

# **Spiritual Direction as the Model for Pastoral Ministry**

By  
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## **Spiritual Direction as the Model for Pastoral Ministry**

### **- Listening for the Soul<sup>1</sup>**

Recently I went to a retirement home and was asked by the supervisor to visit a troubled man nearing his death. As I entered his room the man barked a sharp question at me: "Where am I going?" I was taken aback and a little confused. Was he asking a question about his eternal destiny, or was there something else on his mind? A little more conversation determined that he was indeed concerned about his eternal destiny. Thus we began a conversation about his relationship with God. We talked about how he experienced God. If spiritual direction is defined as "an act of giving attention to what God is doing in the person who happens to be before me at any given moment,"<sup>2</sup> then I was beginning to engage in spiritual direction.

It is not too difficult to become involved in such a spiritual discussion if the topic is raised by the person with whom one is speaking. But like many other pastors, I have often left the spiritual dimension out of my discussion with a person in distress. I believe this is because I have succumbed to the turmoil and confusion that exists in the practise of ministry in the church today.

The twentieth century has seen the rise of several different models of ministry, and pastors have subscribed to one or another of these, with little critical help from their seminary or the church hierarchy. I am advocating a return to an earlier model of ministry which saw ministry to the whole person, body, mind and soul, as practised by such people as Richard Baxter, an English nonconforming clergyman of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote: "we too, must give an account of our watch over the souls of all who are bound to obey us (Heb 13:7)"<sup>3</sup> In his writing, Baxter showed a concern for individuals as whole people, for the unconverted, the spiritually weak, the morally handicapped, the tempted, the disconsolate and the strong.

### **Models of ministry**

The interventionist/crisis model of ministry is one followed by many pastors who have been trained in clinical pastoral education, following the work of Dr Frank Lake<sup>4</sup>, and these pastors have learned various counselling skills. Under this model, the pastor attends the sick bed, the dying, listens to those with marital or other problems, and seeks to allay the symptoms of confusion, pain, grief and so on. The goal of ministry is to *help* the sufferer to regain the state of equilibrium they had before the crisis. In seeking to alleviate the grief or the suffering, the pastor may not think to help the sufferer question where God might be in the suffering. The person grieving is therefore not helped to find meaning in the grief.

This model might also be called the professional model. Pastors who follow this model tend to see ministry in professional terms using medical and legal professions as the model. They are lured by the "...technical specificity of content and the glowing status connoted by the word 'professional.'"<sup>5</sup> The pastor who follows this

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<sup>1</sup> Title of book by Stairs, Jean. Listening for the Soul. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson H. Eugene. Working the Angles. Eerdmans: Michigan 1987. pp. 3-4

<sup>3</sup> Baxter, Richard. The Reformed Pastor. ed. James M. Houston. Multnomah Press: Portland, Oregon, 1982. p. 72

<sup>4</sup> Lake, Frank. Clinical Theology. Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1966

<sup>5</sup> Leech, Kenneth. Spirituality and Pastoral Care. Sheldon Press: London, 1986. p. 76

model sees people as ‘cases’ who are ministered to in a clinical fashion, much as the general practitioner attends to a patient, or as the lawyer works with a client.

Another very popular model current in churches today is the management model.

Leech says, “... much in our training and thought patterns is based on an organisational and managerial view of ministry. The pastor is a churchkeeper, a functionary who runs a show in competition with other shows.”<sup>6</sup>

Leech is concerned that pastors be concerned essentially with God and with helping human beings find union with God. The problem he points out is that, “The care of Souls is one thing. Making a parish a howling success is another.”<sup>7</sup>

One more model of ministry is described by Leech as the social work model. The church is understood to be concerned primarily for social welfare, caring for the underprivileged. In this model the church is seen as “...distributing services rather than enhancing vision.”<sup>8</sup>

It is my contention that we “...must recover a view of ministry that stresses the sacramental, charismatic, theological and prophetic roles more than the professional, managerial, and organisational ones”.<sup>9</sup> I am not arguing that we should abandon the good to be found in any of the models mentioned, but that we need a change of focus. It is not so much that we should be doing things differently, but that we should be exercising ministry with a different mind-set. We do this by listening for the soul<sup>10</sup> as we do our pastoral care. As we engage in pastoral ministry we seek, not so much to alleviate the pain, but to be asking where God is in the pain. As we acknowledge the difficulty we give it significance. We help the people we meet with to find meaning in a world that increasingly cannot make sense of life. People exhibit anxiety because of a sense of meaninglessness. They are desperate for answers to the ultimate questions. “Our society hungers for spiritual connection.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile a pastor may be busy setting up a new programme, and bypassing as unimportant, the needs of those seeking meaning. The strange thing is that the *unimportant* parts of our ministry might turn out to be the most important.

