

Introduction to the Pastoral Conversation

By Rev. Dr. Beatrice Panne

1. The difference between ordinary and pastoral conversations

Pastoral conversations lie at the heart of the practice of care. They can arise almost anywhere, anytime and with anyone. Some occur spontaneously, while waiting at the cash register or the bus stop. Others are entered into intentionally or by appointment. A person's readiness for a pastoral conversation can be gauged by their ability to switch from ordinary into pastoral conversation mode. How does this happen? Ordinary conversations tend to flow back and forth between conversation partners in clusters of associations. If the topic revolves around the children, those issues associated with the children will be exchanged in turn. If the topic is work, church, sports, or health, the same will occur. For example:

J1: O, hello Jenny, how are you? Fancy meeting you here ! I thought you were still on holidays ...

F1: Hello Frances, nice to see you too, ... no, we've been back from the beach for a few days now ... How's Geoff and the kids?

J2: Very well, thanks. Geoff is back to work. He's so much better. And the kids are off to school. It's awfully quiet at home ...

F2: Yes, our kids are back at school too. Eddy is going to school camp next week. He's so excited to spend time on the Murray with boats and water swings. He is all excited. And Jessi has started with riding lessons. She just loves her pony.

J3: Yes, it's nice to see the kids occupied with the things they love doing. Robbi enjoys his soccer and Finn is thinking of doing the overseas exchange at the end of this year. He's looking at going to India.

F3: India? How interesting. Jessi has been thinking about exchange, but she's not quite ready yet, I think. After all she's been through she needs a bit of boring normality again.

These three sets of interactions demonstrate the flow of a casual conversation. The issues are loosely associated. They relate to the children. Information related to the children is briefly shared. There are no follow up questions. There is no reflection, no indication of careful listening. It is just a quick catch up on matters related to the children.

Note that the interactions are numbered and grouped in pairs. This is a key characteristic of creating a record of a conversation, or a 'verbatim'. Pairs of interaction are numbered so that reference can later be made to parts of the conversation when it is analysed in greater depth.

If you read the three pairs of interaction carefully, you will note that there are hints to deeper matters. In J2 we read, "Geoff is back to work. He is so much better." Another matter related to Jenny herself is also mentioned in J2: "It's awfully quiet at home." In F3 we notice a comment about Jessi: "After all she's been through she needs a bit of normality again." These brief sentences indicate that the persons, the women make reference to, have been going through some difficult life experiences. Perhaps, Geoff has recovered from an illness and Jessi has experienced some kind of disruption in her life. In the flow of an ordinary conversation, such hints would be noted but not necessarily followed up. As part of a pastoral conversation they would be carefully noticed and followed up at the appropriate time. While in a quick catch up conversation, a lot of information may go back and forth without being examined or explored, in a pastoral conversation each phrase or sentence is carefully received and examined in terms of a possible reflective response or an exploratory question. Conversation partners in an ordinary chat are often happy with leaving things on the surface, while a pastoral conversation carries an invitation to go deeper.

2. Pastoral conversations

Ordinary conversations can easily turn into pastoral conversations if both parties agree to it and one party knows how to use the tools for turning it into a pastoral conversation. To develop an understanding of the tools for a pastoral conversation and of how to use them effectively is the purpose of this Batch.

The key elements of a pastoral conversation

The following list has been drawn up from my personal experience of counselling conversation skills and their application within a pastoral context. Counselling conversation by and large have the purpose of helping a person to solve a problem he or she is struggling with, through identifying and activating their own resources, or enlisting the resources of others to overcome the problem. The primary purpose of the pastoral conversation, however, is to help a person to reconnect or connect more deeply with God. In this it differs from the agendas of all therapeutic, social work and counselling approaches. The pastoral conversation only aims for one kind of change and that is a change in the person's relationship with God.

Pastoral conversations aim to strengthen the relationship between a person in need and God. The main trajectory for achieving a new or deeper connection with God is through the creation of an experience of ***being received without judgment, being unconditionally understood and accepted***. The underlying ethos of the pastoral conversation is "come as you are, that's how you are welcomed." The pastoral conversation skills listed below are put together for the sole purpose of helping a person to know herself/himself received and

understood in facts and emotions and at the same time unconditionally accepted. The following list contains the six core skills:

1. Preparing for a pastoral conversation
2. Opening a pastoral conversation
3. Careful listening and accurate reflection
4. Exploration
5. Affirmation
6. Prayer/Closing

I will now attend to each skill in turn and then, in conclusion, present examples of the sequence of this particular model of the pastoral conversation.

1. Preparing for a pastoral conversation

There are several levels of preparation for a scheduled pastoral conversation.

- a. **Spiritual preparation:** Taking a few moments before the conversation to collect your thoughts, allow your mind to calm down and focus your attention on God's presence and the activity of the Spirit in your own life, are important.
- b. **Personal preparation:** It can be important for the pastoral carer to let go of any personal or professional concerns and free up all possible energy for concentrating on the pastoral encounter ahead. Rather than planning specific outcomes, the pastoral carer should open her/himself up to the unknown and trust that the pending conversation will be worthwhile regardless of its outcome.
- c. **Preparing the space:** If the pastoral conversation takes place in the privacy of the pastoral carer's home, it is good to set up two comfortable chairs, placed not too far apart, in an angle towards one another, a glass of water, a box of tissues, pleasant lighting and quiet as far as possible.
- d. **Allocating time:** Most pastoral care givers have limited time. It is therefore important to exercise good stewardship with the time that is available. If 30 minutes are the limit, communicate this clearly to the person you see. If you have more time, let the other person know. If the conversation has no time limit, this too can be shared at the onset. If more than one person is scheduled for a pastoral conversation, the recommendation is to set times so that not one single person occupies all the available time. There may well be times when all other appointments have to be cancelled. This should, however, always be the exception. Make sure that you signal to the care seeker when the conversation has to be brought to an end. Do not end the conversation abruptly. Always give notice and then ask for final comments before the closing prayer.
- e. **Preparing for the conversation:** Once the person has entered the space and taken her/his seat, ask, whether he/she needs anything before you get started. When the person is ready to begin, start the conversation.

Opening a pastoral conversation

There is no set strategy for how to start a pastoral conversation. Some people like to start with a period of small talk, beginning with a general question. Douglas Purnell suggests,

”[h]aving prepared yourself for the conversation and having made contact, begin simply. Don’t be in a hurry. When it seems appropriate you can ask people general questions. Asking, “How long have you lived here?” or “Tell me about your life”. (Douglas Purnell. *Conversation as Ministry. Stories and Strategies for Confident Caregiving*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2003, 40.)

If it is a first conversation and you have been asked to visit you may begin by asking, “What would you like to discuss with me?”, or, “What’s on your mind?”, or, “How are things for you?” If the conversation is not the first, you might like to start by asking, “How have you been keeping since we spoke last?” It is important not to let the period of small talk take up the entire time allocated for the conversation. Once the conversation has turned to the issue for which it was called, the next two skills of careful listening and accurate responding come into play.

Being present, active listening and accurate reflection

Being present

Active listening and accurate reflection require an attentive mind, a well exercised concentration and a willingness to remain connected with the person in need no matter how uncomfortable it may be. But most of all, effective pastoral conversations require the full presence of the person who cares. To be fully aware during a pastoral conversation is, at a closer look, a three-directional task: 1. Awareness of yourself; 2. Awareness of the person in need; and 3. Awareness of the presence of God. At first glance, this sounds like an impossibility. How can you be aware of three beings or centres of life and action at the same time?!” I will replace ‘awareness’ or ‘being connected with’ with ‘being present to’. When you are present to someone you are naturally filled with an awareness and attentiveness of the person you focus on. Although there are three ‘persons’ to be present to during a pastoral conversation, the focus may not be equally strong on all three of them at the same time. Imagine you are sitting at your desk concentrating on writing an assignment. The birds are singing outside, you have one headphone in your ear listening to some music on your mp3 player, plus, you can hear the children playing in the living room. As your attention hones in on your assignment, all these noises fade into the background. In the foreground of your mind, you are present to those thoughts that will go into your assignment. Suddenly you hear one of the children calling, “Muuuuuum?” The sound pushes into the world of your thinking and after the second or two, you respond with “Yes, darling, what is it?” Your computer screen is still there, your thoughts are still trying to flow into your key board , yet

who you are present to has changed. You are now consumed with the demands of one of your children.

The dynamics of the three-directional attention work in a similar way. The focus on self and God fades into the background as the world of experience of the person in need who shares and aspect of her or his life takes up who and what you are present to. But perhaps during a pause, in a moment of silence, you become present to how you feel or aware of the presence of God. These impressions push into the foreground, only to fade into the background again as soon as the person in need resumes speaking.

