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LIVING OUT THE CALL

BOOK FOUR:

SERVING GOD'S PEOPLE

Paul Beasley-Murray

Revised edition 2016

Contents

To Caroline

Preface

Hockey can be a tough game. People can get hurt. I vividly remember getting hurt in a school hockey match – blood was streaming from my mouth and the pain was intense – but the headmaster who was refereeing the match simply shouted to me 'Play on Beasley-Murray, play on!'. And play on I did.

Ministry too can be tough. People can get hurt. Most ministers go through at least one bad patch in their ministry. Indeed, for me the first seven years of my ministry at Chelmsford were pretty lean. For whereas in my first church in Altrincham everything I had touched seemed to turn to gold and as a consequence the church turned round and began to grow, in Chelmsford everything I touched seemed to turn to dust and the church continued to decline. It was tempting to give up, particularly when there was misunderstanding and even rejection. In that context, however, somebody simply shouting 'Live out your call, Beasley-Murray' would not have helped. I needed people around me to help me live out the call.

I trust that the four volumes which make up *Living Out the Call* will prove to be a positive resource to those who have been in ministry for a while and are perhaps finding the going tough. Hopefully the lessons I have learnt over 43 years in stipendiary ministry, 34 of which were spent in leading two local churches, will prove of help to some. Hopefully, too, some of the thoughts and ideas will encourage and revitalise pastors in living out the call.

But *Living Out the Call* is not just for seasoned pastors. It is also for those who are just beginning ministry. Indeed, these four volumes are based on lectures that I have given to students preparing for ministry. They need to learn that it is not enough to be called – the call needs to be lived out, and that is a constant process. Hence the present participle – 'living' out the call.

Please also note that *Living Out the Call* is not an instruction manual. I am very conscious that there is no one way to do ministry. Every individual is unique; and what may be appropriate for one pastor may not be appropriate for another. Likewise, every church has its own individual character and its own particular mission to fulfil. God is not in the business of cloning! This does not mean that individuals and churches cannot learn from one another. Indeed, perhaps we can find a Scriptural basis for this, for according to Proverbs 18.15: "Intelligent people are always eager and ready to learn" (GNB), which the *Living Bible* translates: "The intelligent man is always open to new ideas. In fact, he looks for them." Over the years I have greatly benefited from seeing how others operate and subsequently adapting the insights gained to my own church. But do notice, there is all the difference in the world between 'adapting' and 'adopting'. To

'adopt' an idea from another church fails to recognise the unique character of each church. Each church has its own special calling to be church. We can learn from one another, provided we do not slavishly imitate.

Living Out the Call is different from other books about ministry, not least because of the person I am.

- It reflects 43 years of ministry, 34 years of which were spent turning around two declining churches and developing them into the strong churches they are today. There are not many books on ministry written by authors with such experience. As I know well from my six years as Principal of Spurgeon's College, it is very easy to lose touch with pastoral realities.
- It reflects a love of ministry. I have enjoyed being a pastor. In spite of some tough times, there was scarcely a day when I did not thank God for the privilege of calling me to be a pastor.
- It reflects a critical ability to learn from the experience and writings of others. This is not a book which tells the story of a pastor and his two churches. Rather, I have engaged with what others have had to say. The book reflects an unusual breadth of reading and academic robustness called for by an MA module.
- Not surprisingly from one who is still a member of the Society of New Testament Studies, it reflects a delight in relating much of my thinking to Scripture where that is appropriate.
- As one who is Chairman both of Ministry Today as also of the College of Baptist Ministers, it reflects a desire to offer something which will encourage and stimulate today's pastors. I genuinely want to help those who are finding ministry tough to live out the call.
- As befits my personality, the style is clear, passionate and straightforward!

The initial intention was to produce just one book with the title of *Living Out the Call: Rising to the Challenge of Ministry Today*. However, my enthusiasm for ministry ran away with itself, so that in the end it became necessary to publish *Living Out the Call* in four volumes:

1. *Living for God's Glory*
   Ministry today
   The passionate professional
   The exemplary pilgrim

2. *Leading God's Church*
   The inspirational leader
   The empowering team player
   The effective manager

3. *Reaching out to God's World*
   The missionary strategist
   The charismatic preacher

4. *Serving God's People*
   The creative liturgist
   The compassionate pastor

It has been an interesting challenge dividing up what initially was one large book into four volumes – and not least grouping individual chapters under four different headings. The results, however, have been pleasing.

- In the first volume*, Living for God's Glory*, the topics of professionalism and spirituality go surprisingly well together and reinforce my conviction that professionalism is all about giving God our best.
- *Leading God's People* naturally encompasses the different ways in which pastors are called to be leaders.

- *Reaching Out to God's World* proved a little more problematic: along with the need to develop a missionary strategy I felt preaching could also be included, for preaching at its best always has the world in mind.
- Although the leading of worship and the exercise of pastoral care must never be restricted to the church, nonetheless to a large extent the focus for both is on the people of God, and so they are naturally grouped under the title of *Serving God's People*.

Over the years I have enjoyed sharing the fruits of my experience and learning with pastors and theological students in many different countries. Some of the material in *Living Out the Call* represents courses I taught in 2010 and 2013 at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon. However, the immediate inspiration for *Living Out the Call* was invitations to teach Master's courses at Laidlaw College in Auckland, New Zealand in 2014; and at the Colombo Theological Seminary in Sri Lanka, and at Vose Seminary in Perth, Western Australia, in 2015. I dare to believe that the diversity of these settings indicates that the principles underlying these four volumes, although for the most part drawn from ministry in England, are of relevance to pastors wherever they exercise their ministry.

One further introductory comment needs to be made. Unless otherwise specified, the version of the Bible quoted is the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). Other versions used are the *Good News Bi*ble (GNB), the *New International Version* (NIV) and the *Revised English Bible* (REB). I have also quoted from time to time from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.

Finally, in producing these four volumes I am most grateful to my youngest son, Benjamin, who has helped with various technical and editing matters.

Paul Beasley-Murray, July 2015

PART 1: THE CREATIVE LITURGIST

1. The call to lead worship

The writer to the Hebrews describes Jesus as a 'liturgist' (*leitourgos*): as our high priest he is "a minister in the sanctuary" (Hebs 8.2) i.e. he serves in the worship of God. The root etymological meaning of our English word 'liturgy' is 'the public worship of God'. Liturgy has nothing to do with a particular form of words – it simply denotes the worship which we offer to God. "Into the liturgy the people bring their entire existence so that it may be gathered up in praise. From the liturgy the people depart with a renewed vision of the value-patterns of God's kingdom, by the more effective practice of which they intend to glorify God in their whole life."[1] This is the context in which we say that pastors are called to be 'creative liturgists'; they are called to lead their people into the presence of God himself.

Today worship has become one of the great divides in church life. The term 'liturgical' has come to be equated with formal worship, such as is to be found among Anglicans and Roman Catholics, where the worship is ordered by a prayer book, although since the introduction of *Common Worship* in 2000 Anglican worship has become much more flexible and diverse within the 'common' Anglican framework of worship.[2] By contrast in the 'non-liturgical' churches the worship is 'free', with no set orders to follow or set prayers to say. [3]But there are many other sub-divides too: in addition to 'classic worship', there are other classifications such as 'multi-sensory worship', 'indigenous worship', 'innovative worship', 'transformational worship', 'blended worship', 'praise services', 'spirited traditional' and 'creative worship'![4]

Over the years there have been massive changes to the way in which many churches approached worship. There was a time when preaching was exalted above everything else, and worship belonged to the 'preliminaries', while the celebration of the Lord's Supper was an addendum to the main service. For British Baptists things changed radically with the so-called liturgical renewal of the 1950s, and as a result worship became more important, and the Lord's Supper became an integral part of the service. At that stage pastors still did almost everything in the service: church members might be invited to read the Scriptures or lead the prayers of intercession, but the service itself was structured and led by the pastor. Then in the mid-1960s came charismatic renewal and the new structures of worship were blown apart: informality and openness became the norm. In many churches today the pastor just preaches the sermon, while the 'worship' group, often an enthusiastic band of guitar-strumming young people, will be responsible for leading the worship.

Pastors still have overall responsibility for worship

In principle the thawing of God's 'frozen' people is to be welcomed.[5] Today it feels both strange and unnatural to lead a service of worship without active congregational participation. Worship which involves others in both the planning and the executing is always richer than anything a 'one-man' band can offer. Yet such worship has its dangers. For

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[1] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: A Systematic Theology* (Epworth, London 1980) 8.

[2] A sign of this change is that instead of Anglican worship centring around a single book such as the *Book of Common Prayer*, *Common Worship* is made up of twelve volumes, including material both 'authorised' and 'commended'. In the words of Phillip Tovey, *Common Worship* has become "a rich resource to help congregations worship God through the Spirit" (*Mapping Common Worship*, Grove, Cambridge 2008, 3).

[3] As Christopher Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (SCM, London 2004) 29 has pointed out, in Free Church worship, when prayer books are used, "they will be a resource for those leading worship rather than a centrally authorised set of words in the hands of the congregation. Each service will be different, using an infinitely variable mixture of hymns and extempore and specially written prayers."

[4] See Melanie C. Ross*, Evangelical versus Liturgical? Defying a Dichotomy* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2014) 134. As a generalisation, Ross notes that in the USA evangelicals have adopted a frontier *ordo*, with its three-fold shape of preliminary songs that 'soften up' an audience, a fervent sermon, and an altar call for new converts, and the effective marginalisation of the Eucharist. By contrast, churches with a liturgical tradition have a four-fold order rooted in the four primary symbols of word, bath, table and prayer (*Evangelical versus Liturgical?* 6).

[5] The expression is taken from *God's Frozen People* (Collins, London 1965) by Mark Gibbs & T. Ralph Martin, a seminal book 'about – and for – ordinary Christians'.

although there may be no one pattern of worship, there are certainly principles which lie behind it. Worship is both a science and an art. It is not sufficient to be gifted in leading worship: such a gift needs to be trained and developed. Ministers, precisely because of their training, still have overall responsibility for the worship of the church.

The British Baptist editors of *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* had some wise things to say about "competent guidance":

> "Evangelical worship can lose its sense of direction. The idea of movement implicit in some of the traditional orders of service needs to be retained. God has indeed poured out his Spirit upon his people in a new way. Many pastors have abdicated their traditional role of leading worship and handed it over to the church's musicians. Yet there is a clear difference between leading songs and leading worship. To lead a congregation in worship is to be entrusted with one of the most important tasks of the church. Those who lead acts of worship in which many participate require:
> - The training and development of gifts
> - The ability to guide the service in order to avoid cross-currents of emotion and ambition
> - Structures to include praise, proclamation and prayer
> - Direction to move the people on sensitively and expectantly
> - Strength to provide confidence and security."[6]

I believe that ultimately the responsibility for worship lies with the ordained ministers of God's people. The preamble to the section on ordination and induction in *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* states: "In ordination a person's call from God to the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament is given public recognition as he or she is set apart to serve and lead."[7] The implication is that this involves the leadership of worship. Indeed, in two of the specimen services in *Patterns and Prayers* 'leading the church in worship' is specifically defined as the pastor's role.[8] It is precisely because of this responsibility that ministers receive training in the leadership of worship.

This does not mean to say that the leading of worship should be the exclusive preserve of the trained minister. That is not a good thing. There is a real danger of 'sameness' if the worship is solely in the hands of one person. Where there are a variety of worship leaders, there can be a variety of patterns of worship. Yet even where others are involved, ultimately the minister is responsible for the conduct of worship. It is with the minister that 'the buck' stops. Ministers need to take responsibility for the overall conduct of worship – even although they may share the leading of worship with others.

Pastors would be wise to create a worship policy

There is a lot to be said for creating a clear and agreed policy for the church's worship life, such as the following example:

> "Thank God for traditional hymns! They unite young and old, and are often a great medium for confessing the faith. Their very age is a great reminder that down through the centuries men and women have put their faith in God, and not found him to be wanting. We would be the poorer without the riches of the past.
>
> Thank God for modern worship songs! They make a delightful balance to some of the older hymns. There is no one kind of church 'hymnody': variety is needed. Calvin got it wrong when he said, 'The music of hymns should not be light and sprightly; it should have weight and majesty, and there should be a marked difference between the music which is played to delight men at table and in their homes, and that of the psalms sung in church and in the presence of his angels'. Provided music can be a vehicle for worship, then it is valid for worship.
>
> Thank God for music! What a difference music makes to life. However, in worship music is not an end in itself. Rather music is a vehicle for worship. The style will vary to enable the people of God in all their variety to express their praise and adoration, their confession and penitence, their dedication and commitment.

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[6] *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship: A guide-book for worship leaders* (Oxford University Press 1991) edited by Bernard Green and others 7.
[7] *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* 170.
[8] *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* 187, 190.

> Thank God for church musicians, and for the many instruments they play. Although in our music-making we strive for excellence, this quest for excellence should not deter the encouraging of others from contributing to the worship of God. One of the roles of the more experienced musicians is to train up the next generation of church musicians.
>
> Although ministers have overall responsibility for all aspects of the church's worship, inevitably they look to the church's musicians for help and advice, not least in ensuring that the church's music reflects a variety of styles appropriate to the various age-groups and tastes present within the church."[9]

Over the years I have been grateful for gifted musicians, several of whom were professionally trained, who helped lead our worship. Although they suggested the hymns and songs to be sung, my responsibility was to agree the final shape of the service. Not everything I agreed to, did I necessarily approve of – in the sense that not everything we did was necessarily my taste. But that was not an issue. My role as a minister was to ensure that the needs presented by the wide variety of people coming to worship were met.

Pastors need to become 'creative liturgists'

I am convinced that many pastors, particularly those who serve in non-liturgical churches, need to re-discover their role as 'creative liturgist'. Or if that phrase does not appeal, then how about the term 'worship composer?' used by Peter James Flamming? In this respect Flamming wrote:

> "Consider a worship service with the five movements of praise, nurture, commitment, inspiration and quiet centering [meditation]. As in a symphony, the number of movements may remain the same week after week. It is what happens with those movements that makes every symphony, and every sermon different.
>
> To carry the analogy further, the notes and chords that make up those movements might be Scripture, preaching, music, sharing and prayer. Other harmonies may also appear such as the offering, communion, baptism, baby dedication, a shared witness [testimony], and a call to commitment. It is how these are used that gives the service its life, its stability, and its variety. In a given church the movements of worship are not apt to change much, but the variety within those movements needs to be changed from week to week."[10]

Such richness and variation within the worship symphony do not just happen. They come about as the result of the skill, dedication and hard work of the worship composer. The demands of Sunday-by-Sunday worship call for creativity upon the part of the pastor. Alas, in many evangelical churches pastors seem to have given up being creative – and neither have their worship leaders seen the need for creativity. Australians Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, reflecting on their world tour of churches, commented that one of their lasting impressions was that churches "tended to be invariably dull and rather predictable. They had a disturbing propensity to look, feel, and act in basically the same way. They sang the same basic songs and followed the same basic order of service in their corporate worship. The sheer predictability of it all was quite shocking and deeply disturbing. It sometimes seems as if there is some form of 'template' at work in evangelical churches, all over the world, regardless of language and culture."[11]

Before looking more specifically at the role of the creative liturgist, bearing in mind the confused state of worship in many a non-liturgical church, I believe it would be helpful to look at patterns of worship in the early church and some of the principles underlying Christian worship today. Hopefully readers coming from a liturgical tradition will also find some food for thought.

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[9] A policy I developed for Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford in 2005. Some might ask what is the difference between hymns and songs? It used to be that hymns were found in hymnbooks, while songs were on the screen. Christopher Idle commented: "In today's climate a rough and ready measure for a real hymn is that we do not need to sing it twice" (*Real Hymns, Real Hymn Books*, Grove, Cambridge 2000, 4) but since Idle wrote those words songs have changed and many are very stand-alone pieces. John Leach made the perceptive observation that "The songs which do stand the test of time are almost always those which look and feel most like hymns. This built-in disposability does not make songs 'worse' than hymns, any more than Pampers are worse than terry nappies. Only if you tried to reuse Pampers too many times would their value decrease" (*Hymns and Spiritual Songs: The use of traditional and modern worship*, Grove, Nottingham 1995, 12).

[10] Peter James Flamming, *The Pastor as Worship Composer* (Baptist World Alliance, Mclean, Virginia 1992) 4.

[11] Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things To Come* 182.

2. Patterns of worship in the early church

Worship styles varied from church to church

There was no fixed pattern of worship in the early church.

- Paul describes (as distinct from prescribes) the worship at Corinth in these terms: "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation" (1 Cor 14.26).[12]
- In Thessalonica the worship would seem to have been made up of prayer (1 Thess 5.16-17) and prophecy (1 Thess 5.18).
- In Jerusalem the Christians, as well as meeting in one another's homes, continued to participate in the Temple worship (Acts 2.46). Luke tells us that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2.42). It has been suggested that this description gives the basic structure of an early order of service: the sermon ('teaching') was followed by the collection (the Greek word *koinonia* could refer to the giving of money and was used by Paul to describe his collection for the poor of Jerusalem) and in turn by the Lord's Supper (the 'breaking of bread'), which culminated in prayers for the fellowship and for others.
- In Ephesus, by the time Paul wrote to Timothy the church there seems to have become more institutionalised, for Paul charges Timothy to devote himself to 'the public reading of Scripture' (1 Tim 4.13).

The diversity of New Testament forms of worship stands in sharp contrast to those of the Old Testament where worship procedures are clearly defined: great attention, for instance, was given to such matters as the furnishings of the Temple. However, as Trevor Lloyd right said: "In the New Covenant, God gives us his Spirit, some principles, but few regulations, and the responsibility for Spirit-led judgement in the area of worship."[13] He went on to quote the Anglican Article 34: "It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly alike; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word."

The six essential ingredients of worship

In spite of all the diversity, the worship life of the early church had certain core 'ingredients'. These essential ingredients of Spirit-inspired worship find their roots in the Jewish synagogue and the Upper Room. To the praise and prayer, the Scripture readings and the sermon – all characteristic of the Jewish synagogue – were added the breaking of bread and the fellowship of the Upper Room.

Praise: The Jewish Talmud stated, 'Man should always first utter praise and then prayer'. This thought is possibly reflected in 1 Cor 14.26 where a "hymn" (literally a 'psalm') heads the list of contributions. From Eph 5.18 and Col 3.16, with their reference to "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs", we may deduce that the early church experienced a good deal of variety in their praise of God.[14]

Prayer: In the synagogue, praise moved into prayer with the 'Eighteen Blessings' which covered a wide variety of intercessions and petitions. Acts 2.42 suggests that in Jerusalem at least, prayer was a hallmark of early Christian

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[12] According to Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* 690: "Like all the former lists in these chapters, this final one is ad hoc; it is intended neither to give the 'order' of service nor to be exhaustive of what 'each one has' to offer by way of ministry." Over against Gordon Fee, Roy Ciampa & Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* 709, 710, have strongly argued against the assumption that any Spirit-inspired utterance must be spontaneous: "A 'hymn' could be a known composition or something fresh, but there is no reason to assume it was spontaneous (or to rule out that the Spirit might produce on spontaneously). A 'word of instruction' [NRSV 'lesson'] presumably reflects time in reflection and study. A 'revelation' may be given during the time of worship, but there is no reason to assume that people would not bring to the service a revelation that they had received during the week. Even a 'tongue' (and possibly its 'interpretation') could have been given in advance of the meeting and repeated in the gathering… Spontaneity or the lack thereof does not seem to play any significant part in Paul's discussion of these gifts."

[13] Trevor Lloyd, *Introducing Liturgical Change* (Grove, Bramcote, Nottingham 1987) 17.

[14] It is not possible to distinguish clearly between 'psalms', 'hymns' and 'songs' – they are the most common words used in the LXX for religious songs. They describe, wrote E. Lohse, "the full range of singing which the Spirit prompts" – quoted by Peter T. O' Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* 396. The creativity of the early church is shown in some of the early Christian hymns found in the New Testament: e.g. Phil 2.6-11; Col 1.15-20; 1 Tim 3.16.

worship.[15] Paul likewise expected the churches he pastored to take prayer seriously: he urges Timothy to ensure that "supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings should be made for everyone" (1 Tim 2.1-2).[16]

Scripture: An essential ingredient of synagogue worship was the readings from the Law and the Prophets. 1 Tim 4.13 indicates that the early church also made much of Scripture reading.[17] As Paul, with the Old Testament primarily in mind, says to Timothy: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3.16).

Sermon: The Jews called their synagogues 'houses of instruction'. People gathered together to learn from the word of God. After the Scriptures had been read, they were expounded. Likewise 'teaching' formed an essential element of Christian worship (Acts 2.42; 1 Cor 14.26). As far as Paul was concerned, the role of pastor included the role of teacher (Eph 4.11; see also 2 Tim 4.1).

Breaking of bread: It was in the context of the Upper Room that Jesus broke bread, poured out wine and said: "Do this in remembrance of me." Ever since, the Lord's Supper has been a central act of Christian worship (see Acts 2.42; 20.7; 1 Cor 11.17-34).

Fellowship: The last Supper was a fellowship meal. This sense of fellowship was fostered whenever the first Christians came together, for when they broke bread, they broke bread within the context of a meal (see 1 Cor 11.17-34). It is not insignificant that Luke describes fellowship as a hallmark of their life together (Acts 2.42; see also 2.46).

Order and creativity are desirable

In a context where worship at Corinth could be somewhat chaotic Paul commanded that "all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14.40). For Paul "the Spirit of ardour is also the Spirit of order."[18] As Alan Johnson said: "There is a great need for churches today to be balanced between the spontaneous creativity of the Spirit and the ordered, fitting flow of the service"[19] – although I would wish to make clear that the ordered can be as much Spirit-led as the spontaneous.

So much depends upon the context in which we find ourselves as to where the emphasis between creativity and order should be placed. In some charismatic contexts, the emphasis needs to be on order. Within such a context Graham Kendrick wrote: "There have been those who believe that unless a Christian meeting is totally unplanned and spontaneous, that it cannot be Spirit-led. This belief, however, only results in the subtle emergence of an 'unwritten structure', where people's own habits and favourite songs rise to the surface, and mediocrity and predictability creep in once more."[20] On the other hand, in more institutionalised settings there needs to be a greater openness to the Spirit's power and presence. Richard Hays wrote: "Paul pictures a church in which all the members wait together on the moving of the Spirit, and all take responsibility for discerning what God is saying to them. Could our churches learn to listen to the Spirit in this way? If we did, would we stand to gain something that has been lost? Might many members of our churches discover a new openness to the power of the Spirit working through them? Could we on some occasions experience worship as a graceful extemporaneous dance of the whole body?"[21]

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[15] Literally, Luke says that the church at Jerusalem devoted themselves to "the prayers". David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* 162, commented: "The plural form with the article in Greek suggests that the reference is to specific 'prayers' rather than prayer in general."

[16] The distinction between the first three types of prayer is not clear. According to Ben Witherington, *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy & 1-3 John* 212, if there are differences, we should perhaps think of general supplications, then prayer for others, and then petitions for self – "In any event, Paul wants all sorts of prayers for all people."

[17] Literally Paul writes: "Devote yourself to the public reading" – but clearly Scripture is in view. The underlying Greek word (*anagnosis*) is used of the priests reading from the law in Ezra's day (Neh 8.8 LXX), of Jesus reading from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4.16), and of the Old Testament in general which was read in synagogue worship (e.g. Acts 13.15; 15.21). Paul directed that the churches should read his letters aloud in the Christian assembly (1 Thess 5.27; Col 4.16). An account of the public reading of Scripture in the 2nd century is given by Justin Martyr: "On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then when the reader has finished, the president speaks, instructing and exhorting the people to imitate these good things" (*First Apology* I.67).

[18] Roy Ciampa & Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* 735 quoting D.E. Garland.

[19] Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians* (IVP, Leicester 2004) 278.

[20] Graham Kendrick, *Ten Worshipping Churches* (Marc, London 1987) 16.

[21] Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* 250.

In this regard, primarily on the basis of 1 Cor 11-14 Stuart and Sian Murray Williams have powerfully argued the case for "multi-voiced worship", which means "equipping many voices to express praise to God in many ways, to share their own stories as they retell the big story of God, and to express the full range of human emotions as they pour out their hearts to God in prayer."[22] Multi-voiced worship is what used to be called 'open worship' or 'body ministry'. Although this reduces a church's dependence upon worship leaders, as the Williams recognise, leadership is still required – for worship cannot be a free for all. This is where cybernetics is needed – the gift of leadership mentioned in 1 Cor 12.28, where the pastor is at the helm, "steering the meeting in such a way that it catches the wind of the Spirit in its sails, and at the same time avoids the dangerous rocks and reefs of self-centredness below"[23]. In practical terms this means:

1. The leader provides a structure, where praise, proclamation and prayer are the three constituent parts. The leader's task is to ensure that due attention is given to each part. Structure also includes a timed process: as Paul himself said: "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Cor 14.32).
2. The leader gives direction, drawing up an 'order' of service, which may well involve asking others before the meeting to give a 'word' or to share a prayer concern. Yet in this context there must always be an openness to the unexpected leading of the Spirit.
3. The leader encourages participation, encouraging people to contribute and share whatever God has laid on their hearts. This is where pastoral knowledge of people concerned can be helpful: from visiting the pastor may know what God has been teaching particular people, and as the leader of the meeting the pastor may actively seek to draw out such a testimony.
4. The leader ensures that at no stage the meeting gets out of control. In a meeting of this kind, there will always be the immature and the unstable, the exhibitionist and the attention seeking, those who have hobby horses to ride, and those who, for one reason or another, wish to take over a meeting. One aspect of controlling ensures that, where appropriate, contributions are weighed and evaluated. It is significant that in the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12.10, the gift of 'prophecy' is immediately followed by the 'gift of 'discernment of spirits'. Likewise if there are tongues, the leader needs to ensure that Paul's guidelines are followed (1 Cor 14.27-29).[24]

It is important to note that such 'open worship' is not possible where large numbers are involved. The larger the church, the more difficult the kind of worship described in 1 Cor 14.26 becomes. Unfortunately Stuart and Sian Murray Williams in their advocacy of 'multi-voiced' worship do not give full weight to the fact that the New Testament churches were house-churches, and therefore that these house churches were limited in size. On the basis or archaeological considerations, the Roman Catholic scholar Murphy-O'Connor estimated that the total number in the Corinthian church was between thirty and fifty people (more likely in the direction of fifty). Robert Banks believed that "a meeting of the 'whole church' may have reached forty to forty-five people – if the meeting spilled over into the atrium then the number could have been greater, though no more than double that size."[25] Group dynamics, let alone personal preference, mean that in a larger church multi-voiced worship has to be limited in the context of Sunday worship. To my mind the home group is a much more fitting context for open worship of this kind.

3. Principles underlying Christian worship

Worship is glorious

Christian worship, declared Karl Barth, "is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in life".[26] Worship is the occasion when we men and women become truly alive; when we humans, made in the image of God, begin to fulfil the very purpose of our existence by relating to the God who made us. It is the moment when we are caught up into heaven itself and join with the multitude around the throne, singing the praises of God and the Lamb. In the words of the ancient *Sursum Corda* ('Lift up your hearts'):

> "Therefore with angels and archangels
> And with all the company of heaven

[22] Stuart and Sian Murray Williams, *Multi-Voiced Church* (Paternoster, Milton Keynes 2012) 7.
[23] Paul Beasley-Murray, *Faith and Festivity: a guide for today's worship leaders* (Marc, Eastbourne 1991) 90, 91.
[24] See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Faith and Festivity* 91-94.
[25] Quoted by Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission* 139n119; also see Andrew Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* 45n11.
[26] Karl Barth, quoted by J.J. Von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology And Practice* (Lutterworth Press, London 1965) 15.

> We proclaim your great and glorious name,
> For ever praising you and saying:
> Holy, holy, holy Lord,
> God of power and might,
> Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
> Hosanna in the highest!"

Worship is the business of heaven. In worship we anticipate the day when, in the words of St Augustine: "We shall do nothing other than ceaselessly repeat Amen and Alleluia with insatiable satisfaction." It is in worship that heaven invades our world, and we discover ourselves in the presence of Almighty God. What an experience! What a privilege!

No doubt all of us can look back on those never-to-be forgotten occasions when God broke into our worship never to be forgotten. The American, Anne Ortland, captures something of the wonder of worship when she writes:

> "Stop and recall [that moment when God was obviously present in worship]. Oh holy, glorious, sweaty-palms time! If you were the leader, you wondered when – how – if you should put a lid on this bubbling pot. One thing is sure: you knew: Oh, God, this is what I was made for. This is stretching and rewarding and fulfilling, deep down in my bones. This is Eternity Business. I'm being caught up into the Important. This is – breaking into glory."[27]

There is no experience which can compare to Christian worship. It is "the most glorious action that can take place in life". Nothing is more important than worship As Ben Witherington writes: "If it is true that worship is what every human being created in the image of God was intended to do, and if it is true that in the End what will happen is that there will be a giant worship-fest in the Kingdom, and if it is true that the last great battle on earth will be about the hearts and minds of humankind and the nature of true worship, then it follows that worship is the most important act that anyone can do on earth."[28]

True worship focuses on God

It is hard for people to see the importance of worship when their experience of worship is generally not glorious. Too often worship is dissatisfying, it is frustrating, it is downright disappointing. God does not break in, boredom breaks out. That's why many people – not least young people – no longer go to church. Church is boring. What's more, it is not just traditional services with Bach chorales which people find boring. The 'contemporary services' with lots of modern praise songs can be equally boring. What has gone wrong?

First of all, in many circles worship has become centred on ourselves: the emphasis is upon our feelings. We spend much of our time telling God how we feel, as an examination of any collection of modern songs quickly reveals. Furthermore, there is a tendency to expect that worship should always make us feel good. Instead of coming to worship God because he is God, we come to worship God because we need a boost. 'Join us for worship', declared a noticeboard outside a church, 'you will feel better for it'. But is that necessarily true? If God is to the fore, we may not initially feel better at all. An encounter with God may actually prove to be painful and may entail a call to sacrifice, commitment and self-denial. In the words of the English Baptist, Ralph Martin: "The call is not so much, 'Smile God loves you' as 'Repent', 'Weep', 'Tremble'."[29]

Secondly, and related to our first point, much contemporary worship has effectively become 'entertainment' and 'consumer-oriented'. This is reflected in the present 'warehouse' 'cave-like' structures favoured by many evangelical churches today, which do away with natural light and instead are modelled on secular places of entertainment.. The architectural focus is no longer on God – but on the performers. I find it significant, for instance, that in a relatively recent trip I made to New Zealand, without exception where I preached in such churches the chief concern was to test my 'sound levels' – and not once was I invited to a pre-service meeting where we could pray God's blessing on the service. The band and the singers dominated the stage: the singers swayed in time to the beat of the drum, and encouraged the congregation to do the same. Church has become religious entertainment: the focus has subtly switched from giving glory to God to making the punters feel good. In all the cave-like churches I visited in New Zealand most of the songs were devoted to telling God how we felt. At no point in the first half hour or so was God

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[27] Anne Ortlund, *Is Your Church Real?* (Regal, California1975) 3-4.
[28] Ben Witherington III, *We have seen His Glory: A Vision of Kingdom Worship* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2011) 162.
[29] Ralph Martin, *The Worship of God* (Paternoster, Exeter 1982) 5.

allowed to speak – Scripture was notable by its absence. 'It's all about me Jesus!' The sense of the numinous was hard to discern. Such 'worship' can produce ecstasy, but is it truly divine? So Andrew Walker and Robin Parry in their powerful critique of such worship write:

> "If we position worship as a form of Christian entertainment we will shape Christians who consume worship as a product; Christians that move from one worship 'high' to the next, chasing one stimulating event after another; Christians that assess how good the worship was by how fuzzy it made them feel; and Christians that will leave one congregation for another with little hesitation if a more entertaining gathering springs up in another church. But this kind of worship is, at rock bottom, all about *me*, and God is approached as if he were under some obligation to keep me happy. He is my drug of choice, but if he gets boring, I'll move on."[30]

Thirdly, much contemporary worship has lost its direction. The sense of movement implicit in some of the traditional orders of service has been abandoned and little of substance has been put in their place. The 'new wine' of the Spirit has proved to be heady stuff. It has burst its old containers. It needs new wineskins, new worship structures, if it is to be contained. Alas, in many non-liturgical churches, worship at times lacks form and therefore lacks direction. Many pastors have abdicated their traditional role of leading worship and handed it over to the church's musicians, without apparently realising that there is a great difference between leading songs and leading worship.

If worship is to be truly satisfying, if worship is to lead into the presence of God, if worship is to provide the norms and inspiration for living, then there must be structure and direction. Freedom without form all too often means that worship becomes an emotional experience, which does not actually meet the needs of the heart. In this context a new sense of liturgy is needed.