It was Eugene Peterson who first alerted me to my need to change focus in my ministry. In a chapter entitled, “Curing Souls: The forgotten art”,<sup>12</sup> he points out that, “...one by one, pastors are rejecting the job description that has been handed to them and are taking on this new one or, as it turns out, the old one that has been in use for most of the Christian centuries.”<sup>13</sup> When using the term ‘cure of souls’ Peterson understands “The primary sense of *cura* in Latin as “care”, with undertones of “cure.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 75

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 77

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 77

<sup>9</sup> Leech, Kenneth. *op.cit.* p. 79

<sup>10</sup> Stairs, Jean. Stairs defines *soul* as “...the spiritual essence of one’s existence expressed through body, mind, or any other facet of one’s being.” *op.cit.* p. 10

<sup>11</sup> Rice, Howard. *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide*. Upper Room Books: Nashville, 1998. p. 38

<sup>12</sup> Peterson H. Eugene. *The Contemplative Pastor*. Eerdmans: Michigan, 1993

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 56

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 57

The change of focus in pastoral ministry to that of spiritual director means that whenever I am with people in a variety of ministry situations, I am constantly asking myself: “How can I foster this person’s, or this group’s relationship with God? Are there signs of God’s voice or activity in this person’s life? Can I help this person become aware of such activity?” When I do this I realise that, “...being a spiritual director doesn’t mean introducing a new rule or adding another item to [my] ever-extended job descriptions, but simply rearranging [my] perspective: seeing certain acts as eternal and not ephemeral, as essential and not accidental.”<sup>15</sup> I’m not actually doing very much. I simply call attention to what is already happening.

In 1977 when I became Vicar of a parish for the first time, I received from the bishop a licence that gave me “...*authority to officiate and have the cure of souls in the Parish of...*” It is a sign of the times that the wording on current licences has been changed by the removal of the words, “cure of souls”. The phrase sounds antique but I believe that it is not obsolete. It describes a way of ministry which puts the whole person in focus. “For centuries it was the pastor’s defined task to “prepare people for a good death,”<sup>16</sup> and to live a full life. He was making sense of their lives.

### **So how will the focus of my ministry change if I begin to listen for the soul?**

#### **Visiting the grieving**

In the therapeutic model the pastor finds ways to alleviate the grief of the sufferer. Modern Western society finds grief difficult to handle. The funeral director (formerly “undertaker”) in some parts of New Zealand has replaced soil with clean sand for sprinkling in the grave, and plastic grass to hide the bare earth. The grieving are not uncommonly offered a drug to help them through their initial grief. Yet anyone familiar with Maori culture (or the Psalms) will know that the time-honoured way of supporting the grieving is simply to be with a person, to cry together and not to “fix”. Instead of trying to help people minimise or even avoid their grief, I will be trying to help them enter the depth of their crisis, and find spiritual meaning there. “... the pastor will have the strength to *do* far less in relation to suffering, and *be* far more. Pastors will not give in to the temptation to fix the sufferer and will engage in a ministry that honours the sufferer.”<sup>17</sup>

#### **Visitor of the hale and hearty**

As a new, young Anglican curate I was asked by my Vicar to visit several parish homes each a week. What was the Vicar’s expectation? Obviously the first object is to get to know the family, to show interest in their life, and begin to forge a relationship. Exactly what else I was expected to do was not clear. By the time a second visit to the same household came around, I was struggling to find the purpose of the visit and not finding a clear answer. But as a pastor with knowledge of spiritual direction I can “...pay attention to the ways God is at work in their lives, individually and corporately.”<sup>18</sup> This is not taxing. “...I am not so much wondering what I am going to do or say that will be pastoral as I am alert and observant for what the risen Christ has been doing or saying...”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Peterson H. Eugene. Working the Angles. Eerdmans: Michigan, 1987. p. 153

<sup>16</sup> Peterson H. Eugene Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work, Eerdmans: Michigan, 1980 p. 110

<sup>17</sup> Peterson, *ibid.* p. 141

<sup>18</sup> Rice, *op.cit.* p. 62

<sup>19</sup> Peterson H. Eugene. Under the Unpredictable Plant Eerdmans: Michigan, 1992, p. 128

### **Preacher**

This is a less obvious spiritual direction task (at first sight) because the preacher is by definition, doing all the talking, which is the opposite to the normal practice of a spiritual director. But as a preacher I am going to be working alongside people during the week, listening to problems, sharing in joys, wrestling with issues, and supporting them in crisis. I will come in contact with the issues of life, and I will be able to put these in a theological context on Sunday. I will be constantly asking myself the question, “how can I help these people deepen their relationship with God?” As a result I will be helping people pay attention to the ways God is at work in their lives, individually and corporately. There is always a two-way relationship between preacher and the worshipper. “The pastor’s responsibility is to keep the [*worshipping*] community attentive to God”.<sup>20</sup>

### **The casual encounter**

Every pastor has had the experience of chance meetings with a parishioner in a public place, such as the supermarket. In the conversation that ensues, it is very easy for the pastor to raise spiritual questions, or a person may raise one.