While the pastoral carer receives a diverse range of impressions, images, feelings, events, interpretations from the world of experience of the other, she or he also, from time to time, perceives her/his own inner world of experience and impressions that belong into the spiritual realm or into the relationship with God or the Spirit. What the other person shares may even evoke special impressions that potentially interfere with careful listening. Distractions are an intricate part of any interaction. The pastoral care giver, over time, learns to discern which distractions to pay heed to and which to ignore.

Australian pastoral theologian Neil Pembroke, in drawing from the work of Gabriel Marcel, makes the point that “[w]hat one brings to a genuine [pastoral]encounter is not first and foremost an ensemble of communication techniques but one’s-self.”¹ A person not only has the ability to communicate, but to ‘commune’, that is, to enter into a communion with another person. Entering into a communion is a gift that comes with being fully available to the other and being will to participate in the life of the other without invading or dominating it with one’s own ideas and beliefs. Presence in this sense is not an act of detached observation but of empathic participation.

Graeme Griffin, in his book, *Coming to Care*, talks about presence as a ministry, embedded in the ministry of silence and the ministry of conversation.² He defines presence “[i]n the most obvious sense, ...[as] being there in a bodily, thoroughly physical way.”³ Being there in this way has an incarnational quality, because it reflects something of God’s embodied self in humanity. Being present to another, bringing loving attention and the willingness to be effected by the other’s life world, echoes God’s incarnated presence in Christ. In this sense, practicing a loving and attentive presence is part of the spiritual practice of imitating Christ. By being mentally, emotionally and spiritually present to a person in need the pastoral carer expresses to the other that she or he “is of genuine value. He or she is worth spending time with, the more precious in a context where so few others have time to spend and where

¹ Neil Pembroke. *The Art of Listening. Dialogue, Shame, and Pastoral Care*. William Eerdmans Publishing Company:Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K., 2002, 13.

² Graeme M. Griffin. *Coming to Care. An Introduction to Pastoral Care for ordained ministers and lay people*. Uniting Church in Australia. Synod of Victoria. Theological Hall, 1995, 47.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

one's sense of being a person of significance is so easily eroded," as for example, "in the protocols of the hospital system,"⁴ or in a large age care facility or a prison. Griffin points out that silence is "is a deepening of the ministry of presence."⁵ Silence perhaps represents the ministry of presence in its purest forms. It allows for an abstinence from all doing, acting and helping, in preference of a full 'being with' and being for' the person in need. This kind of silence takes the pastoral encounter into close proximity of the cross, which has transformative power despite of its obvious powerlessness, as Paul so aptly explains in 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31.

Active listening

When active listening is embedded in the ministry of presence and the ministry of silence, it has the capacity "to take us deep into the being of the other person."⁶ Active, or as Griffin calls it, 'true listening', aims to enter the world of **the other** as fully as possible without importing too much of one's own personal material. The pastoral care giver listens to information on events, circumstances, facts and relationships one the one hand, and the disclosure of emotions and meaning, on the other. Some of the more important things often remain initially unsaid, but reverberate between the lines. They are expressed through facial expressions, body postures, sounds of the voice or gestures of the hands. Listening is a fundamentally wholistic process in that it encompasses a perception of the whole person, not merely the words that are spoken. The more a pastoral care giver is capable of being in touch with the fullness of her or his own life in thought, feeling and imagination, the more she or he will be able to enter into that of another person. The two are inextricably interconnected.

Distractions are a well known and perennial disturbance throughout the process of listening. It is unavoidable and best not actively fought. There is virtually never a time when the listener does not have to override some of his/her emotional, cognitive or imaginative resonances in thoughts, emotions, sensations or images, it is possible to place such resonances at the periphery of one's attention and focus one's attention onto the person and what they are sharing.

The transition from the state of presence, silence and active listening to speaking needs to be managed carefully. It is important for the listener not to listen **in order to respond**, but to listen to the other person and respond at the appropriate time with words that show genuine understanding of what has been said up until then. Listening as part of a pastoral conversation, and perhaps in any situation in life is a valuable service in its own right. It does not have to be accompanied by responses unless the person in need expressively asks for a

⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁶ Ibid., 48

response, or it is obvious that a response is required. Habitual interruptions with questions or advice do not count as proper pastoral responses. By the same token, it is true that in many pastoral conversations responses are desirable. And so, it is a vital part of the pastoral conversation to offer responses in ways that are helpful, making more room for the other rather than stifle the conversation and take space away from the other.

Accurate reflections can take the form of a brief, one sentence paraphrase or a longer summary of what has been said. When the person in need has entered into a flow of sharing, the rule is, not to interrupt in any way. Wait until a natural break occurs and then reflect, rather than elicit information by asking a question.

In conclusion, I will list seven guidelines for listening which come from Michael Jacobs' book, *Swift to Hear*:

1. "Listen with undivided attention, without interrupting.
2. Remember what has been said, including the details (the more you listen and less you say, the better your memory).
3. Listen to the 'bass line' – what is not openly said, but possibly being felt.
4. Watch for non-verbal clues to help you understand feelings.
5. Listen to yourself, how you might feel in a described situation, as a way of further understanding – empathy.
6. Try to tolerate pauses and silences that are a little longer than usual in conversations (and avoid asking lots of questions to break silences).
7. Help yourself and the other to feel comfortable and relaxed with each other; keep calm even when you don't feel calm."⁷

Accurate Reflection

The purpose of any response in the pastoral conversation is to create understanding between the conversation partners. Ordinary conversations often run in an associative manner, as the examples above demonstrated. But there are further patterns to eliminate: Giving advice, asking questions for more information or offering leading questions, to direct towards a particular solution or to evaluate what has been said, - these are some of the most common pitfalls. You might think, well, if I can't ask questions, give advice, fix the problem or evaluate the situation, what is left for me to say? Excellent question ! Although the listed pitfalls have their rightful time and place in problem solving and guiding, they are not primary aims of the pastoral conversation. Without a doubt, the listed responses are deeply engrained in our communicative behaviours and are therefore difficult to shed when we enter into a pastoral encounter. They are so frequently practiced, because they create a sense of control and satisfaction in the mind of the friend or helper. But, in fact, taking over

⁷ Michael Jacobs. *Swift to Hear. Facilitating Skills in Listening and Responding*. New Library in Pastoral Care. Editor: Derek Blows. SPCK: London, 1985,13

the conversation and driving someone else's problem toward a solution run contrary to the ethos of pastoral care giving, which is based on empowering the other person to ground themselves in God and to discover strength, courage and direction there.

EXAMPLES FOR ORDINARY REPOSES

Peter is running into his friend Charlie at the cash register. Charlie asked Peter how he is going:

Introduction: How are you mate? It's been ages since I've seen you !

P1: Yeah, that's right. I've been on sick leave for a few weeks. I've been diagnosed with chronic fatigue and so, I've been trying to recover and get well.

C1: O mate, sorry to hear that ! Have you seen the doctor? (Leading question)

P2: Yes, unfortunately, there is no silver bullet ...

C2: I know this accupuncturist in the shopping centre, he is supposed to be excellent. And I have heard of some great herbal medicines that are supposed to prop up your immune system.(Giving advice)

P3: I actually have a good doctor, but she says it will take time. I am still feeling tired a lot.

C3: I think, you should take your time and not feel rushed to come back to work. Aw man, that's really bad. I feel for you. (empathy mixed with evaluation)

P4: Thanks mate, it was good to see you. I've goto move on. Bye.

C4: Ok, mate, see ya.

Charlie's responses stifled the possibility of a real conversation from the onset. His reactions only show superficial interest in Peter's situation. He seems to have suggestions and strategies for Peter without fully appreciating Peter's reality. Although Charlie shows some empathy, he is not really prepared to enter fully into Peter's world of experience.

Alternatively, a brief pastoral conversation during a time of waiting at the cash register could have looked something like this:

Introduction: How are you mate?! It's been ages since I've seen you !

P1: Yeah, that's right. I've been on sick leave for a few weeks. I've been diagnosed with chronic fatigue and so, I've been trying to recover and get well.

C1: Chronic Fatigue? That sounds like you've been tired a lot ? (Tentative exploratory question that allows for Peter to take up more space)

P2: Yes, I've been in bed for most of the past 6 weeks. I am tired all the time, still. It's quite depressing, when you sleep for ten hours, you get up and try to have breakfast and after five minutes you feel as if you haven't slept at all.

C2: Wow, mate, I can't imagine what that must be like. It sounds really hard to adjust to that level of not having any energy. (Empathic resonating with Peter's illness)

P3: You can say that again. Some of my colleagues have given me energy supplements, thinking that would make me well in an instant. My wife has struggled with looking after our three little kids virtually by herself.