True worship gives God the glory

Worship is a giving of ourselves and of our praises to God. Worship is giving God the glory. The English word worship comes from the Saxon *weorthscipe* which became 'worthship' or the acknowledgement of worship. Therefore to worship God means to acknowledge God's worth, to tell him how he actually is, to give him the glory.

Worship is an event in which every worshipper is actively involved. Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher-theologian, used to say that worship is a drama in which the congregation is the actor and God is the audience. In our entertainment-oriented society there is a real danger that the up-front personalities (the pastor, the worship-leader, the band) may appear to be the players rather than those whose task it is to lead the entire congregation to 'perform' (i.e. worship). Hence we may hear such comments from the congregation as: "I didn't get anything from the worship today" or "I really enjoyed the worship today", as if in worship we primarily receive rather than give. However, in the first place worship is for God, and God alone.

Worship inevitably focuses on God. It is a turning away from self and a gazing upon God in such a manner that praise and adoration, confession and penitence, dedication and commitment, are our response. In true worship, God is at the centre. As Ben Witherington rightly pointed out: "If you end up with a nice 'buzz' because of it, that's a bonus and a by-product; it's not what worship is striving for." He went on: "The function of music in worship is not to set the mood or even to rev up the troops, but rather to engage them at the affective level so that their whole beings – body, mind, emotions, will, spirit – are caught up wonder, love and praise."[31]

Andrew Walker and Robin Parry make a similar point: "The more we move our focus away from ourselves toward God, giving him honour whether we get anything from it or not, the more we find that our cup runs over with the wine of divine blessing. Joy is found when we stop pursuing joy and start pursuing God." Indeed, "somewhat provocatively", they describe this "rapturous joy of knowing God" as "Christian hedonism… The pleasure comes when we are not focusing on it but on God. It is in losing ourselves that we find ourselves."[32]

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[30] Andrew G. Walker & Robin A. Parry, *Deep Church Rising: Recovering the Roots of Christian Orthodoxy* (SPCK, London 2014) 98.
[31] Witherington, *We Have Seen His Glory* 16, 17.
[32] Andrew Walker & Robin Parry, *Deep Church Rising* 100.

True worship celebrates God's love for us in Jesus

In Christian worship we come above all to celebrate the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ. We come to praise God for Jesus, crucified and risen.

Let us remind ourselves that the resurrection is the supreme act of God in Christ. As Paul made so clear in 1 Corinthians 15, the Christian faith stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead... Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15.17, 20, 57). Yet, from careful observation, I know that it is possible for a visitor to attend a non-liturgical church and not to hear so much as a whisper about the resurrection, either in the hymns, or in the prayers, or in the sermon. How strange! How is it that the 'community of the resurrection', meeting as it does on the first day of the week, fails to celebrate Sunday by Sunday God's triumph over sin and death, reserving its Easter praises to Easter day alone? Why is it that in many churches Easter hymns are only sung on Easter day?

We do not need to confine our praise to our hymns. There is much to be said for celebrating the faith in our prayers. Although the non-liturgical churches tend not recite the creed, there is no reason why in our prayers we cannot praise God for Christ crucified, risen, ascended, reigning, returning... Here is the 'raw meat' of the Gospel. How anaemic so much prayer is today, centring on peripherals rather on the heart of the Christian faith.

With the general demise of the singing of the old hymns, in which the congregation confessed its faith, I now wonder whether the non-liturgical churches should bring back into Sunday worship some of the great creeds of the church. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, for instance, belong to the whole church and form the basis of our unity in Christ. Creeds, it must be remembered, belong to worship: for through the saying of the creeds we are not simply saying what we believe, but also committing ourselves afresh to the one in whom we believe. At the very least there should be a place for the great acclamation found in the Anglican Eucharistic liturgy: 'Christ has died – Christ is risen – Christ will come again"!

True worship comes to a climax around the Lord's Table

The high point for Christian worship must surely be the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Indeed, one might well argue along with the Roman Catholics and Anglicans that the Lord's Supper should be the central act of worship in the church. It is significant that Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper is given in a context where he is speaking of what takes place when the Corinthians "come together as a church" (1 Cor 11.18). Likewise it would appear that, at Troas at least, the Lord's Supper was celebrated once a week: "On the first day of the week", records Luke, "we came together to break bread" (Acts 20.7).

Unfortunately the Lord's Supper is yet to become truly central in many non-liturgical churches. Baptists, for instance, for all their desire to honour the Scriptures and follow its teaching, are for the most part non-sacramental in their worship.[33] Maybe they need to take note of John Calvin, who regarded infrequent communion as "an invention of the devil". The French Reformed scholar, J.J. von Allmen, was of the decided opinion that "the absence of the Eucharist shows contempt for grace."[34]

When Baptists do get round to holding a communion service, they often find it difficult to truly celebrate the faith. The emphasis is on remembering Jesus and his cross, and so in their mind's eye they rightly look back and see Christ hanging on that cruel cross, a pain-racked victim bearing the sins of the world. However, such an emphasis, though important and vital, can become one-sided. For around the Table we are called not just to look back to the Christ who died, but to encounter the Christ who rose from the dead. We may not believe in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the 'real presence' of Christ, and yet, as the Emmaus couple discovered, Christ can be truly present among us as we break bread and drink wine (Luke 24.30-31). Furthermore, this risen Lord Jesus has promised to return again in glory: indeed, the Apostle Paul calls us to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11.26). The Lord's Supper is an anticipation of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (see Matt 26.29), when there shall be an end to suffering and to death; when we shall be reunited with our loved ones and all God's people; and when, above all, we shall be united with God himself (Rev 21.3-4). What a cause for celebration!

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[33] Christopher Ellis, *Gathering* 191, 192 suggests that Baptist resistance to more frequent celebrations of the Supper "may partly be because the quietism of the service is at odds with the upbeat mood of much Sunday worship. Like many evangelicals, they are determinedly activist and the reflective and unvaried nature of the Supper may only be sustainable on a monthly basis."

[34] J.J. von Allmen 156.

How can this note of celebration be blended with the serious and sombre task of remembering? The cross cannot be isolated from the resurrection, nor the resurrection from the cross. Alas, in many Baptist churches, almost immediately after the bread and wine have been served, the service is brought to a hasty end, with little if any time allowed for the necessary journey from the cross to the resurrection and beyond. Time needs to be made for worship to build up and to come to a climax – not least in a final hymn of triumph to the risen, ascended and reigning Lord Jesus.

But there is a more serious development taking place in many evangelical churches committed to the development of contemporary worship, and that is what I can only call 'the dumbing down' of communion. In some places communion has become a 'self-service buffet', where worshippers help themselves to bread and wine – or, as in the case of one American church, Kool-Aid and cheese crackers. Ben Witherington tells of how at this American church, a visiting 'seeker' went up to the senior minister after the service and said: "You know what I really liked about the service?" "No", the minister answered. "I liked it that, in the middle, we stopped and had snacks." Reflecting on this encounter, the minister said later: "An unacceptable image arose in my mind during this conversation: 'This is my snack, given for you'." The Lord's Supper had been trivialised. Indeed, comments Witherington: "Some would say that sacrilege happened that day in that church."[35] Sadly this is not an extreme one-off case. In many places we now have the phenomenon of "fast food worship, welcome to MacEucharist."[36] In many churches there is no longer a formal corporate prayer of thanksgiving for God's salvation symbolised in bread and wine. In some churches instead of one central communion table, there are a host of small tables to which people are invited to go and help themselves to bread and wine; in one church I worshipped at there was no table whatsoever, instead the bread and wine were put on the floor; while in another church the bread and wine were taken out of a drawer!

In many churches the Lord's Supper is no longer the climax to worship, but is squeezed into the main service before the sermon. Yet if we wish to pattern ourselves on the early church, then the death of the Lord needs to be proclaimed before we eat bread and wine; the good news of Jesus needs to be preached from the Scriptures – otherwise there is a danger that the eating of bread and the drinking of wine becomes an empty rite.[37] But even where the Lord's Supper follows the sermon, there is no guarantee that it has meaning. Some years ago I was present at a service in a large Baptist church where immediately after the bread and wine had been served in a most cursory manner, the minister declared on draining his cup, 'The service is over. You are all invited to have a cup of tea in the hall at the back of the church'. There was no pastoral prayer for the needs of the fellowship (as has been customary in Baptist churches), no final hymn of triumph, no benediction or sharing of the Grace together. We had just 'done' communion! We had eaten bread and wine but I doubt whether many of us that day had met with the Lord. I am not against change, for change is both inevitable and necessary; but where change involves throwing the baby out with the bathwater, then such change needs to be resisted.[38]

What can be done? In the first place, pastors need to preach and teach more about the Lord's Supper. Over the years I have discovered that even among Christians of long standing there is widespread ignorance of what they should be going through their mind as they take part in the Lord's Supper. New Christians in particular need instruction.[39] Pastors need to help their people understand that it is the *Lord*'s Supper, that as the host the Lord Jesus invites us to come to his Table: "He welcomes us to have fellowship or communion with him over this meal. Jesus calls us to eat with him and to do so not as individuals alone together like customers in McDonald's but as a family at table. It really is a meal of 'Holy *Communion*'."[40] Members of the congregation need to realise that this is not just an 'ordinance' laid down by our Lord for us to observe, but a 'sacrament', a 'means of grace' by which the Lord Jesus blesses us with his very self. Pastors need to help their people to reflect on what it actually means to feed on Christ by faith (John 6.54). To quote Andrew Walker and Robin Parry again:

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[35] Witherington, *We Have Seen His Glory* 147, 148.

[36] Walker & Parry, *Deep Church Rising* 146

[37] When Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes," (1 Cor 11.26), he was not referring to the acts of eating and drinking, but rather to the telling of the story of the salvation that Jesus brings, just as Jews coming together for the Passover meal listened first to the story of their salvation as embodied in figures such as Abraham and Moses.

[38] For those wanting to enrich their communion services, see *For You and for Many: contemporary additional texts for celebrating the Lord's Supper* (Kevin Mayhew, Stowmarket 2004) by Baptist minister, Nick Fawcett.

[39] See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Baptism, Belonging and Breaking of Bread: Preparing for Baptism* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 2010).

[40] Walker & Parry, *Deep Church Rising* 152.

> "When you eat or drink something it enters right into the depths of you – it brings you life – it becomes part of you… Jesus speaks of drinking his blood and eating his flesh as a metaphor for taking his very life deep into our own spiritual lives by faith. We are united with him – his life becomes our life."[41]

True worship is more than celebration

For all the emphasis on celebration, we need to recognise that worship involves more than celebrating the faith. In the Church of England liturgy for morning and evening prayer, the minister normally begins the service by saying:

> "We have come together in the name of Christ
> to offer our praise and thanksgiving,
> to hear and receive God's holy word,
> to pray for the needs of the world,
> and to seek the forgiveness of our sins,
> that by the power of the Holy Spirit,
> we may give ourselves to the service of God.[42]"

My observation is that while charismatic renewal has caused many churches to rediscover the note of celebration in worship, it has also resulted in the same churches giving up on confessing their sin, on praying for others, and on hearing God's Word. Let me explain.

We seek the forgiveness of our sins

As a pastor my experience is that Sunday by Sunday people need to be assured that their sins are forgiven. Unlike our Anglican counterparts, Baptist and other ministers may not feel the need to act as priests and to pronounce 'absolution' on those who confess their sins – but on the basis of God's Word we can assure our people that with Jesus there is always a new beginning, for "the blood of Jesus God's Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1.7). Yet for some reason many pastors deprive their people of this grace. Indeed, one unhelpful by-product of charismatic renewal in non-liturgical churches is that there are often no prayers of confession at all. I find this strange. Maybe this is an indication that in our services we are not truly focusing on God. For if we focus on God and what he has done for us in Jesus, then surely we become conscious of our own unworthiness and sinfulness. Adoration and thanksgiving inevitably lead to penitence. In the words of the prophet Isaiah: "I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted… 'Woe to me!' I cried, 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the king, the Lord Almighty'" (Isaiah 6.1, 5). In Isaiah's vision 'confession' was followed by 'absolution': a seraph touched Isaiah's mouth with one of the live coals and said: "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned" (Isaiah 6.7). Likewise in Christian worship the congregation needs to confess their sins and to be assured of their forgiveness in Christ.[43]

We pray for the needs of the world

Many churches have given up on praying for others. Or if they do pray for others, then it is mostly for others known to them: they pray for the needs of the fellowship, for Aunt Agatha's toe-nail, and somehow forget the needs of the wider world. If the truth be told, they do not really love the world. For if they loved, they would pray (see Matt 5.43, 44). The breadth and intensity of our praying reveals the breadth and intensity of our loving.

The Scriptures make it clear that we are to pray for the world and its needs. Paul's words to Timothy come particularly to mind: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers and intercession be made for everyone – for kings and all

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[41] Walker & Parry, *Deep Church Rising* 156.

[42] *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (Church House Publishing, London 2000) 30, 38. A slightly different rendering, but with the same content, is found in the order of Morning and Evening Worship in *A New Zealand Prayer Book of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia* (Genesis, Christchurch, NZ, 3rd edition 2002) 35: "Let us celebrate God's majesty, and delight in the wonder of God's love. Together we shall confess our sins and receive assurance that we are forgiven. As the Scriptures are read, we can allow God's word to speak to us, and ponder its meaning for our lives. In our prayers we give thanks for God's goodness, we pray for others."

[43] See Andrew Atherstone, *Confessing our Sins* (Grove, Cambridge 2004) 6: "Corporate confession… is a way of expressing publicly the importance of repentance in the Christian life and should be revitalised rather than neglected."

those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in godliness and holiness" (1 Tim 2.1-2). Dick Williams, an Anglican priest, wrote in his introduction to his collection of prayers: "The range of every congregation's intercession must be as wide as the mass media's coverage. Indeed, it should be wider."[44] His prayers reflect that width – there are prayers for entertainers, drop-outs, novelists, composers, psychiatrists, and even for space travel. How his prayers contrast with the prayers heard in many an independent church today.

Over the years I have always encouraged different members to lead the prayers of intercessions. However, they were not left to their own devices. In written instructions given to them they were asked to divide their prayers into three and pray for the church (local or overseas); the nation (or local community); and the world.[45]

We hear and receive God's holy word

Baptists and many other evangelicals in independent churches regard themselves as 'Bible-believing' Christians. However, strange to say, the more 'Bible-believing' a church might claim to be, the less Scripture seems to have a place. By contrast, Scripture plays an important role in the great state churches, where liturgy is to the fore. In an Anglican communion service, for instance, there are normally three readings: from the Old Testament, the Epistles and the Gospels – this does not include any psalms that may be sung, nor the Ten Commandments that may be read. Yet in some Baptist churches Scripture has been unconsciously marginalised: often only a few verses of Scripture are read before the preacher then launches into a lengthy sermon. We need to 'Bring back the Bible' into our worship. We need to remember the words of John Wesley: "Although there may be chaff in the pulpit, there is always good grain at the lectern."

In the two churches I have pastored we always had at least two Scripture readings: normally one from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament. Sometimes as we heard the one reading interpret the other reading, I felt like doing away with the sermon all together. For God had already spoken through the reading of his Word. In addition we would often intermingle our worship with other passages of Scripture – some verses from a Psalm, for instance – to enrich and stimulate our worship.

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[44] R.H.L.Williams (editor), *Prayers for Today's Church* (CPAS, London 1972).

[45] *Common Worship* specifies a five-fold sequence for the prayers of intercession, viz.: the Church of Christ; creation, human society, the Sovereign and those in authority; the local community; those who suffer; the communion of saints. See also *How to… Lead the Prayers: A Training Course* (Grove, Cambridge 2002) by Anna de Lange and Liz Simpson who conclude with a brief list of final instructions:
"Pray thankfully (1 Timothy 2.1); Pray briefly… avoid long, drawn-out details; Pray clearly… use words and ideas people will know; Pray specifically… ask God to do definite things; Pray expectantly… something's going to happen; Pray humbly… you do not have all the answers. (2 Chronicles 7.14); Pray boldly… that is our privilege (1 John 5.14); Avoid using prayers to teach people points you think they need to know."

Sermon: Worship that pleases God (John 4.21-24)

For most people, even for most Christians, worship is about pleasing self.[46] We choose a church because of its worship. For some, the attraction of a church will be found in its choral music, and so they go to a place like King's College Cambridge and they are lifted into the presence of God through the sheer power and beauty of the worship offered there. For others, the attraction of a church will be found in the style and professionalism of the worship band, and so they go to a place like Hillsong, and they are lifted up into the presence of God through the power and energy of the worship offered there. For all I know there are some of you here tonight because you are attracted by the kind of worship that we offer. True, we are not King's College, Cambridge nor Hillsong, but in spite of our limitations there are times when the worship really does lift us into the presence of God.

There is something wrong with our worship, if worship is about pleasing us. First and foremost in our worship we should be seeking to please God. As Rick Warren put it: "Worship is not for our benefit… We worship for God's benefit. When we worship, our goal is to bring pleasure to God and not to ourselves." [47]

1. True worship has God at the centre

Worship is not about us and our feelings – or if it is then it is false worship. True worship is centred on God, and is intent on bringing him pleasure.

The Bible passage for this evening is John 4.21-24. It is part of a long conversation Jesus has at Jacob's well with a Samaritan woman. The conversation gets off to a wonderful start about the life-giving water Jesus has to offer. The woman is deeply attracted to Jesus, although not in a sexual way. She clearly is desperate to find meaning and fulfilment in her life. The conversation becomes a little embarrassing as Jesus reveals that he knows all about her failed relationships with men. So she tries to change the subject and begins to talk about worship. "I see you are a prophet, sir… My Samaritan ancestors worshipped God on this mountain, but you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place where we should worship God" (4.19, 20). In effect she asks Jesus: 'Where is the best place to worship God? Is it on Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worshipped God, or on Mount Zion, where the Jews worshipped God?' In our terms, is it in one of the great traditional cathedrals with all the wonderful liturgy, or is it in one of the newer churches with all the life and energy of contemporary worship?

Jesus replies: "The time is coming and is already here, when by the power of God's Spirit people will worship the Father as he really is, offering him the true worship that he wants. God is Spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people worship him as he really is" (4.23-24). The issue, says Jesus, is not where you worship – but whom. True worship is not about place, it is about the expression of a relationship. God needs to be at the centre of our worship. In the first instance, we need to seek to please God, rather than ourselves.

Look at the words of Jesus: "the true worship that he (i.e. God) wants" (4.23). The NRSV speaks of God 'seeking' people to worship God aright: "the Father seeks such as these to worship him." That's an amazing thought: God wants our worship! God says: "Come and worship me" (Psalm 27.8). Our worship is important to him.

Therefore in worship we should be seeking to please him. If we took that seriously, our approach to worship would perhaps become very different. True worship has God at the centre. In worship we acknowledge the worth of God, and celebrate who God is and what he has done for us. Worship is all about putting God at the centre.

In some churches, the choir and the organ are at the centre of the worship; in other churches, the singers and the band. They are at the centre in the sense that they are the attraction, essentially offering to us, the congregation, sacred entertainment. But we've got it wrong. There is only one person we should be seeking to please, and that is God. As Søren Kierkegaard used to say, worship is a drama in which the congregation is the actor and God is the audience. When he said the congregation, he had in mind not just the punters in the pews, but the clergyman in his cassock and the choir in their robes. Or in our terms, the congregation includes the worship band; for the worship band is not performing for our sakes; we together with the worship band, are seeking to perform for God's sake.

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[46] I preached this sermon at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford on February 25, 2007. Scripture quotations are from the GNB.
[47] Rick Warren*, The Purpose Driven Life* 66.

Worship is about giving of ourselves to God. For that reason we should never say, 'I didn't get anything out of the service' – we weren't intended to. Worship is all about pleasing God.

Alas, in our debates about worship, we focus on secondary matters: as if what really matters is the type of song we sing, and how we sing the song; whether we sing a number of songs one after another; and at what stage we sing the songs. There is no one right way to worship God. God doesn't care two hoots whether we worship him with a Bach chorale or a modern song – dare I say it, God is tone-deaf. What he wants is our worship.

2. True worship arises from the Spirit

"God is Spirit, and only by the power of the Spirit can people worship him." Or in the more literal translation offered by the NRSV: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit." In the GNB the Spirit is spelt with a capital 'S' and is a reference to God the Holy Spirit; whereas in the NRSV spirit is not capitalised, nor is the definite article present. What does it mean to worship God "in Spirit"? Is it big S or small s?

I remember as a child being told the story of an Anglican clergyman who while saying the words of committal at the graveside, cleaned his nails. This, the implication was, is the kind of thing that happens when you use a prayer book. Set prayers and set services, are unspiritual. The Spirit is only present when free extempore prayer is offered. The Spirit, so the argument went, is only found in immediate spontaneous forms of worship. But that is a nonsense. The Spirit can also be at work in worship that is carefully prepared and thought-through. After all, we speak of the Scriptures being 'Spirit-inspired', but much of Scripture has gone through a long process of careful construction. What is true of Scripture, is true of sermons. Heaven help you if you were dependent upon the Spirit inspiriting me in the moment of my delivering the sermon! Neither liturgical nor free worship is necessarily more spiritual than the other. They are but different forms of worship.[48]

The key to worship is that it is offered "in the Spirit" – big S: i.e. that it arises from our hearts, hearts which have been touched by the Spirit of God. "God is Spirit" and in the Bible the Spirit is above all the life-giver. At the very beginning of creation God through his Spirit swept through and gave form and substance to our world. In the new creation God through his Spirit causes us to be born again. The Spirit is the life-giver; and he it is who gives life to our worship.

But worship is also offered 'in spirit' – small 's'. "God is spirit", in the sense that he is not visible or tangible. He is not restricted to a particular form. Neither is he restricted to a particular form of worship. Spiritual worship is worship of the heart and will. If God is at the centre of true worship, true worship will emanate from the centre of our beings. Inevitably, such spiritual worship is invisible and intangible, like God himself. Onlookers cannot determine whether worship is truly spiritual.

A sign of spiritual worship may well be that it touches the emotions. Enthusiastic worship may be a sign that God the Spirit is at work. The 'enthusiasm' is derived from the Greek – 'in God'. Yet, emotions can be misleading, and can be an expression of superficial emotionalism. We only have to think of the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. What counts is not how we express our worship, but rather from where our worship comes. It needs to come from the innermost parts of our being.

3. True worship responds to the truth in Jesus

"God is Spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people worship him as he really is": or in the more literal translation of the NRSV: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

If God is Spirit, and as such is invisible, how can we worship him "as he really is"? The answer is found in his Son. If we want to know the truth of God, we need to look to Jesus. "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (1.18). No wonder John prefaces that statement with the words: "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1.17). Jesus is the truth, for he alone reveals the truth about God.

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[48] See Walker & Parry, *Deep Church Rising* 107: "To extemporise prayer is often to dip into a compendium of well-worn religious clichés strung together with as much familiarity and repetition as monks reciting the Office together, or a sisterhood of nuns telling the rosary. Extempore prayers can be personal and profound but they can also be hackneyed and shallow."

I find it significant that immediately after Jesus declares: "God is Spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people worship him as he really is", the Samaritan woman said to him: "I know that the Messiah will come, and when he comes, he will tell us everything" (4.25). Unwittingly she hit the nail on the head. Jesus has told us "everything"; or at least, everything we need to know about God.

To worship God in truth is therefore to worship God "as he really is". This means that if true worship centres on God, it centres on the God who has made himself known to us in Jesus. What's more, it is the God who has above all made himself known in Jesus who died for us on the Cross and who rose for us on the third day.

Notice the way in which Jesus introduces the theme of true worship. "The time is coming and now is already here, when by the power of God's Spirit people will worship the Father as he really is" (4.23). Literally Jesus says, "the hour (*hora*)" is coming and now is here. This is an expression which comes up time and again in John's Gospel and is always associated with the death of Jesus and with his subsequent exaltation: e.g. in 12.23, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem the Greeks came to look for Jesus, Jesus declares: "the hour has now come for the Son of Man to receive glory"; in 12.27 the "hour" is the "hour of suffering"; in 13.1 John begins his account of the Last Supper: "It was now the day before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that his hour had come."

There in the darkness of the Cross as also in the light of Easter Day we begin to see God as he really is: a God who loves us, who sent his Son for us, and who by his Spirit now offers life to us. It is when we begin to see God as he really is, that we in turn want to respond by giving our all to him in worship. True worship arises from the truth as seen in Jesus. Surely no more fitting a place for worship, therefore, is here, around the Table of the Lord.

True worship, then, has God the Father at its centre, arises from the Spirit, and responds to the truth in Jesus. True worship is Trinitarian in structure. In the words of Mark Stibbe: "True worship is paternal in focus (the Father), personal in origin (the Son), and pneumatic in character (the Spirit)."[49]

Sincere and spiritual worship

William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, in his commentary on the call of Jesus to worship him in spirit and in truth gives this tremendous definition of what he terms "sincere and spiritual worship".[50]

> "Worship is the submission of all our nature to God.
> It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness;
> the nourishment of mind with His truth;
> the purifying of imagination by His beauty;
> the opening of the heart to His love;
> the surrender of will to his purpose –
> and all of this gathered up in adoration,
> the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable
> and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centredness
> which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin."

True worship is about pleasing God; and we please God when we offer all that we are to him.

[49] Mark Stibbe, *John* 64.
[50] William Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel* 67.

4. Creative worship and celebration

Celebrating the Lord's Supper with children present

In the Anglican Church there is nothing novel about children being present at the Lord's Supper – it is the norm. In many Anglican churches children will often share in eating bread and drinking wine. However, in most Baptist churches it is rare for children to be present at communion, and as a general rule children brought up within a Baptist church do not take communion until they have been baptised.[51] Nonetheless there is a lot to be said for making it possible for children occasionally to be present and to see what is involved. If this is to happen, then it is helpful for the pastor to create a child-friendly form of communion. Here is an example of such a service, which involves far more responses than would be normal in most Baptist churches – even the prayer of thanksgiving is a responsive prayer.

> As we come to celebrate the Lord's Supper this morning, I shall lead you in a series of responsive readings – please read the words which are in **bold type**.
>
> Jesus invites us to come to him. The Lord Jesus says:
> **"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest**
> **Come to me, all of you who are thirsty, and you will never thirst again.**
> **Come to me all you who are hungry, and you will never be hungry again."**
>
> Jesus invites us all, young and old, to come to him. In particular he invites you children to come and know his love. As the bread is served we invite you to come forward and receive a blessing. Parents with babies are also welcome to bring their children to be blessed.
>
> Jesus wants us to remember him.
> The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread. He thanked God and, as he broke it, said: "This is my body, broken for you. Do this to remember me"
> **Thank you Jesus for loving me**
>
> After the supper Jesus took the cup and said: "This is my blood, the blood of the new covenant, poured out for you. Do this to remember me."
> **Thank you Jesus for loving me**
>
> Let us continue to thank Jesus for his love.
> You went to Calvary, there you died for me
> **Thank you Jesus for loving me**
> You rose up from the grave, to me new life you gave
> **Thank you Jesus for loving me**
> You're coming back again, and we with you shall reign
> **Thank you Jesus for loving me.**
>
> We remember Jesus as we break bread.
> The Bread is broken and distributed. Children are invited to come forward for prayer
> Together we say: **The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me**
>
> We remember Jesus as we drink wine.
> The wine is served – and a song is sung as the cups are distributed
> Together we say: **By the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God!**
>
> Let us pray for our church: "O God, make the doorway of this house of prayer wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship; and narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, or barrier to the elderly and disabled. Let its door be

[51] See *Gathering around the Table: Children and Communion* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 2010).

rugged and strong to turn back the tempter's power, but open and inviting to those who are your guests. O God, make this house of prayer the door to your eternal kingdom" (Anon)

Celebrating diversity of race and culture

In the UK on the second Sunday in September, designated as 'Racial Justice Sunday', churches are asked 'to reflect on racial justice issues, to pray for a Christian response, and to make a commitment to work for justice'. Although as Christians we need to be passionate for justice, the term 'Racial Justice Sunday' implies to me a degree of negativity. A more positive approach would be to celebrate racial diversity – for where diversity is appreciated, there justice is more likely. Of course, we need to be concerned for injustice, of course we need to pray for the disadvantaged, of course we need to be reminded from the Scriptures that we are all one in Christ Jesus. However, above all we need to celebrate the rich diversity of race and culture we are able to enjoy in Britain; and not limit such celebrations to once a year.

I commend the practice of holding international Sundays three times a year, allowing the worship of the day to be enriched through the contributions of people from other cultures. Here I have in mind not just listening to Black Gospel choirs or watching Asian dancers, but giving an opportunity for people from other cultures to lead worship. Within many churches in our larger cities, this is already the norm – in places like London there are probably more black than white-majority churches.[52] However, where churches are still white-majority it can be a real blessing to sing African worship songs, and even dance Congolese-style around the church!

Celebrating special Sundays and occasions in the church

In the compass of this book we cannot do justice to all the 'specials'. Let me therefore give just a few examples of creativity in worship

Celebrating Christmas

For most people, Christmas is a wonderfully happy time – but not for all. In our Christmas prayers we need to remember those for whom Christmas is difficult

> "Our Father God, we praise you for the wonder of Jesus entering our world and sharing our human condition. He knows what it is like to be depressed and troubled in heart, to be misunderstood by family and friends and because he knows he understands. We bless you that he can offer help and strength to those for whom life is dark and bleak. In that knowledge we pray for all for whom this Christmas is a time of sadness and of pain. We remember those who have lost loved ones this past year and for whom the empty place at the Christmas table will re-open past wounds; those who have gone through the pain of marriage breakdown, and who on Christmas Day will be without their children; families for whom coming together exacerbates all the old tensions. For all those for whom Christmas only makes their unhappiness all the worse, Lord, we pray, give them special grace to help in their time of need."

Celebrating Good Friday

Good Friday is a day marked by solemn services of one kind or another, which generally exclude children. But Jesus died for children too. What about creating a Good Friday service for children? Recently I experienced a service at the international Anglican church in Beirut, where for one hour the children (together with their parents) focused on the Cross. But it did not feel like a service. We began by looking at the vicar's wide-ranging collection of crosses and in a simple way he emphasised that 'God loves me'. The children were then given an opportunity to make or draw their own crosses. We came back to sing a couple of songs and ended praying together a beautiful prayer of forgiveness. That was it! It was a moving experience and a challenging experience too, for I realised that over all my years of

[52] See David Wise, 'Multi-Ethnic Worship', *Ministry Today* 63 (Spring 2015) 23-28 who describes how he and his fellow leaders at Greenford Baptist Church, West London, have enabled members of their congregation to use their 'heart music' to worship God, not only on their own, but as part of a gathered church, a foretaste of heaven. Songs are sung in a variety of languages and styles; languages other than English are used in prayer and Bible reading; worship often involves movement,from energetic West African-style dancing all the way through to slow, deliberate Asian-style worship.

ministry I had never sought to help children focus on the Cross in Holy Week. It is as if the message of Good Friday is for adults only.

Celebrating Easter Day

In most churches the highlight of Easter Day is the congregation shouting out the traditional Easter greeting: *The Lord is risen – He is risen indeed – Hallelujah!* But there are ways and ways in which the greeting can be given. There is much to be said for building up to a crescendo in the following manner:

> Leader: *The Lord is risen!*
> The people: *He is risen indeed!*
> Leader: *The Lord is risen!*
> The people: *He is risen indeed!*
> Leader: *The Lord is risen!*
> The people: *He is risen indeed!*
> Together: *Hallelujah!*

I love also to use the following prayer:

> "Lord Jesus, we praise you that nothing could keep you in the grave.
> Death couldn't defeat you! Evil couldn't defeat you!
> Fear couldn't defeat you! Sin couldn't defeat you!
> Lord Jesus, we praise you and celebrate your victory.
> Help us in turn to share your victory.
> Forgive us our sins. Remove our fears.
> Strengthen us in the face of evil. Lead us through death into life
> And to you, our Risen, Reigning Lord, be all the glory. Amen."[53]

Celebrating Pentecost

A few years ago a bright twelve year old girl in my church showed me a copy of a presentation she had made for her school on the Christian faith. It featured the two main Christian festivals: Christmas and Easter. There was also material on Advent and Lent, but there was nothing on Pentecost. She had attempted to expound the doctrine of the Trinity, but there was nothing about the coming of the Spirit and of the way in which the Spirit transforms lives. I felt rebuked. For all her life I had been this girl's pastor. Yet, in spite of her coming Sunday by Sunday to our church, it was clear that Pentecost just did not feature. In the light of this experience, I believe that we need to make more of Pentecost, in such a way that it impacts upon everybody, young and old alike. We need to encourage our congregations to come dressed in bright clothes: in yellow, red, and gold, colours reminiscent of the fire of the Spirit. We need to ensure that Pentecost is well and truly celebrated as one of the great festivals of the church, reminding the church of the presence of God's Spirit today.