“In every visit, every meeting I attend, every appointment I keep, I have been anticipated. The risen Christ got there ahead of me. The risen Christ is in that room [place] already. What is he doing? What is he saying? What is going on?”<sup>21</sup>

### **Management**

The life of every congregation finds expression through worship and in meetings. There are times when every pastor functions as an administrator of the church as an institution. Meetings are important and necessary for the growth and well being of the community. “Every meeting should be an opportunity for the spiritual growth of those present and, through them, for the whole congregation.”<sup>22</sup> This can happen when members of a group understand the group’s role as a facilitator of spiritual growth, and when members are encouraged to share something of what is going on in their souls. In a vestry or church board meeting a pastor may foster a change of focus from agenda to discerning God’s work in the group. Rice suggests that one way to introduce change into a church board meeting is to meet on alternate months for business. In the intervening months the pastor can shape the meeting around personal concerns, sharing of ideas and telling faith stories.

### **Social Change**

Poverty, racism, prejudice, underemployment, homelessness, and lack of equal opportunities are all present in New Zealand society. I can act as a spiritual guide when presenting and addressing society’s needs. “Helping people encounter the risen Christ in the faces of the poor is as much an act of spiritual guidance as teaching them to pray.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Peterson, *Working the Angles*, p. 2

<sup>21</sup> Peterson H. Eugene. *Under the Unpredictable Plant* p. 127

<sup>22</sup> Rice, op. cit. p. 140

<sup>23</sup> Rice, op.cit. p. 138

### **Why have I chosen this topic?**

For many years in my ministry as a pastor, I was unaware of the possibility of spiritual direction as the model for pastoral ministry. I wish someone had alerted me earlier to the significance of spiritual direction in the pastor's everyday work. I am now slowly coming to terms with all the possibilities inherent in this way of understanding ministry. I may be able to alert others to come to terms with spiritual direction in their parish ministries. Many pastors have an understanding of what spiritual direction is. However less have received spiritual direction, and even fewer give spiritual direction.<sup>24</sup> Spiritual direction was not something that was given much attention in New Zealand Protestant theological institutions in the 1970's when I was in training. I echo the cry of Peterson when he wrote: "Why had no professor so much as mentioned the subject of spiritual direction? And why did no one tell me that the essential work in which I would be occupied as a pastor had this rich tradition of practice and learning, and that I must be acquainted with it?"<sup>25</sup>

Strangely enough I think that lay people will understand immediately the significance of this topic. I think many people in parishes want the growth of their soul. They readily accept crisis-focussed pastoral care and grief counselling, but I suspect they have a feeling that something is missing.

"Ironically, this [spiritual direction] is the work that many people assume that pastors do all the time: teaching people to pray, helping parishioners discern the presence of grace in events and feelings, affirming the presence of God at the very heart of life, sharing a search for light through a dark passage in the pilgrimage, guiding the formation of a self-understanding that is biblically spiritual instead of merely psychological or sociological. But pastors don't do it all the time or nearly enough of the time....Whenever it is done, though, there is an instinctive recognition that this work is at the very centre of the pastoral vocation."<sup>26</sup>

I understand that the authors quoted in this paper have been speaking out of an experience of the small parish (50-150 worshippers on a Sunday). Can spiritual direction be offered as a model of pastoral care in the larger parish of 300+ worshippers on a Sunday? Such a parish has been described as a programme parish, which has grown to such a size that the pastor cannot know each person individually in a way that the pastor of a small parish can.

Rice may offer us a way forward. He differentiates between spiritual guidance and spiritual direction. "The relationship of spiritual guidance to spiritual direction is the same as that of pastoral care to therapy."<sup>27</sup> By this I understand him to mean that any person can offer spiritual guidance to another using insights and skills of spiritual direction, but will use trained spiritual directors for referral. Spiritual guidance is something that should be encouraged in every parish, and be the prevailing atmosphere within a parish. No one any longer expects the pastor to be the sole

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<sup>24</sup> A short questionnaire of mine to a sample of 25 Anglican priests in New Zealand resulted in 15 respondents. The following 4 questions were asked:

- Have you had a spiritual director at any time in your life? (10/15 responded "yes")
- Have you ever directed anyone? (4/15 responded "yes")
- Did anyone explain spiritual direction to you at Theological College? (3/15 responded "yes")
- Have you ever undertaken any reading/study on the subject? (10/15 responded "yes")

<sup>25</sup> Peterson H. Eugene. Working the Angles, p.159

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p.151

<sup>27</sup> Rice, *op.cit.* p.61

minister. The church is beginning to recover the New Testament emphasis on every-member ministry. Each person, and certainly all lay leaders, may aim to offer spiritual guidance to those around them, helping another foster his/her relationship with God. In a large parish as well as small, the senior pastor may aim to be the role model for spiritual guidance. As Peterson says, “The paradigm shift that I am after is from pastor as program director to pastor as spiritual director.”<sup>28</sup> The senior pastor will train others to offer the ministry of spiritual guidance and spiritual direction.

Those of us in pastoral ministry seek to model our lives on the life and ministry of Christ. What I notice Jesus doing is listening to the souls of those he met. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, with Nicodemus, and with the centurion who came seeking healing for his daughter, he is caring for the soul. When the cure of souls becomes the centre of what we are about, rather than techniques in ministry, I am sure we will see new life begin to flourish in individuals and in the local church.

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<sup>28</sup> Peterson H. Eugene. Under the Unpredictable Plant, p.175

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