C3: So, apart from being sick, you also have to fight off the unsolicited advice of well meaning colleagues and you feel guilty for not supporting your wife as you normally would. (Accurate reflection of facts and feelings)

P4: Too right. It's hard to allow myself to be as unwell as I actually feel, being surrounded by people who all want me to get well fast. And that's exactly what the doctor has told me, I've got to avoid all stress, relax and rest. Easier said than done.

C4: When I hear you talk like that I imagine that you are pulled between wanting to fulfil your family's expectations and your need for rest. (Accurate reflection of Peter's tension)

P5: Yeah, and that stresses me more and so I don't feel I can get better.

C5: I can see how this could easily turn into a vicious cycle. (Summary/comment)

The responding skills employed here are based on the commitment to make room for the other person. The pastoral care giver's responses are closely following the content/feelings that have been shared. They are paraphrased reflections, not word-for-word repetitions. Reflection is not a form of parroting, but a form of resonating. Just as the string of a guitar, once plucked, resonates through the wooden body or the amplifier, the thoughts and feelings of a person in need echo through the heart, mind and spirit of the pastoral listener. Resonating the other person's reality in the words of the response is meant to create a sense of being received, heard and understood. Each cycle of listening and accurately reflecting content and feelings perpetuates something of a gentle spiralling movement, helping the person in need to enter more fully into their own specific experience of life. Many people who find themselves caught up in problems or illness rarely take the time to process what is happening for them. They do not wish to worry their loved ones or burden their friends. As a result, they keep thoughts and feelings to themselves, trying to cope with the issues on their own. In Peter's case, Charlie's responses enabled him to enter more deeply into the conflict he experienced between the needs of his family and the needs of his body. Finding himself unexpectedly received by a friend in the middle of the supermarket, relieved Peter from spending energy on holding his tensions in. It diminished his sense of loneliness, even if only for a few minutes and connected him with the compassion and care

of another person. Having a friend resonate with his situation allowed him to vent his stresses freely. This kind of freedom sets the stage for the emergence of new options or a different path of action, without direction or manipulation on the side of the pastoral care giver.

Many learners of pastoral conversation skills struggle initially to abstain from the familiar patterns of responding, especially the habit of asking questions and offering unsolicited advice. It will help you in your learning of new ways of responding, if you anticipate a time of transition and struggle. It may initially feel utterly unnatural to respond in the ways I will suggest below. But eventually, you will assimilate and integrate those patterns of responding that are appropriate for pastoral care giving. Once you discover their effectiveness, you will become more committed, more motivated and finally more effective in applying them.

In conclusion, accurate reflection is just that, a precise, detailed reflection of what has been shared in terms of content and feelings. What is the function of accurate reflecting? I have already mentioned, that the purpose of pastoral responding is to create understanding. When a person feels actually and specifically – not vaguely – understood in terms of facts and feelings, he or she experiences a sense of ‘decompression’ of the issue they are sharing. Thoughts and feelings that have been stored away suddenly come to the surface. In the process of being aired, thoughts and feelings change and new pathways open up. The experience of being accurately received by another person, without one’s reality being altered or judged, often feels like the creation of an inner breathing space, wherein life can expand to its fullness and be what it really is. Hearing one’s reality **reflected back as it is** by another person is therefore in itself a way of bringing freedom. A person is freed to be who they truly are.

EXERCISES FOR REFLECTIVE PASTORAL RESPONSES

Read through the following scenarios⁸ and write down what kind of response each of the lines represent. Identify the response that appear like an accurate reflection of feelings and content to you. Circle the content and the feeling component of the statement. Then classify the other responses similarly to the way I have done below on pp 11-12.

Statement 1:

I wish I didn’t find it so difficult to concentrate properly on my job, but my father is ill in hospital, and I can’t help but worry about him all the time.

Response:

1. Aw, don’t worry, he’ll get better eventually.
2. O that’s just awful. I hope your Dad is getting better soon.
3. Have you spoken to the doctor?

⁸ The design of these exercises is based on some of the examples in Michael Jacobs, *ibid.*, 57ff.

4. You should cheer up, your worries don't help your father in his recovery.
5. I can understand that you are worried.
6. You feel distracted at work by your worries about your Dad's illness.

Statement 2:

I really don't like the fact that the young people sit in the back of the church, chat and use their phones during the service. I think that's very disrespectful. But I can't say anything to the minister because he prefers the teenagers over the older congregation.

Response:

1. Why don't you speak to the chair of the church council?
2. Yes, I agree, the young people of today are just so badly behaved!
3. Don't worry, they will grow out of it, eventually.
4. I think, you need to do something about that judgmental attitude of yours.
5. You are angry because those young people seem to follow a different code of conduct during services. Plus, you don't feel confident in your minister's support.
6. You think, the minister is not on your side.

Statement 3:

I haven't spoken to one of my colleagues in the past ten months. I think she just doesn't like me and so I keep my distance.

Response:

1. I think, that's bad work place behaviour.
2. You should think of something to say to her before you make it worse.
3. What happened? Did she offend you?
4. I once had a conflict with a colleague and I resolved it eventually.
5. The silence between you two is starting to bother you.
6. You are trying to be safe by keeping your distance. But I have a sense that you are starting to feel anxious about the silence between you.

Similar to the scenarios above, write your own set of responses to the following scenarios:

1. advice
2. evaluation
3. directive/leading question
4. associative change of subject ... "I have also ..."
5. Partially correct reflection
6. Accurate reflection of feeling and content.

Please reply with the set of responses above to the three scenarios⁹ below:

⁹ The following scenarios are taken from Michael Jacobs, *ibid.*, 47ff

Statement 1

My company is downsizing. I think, I will lose my job. I wonder what will happen to my home. We have just taken out a huge mortgage.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Statement 2

I went to a party last night and I was so drunk at the end of the evening that I can't remember what I said or did. I hope I have not embarrassed myself or my friends.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Statement 3

My husband and I are going on our first holiday without the children. We are so looking forward to it. I hope the kids will behave while we are away and not turn our home into a trash heap.

- 1.

- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Emotional Literacy

Many pastoral care givers find easier to summarise or paraphrase events or a situation, than using the right feeling words to accurately describe the emotions of the person who is sharing. Emotional literacy is a vital skill in conducting pastoral conversations. It concerns the awareness of the pastoral care giver of her or his own emotions and the ability to notice and accurately name the emotional reality of the person in need. In other words, a pastoral carer who is out of touch with her or his own emotions will have a hard time empathizing with the emotions of the person in need. Emotional literacy requires first of all being in contact with one's own emotions. Only then can the pastoral carer practice the accurate use of an extensive and nuanced emotional vocabulary. Learning feeling words can be a help in acquiring or honing emotional literacy. But it cannot replace being in touch with one's personal feelings. The list of feeling words that is part of your resources¹⁰ is divided into seven groups of words, headed: Happy, Sad, Angry, Confused, Scared, Weak, Strong. The division into these specific clusters is somewhat arbitrary, given that there is a vast body of research literature¹¹ around the question, what the most basic human emotions are. However, these seven groups are useful in that they cover a variety of emotional shades that when applied correctly will enhance the sense of being understood in the person in need.

Empathy

Core to the idea of reflective responding is the concept of "empathy". The kind of reflective responding I have introduced here can also be called "empathic responding". The notion of empathy as a core quality in human helping interactions was introduced by Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987), an American psychiatrist and psychotherapist who has been credited with the development of the person-centered model of personal growth. Rogers explains empathy as follows:

¹⁰ From Robert R. Carkhuff. *The Art of Helping in the 21st Century*. 8th edition. Human Resource Development Press Inc.: Amherst Massachusetts, 2000, 257-258

¹¹ To give only one example: Mick Power and Tim Dalgleish. *Cognition and Emotion. From Order to Disorder*. Hove, East Sussex: Psychology Press, 1997, especially Part II, 197ff.

To sense the client's private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the "as if" quality – this is empathy ... To sense the client's anger, fear, or confusion as if it were your own, yet without your own anger, fear, or confusion getting bound up in it, is the condition we are endeavouring to describe. When the client's world is this clear to the therapist, and he moves about in it freely, then he can both communicate his understanding of what is clearly known to the client and can also voice meanings in the client's experience of which the client is scarcely aware.¹²

It is important to highlight that Rogers does not expect a symbiotic identification from the therapist which leads to his or her loss of self. He invites the therapist "to sense" the client's emotions and inner experiences "as if" they were the therapist's own. That is, part of the therapist's effectiveness consists in maintaining his or her personal distinctiveness or some element of distance towards the client at all times.

