

A Brief History of Pastoral Care

Pastoral Care has always been provisional and contextual, and there have been different patterns and emphases throughout history.

However, constant throughout has been the teaching and example of Jesus who calls his ministers to take their share in shepherding the flock.

The fellowship/communion of those first believers after Jesus resurrection were bound together by their common faith, their eschatological hope in the return of Jesus and the sharing of bread and wine. Earthly wealth was given for the good of the community, the early seeds for later monasticism.

As the Church grew pastoral issues developed. Peter and Paul exercised leadership in very different ways e.g. Peter responded spontaneously to pastoral needs, e.g. appointing Stephen and others to care for the widows, whereas Paul's writing sometimes reads like a book of guidance on how to live as a Christian community.

As the Church grew and spread around the known world different communities began to respond to pastoral need in different ways.

In the 3rd and 4th century a group of Christians began to live solitary lives and became known as the Desert Fathers. Folk would go and see them to learn from their lives and their teachings.

The sixth century saw the birth of Monasticism. The Rule of St Benedict epitomises this era and is seen as the outworking of the dual focus of love for God and love for neighbour. Benedict's Rule gives a rhythm of life that is highly disciplined and practices mutual accountability in prayer, work and rest.

Over time monasteries become places of learning, of healing and of hospitality. Interestingly the resurgence of the monastic movement in the 20th century and the new monasticism of the late 20th and early 21st century trace their roots back to the earlier movement.

In the 4th century Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. There were many changes and conflicts arose, as lines were blurred between the Church and the Empire. Who should offer pastoral care - church or state? We still see this today e.g welfare state and food banks.

In the 6th century Pope Gregory sent missionaries to England, and during this same period missionaries also arrived in the North from Ireland. Celtic (northern) and Roman

(southern) Christianity differed in many ways, but eventually the Roman influences became the strongest and shaped Church structures in the coming centuries.

By 13th century certain important practises were beginning to be defined. Gregory the Great's sixth century Book of Pastoral Rule set a high standard of discipline and personal study for the pastor and local communities began to have a recognisable pastor to care for the flock. They had the cure of souls for a geographical area, and took issues of discipline and godly living very seriously.

The rhythmic cycle of the Ecclesiastical year shaped people's lives. Lent became exceedingly important as a period of penance and the pastor paid particular attention to his role of confessor with the Eucharistic feast became the highlight of Easter celebrations.

During the Medieval period most folk were illiterate and therefore the cycle of the liturgical year, its repetition of gospel stories along with the church frescos, iconography, liturgy, incense and music that brought it alive shaped the faith of the nation. For many people the liturgical year still bring shape to their lives.

Then came the 16th century and the Reformation. Out went the tactile, tangible traits of popular religion, the palm crosses, the ashing, the pictures, out went the pascal candle, the possessional crosses and the incense. Out went the visual culture with its central symbolism of God made present in the Eucharistic Host. These losses were replaced by preaching in the vernacular, church courts and a trained pastoral theologian/clergy who had five tasks.

- 1 To lead to Christ and the church all those people estranged from the church
- 2 To restore those who had fallen away
- 3 To secure amendment of life for those who had sinned but were penitent.
- 4 To strengthen the fainthearted Christian
- 5 To encourage the faithful and strengthen them in their personal journey

The Penitential cycle (guilt - conviction - redemption) was now dealt with by teaching from the pulpit, public lectures, person to person confession and private pastoral advice. England broke from the Church in Rome under Henry VIII, and his three children reigned over a period of religious turmoil.

The Elizabeth Settlement sought to bring stability to church and therefore national life. The Church of England organised herself into parishes and Dioceses and adopted a common vernacular Prayer Book (BCP) bringing some uniformity to the church. But not everywhere, there was more local variety than we often give credit for (see Eamon Duffy's book Stripping the Altars).

The 17th century birthed the Age of Reason, new knowledge and the origins of science. John Donne wrote sermons, George Herbert wrote poetry, the Presbyterians wrote letters and Richard Baxter wrote the Reformed Pastor which reshaped clerical pastoral ministry.

The 18th and 19th century brought about the evangelical movement, the missionary movement, the rebirth of Anglican Monasticism and a renewed zeal for education, health care shaped by Christians of all denominations with a social conscience. e.g Methodists sang hymns and helped educate deprived people , Mary Sumner started the Mother' Union for her husband's parishioners, Octavia Hill got people rehoused, the worker priests moved into the cities slums

As the 19th century turned Freud and Jung looked into Psychology and as the 20th century grew Interest in Psychology grew.... Kenneth Leech, Michael Jacobs etc The second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of Liberation theology centred around South American which engaged in socio-economic analysis, with social concern for the poor and political liberation for oppressed peoples and addresses other forms of inequality, such as race or caste.

And so to today Except in fringe groups it is rare to find strong patterns of discipline in the contemporary church. Our moral liberalism and voluntary association of church membership has resulted in the pastoral accountability of previous generation having been almost privatised out of existence .. do we need to regain the lost art of appropriate challenge within pastoral care?

... In our post covid world shaped by Pride, #metoo, #blacklivesmatters we are all too aware that we can not tackle the individual domestic need without paying serious attention to the structural dimensions within which these problems arise. Pastoral niceties are an affront to the radical challenge of Jesus in the gospels.

In a world full of fear, social fragmentation and cultural as well as religious pluralism we need to look again at the practice of hospitality. This has often gone hand in hand with a reshaping of trinitarian theology, and practitioners such as Henri Nouwen have characterised this dynamic as a one from hostility to hospitality, generating space where people are free to be themselves.