Here are examples of a call to worship and an opening prayer for Pentecost:

> A call to worship: "Today is Pentecost Sunday, the Sunday when we celebrate Jesus' sending of the Holy Spirit to all who love him. Jesus, as he was about to leave this world, said to his disciples: 'When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me'."
>
> A prayer: "Lord Jesus, we thank you that when you left this world to go to live with your Father in heaven, you did not leave us to our own devices, but instead sent your Holy Spirit to help us along life's way. How we need that help: for we are weak, and in our own strength we have not the resources to go your way. Our prayer, therefore, is that you will send your Holy Spirit again into our lives. Holy Spirit, come to us as wind and stir us to new life; come to us as fire and burn away all that is impure; come and make us more like Jesus."

[53] Alas, I cannot find the source for this prayer.

Celebrating All Saints Day

All Saints Day provides a wonderful opportunity to thank God for loved ones who have died in the past year – and in past years too. All Saints Day is always the first day of November. Halloween, as its very name suggests, is the day before All Saints Day. The Anglican lectionary, however, allows the celebration of All Saints on the Sunday nearest to it.

This is a day to invite to church the relatives of all those whose funerals have been taken by the minister over the past year. It is good too to remind those within the church who have lost loved ones (but whose funerals have taken place elsewhere) that this is an opportunity for them also to remember their loved ones: e.g. parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, and anybody who has been special to them.

Within the context of a service drawn up with the needs of the bereaved in mind, there is an opportunity through the Scriptures and the sermon to remind people of the difference that Jesus makes. All this builds up to the highpoint of lighting candles in memory of loved ones. It can be an incredibly moving and cathartic experience. The worship becomes the key vehicle for experiencing God's grace. Here is a liturgy which Evangelical Christians can feel comfortable to use:

> Leader: "We find it hard to let go of our loved ones and leave them in God's keeping. Today I light this candle to remind us that Jesus rose from the dead to bring us God's new life, and that he is the Light of the world. Today let it be a sign of the new life and love of God. We invite everyone who wishes, whether your loved one died in recent years or many years ago, to come and take a candle and light it in memory of your loved one, so demonstrating your faith that all who trust in the risen Christ are in God's safekeeping."
>
> Lighting of candles (accompanied by music with appropriate images projected on the screen).
>
> Leader (after the candles have been lit): **"**We remember, Lord, the slenderness of the thread which separates life from death, and the suddenness with which it can be broken. Help us also to remember that on both sides of that division we are surrounded by your love. Persuade our hearts that when our dear ones die neither we nor they are parted from you. Let us find our peace in you; and in you be united with them in the glorious body of Christ, for you have conquered death, and are alive – our saviour and theirs – for ever and ever."[54]
>
> After a hymn, a benediction: "Let us trust God for the past – for the forgiveness of past sins and the healing of past hurts. Let us trust God for the present – for the meeting of daily needs and for guidance in daily living. Let us trust God for the future – for help with tomorrow's troubles and for the hope of eternal life. So may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be upon us all."[55]

Celebrating God's goodness at the end of a year

There is a simple way of making the Sunday after Christmas, known as a 'Low Sunday', into a 'High Sunday': turn the service over into a 'testimony' service, when people briefly (for three or four minutes) share their experience of God's goodness over the past year! One might speak of the joy of coming to know the Lord through an Alpha course; another of God's encouragement while away at university; a third, perhaps, of her gratitude to God for the gift of a child; while another of the strength received to cope with bereavement. There are all kinds of reasons why people might thank God: a new job, a new home, a new church family; a silver or golden wedding; a healing of relationships or a healing of body. It is good for each testimony to include a verse of Scripture, for while testimonies are inevitably subjective, there is a certain objectiveness about the word of God.

On such a day, the prayers need to be carefully crafted with the time of year in mind: e.g.

> *An opening prayer:* "Let us cast our minds back over the past year and remember the many varied ways in which God has blessed us. Let us thank him in our hearts for all his love and goodness. Let us remember also the hard times – the difficulties or losses we have encountered. Let us thank God for the strength he has supplied, and ask him to help us to continue to grow through these experiences. Let us look ahead to the New Year that will soon be upon us, with all its challenges and opportunities, and ask God to give us the courage

[54] A prayer written by Dick Williams, *Prayers for Today's Church* (CPAS, London 1972) 273.
[55] An adaptation of a benediction contained in *Invocations and Benedictions for Revised Common Lectionary* (Abingdon, Nashville 1998) edited by John Drescher, 130.

and the energy to neither fail him nor one another. Father God, as we look back, we look back with thanksgiving. Even in the darkest of days your goodness and your mercy has followed us; we bless you for every token of your love and grace. As we look back, we also look back with sadness. For in spite of the pattern given to us by your Son, we have been slow to learn of him and reluctant to bear his Cross. As we face the unknown future, we pray that you will take our lives afresh into your keeping and fit us by your grace for whatever lies before us in the days to come."

A prayer seeking God's blessing on others and ourselves: "O God our Father, God of the past and God of the future, God of new beginnings, as we come to the end of one year, we look ahead and ask your blessing on the year lies ahead. Bless our church, as in the coming months we seek to love and care and serve; bless us as we come together to learn and worship; bless us too as we seek to reach out to our community with the good news of Jesus. Bless our world, with all its waste and war and sorrow, yet also with its joys. Today we pray especially for… Lord, how we long that in the year to come our world may become a better and safer place. Bless each one of us here and also all those we love. Bless us as in the coming year we do our work, face our exams, run our households, earn our wages, maintain our business, and enjoy our leisure. Lord of the years, may your blessing be upon the year to come. Give us the resilience to bear its disappointments, energy to seize its opportunities, and openness to discover more of that abundant life which you have promised to us in Jesus your Son."

A benediction: "I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown'. And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way'. May that Almighty hand guide and uphold us all – and so may the blessing of Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon us all."[56]

5. Creative worship and the traditional rites of passage

The three major events of life – birth, marriage and death – are marked by three traditional Christian rites of passages: viz. the christening, the wedding and the funeral. Within the context of a nominal Christian society, these three occasions are often the only time some may darken the door of a church. Such people are often referred to as 'four-wheeler Christians' – the four wheels being provided first by the pram, secondly by the wedding car, and thirdly by the funeral hearse!

A fourth major rite of passage may be found in the rite of 'believer's baptism' (or in churches practising infant baptism, 'confirmation'). Although such a rite may take place at any time of life, often it is the Christian equivalent of a rite of puberty, marking the end of childhood and the entering into at least some of the responsibilities of adulthood.

For all these four rites of passage much guidance and help is afforded to the pastor in a wide variety of service books. There patterns of worship may be found together with additional appropriate Scriptures and prayers. Yet, I have often found it necessary to devise my own liturgies and prayers, or at the very least to make a few amendments. For instance:

A service of thanksgiving, promise-making and blessing

I felt a fresh approach was needed to what Baptists have traditionally called the 'dedication service' and wrote the following preamble, bearing in mind that often many non-Christians are present on such occasions.

"In this service of thanksgiving, promise-making and blessing, we come to do three things.

In the first place we come to thank God for the gift of this new life. Today we affirm publicly that children are not just the result of a man and a woman coming together. Rather we believe that in and through the physical act of conception God is at work. This child is a miracle – s/he is a gift of God.

Secondly, we come to make promises. The parents come to promise not only to love and care for their child, but also to bring up him/her within the Christian community and to share their faith with him/her. Today we

[56] Adapted from words of Minnie Louise Haskins quoted by King George VI at the end of his broadcast to the nation and commonwealth on Christmas Day, 1939.

affirm the key role that parents have in offering security to their children, and within that security allowing children to discover the security we all can have in God. We, the members of this church and the friends of this family, also come to make a promise – a promise to offer our love and care for this family, and to join with the parents in sharing our Christian faith. Today we recognise the important responsibility we have as a church to help young parents and their children. In this church we run all kinds of activities for children and for parents – but activity in itself is not enough. Love in action is what is required.

Thirdly we come to ask God's blessing on this child remembering how the Lord Jesus took little children in his arms and blessed them. In other words, in this service we recognise our need of God in our lives. What a difference it makes when we open up ourselves to God and to all that he has to offer to us!"

The wording of this service with its elements of thanksgiving, promise-making, and blessing presumes that the parents are at the very least Christians, and probably members of the church too. But what happens when this is not the case? There are times when non-Christians want to have their child 'done'. It is hardly appropriate to ask them to promise "to bring up their child within the Christian community and to share their faith with him/her". What then have we to offer them? The promise can be altered to something less specifically Christian, such as: "We want to ask the parents to declare their intention to bring up their child in God's way, recognising that our children will only harm themselves if they don't follow their Maker's instructions."

Giving deeper meaning to baptism through a catechumenate

The early church took the preparation for baptism very seriously. According to the third-century *Apostolic Tradition*, 'catechesis' ('education into faith') was a journey that lasted for three years. The fourth century Synod of Elvira made provision for a five-year 'catechesis'. What a contrast this makes with much baptismal preparation today!

Why did the early church introduce such lengthy baptismal preparation, when on the Day of Pentecost Peter and his fellow apostles happily baptised 3,000 people (Acts 2.41), and when Philip the evangelist did not hesitate to baptise the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.38) within a matter of hours of their 'conversion'? Andrew Walker and Robin Parry supply the answer:

> "They knew that pagan people entering the community were not coming in as blank slates ready to be written on by the Spirit but were coming in already covered in scribbles – long-term exposure to practices and beliefs that the church considered demonic. Such converts were coming already pre-formed, or de-formed, from years of exposure to influences that ran counter to the subversive gospel of God. So the church, especially after it moved into primarily pagan rather than Jewish contexts, did not simply let people straight into the community. Instead, catechesis functions as a kind of decompression chamber that took those seeking entry into the church on a transformative journey, climaxing in baptism and full entry into the Christian community."[57]

Preparing new converts for baptism

Pastors today need to ensure that those requesting baptism understand the implications of the step they wish to take. To do without baptismal preparation is as sensible as to get married without any marriage preparation. Just as it is good to have an interval between the engagement and the wedding, so it is good to have an interval between the initial prayer of commitment and baptism. In my booklet *Radical Disciples: a course for new Christians preparing for baptism* I expected candidates to cover the following subjects:

- Responding to Christ (conversion)
- Obeying Christ (baptism)
- Growing in Christ (Bible reading and prayer)
- Following Christ (the Christian lifestyle)
- Worshipping Christ (including the Lord's Supper)
- Living together in Christ ('one anotherness')
- Living together under the Lordship of Christ (the church)
- Serving Christ (giving of time, talents and treasure)
- Witnessing to Christ
- Expressing Christ's love to others

[57] Andrew Walker & Robin Parry, *Deep Church Rising* 133, 134.

- Belonging to the wider family of Christ. [58]

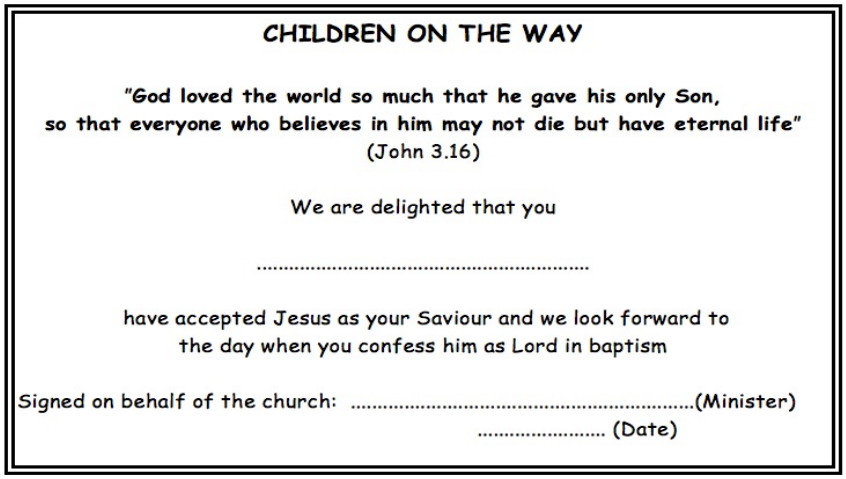
My baptismal courses tended to last ten or so weeks. Such a length of course was fine for people already familiar with church, but I now believe that something much longer and more intensive is needed for people coming to faith from a totally 'pagan' background. In many churches this is already the case: for often an Alpha course is followed by some kind of post-Alpha course. However, what is also needed is a carefully structured course covering all the 'bases' of Christian believing – and this can take time. But so what? The Mennonite Alan Kreider has argued: "As we prepare candidates for baptism today, let the preparations last not six weeks, but sixty weeks, or even ninety weeks, which is only half of what the Apostolic Tradition specifies… Can we in our culture become disciples of Jesus easily, quickly, without mentors, without sacrifice?"[59]

Preparing children for baptism

What do you do when a young child says that they love Jesus and want to be baptised? For Anglicans and other 'paedobaptists', this is no problem. For many Baptists in the USA this is also no problem – a simple 'decision' to follow Jesus is all that is required for baptism. However, baptism is more than telling the world we love Jesus. Baptism is the moment when we publicly die to self and resolve to live for Christ (see Rom 6.3-4; Col 2.12). Baptism presupposes that we have counted the cost and are wanting to go the way of the cross. So in baptism we confess Jesus not just as our Saviour, but also as our Lord. Young children cannot make such a confession with any real depth of meaning; they have yet to learn what it means to bear the weight of the cross.

I accept the reality of child conversion. Jesus said that to enter the kingdom we must "receive the kingdom as a child" (Mark 10.15). Children can and do receive the good news of the Kingdom. I still remember the Sunday evening when I knelt down and asked the Lord Jesus to come into my heart to be my Lord and Saviour. I understood John 3.16 with its call to believe; but I did not understand Mark 8.34 with its call to go the way of the Cross. As a result I had to wait until I was 13 before I was baptised – and rightly so.

Conversion is a process, with baptism marking the end of the first stage of that process. When children accept Jesus as their Saviour, they should be encouraged to join a group of other children who have begun to go the way of Jesus, and there receive appropriate instruction and encouragement prior to the time when they commit themselves fully in the waters of baptism. In other words, they become 'catechumens'. As a sign of their being 'children on the way' they could be given a card featuring the words of John 3.16 and the following statement, dated and signed on behalf of the church by the minister: "We are delighted that you have accepted Jesus as your Saviour and we look forward to the day when you confess him in baptism." In this way the faith of the child would be taken seriously, but so too the nature of believers' baptism.



CHILDREN ON THE WAY

**"God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life"**
(John 3.16)

We are delighted that you

.....

have accepted Jesus as your Saviour and we look forward to
the day when you confess him as Lord in baptism

Signed on behalf of the church: .....(Minister)

..... (Date)

[58] Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Disciples: a course for new Christians preparing for baptism* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot, 1st edition 1996; 2nd edition 2005).

[59] Alan Kreider, 'Baptism and Catechesis as Spiritual formation' 177, 202, in *Remembering our Future: Explorations in Deep Church* (Paternoster, Milton Keynes 2007) edited by Andrew Walker & Luke Bretherton. See also Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making your church a faith-forming community* (Baker, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2003) who argues we need to translate the ancient process of 'catechesis' into evangelical churches – this could result in the renewal of the catechumenate, but it could also take the form of long-term post-baptismal instruction.

When might the child be 'ready' to be baptised? In the Jewish community it is not until a boy reaches the age of 13 and a girl reaches the age of 12 that they are reckoned to be ready to take on the responsibilities associated with being a *bar mitzvah* ('son of the law') or a *bat mitzvah* ('daughter of the law'). Although I have baptised a couple of children as young as 12, I believe that for most young people it is not until they reach mid-adolescence that they begin to understand the cost of discipleship.

At this point I differ from my father, who wrote:

> "The word of Jesus about the children must be taken seriously, and we must guard against equating faith with the knowledge that can pass examinations on Christian doctrine. Jesus said that to enter the kingdom we must 'receive the kingdom as a child', i.e. we must receive the good news of the kingdom as a child receives it. That has the corollary that a child who receives the good news of the kingdom should take its place among the people of the kingdom... Baptism is faith in Christ coming to overt expression. There is no theological bar to a child with faith being baptised. In a secularist world that is loaded against a life of faith in God there is much to be said for taking the yoke of Christ in early days."[60]

However, in a later contribution to a book of essays on *Children and Conversion* he himself recognised the desirability of setting up a catechumenate in which young children could receive instruction from their pastor until they were ready for baptism.[61]

Declaring Jesus is Lord

The day comes when the catechumens are ready to be baptised and to declare that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Rom 10.9; 1 Cor 12.3: see also Rom 10.12 and Phil 2.11). As a result of their baptismal preparation they understand that this is no mere creedal statement, and that this has ethical implications too. Baptism is a dying to the old way of living and a rising to Christ's new way of living (Rom 6.3-4). It is an acknowledgement of the lordship of Christ, come hell or high water. Baptism is more than an act of obedience (Matt 28.19). It involves total surrender to Christ. What is more, this surrender is the surrender of a life-time. From this point there is no going back.

All this is symbolised in the waters of baptism. It is precisely this understanding of dying and rising with Christ which demands total immersion. Baptists differ in how they immerse. Most commonly, candidates are taken backwards into the water as a sign of burial. However, in parts of Africa candidates are baptised by being plunged down into the water – a meaningful symbol where people are buried vertically! Also, for Africans the very act of 'squatting' reminds them of a foetus and so for them is a symbol of new life, too. An alternative mode is to have candidates kneel in the water and take them forwards as a sign of their submission to Christ.

The giving and receiving of rings at a wedding

For the most part I am happy to use the traditional service books for a wedding. However, I prefer an alternative wording for the giving and receiving of rings. For marriage is primarily not about love, but about commitment. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it: "It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love."[62] I therefore use the following form of words for the giving of the rings:

> "I give you this ring as a sign of our commitment to one another.
> All that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you,
> Within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

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[60] G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (Macmillan. London 1966) 106, 107.

[61] G.R. Beasley-Murray, 'The Child and the Church' 127-141 in *Children and Conversion* (Broadman, Nashville 1970) edited by Clifford Ingle. Lorna Jenkins, a New Zealand Baptist who for many years has championed the importance of children's ministry, recognises the need for a children's catechumenate, but felt that baptism should not be unduly delayed. In a private email to me (17/07/2014) she wrote: "My personal feeling is that it should be on a 'case by case' basis depending on their faith and their understanding, but it should not be delayed until they are thoroughly taught and mature. We don't ask that of adults. Baptism seals their choice and becomes an unforgettable landmark in a child's spiritual growth. I myself was baptised at the age of nine. I made an approach to the elders myself and faced up to their questions about why I wanted to be baptised. It was very meaningful to me and I have never regretted it."

[62] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'A Wedding Sermon from a Prison Cell', May 1943, in *Letters and Papers from Prison: An Abridged Version* edited by Eberhard Bethge (English translation, SCM Press, London 1981).

A funeral of a young man who committed suicide

Normally prayers are directed toward God alone, but on an occasion like this it is good in an opening prayer to also declare God's love for us all. Here is a specimen prayer I used for a young man:

> "O Lord our God, the Creator of the Universe and the Sustainer of all life, but also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our God and Father too; this morning we bless you for our hymn's reminder that like a father you tenderly care for us. Lord may we experience that tender care today. How we thank you that in Jesus we have discovered that your love has no limits, and that there is nothing in this life or in the world to come which can separate us from you. As we come to you in our pain, help us to remember that you too have known the pain of loving: for you are the Father of a crucified son and know the anguish of a broken heart. As we come to you in our bewilderment, remind us that although *N* is beyond our reach, he is not beyond your touch of care and love. As we come to you with our feelings of guilt, forgive us for those times when we failed *N*; help us to forgive him for the hurt he has inflicted upon us; and help us to forgive ourselves for any harm we may have caused him. So bless our service this morning. Help us as we now hear your promises contained in your Word; help us to believe them, and in believing receive the comfort they offer."

Expressing grief at a funeral

Several years ago I went to the funeral of a great friend who died far too young, with still so much to offer. I was devastated by his death, and by its suddenness – only two weeks from diagnosis of cancer to death. I arrived for the church service very much a mourner, but alas, I was given no room to mourn. The funeral was billed as a 'Service of Celebration and Thanksgiving'. From start to finish celebration and thanksgiving were the order of the day. Apart from the guest preacher, nobody mentioned the word 'pain' or 'sorrow'. Instead, we were called to rejoice in the triumph of the risen Christ and in the hope of resurrection which is ours.

The hymns and songs were all upbeat, with a worship band accompanying the organ. It was toe-tapping, hand-raising stuff – but not for me. I felt even more miserable. To make matters worse (for me), humour abounded. Before the service, pictures of my friend were beamed up on a screen, and people laughed at some of the amusing poses of the deceased. Humour characterised the official tributes paid by the family, as well as the unofficial tributes paid by others taking part in the service. Even the minister leading the prayers had to precede the prayers with humorous reflections. I wanted to cry. Nobody addressed my pain. The prayers were just prayers for the family. No mention was made of others who might be grieving. I, the staunchest of Nonconformists, found myself longing for a requiem mass! After the service there was a 'celebration party' to which we were all invited.

As I reflect on my day of grief, I recognise that I may have been unfair to the widow and her family. For them the note of celebration and thanksgiving may have been appropriate. Presumably they had already expressed their grief at the private committal service in the local crematorium, which had preceded the church service. Maybe, too, I was unusual in not having dealt with my grief before the service: after all, there had been a whole week between the death and the funeral, some might argue time enough for me to grieve.

Death is a nasty business and should not be trivialised. Job described death as "the king of terrors" (Job 18.14) The Psalmist was equally realistic: "My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me" (Psalm 55.4-5). Even Paul, in his great chapter on the resurrection, called death "the last enemy" (1 Cor 15.25). Yes, we believe in resurrection, but resurrection presupposes death. If we are to be true to life, then we need to acknowledge the pain, the bleakness, and the sheer utter 'bloodiness' of the situation. We do people no favours if we seek to protect them from the pain. I find it significant that on the very occasion when Jesus spoke of his being the resurrection and the life, "Jesus wept" for his friend Lazarus (John11.35). If Jesus could weep, then so too may we. If the bereaved are not given an opportunity to acknowledge their sense of pain and loss, then the grieving process may take so much longer.

Allowing people to grieve does not mean that there is no place for celebration. Although we may weep for our loss, we need not weep for those who have died in Christ. They are safe in the Father's house (John 14.1-2). Death for them is "gain" (Phil 1.21). I love John Bunyan's description of Mr Valiant-for-Truth's dying:

> "After this it was noised abroad, that Mister Valiant-for-Truth was taken with a summons and had this for a token that the summons was true, 'That his pitcher was broken at the fountain'. Then said he, I am going to my Father's, and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I

> have been at to arrive where I am. My sword, I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill, to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, a witness for me, that I have fought, who now will be my rewarder. When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river-side, into which as he went, he said, 'Death, where is thy sting?', and as he went down deeper, 'Grave, where is thy victory?' So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."[63]

In the light of the resurrection hope, there is a place for the sounding of trumpets on this side too. The great Catholic requiems have got it wrong: Brahms' *German Requiem* with its great celebration of resurrection has got it right. Death is a *defeated* enemy! Paul was right to declare: "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15.56). Not to celebrate the difference that Jesus makes to living and to dying would be a denial of our faith. But we also need to grieve; and in our funeral sermons and funeral liturgies we need to allow people to grieve as well as to celebrate.

6. Pioneering new rites of passage

We need new rites of passage

Life today is far more complex than the traditional rites of the church would suggest. Most of us have to pass through many more than four major life transitions. Life is a continuous process of transition; for change is part of the warp and woof of life. Change – transition – is "the norm, rather than the exception".[64]

Yet even if transition is a permanent way of life, it is true to say that there are specific experiences or stages of transition through which we go. Such experiences or stages serve as boundaries to situations of 'relative' stability – "relative because in reality there are no situations of complete stability and lack of movement in life." [65]The thrust of this section is that many of these less-recognised transitions would benefit from a rite of passage, in which at the very least prayer and Scripture were combined to help the passing over into a new phase of life. Increasingly it is being recognised that "merely talking does not seem to have the same transformative effect as combining conversation and words with symbol and gesture in ritual".[66]

Important though these transitions and rituals are, little guidance is offered to pastors on how to mark these profound changes in people's lives. It is left to the pastor's own imagination and creativity to find worship resources appropriate for the occasion. I want to help fill the gap by offering some suggestions on possible rites of passage. However, two things need to be emphasised.

First of all, any rite of passage always has to be individually tailored. There is no one set of words appropriate to each and every occasion.

Secondly, it would not be right for every transition to be marked by a public rite of passage. Unlike a baptism or a wedding which are conducted in public before a congregation, some of these other transitions would of necessity be recognised within the context of a private pastoral visit. The privacy of a home or of the pastor's office does not rule out the helpfulness of an appropriate form of words (a 'liturgy') which enables, for instance, the people concerned to give thanks for the past, and where appropriate to ask God's forgiveness for where they have failed him and others; to seek God's strength for the present and his blessing for the future. True, such a rite of passage need not always be formalised within a set 'liturgy': it might simply take the form of an extempore prayer. But there are occasions when a set form of words may reinforce confession or blessing.

Many of the rites of passage may seem to involve only one or two individuals, and yet indirectly it is the whole family which is involved. In a divorce, for instance, the two major players are the husband and wife; and yet where there are

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[63] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (first published, Part I 1678, Part II 1884; but my edition, Collins, London 1953) 317; set to music by Ralph Vaughan Williams.

[64] Roy Oswald with Jean Morris Trumbauer, *Transforming Rituals: Daily Practices for Changing Lives* (Alban Institute, 1999) 3. See also Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1994) 94: "Movement, change, and a lack of final clarity are what we live with most of the time. The other moments are occasional resting places."

[65] So Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires* 97. James Roose-Evans, *Passages of the Soul: Ritual Today* (Element, Shaftesbury, Dorset 1994) xiii argues that the very word 'experience' describes life as a journey characterised by risk and fear.

[66] Roy Oswald with Jean Trumbauer, *Transforming Rituals* 115.

children and parents, they too are affected. The birth of the first child not only creates parents, it also creates grandparents: whereas for the new parents the birth may cause joy, for the new grandparents the birth may be yet another marker in the long road towards old age and may even be resented as such.[67] Change in one member of the family inevitably involves the wider circle. It has been said: "So central is the role of family process in rites of passage that it is probably correct to say it is really the family that is making the transition to a new stage of life at such a time rather than any 'identified member' focused upon during the occasion."[68] In other words, effective pastoral care must always have the wider horizon in view.

Rites of passage have stages

Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase 'rite of passage'.[69] He showed that all such rites include three phases: separation from the old status, transition, and incorporation into the new status. The old status is the old way of life; the new status is the new way of life; and transition is the moment when one crosses the threshold between the old order and the new. Within the context of Christian worship and pastoral care, the church, as the community of love, is able through an appropriate rite of passage to surround and support those experiencing the crisis of transition.

Every transition is a 'crisis' of one kind or another. At first sight such a term may seem strange to use of some of the more joyful transitions of life, and yet every new beginning involves some kind of 'death' or loss. This sense of loss must not be minimised. For some the transition involved may prove to be profoundly disturbing, and may even seem to involve the loss of God.[70] Yet there is always a positive side to the transition. Every transition also involves a new opportunity, a new challenge.

Christian rites of passage give us an opportunity to acknowledge both the negative and positive sides of the transition involved. In the words of Wayne Price: "Nearly every transition involves grief over what is being left behind; ritual in a community context says we are allowed to grieve and we have caring people to grieve with us. Nearly every transition involves exhilaration and excitement; who can bubble over alone! Nearly every transition involves fear of the unknown. Who better than the church to stand with us at such times?"[71]

To this we may add that the role of the church is not only to enable those in transition to get through the crisis they are facing, but also to provide the necessary help to enable those in transition to emerge the stronger and the more mature in the faith. Hopefully as a result of the church's 'turning-point ministries' people will in turn be able to help others.[72] Moments of change are inevitably moments of loss: at such a time many have need to be reassured of their own worth. These needs are met within worship, whether public or private. Worship is therefore "a dimension of Christian pastoral care, and pastoral care is a dimension of Christian worship."[73]

There is a further strand to a Christian rite of passage. Not only is it an expression of pastoral care, it can also prove to be an expression of the church's evangelism. Although in this chapter we are primarily focusing on rites of passage within the church, inevitably there will be those who have not committed themselves to the covenanted community of believers but who will also come within the scope of our pastoral care. Where we are dealing with unbelievers our evangelism will not be highly pressured. Rather, the Good News of God's unchanging love naturally comes to the surface as pastoral care in the context of worship is offered at the various turning-points of life. How precisely evangelism is linked to the rite of passage may vary. It could, for instance, be that the rite of passage would be followed by an invitation to join an Alpha group looking at Christian basics. In one way or another, rites of passage can prove a bridgehead for the Gospel. Interestingly, surveys have indicated that loving attention given to people at major turning-points in their lives has often proved more evangelistically effective than formal evangelism.[74]

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[67] Sue Walrond-Skinner, *The Fulcrum And The Fire* (SPCK, London 1993) 136.
[68] E.H. Friedman, quoted by Sue Walrond-Skinner, *The Fulcrum And The Fire* 121-122.
[69] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (The University of Chicago Press 1960). Originally published as *Les Rites de Passage* (Paris 1909).
[70] See Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires* 99: "The spiritual dimension of letting go and of major transitions has sometimes been described in the Christian tradition in terms of a 'dark night'. Here there is real spiritual pain that engages the level of faith as well as that of the psyche."
[71] Wayne Price, *The Church and the Rites of Passage* (Broadman, Nashville 1989); see also 'Rites of Passage and the Role of the Church', *Search* (Summer 1990) 27-34.
[72] Similarly Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Alban, Washington 1991) 52: "Each life crisis… is also an opportunity for the community of faith to help a person go deeper into faith and into a new stage of ministry."
[73] Duncan Forrester, James I.H. McDonald & Gian Tellini, *Encounter With God* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1983) 145.
[74] Robin Green, *Only Connect* 65n9: "Two surveys were undertaken in the Anglican deaneries of Wandsworth and Merton in South London to discover the routes by which new Christians had come to active faith. They both revealed that the largest group

Transitions galore

There are many other transitions which may be marked. We have not dealt with helping those who have suffered some non-life-threatening disability: e.g. the onset of blindness, the loss of a limb or the paralysing effect of a stroke. Nor have we looked at transitions of a specifically ministerial nature: here we have in mind, for example, not only the loss experienced by pastors and their families, as they move on to another church but also the loss experienced by the church.

The longer I have been a minister, the more I have come to realise that worship is a form of pastoral care. In worship we come to seek God's grace for our lives and for other members of the family of God. In the words of Mark Santer, a former Anglican Bishop of Birmingham:

> "The ministry of the liturgist is one of helping people to bring their real lives, their real world, our world, to God – with its pains and sorrows and its failures as well as its joys and thanksgivings. It is to help them to bring their world to God and find it transformed by his grace into a foretaste of heaven; to help them to receive the divine life in such a way that they can go back into their daily lives renewed, so that, having gone out into the world, they can bring it back again."[75]

Life is a journey marked by many different stages. One of the joys and challenges for the minister is to fulfil the role of being a creative liturgist, and so be an agent of God's grace at times of change and transition.

7. Enabling transition at every stage of life

Transitions of childhood and youth

Starting school

Starting school is a major event in any child's life, although with the multiplicity of pre-school playgroups and nursery schools, it is not as traumatic an event as in the past. Indeed, with an increasing number of women going back to work within a matter of months after the birth, many children are used to being in all-day nurseries from very early on. Nonetheless, it is still a major transition when a child first attends school and begins to experience the rigours of full-time education. It can also be quite a transition for the parents, especially where it is either the first or last child. Surprisingly, this event has tended not to be recognised by churches. Within many English churches more attention seems to be focused on the relatively minor internal transition of children moving from one Sunday School class to another rather than what is happening in the wider world.

A church might well mark this transition by introducing the children to the morning congregation on the Sunday before schools go back and offering up prayer for them. To make the occasion more memorable as far as the children are concerned, maybe a small gift might be appropriate: e.g. a ruler with a Christian slogan such as 'God cares for you' or 'Jesus is Lord' or even 'Church is Fun'! Scripture Union (England and Wales) has also an excellent booklet for children starting school: *Get Ready Go!*[76]

Moving up into a new school

Although patterns of education vary, few children remain in one school for the whole of their education. At seven, eleven or thirteen, children will often change schools. Such changes can be quite traumatic and disorientating as the child often moves from a relatively small school to a much larger school. Previously one had been important – a big fish in a small pool; but now one feels totally insignificant – a minnow in a massive lake. This change is surely significant enough for the children to be publicly presented, given a gift, and prayed for. Again Scripture Union

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[in each case over 50%] had come to faith through ministry given at a major turning point, e.g. the birth of a child, bereavement, divorce etc. Events like evangelistic campaigns or special services were quite insignificant compared with that group."