If we change the language from therapist and client to pastoral care giver and receiver the same principles apply. There are two aspects to empathy, both of which are vital for the pastoral conversation: 1. The passive-perceptive or immersive aspect and 2. the active-reflective aspect. The perceptive aspect of empathy takes place while the pastoral carer is listening silently. In it she or he enters into the world of the other person as she or he shares it. The listener immerses her/himself into the complex web of facts, feelings and meaning that the person in need discloses. The active/reflective aspect of empathy comes to the fore in the reflective response. Here the listener reveals her or his understanding of the world of the other, thus conveying understanding and acceptance of feelings and content in accurate detail. When the person in need receives the accurate reflection of the care giver, real understanding is established.

Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring explores the dynamic between immersing oneself in the world of another while maintaining one's distinctiveness further.¹³ For a helping relationship Doehring developed a scale of 'modes of relating'. We can imagine an axis that has 'empathy' sitting in the middle, at the point of balance, 'disengagement' at one end and "merger" at the other. At the disengagement end of the axis, no empathy is possible, because no connection has been established between the pastoral care and the person in need. There is too much distance. At the merger end of the axis, there is an overwhelming sense of fusion, accompanied by an overpowering flood of information which is rather disabling. Here is not enough differentiation or distinction between carer and care seeker. Both poles are to be avoided in the pastoral caring relationship. Instead, Doehring describes how for her empathy meant

¹² Rogers, *The necessary and sufficient conditions*, 132-133.

¹³ Carrie Doehring. *Taking Care. Monitoring Power dynamics and Relational Boundaries in Pastoral Care & Counseling*. Nashville, Abingdon, 1995, 14.

a quality in a relationship that allowed me to imaginatively step into the experience of another, where there was a constant exchange of information both between me and the other, and within me. This flow of information (both conscious and unconscious) fine-tuned my awareness of what I imagined was going on within the other, within me, and between us.¹⁴

Using one's imagination in Doehring's thinking plays an important role in being empathic. Doehring does not attempt to empathise with another "as if" it was her own world of experience without her own emotions, as Rogers suggested, but she engages with a keen awareness of the level of appropriate engagement and observation, closeness and distance, thus holding in distinction, awareness of self and other. Throughout this study I will refer to empathic responding as reflective responding.

Exploratory Questions

Asking the right kind of questions as part of a pastoral conversation is a skill in its own right. Gerard Egan¹⁵ names the skill of asking good questions, 'the art of probing'. As a rule of thumb, any question that enhances understanding and deepens a sense of acceptance is welcome. As a conversation opener, questions such as, "How are you?" or, "How have you been?" are quite acceptable. However, the apprentice to the pastoral conversation should make considerable efforts to hold a conversation purely with reflective responses and **without asking any questions during the first 15-20 minutes and concentrate on reflection only**. It is surprising to experience that a meaningful conversation can unfold without probing for more information or directing the conversation via questions to the places that are interesting for the listener. Both, extracting information and directing the conversation through questions, are pitfalls because they take away control of the conversation from the person seeking care. Being able to share what the person in need deems necessary is in and of itself an important clue to the issue they are struggling with. Remaining closely aligned with what the person in need is trying to disclose is the most effective path to generating understanding.

When reflection is applied correctly, understanding constantly deepens and expands and the person in need grows in their sense of regaining control over something they struggle with. However, this increasing sense of control cannot grow if the pastoral carer takes control over the conversation by constantly asking directive or probing questions. Reflective responding will release most of the salient information that is needed. Questions are only

¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵ Gerard Egan. *The Skilled Helper. A Systematic Approach to Effective Helping*. 4th edition. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company: Pacific Grove, California, 1990, 141 ff.

employed when there is an obvious need for more information and the person in need is not offering the information for reasons unknown.

Examples of helpful exploratory questions:

Exploratory questions are questions that invite the care seeker to share more information. However, it is up to the person in need to decide the detail and content of it. The first group of questions is called: **open-ended questions**

- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about this situation/issue/experience?
- How did it make you feel when did/said.....?
- What happened for you when took place?
- What happened for you when said/did
- Have you been in such a situation before?
- How did you cope when happened?
- What kind of things did you do to get better?

Note that these are open questions because they do not ask for a yes/no answer or seek to extract specific pieces of information. Whereas **closed questions do exactly that:**

- What did the doctor say?
- Did you make the appointment?
- Does your wife know?
- How much money do you make?
- Have you ever been that sick?
- When did your Mum die?
- How old is your daughter?
- How long have you had the wheel chair?

Closed questions can sometimes be helpful in providing important pieces of information. However, they are not a first but a last resort. The main context for the use of closed questions is found when a person is in crisis and decisions need to be made quickly.

The use of exploratory questions within the pastoral conversation follows extensive periods of listening and reflecting. Asking an exploratory question may be appropriate when the flow of conversation weakens and certain aspects of a scenario or problem could still be further unpacked. It is important not to prey or probe but to leave room for the person in need to go deeper in their own time and in their own way. Sometimes, a few moments of deliberate silent waiting will accommodate a deepening of the conversation more naturally, than a probing question can. This is why open questions are more suitable as exploratory tools, than closed questions.

Affirmation

To reiterate the point, the purpose of the pastoral conversation is to help a person to resume or deepen a connection with God. This is facilitated by practicing a style of conversation that seeks to generate a sense of being understood and accepted in the person seeking care. If at all possible, the care giver avoids to solve problems or to direct the person in need toward specific solutions. The domain of the pastoral conversation differs from other forms of helping or counselling in that it assumes that solutions come to a person when they connect more deeply with the source of life and faith. Affirmation as a pastoral conversation tool is not the jovial slapping on the back, saying, "Well done. I know you could do it." Nor does it consist in inventing qualities to make the other person feel better. Affirmation is the ability to name virtues, qualities and skills that have surfaced in the conversation and draw them together into a larger picture shedding a new light on the person or issue the person in need has been struggling with. For example, a woman, aged in her late fifties has shared about caring for her mother in her last months of life. She talks about the stress and overwhelm of an emotionally and physically taxing situation. She describes herself as weak and flawed. She feels guilty for all the things she would have liked to do and didn't do. She misses her mother. Once this issue has been sufficiently explored, an affirmation given by the pastoral carer could sound something like this:

"As I have been listening to you, I have been deeply moved (or much impressed) by the strength of your commitment to be there for you Mum. I hear that you feel very flawed in all of it, yet I have also noticed your courage to face the end with her. I recognise that you feel less than perfect. But in the whole of this journey, I can see that you have been a wonderfully loving daughter who has not shied away from making personal sacrifices for her Mum. Your Mum was blessed to have you."

Note, the pastoral carer does not deny the negative judgment the woman passes on herself. The affirmation does, however, highlight the qualities that stood out to the pastoral carer. The pastoral carer does not argue with a person in need over who is right. However, the pastoral carer names those skills that were naturally employed without being recognised, those virtues that came to the fore without being noticed, those human qualities that were taken for granted, without being acknowledged. Such qualities, skills or virtues can be related to basic human character, or they can show faithfulness, commitment, sacrificial love and so on. The skilled pastoral carer listens to these skills/virtues/qualities from the very beginning onset and makes a mental note for the later ensuing affirmation later.

Closing Prayer

The closing prayer marks the conclusion of the pastoral conversation. Not every pastoral conversation can be closed with prayer. However, I would like to encourage you to pray for those you care for, either in their presence or afterwards. Praying is more than an act of faith. It is the relinquishment of the burdens shared to God. It places all issues into the

loving providence of God's care and thereby releases the pastoral carer from carrying those burdens further.

The closing prayer itself should contain an accurate but brief summary of what has been shared, a recognition of the struggles or issues embedded into a prayer of thanksgiving. Making reference to the previous scenario, a closing prayer could sound like this:

Loving God,

We give thanks for your caring presence with us.

You know intimately well, you know her struggles and her strengths.

We acknowledge that she has been through a tough time.

The loss of her Mum still hurts and thoughts and feelings of inadequacy are burdening her.

But God, you also see her strength, her courage and her love. We place all these issues into

your gracious hands, trusting that you will bring healing in time. I ask for peace and a sense

of your comforting presence for May she know your love for her deeply in this time of

pain and loss. Bless us both as we continue with our day. In the name of Christ I pray, Amen.

The closing prayer should not introduce new material. It is not a pathway to teach, admonish or make judgments. It merely recognises the presence of God and embeds the conversation into it. It releases the pastoral carer from taking on unresolved issues and confirms the other's issues as being recognised and contained in God's care. Where a person in need has not indicated a connection or interest in the Christian faith, a pastoral prayer may not be appropriate. However, it is at the discretion of the carer to offer one, if the carer has a sense that it may be helpful. Now offense should be taken if the offer is refused. The prayer can be offered later, once the two have parted company.

