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more training material please revisit the website. There is also material for use before making pastoral visits in and for other meetings in the Nibbles section of the Bible Year menu.

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