[75] Mark Santer, 'The Praises of God', 4 in *Liturgy for a New Century* (SPCK/Alcuin Club, London 1991) edited by Michael Perham.

[76] *Get Ready Go!* (Scripture Union, Milton Keynes 2005) by Marjory Francis.

(England and Wales) have a booklet for the occasion,[77] but some churches may prefer to present a book of Christian fiction.

Passing the driving test

According to Howard Roberts, within American society, getting a driver's licence and a key to the car are the symbols of a teenager come of age, and represent expanded freedom and additional responsibility. He therefore developed a service for sixteen year olds (in the USA 16 is when young people are allowed to drive) at which young people are called forward to receive a key ring. He gives an example of such a service entitled, 'Worshipping the God who loves us'.[78]

Leaving school

Leaving school has always been a major milestone in a young person's life. Today it has become even more of an occasion. British teenagers have now turned to American-style prom celebrations complete with stretch limousines, dinner jackets and ball-gowns. Surely in our churches we should find ways of recognising the new freedoms are young people are entering into.

In American churches the names of graduating 'seniors' appear in the church news bulletin, and often there is a 'litany of recognition'. In a British context we tend to be less affirming – perhaps in part because of our divisive educational process, which accords varying worth to young people depending on their scholastic attainments. At the very least we need to present the young people concerned to the church at one of the services and pray for them publicly; as also list publicly their names and the places of work or higher education to which they are moving on.

Transitions of adulthood

The transitions of adulthood, unlike the transition of childhood and youth, tend to be less fixed and less universal.

Special birthdays

In any family birthdays are always an occasion for celebration. However, certain birthdays are an occasion for even greater festivity. An obvious 'special' is the day of 'coming of age': in Britain it used to be 21, but now the 'key' is handed over at 18. The beginning of a decade is often marked with special celebrations: 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90 and increasingly 100. Such celebrations, even within Christian families, tend to be purely secular in mood. However, there is a place for specific Christian thanksgiving too. Whether in the public context of the party itself, or within the privacy of a pastoral visit, it is good to mark the transition with prayer; and perhaps at the same time read a few verses from Psalm 90, reflecting for a few moments on the prayer "Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart" (Psalm 90.12), with the thought that growing older should be about growing in wisdom and understanding, as we learn more about ourselves and more about God; and as we learn, hopefully changing and become more like the people God intended us to be. Birthdays are an opportunity for taking stock, for reflecting on how much we have grown.[79]

On a good number of times I have found myself at birthday parties where I have been asked to pray for God's blessing on the birthday 'boy' or 'girl'. One memorable occasion was a crowded and noisy African 50th birthday party for my friend Teju at which I had been asked to give a few words. For that occasion I used the following form of words:

> "As we celebrate Teju's birthday, let us remember the one who made her. As the Psalmist declares in Psalm 139: 'Lord, you shaped me first inside, then out; you formed me in my mother's womb. I thank you, High

[77] *It's Your Move: Your guide to moving to secondary school* (Scripture Union, Milton Keynes, revised 2013) written by a team of authors.

[78] Howard W. Roberts, *Pastoral Care Through Worship* (Smith & Helwys Publishing, Macon, Georgia 1995) 105-125.

[79] See Paul Beasley-Murray, Birthdays are more than a time to celebrate, *Blog* 14/02/13. Another way of taking stock and looking forward is to create a birthday time capsule. This involves writing a letter to oneself, answering a number of questions, and then sealing the letter in an envelope, with a view to opening it up at a much later date. Questions could include: Where am I now? What is the date and what is the weather like? What am I most worried about? What is one amazing thing I expect to do in the coming year? What is my favourite recent memory? What were my top three accomplishments last year? What made me laugh the hardest most recently? What are my goals for the coming year? For the next five years? What do I want to change in my life? How do I want to grow?

> God – you're breath-taking! Body and soul, I am marvellously made... Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you. The days of my life all prepared before I'd even lived one day' (*The Message)*. So let us pray: 'O God our Father, the giver of life and the author of all that is good, we thank you for creating Teju – moulding her and forming her not just within her mother's womb but down through the years making her the woman she is – a woman with a zest for life, with love for family and friends alike. Thank you Lord that in good times and in tough times you were there for her. Thank you Lord for all that you have enabled her to do and to be. Thank you Lord for your grace displayed to her and to us – and above all that you for your grace displayed to us all in Jesus'."

Is it significant that I have not often been asked to pray for a younger person?[80]

One final thought: with the passing of the years, birthdays also become the opportunity to express how much we love and appreciate our friends and dear ones. Here is the answer to the question James Roose-Evans asks: "Why do we so often wait until someone is dead before we say how much we valued them?"[81] His suggestion is that "we have need of rituals for ageing", but surely all that is needed is a birthday party! On such an occasion, we can thank God for our friends and loved ones – recognising that God is the 'giver of every good and perfect gift' (Jas 1.17).

Leaving home

Because of stricter mortgage criteria and rising rents, as also difficulties in getting a decent job, an increasing number of young adults in the UK are now living at home. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2013 a total of 3.3 million 20-34 year-olds were living with their parents. Nonetheless many young people do leave home: many to live with friends, but others to move in with a partner. Again, Howard Roberts has devised a service for that period of life, recognising that "For the one leaving, the process of uprooting – being transplanted – and growing in a new place is not easy and simple, even when it is exactly what the persons wants to do. For the ones who are left, there is a void, and emptiness with which to deal… While the adjustment to this type of change and loss varies with people, acknowledgement and support from a congregation, a family of faith, will be strengthening and hopeful for those on this trail of the journey."[82]

In the UK living together has become the norm. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2012 there were 5.9 million people cohabiting. A poll in May 2014 by the Co-operative Legal Services showed that only a quarter of couples who move in together see it as a step toward getting married. Some claimed they will get married once they can afford a wedding: here they had in mind not church fees, but the celebration that follows. Others claimed to be testing their relationship, but as Harry Benson of the Marriage Foundation observed: "If you are explicitly saying that you are there to test your relationship, that almost certainly means that it is not going to work and you are really doing it for convenience or fun."[83]

In *A Call to Excellence* I raised the possibility of devising new rites of passage for couples who have chosen to live together, but I have since changed my mind. I cannot see how we can ask God's blessing on a relationship which is not in line with God's clearly stated will for men and women.

Some might argue that to all intents and purposes cohabiting couples are already married. However, there are at least two differences between co-habitation and marriage. Firstly, marriage involves the making of life-long vows which has the future therefore in view. Co-habitation is simply a present relationship with the future ill-defined. Secondly, marriage is a public act in which families as also the community in general is involved (the doors of the church have to be open during a wedding!), while co-habitation tends to be a private relationship between two individuals. We should see cohabiting couples as couples on the way to marriage: although perhaps 'betrothed' to one another, they have yet to fully 'cleave' to one another. Although they may enjoy sexual union, I do not see a cohabiting couple as being truly 'one flesh'. Sexual intercourse is an integral part of marriage (indeed, in law a marriage without sexual union is not a marriage and can therefore be annulled) but by itself it does not make a marriage.

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[80] A fascinating contrast I found in the Jewish coming-of-age ceremonies. A boy, for instance, when he becomes a *bar mitzvah* celebrates the occasion in the synagogue, where he reads publicly from the Torah for the first time.
[81] James Roose-Evans, *Passages of the Soul* 9.
[82] Howard Roberts, *Pastoral Care Through Worship* 141-150.
[83] *Daily Telegraph*, May 7, 2014.

Engagement

In the Roman Catholic Church there is liturgical provision for a family seeking God's blessing on the engagement of a young couple. The rite for celebrating the engagement, which may take place in the home of in church, includes the lighting of family candles and the reading of Scripture verse; there is opportunity for the couple to pray, for the Peace to be exchanged, and the engagement ring to be blessed.[84] Interestingly on Valentine's Day 2014 Pope Francis held a special service of blessing for 20,000 engaged couples in St Peter's Square. Protestants don't seem to have an equivalent rite, although prayers for engaged couples abound.

Pregnancy

At one stage in my ministry I argued for an appropriate rite of passage to mark the onset of pregnancy on the grounds that it, would give recognition to the fact that life does not begin with birth, but in the preceding months of gestation. I wrote: "Such a rite, if held within the context of a public service of worship, would possibly prove more creative and would certainly be more positive than many an anti-abortion protest."[85] On reflection, I do not think this is a realistic option: in part because in a large church most weeks one would be praying for pregnant women; in part because not all women want everybody to know immediately that they are pregnant; and in part because once the news of a pregnancy was made so public, one would then have to make a public announcement of a miscarriage, if that were to occur.

Wedding anniversaries

Long before the purveyors of greeting cards peddled their wares, it had been customary for special anniversaries to be observed – ranging from paper for the first, silver for the 25th, ruby for the 40th, gold for the 50th and diamond for the 60th. Such special anniversaries deserve to be honoured within the church. At the very least a pastoral visit is called for.[86] On golden and diamond weddings, there is much to be said for a formal act of thanksgiving, either within the context of Sunday worship or at a service for friends and relatives, say on a Saturday afternoon.

When our friends, Colin and Beryl celebrated their golden wedding, I led the congregation in the following prayer:

> "Father God, together with Colin and Beryl, many of us not only want to thank you for the good things in their marriage, but also in ours. Yes, Lord, those of us who are married, or indeed have been married, thank you for all the fun and laughter we have known, for those quieter moments of deepening companionship, as also for the secret intimacies of our lovemaking. We thank you for all that we have had in common, and also for those differing interests and differing insights which have broadened our life together. We thank you for the homes that we have been able to make, and for the children with which many of us have been blessed. We thank you for all the good times we have been through together – and for all that we have learnt together in the bad times too. We thank you for friends who have enriched our lives, as also for friends who have stood by us in difficult days. Above all we thank you for the difference you have made to our lives – giving us purpose and direction, helping us to cope when life has been tough, and deepening our joy when life has been good. For all these gifts of your grace, we thank you. Yet, along with our thanksgiving, we come to seek your forgiveness. All of us, in one way or another, have failed you and failed one another. We have not always loved as you would have us love. Father, forgive us for the times when we have hurt one another; when we have shown lack of respect and lack of understanding for one another; when we have fought with one another rather than prayed for one another. Forgive us for the many ways in which we have spoiled that perfect relationship you planned for us together. For the for sake of your Son Jesus Christ, forgive us for all that is past; and by the power of your Holy Spirit help us to live more truly lives that are well pleasing in your sight."

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[84] See Charles Read, *Revising Weddings* (Grove Books, Nottingham 1994).

[85] Paul Beasley-Murray, *A Call to Excellence* 116, 117.

[86] In *A Call to Excellence* I suggested that for the first wedding anniversary, a card – and not a visit – would suffice. However, again I have changed my mind! In my booklet, *Happy Ever After? A 'radical' workbook for couples preparing for marriage* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 2nd edition 2003) I suggest that after the wedding there be three sessions to reflect together on married life: the first four to six weeks after the honeymoon; the second after the first six months; and the third around the time of the first anniversary.

Renewal of wedding vows

In many churches opportunities are given for wedding vows to be renewed. For the most part such a renewal of vows does not take place after any particular crisis, but is rather occasioned by the conclusion of a marriage enrichment course; or perhaps by a special church anniversary when it might be deemed 'nice' if all those married in the church over the past years were to return for a special service and renew their wedding vows.[87]

On one such occasion, after the renewal of vows and prayers, we did away with the sermon. Instead I encouraged the couples to reflect on a selection of quotations about love listed in the order of service:

> "Pleasure is God's invention and not the devil's" (C.S. Lewis).
>
> "Love is not gazing at each other, but a looking outward together, in the same direction" (Thomas Harris).
>
> "As soon as a husband and wife have the courage to be completely open with one another, whatever the cost, their marriage becomes once more a wonderful adventure" (Paul Tournier).
>
> "Genuine love not only respects the individuality of the other but actually seeks to cultivate it, even at the risk of separation and loss. The ultimate goal of life remains the spiritual growth of the individual, the solitary journey to peaks that can be climbed only alone. Significant journeys cannot be accomplished without the nurture provided by a successful marriage or a successful society" (Scott Peck).
>
> "Marriage is three parts love and seven parts forgiveness" (Langdon Mitchell).
>
> "It's never too late to really 'marry' the one who shares bed and board with you. You only have to make up your mind to do it. Three is a crowd: your wife, yourself and your dream. If you really want to get married, divorce your dream. If you can't build a castle you can at least build a hut, but you'll never be happy in your hut if you're still dreaming of living in a castle. Let's assume that you've made up your mind to break with your dream, to abandon your hopes for a castle... Is this then the end of your illusions? No, this determination of itself will not be sufficient to dispel them once and for all. You will have to start by *forgiving* the other, for you have never forgiven your husband or wife for not being equal to your dream. Offer your disappointments to God, offer him your shattered dreams, your dissatisfaction, your rancour, your discouragement. Finally, accept the real person whom you have married, and your life together as it *really* is. It's not a question of remaking your world but of remaking your own attitudes" (Michel Quoist).
>
> "Love is for all seasons,
> not just the vibrant spring
> or summer laughter, with its welcome shade,
> but for bringing to a fruitful place the purposes of living
> and to warn the winter of our sorrows.
> For in every season of my life I find new joy in you" (Mary Hathaway).
>
> "Close your heart to every love but mine; hold no one in your arms but me. Love is as powerful as death; passion is as strong as death itself. It burst into flame and burns like a raging fire. Water cannot put it out; no flood can drown it" (Song of Songs).

A renewal of wedding vows following a crisis in the marriage is different. There is a greater intensity when, for instance, a couple wish to recommit themselves to one another where one, if not both partners have been unfaithful. Normally it would not be appropriate for such a service to be public: rather, a service might be conducted with just the immediate family (the children) and a few close friends present. It is good if such a renewal of wedding vows were to take place within the church 'sanctuary'. Holding the ceremony in church adds strength to the vows, for in this symbolic way the couple concerned would be consciously calling upon God to be their witness.

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[87] It is important that preparations should precede any renewal of vows. Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1987) 27 quotes an anonymous letter to *The Lutheran*: "I inwardly recoil whenever I read or hear of a church service during which the pastor unexpectedly calls for all married couples to stand and publicly renew their wedding vows. If my former spouse and I had been placed in such an embarrassing position, we would hate ourselves for our hypocrisy. Undoubtedly pastors who initiate these little rituals do so with the best of intentions. For those couples who are already lovingly committed to each other, this can be a beautiful reinforcement to their marriage. But it is unreasonable to expect a healing of a dying relationship through such one-shot, show-biz techniques."

The prayers on such an occasion inevitably have to include confession of sin. For example, after reading from John 15.9-11 and 1 Cor 13.4-8a and before the vows are taken, the following prayer might be said together by the couple:

> "Our Father God, confronted with your Word, we have to confess our sins against you and against one another. We have not loved as you would have us love. Forgive us for the times when we have hurt one another; when we have shown lack of respect and lack of understanding for one another; when we have fought with one another rather than prayed for one another. Forgive us for the many ways in which we have spoiled the perfect relationship you have planned for us together. Father, at this moment we are very conscious of our failings and mistakes. Yet we thank you too for all the good times we have had in the past, and for all the happiness we have experienced together. Help us now as we make our vows afresh to rediscover that happiness, to know again your richest blessing upon our life together."

The parting of the ways for a divorced couple

Not all marriages survive the strains of modern life. Divorce, even among committed Christians, is increasingly common. How is the church to react to this? Clearly the church has to continue to affirm the ideal of life-long marriage, but such an affirmation does not help those whose marriages have irretrievably broken down. Nor does it help the church if divorce is pushed under the carpet and a blind eye is turned to what is going on. For the sake of the couple, for the sake of any children, and for the sake of the church itself, some kind of rite of transition is called for, where people are helped to face up to what has happened and to discover that even in the midst of the pain and the failure, God is there.[88]

As with the renewal of wedding vows where relationships have gone wrong, so too with this ceremony of the parting of the ways it may well be wise to hold a semi-private ceremony of the parting of the ways, to which invitations are limited to the immediate family and friends. Such a ceremony would include the couple acknowledging before God their failure and their need of forgiveness, both from God and from one another; it might also include confession on the part of friends and family for failing to give the couple the support they needed. It would include a prayer for the healing of all the hurt and brokenness which the couple – and their family and friends – have experienced. It would be good also to include an opportunity for the couple to thank God for the good times they have had together: part of the sadness of most divorces is that the marriage has not been all bad. The assembled company would move on to ask God's blessing on the couple as they went their separate ways, and to pledge their support for them as individuals.[89]

Human Rites: Worship Resources for an Age of Change offers a number of liturgies for couples at this point: e.g. a liturgy for the leave-taking of a house after separation or divorce; a liturgy for release from marriage vows; a service of new start after the end of a marriage; a liturgy for divorce; and a children's liturgy at the time of divorce. [90]

It is important to emphasise that such a service would in no way be blessing the practice of divorce. Rather it would be helping the couple, and also family and friends, to face up to the reality involved.

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[88] The situation here envisaged is where both husband and wife are members of the church and where both are desirous of going through such a ceremony. A different rite of transition might be necessary where only one of the partners wishes such a rite of passage.

[89] For a useful discussion of the pastoral needs which such a service might address, see Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* 53. Wayne Price *The Church and the Rites of Passage* 119 gives an example of such a 'ritual of dissolution' where the couple affirm in unison: "I John/Mary, give thanks to God for the love and the joy which have been present in this marriage. I pledge to keep sacred the memory of everything good and lovely we have experienced together. I further acknowledge my own sins of word, thought and deed, which have contributed to this failure. I ask forgiveness of God, of you (John/Mary), of our children, and family and friends. Finally, I promise in both attitude and in word to refrain from anything which may be hurtful to you, our families, and our friends. I pray God's leadership in our separate lives."

[90] Hannah Ward & Jennifer Wild (editors) *Human Rites Worship Resources for an Age of Change* (Mowbray, London 1995) 175-193. The children's liturgy, devised by Vienna Cobb Anderson, is particularly moving. In the service the parent individually make a pledge to their children: "I promise that I will love you always whether we are together or apart. I will care about everything that happens to you. I will try to help you feel secure when you are afraid, to give you comfort when you are hurt, and to protect you from all harm". Each parent gives the child a gift. Then the family prays together: "Bless us, O God, as we who once lived together now are separated and live apart. Bless our children. Keep them safe from all harm, give them courage to face the pain of this division, and the knowledge that our brokenness is not their fault. Help us to keep the promises we made to them; let us not fail them again; in the name of Jesus we pay. Amen." The priest then pronounces a blessing: "The blessing of God, whose love gives you life, forgives mistakes, and heals brokenness, be with you now and always."

Such a rite of passage should never precede the actual legal divorce itself. It is only appropriate where the marriage has irretrievably broken down. In so far as divorce is often surrounded by much anger and bitterness, such a rite of passage would only be possible after a good deal of counselling and help. As with a wedding, so too with a dissolution of a marriage, much preparation is needed if the rite is to have meaning.

Furthermore, such a rite of passage would also enable the divorcing couple to know that, in spite of their failure, neither God nor his people had written them off. Experience shows that all too often the divorcing couple feel totally isolated from others. As with a death, many people do not seem to know what to say: the upshot is that they "pass by on the other side", saying nothing, with the result that the individuals concerned feel even more lonely.

Sometimes divorce is surrounded by so much acrimony and bitterness that a rite of this kind is impossible. Roy Oswald tells of one woman who had to wait several years before she felt ready to create a personal ritual recognising the loss of her marriage; and then when she did so, she did so alone.[91] Rites of passage have to be individually crafted to suit the individual situation.

Affirming singleness

To speak of singleness requiring a rite of passage may appear strange. Certainly, we do not envisage a ceremony akin to the monastic vow of celibacy. Yet there is a place for an acknowledgement, if not a celebration, of the freedoms to be found within the single state. Sadly, the significance of singleness has been undermined by the pro-family movements of North America and Europe. The fact is that whereas the Jewish religion is 'the religion of the family', the Christian faith emphasises the kingdom rather than the family. As it is, Christian singles often feel marginalised.

It may be that what is required is an annual occasion when singles are enabled to affirm their singleness. Such an affirmation would involve not so much a rite of transition, as rather a recognition that, whether willingly or unwillingly, a transition has been made. Along with Mothers' Day (or Mothering Sunday) and Fathers' Day, we might use the Sunday nearest 25 January (the day when the church traditionally celebrates the Conversion of St Paul) to celebrate that great body of men and women who are freer than most to serve the Lord.[92]

At one such 'celebration' of singleness we began by recognising that although about one third of most adult congregations is made up of single people – unmarried, widowed or divorced – single people are often viewed as failures. We listened to the following statement:

> "There is no doubt that for many single people their biggest problem is the rest of the church. Most churches just don't take single adults seriously. They are a negative by-product of failure to find a partner, failure to hold on to a partner and make a marriage work, or failure to die at the same time as their partner. The well-meaning comments at weddings, 'Your turn next!'; the concerned conversations, 'And she's such a nice girl!'; the assumption that if you are a leader you are married, and the obvious confusion when they discover you are not, 'Oh, I am sorry…' These can all contribute to a sense of failure and of exclusion. It is the dripping of a tap that exacerbates the feeling of isolation and unfulfilled longing which is both the privilege and pain of the single life."

We made ourselves aware that marriage does not always live up to the glamorous fantasy woven by those who are denied it. This can be a slow and painful process unless people are prepared to share their dreams and admit their disappointments. In this context we listened to a thought-provoking poem by Veronica Zundel – 'The Late Bride'

> "And so she finally
> After all those years
> Opened the box
> And out flew
> Nothing.

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[91] Roy Oswald with Jean Trumbauer, *Transforming Rituals* 66: "She began by walking to the very spot in the sanctuary where she had once taken her vows and there, in an empty church, acknowledged in a whisper that the marriage she had so valued was over. Then taking a seat nearby, she quietly remembered the many good times in her relationship with her husband and all the many ways she had grown… She reflected on the painful times in the latter days of the marriage and gradually let them go…"

[92] There is an International Singles Day on August 14. In the words of one Facebook page: "Treat yourself to candy, flowers, dinner, fun with friends! Exactly 6 months from Valentine's Day, this is the day for SINGLES to enjoy!" But in the Northern Hemisphere August is a holiday season and so not a good time for a special service.

And was that all, she cried
There was in it?
Then why did I dream and yearn
Scrabble and fight so long
To get my hands on it?

That was at first.
It was only later she learnt
Slowly, so slowly
To fill the box with
The treasures she had
Unknowing, owned all along."

There were other readings too – followed by a variety of prayers, including 'A Prayer on Sunday Night' by Michel Quoist:

"Tonight, Lord I am alone. Little by little the sounds died down in the church.
The people went away. And I came home, alone.

I passed the people who were returning from a walk. I went by the cinema that was disgorging its crowd. I skirted the café terraces where tired strollers were trying to prolong the pleasure of a Sunday holiday. I bumped into youngsters playing on the footpath, youngsters, Lord, other people's youngsters, who will never be my own.

Here I am Lord, alone. The silence troubles me, the solitude oppresses me.

Son, you are not alone, I am with you, I am you.
For I needed another human vehicle to continue my Incarnation and my Redemption. Out of all eternity, I chose you, I need you.

I need your hands to continue to bless, I need your lips to continue to speak, I need your heart to continue to love, I need you to continue to stay. Stay with me, son."[93]

The Scripture readings were taken from Matt 19.3-12 and 1 Cor7.25-34. The theme of the sermon was 'Singles count'. Thankfully, for a married pastor there was a good deal of material to help me in my preparation.[94]

Moving home

Transitions of residency come at any stage. Older children and young people can find the move to a new area particularly difficult; and all the more so because the move has not been chosen by them, but imposed by their parents. The setting up of a new home is always significant; even more so in the case of a couple newly married, for whom it is their first home. The moving into one's last home, be it a retirement apartment or a small room in sheltered accommodation for the elderly, is another major transition.

All such transitions can be enhanced by some rite of passage. Such a rite may take place within the privacy of a pastoral visit, where the pastor reads a suitable Scripture[95] and asks God's blessing upon the new home. The prayer may be extempore, or may be crafted for the occasion.[96] Some suggest that it is good to go from room to room and

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[93] Michel Quoist, *Prayers of Life* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin 1965) 64.

[94] See Lakshmi Deshpande, *Singled Out or One in the Body? An exploration of Singleness in the Church Today* (Grove, Cambridge 2001); Stephen Couvela, *Celebrating Celibacy: Sexuality, Intimacy and Wholeness for the Single Adult* (Grove, Cambridge 2007); Barry Danylak, *A Biblical Theology of Singleness* (Grove, Cambridge 2005); Philip B. Wilson, *Being Single: Insights for Tomorrow's Church* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 2005).

[95] For example, Ps 127.1: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain"; or Luke 24.28-32, where Jesus was a guest at the home in Emmaus.

[96] See the Corrymeela Community 'prayer for dedication of a house', *Human Rites* 90:
"We dedicate this house to you and your work as the God of Peace.
May it be a place of joy, laughter and freedom.
A place of renewal; and refreshment for those who are weary.
A place of hope for those who have become disillusioned.

pronounce an appropriate prayer or Scripture in each room.[97] With reference to the blessing of an elderly person's room, Butler and Orbach make the interesting comment: "To bless a small institutional room will not alter its size or shape, but its occupant may feel that it has been turned into a home – perhaps even that it has been given a soul."[98]

Work transitions

Elaine Ramshaw has highlighted the dangers of centring ritual around jobs and vocation. She is mindful of the hurt that could be caused to those who are unable to work, whether they be the unemployed or the severely disabled.[99] This does not rule out recognising work transitions: otherwise, using a similar argument, we would have to rule out recognising certain family transitions for the sake of singles present. Ramshaw's warning is helpful, in that it reminds us of the need for sensitivity. Work transitions are many and varied:

Unemployment

Once a job was for life. Today technological advances and economic factors have changed all that. In many countries redundancy and unemployment have reached alarming heights. The day of full employment appears to be over. Redundancy puts tremendous strain upon individuals and their families. Such strain is not simply financial; it also involves issues of human dignity and self-worth

Career change:

Today most people will end up having two, three, if not more, separate careers. Sometimes this is linked with advances in technology and with modern economic patters. At other times change comes about as a result of such diverse factors as pressure, boredom or altruism. Career change produces strain upon individuals and their families: retraining may involve extra expense, and almost certainly extra time and effort. It will also involve self-questioning: Have I made the right decision? Will I succeed in this new sphere of work?

Returning to work

Another transition involves married women with children returning to work. Of those who return immediately after maternity leave some return reluctantly, for they are working only because they need the money; others return enthusiastically, for they enjoy their chosen career. In both groups feelings of guilt may be present: Am I neglecting my family? Then there are women who return to work because their children are older or are off their house and their lives otherwise feel empty.

Mid-life crisis

Yet another transition takes place when people discover that they are no longer making transitions from one position to another at work, but are stuck in the one position. This transition from youthful ambition to mid-life realism can be painful. It is the time when most of us come to recognise that we will never make it to the 'top': the chairmanship of Barclays or the presidency of Ford will never be ours![100] Inevitably issues of self-identity arise.

A place of healing and comfort for those broken and hurt.
A place of forgiveness for those who seek a new way of life
A place of encouragement for those who hunger and thirst for peace and justice
A place of vision and inspiration for all those who seek a new and better way for our country."
What a challenge is contained within this prayer! For another 'blessing on a new home', see Jean Gaskin's prayer in *Human Rites* 91; and *Common Order* 421-425.

[97] See the 'Order for the Blessing of a House' drawn up in a private paper by Frank Wells, which links the following areas with the following Scriptures: the entrance hall (John 10.9); the dining room (John 4.34); the living room (John 15.5); the kitchen (John 21.9); the study (Isaiah 34.16); the bedrooms (Matt 11.28); the bathroom (Psalm 51.2); and the house (John 14.23).

[98] Butler and Orbach, *Being Your Age* 104-105.

[99] Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* 50.

[100] Traditionally the mid-life crisis is viewed as a peculiarly male problem. Yet it is experienced by women too. Here we have in mind not just the career woman, but also the woman coming to terms with the 'empty nest'. A peculiarly feminine expression of the midlife crisis is, of course, the menopause: for that too raises questions of self-identity.

The mid-life crisis is in fact a religious quest, for it is a search for renewed identity.[101] It is therefore not enough to give an opportunity for such individuals to 'grieve' those things which will never be. At the same time people need to be helped to gain a sense of self-worth which is independent of worldly ambition. Handled aright, the mid-life crisis can prove a catalyst for achieve a degree of maturity.[102]

It is difficult to see how these important life-transitions can be properly marked by the worshipping community of God's people, as distinct from becoming the focus of a private pastoral call. Yet this does not mean that such transitions are not given public recognition. Pastors can ensure that their preaching and teaching relate to issues of work and of personal worth.

Sunday prayers should include the working week. Mark Greene, who has been passionately seeking to encourage Christians to relate their faith to their work environment, suggested that the world of work could be inserted in a confessional prayer like: 'Lord, we bring to you our relationships – our relationships at home, our relationships with neighbours, our relations at work and school.' "The simple addition of seven words 'our relationships at work or at school' instantly transforms this prayer into one that encourages the whole congregation to recognised that life cannot be compartmentalised, that God is interested in the 9-5."[103]

The prayers of the church can also be quite specific: for example, individuals can be interviewed about their work and prayed for; members made redundant can be mentioned by name in the church's intercessory prayers. Whatever else such praying achieves, it affirms the worth of the individuals concerned! [104]

Transitions in older years

There is a danger that we underestimate the number of transitions through which older people go. In fact the years between 65 and 100 are probably the most dynamic period of life, excepting childhood. Change follows change. The period following statutory retirement (which may well move up to 70 in the UK) is made up not of one stage but of a series of stages. The World Health Organisation has suggested that the retired can be divided between 'the elderly' (60-74 years) and 'the aged' (over 75 years). In reality, old age is much more complex.

An imaginative approach to the life-cycle of older people was developed by Tim Stafford. He broke the years beyond 65 into seven stages – or seven 'days of the week of old age'.

> "The First Day – Freedom Day – begins with retirement which introduces the life of leisure.
> The Second Day – the Day of Reflection – leads an elderly person to begin meditating on their life.
> The Third Day – Widow's Day – comes with the loss of a spouse.
> The Fourth Day – the Role-Reversal Day – begins when an older person needs frequent help to manage.
> The Fifth Day – the Dependence Day – comes when a person must lean on others for basic needs.
> The Sixth Day – the Farewell Day – is the period of preparing for death.
> The Seventh Day – the Sabbath Day – is the day of worship, the day of rest."[105]

Retirement

Retirement marks the entry point into old age. In Western societies, where often people are what they do, retirement can prove a difficult transition, for in ceasing to work some can feel they are in danger of losing their worth, if not their identity. Yet, as with death, this 'loss' is often denied. The newly retired talk of being 'busier than ever' and

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[101] It is in the context of the mid-life crisis that we can make sense of the well-known statement of C.J. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Kegan Paul, London 1933) 264: "Among all my patients in the second half of life – that is to say over thirty-five – there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life."

[102] See Howard Roberts, *Pastoral Care through Worship* 160-171 who devotes a whole chapter to 'Negotiating the Midpoint' and also provides an example of a service, entitled 'Worshipping the God who helps us renegotiate life.

[103] Mark Greene, *Supporting Christians at Work* (Administry, St Albans 2001) 28. He also gave the example of how one church took the concept of being salt in the world (Matt 5.13) and used it to create a brief and moving ceremony: Members of the congregation went forward and were given a small amount of salt in their hands. After a prayer of commitment to be salt in the world, they ate it as a sign of that commitment (29).

[104] Mark Greene, *Supporting Christians at Work* 5 drew attention to the fact that "workers say that church communities do not support them to any significant degree at all in their work. Not in the preaching, not in the teaching, not in the worship, not in the pastoral care."

[105] Tim Stafford, *As Our Years Increase* (IVP, Leicester 1992) 26-28.

delight to rehearse the advantages of a new life where they are now in charge: they are now enjoying the freedom of being 'self-employed'. They are 'retired from work, but not from life'.

From a pastoral perspective it is important to get the balance right. Retirement is not only an occasion of blessing, it is also a moment of loss. For the unmarried the sense of loss may be even more acute.[106] The wise pastor will ensure that both the losses and the gains of this new stage of life are recognised.