Another example of a closing prayer:

A young man who recently got married has shared about his struggle with losing his freedom to live his life as he wants to. He is frustrated and angry about having to tell his wife every move he makes. He talked about his disappointment and expressed doubts as to whether he made the right decision getting married. After a period of reflections, a few probing questions and more reflection, some affirmations have been offered. This is the concluding prayer:

God, we thank you that you have been with us as we spoke. I give thanks for For having shared so openly with me what his struggles are. I pray for a real sense of your loving presence for and his wife. You have blessed his marriage with ... and you wish all joy, peace and happiness for their lives together. But you also see that is frustrated. Things have not turned out the way he had hoped. We give thanks for his courage to take the big step. Now, I ask you loving God, for your wisdom and guidance. Help ... to find a way

forward that will bring him closer to his wife again. We trust in your provision for ... Bless him as he works through the issues and bless us both as we part ways and continue through our day. In the name of Christ, Amen

A pastoral prayer by its very nature communicates directly with God on behalf of another. It is intercessory prayer on behalf of and in the presence of another.¹⁶ It is vital that the language of the concluding prayer does not inappropriately exaggerate what has been said, nor introduce concepts of faith that are part of the pastoral carer's make up, but not part of the other person's life. Authenticity and simplicity in thought and emotion are of the essence. However, cultivating a prayer vocabulary that can make appropriate reference to well known, meaning-laden motifs from the scriptures or the wider faith tradition, is very useful. Especially the book of the Psalms in the Old Testament and knowing the parables and healing stories of Jesus' ministry from the four gospels well, can enrich the vocabulary of a pastoral carer who prays the concluding prayer. The following examples will illustrate this point:

Loving God,

*We give thanks for your caring presence with us. **We turn to you as our refuge and strength in times when we hurt and struggle.** You never turn us away, no matter how miserable we are. You know about human struggle and loss as **we know from Christ's life and death.** And so we do not need to fear your judgment or indifference. We acknowledge thathas been through a tough time. The loss of her Mum still hurts and thoughts and feelings of inadequacy are burdening her. But God, you also see her strength, her courage and her love. We place all these issues into your gracious hands, trusting that you will bring healing in time. I ask for peace and a sense of your comforting presence for May she know your love for her deeply in this time of pain and loss. Bless us both as we continue with our day. In the name of Christ I pray, Amen.*

*God, we thank you that you have been with us as we spoke. I give thanks for For having shared so openly with me what his struggles are. **You know all about human relationships. Because of our broken relationship with you, you sent Christ into this world to teach us how to relate.** I pray for a real sense of your caring presence for and his wife. You have blessed his marriage with ... and you wish them all the joy and happiness for their lives together. But you also see that is frustrated. Things have not turned out the way he had hoped. We give thanks for his courage to take the big step. Now, I ask you loving God, for your wisdom and guidance. Help to find a way forward in this situation. We trust in your provision for ... Bless him as he works through the issues and bless us both as we part ways and continue through our day with you. In the name of Christ, Amen*

¹⁶ Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger talks about pastoral prayer as intercession in her book, *Pray without Ceasing. Revitalizing Pastoral Care.* William Be Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K., 2006, 121-123.

The pastoral prayer marks the end of the pastoral conversation. The pattern of the pastoral conversation is simple and easy to remember. It does not represent a complex problem solving process, because problem solving is not its primary aim. The aim of the pastoral conversation is to provide an experience of being received, understood and accepted just as she or his is, without judgment or giving direction. When the pastoral carer is asked for direction she or he should answer honestly. If you are inclined to give direction and you feel that it might help the person in need, go ahead. However, offering a direction that has not been generated from the strengths and capabilities of the person in need always runs the danger to go over their head or beyond their capacity. The best solutions are those that arise from within the person in need and have been birthed as part of the reflective, person-centred approach to care. They have a greater chance of succeeding, because they come with a high level of ownership by the person in need.

The rhythm of this model of conducting a pastoral conversation has arisen from conducting and experiencing many spontaneous pastoral interactions. It does not invite the pastoral carer into a professional counselling role, but into that of a caring companion. In the following section, I will offer three pastoral conversations which follow the pattern outlined here. After studying these examples of conversations, you will be asked to write your own example of a pastoral conversation, incorporating all the steps outlined until now, to give you the opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of this model and your skill in applying the various modes of responding.

Three Examples of a Pastoral Conversation

Example 1: A pastoral conversation at a hospital bed

A friend of yours has asked you to visit a woman who had been a friend of the family for many years. She has just been told that she has an aggressive cancer of the bowels. She has a rather limited life expectancy of around six months. Her name is Liz and she is 48 years old. Liz has three children of school age and a husband who has just been made redundant by a

local car manufacturer. You have contacted the hospital chaplain and received permission to visit Liz, who is a member of a local Uniting Church. PC is short for pastoral carer.

PC1: Hello Liz, my name is Kerry. Peter has called me and asked me to visit. Are you up for a visit at all?

Liz1: O, I see, yes, sure (*her voice is a bit tentative*) come in ...

PC2: Look, I don't want to intrude, if this is not a good time, I can come back another time

Liz2: O, no, I am sorry, I didn't mean to sound unfriendly, but I am not that well and since we have never met ... uhm ... I wasn't sure ...

PC3: Of course, I understand. It is a bit strange to get a visit from a total stranger when you feel a bit vulnerable and tired ...

Liz3: Yes, that's it ... but why don't you come in for a little bit. I can't take much conversation, I get tired very quickly. (*She points to a chair*) Pull up the chair and tell me about yourself.

PC4: Yes, uhm, as I said, my name is Kerry. I am a retired nurse and I am a volunteer at my local church, as part of our pastoral care ministry. I visit people in their homes, sometimes here at the hospital or in age care homes. I love supporting people when they are going through a rough patch ...

Liz4: O, so you have been a nurse. Then you must have seen your fair share of difficult situations and I won't be scaring you with my own troubles ...

PC5: Yes, quite right. I've seen a lot during my years at the hospital. And thank you for being concerned for my well being. I think, I'll be alright. So, how are you doing with all the news you've received?

Liz5: (*releases a deep sigh and tears are welling up in her eyes*) ... It's been a rollercoaster as you can imagine. I've had complaints in my gut for a number of months. I'd just been too busy to have it checked out. But when I started to feel sick all the time, I thought it was time to go and see the doctor. Then came the shock ... I did not expect it to be so bad ...

PC6: That must have felt like the world came crashing down when you received the diagnosis ...

Liz6: (*between quiet sobs*) I was absolutely in shock and it took me a while to take it all in. Especially realizing how little time I've got left. What about my kids ...? It's not fair to them! I feel so sorry for my husband. He is left in such a mess. First he loses his job, now me.

PC7: There is a whole mix of emotions welling up in you, grief, sadness and guilt ...

because your whole family is effected by your illness.

Liz7: Yes, and underneath it all, I feel so utterly helpless. I won't even be able to help them through it, because I won't be there soon ... *(breaks down into crying)*

PC8: *(remains silent and fully present to Liz, without trying to diminish her pain or hurry her up)*

Liz8: I am sorry I am such a mess. But I just can't hold it together any more. It's just too hard.

PC9: Yes, it is. Take your time, I am not in a hurry.

Liz9: *(blows her nose and tries to talk)* Jake, my husband is devastated, of course, and he tries to keep it all to himself. I wish I hadn't caused him all this pain. I know it would be good for him if he could speak to someone. Would you be willing to see him? It would be a big load of my mind.

PC10: If you would like me to see him, I would be happy to. I can see how concerned you are for your husband, naturally. It is hard for him to lose you and you feel terrible seeing him suffer, especially thinking that you are the cause.

Liz10: Yes, please, he needs help with all of this. I've got all the help I need from the doctors and nurses, but he is all on his own.

PC11: I am really moved by the way you are trying to help your family, even from your hospital bed. Your commitment to their wellbeing is very obvious. I can see that you are a very compassionate and loving person who cares deeply for the people she loves.

Liz11: They are the most important people in my life and I don't want them to suffer on my account and now they have to ...

PC12: This must be one of the hardest things in life to go through, to love your family and see them suffer, believing that you have caused their suffering.

Liz11: Yes, it is. And I feel guilty and sorry and bad all at the same time. I wish I could change things. I mean, I know, the cancer is not my fault. But I can't help but feeling bad about it. I So wish that these last months would be a time of peace and happiness for all of us, rather than struggle and pain. I would love you to pray for me, if you don't mind ...

PC13: I am happy to. Loving and caring God, we give thanks that you are present with us, as we are talking to one another. You are a God who cares so deeply about Liz and Jake and the kids. This family is ever so close to your heart. And you see that they are going through a really hard stretch. Liz knows that she is dying and she watches on with guilt and sadness as her husband and children are trying to come to terms with it. We give thanks for how deeply Liz cares for each member of her family. The love she feels for them binds her to you

and the love you have for your whole creation. I bring to you Liz's wish that the days and weeks to come may be a time of peace and happiness, of relishing the moments of togetherness and joy for the rest of their lives. I ask, loving God, that her wish may come true. May your Spirit of comfort and peace touch Liz and each member of her family. May they know your presence as the one constant through the time of loss and grief ahead. I pray all these things in Christ's name, Amen.