In the first place these losses and gains will be articulated in pastoral conversation. In terms of the gains, hopefully conversation concerning the 'second life of retirement' will highlight not so much the opportunities of further service for the church, but rather the opportunity for further growth and self-development. As T.S. Eliot wonderfully put it in his poem 'East Coker':

> "Old men ought to be explorers
> Here and there does not matter
> We must be still and still moving
> Into another intensity
> For a further union, a deeper communion
> Through the dark cold and empty desolation."[107]

Theologically speaking, retirement can be viewed as the 'Sabbath' of life. "Retirement", wrote David Winter, "is not meant to be seen as a restriction, a diminishing of our lives, but as an opportunity to live more fully." [108]

These gains and losses need to be recognised before God, with a view to giving thanks for the past and asking God's blessing for the future. Such recognition could take the form of appropriate Scripture readings (e.g. Joshua 1.9; Psalm 92.14-15; Isaiah 46.4) and prayer with the newly retired on a one-to-one basis. A 'prayer' that could be included is the so-called 'Nun's Prayer':

> "Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing older and will some day be old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody; helpful but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it at all, but thou knowest Lord that I want a few friends at the end. Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details, give me wings to get to the point. Seal my lips on my aches and pains. They are increasing and love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. I dare not ask for grace enough to enjoy the tales of others' pains, but help me to endure them with patience. I dare not ask for improved memory but for a growing humility and a lessening cocksureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken. Keep me reasonably sweet, I do not want to be a saint — some of them are hard to live with — but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. And, give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so. Amen,"[109]

Where the newly retired person is married, there are advantages in involving the partner too, for here retirement has consequences beyond the individual. Better still would be if at the conclusion of a retirement party the pastor were given the opportunity – with the support of friends, colleagues and family – to 'send out' the newly retired to encounter the new adventures and challenges of the future.[110]

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[106] Michael Butler and Ann Orbach, *Being Your Age: Pastoral Care for Older People* (SPCK, London 1993) 48 draw particular attention to the sense of loss experienced by the single woman: "The decisive break at 609, with only a perfunctory party as a rite of passage, followed by that return to en empty flat, can feel like the beginning of dying." However, newly retired single men can feel equally lonely

[107] T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker' from *Four Quartets* (Faber & Faber, London 1944).

[108] David Winter, *The Highway Code for Retirement* (Crusade for World Revival, Farnham, Surrey 2012) 22.

[109] This prayer is often said to be dated from the 17th century, but is more likely to be a 20th century creation.

[110] In this respect Roger Grainger devised an innovative retirement service. After reading a passage such as Eccl 3.1-8 ("For everything there is a season…") the minister says: "We have come together in God's presence in order to celebrate an event of great personal importance to one of our friends. This is the point in *his* life when *he* must leave behind the joys and sorrows, satisfactions and responsibilities of a way of daily living which *he* has practised for many years, and must now launch out into a new world of experience. We shall try to understand and appreciate how difficult it is to make this voyage into the future, for we are determined that *he* will not have to face the challenge alone. That is why we are accompanying *him* to the threshold of his new life. As *he* lays down one set of responsibilities and takes up another, we shall do our best to share those burdens with *him* in accordance with Christ's law" (*Human Rites: Worship Resources for an Age of Change*, edited by Hannah Ward & Jennifer Wild,

At the service to celebrate my retirement from stipendiary ministry after 43 years in ordained Christian ministry, not only was there a good deal of looking back, but also a good deal of looking forward. A male trio sang a specially composed rendering of the ancient Irish blessing:

> "May the road rise up to meet you
> May the wind be always at your back
> May the sun shine warm upon your face
> And the rain fall soft on your face.
> And until we meet again
> May God hold you in the palm of his hand.
>
> May the love of God in dark times
> Be the lamp to guide your ways.
> May the children's laughter lighten your life
> And their growing be your song
> And until we meet again
> May God hold you in the palm of his hand."

The Scriptures chosen for the day were Eccl 3.1-8 and Matt 5.1-10. My friend Nick Mercer preached on the theme of 'immortal longings' based on Eccl 3.11: "God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in their hearts; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (AV). He ended his sermon with these words:

> "How many of us resist change and find ourselves stuck being what we were, clinging to our past? We live life blind to the fact that God calls us to be renewed and transformed daily in an unfolding universe of opportunity; called to respond to our sense of vocation, whatever it is, over and over again... So for Paul it has been a mixture of these ingredients: timeliness, talents, immortal longings and his own imperfections, which have allowed our Lord Jesus continually to change him and use him. God grant that throughout our years we all may grasp the day and so respond to the eternity which God has set in our hearts, the immortal longings."

He followed the sermon with a prayer of Thomas Cranmer, who had worked through and led so many changes in his own lifetime for the sake of the Gospel:

> "O almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise, that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

It was indeed a service to mark the transition of retirement. In some ways it felt as though I was listening in to my funeral service![111]

The second retirement

The transition from active retirement to a more passive form of retirement can prove difficult, accompanied as it is not simply by a loss of role, but also by a gradual loss of physical ability. This transition can be particularly difficult for church members, whose spirituality over past decades has been primarily expressed in terms of activity. The pastoral challenge is to help ageing members to let go of their responsibilities and discover that God is far more interested in who we are and who we are becoming, rather than in what we have done or are doing. Even though it may be late on in the day, we need to discover our true selves. Joyce Grenfell said: "I think what I am doing is losing Joyce Grenfell and finding out the person God made. The older you get the more you realise that happiness is losing your false sense of what you are, your false self. What was that lovely quotation: Become what you are! Well, that interpreted means

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66-69). In his introductory note Roger Grainger states: "A service which is intended to symbolise retirement is bound to share at least some of the characteristics of a funeral service. If it does not, it will have surely failed in its object."

[111] See Howard Roberts, *Pastoral Care through Worship* 185-199 who has a helpful chapter with worship suggestions on 'Worshipping the God of all ages'. He suggests too an annual Senior Adult Day when senior adults are asked to share in the worship leadership, in which they can emphasise some of the needs, concerns and gifts of senior adults.

become what your true potential is, your spiritual wholeness."[112] With the lengthening of days, older members need with Simeon to be able to pray the 'Nunc Dimittis' (Luke 2.29-31): one possibility would be for them to be helped to write their own version of the 'Nunc Dimittis'. Would it be beyond the bounds of possibility for such new liturgical creations to be read out within the context of public worship?

Final transitions

Preparing for one's funeral

'My bags are packed. I am ready to leave', declared Pope John Paul.[113] Would that were true of all Christians! Sadly, many Christians die without even making a will, let alone preparing for their funeral. Yet there is much to be said for the latter. When the hymns, songs and Scripture readings have been chosen beforehand, it not only makes the eventual funeral service more personal, but also it enables the person concerned to face up to the difference which Christ makes to death. As James White helpfully commented: 'Making plans for one's funeral is not necessarily a morbid preoccupation; it can be a witness to one's faith and a splendid way to advance in understanding of life."[114] With that thought in mind some years ago I drew up the following order of service for my own funeral:

> Organ prelude: *How beautiful are the feet of those who proclaim good news* (from Handel's *Messiah*)
> Call to worship: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11.25).
> Hymn: *For all the love which from our earliest days* (one of our wedding hymns)
> Prayer: We ask God's blessing on the service
> Scriptures: Psalm 23 (God cares for us); John 14.1,2,6 (Jesus calls us to trust him); 1 Cor 15.20, 42-43, 54-57 (Paul works out the implications of the resurrection for us)
> Hymn: *Who would true valour see* (The pilgrim's hymn)
> Tributes
> Scripture: 2 Cor 4.1-15
> Sermon: Treasure in clay jars (2 Cor 4.7)
> Prayer: We praise God for the comfort of the Gospel
> Prayer: We thank God for the life of our loved one
> Prayer: We pray for the family
> Hymn: *I love you, O Lord, you alone* (modern paraphrase of Psalm 18)
> Benediction: "May the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding and of far more worth than human reasoning, keep guard over your heart and thoughts, through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Phil 4.7)
> Organ postlude: Toccata from Widor's *Symphony no. 5*

Ritual with the dying

The traditional form of the last rites is the practice of 'extreme unction', where the dying person is anointed, not for healing, but rather as a form of 'consecration for death'. In so far as death may be regarded as ultimate healing, maybe the practice advocated in Jas 5.16 could be applied in this way. When the dying person is too sick to converse, physical actions such as anointing and laying on of hands can be a very meaningful form of communication with a dying person.

There is much also to be said for a last communion, whether at home or in hospital, in which the pastor helps the dying person – together ideally with a few family members and/or friends – not only to look back ward to the Saviour who died that we might be forgiven, but also to look forward to the feast that is to come. My mind goes to one memorable experience of communion:

> "Jim was very near the end and could scarcely utter a word. Nonetheless, as he lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, it was clear that he could still hear. Without wasting time on general chit-chat, I went straight in to the communion 'service'. After an opening prayer, in which we asked God's help, I read to Jim the first seven verses of Rev 21, which speak of the new heaven and the new earth, where there will be 'no more death, no

[112] Quoted by James Roose-Evans, *Passages of the Soul* xiii, xiv.
[113] Pope John XXII said these words to his physician just before he died on June 3, 1963.
[114] James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* 270. He added: "Members of one retirement home weave their own funeral palls, a magnificent final affirmation."

more grief or crying or pain'. On the basis of this Scripture, I spoke to Jim of the difference that Jesus makes to life and death, and of the glorious hope that is ours. Jim was a great Christian, so I was not in the business of presenting the Gospel to him, but rather reminding him of the truths he had long held. However, for the relatives listening in, it may have been another story. Holding his hand, we prayed again, as I thanked God for these Gospel truths. From the 'sacrament' of the Word, we moved into the 'sacrament' of communion – for both are 'means of grace'. After reading the familiar words of institution, I led in prayer, thanking God for Jesus and asking that he would strengthen our faith. Yes, the whole service was laced with prayer. I distributed bread and wine to all, reminding each one that 'the body of Christ was broken for you' and 'the blood of Christ was shed for you'. One of the relatives helped me put the smallest of crumbs in Jim's mouth, followed by a little wine. Yet again we prayed: this time we prayed in particular for Jim as he walked the final steps along the valley of the shadow. We concluded by holding hands with Jim and with one another as we prayed for one another in the words of the Grace. Tears flowed down Jim's cheeks, and down the cheeks of others: it was an immensely moving experience. It was also an immensely uplifting experience. As a result I hope that when I die there will be somebody to bring me communion too."[115]

Within the context of such a rite of transition it might be possible for the dying person to make their peace with any family members where there has been a rift. Along with an assurance of sins forgiven, there will also be confirmation of the hope of the life to come.

Where the dying person is unconscious, the pastor can help family and friends to say their goodbyes by formally commending their love one to Jesus. Similarly, where life-support is to be removed, it should not just be left to the medics to pull the plug: ideally an opportunity should be given for the pastor to release the loved one in the name of Jesus and to entrust the loved one to the Saviour as they go on their journey to the world beyond.

Untimely terminations

Rosemary Manning, in her novel *The Open Door* has a character observe: "Oh, God, why is there no satisfactory ritual for *parting*? The pain is raw at the edges: no healing balm of sherry."[116] But increasingly there are rituals, not least for what we here term 'untimely terminations'.

A miscarriage

Strictly speaking there is no need for a funeral after a miscarriage.[117] However I vividly remember one occasion when an African family asked for a funeral of their son who had died just under 28 weeks into the pregnancy: We held a service one Friday evening, with the parents and a small group of church members sitting in the round. Along with the deep sadness the informal way we sat emphasised that we were 'family'. Because I know from my own experience there is little guidance available for such a service, let me detail the shape of the service:

I began with the words of Paul: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8.38-39) and followed them with an assurance of God's love for us all:

> "We gather here on what is for all of us a sad occasion. We were looking forward to a time of joy and happiness, and now there are tears and grief. We are left with a feeling of emptiness. All that has happened seems futile and pointless. Our minds are filled with questions to which there appear to be no answers: so many things we do not know; so many things we do not understand. But there are some truths we do know. We know that the God who made us, loves us; that he loves us always; that, through his Son Jesus Christ, he has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. We know also, as others before us have found, that his strength is available for us, especially at those times when we feel we have no strength of our own. My prayer for Paul

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[115] See Paul Beasley-Murray, 'Communion for the Dying', *Baptist Times* November 17, 2005.

[116] Quoted by James Roose-Evans, *Passages of the Soul* 8.

[117] See Robin Lapwood, *When Babies Die* (Grove, Nottingham 1988) 5-8: "Under British Law any baby who dies in the womb through natural causes less than 28 weeks after conceptions is termed a *Miscarriage*. Such a baby has no legal status. Its birth or death does not have to be registered; it has no name; and it may be disposed of in any way suitable to the hospital – frequently in the hospital incinerator. From 28 weeks and after this situation changes. A baby who dies during this period is deemed to have been a *Stillbirth*. Her birth and death must be registered, she may be given a name, and her body must be disposed of decently, usually in an unmarked common grave in the public cemetery."

and Fiona, as indeed my prayer for every person present here this evening, is that you will experience that strength which God in his love wishes to offer to us all."[118]

After singing 'Through all the changing scenes of life', I prayed: "O Lord our God, how good it is at a time like this to know that you are a God who loves us and cares for us, even as a Father loves and cares for his children. We thank you for the hymn which we have just sung, and for its reminder that you are with us 'through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy'. Loving Father, Father of all mercies and the God of all comfort, help us in this time of distress and grief to rest ourselves within the circle of your love. Grant us now the assurance of your living presence to cheer and to guide. Comfort us as we hear the promises contained in your Word; may we find in you the strength and peace we need."

We read Psalm 139.1-6, 13-17 (God knows and understands); John 14.1-2, 6 (Jesus calls us to place our hope in him); 1 Cor 15.20, 42-43, 54-57 (Jesus alone can give us life); and Mark 10.13-16 (Jesus has a special love for children)

We listened to a recording of a Ugandan children's choir: "You are my peace in the storm. Holy Lord, I call out your name again. I am broken, but you are my peace in the storm…"

I gave the briefest of addresses:

> "It has been said: 'Few things in life leave us more helpless, hopeless and faithless than the death of a child'. This certainly is true of baby Philip. Paul and Fiona, you had been looking forward so much to his coming, but now your hopes have been dashed; only the week before he died you had shared the news with Martin that he would be having a baby brother to play with, but now there is no brother. Not surprisingly you are stunned, shattered. This is the context in which we meet this evening. And I ask myself, 'What on earth can I say to you this evening?'
>
> Perhaps the first thing to say, is that we too share in your bewilderment. We too share something of your pain. Furthermore at this time of loss, we want to assure you that we are here for you. We want you to know that we care for you, as also for Martin and for Paula.
>
> But as a minister, I want to say something more. Tonight I want to remind you of the special place children had for our Lord. 'Let the children come to me', Jesus said, 'and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these'. On that occasion the disciples discovered to their amazement, children had a special place in the affections of Jesus. I dare to believe that Philip too has a special place in the affections of Jesus. As Jesus welcomed those children of old, so Jesus now welcomes Philip too into his Kingdom. We can in faith entrust Philip to his loving care, knowing that the strong love of Jesus encompasses all those who die in tender years. Philip's life, that was all too short in this world, is now complete in Jesus. We can indeed praise God for his love."

As is my custom at any funeral, I then led the congregation in three short prayers:

> "Our Father God, we praise you for the comfort of the Gospel. For Jesus, your Son, has broken the power of death – he has brought life and immortality to light. We thank you for all that you have done for us in him. We praise you for his Cross where our sins are forgiven – for his Resurrection, on which our hope of life is anchored.
>
> Father God, you have loved us from the moment when you shaped and formed us in our mother's womb. Today we give thanks for Philip. Lord, you know him and you love him, for you created his innermost self. Help us as we now entrust him to you, knowing that he is safe in your care. As we do so, we think of those who have gone before him – and not least Paul's father – and we bless you for the great company of those who you have brought through death to be with you forever in glory.
>
> We pray for all those for whom today is a day of great sorrow and loss. In particular we pray for the family: for Paul and Fiona; for Paul's mother, Joyce; for Fiona's parents, Michael and Edith; and for all the wider family. Father, comfort them and indeed us all in our sorrow. Amid all our questions, help us to trust you. In our time of darkness shine into our lives with the light of your presence. We pray too for Martin and for Paula,

[118] This affirmation is based on words to be found in 'an order for the funeral of a still-born child' which is included in the *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* (Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1994) 319.

and thank you for all the joy that they bring in this time of sadness. Continue to bless them and may they too in due time come to know the security which we find in your love for us all."

We listened to a recording of 'Blessed be your name', a song written by Matt Redman after his wife had suffered three miscarriages. It was also a song which the parents had at their wedding.

We finished with a benediction: "May the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding and of far more worth than human reasoning, keep guard over your hearts and thoughts, through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Phil 4.7).[119]

A still-birth

While a service to mark a miscarriage is relatively rare, it is increasingly common to honour a still-birth with a funeral. With a still-birth there is a real sense of loss, and all the more so when young parents just assume that will go well. When I have taken such a service, the shape has been very similar for a miscarriage. Normally such services are not large affairs and are not held in church. Appropriate Scripture readings include not just Mark 10.13-16, which depicts the special love Jesus has for children, but also the story of Jairus' daughter in Mark 5.36-43//Luke 8.49-56 where Jesus encourages the distressed parents to believe and assures them that their daughter is not dead but sleeping. Isaiah 40.11 is also particularly apt for a funeral involving a child: "The Sovereign Lord will take care of his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs together and carry them in his arms." After the act of committal, I often read the promise from Rev 21.4: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." Then a benediction based on these words of comfort: "May the love of God and the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ bless and console us, and gently wipe every tear from our eyes: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

An abortion

Although abortions are increasingly common-place,[120] for many abortion is a traumatic procedure which arouses not only a sense of loss, but also of guilt. Here surely there is a place for a private rite of transition in which the loss is recognised and the help of God is sought. Such a rite could include the Lord's Supper, where the emphases of forgiveness of sin and of the communion of saints would be relevant. Vienna Cobb Anderson has devised two liturgies for women undergoing abortion: the first is a 'liturgy at the time of choosing whether or not to have an abortion'[121] and the second is a liturgy containing 'rituals for abortion'.[122]

The bereaved

Liturgical ministry to the bereaved is not limited to the funeral or thanksgiving service. David Howell in his autobiographical account of the grief journey told of the difference participating in the Lord's Supper makes to the bereaved, as "with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven we proclaim his great and glorious name". In the context of 'the communion of saints' he recorded how he dealt with some of his inevitable regrets for the past by writing a letter to his former wife and placing it in a sealed letter on the communion table at a special celebration of the Lord's Supper just three days after her death, "reckoning that our Lord would know what to do with its contents. I

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[119] See also Tina Hodgett & Emma Major, *Miscarriage and Pastoral Care: Ministering to Sufferers of Pregnancy Loss* (Grove, Cambridge 2015) who in addition to offering practical suggestions for how a church might care for women and their partners who experience a miscarriage, also reflect theologically on the loss involved. The Appendix includes a 'service of prayer for babies who die before birth, with readings (Isaiah 49.13-16, 20, 23; Psalm 139.13-18; Mark 10.13-16) and prayers, including a commendation': "God of compassion, you make nothing in vain and we love all that you have created; we commend to you baby N, whose parents poured out such great love and cherished hopes and dreams. Grant them the assurance that their child, though not seen by us, is seen and known by you, and will share the risen life of your Son, Jesus Christ."

[120] According to government statistics, in 2012 there were 185,122 abortions performed on women resident in England and Wales.

[121] *Human Rites* 75-76. This includes the suggestion that if the woman has chosen to have an abortion, a letter to the dead child written by the mother may be read by her or by someone of her choosing. The letter may express her feelings her thoughts about the abortion and what she would have liked to say to the child. If the woman has chosen not to have an abortion and to keep her child, a letter expressing her hopes and dreams for her child may be read.

[122] *Human Rites* 151-152. This includes rituals for before, during and after the abortion. With regard to the third ritual, water is poured from a pitcher into a bowl, and one by one friends come to the woman, and put water on her head, hands, face and feet, saying: "We wash you with water as a symbol of the tears of mourning, the forgiveness of guilt, and the beginning of new life."

can only say that the service was a truly healing experience for me and through it I felt deeply reassured."[123] Whether or not people write letters in this way, communion services can prove unusually helpful and reassuring to the bereaved as they become aware of the wider 'communion of the saints'.

Other times for special prayer with the bereaved include the first anniversaries of a death.[124] In cases where both parents are gone, the clearing of the family home can prove fairly traumatic: here too there may be a place for special prayer. Praying does not do away with the need for grieving: it may, however, help to mark the end of a phase of the grief process.

8. Facilitating transitions within the community of faith

Transitions of faith

Renewal of baptismal vows

Not infrequently people say that they would love to be baptised again on the ground that baptism would have so much more meaning for them. Yet baptism by its very nature is unrepeatable: it is the entry rite into the Christian Church.[125] However, baptismal vows can be renewed in various ways.

- They can be renewed on a regular basis whenever the Lord's Supper is celebrated. If the Lord's Supper is to be at all meaningful, then it must end in renewed dedication; it must spur us onwards in our service of Christ.[126]
- They can be renewed by the whole congregation at a significant time of the year: e.g. the first Sunday of the New Year, on Easter Sunday or on the day of a Church Anniversary. The wise pastor will ensure that nobody is taken by surprise, but rather that the church is properly prepared for such a service.
- Where someone has backslidden and wandered away from the Christian faith, a reaffirmation of vows could fittingly take place at a service of baptism. The individual concerned would not be baptised again, but after the giving of a testimony could receive the laying on of hands together with prayer for a fresh infilling of the Spirit – somewhat along the lines of an Anglican confirmation.[127]

Gathering for Worship makes the helpful point: "Whatever the circumstances, the central truth proclaimed by this action should be the grace of God – through our redemption in Jesus Christ and through his constant welcoming of us with him and with the people of God."[128]

Reaffirmation of faith after trauma

Christians are not immune from tragedy and disaster. To many of us there come times when things go wrong and our world collapses around us. In such times some find themselves wonderfully upheld by the Lord; others, however, go through a dreadful time of darkness, when God seems to be absent and faith seems almost impossible. Depending on the pain, this 'dark night of the soul' may go on for weeks, if not months. They may hold onto the truth of Rom 8.28 in their minds, but they cannot feel it in their hearts. But given pastoral support and care, the day eventually comes

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[123] David Howell, *The Pain of Parting* (Grove Books, Nottingham 1993) 19.

[124] See Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* 72: "It should be remembered that the ritual occasions of the first year following death are particularly important milestones in grieving: the first Christmas without Dad, the first Easter, the first wedding anniversary."

[125] What if someone doubted whether they had ever truly believed in the first place? In such a case there might be room for 'conditional' baptism: i.e. the individual concerned would be baptised 'again', on the understanding that if they had been properly baptised the first time around, then this second baptism was in fact not baptism.

[126] See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Faith and Festivity* (Marc, Eastbourne 1991) 73: "Traditionally, Baptists have not used the term 'sacrament' of the Lord's Supper – no doubt in reaction against some of the magical associations with the word found in certain church traditions. However, it is good to be aware that the Latin word *sacramentum* at one time meant a soldier's oath of loyalty to his emperor. In this sense the Lord's Supper can be sacramental: a moment when worshippers renew their commitment to the Lord who loved them and gave himself for them."

[127] See the order for Reaffirming Baptismal Vows in *Gathering for Worship* 86-90.

[128] *Gathering for Worship* 86, where a number of suggestions are made for 'Reaffirming Baptismal Vows' (86-89) including the saying of the Apostles Creed.

when they are able to look back and discover that even in the darkness God was there. From the alchemy of fire a purer and deeper faith has emerged. How helpful it would be if that experience could be shared with the wider family of God. Then, after having given testimony and received communion, prayer with the laying on of hands could be made by the church, as the church in turn commits itself afresh to care for the individual concerned.

A healing rite for survivors of rape and sexual abuse

Sexual abuse and violence continue to abound. In January 2013 the Ministry of Justice reported that 85,000 women are raped on average in England and Wales every year; over 400,000 women are sexually assaulted each year; and 1 in 5 women (aged 16 – 59) has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 16.[129] In April 2014 the National Society for the Protection of Children reported that 1 in 20 children have been sexually abused. Many of these victims are in the church and sometimes even after years are struggling with what was done to them. Clearly they need the prayers of the church; but many could also benefit from a specific rite of healing.

One example of 'a liturgy of healing for survivors of domestic violence, rape, date rape, marital rape, incest, sexual abuse' starts with the words: "In the beginning… there was only pain and anger… only denial and humiliation… only loneliness and destruction… What else was there? Tell us and we will listen…" The leader then picks up a rock and says: "the stone symbolises a release from pain and renewal of loving healing energy" – the stone is then passed around, on the first occasion the people present are to imagine that they are pouring their pain into it, while the second time they are to fill it with loving energy.[130] In a 'rite of healing for a woman threatened with rape' the woman is given an opportunity to tell her story and then is affirmed and 'exorcised': "We affirm our sister who has been hurt, we declare she is loved of God and created in the image of God. Though she has been abused she is not destroyed. Although she has been deceived and demeaned, she retains her integrity. Though she has been a victim, she is a survivor. In the name of Christ the wounded healer we pray: From violence in your feelings, be healed. From the echo of violent wounds, be healed. From violence to your mind and spirit be healed."[131]

Relational transitions within the community of faith

Entering into church membership

Church membership, in a Baptist context at least, is about relationships; it is about commitment to one another. "In a Baptist church membership involves a dynamic covenant relationship with one another – a relationship in which we commit ourselves not only to work together to extend Christ's Kingdom, but also to love one another and stand by one another whatever the cost."[132] If this understanding of church membership is right, then it is insufficient to speak of 'welcoming' new members into fellowship. Before giving the 'right hand of fellowship' and receiving new members, it is good to give an opportunity for the new members to commit themselves to the church, and for the church in turn to commit themselves to the new member.[133]

Leaving church membership

If membership is about commitment to one another, then it cannot be right for members just to slip out of the fellowship. If church members are moving away, then on their last Sunday the rest of the church should be given an opportunity to say farewell to them.[134]

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[129] See *Overview of Sexual Offending in England and Wales.*

[130] See Diann L. New, *Human Rites* 154-155.

[131] See Ruth Bottoms, 'Rite of Healing for a Woman Threatened with Rape' *Worship File* 4 (Baptist Publications, Didcot 1993) 13-16. See also Judy Hanson, *Rape as Bereavement* (Grove, Nottingham 1992) 21-25.

[132] These words are taken from the rite used at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, to 'receive' people into church membership. See further Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot, 2nd edition 2006) 65-76.

[133] The new member may be asked: "Do you commit yourself to love and serve the Lord within this fellowship and also in the wider world?" The church may be asked: "Do you promise to love, encourage, pray for and care for *N*?" For further ideas see *Gathering for Worship* 74-83 which offers orders for 'Laying on hands and receiving into the church'; Receiving those recently baptised'; and 'Receiving members through transfer'. My one criticism of these orders is that they are very wordy and overly time-consuming, especially in a church which is regularly receiving new members.

[134] See Wayne Price, *The Church and the Rites of Passage* 123: "We ask them ahead of time to allow us to call them to the altar area where I bid them farewell on behalf of the church. The benediction to worship includes a benediction upon them as well. The congregation then files by with their own personal 'Godspeeds'." See also *Gathering for Worship* 92-93 which offers a rite for

Even if members are moving not out of town but simply to another church, they should be encouraged not to slip out, but to say their farewells. Christians need to learn to disagree gracefully, even if it means that, like Paul and Barnabas, they need to go their separate ways (see Acts 15.36-41). Their earlier commitment to one another needs to be formally dissolved. Unfortunately, it is probably unrealistic to expect a public dissolution of such vows. At the very least, however, it could take place privately in the pastor's office.[135]

Rites of reconciliation

In every church from time to time there are relationships difficulties. People fall out with one another. People hurt one another. People sin against one another. As a result some people leave the church, others stay in the same church, but relationships are cool. If the church is to live up to its calling of a reconciled and reconciling community, then steps have to be taken to talk to the parties and eventually bring them together.

As part of the reconciliation process a rite of reconciliation can be helpful, where both sides are able to ask forgiveness of one another. Where the breach of fellowship has been known only to a few, then such a rite of reconciliation can be conducted privately. Where the breach of fellowship is known to many, the rite could be conducted within the context of a 'church meeting'. Where the breach of fellowship is known throughout the wider community, then reconciliation should be demonstrated within the context of public worship.

In all three such scenarios the rite of reconciliation would best take place within a celebration of the Lord's Supper. There forgiveness can be received from the Lord and strength found to extend such forgiveness to one another. On such an occasion the offering of the 'Peace' would gain special significance.[136]

Reconciliation involves a process. Major relationships tend to be complicated in origin. Time will almost certainly be needed to address the underlying issues before any meaningful act of reconciliation can take place. Even after the eventual 'reconciliation', it may be unrealistic to expect fellowship to be restored immediatelyin depth. Indeed, fellowship may never be experienced in the same way again. But at least boundaries can be set in which love can be exercised.

Rites of forgiveness

By rites of forgiveness we refer not to the receiving of forgiveness, but the extending of forgiveness to those who either will not or cannot ask for forgiveness. In particular we have in mind those who have been abused by others and who for the sake of their own spiritual and emotional health need to be able to release their feelings of anger and pain over the undoubted wrong they have suffered before they can move on to a new, more positive stage where they forgive the wrongdoer. The releasing of anger and pain is part of the process of forgiveness.

'blessing departing members', but again this is probably too lengthy. Also Howard Roberts, *Pastoral Care through Worship* 211 offers a 'litany of departure'.

[135] See Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond the Churches* (SPCK, London 2002) 29-45 where he is particularly concerned about the number of church leavers giving up church together: on the basis of his research into church leavers he discovered that the majority of pastors are ignorant of the crucial reasons why people leave the church.

[136] In a private communication Malcolm Goodspeed, formerly Head of the Ministry Department of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, gave the following example of a rite of reconciliation:

Scripture readings: Matt 5.21-24 and 1 Cor 13

Meditation: "Love lets the past die. It moves people to a new beginning without settling the past. Love does not have to clear up all misunderstandings. In its power, the details of the past become irrelevant; only the new beginning matters. Accounts may go unsettled; differences remain unresolved; ledgers stay unbalanced. Conflicts between people's memories of how things happened are not cleared up; the past stays muddled. (Lewis Smedes, *Love Within Limits*).

Recalling of wrongs before God: Wrongs are written down by each person privately, sealed in an envelope, and place in a receptacle to be shredded later.

Act of reconciliation with the two parties saying in turn: "Although our perception of things is different from yours, we understand that you have experienced wrong and hurt because of our actions and attitudes. We have therefore come to ask for your forgiveness"; "We think you have wronged us and we have been hurt by your actions and attitudes. We have thought that we have been in the right in these matters that have hurt us all. We understand that you do not share this perception. We know that you hold the opposite view. Here in the presence of witnesses we freely forgive you and ask that you receive our love."

The Peace and the Lord's Supper

Gordon Sleight has perceptively pointed out that the fundamental meaning of the Greek word usually translated as 'forgive' (*aphiemi*) is 'to let go, let out, allow to depart, leave behind, dismiss – and the exact opposite of suppress and hold onto'. He goes on: "Many of the attempts of the Christians to whom I have listened to forgive their abusers, have been based on suppressing their bad feelings (anger, guilt, fear etc.) in the belief that this was what their faith called them to do, when in fact what they need to do was to let go of those feelings.[137] Rites need to be devised whereby people who have suffered abuse can tell their story and express their anger and pain, and then through supportive prayer (with laying on of hands?) be helped in Jesus' name to begin to release those feelings and discover past healing for their past wounds. We say "begin to release" feelings of anger and pain: it is important to emphasise that all this takes time. The pain may be so deep that sometimes many years elapse before full healing is accomplished, if indeed ever. The rite of passage may be seen as a help in an ongoing process, giving fresh strength to face up to the pain of the past.

To put it another way, we must give people an opportunity to 'dis-member' their memories, as distinct from 're-membering'. Let me explain. To 're-member' literally means putting back together something that has been broken and disconnected. This means more than recalling an event from the past – that is but a feat of memory. The opposite of re-membering is not forgetting; but dis-membering. To truly remember requires that we turn back to past actions or relationships and recognise our own place within what happened – perhaps for the first time. As we begin to re-member we may discover that far from having been totally in the right, we may actually have been in the wrong. In that sense re-membering can often be the key to restoring broken relationships. But for that to happen such re-membering must go way beyond the nursing of old hurts and, instead, allow the hurts to be exposed in such a way that we discover our place in the cause of pain. Such re-membering allows memories to become healing rather than destructive. Perhaps it was this kind of re-membering which James had partly in mind when he urged his readers: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (Jas 5.16).[138]

No rite dissolves responsibility from the abuser. It does, however, enable the abused person to move on ('a transition') and gain control over their lives again. If the abused cannot exercise forgiveness then will always be bound by the past

Covenanting together

After a period of difficulty at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, I drew up the following 'covenant' which now the church renews annually:

> "Lord Jesus, you are Lord of our lives and Lord of your church.
> We will act in love toward one another.
> We will care for one another.
> We will support those you have called to lead us.
> With your help we resolve to do our best to preserve the unity of your church.
>
> Lord Jesus, you wish to enter the hearts and lives of everybody.
> We will pray for those who have yet to respond to your love.
> We will invite friends to come to our church.
> We will make our church a place where strangers feel at home.
> With your help we resolve to do our best to make disciples."