Read through this conversation carefully and identify the different stages. Write the name of each stage into the margin. Notice that at the beginning of the conversation it was briefly unclear whether the visit would take place or not. Being sensitive to the needs of the patient and listening carefully to the tone of voice, facial expressions apply at the beginning, middle and end of the conversation.

Example 2: A pastoral conversation in a visitor's centre at prison

The prison chaplain has asked you to visit this prisoner whose family lives interstate. He was a drunk driver in a car crash in which one of his friends died. He is in prison for dangerous driving under the influence causing death for 3 ½ years. Half of the sentence is served inside, the other half on parole. Martin is 21 years old and into his 4th month. He has threatened to suicide and has already had a meeting with the doctor, the social worker and the prison psychiatrist. The chaplain has met with Martin on two occasions. He felt that talking to a younger man would help him. Martin comes from a good home and had never been involved with the police before. You are a 24 year old student of social work who is a member of a local congregation's pastoral care group. Your congregation has a special commitment to supporting young offenders. This is why the chaplain called you. In order to get to the visitor's centre inside the prison compound, you have to sing into a visitors' log, have your id checked and then you are accompanied over the prison yard to the centre. Martin is brought over to the centre from his cell. You sit in an open room, on chairs that are bolted to the ground. Martin is not allowed to get up and walk around once he has sat down. You are now sitting across from each other.

PC1: Hello Martin, my name is Dan. The prison chaplain has asked me to visit you. He said, you might like to talk to someone your age. I don't actually know, whether you would like to see me or even speak to me. But here I am, I thought, I give it a shot.

Martin1: Hi, ..., yea, not sure. Don't really know why you're here and what to talk about. Just came down to beat the boredom, to be honest. Nothing to do here and all day to do it ... Have you got a smoke?

PC2: No, I am sorry, I am a non smoker. But if I come back, I will try to remember to bring

you some.

Martin2: Just tobacco and papers would be alright.

PC3: Yea, sure. So, how are you holding up?

Martin3: Aw, well, what'ya expect?! I'm surrounded by criminals from all over the place. Murderers, rapists, bank robbers ... it's bad guys galore here. Some are pretty scary dudes. I stay right away from them. Others are more normal, like me, stole money from the boss, that sort of thing ... but aren't violent or anything ...

PC4: Sounds like a massive change, surrounded by strangers, feeling unsafe and unsure how to behave ...

Martin4: Yea, exactly and at the same time, your every step is watched. You can't go to the toilet without someone knowing about it. I've only got one hour a day outside. And usually, all the big muscles occupy the basket ball court. I stay away from them. You don't want to annoy the guys with the big tatt's. They can get narky quite quickly over little things, like if you sit on 'their' chair or use 'their' ball.

PC5: So, there are guys here, who could be a physical threat to you? I can understand that you feel scared.

Martin 5: Yea, I didn't realise that certain guys have their own territory within the prison. They sit in certain places, get extra food ... they seem to know how to make their lives more comfortable in here. They never seem to run out of cigarettes or chewing gum ...

PC6: It almost sounds like there is a class system in here and you still feel disoriented about the unspoken rules.

Martin 6: Too right ! And if you break one, without even knowing, you can get into serious trouble. So, I feel like I'm walking on egg shells here. Nobody tells you anything, you know ...

PC7: I can see that you are treading carefully, because you're afraid to set a foot wrong.

Martin7: Yea, it's a jungle out here. You know, I can't tell my parents how it really is, they would be worried sick, if they knew. They are already devastated about the whole thing. It's terrible what I've already put them through. They've always warned me not to drink and drive. Always, I could have repeated it in my sleep – Martin, never drink and drive, you never know when it's your turn to kill someone with sheer stupidity ... my Dad said it over and over again. And now, look where I have ended up?! (*Bashes his forehead with his hand*) stupid, stupid, stupid ...

PC8: You sound really angry and disappointed in yourself, because you've ignored your Dad's advice and now you pay the price.

Martin8: Yes I pay the price, but what price are Charlie's parents' paying? My parents can see me again. I still have a life after prison. But they – they will never see him again.

They have to live without him now. (*Hangs his head and covers his face with his hands*).

PC9: You feel horrible because you've caused a friend's death and you now have to watch the parent's grieve and be powerless.

Martin9: They were at the trial, crying the whole way through. They don't hate me, they've known me since I was a little boy. Charlie and I grew up together, went to the same schools, played during holidays, we were best friends ... (*his voice is choking*) I don't know if I can ever forgive myself ... being in here is a small price to pay. I wish I could turn back time and do it all over again, differently.

PC10: I can hear the deep regret in your voice. You feel guilty because your actions led to your friend's death. And you find it really hard to come to terms with that.

Martin10: (*There is a time of silence. Neither Martin nor Dan are saying anything. After a time Martin asks*): Do you think, God would ever forgive me?

PC11: Yes, I think, God forgives us our small and large failures, even the ones that caused severe pain for others. But I can see that you have some serious doubts about that. You think, you have done something so terrible, perhaps God won't forgive you.

Martin11: You are spot on. I can't believe that God would ever forgive me the stupidity that cost my friend his life.

PC12: I understand, at this point, you are carrying a tough burden on your conscience. Being in here pales into insignificance in comparison. But I also hear your sincere regrets, your deep sense of guilt towards Charlie's parents and your honesty about your mistake. In the midst of all that has gone wrong, you have not lost all sense of integrity and of who you are.

Martin12: That may well be true, but what difference does it make?

PC13: It just shows that you are a good person at heart ... I wonder whether you would let me pray for you. I believe, God can hear your questions ...

Martin13: Yea, sure, why not ...

PC14: Gracious and caring God, we give thanks for your loving presence during our conversation. You care deeply about all involved, Martin, his parents, Charlie's parents and anyone who has been effected by the accident. You see into Martin's heart and know the profound sense of regret he carries. He so wishes he could undo the loss of his dear friend and the grief he has caused everyone. Hold his hand, loving God, in the deep of night, when Martin's regrets torture him and his doubts leave him sleepless. Let him know your healing and restoring love and forgiveness for himself and those who hurt. Help him to turn his life around, even in here. I pray that you would keep Martin safe and allow him the gift of companionship. Bless him in the days and weeks ahead. In

the name of Christ I pray. Amen

Read through this conversation carefully and again identify the different stages. Write the name of each stage into the margin. Notice that at the beginning of the conversation it was briefly unclear whether the visit would take place or not. Being sensitive to the needs of the inmate and listening carefully to the tone of voice, facial expressions apply at the beginning, middle and end of the conversation.

Example 3: A pastoral conversation in an age care facility

You are part of a pastoral visiting group in your congregation. Your minister has given you the name and address of an elderly woman who has just moved into an age care facility and struggles with adjusting to it. Mary is 78 years old and suffers from severe arthritis. Her mobility has diminished over the past months and she is looking at moving around in a wheel chair. You knock on her door and she invites you in.

PC1: Hello Mary, my name is Jane. I am from the local Uniting Church. We are doing some volunteer visiting at this age care facility. Would you like a visit?

Mary1: I am not religious, you know, but if you would like to come in and give me some company, I wouldn't mind.

PC2: Thank you for inviting me in, I would be happy to sit with you for a bit. How are you doing today?

Mary2: O, I don't know ... where to start?!

PC3: That does not sound good. Are you finding it hard to be here?

Mary3: Hard doesn't even begin to cover it. I have been here for 3 weeks now and I have hated every minute of it. Most of the staff are always in a rush. The food is awful, I miss my home. I can hardly walk anymore and have to use the wretched wheel chair which makes me completely dependent on others. If only my legs were working again.

PC4: That is quite a list of difficulties. I can appreciate that you are feeling annoyed, to say the least.

Mary4: Yes, **I am** annoyed! I miss my privacy and my independence. My friends from my old neighbourhood are too old to come here. So now I am not only without a home, but also without my friends! And who can I complain to? Noone! And even if I did, it would not make a shred of difference, would it ?!

PC5: You miss your friends and your home, and on top of it, you don't feel you feel powerless to make a difference to your situation. No wonder you are upset..

Mary5: Yes, and the people around me just nod and smile and they think, that I will eventually come around and like it here. But I won't, I'd rather die!

PC6: I can hear your anger and despair. Here you are in your new home and you don't want to be here at all.

Mary6: Actually, to tell you the truth, there is one little bright light. We have one nurse who is just lovely. She comes in each morning to bring me my medication. And each time she stops and chats just for a few minutes. She really understands how unhappy I am but she doesn't judge me. I look forward to seeing her every time. She's really nice.

PC7: So you are beginning to make your first friend and you are really glad to see her each morning.

Mary7: Yes, I suppose, it is a start. Cathy oversees all my medical problems and I can trust her, because she's diligent and on the ball. And really nice on top of it.

PC8: That's wonderful. I am really glad for you to have one person you can feel comfortable with.

Mary8: Actually, now that I come to think of it, the chaplain is also a really nice guy. He comes to visit and conducts the Sunday services here. I love to listen to him speak and he has a rather wonderful singing voice too. He tells the most interesting stories and he seems to care about how I am going ... because when he's here, he always looks in on me to find out how I am going. HE says, that's part of the service ...

PC9: I am really impressed, Mary, that in and amongst this difficult transition and all you have lost you can actually be grateful for a couple of people with whom you have found a real connection. To find things to be grateful for in the midst of struggle and difficulty, is a special skill you seem to have mastered.

Mary9: Yes, it sure helps to look on the bright side.

PC10: Mary, I need to move on soon. But I wonder would it be okay, if I prayed for you?

Mary10: Sure, go right ahead.

PC11: Gracious and loving God, we give thanks that you are present with us, as we looked at Mary's struggle together. You know Mary's innermost thoughts and feelings. You understand her struggle to make a home in this facility. We give thanks, that we can take refuge in you, that when all else seems strange and difficult, in your care we can find a home and you give us strength. I am grateful that Mary has found two people she can relate to. I ask that you to be with Mary on this challenging journey of saying good bye to her old life and finding a new life here. We know, there will be bad days. But we pray that the good days may grow in number and that eventually Mary will find peace and new friends here. We thank you that we can always count on your friendship. In the name of Christ I pray, Amen.

Conclusion

You may find this kind of responding artificial or unnatural at first. However, as you discover how it effects those you care for, you may be more motivated to become better and better at it. Once you have integrated reflecting into your conversational repertoire you will hardly notice anymore when you use it.

Self Awareness

In section 1.6 I wrote about the roles and activities that characterise the practice of pastoral care. I pointed out that the person who cares brings their own set of strengths and weaknesses to this ministry. Being aware of both, gifts and limitations, assets and liabilities within one's own self, is an important feature of a safe and effective pastoral carer.

Authenticity, that is the ability to represent one's true self rather than a social mask to others, **congruence**, that is the ability to act in alignment with one's thoughts and emotions and **empathy**, that is the ability to enter into the world of another without losing one's distinctiveness are three core qualities which each pastoral carer needs to cultivate in order to function well in this ministry. When these three qualities are embedded into an ongoing commitment to faithful discipleship, Christ's call to care issued to the church and its members, can be followed and acted upon.

Introduction

Pastoral conversations are the 'bread and butter' of pastoral care. They often take place spontaneously, as part of an encounter in the car park, the bus stop, the at the cash register in the supermarket, after worship during morning tea; or more intentionally at the hospital bed, in the prison's visiting centre, in the private or public space of an age care facility or as part of a home visit. Pastoral conversations are unpredictable in terms of their content.

They could be about the joy of a newborn child, the sudden death by accident or illness of a loved one. They could be about a shattered dream or an emerging hope, a trivial matter of daily life or a life changing experience of insight, suffering, pain or loss. Consequently, pastoral conversations have a certain fluidity in terms of their beginning, middle and end. The floor boards of social etiquette may suddenly disappear when a person is ready to take the leap of faith of entrusting herself to the pastoral carer for about ten to fifteen minutes, as she reveals an issue that deeply matters to her. Real life with its depths, doubts and uncertainties comes to the fore and the conversation has changed from a light chat into a pastoral during which some serious speaking and listening takes place.

The influence of Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987)

At the heart of the pastoral conversation lies the mystery of one person entrusting themselves to another in the hope of finding non-judgmental acceptance, respect, integrity and perhaps even the discovery of new truths. This set of expectations points to the thorough internalisation of Carl Rogers' person-centred approach to helping. Rogers' discoveries of how the therapeutic relationship could work in favour of a client's growth were brought into the main stream, among other things, through a book that was widely read in the late eighties and early nineties, written by Robert Bolton, entitled, *People Skills*.¹⁷ In his own approach to assertive yet sensitive communication Bolton drew from Rogers' core ideas, both in terms of the desirable qualities in a helper and the nature of effective communication. In a famous article first published in 1957¹⁸, Rogers formulated a series of conditions for the therapeutic relationship which were to facilitate change in the life of a person experiencing stagnation and unresolvable problems. In Rogers' view the change would lead to indications that the client's life was moving into a new direction,

at both surface and deeper levels, in a direction which ... means greater integration, less internal conflict, more energy utilisable for

¹⁷ Robert Bolton. *People Skills. How to assert yourself, listen to others, and resolve conflicts*. East Roseville, NSW: Simon & Schuster, 1987. See especially chapter 15, 259ff

¹⁸ see Carl Rogers. 'The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change.' 43-74. In: Ben N. Ard (ed) *Counseling and Psychotherapy. Classics on Theories and Issues*. Palo Alto: Science and Behaviour Books, 1966. This article was first published in 1957 in the *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 1957, 21: 95-103.

effective living; change in behaviour away from behaviours generally regarded as immature and towards behaviours regarded as mature.¹⁹

Roger thought that if the following six conditions were present in the therapeutic relationship change was almost inevitable. He described these six conditions in simple and comprehensive:

1. Two persons are in psychological contact.
2. The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.
3. The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.
4. The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.
5. The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavours to communicate this experience to the client.
6. The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved.²⁰

Roger's six conditions offer a frame work that enables a person who lacks congruence to receive in growing towards a greater level of wholeness and authenticity. The client's lack of congruence, genuineness or authenticity²¹ is gradually corrected because the expression of the therapist's own congruence and authenticity is encouraging the client in her or his world of experience to do the same. As the therapist immerses him or herself empathically into the world of the client's experience and begins to share openly and without criticalness or condemnation his or her perceptions, the client's courage increases to embrace his or her own personal reality more fully. As a result the client begins to show some empathy and unconditional regard for his or her personal truth via the therapist's accepting and respectful attitude. Modeling empathy on the part of the therapist leads to embodying new

¹⁹ Rogers, The necessary and sufficient conditions ,127.

²⁰ Ibid.,127-128.

²¹ The three terms are used interchangeably by both Rogers and Bolton.

levels of empathy on the part of the client. Genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy are inseparably intertwined. Rogers explains empathy further:

To sense the client's private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the "as if" quality – this is empathy ... To sense the client's anger, fear, or confusion as if it were your own, yet without your own anger, fear, or confusion getting bound up in it, is the condition we are endeavouring to describe. When the client's world is this clear to the therapist, and he moves about in it freely, then he can both communicate his understanding of what is clearly known to the client and can also voice meanings in the client's experience of which the client is scarcely aware.²²

The practice of empathic listening has highlighted for therapists, teachers and chaplains alike the productive tension between emotional immersion into the world of experience of the other, and the need to remain personally differentiated and distinct. That is, part of the therapist's or chaplain's effectiveness consists in maintaining a fine balance between resonating with the other's experience of life while maintaining his or her personal distinctiveness. Closeness and distance appear to be involved in a delicate dance where sometimes one and at other times the other takes the lead. But empathic listening is ultimately not an end in itself. Its purpose is to create understanding and integration. As Rogers put it, "empathy is in itself a healing agent. It is one of the most potent aspects of therapy, because it releases, it confirms, it brings even the most frightened client into the human race. If a person is understood, he or she belongs."²³ Congruence and integration as key therapeutic outcomes not only pertain to the intra-personal dimension in that the client's thinking, feeling and acting have become more closely aligned, they also extend to the client's social environment. A more congruent client is also re-integrated into the social fabric of human relationships.

²² Rogers, *The necessary and sufficient conditions*, 132-133.

²³ Carl Rogers. *A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980, 129. Quoted in : Egan, *The Skilled Helper*, 124.