Ministry transitions

Worship manuals offer plenty of guidance on services of ordination and induction, of commissioning lay leaders such as deacons and elders, but little for some of the less formal ministry transitions within the local church. This has involved me crafting my own 'rites'. Let me give two examples.

A commissioning of a prayer ministry team

"This morning we are setting aside a group of people who after having undergone appropriate training have formed a prayer ministry team, with a view to praying with others. In a very real sense they will be

[137] Gordon Sleight, 'Can confession damage your health?', *Contact* 111 (1993) 22.
[138] See Paul Beasley-Murray, 'What should we do with painful memories?', *Baptist Times*, November 11, 2004.

representatives of the Lord Jesus, offering his love and his grace to all who in need of God's touch upon their lives.

The Good News is that Jesus continues to invite us to come to him. He says: 'Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest' (Matt 11.28). As one hesitant sufferer discovered, it was enough just to touch the edge of Jesus' cloak to experience healing. On that occasion Jesus said: 'My daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace' (Luke 8.48). So let us come to Jesus believing that he is able to make all the difference. In the words of this year's church motto: 'Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart' (Phil 4.6). Of course, we can come to him directly. But sometimes in our weakness we need others to pray for us. In this respect the words of James are pertinent: 'Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you will be healed' (5.16). This is the context in which we now establish our new prayer ministry team.

My brothers and sisters, do you believe that God has called you to serve as a member of our new prayer ministry team, and do you promise, with God's help, to exercise this ministry faithfully? "*We do*"

Let us pray for our friends: "Father God, we pray your blessing upon every member of our prayer ministry team. Help them to be open to others in listening, sensitive to unseen suffering, perceptive in understanding, so that in their praying they may be able to bring to you the true needs that are among us. May they become channels of your love and grace. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen."

A commissioning of a youth worker

Two questions to the youth worker:

1. The Apostle Paul said to Timothy: "Concentrate on doing your best for God, work you won't be ashamed of, laying out the truth plain and simple" (2 Tim 2.15). Do you promise to do study God's Word so that you will be able to be a good teacher of the young people in your care? ["I do"]
2. The Apostle Paul also said to Timothy: "Keep the Message alive" (2 Tim 4.5). Do you promise to do the work of an evangelist by sharing the Good News of Jesus in ways which are relevant to the young people of Chelmsford? ["I do"]

Two questions to the church:

1. The Lord Jesus said: "Let me give you a new command: love one another" (John 13.34). Do you promise to show your love for *N*, not least by encouraging him/her and strengthening his/her faith in God? ["We do"]
2. The writer to the Hebrews said: "Be responsive to your pastoral leaders. Listen to their counsel. Contribute to the joy of their leadership" (Hebs 13.17). Do you promise to support the leadership he/she will give in his work amongst young people? ["We do"]

Before proceeding with prayer and laying-on-of-hands, two further verses of Scripture.

1. Jesus said: "Take a good look at the fields; the crops are now ripe and ready to be harvested" (John 4.35).
2. The Apostle Paul said: "The Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead his Spirit fills us with power, love and self-control"(2 Tim 1.6).[139]

9. Providing rites of passage for the church year

Many of these individual rites of passage could be recognised in a corporate manner, and could be fitted into the church year. From the perspective of pastors this could be helpful: it would help them in their planning to ensure that various groups in the church are not missed out. It would also be helpful to the church as a whole: members would become more aware of their responsibilities to each other, and the fellowship of the church would be deepened as a result. With this in mind, we offer the following suggestions:

First Sunday of the New Year: Renewal of membership vows
Sunday after 25 January (Conversation of St Paul): Celebration of singleness
Sunday before Valentine's Day (14 February): Renewal of wedding vows; recognition of all those who in the past year celebrated special wedding anniversaries

[139] To be fair, there was material available for commissioning youth workers, but none inspired me. Note that in this order the version of Scripture used is Eugene Peterson's *The Message.*

*Mothers' Day & Fathers' Day:*Prayer for all those who have lost their parents over the past year
Easter Day: Renewal of baptismal vows
Sunday nearest May Day (1 May): Prayer for the unemployed; recognition of all those who retired in the past year
Pentecost/Church Anniversary: Renewal of membership vows
Trinity Sunday: Prayer for right relationships in the church (reflecting the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit)
A Sunday in June/July: Recognition of school leavers
First Sunday in September: Recognition of school starters
Sunday nearest 1 October (UN Day of the Elderly): A celebration of old age
Sunday nearest All Saints Day (1 November): Recognition of all those who died in the past year

Conclusion

Worship is the *raison d'être* of the church. In the final analysis, the church doesn't exist to tell others the good news of Jesus Christ; nor does it exist to help the world to be a better place. The church exists for God. In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever." What is true of men and women, is even more true of the church: God has made us to "declare his praise"(Isaiah 43.21: also 1 Pet 2.5, 9). To lead a congregation in worship, therefore, is to be entrusted with one of the most important tasks in life. This is the context in which pastors are called to be 'creative liturgists'.

PART 2: THE COMPASSIONATE PASTOR

10. The call to care

As the very metaphor suggests, pastors, as 'shepherds' of the flock, are called to care for those in their charge. It is a multi-facetted task, for it involves not only caring for the 'weak' and for those going through the various crises of life, but also promoting the spiritual development of the 'strong'. Pastors need to know all those in their care – to know not just their names, but also the person behind the 'persona'. Along with general visiting, this entails being alongside people undergoing significant change in their lives: e.g. at the point of birth, death, redundancy, and divorce. It is a demanding task. However, as we shall see, it is also a shared task: God's people are called to care for one another. Nonetheless pastors have a particular responsibility. Caring for the flock is at the heart of their call.

The shepherd image in the Old Testament

The word 'pastor' is derived from the Latin word for a 'shepherd'. It is a term which has a rich history both in the Old and New Testaments

Probably for many the first Scripture passage to come to mind is Psalm 23, where God's care for his people is likened to that of a shepherd caring for his sheep. "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalm 23.1), a reminder that in the first place pastoral care is personal. In this Psalm we see something of the multi-faceted nature of pastoral care. The good shepherd feeds, restores, and guides his sheep. With his rod and staff he not only protects his sheep, but also "disciplines his sheep and examines them for disease"[140]

Jeremiah frequently applied the shepherd designation to Israel's leaders. Through Jeremiah God promises: "I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer 3.15). The phrase "after my own heart" suggests, says Timothy Laniak, that: "A good shepherd is one who sees what the Owner sees and does what the Owner does. He is a *follower* before he is a leader." Further, says Laniak, the promise that these shepherds will lead "with knowledge and understand", suggests that these future shepherds will have "a sharp godly mind. The challenges of leadership require reservoirs of knowledge and understanding."[141]

The shepherd imagery recalls Ezekiel's description of the divine shepherd: "I myself will be the shepherd of the sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice" (Ezek 34.15,16 NRSV). The somewhat harsh Hebrew version only makes sense if the meaning is that the divine shepherd will care for the needy by destroying the strong who would attack the helpless sheep, and therefore feed them with justice. On the other hand, from the perspective of pastoral care the rendering presented by the LXX, Syriac and Latin versions is more attractive: "And the fat and the strong I will watch over" (so, for instance, the RSV). On the basis of Ezekiel 34 the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer defined the pastoral task as:

1. To draw to Christ those who are alienated.
2. To lead back those who have been drawn away.
3. To secure amendment of life for those who fall into sin.
4. To strengthen weak and silly Christians.
5. To preserve Christians who are whole and strong and urge them forward to the good.

In other words, on this model of the divine shepherd, the pastor's responsibilities are evangelism, restoration, teaching, encouraging and feeding.[142]

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[140] Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherd*s (IVP, Leicester 1986) 45.
[141] Timothy Laniak, *Shepherds after My own Heart: Pastoral traditions and leadership in the Bible* (Apollos, Leicester 2006) 22.
[142] See *Martini Bucer Opera Omnia Series 1: Deutsche Schriften VII* 67-245, cited by Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds* 47.

The shepherd image in the New Testament

The term 'pastor' referring to a ministry in the church only appears once in the New Testament: viz. in Eph 4.11 where Paul lists the various gifts of the Risen Christ to his church: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers." This verse is often seen as listing five separate offices or ministries in the church. In fact, the underlying Greek suggests that Paul is speaking just of four, for only one definite article covers both 'pastors and teachers': pastors, who are responsible for the nurture and care of their congregations, "exercise their leadership role by feeding God's flock with his word".[143]

Although there are no other instances of 'pastor' as a noun, the related verb 'to shepherd' (or 'to pastor') appears several times in this sense: see Acts 20.28; 1 Pet 5.2; also John 21.6. The noun 'flock' is used of the church in Acts 20.28-29; 1 Pet 5.2. In Acts 20.28-29 pastoral care is described as 'watching over *all* [my italics] the flock". David Peterson comments: "Neglect of one group or another will result in the whole congregation being hurt or hindered in its growth and witness."[144] In 1 Peter 5.2-5 caring for the flock is to be characterised by humility and servanthood.

Jesus the Good Shepherd models pastoral care

Jesus took up the Old Testament imagery of God as a shepherd caring for his people. In the parable of the Lost Sheep (Matt 18.12-13; Luke 15.4-7) Jesus by implication likened himself to the shepherd who goes in search of the sheep who has strayed – no pastor should ever be content with the 99! When challenged by the Canaanite woman, he described himself as being sent "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15.24; see also Matt 10.6). He saw his disciples as God's "little flock" (Luke 12.32). The same picture was in his mind at the Last Supper when he quoted Zechariah 13.7 ("I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered") in connection with the disciples' impending desertion of him (Mark 14.27).

Jesus saw himself as a shepherd not only relation to his disciples, but to Israel as a whole. Mark describes how on the occasion of the feeding of the five thousand Jesus "had compassion for [the crowd] because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6.34). Mathew says much the same in a more general context: "When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9.36). Here pastoral care goes hand in hand with 'compassion'.

The metaphor is most fully developed in John's Gospel. Two passages are especially significant. In John 10.1-18 Jesus declares: "I am the good shepherd" (10.11). In John 21.15-19, the risen Christ commissions Peter to feed his sheep. It is because of John 21 that we are able to use John 10 as a pattern for later Christian ministry. In John 10 Jesus does not refer to future leaders acting as shepherds, but John 21 implies an ongoing responsibility. This is presumably why the Anglican ordination service prescribes John 10 as the Gospel reading. In the light of these two passages the following implications for pastoral care emerge:

- Pastoral care, based on the pattern of Jesus, is based on a relationship of trust. Twice in John 10 Jesus declares that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep (10.3-4; 10.14-15). By implication today's pastors need to know their people – to know not just their names, but the circumstances of their lives. That is the context of good pastoral care.
- The Good Shepherd serves the sheep in his charge by seeking their good, not his good. Unlike "the thief" who "comes only to steal and destroy", the Good Shepherd comes "that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10.10), and ultimately lays down his life for the sheep. In order for the remarkable nature of this service to emerge, we need to rid ourselves of romantic and sentimental notions concerning sheep. Sheep are not particularly loveable creatures. They can be dirty and pest-ridden; silly and stupid. Yet, in spite of this, the Good Shepherd cares for them unreservedly – even if it is to his own detriment. By implication today's pastors need to care for the welfare of their people, however difficult and awkward some might be. Important as are such things as competence and ability, even more important is love and sacrifice.
- The Good Shepherd is concerned not just for the survival of his sheep, but also for their growth. The concept of the sheep finding pasture (John 10.9) is developed in Jesus' commission to Peter to "feed" both his lambs and his sheep. By implication today's pastors need to be concerned not just for the casualties of life, but also to encourage the personal change and growth of all. Good shepherding encourages diversity rather than

[143] Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* 300. O'Brien does not think that the two groups are identical, and believes that it is more likely that the terms describe overlapping functions (see 1 Cor 12.28-29 and Gal 6.6., where 'teachers' are a distinct group). "All pastors teach (since teaching is an essential part of pastoral ministry), but not all teachers are also pastors."
[144] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* 569.

uniformity: "We are… to coax different seeds of growth in the people we care for, until they reach a maturity, that richness of character, their own particular character and no one else's."[145]

Paul's model of pastoral care

Pastoral care has many aspects. This comes out very clearly in the way in which Paul approached the pastoral task. Interestingly in his letters Paul never described himself as a "pastor" (but see Eph 4.11; also Acts 20.28). Instead he used the imagery of the parent-child relationship. Tender and loving as a mother (1 Thess 2.7, 8), he was anxious to see his children grow in the faith (Gal 4.19, 20). As a father, Paul believed that both encouragement (1 Thess 2.11, 12) and correction (1 Cor 4.14-21) were necessary for healthy development within the Christian family.[146] For Paul, discipline was not reserved as a final resort for gross moral error, but rather was perceived to be an essential part of Christian nurture by which individuals and churches were built up in the faith (see Col 1.28).

Significantly, Paul was concerned not just for the corporate health of the churches in his care, but also for the wellbeing of individuals. People counted for Paul: hence in Rom 16 Paul takes the trouble of greeting over 27 people by name. The personal character of Paul's pastoral work comes to the fore in 1 Thess 2.11 and Col 1.28. This is in line with Luke's account of Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders, which suggests that his normal practice was to combine preaching to the church at large together with the visiting of individual church members (Acts 20.20).

Although Paul was clearly a dominant figure, he never operated as a solo pastor. He constantly surrounded himself with colleagues who could share in the pastoral task. What is more, Paul also encouraged his converts in general to be involved in pastoral care. Likening the church to a body, he spoke of the members having "the same care for one another" (1 Cor 12.25). Paul urged the Galatians to "bear one another's burdens", which in turn involved caring for those straying from the faith, restoring the backsliders (Gal 6.1, 2). Within the context of death and bereavement the Thessalonians were told to "encourage one another and build one another up" (1 Thess 5.11). Paul expected the Thessalonians to share in every aspect of pastoral care: "admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak" (1 Thess 5.14). Similarly the Colossians were to "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Col 3.16). Pastoral care was not exclusive to a particular cadre in the church: all were involved in "the work of ministry" (see Eph 4.12, 15, 16).[147]

11. Pastoral care today

Pastoral care: modern definitions

From biblical images and patterns, which contain some significant principles for contemporary pastoral care, we turn to pastoral care as it is understood today. By general consensus Clebsch and Jaekle's definition has been regarded as standard in North America as also in Britain: pastoral care "consists of helping acts, done by representative Christian persons, directed towards healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns."[148]

There are, however, three distinct limitations to this definition:

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[145] Frank Wright, *Pastoral Care Revisited* (SCM,

[146] The question arises as to what extent Paul's parental care for his churches should be emulated today. Emma Percy argues that mothering is a helpful analogy for parish ministry, and that clergy should reflect the arts of cherishing and of comforting; of multi-tasking and multi-attending; of homemaking and housekeeping; of weaning and managing change. She concludes: "My concern is that we fail to articulate the achievements of good parish ministry, which involves all the seemingly unproductive aspects of being seen around the parish, being interruptible, knowing how to offer a comforting word or attend properly to friend and stranger. The process of keeping the show going, noticing if the church is clean and the aspect welcoming, putting on the services with love and attention, being authentic, trustworthy, humble, cheerful and faithful. If we undervalue all these things and appear to privilege formulaic action plans and blueprints for growth then I would suggest we undermine the proper practice of parish ministry and its vital importance for building up the church in a particular place" (*Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry***,** Ashgate, Farnham 2014, 153.) Although I very much affirm the pastoral nature of ministry, I fear that if the 'mothering' metaphor were to become the dominant analogy for a minister's calling, we would be in danger of encouraging yet further church decline.

[147] See further Paul Beasley-Murray, 'Paul as Pastor' 654-658 in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (IVP, Leicester 1993) edited by G.F. Hawthorne & R.P. Martin.

[148] William A. Clebsch & Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (Aronson, New York 1975) 4.

1. The underlying assumption is that pastoral care is exercised by professional pastors, i.e. "representative Christian persons". There is, however, no good reason why pastors should have the monopoly on pastoral care.

2. Pastoral care is conceived in terms of what Martin Thornton called "the ambulance syndrome".[149] It has "troubled persons" in view, as distinct from people in general. Pastoral care, however, needs to have a much broader base. Pastoral care viewed from a Christian perspective is not just helping the hurting, but also helping, encouraging and enabling people to grow and develop in the Christian faith.

3. To speak of care exercised "in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns" is vague and ambiguous. Specifically Christian pastoral care is rooted in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Swiss Protestant pastor and theologian Eduard Thurneysen rightly said: "True pastoral care does not rest until it has carried the forgiving Word into these depths in the strength of the Spirit and of prayer and has really... brought [persons] again under the healing power of grace."[150] In Jesus only is fullness of life to be found (John 10.10).

In the light of these criticisms in 1988 Stephen Pattison offered a more welcome definition: "Pastoral care is that activity, undertaken especially by representative Christian persons, directed towards the elimination and relief of sin and sorrow and the presentation of all people perfect in Christ to God."[151]

Later Paul Goodliff has sought to build on the work of both Clebsch and Jaekle on the one hand, and Pattison on the other, combining the 'outcome' categories of the former with the specifically Christian emphasis of the latter, and defined pastoral care as "the healing, sustaining, guiding, personal/societal formation and reconciling of persons and their relationships to family and community by representative Christian persons (ordained or lay) and by their faith communities, who ground their care in the theological perspective of that faith tradition and who personally remain faithful to that faith through spiritual authenticity".[152]

Interestingly, by 1993 Pattison wanted to amend his definition. He now believed that "the norm for thinking about care must now be that of the ordinary non-trained, non-professional person."[153] In similar vein, Alastair Campbell wanted to "prevent specialised counselling by clergy becoming normative for pastoral care".[154] He was afraid lest in professionalising pastoral care we lose "the spontaneity and simplicity of love".[155] For "pastoral care is, in essence, surprisingly simple. It has one fundamental aim: to help people to know love, both as something to be received and something to give."[156] Pastoral care is simply the fulfilling of the 'new commandment' (John 13.34) – to love one another as Christ loved us. How that love will be expressed will vary: love can be tough and not just all-embracing. To quote St Augustine: "Disturbers are to be rebuked, the low-spirited to be encouraged, the infirm to be supported, objectors confuted, the treacherous guarded against, the unskilled taught, the lazy aroused, the contentious restrained, litigants pacified, the poor relieved, the oppressed liberated, the good approved, the evil borne with, and all are to be loved."

An aspect of that loving is that we enter into the pain of others. John Pritchard describes the role of the priest as pastor as that of a "wounded companion: sharing the journey"; "the huge privilege of the priest is to be given access to people's lives and struggles at their most vulnerable points."[157] There are times when pastors can only sit and be silent, as they accompany people in their pain. "To whom" cried out the poet Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD), "can any man say – 'Here I am! Behold me in my nakedness, my wounds, my secret grief, my despair, my betrayal, my pain, my tongue which cannot express my sorrow, my terror, my abandonment. Listen to me for a day – an hour – a moment! Lest I expire in my terrible wilderness, my lonely silence! Oh God, is there no one to listen?'." Pastors are called to listen.

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[149] Martin Thornton, *Spiritual Direction* (SPCK, London 1984) 9: "It is curious that what we ambiguously call pastoral care is seen as something entirely negative. It invariably suggests the dispensation of human benevolence with a sprinkling of Christian saccharin: helping those in trouble, counselling the disturbed, solving human problems. This is the ambulance syndrome, implying that Christianity might alleviate suffering but that it has nothing more positive to offer. The pastor is there to pick up the pieces after an accident, and barring accidents he is out of a job."

[150] Eduard Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care* (English edition: John Knox Press, Richmond 1962) 67.

[151] Stephen Pattison, *A Critique Of Pastoral Care* (SPCK, London, 2nd edition 1993) 13.

[152] Paul Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate: Pastoral Care and Postmodern Culture* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1998) 10.

[153] Stephen Pattison, *A Critique of Pastoral Care* 194.

[154] Alastair Campbell, *Paid To Care? The Limits of Professionalism in Pastoral Care* (SPCK, London 1985) 53.

[155] Alastair Campbell, *Paid to Care?* 4.

[156] Alastair Campbell, *Paid To Care?* 1.

[157] John Pritchard, *The Life and Work of a Priest* (SPCK, London 2007) 67.

Yet there are times when pastors are called to speak. For as Pritchard goes on to say, along with "compassion" there must also be "challenge".

> "Even a skin-deep consideration of the ministry of Jesus reveals a man whose pastoral relationships were often profoundly uncomfortable. Contact with Jesus meant change. You couldn't simply count on a hug and a handkerchief. The woman caught with her lover had to change her life-style. A young man with a lot of money had to give it all away. A blind man had to be sure he really wanted his sight, with all the loss of a beggar's privileges that went with it. In other words, Jesus' compassion had a challenging edge to it, and it's here that priestly pastoral care comes under a harsh spotlight. It's easy to be gentle; it's less easy to risk the unpopularity or goes with asking the hard questions which are sometimes necessary for a deeper transformation."[158]

Pastoral care entails compassion

Compassion is "the cardinal virtue of the Christian pastoral tradition".[159] Christian pastors by definition are compassionate people; and rightly so because we follow Jesus, the compassionate pastor *par excellence*.

I find it significant that in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark we read time and again not so much of the love of Jesus as the compassion of Jesus (see Matt 9.36; 14.14//Mark 6.34; 15.32//Mark 8.2; 20.34; Mark 1.41). His compassion was 'visceral': it involved a 'gut response' – literally 'his bowels were churned up'.[160] Today we associate the heart with the seat of emotion , but the ancient Greeks tended to locate the emotion of love and compassion to the bowels. So we can say that when Jesus had compassion he 'experienced inward pain'. It is difficult to find the right English word to express the full emotional force of the underlying metaphor. R.T. France suggests "his heart went out" to people in need;[161] Eugene Peterson says "his heart broke".[162] Personally I like the term 'compassion': the English word 'compassion' is derived from two Latin words, *cum* ('with') and *passio* ('suffering') – so compassion is 'suffering with'. In other words, Jesus 'hurts' when he sees people, he 'feels for them', they 'grab him down deeply', they 'reach him'.[163]

The NRSV and the GNB speak of Jesus having 'pity'. Oliver Davies took issue with this translation. Compassion, he said, needs to be distinguished from 'pity', for while we may pity someone, we may not choose to help him; it needs to be distinguished from 'mercy', for that implies a power relationship; it needs too to be distinguished from 'empathy', for that is merely a cognitive state where the emphasis is on feeling. Rather, said Davies, there are three elements to compassion: when we are compassionate, we perceive another's suffering, we are moved by it, and we seek to come to its aid.[164] The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia makes a similar point: "Compassion is the emotion that we feel in response to the suffering of others that motivates a desire to help… More involved than simple empathy, compassion commonly gives rise to an active desire to alleviate another's suffering." That was certainly true of Jesus; his compassion always moved him to action. So, Mark tells us that when a leper came to Jesus, "moved with compassion Jesus stretched out his hand" and healed him (Mark 1.41).

It is possible that Mark in his account of the healing of the man with leprosy does not refer to compassion at all. A few manuscripts have an alternative wording:[165] so the REB translates Mk 1.41 as: "Jesus was moved to anger". There has been much debate as to which of the two readings is correct: some argue that the original reading is "moved to anger", because it is the more difficult reading. If so, then why was Jesus angry? Was it because of the awfulness of the disease? Or was it because of the way in which the disease had so badly mutilated and disfigured this man? Some might say that this is a pointless debate. Margaret Magdalen, for instance, wrote: "Anger is the flip-side of compassion

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[158] *The Life and Work of the Priest* 68, 69.
[159] Rodney J. Hunter (editor) *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (Abingdon, Nashville, 2nd edition 2000) 207.
[160] The Greek verb is *splagnizomai* and is derived from the noun *splagnon*, which literally means 'inwards parts, entrails'. This verb is found in 1 John 3.17 which the AV translates: "But whoso hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother hath need, and shutteth up his bowels from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"
[161] R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2007) 373.
[162] Eugene Peterson, *The Message.*
[163] Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1987) 448.
[164] Oliver Davies, 'Compassion', *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (SCM, London 2005) edited by Philip Sheldrake.
[165] *orgistheis*

and the lack of one would indicate a lack of the other. At times the strength of our compassion is in direct relation to the extent of our anger. The 'sap' rises equally to become one's energy."[166]

I find the link between compassion and anger of interest. Walter Brueggemann claimed that where in the Scriptures people were in need, "the hurt had to be taken seriously, that the hurt was not to be accepted as normal and natural but was an abnormal and unacceptable condition of humanness."[167] In other words compassion "is the fruit of harnessed rage at the manifest evils of society and the sheer weight of human misery".[168] This reminds me of John Swinton's book, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*, where he argued that "the task of the church is not to attempt to explain evil and suffering, but rather to offer modes of embodied resistance such as listening to silence… that provide crucial and countercultural ways of encountering and dealing with evil."[169]

One other thought. Compassion is not just the basis for pastoral care; it is also the basis for mission. So Bruner, commentating on the "compassion" of Jesus for the crowd "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 10.36) observed:

> "Mission is not motivated by Jesus' disgust for people because they are such sinners, nor even by an imperial sense that he has a right to people (which, properly understood, he has). Mission is motivated by the more appealing fact of Jesus' compassion for helpless people… When sin is stressed inordinately as a source of mission, compassion is smothered rather than stoked. When Jesus looks out over the world, it is first of all people's 'helplessness' that he sees; it is their depression, oppression, and suppression that affects him most. He sees people as a *massa confusionis* before he sees them as a *massa perditionis* (though he does also see them as perishing: see 10.6). People need nothing so much as they need a really *good* shepherd, a finally good pastor."[170]

Here is a challenge for every pastor.

Pastoral care is demanding

Within any given week a pastor can be helping a schizophrenic, sitting by the bedside of a dying patient, comforting a bereaved family, counselling a couple whose marriage is on the rocks, confronting a member whose business practices are shady, listening to someone experiencing the pain of redundancy, answering the doubts of a waverer. All this on top of preparing a sermon and running the church!

Joey Faucette estimated that in a hypothetical American congregation of 500 people representing a cross-section of the population:

> 25 have been hospitalised in the past for a major mental illness
> 24 are alcoholics
> 50 are severely handicapped by neurotic conflicts
> 100 are afflicted by moderate neurotic conflicts
> 115 would answer "yes" to the question: "Have you ever felt you were going to have a nervous breakdown?"
> 70 have sought professional help for a personal or marital problem in the past.
> 1 will attempt suicide every other year.
> 8 will be involved in a serious crime.
> Fewer than one half of those persons married would rate their marriage as "very happy".[171]

Whether the situation is any better in the UK, I don't know. What I do know is that where the love of Christ is real, churches seem to attract all kinds of problem people. Many of these people need a good deal of help and support just to be able to cope with the pressures of day-to-day living. What's more there are some who seem to need constant support.

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[166] Margaret Magdalen, *The Hidden Face of Jesus: Reflections on the Emotional Life of Christ* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1994) 58, 59.
[167] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (London SCM 1992) 85.
[168] Margaret Magdalen, *The Hidden Face of Jesus* 61.
[169] John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2007) 5.
[170] Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, 448.
[171] Joey Faucette, 'Pastoral Wholeness: Preaching and Teaching that Heals', *Congregations* (Nov/Dec 1993) 10.

Gordon MacDonald analysed the extent of the pastoral challenge by distinguishing between the VIPs, the VTPs, the VNPs and the VDPs:

- The VIPs (Very Important People) are "those you are developing for leadership roles. You share with them your vision for ministry. They are spiritual heavyweights that are really coming along."
- The VTPs (Very Teachable People) are "the younger believers who are open to learning and will be tomorrow's leaders".
- The VNPs (Very Nice People) are "wonderful to be around, but they make no difference whatsoever as far as the spiritual life of the church is concerned. The church is full of VNPs."
- The VDPs (Very Draining People) are "the ones who create a negative balance in the arrangement. You're always giving to them, whether its advice or encouragement or problem solving. You get absolutely no return from them."

MacDonald added: "The VIPs are doing the work now, the VTPs will do the work tomorrow, the VNPs are likely to avoid the work whenever possible, and the VDPs are often the work itself. Most pastors spend their time with groups three and four. We minimise our time with the VIPs because they can take care of themselves. We don't give enough time to the VTPs because the draining people are making such extreme demands on our time. Jesus, however, spent most of his time with the first two groups, and he got them to help with the work of dealing with the other two groups."[172]

Pastoral care involves visiting people in their homes

For almost all of my working life as a pastor I worked from church. Unless I was writing a sermon or having a confidential conversation, my office door was always open. People came to see me: but for the most part they were people with whom I had already established a relationship by visiting them in their home.

In times past one of the chief tasks of the pastor was to visit people in their homes. Some pastors still do, many do not. Nolan Harmon told of one energetic Baptist minister who used to get into every home in his church – he had over 2,000 members – once every year. His calls were necessarily short, about ten minutes each, but he got them made.[173] But Harmon was writing in 1928. Today things are different. According to George Barna, the average senior American pastor in 1992 was spending five hours a week doing visitation.[174] One gets the impression that if it were possible, American pastors would do even less, because only 10% listed pastoral care as "the primary joy of pastoring".[175]

Robin Greenwood is quite clear: pastoral visiting for the sake of pastoral visiting is to be avoided. Far from being helpful, it is actually harmful to the effective functioning of the church. "It is a mistake regularly to visit the hale and hearty, because this reinforces in them the image of a priest who is there to look after them rather than as one to preside over their many and varied ministries."[176]

Eugene Peterson is also far from enamoured with much of routine pastoral visiting, and suggests it has little point. "I want to be a pastor who listens. I want to have the energy and time to really listen to them so when they are through, they know at least one other person has some inkling of what they're feeling and thinking... Too much of pastoral visitation is punching the clock, assuring people we're on the job, being busy, earning our pay."[177]

Similarly, according to Stephen Pattison, routine pastoral visiting accomplishes very little, because there is no agreed understanding why a particular visit is taking place. Often the pastor has no clear purpose, and even if the pastor does have a motive for visiting, this motive is not normally communicated to the person visited. Add to that the residual "judgemental aspect" of the ministerial role, and you end up with not only a pointless visit, but possibly an unwelcome visit too.[178]

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[172] Gordon MacDonald, *Leadership* V.4 111.
[173] Nolan B. Harmon, *Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette* (Abingdon, Nashville, revised edition 1978) 83.
[174] George Barna, *Today's Pastors* 130.
[175] Barna, *Today's Pastors* 65.
[176] Robin Greenwood, *Reclaiming the Church* (Collins/Fount, London 1988) 57, 58.
[177] Eugene Peterson, 'The Unbusy Pastor', *Leadership* II (Summer 1981) 72.
[178] Stephen Pattison, *A Critique of Pastoral Care* 75, 76.

Much depends on the skill of a pastor. Pastors with "knowledge and understanding" (Jer 3.15) can certainly engage in conversations which get below the surface. But, whatever the size of a church, there is little justification for a mere routine visit. However, what is essential for a pastor is visiting everybody at least once in their home: for only in that way can a pastoral relationship be truly established. As the veteran Southern Baptist pastoral theologian, C.W. Brister, pointed out, it is in their home that a person generally risks being real. True, there are people who even in the home put up a facade, with the result that the visit – from the point of view of the pastor at least – proves a frustrating experience. Nonetheless, it is more difficult to put up a facade at home. Within the home setting, without anything so much as being said, the discerning pastor can begin to understand the context from which a person comes. There is no better way of getting to know a person than actually visiting them in their home. There is therefore a lot to be said for new pastors within the first year or so of their call to a church, to aim to visit all the members in their homes. Some pastors beginning their ministry in a new church feel it is more effective arranging for people to visit them in their church office, but while such a method may be more effective in the use of time, in the long run it proves less effective in getting to know and understand those in our charge.

Pastors needs to get out of their offices and be where there people are. Pope Francis made this point tellingly when he said: "The priest who doesn't go out of himself, who mixes little with people, loses the best part of the people, the part that is able to activate the deepest part of our priestly heart. He who doesn't get out of himself, instead of becoming a mediator, gradually becomes an intermediary, a manager… That is the explanation for the dissatisfaction of some who end up being sad and transformed, as it were, into collectors of antiques or novelties, instead of being shepherds smelling of sheep, shepherds in the middle of their own flock, and fishers of men… I ask you: be shepherds smelling of sheep, they must be smelled"![179]

Being among one's people involves visiting. In a large church, the visiting of everybody in their homes can be a challenge, and can easily take a couple of years. What's more, once those initial visits have been made, there are all the newcomers to visit too!

Pastoral care involves visiting newcomers

At what stage should pastors visit newcomers? At one stage when I was pastoring a church with less than 200 members I would seek to visit everybody who visited our church in the week following their visit. However, many one-off visitors did not return – the style of our church life and worship was, perhaps, not be for them. So I decided to wait until people had come to church for at least three Sundays. By then the 'visitors' had become 'newcomers': they were clearly expressing an interest in our church, and we in turn in them. That was the point when I would normally offer to make a visit.

For me, visiting newcomers in their homes has always been a delight. I know that for many ministers this is something they happily delegate to others. Yet this is the only way in which a pastor can get to know people new to the church. Having a conversation at the church door after a service will yield some information, but it can never take the place of visiting a home. Visiting a person's home, looking at the pictures they have on display or perhaps the books they have in a bookcase, will immediately tell me so much about them.

I have always been pretty direct in my visits; so much so that I often began the conversation by apologising for the fact that I will be somewhat like the Gestapo in the questions I ask. But then, that seems to me to be the task of a pastor. A pastor is not a counsellor, who just listens and responds: a pastor can probe and even challenge. If, for instance, I was visiting a couple who were living together, I would – in a gentle way – make it clear that I did not approve of their living arrangements, and would tell them that I would be delighted to regularise their situation. It was amazing how many weddings eventually then took place! I asked people to tell me where they were born and brought up, and got them to go through their past. I got them to share with me their faith journey. Only then did I begin to talk about our church, what it does in our community, how it functions, and what it might have to offer them. So much depended on the individual, as to how the conversation then proceeded. For me visiting newcomers was a vital pastoral task, as important as leading the church and expounding God's Word.

[179] Quoted by Elisabettah Pique in *Pope Francis: Life and Revolution. A biography of Jorge Bergoglio* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 2015) 190.

Pastoral care seeks to integrate newcomers

Welcoming newcomers

The challenge all churches face is not just to attract worshippers, but to keep worshippers. How do we keep, and not just attract, visitors?

Clearly people need to be welcomed, and to feel welcome. As Rick Warren said: "Long before the pastor preaches, the visitor is deciding whether to come back. They are asking themselves, 'Do I feel welcome here?'." [180]Many churches have a welcome team ready to greet visitors as they appear at the door of the church, and then to show the visitors to their seats. To my mind, the initial welcome is so important, the pastor should be there too. I used to ensure that I was the door twenty minutes before the service, ready to welcome everybody to church.

Church welcome cards are a great pastoral tool. The welcome cards I devised gave visitors an opportunity to tell us not only their names and addresses, but also their first impressions of the church:

> This is what I first noticed
> This is what I liked best
> This is what I did not like.

To encourage people to fill in the card I would promise every newcomer who returned one of these cards a pen, inscribed with the name and website of the church. It was amazing how a 'bribe' of this nature encouraged people to give us their details.

I once visited a church in Auckland, New Zealand, where newcomers were offered two gifts. On their first visit they were given a mug with the name of the church. During the week following their visit they were sent a welcome letter and promised a further gift if they were to attend church next week – the gift was a CD featuring a sermon of the senior pastor. Perhaps significantly this particular church has a very high rate of retention of newcomers.[181]

The welcome that truly counts is the welcome given informally by church members after the service. While welcome teams and welcome processes can be organised, a welcoming spirit cannot be stage-managed. But it can be developed. I constantly challenged my people to get to know 'one new name a Sunday'. The very first 'value' we set ourselves as a church was to be 'warm and welcoming'. We wanted a welcoming spirit to be written into our church DNA. Lawrence Peers tells of a large urban American church which began to grow once the members of the church agreed to use the first half-hour after the worship service to 'be present' to their visitors – that 'intentional first half hour' made all the difference.[182] It has been rightly said that: "The most important element of being a more welcoming church is a commitment from the whole congregation to be more welcoming. Although welcoming procedures are important, a welcoming attitude is vital."[183]

Becoming the friendliest church in town

To encourage such a welcoming attitude I preached a sermon entitled 'The friendliest church in town'.

> "I long to be the pastor of the friendliest church in town. I long for my church to be the most open, the most accepting, the most caring, the most supportive, and the most loving church in town.
>
> If we are to be the friendliest church in town then we must know one another by name. I believe that had Christ been standing at the door of our church welcoming us to church, he would have welcomed each one of us by name. He wouldn't just have said 'Good morning' to me, but 'Good morning, Paul'. Jesus, the Good

[180] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* 211.
[181] Heather Wraight writes: "A large, nationwide survey found that churches which were growing were more likely to give newcomers something. It didn't seem to matter what that 'something' was, presumably because the act of identifying the recipient is in itself significant. However, what they are given… ideally should help to encourage them to come again" ('Extending a warm welcome'**,** 211-217 in *How To Become A Creative Church Leader: a MODEM handbook* Canterbury Press, Norwich 2007, edited by John Nelson) 214.
[182] Lawrence Peers, 'What it takes to make congregational change stick', *Alban Conversation* 16/07/2007.
[183] Rob Norman, quoted in *New Era, New Church?* (HarperCollins, London 1999) 10 by Steve Chalke with Sue Radford.

Shepherd, 'calls his own sheep by name' (John 10.3). And so too should we! To greet a person by name is show that they count, they have value.

Some might say: "There are too many people in our church to get to know." I don't buy that. I read of an American pastor who claimed to know all 16,000 of his members by name. Nor do I buy the excuse, 'But I haven't got a head for names'. I believe that when English people say they have a bad memory for names, they are in effect saying 'I can't be bothered'; 'I'm too lazy'. If you don't believe me, then why is it that Americans are by and large better than British people in remembering people's names? Is it that they are cleverer? Or is it that in American society it is impolite not to know somebody's name?

Some people accuse me of having a small church mentality. No I have the mentality of Jesus, for whom names are important. On this 'Name Tag' Sunday let me encourage you to look at other people's name tags and learn their names – and then greet them by name! In saying their name, you will more easily remember their name the next time!

But there is more to friendliness than simply standing at the door, and saying "Hi Bill", "Hi Gwen". Friendliness goes a step further. The smile and the handshake are accompanied by an offer of a coffee or a meal at home. Friendliness involves welcoming one another into one another's homes.

It is true that nowhere do we read that Jesus welcomed folks into his home – probably for the simple reason that he was a single guy who spent much of his time on the road. But one thing we do read: Jesus was always having meals with others. So much so that his enemies described him as 'a glutton and a drunkard' (Matt 11.19; Luke 7.34). Not surprisingly, his followers made a big deal of hospitality. So Paul wrote: 'Open your homes to strangers' (Rom 12.13). Peter wrote: 'Open your homes to each other without complaining' (1 Pet 4.9). The unknown writer of the letter to the Hebrews wrote: 'Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it' (Hebs 13.2). Do notice that the New Testament does not say 'those of you with larger homes or with children off your hands and who have the gift of hospitality, open your homes to one another'. In the New Testament church hospitality was not perceived as a gift of some, but rather as a duty for every Christian. What was true then, remains true today. We too in our turn need to be inviting people into our homes.

If we are to be the friendliest church in town then we must learn not only to greet one another by name, but to invite one another into our homes."[184]

Creating a welcoming church environment

Is a welcoming spirit sufficient to encourage people to return? According to one American study the three most important factors in ensuring a return visit are the pastor, the nursery, and the signs.[185] I find that a fascinating insight. It's not just the pastor: it's about facilities for children, and also about finding the facilities. It's not enough to welcome people at the door: the whole church environment needs to be welcoming.

Even more important is the attitude of the congregation toward their faith. According to Graham Tomlin, it is not primarily the quality of the preaching, liturgy or music which brings people back to church – it is the authenticity of the church members. "Unless there is something that intrigues, provokes or entices, then all the evangelism in the world will fall on deaf ears. If churches cannot convey a sense of 'reality' then all our 'truth' will come to nothing… Churches need to be provocative, arresting places which make the searcher, the casual visitor, want to come back for more."[186]

One American study listed the following five factors as key to attracting new members

- a positive identity (energy, inclusive, common vision)
- congregational harmony and co-operation
- the pastor's ability to generate enthusiasm (good sermons, warmth, spiritual depth)
- congregational involvement in social action/service

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[184] The sermon, based on Psalm 133, was preached at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford January 27, 2008. After the service one person criticised me for encouraging our church to compete with other churches. My response was to say, "Wouldn't it be great if all the churches in our town were to seek to be the friendliest church in town!"

[185] *The Inviting Church: A study of new member assimilation.*

[186] Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* (SPCK, London 2nd edition 2004) 10-11.

- small group programming.

In larger churches small groups are vital to retaining people. It is, however, not enough to advertise small groups; nor even to give the newcomer a list of small groups in the church. People need to receive a personal invitation: "Come to my small group." Or better still: "May I call on you on Wednesday night (or whenever) and take you to my small group?"

Developing effective follow-up procedures

At what point does the church follow up newcomers? According to Bill Easum, a North American Methodist church consultant: "Traditional churches must respond within 24 hours to those who decide to give you their names, addresses, and phone numbers. This contact needs to be personal and made by the pastor in a church with fewer than four hundred in worship and by laypeople in the larger church. The layperson can call the visitor on the phone or make what some call a 'doorstep visit', taking a gift of some kind and not going inside the door. The key to assimilating new people is introducing them to five to seven new people whom they will consider to be good friends within the first three months of their visiting."[187] A little later Easum wrote:

> "Studies show that friendly, brief visits to first-time visitors within 36 hours after they attend will cause 85% of them to return the following week. If this home visit is made within 72 hours, 60% will return. If it is made more than 7 days later, 15% will return. If the pastor makes this call, each result is cut in half. A phone call by a layperson or the pastor instead of a personal visit cuts results by 80%. This immediate response by a layperson is the most important factor in reaching first-time visitors. The average person today visits several churches before deciding on a church. This means he or she may not come back for six weeks. By then, the average person decides which church to return to based on the friendliness and helpfulness of the members. If you wait until they return the second time, you lost 85% of your visitors."[188]

These statistics relate to a particular cultural situation. What may be true in the States may not be true elsewhere. Nonetheless, I find the statistics challenging – and not least the emphasis upon the prompt follow-up by a layperson.

For newcomers who have yet to come to faith, then clearly an invitation to a course such as Alpha would be the next step. For newcomers who have already a Christian faith, then the next step is to attend a new members' class. According to one American study, in 'low demand churches' these new membership classes tend to be between 1-3 sessions, while in 'high demand' churches the classes can last between 24-45 sessions! In my judgement lengthy courses ask too much of newcomers. I note with interest that the membership class run at Saddleback Community Church, where Rick Warren is the pastor, is only four hours long and is taught in one day. The course ends with a 'Saddleback quiz' testing the prospective members on how well they can state the purposes of the church.[189]

12. Sharing pastoral care with others

Encouraging everybody to care

Pastors are not to be the only people in the church engaged in pastoral care. Although ultimately the pastor has general pastoral oversight of the church, the task of pastoral care must be shared with others.

In the first instance the task of pastoral care is to be shared with everybody. If pastoral care is primarily "a kind of loving"[190], then clearly all can be involved. In these terms pastoral care is simply the fulfilling of the "new commandment" to love one another (John 13.34). Pastoral care is the responsibility of every Christian. To help people care for one another, it is helpful to produce a church handbook, including names of spouses and partners, whether or not they attend the church, as also the names of all the children, whether or not they still come to church. In this church handbook it can also be useful to put next to the name of each child the month and year of their birth.

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[187] Bill Easum, *The Complete Ministry Audit* (Abingdon, Nashville, revised edition 2006) 125.
[188] Easum, *The Complete Ministry Audit* 126
[189] Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* 316, 317.
[190] The title of the first chapter of Alastair Campbell's *Paid To Care?*

Caring through setting up pastoral teams

Pastoral care in a deeper sense is more than just loving. It is also a specialised form of loving, which involves the ability to listen and to discern, acting where appropriate as a channel of the grace and indeed of the discipline of Christ.[191] This means that there are some more gifted than others to exercise pastoral care in the fellowship of the church. This being so, it makes sense for churches to recognise those with gifts of pastoral care and encourage pastors to share the pastoral load with a pastoral team. Delegation of pastoral care is, however, not sufficient. A key task of the pastor is to give support to the team members, meeting with them regularly and together sharing news and concerns

As a church grows, it can be helpful to divide the fellowship into geographical areas, and to assign responsibility for caring to the various members of the pastoral team. At Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford we had two levels of caring: a large group of caregivers with whom I used to meet on a termly basis, and a smaller pastoral team with whom I met on a six weekly basis. Once a term we offered training to all involved in pastoral care, when we had talks on such subjects as autism, depression, disability, M.E., mental illness, the needs of older people, the needs of younger people, caring in a multi-cultural context, and caring for 'problem' people. We ensured that everybody had a job-specification. To the larger group of caregivers we set down the following expectations:

- In a church as large as ours it is very easy for people to feel lost and uncared for. Your primary task is to ensure that all those in your care feel loved, wanted and cared for – you represent the Lord and his love to all those in your care. To keep track of people in your care, you may find it helpful to have an informal register, in which you mark absences from church.
- A secondary role is to be the eyes and ears of the ministers and the pastoral team. Please inform us of concerns: e.g. sickness, loneliness, loss of faith, family problems, and redundancy.

We listed suggestions for fulfilling their caring role:

1. Begin by getting to know all those in your care.
2. Find out the dates of their birthdays (and other anniversaries such as weddings or death of a partner) so that you can send a card.
3. Every Sunday look out for those in your care – if you don't see them at church, give them a ring.
4. Every week (or possibly every other week) visit any housebound members in your care. This visiting could perhaps be shared with others.
5. Once a month have a pastoral conversation with everybody in your care. This could be just a phone call. Remember that pastoral care is not just helping people to cope with life's crises, but about encouraging one another in the faith.
6. Once a term practise hospitality, and invite everybody in your care to your home.
7. Once a year pay a pastoral visit on everybody in your care.

Caring through small groups

Another way of sharing pastoral care in a church is through home groups. It surely is axiomatic for the members of any such small group to care for one another. Paul's words to the church at Corinth are apposite to every small group: "God has so composed the body... that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together" (1 Cor 12.24-26). The body of Christ has a common 'nerve', whereby if one member suffers, then all the others do too.

Ron Sider's description of the radical nature of Christian fellowship is truly challenging :

> "The early church was able to defy the decadent values of Roman civilisation precisely because it experienced the reality of Christian fellowship in a mighty way… Christian fellowship meant unconditional availability to and unlimited liability for the other sisters and brothers — emotionally, financially and spiritually. When one member suffered, they all suffered. When one rejoiced, they all rejoiced (1 Cor 12.26). When a person or church experienced economic trouble, the others shared without reservation. And when a brother or sister fell

[191] See Jay Adams's strong commitment to 'nouthetic' counselling in *The Christian Counsellor's Manual* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, Nutley, New Jersey 1973) – where the emphasis is on counselling as directive and confrontational. It is interesting to discover that the Greek verb *noutheteo* ('to warn, to admonish') appears thirteen times in the New Testament, whereas the Greek verb *parakaleo* ('to comfort, to draw alongside') is used well over one hundred times.

> into sin, the others gently restored the straying person (Matt 18.15-17; 1 Cor 5.1-5; 2 Cor 2.5-11; Gal 6.1-3). The sisters and brothers were available to each other, liable for each other and accountable to each other. The early church, of course, did not always fully live out the New Testament vision of the body of Christ. There were tragic lapses. But the network of tiny house churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire did experience their oneness in Christ so vividly that they were able to defy and eventually conquer a powerful, pagan civilisation. The overwhelming majority of churches today, however, do not provide the context in which brothers and sisters can encourage, admonish and disciple each other. We desperately need new settings and structures for watching over one another in love."[192]

That is some commitment! Frankly, I don't think that kind of commitment is always possible across a church, but it is possible in a small group.

I once attended the 'business meeting' of my mother's Sunday School class. At that time my parents lived in Louisville, Kentucky, and were members of a mega church with over 2,000, if not 3,000, members. That church was broken down into small groups, which in a Southern Baptist setting were known as 'All Age Sunday School classes'. My mother belonged to a class of women all of a similar age – at that time she was in her late 50s, and the other women were of a similar age or a little older. When they met for their midweek business meeting the subject on the agenda was: "How do we care for one another, when a loved one dies?" Here they had in mind the death of a husband or the death of a parent. They were all of an age when such deaths were likely. I was amazed how for an hour or so, in a 'business meeting', these women discussed how they could offer practical help encouragement to one another in time of bereavement. Here was love in action. This is what true fellowship is all about.

Small groups are places where people can be real with one another, and so begin to meet the pastoral needs of one another. Many in our churches today are crying out to be affirmed, to be valued, to be loved. But nobody can be affirmed, valued or loved within a crowd. Howard Snyder was right when he wrote: "Our churches are filled with people who outwardly look contented and at peace, but inwardly are crying out for someone to love them... just as they are – confused, frustrated, often frightened, guilty, and often unable to communicate even within their own families. But the other people in the church look so happy and contented that one seldom has the courage to admit his own deep needs before such a self-sufficient group as the average church meeting appears to be."[193]

There is nothing magic about small groups. Honest conversations and meaningful relationships only develop as people are prepared to make themselves vulnerable. Yet once one person is prepared to be 'real', often others are willing to be 'real' too. This process is well-described by Scott Peck: "Vulnerability in community snowballs. Once its members become vulnerable and find themselves being valued and appreciated, they become more and more vulnerable. The walls come tumbling down. And as they tumble, as the love and acceptance escalates, as the mutual intimacy multiplies, true healing and converting begins. Old wounds are healed, old resentments forgiven, old resistances overcome. Fear is replaced by hope."[194]

Small groups are the place where we can love even those whom we find difficult to love. At one stage in my ministry in Altrincham we seemed to be attracting a number of 'odd-bods' with all kinds of needs, and I felt tempted to create a small group made up of these demanding people, but in the end I ensured that every small group was allocated an 'odd-bod'. Shared around in this way, these 'odd-bods' were no longer as demanding as they seemed – each of them became part of a small group where in turn they felt loved and affirmed.

Small groups are also places where we can pray for one another – and that too is a form of pastoral care; it is indeed a form of loving. As Bonhoeffer once wrote: "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses... He who denies his neighbour the service of praying for him, denies him the service of a Christian."[195]

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[192] R.J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (IVP, Downers Grove, Illinois 1977) 190-191.

[193] Howard Snyder, *New Wineskins: Changing the man-made structure of the church* (British edition: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London 1977) 80.

[194] Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace* (Simon & Schuster, New York 1985), 67, 68. Peck went on to liken such a group to "an amphitheatre where the gladiators have laid down their weapons and their armour, where they have become skilled at listening and understanding, where they respect each other's gifts and accept each other's limitations, where they celebrate their differences and bind each other's wounds, where they are committed to a struggling together rather than against each other. It is a most unusual battleground indeed. But this is also why it is an unusually effective ground for conflict resolution" (*The Different Drum* 71).

[195] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* 65, 66.

The one drawback of structuring pastoral care through small groups is that, unless every member of the church belongs to a small group, inevitably there will be people missed out.

Pastors and pastoral care

One way or another, it is vital for pastors to share the pastoral care of the church. Within this context of general care, pastors then have specific responsibilities. For instance, where there is a crisis – whether it relates to birth, marriage, death or some other event – pastors will certainly want to be involved. Hospital visiting is part of most ministers' brief. In addition, it is important for pastors to have a particular care for the leaders of the church, listening to their concerns and sharing with them my dreams.

As ministers know to their cost, there is no end to pastoral care. The possibilities are limitless. We could spend every minute of our lives engaging in pastoral care. So the question arises: is there a yardstick by which we can measure our activity? The only yardstick I have come across is Kennon Callahon's principle of visitation: "Spend one hour in pastoral visitation each week for every minute you preach on a Sunday morning."[196] In other words, if we preach for twenty minutes on a Sunday morning, then during the week we should visit twenty people. That is quite a challenging task. Hard lines on the pastor who preaches for forty minutes!

[196] Kennon L.Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (Harper, San Francisco 1983) 12.

Sermon: Kissing frogs – or loving as Jesus loved us (John 13.34)

Let me begin with a parable[197]

"Have you ever felt like a frog? You know the type of thing I mean – stone cold, clammy, ugly, drooping, green, lifeless – all by yourself in the middle of a pond! I have! And I've met plenty of others. We have one in our house nearly every morning. The only thing missing is the pond!

The frog blues (or should I say greens) come when

- you want to be bright, especially first thing in the morning, and you can't
- you want to share, but are selfish
- you want to feel thankful, but feel resentment
- you want to be honest with others, but keep wearing a mask
- you want to be somebody, but feel a nobody
- you want to care, but the required effort makes you indifferent
- you want to make friends, but will they?

If we are honest we have probably all sat on that lily pad in the middle of the pond. Often we have sat there for ages, too frightened or disgusted to jump off and swim. Maybe you're still on that lily pond, floating around and round – all froggy like, fed up and lonely.

Others we meet in our small groups or in everyday contact come across as frogs. They are so hard to love. Their personality doesn't attract others to them. They are either slow, shy, withdrawn and negative or they are dominant, autocratic, forcing their opinions on others. Cold unattractive frogs. You feel repulsed by them and want to ignore or throw a rock at them.

A parable might help: Once upon a time there was a frog. He was really a handsome prince under the nasty spell of a wicked witch. Only the kiss of a beautiful maiden could save him. So there he sat, un-kissed prince of his lily pond kingdom. But you've guessed it! One day a beautiful maiden saw him, was overcome with pity, grabbed him and kissed him. Bingo! In a moment of time he stood transformed before her, a handsome prince. And you can guess the finish!

SO WHAT is the task of the church? To KISS FROGS, of course![198]

Churches are full of frogs – those 'cold, clammy, ugly, drooping, green, lifeless' things. All of us can name people whom we find unlovable; who rub us up the wrong way; whom we do our best to avoid, whom we would never dream inviting back home for coffee. Yet Jesus calls us to love such people – for he loved people such as us. "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples" (John 13.34, 35). But how are we to "love one another"? How are we to kiss the frogs in our church?

For starters, let's face up to the fact that love, if it means anything at all, must be expressed. Hands up any man who's loved a girl, but never kissed her! Love is always more than gooey feelings. This was certainly true of Jesus. John tells us: "He had had always loved those in the world who were his own, and he loved them to the very end" (John 13.1). In the light of that love he washed his disciples feet he gave his life on a Cross.

Jesus calls us to be equally practical. "As I have loved you, so you also must love one another." We are to express our love for one another in ways which our tangible and real. This morning I want to give four simple illustrations of what it means to "love one another" by reference to four other "one another" texts in the New Testament.

1. *To love is to greet one another.*

Paul says: "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Rom 16.16). I shall never forget visiting a flourishing Baptist church in Nairobi. Caroline and I had been missionaries in Congo/Zaire for some 18 months. It had been a barren time

[197] Sermon preached at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford on February 13, 2011. The Scriptures quoted are from the GNB.
[198] Taken from John Mallison, *Creative Ideas for Small Groups* (Scripture Union, London 1978).

spiritually. Now here we were, after 18 months of French services, in our first English-language service. We arrived early for the service and saw a large multi-cultural congregation hugging and greeting one another – but nobody greeted us. When the service was over, we stayed in our seats, hoping that someone would come up to us and greet us – but nobody did. We slunk out of that church feeling so miserable, so alone. True, we might have taken the initiative in going up to somebody, but we hadn't the spiritual energy; and we walked out with even less spiritual energy.

Is it possible for people to enter our church and leave without a welcome? One reason I stand at the door as people leave is to ensure that never happens. But, of course, the call to 'greet one another' is not addressed just to ministers, but to every member of a church.

What's more, we are to greet one another by name. When you get home, read Rom 16: it is a remarkable chapter made up of a list of names: "Greetings to Prisca and Aquila... to my dear friend Epaenetus... Greetings to Mary... to Andronicus and Junia...to Ampliatus and Urbanus... to Stachys, my dear friend… to Apelles… those who belong to the family of Aristobulus." And so the list goes on: Greetings are also sent to Herodion, the family of Narcissus, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus and his mother, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, Olympas. Is anybody expecting a baby and stuck for a name? There is plenty of choice here!

Paul greeted people by name – and in greeting people by name, showed that they counted.The same is true of the Lord Jesus: in John 10.3 we read that the Good Shepherd "calls his own sheep by name". Jesus calls us by name. On this Name Tag Sunday I want to say we too should call one another by name. For to call a person by name is to show they count.

But you say: "There are too many people in the church to get to know." I don't believe you. I read of one American pastor who claimed to know all 16,000 of his members by name. That is an extreme case, but it does show the importance Americans tend to attach to names. When English people say they have a bad memory for names, by and large they are not telling the truth. What in effect they are saying is, "I can't be bothered; I am too lazy." Or are we to believe that Americans are simply cleverer than us?

Note too that we are to greet one another with a holy kiss. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it: "Holy embraces all round"! What's more this is no isolated teaching of Scripture. We find the same injunction in 1 Cor 16.20; 2 Cor 13.23; 1 Thess 5.26; and 1 Pet 5.14. Kissing was obviously perfectly acceptable in the early church. But some might object: "A kiss was fair enough in the culture of Paul's day, but it doesn't belong to 21st century Britain." That is true – we are not like the French or the Italian. Although society is changing: just the other week I was kissed by a Scotsman!

Kissing itself is not the issue. What Paul was trying to say was this: show affection to one another. Express your love for one another in a tangible manner, whether it be through a kiss, a bear hug or just a holding of the hand.

2. To love is to encourage one another

Paul wrote: "Encourage one another and help one another" (1 Thess 5.11). William James once said: "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated."[199] We all need appreciation, we all need encouragement. As the Americans put it, we all need to be 'stroked'. Few of us remain on a perpetual even keel: all of us have our ups and downs; all of us need a brother or sister to speak a word of encouragement into our lives.

A legend is told of how God decided to reduce the weapons in the Devil's armoury. Satan could choose only one 'fiery dart'. He chose the power of discouragement. "If only I can persuade Christians to be thoroughly discouraged, they will make no further effort and I shall be enthroned in their lives." Let's ensure that the Devil has no place in our fellowship. Let's resolve to encourage one another. Indeed, let me practical: what about seeking to find a different person each day to encourage! In particular, let me suggest that you encourage the servants of the church. When did you last encourage the members of the worship band? Or do you instead tend to criticise them when they play too loudly? When did you last encourage a Sunday School leader or helper? Or don't you bother because you haven't got children of that particular age? Or what about those who prepare communion? Maybe you don't even know them! Or what about the church treasurer? Or did you instead criticise him for using too small a font when he presented his figures at the last church meeting?

[199] See *The Letters of William James: Volume 2* (The Atlantic Monthly Association, Boston 1920) edited by Henry James.

At this point I have to confess that I have not been expounding Scripture aright. The context here is one of death and bereavement. There were people in the church at Thessalonica who were finding the deaths of some of their friends hard to handle. The fact is that bereavement can be a shattering experience. As those of you who have lost loved ones know, grieving isn't done within a matter of days; it goes on for months. Alas, sometimes we feel embarrassed to talk to people about their loved ones who have died. Are we not just opening up old wounds? I believe not. We are simply showing that we remember. Let's not be afraid to talk, and in that context of talking encourage one another, for we have a hope that goes beyond death itself.

3. To love is to help carry one another's burdens

Paul wrote: "Help to carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ" (Gal 6.2). Do notice that Paul assumes that we all have burdens. That is true. I have yet to meet a person able to go through life trouble-free. Some may appear to live a more charmed existence than others; and yet underneath the smiling exterior all kinds of hurts all too often lurk. Life may not be a perpetual burden, but there are times when life is very much a burden.

Not to admit to those times when life is tough is to live a lie. The people whom Jesus constantly attacked were religious people who pretended to be what they weren't – Jesus called them 'hypocrites'. Let's not fall foul of Jesus. Let us be open with one another and cast our masks aside and so begin to be real.

Being open could prove to be a liberating experience for others, who may be tempted to believe that they are alone in their pain. Sometimes we think we're the only ones with problems. We look at others and think that for them life is bed of roses. Time and time again we are mistaken. It can also be liberating for ourselves. All too often because of our pride we deprive ourselves of the opportunity of talking things through, sharing, and being prayed for, and allowing others to share the burdens we bear.

Burdens are to be shared. God does not intend us to grin and bear it. He does not intend us to adopt the heroic John Wayne syndrome, whereby we keep smiling whatever. God intends burdens to be shared with brothers and sisters in the faith. My mind goes to the Apostle Paul, who at one stage was terribly burdened; he was worried to death over Corinthian church and their reaction to rather severe letter he had written: "But God, who encourages the downhearted, encouraged us with the coming of Titus" (2 Cor 7.6). Titus made the difference.

Notice too that burdens are to be shared with one another. Paul doesn't say: burdens are to be shared with one of the ministers or deacons, but with "one another". Burden-bearing is a task in which we are all involved. Burden-bearing is not the prerogative of any special group, but the responsibility of us all. Let me encourage you therefore to be on the *qui vive* to see who appears for one reason or another to be going through a rough time, and to provide whatever might be the appropriate support.

4. To love is to pray for one another

The Apostle James said: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you will be healed. The prayer of a good person has a powerful effect" (Jas 6.16). If you care for a person, you will pray for them. Think back to your own private prayers: for whom do you pray the most? For your loved ones, for your family. If we love one another, then we will pray for one another; we will pray for those in the family of God, even for the frogs in the fellowship – those "cold, clammy, ugly, drooping, green, lifeless" things. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses."[200] Wow – that's a thought!

The particular context in which James tells his reader to pray is physical healing: "Are any of you ill? You should call for the church elders, who will pray for them, and rub olive oil on them in the name of the Lord" (5.14). The olive oil is not a symbol of the Holy Spirit; it was a practical medicament. It was the 1st century equivalent of sticking plaster. This verse does not mean that we should pray and turn our backs on medical science, but rather to see prayer as a complementary channel of healing.

Notice that James has in mind not just physical healing, but also the healing of relationships. He writes: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed" (5.16). Is James simply referring to private sins

[200] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* 65.

between us and God? Or does James have in mind sins which affect the fellowship: sins of envy, bitterness, and dissent? I think it is the latter. Put things right with one another. Even as you are giving one another the peace at communion, put things right and say sorry.

On this Sunday before Valentine's Day, let me encourage you to love one another as Jesus loved us. Let us give practical expression to that love by greeting one another by name; by encouraging one another; by helping to carry one another's burdens, and by praying for one another. "If you have love for one another" said Jesus, "everyone will know you are my disciples" (John 13.35).

13. Caring or counselling?

The specialised task of pastoral counselling

The distinguished American pioneer in pastoral counselling Howard J. Clinebell defined pastoral counselling as "the utilisation by clergy of counselling and psychotherapeutic methods to enable individuals, couples and families to handle their personal crises and problems in living constructively". Or more simply put, pastoral counselling refers to "counselling in church contexts".[201] He saw contemporary pastoral counselling expressing the five traditional functions of pastoral care:

> "1. The *healing* function is expressed by in-depth pastoral counselling (also called pastoral psychotherapy) aimed at helping those with major psychological and spiritual problems.
> 2. The *sustaining* function is expressed in supportive, crisis and bereavement counselling.
> 3. The *guiding* function is expressed in educative counselling (such as preparation for marriage), ethical guidance and spiritual direction.
> 4. The *reconciling* function is expressed in approaches such as marriage and family counselling designed to help people resolve interpersonal conflicts and increase the quality of their relationship.
> 5. The growth *nurturing* function is expressed in a variety of individual and small-group methods aimed at helping people enhance their lives and deal creatively with their developmental crises."[202]

At a basic level every pastor is involved in pastoral counselling. Pastoral care will inevitably include the ingredient of pastoral counselling in which a pastor will seek to help people to work through whatever concerns they bring to a constructive end. In that respect pastors will do well to develop counselling skills such as careful listening both to the obvious words and the hidden messages, being empathetic, not making judgemental or moralising remarks, allowing space, responding carefully through the use of non-threatening questions, open questions, and summarising and paraphrasing what has been said.

However, where pastoral counselling is linked with the insights and techniques of the modern schools of psychotherapy, it becomes a very distinctive discipline.