Roger's approach was highly priced and widely applied in a number of other areas of learning, growth and change, such as the counseling, the educational sector and the realm of pastoral care²⁴ due to its non-pathologizing, person-centred approach to growth.²⁵

The pastoral conversation

From the excerpts of Roger's work on the therapeutic relationship above we can glean important points of contact for the foundation, ethos and the practical skills of the pastoral conversation. Empathy, personal congruence and authenticity paired with unconditional positive regard create the conditions for growth. But more importantly, through the therapist's empathic listening and responding, understanding is forged, a new level of congruence ensues and the client's social isolation is overcome. Here we find the strongest point of contact with the ethos and practice of the pastoral conversation. The ethos of the pastoral conversation is grounded in the pastoral carer's acceptance and respect for the importance of each person with whom a conversation is conducted. But more so, the pastoral carer in each conversation works towards and hopes for the emergence of trust and understanding so that the person in need may feel a new sense of wholeness and belonging. The pastoral relationship is grounded in gratitude for the gift the other gives to the carer by disclosing an aspect of his personal life to her. As Douglas Purnell wrote, "[to] share in a pastoral conversation is an extraordinary gift. You are invited into the most intimate spaces where people talk about the very nature of their being human. They share their joy and they share their pain. They reach hard-to-find words of genuine faith. If you are alert to it, they bless you with life-shaping wisdom."²⁶

²⁴ See for example the article 'Carl Rogers.' 411-422. by Fred Zimring In: *Prospect: quarterly review of comparative education*. Paris, UNESCO: International Board of Education, vol. XXIV, 3 / 4, 1994 At: <http://pdfcast.org/pdf/carl-rogers> Accessed 15/01/2011. Gerard Egan. *The Skilled Helper. A Systematic Approach to Effective Helping*. Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1990 and the earlier editions from 1982 and 1975. Egan makes ample reference to Roger's work in relation to the conditions of helping and change.

²⁵ See for example the influence of Rogers on clinical pastoral education in a current description of pastoral care: "Pastoral care is a person-centred, holistic approach to care that complements the care offered by other helping disciplines while paying particular attention to spiritual care." At the website of the Pastoral Care Council of the ACT at: <http://www.pastoralcareact.org/pastoral.html> Accessed 05/09/2013

²⁶ Douglas Purnell, *Conversation as Ministry. Stories and Strategies For Confident Caregiving*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003, 1.

At the edge of the pastoral encounter, where the mystery of giving and receiving trust and the miracle of understanding unfold, the spiritual nature of pastoral interactions becomes obvious. Listening and speaking in this context are no longer considered as merely mundane activities, but they take on the nature of spiritual practices which hold the possibility of encountering Christ in one another, of perceiving a movement of the Spirit or a Word from the mouth of God.²⁷ In this sense, the skills of

1. being fully present and available to the other, self and God
2. listening empathically/receiving the other with heart, head and spirit,
3. responding reflectively to create a bond of understanding,
4. exploring an issue in faithfulness to the other person's agenda,
5. affirming and encouraging the other,
6. and praying in conclusion for the other,

are not only conversational techniques or skills but also trajectories for spiritual experiences or new personal realisations. Growth in the context of a pastoral conversation could be understood as helping a person enter into a deeper relationship with God. The skills of the pastoral conversation are then understood as stepping stones towards such a deepening. To take the significance of the pastoral conversation one step further, I would like to suggest that pastoral interactions could be viewed as an arena in which God may reveal God's love and exquisite attention for each person. In the first verses of the gospel of John we find God's intimate relationship with the Word expressed. In chapter 1 we read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Then the Word becomes light coming into the world, yet the world did not know him, ... he came into what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. (From verses 1-11, NRSV)

Christ, the Word and Light, spoken and sent into a world of darkness, was initially rejected. God's Word was misunderstood, misread, misheard. Although words were made and

²⁷ In his book, *Let Ministry Teach, A Guide to Theological Reflection*, Robert L. Kinast simplifies theology as "a Word-from God, a Word-about-God, and a Word-to-God", 9. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996. I think, that his 'trilogy' of words in relation to God could equally be related to what happens at the heart of a pastoral conversation. I want to propose that pastoral conversations cannot only be understood as implicit or explicit words about God, but also as a space where words from God can be heard and words to God can be spoken.

spoken, understanding did not take place, connections were not made. Christ remained separated from God's beloved humanity and darkness prevailed, until some listeners began to recognize who he was and then understood his significance. The Johannine community is one that found its way to the heart of God's mission in Christ, as being loved and being sent to love others. It exists in contradistinction from the world that is wilfully ignorant, manifesting darkness, that is, the absence of having entered into a relationship of being known by and knowing Christ.

At this point chaplains in their daily encounter with others may encounter the vacuum that is left by not being understood: words have been spoken and received between family members or friends, spouses, partners, parents and children, among colleagues and employees, but the connection of knowing and being known has not eventuated. On the contrary, the rift of not being understood or understanding, of neither being received nor receiving has opened up. At this point the chaplain bears a special responsibility, namely, that of not repeating what has occurred in previous conversations. The chaplain is committed to entering into the world of the other person, even if it is rather different from his own with the intention of facilitating connection through understanding. In this way she disrupts the endless cycles of miscommunication, estrangement, distancing, prejudicial knowledge and conditional listening. To become truly competent in these skills the chaplain carer needs to master, at least to some measure, the art of attending, listening and affective responding, the craft of reflecting, exploring and affirming. When he has achieved at least a basic level of mastery of these skills, the precious, yet elusive gift of understanding of another in her own world of experience, her own reality of thinking, feeling, believing and acting can happen and make room for the emergence of new congruence, authenticity and the sense of belonging. I will now deal with each of the six conversation skills in turn, concluding with a verbatim of the flow of a pastoral conversation that illustrates each of the six stages. Here they are firstly in overview:

STAGES OF THE PASTORAL CONVERSATION

Pastoral intent	Conversation skill
Welcoming hospitality	Attending to the person's physical needs; Setting up a space for care; Becoming ready to enter into the conversation.
Making a space in myself for the other; Being open to encountering Christ in the other; Being open to the whispers of the Spirit; The other is worthy of my full, uninterrupted attention Entering into the other's world of experience Understand the other more fully	Opening the conversation; Widening the attention towards the obvious and the hidden Three-directional listening: other, self, Spirit. Listening: receiving the other's reality in thinking and feeling for its own sake; laying the foundation for a reflection of the other's reality; Reflecting facts and feelings Asking exploratory questions, then returning to reflection, paraphrase and summary
Affirming the other's God-given goodness and capability	Identifying and naming qualities or skills that have enabled the person to prevail or cope (courage, patience, kindness..)
Parting ways in hope	Concluding the conversation with prayer or words of hope and blessing

The difference between an ordinary and a pastoral conversation

Ordinary conversations tend to flow back and forth between conversation partners in clusters of associations. If the topic revolves around the children, those issues associated with the children will be exchanged in turn. If the topic is work, church, sports, or health, the same will occur. For example:

J1: O, hello Jenny, how are you? Fancy meeting you here ! I thought you were still on holidays ...

F1: Hello Frances, nice to see you too, ... no, we've been back from the beach for a few days now ... How's Geoff and the kids?

J2: Very well, thanks. Geoff is back to work. He's so much better. And the kids are off to school. It's awfully quiet at home ...

F2: Yes, our kids are back at school too. Eddy is going to school camp next week. He's so excited to spend time on the Murray with boats and water swings. He is all excited. And Jessi has started with riding lessons. She just loves her pony.

J3: Yes, it's so lovely to see the kids happy and occupied with things they love. Robbi loves going to soccer and Finn is thinking of doing the overseas exchange at the end of this year. He's looking at going to India.

F3: India? How interesting. Jessi has been thinking about exchange, but she's not quite ready yet, I think. After all she's been through she needs a bit of boring normality again.

These three pairs of interactions demonstrate the flow of a casual conversation. The issues are loosely associated. They relate to the children. Information related to the children is briefly shared. There are no follow up questions. There is no reflection, no indication of careful listening. It is just a quick catch up on matters related to the children.

Note that the interactions are numbered and grouped in pairs. This is a key characteristic of creating a record of a conversation, or a 'verbatim'. Pairs of interaction are numbered so that reference can later be made to parts of the conversation when it is analysed in greater depth.

If you read the three pairs of interaction carefully, you will note that there are hints to deeper matters. In J2 we read, "Geoff is back to work. He is so much better." Another matter related to Jenny herself is also mentioned in J2: "It's awfully quiet at home." In F3 we notice a comment about Jessi: "After all she's been through she needs a bit of normality again." These brief sentences indicate that the persons, the women make reference to, have been going through some difficult life experiences. Perhaps, Geoff has recovered from an illness and Jessi has experienced some kind of disruption in her life. In the flow of an ordinary conversation, such hints would be noted but not necessarily followed up. As part of a pastoral conversation they would be carefully noticed and followed up at the appropriate time. While in a quick catch up conversation a lot of information may go back and forth

without being examined or explored, in a pastoral conversation each phrase or sentence is carefully received and examined in terms of a possible reflective response or an exploratory question. Conversation partners in an ordinary chat are often happy with leaving things on the surface, while a pastoral conversation carries an invitation to go deeper.

Ordinary conversations can quickly turn into pastoral conversations if both parties agree to it and one party knows how to use the tools for turning it into a pastoral conversation. To develop an understanding of the tools for a pastoral conversation and of how to use them effectively is the purpose of this Batch.