Pastoral care: the pastoral task

As ministers of the Gospel pastors are called in the first place to function within a specifically Christian context. While secular therapists look primarily to the 'healing forces of life' within their patients for recovery, pastoral counsellors rely upon the character and power of God to effect constructive changes in those whom they are counselling. In this respect C.W. Brister helpfully quoted the theologian John B.Cobbe:

> "For pastoral counselling to carry forward genuinely the ancient tradition of the care of souls, it must separate itself further from secular therapy. Therapy can too easily be based on a model of restoring people to the capacity to function in society as it now exists. That can be a proper moment in pastoral counselling, certainly, but it cannot provide the basic model. The goal of pastoral counselling needs to be something like growth in grace, the strengthening of Christian existence, enabling Christians to be more effective disciples, of salvation. Such a goal will enable pastoral counselling to be spiritual direction as much as it is therapy."[203]

There is a real difference between this kind of specific Christian counselling and what is offered by the modern pastoral counselling movement. Morgan Derham argued that ministers should not be involved in the latter – or at least not in their role as ministers. "His ministry as a Christian pastor is a distinctive one, with spiritual concerns controlling the way he deals with people... The secular counsellor aims at wholeness... but the Christian pastor is concerned for holiness, which is a very different objective, though it may well include wholeness."[204] In this regard, people's expectations today can be very different from earlier times: today most people seek help from counsellors not because

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[201] Michael Jacobs, 'Counselling' 76 in *The New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies* (SPCK, London 2002) edited by Wesley Carr.
[202] Howard J. Clinebell, 'Pastoral Counselling' 198, 199 in *A Dictionary of Pastoral Care* (SPCK London 1987) edited by Alastair V.Campbell.
[203] C.W. Brister, *Pastoral Care in the Church* 189.
[204] A. Morgan Derham, 'Counselling or Christian Counselling', *Ministry Today* 2 (1994) 14-19.

they 'feel bad', but because they 'do not feel good'. As Ian Bunting put it: "Often they are not so much feeling guilty as wounded."[205]

This is not to say there is not a place for the insights and techniques of secular counselling. Morgan Derham, for instance, was happy at the thought of churches offering counselling services, provided it is made clear that they are counselling services in a Christian context, as distinct from 'Christian counselling'.

Pastoral care and pastoral counselling in its more technical sense are therefore quite distinct. The pastor seeks to encourage people to grow in Christ, the counsellor seeks to enable people to reach self-understanding and identity. The pastor may through prayer bring God and his grace into the situation, the counsellor aims to release resources from within.[206] There is another major difference in aim, particularly where pastoral care includes the dimension of spiritual direction, for as Paul Goodliff puts it: "Pastoral counselling, with its therapeutic mind-set, has seen the attainment of inner harmony, integration, and freedom from anguish as its goals. It helps the client adjust their life to the environment they inhabit. However, the spiritual director will not want to reduce the spiritual life to one of simply peace and ease, for how can the Christian following Jesus not weep over our Jerusalems and rage at our temple commerce? To grow spiritually is to become more angry at injustice and less at peace with the world as it is."[207]

Other differences include the fact the pastor is free to initiate a pastoral conversation, while the counsellor is only free to respond to a request for counselling. The pastor may be dealing with people on a one-off basis, the counsellor rarely sees people for less than six sessions and often for very many more. The pastor, where necessary, can be directive, the counsellor is always non-directive. The pastor relates to people primarily at conscious levels of experience, the counsellor is concerned to relate to the unconscious dimensions of experience too. The pastor will often be dealing with people whom he sees in other church and social contexts, the counsellor keeps at a distance and only sees 'clients'.

Pastors therefore are called to exercise pastoral care, but not to engage in the modern disciplines of pastoral counselling. This is not to put down pastoral counselling. Far from it. It is simply to recognise that pastoral counselling is a distinct area of expertise calling for specific skills, which in turn call for specialised training and competent supervision. There are many times when the skills of pastoral counselling are required. In such situations, wise pastors will recognise their limitations in this area and happily pass the person concerned on to a recognised counsellor.[208] The fact is that referring people to others who are better qualified is often "the most caring pastoral act".[209] Not that this referral then brings the pastor's role of pastoral care to an end. The distinctive contribution of pastoral support – and prayer – still has a very real supportive place.

14. Caring for children

Children need care

Children are very much on the agenda of the church today. Child-protection is rightly to the fore: every church has a duty to develop safe-guarding policies for children, young people under 18 years of age, and vulnerable adults. Much attention in recent years has been given to the faith-development of children.[210] Similarly much has been written about the admission of children to the Lord's Table.[211] But relatively little seems to have been written specifically about the pastoral care of children.[212]

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[205] Ian Bunting, 'Pastoral care at the end of the 20th century', 387 in *A History of Pastoral Care* (Cassell, London 2000) edited by G.R. Evans.

[206] To be fair, some counsellors working within mainstream counselling and psychotherapy are expressing a growing interest in the spiritual dimension of counselling: see Peter Madsen Gubi, *Prayer in Counselling and Psychotherapy: exploring a hidden meaningful dimension* (Jessica Kingsley, London 2008).

[207] Paul Goodliff, *Care In a Confused Climate* 204.

[208] We do not agree that ordination is a guarantee of counselling skills – unlike Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counsellors Manual* 20: "We must insist upon the idea that every man who has been called of God into ministry has been given the basic gifts for… counselling."

[209] Alistair V. Campbell quoted by J. Alastair Ross, 'Carers not Counsellors', *Ministry Today* 29 (October 2003) 8.

[210] See, for example, *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids & Gracewing, Leominster 1992) edited by Jeff Astley & Leslie Francis.

[211] See, for example, David Holeton, *Infant Communion – Then and Now* (Grove, Nottingham 1981); Colin Buchanan, *Nurturing Children in Communion* (Grove, Nottingham 1985); Peter Reiss, Children and Communion: A Practical Guide for Interested

This neglect of children is strange, because children have pastoral needs too. Yet for the most part we overlook those needs and assume that childhood is "the golden age of innocence, a time of cookies and lemonade, all fun and play, with nothing to worry about". However, as Lester goes on to show: "For most children, childhood is filled with stresses and strains, doubts and fears, losses and separations – children go through all the experiences of death, moves, illness and accidents."[213]

This being so, how might we address the needs of children? I believe that pastors need to formalise and develop the kind of work already being carried on by Sunday School teachers and leaders of other church activities for children. For probably in most churches pastoral care is already being shown on an informal basis to children: thus if a child in the Sunday School is ill for any length of time, then in all likelihood a card will be sent and a visit will be made by the Sunday School teacher. This kind of care needs to be extended to cover not just all the children in the Sunday School or all the children who attend one activity or another of the church, but all children associated with the church, whether or not they attend a specific children's activity. This would therefore include children of mothers or fathers who have only a loose link with the church.

Children need a pastor

Ideally every church should have a children's 'pastor' or a 'children and families worker'. Such an appointment, although normally only a part-time and voluntary position, recognises the importance and significance of children.

Some years ago Lorna Jenkins drew up a job description for a children's pastor in New Zealand Baptist churches:

> "When a family has a crisis, such as a bereavement or marriage break-up, the children's pastor would make sure that there is someone who is caring for the child and talking with the child to help them through grief and misunderstanding. This may include situations in which a child is shifting into the district or is in trouble at school or with his peer group. Sometimes children are distressed about misfortunes which happen to their parents."[214]

In my experience pastors are very good at showing pastoral care to adults at times of bereavement or marriage break-up. They are less good with the children. Indeed, sometimes they seem to be totally oblivious to the needs of the children at the time.

In the New Zealand scheme the children's pastor would at once be alert to the needs of the children. If counselling is required, the job description sets down that the parents should be made aware that such counselling is taking place. Significantly, the job description states that: "All matters which are shared by the children should be regarded as confidential. If there is a need to pass on information to parents or other people, it should be done with the child's permission, explaining carefully the need for further action." It is important that in a church setting as much as anywhere else the rights of children are observed.

Drawing up a job description for a children's and young families worker

Within our context at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, we drew up a similar job description for a children's and young families' worker, and used some of Lorna Jenkins' wording when defining the twin focus of the appointment.

Children

- Overseeing the pastoral care of children. When a family has a crisis such as bereavement, divorce or redundancy, she will ensure that there is someone who is caring for the child. Similarly, when a child experiences distress at school, she will ensure that the church is offering support. In this role she will ensure that the senior minister and pastoral deacon are kept informed.

Churches (Grove, Cambridge 1998), Stephen Lake, *Let The Children Come To Communion* (SPCK, London 2006); and the Baptist study guide, *Gathering around the Table: Children and Communion* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 2010.

[212] See A.D. Lester, *Pastoral Care with Children in Crisis* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1985).

[213] Lester 48.

[214] A paper presented to a BWA Study Commission, date unknown. For a further development of her ideas, see Lorna Jenkins, *Shouting in the Temple: A Radical Look at Children's Ministry* (Touch Ministries International, Singapore 2001).

- Overseeing the general nurture of children through such church activities as 'Light Factory' [Sunday School]; ensuring that children who decide to follow Jesus are appropriately discipled; and encouraging prayer.
- Reaching out to non-church children through special activities such as Holiday Club.
- Working with the Brigades and encouraging the integration of Brigade children into the church. Also encouraging and informally supporting the Brigade leaders.
- Helping children to be part of the worshipping congregation: involving them in the services, ensuring that the services are accessible to children, and exploring new ways of children being part of the church's worship life.
- Integrating children into the life of the church through inter-generational activities.

Families

- Developing relationships with families on a Sunday.
- Supporting and encouraging families through family events, and through providing parenting advice (through courses, the e-letter, small group work, and individually).
- Providing pastoral support, particularly to mothers. Where appropriate she will ensure that the senior minister and pastoral deacon are kept informed.
- Reaching out to non-church families, particularly through the weekly Baby and Toddlers Group and the monthly Dads and Toddlers Group.
- Helping both parents and the church to keep promises made within the context of dedication services.

Creating a church policy for the pastoral care of children

We adopted a simple statement outlining our approach to children:

> "The mission of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford is to 'Go Christ's way and make disciples'. As with all the activities of the church, learning to follow Jesus and helping each other to follow Him is at the heart of all the activities with the children.
>
> Everyone needs to be valued and accepted for who they are.
>
> Children's activities need to be fun and help everyone to learn about the love of God and experience it for themselves.
>
> We need to encourage and support each other in whatever God asks us to do in the church and in sharing what we know about God and the church with others.
>
> Children are an important part of the church family.
>
> Every adult and child in our church family needs to be polite, listening to and showing respect for each other.
>
> Adults need to make sure that the church is a safe place for children."[215]

There are many biblical reasons for taking special care of children – not least that Jesus himself on a number of occasions showed that children were important in their own right.[216] The shepherd model of pastoral care implies that special care needs to be given to the youngest sheep: "The youngest lamb was also the recipient of the shepherd's guarding, guiding, nurturing, healing and seeking. In fact, since the young lambs were the most defenceless, and because they represented the future, they probably received a disproportionate amount of the shepherd's attention."[217]

Here then is a neglected area of pastoral care in urgent need of attention. For the sake of the children, we need to give our best and ensure proper care is given.

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[215] Adopted by the Church Meeting 25/05/2005.
[216] See, for instance, Matt 18.1-7; 19.13-15.
[217] Lester, *Pastoral Care of Children in Crisis* 32.

15. Caring for older people

Older people need to be valued

Another area where more creative care and attention might be given is at the other end of the age-spectrum. Statistically old age is the 'boom generation'. With life expectancy still on the upward trend, our society like all other Western societies is increasingly a society of middle age and older adults. Yet for the most part the church has adopted the youth culture. So while evangelistic efforts for young people abound, churches rarely include any special outreach events specifically for older people. Many churches have youth workers and youth pastors, but far fewer have people set aside to work among older people. Churches it would appear are guilty of ageism.[218] In the church as in the world older people have become second-class citizens rather than senior citizens; their potential for growth and for service has been ignored, instead they are seen as the weak and dependent who need to be helped and entertained.

Let me suggest a number of ways in which we can value our 'senior adults':

We need to recognise that older people are as much people of worth as those at any other stage of life. In theological terms we need to recognise that each person of whatever age is made in the image of God (Gen 1.26), and as such is to be treated with respect. With Chris Skilton we need to ask the question: "Does our care of the elderly in our churches reflect and honour this, and is it shaped by this foundational understanding of the inherent worth of each person?"[219]

Julia Neuberger, a liberal Jewish rabbi and a member of the House of Lords, published a thought-provoking manifesto of ageing entitled, *Not Dead Yet*.

> "Don't make any assumptions about my age.
> Don't waste my skills and experience.
> Don't take away my pride.
> Don't trap me at home.
> Don't make me brain dead, let me grow.
> Don't force me into a care home.
> Don't treat those who look after me as rubbish.
> Don't treat me like I'm not worth repairing.
> Don't treat my death as meaningless.
> Don't assume I'm not enjoying life."

One way in which we can recognise the worth of older people is to stop using the phrase 'old people', which tends to have derogatory associations. Instead let's use the term 'senior adults' The very word 'adult' indicates that older people possess wisdom and maturity.

We need to go on to recognise that however frail and however confused older people may become, they still have value – there never comes a point when we no longer bear the image of God. All human beings have equal worth. From God's perspective there is never a moment when we reach our 'prime' – there is never a point at which we begin to 'go downhill'. The following statement of John Swinton, written with dementia suffers in mind, applies to all in our care:

> "Human beings are both wanted and loved irrespective of their physical or physiological condition. It is not any capacity within them that gives them value. Nor is it the value that those around them bestow upon them (a value that could be rescinded at any moment). Human beings' value and their identity are held and assured

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[218] See the "seven myths of old age" listed in the Search publication *Against Ageism* quoted by Arthur Creber, *New Approaches To Ministry With Older People* (Grove, Nottingham 1990) 7:
1. *The myth of chronology* – that people are 'old' simply by virtue of the length of their life.
2. *The myth of ill health* – that all older people are in need of medical treatment.
3. *The myth of senility* – that the intelligence of older people deteriorates with age and very many suffer from senile dementia. (In fact only 5% of people over pensionable age suffer from senile dementia).
4. *The myth of isolation* – that all older people are lonely and isolated.
5. *The myth of misery* – that all older people are unhappy.
6. *The myth of unproductivity* – that older people are incapable of making a useful contribution to society, they lack creativity and are redundant to the real future.

[219] Chris Skilton, 'Understanding the elderly – a theological reflection', *Ministry Today* 64 (Summer 2015).

> by God who created them, who inspired them with God's *nephesh*, who sustains them in the power of the Holy Spirit, and who continues to offer the gift of life and relationship to all of humanity."[220]

We need to recognise that 'old age' is an exceedingly broad term, covering many stages of life.[221] Far from being weak and feeble, many senior adults are fit and healthy, full of experience, and are keen to serve God and their fellows. Even at the ripe old age of 85, Caleb felt as vigorous as ever (Joshua 14.11) In the words of one American commentator: "Caleb was not ready for a rocking chair or a tent in some retirement village in the Jordan Valley. Some may have thought that it was the time for his disengagement from life, but he claimed a mountain. He asked for a challenge, not a cushion. He wanted more adventures in his 'retirement' years."[222] Caleb is not alone. We therefore need to ensure that this energy is constructively channelled.

We need to recognise that even those who are technically 'elderly' do not necessarily feel any different from when they were young. "On the contrary", says American research anthropologist, Sharon Kaufmann, "when old people talk about themselves, they express a sense of self that's ageless – an identity that maintains continuity despite the physiological and social changes that come with age."[223] No doubt as a result of such feelings, in a research survey of people over 80, although 53% admitted they were old, 36% reported that they considered themselves middle-aged, and 11% young.[224]

We need to recognise that senior adults have still enormous potential for growth. What is more, now that they are 'self-employed', senior adults may well have more opportunity for growth and development. For many in the early retirement years this is a time for learning new skills. One acquaintance of mine taught himself classical Greek and read all of Homer in his retirement! From a specifically Christian point of view old age "is a tremendous opportunity for drawing nearer to God; indeed that may well be its main purpose; and each day becomes a day of opportunity, a day of spiritual growth, of radiating, albeit unconsciously, something of the peace and power of God to others."[225] Stanley Jones, a great Indian Methodist, suggested the following seven steps for old age:

> "Don't retire. Change your occupation… to something you always wanted to do
> Learn something new every day
> Set yourself to be gracious to someone every day
> Don't let yourself grow negative; be positive
> Look around you for something for which to be grateful every day
> Let your spiritual activities increase. Old age provides increased opportunity for prayer
> Keep laying up… 'the good store' of which Jesus spoke… the depository of every thought, motive, action, attitude which we drop into the subconscious mind. It can be the deep subsoil into which we can strike our roots in old age and blossom at the end like a night-blooming cereus."[226]

We need to recognise that senior adults are perhaps more open to the Gospel than any other group. The older people become, the more frequently they experience life-changing events. These events provide 'windows of opportunity' in which people seem to move from resistance or indifference to the Gospel, on the one hand, and to receptivity and openness, on the other hand.[227] Old age provides therefore an opportunity for sensitive evangelism. One such approach, within the context of a reminiscence programme, is the use of the so-called 'Quaker Questions':

> The group are invited to share their memories of what kept them warm during the winters when they were about seven years old.
> They are asked to recall who they felt warm towards in their early life and why.
> They are gently encouraged to share any experiences of God's warmth in their lives either as children or adults.

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[220] John Swinton, *Dementia – Living in the Memories of God* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2012).
[221] See 'Third, Fourth and Fifth Agers' (*Future First*, October 2014) where Peter Brierley divides the '65 and over' into the 'Third Agers' (65-74), the 'Fourth Agers' (75-84) and the 'Fifth Agers' (85+).
[222] Richard Morgan, *I Never Found That Rocking Chair: God's Call at Retirement* (The Upper Room, Nashville 1992) chapter 74.
[223] Sharon Kaufmann quoted by Michael Butler & Ann Orbach, *Being Your Age* (SPCK, London 1993) 13.
[224] Tim Stafford, *As Our Years Increase* (British edition: IVP, Leicester 1989) 12.
[225] H.P. Steer, *Caring for the Elderly* (SPCK, London 1966) 32.
[226] E. Stanley Jones, *Growing Spiritually* (Abingdon, Nashville 1953) 213.
[227] See Win & Charles Arn, 'Catching the Age Wave', *Faith And Renewal* (Sept-Oct 1993) 23-28. Also 'The Age Wave Is Here', *Church Growth Digest* 12 (Spring 1991) 3-5.

> Friendly discussion is encouraged about who or what makes them feel warm now, and where God's warmth is experienced in the present situation.[228]

Finally, we need to celebrate old age. Over against what he perceived to be the prevailing prejudice within the church toward old age, Arthur Creber wrote:

> "It really cannot be satisfactory for us to present a gospel which encourages older people to withdraw from life and to prepare for death (although this may be wholly appropriate for a person suffering from a terminal illness). Neither is it satisfactory to reduce our ministry to the patronising provision of free hand-outs or cheap trips to the pantomime at Christmas. If the gospel has to do with new Life we should be encouraging older people to explore their potential for creative activity, for maintaining and improving their health, and for establishing or re-establishing loving relationships with other people and with God. We should be providing opportunities for the development of understanding, growth and experimentation. A positive approach to the potentialities of old age will motivate us as ministers and will ensure that the necessary resources are made available for the provision of creative opportunities."[229]

There is much to be said for consciously developing a senior adult ministry. The fact is that while in most churches there are women's meetings or clubs for older people, in few churches is there any strategy toward helping senior adults grow and develop. Pastoral care of senior adults is much more than keeping the 'old folk' happy. It is more than visiting the housebound (the so-called 'shut-ins') and taking them communion. Pastoral care of senior adults lends itself to developing all kinds of innovative ministries.

Developing a strategy for the sixty-plus

A few years ago I developed the following 'strategy for the sixty-plus':

1. Encourage senior adults to socialise. Just like young people, older people have social needs. These social needs become all the more important as friends and loved ones die. Older people can feel very lonely. Churches need to provide opportunities for social activity, where older people can genuinely enjoy themselves and find new friends.

2. Encourage senior adults to grow as persons. Emotionally all of us have still got a lot of growing to do. The sad fact is that some older people are stunted people as a result of past experiences which have embittered them. Here is a massive pastoral challenge to ensure that older people continue to be "green and full of sap" (Psalm 92.14) in their later years.

3. Encourage senior adults to continue to use their minds. Just as life doesn't end at sixty, neither too should life-long learning! This may involve going to the local branch of the University of the Third Age rather than involvement in the church. But so what? Ministers should be concerned for the good of people, rather than treat them as fodder for the church machine. And any rate, it ensures that older people do not get stuck in a church ghetto.

4. Encourage senior adults to grow spiritually. With the beginning of the retirement years there is an opportunity to develop one's prayer life, to explore new and unfamiliar paths of spirituality, and to go on retreat.

5. Encourage senior adults to face their mortality. Just as sex should regularly feature on any programme for young people, so too death and the world to come should feature regularly on any programme for older people. But it is not simply death and the world to come which should be on the agenda. Older people need to be helped to cope with the stages of role-reversal and of dependence, when they can no longer be the kind of active people they were.

6. Encourage senior adults to continue to serve the Lord. This can do the church good, and it can do the individuals good too. Paul Tournier believed that every retired person needs a second career, with goals and a mission that must be distinguished from leisure activity.

7. Encourage senior adults to seek and use opportunities for evangelism. Just as teenage years can be fruitful for the Gospel, so too can retirement years. For just as teenage years can be turbulent, so too can retirements years, for retirement makes the onset of a series of life-changing events. These events can provide 'windows of opportunity' in

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[228] Arthur Creber, *New Approaches to Ministry With Older People* 20 commented: "The opportunities for sharing the gospel and helping build their lives on their own declared experiences of God's love in their lives has been enormous."
[229] Creber, *New Approaches to Ministry with Older People* 23.

which people can move from resistance or indifference to the Gospel, on the one hand, to receptivity and openness, on the other hand.

From ageing to 'sage-ing'

There is more to ageing than simply growing older. One of the key tasks of people engaged in caring for seniors should be to encourage older people to grow in wisdom. Wisdom is not an automatic gift; it is something which is developed through reflection. In this respect Zalman Schachter, a Jewish commentator, wrote:

> "One is only old by the calendar, but one becomes an elder when one knows how to use those years, and that means life review, life repair, relationship repair, and a way of thinking about, how do I want to harvest what I learned in life. And there are good memories and there are some other memories that are not so happy, but they contain in themselves some good too, if one looks into them."[230]

Sage-ing involves looking back on our past and making sense of our lives. Hopefully, such looking back will create a sense of pride as one perhaps becomes aware of one's achievements, not just in the world of work or of the wider community, but also in terms of the family. Almost certainly, looking back will also involve coming to terms with disappointment; for the fact is that for most of us there will be unfulfilled dreams. For some looking back will involve a sad realisation of broken relationships; and the need to forgive, both others and maybe oneself too.

Sage-ing involves a good deal of self-awareness. Yet few of us are truly self-aware. We need others to help us see ourselves as we truly are – we need others to see our lives as they truly have been. But where do we find that help, apart from paying for the services of a professional therapist? Ideally this should be one of the tasks of pastoral care. There is much more to the pastoral care of seniors than just 'visiting'. Pastoral care is enabling people to continue to grow and develop, whatever their age.

The task of the church through its activities is to help senior adults shift from ageing to sage-ing. A church that simply puts on lunches for senior adults or even devotional services for senior adults people is failing in its task of helping seniors to grow in their understanding of God and self, and as also in their understanding of the relationship between God and self.

Relating the Gospel to older seniors

Caring for seniors in a church context must always be Gospel-centred. Important as it is to help seniors make sense of their lives, it is even more important to help our older seniors realise the value that their lives have in the sight of God. In a world where all the emphasis appears to be on the young, the old often feel they have little value; and all the more so, as they can do less and less. Old age can be a demeaning process, particularly if it involves having to have somebody wash us and perhaps even toilet us. Dementia itself can be a happy release, but not the gradual loss of one's ability to think and to remember. Increasingly a burden on society, if not the family, older people often feel that their lives no longer have any value. Pastoral carers need to remind those whom they visit as indeed themselves that however much the years may have taken their toll, even the most senile still have value to God: for not only have we been made in the image of God, we continue to bear that image to the end of our days. The good news is that we all have inestimable worth to God, however diminished we may feel.

Linked with a loss of self-worth is often a sense of uselessness. Whereas in early retirement people can be incredibly active, not least in the service of God and his church, there comes a point when energy is gone and physical limitations appear. Old age for those who are becoming frail can sometimes seem to be nothing more than a waiting-room for death. The reality, however, is that we can still be useful for God. Older people have time to pray: perhaps one of the tasks of a pastoral carer is to share names of people who need particular prayer. Older people too can continue to witness to those who look after them, as also to family members. As Vernon Grounds put it: "Without becoming a loquacious bore, an older person can testify of God's faithfulness through the years of life. That is the message of Psalm 71. The older generation can pass on to the next generation… Perhaps a grandparent's congregation

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[230] Zalman Schachter Shalomi – quoted by Rachel Kohn, 'The Ageing Spirit' in *Ageing & Spirituality across Faiths and Cultures* (Jessica Kingsley, London 2010), edited by Elizabeth MacKinlay, 64. See also James Woodward, *Valuing Age: Pastoral Ministry with Older People* (SPCK, London 2008) 192: "Wisdom is not what you know about; it is what you know, deep inside you, the essence of your inner life. Wisdom is the art of holding together the old and the new, of balancing the known with the unknown, the pain and the joy; it is a way of linking the whole of your life together in a needful integrity."

is one small grandchild, but how important it is that the upcoming generations hear about the spiritual experience of the older generations. The good news is that older people, if they look, can find opportunities for ongoing usefulness."[231]

Older people become increasingly lonely. True, retirement years are often an opportunity to make new friends, both in the church and outside. Moving into a retirement home or into sheltered accommodation can increase those opportunities. However, there comes a stage as we grow older that our circle of friends diminishes; and all the more so if ill-health causes us to become housebound. The good news, however, is that God never leaves or forsakes his people. As we read the Scriptures and pray for the elderly in our care, we can assure them afresh that there is nothing in this life or the next which can ever separate us from God and his love.

As we grow older, we become more conscious of our mortality. Friends are dying and we realise that our own death may soon be imminent. Instead of denying the reality of death, our task as pastoral carers is to enable people to face up to their mortality. There comes a point when we need to speak words of hope. The good news is that for those who die in Christ death is not the end, but simply the beginning of a new and fuller life.

16. Caring for non-conformers

Changing attitudes

Over the years many churches have changed their stance on a range of moral issues, without necessarily compromising their principles. Let me give three examples of the way in which most churches now include people in a way in which they did not when I was young

- We welcome people who have gone through divorce. In the old days, if a divorce took place, then the people concerned were often drummed out of the church. Today it is different. It is not that divorce is OK: we still believe that God's plan is for life-long marriage. But we no longer ask people to leave the church.
- We welcome girls who have had babies out of wedlock. In the old days, they would disappear and in all likelihood, once the baby was born, would have given the baby away for adoption. Today we support them. This does not mean that we approve: we still believe that children are best brought up in the context of marriage. But we also believe that single pregnant girls need our love and care
- We welcome cohabitees. In the old days, the church condemned people living together; and I would only marry people living together if they were to separate for a period before the wedding. Today there are many churchgoers who live together. Again, it is not that we now approve of their living arrangements. But we believe that God welcomes all, whatever and whoever.

This is the context in which I found myself drawing up guidelines for people do not conform to the norms of Christian discipleship.

Creating guidelines for non-conformers in our midst

How do we respond as a church when people who do not conform to accepted Christian norms of behaviour begin to attend our services? Indeed how do we respond when church members deviate from the norm?

If we believe, as we do, that homosexual relationships are wrong, then what should our attitude be to gays and lesbians wishing to be part of our fellowship? If we believe, as we do, that marriage is for life, then how do we respond when marriages fall apart in our midst? If we believe, as we do, that children should be born in wedlock, then how do we respond to those among us who become single mothers? If we believe, as we do, in the sanctity of life, then how do we respond to single girls who decide to terminate their pregnancy? If we believe, as we do, that pre-marital sex is wrong, then how do we respond to couples living together? If we believe, as we do, that self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit, then how do we handle people suffering with alcohol or drug addiction or who self-harm, and who wish to become members of our church? And if we believe, as we do, that we should welcome the

[231] Vernon Grounds, 'A Personal Perspective', 23-13 in *Ageing, Death and the Quest for Immortality* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2004) edited by C. Ben Mitchell, Robert D. Orr & Susan A. Salladay.

stranger and care for the oppressed, then how do we respond to those who are prejudiced against asylum seekers or wear clothes produced by sweat shops?

The fact is that already our church reflects society today. Most of the scenarios described in the previous paragraph are a reality in the life of our church. Some situations are well-known, others are perhaps known only to a few, while yet others are not even known to the ministers.

If Jesus is to be our guide, then there is no doubt that we should welcome everybody, whether or not they conform to norms of Christian discipleship. For Jesus was known as the friend of sinners (Matt 11.19; Luke 7.34). But Jesus was not content to be the friend of sinners. To those who complained of the company he kept he declared: "I have not come to call respectable people to repent, but outcasts" (Luke 5.32). Jesus clearly expected people to change. Although he did not condemn the woman caught in adultery, he did say: "Go, but do not sin again" (John 8.11). The Apostle Paul was equally forthright: "People who are immoral or who worship idols or are adulterers or who steal or are greedy or are drunkards or who slander others or are thieves – none of these shall possess God's Kingdom" (1 Cor 6.10 GNB).

How does all this translate into the life of a Baptist church? Are we to baptise only those who have got their life together? Although baptism clearly denotes repentance, it also is an acknowledgement that our only hope is the grace of God. If baptism becomes a mark of 'perfection', then it denies the need for the grace of God! Another issue relates to how we deal with church members who in one way or another 'fall' into 'sin' of one kind or another? Where does church discipline come in? Indeed, what do we understand by church discipline? Does church discipline entail suspension from church membership? Currently pastoral matters of this kind are handled privately. Only the most brazen and impenitent of 'sinners' are ever suspended from membership. And what, for that matter, are the most heinous of 'sins'? More often than not Jesus attacked the hypocrisy of the Pharisees rather than people's sexual morals. Furthermore, in the Sermon on the Mount he made it clear that attitudes can be as important as actions. As for Paul, his lists of 'sins' are so wide-ranging that few would escape his condemnation!

Traditionally Baptist churches have been high commitment churches. However, at a time when life is increasingly messy, and where matters are often more grey rather than black and white, people are increasingly regarding the Christian life – and not just conversion – as a process. Or, to put it another way, we are increasingly recognising that in the New Testament conversion is a life-long process and involves three tenses: we have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved.

So where does this leave us as a church? Theologically we cannot regard baptism and church membership as badges of perfection. True, baptism has ethical connotations: in baptism we resolve to die to self and to live for Christ. But that resolve has to be lived out. Perhaps we should regard baptism and church membership as a sign that people desire to go the way of Christ. On this basis we can welcome people into church membership who are struggling to live up to Christ's calling.

Although none of us live truly consistent Christian lives, we do need to ensure that the lives of church leaders (here we have in mind not just ministers and deacons, but also leaders of organisations and activities) are consistent with their calling. The lists of qualifications for church leaders in the Pastoral Epistles make it clear that character is important. Here we can and should insist that our leaders do conform to accepted norms.

Are gay people welcome too?

In April 2013 I said to my church:

> "Where do we stand as a church on inclusivity? I believe that as a church we need to give some hard thought to our policy toward gays. As Christians we cannot afford to be like the proverbial ostrich. We need to face up to the realities of life around us and look at the facts without prejudice or irrational emotion. For some the question of how we deal with gays is primarily a pastoral issue, for others it is primarily a justice issue, but for me it is primarily a missiological issue. Sadly the traditional evangelical approach to same sex relations is a massive stumbling block to the younger generation, with the result that for most people under 45 the church and its message are now a total irrelevance. This should be a cause of massive concern."

We looked at the Bible, and discovered that although the Bible has a good deal to say about marriage, it has little to say about same sex relationships; and where the Bible does speak about what we now call 'homosexuality' the context

then was very different from the context in which we live. For instance, although Paul undoubtedly condemned promiscuous gay sex, the concept of a loving, faithful gay partnership may well have been unknown to him.

We noted too that in the same breath as Paul condemned gay and lesbian sex, he also condemned gossips, thieves and greedy people. He made no distinction between one group of sinners and another (see 1 Cor 6.9-11).

We reflected upon the fact that down through the centuries Christians have had to work out how biblical principles are to be applied to a changing world. As a church, for instance, we do not follow the teaching of Paul in 1 Cor 14.34-35 and 1 Tim 2.11-15 where Paul forbids women to speak; nor do we follow the teaching of 1 Cor 11.2-16 where Paul speaks of the need for women to cover their head in church. We say – and rightly so – that these passages relate to particular cultural situations and do not have force today. Nor do we attempt to justify the practice of slavery. When preachers today expound Paul's instructions to masters and slaves, they change the context and apply Paul's teaching to today's work context.

We read again Paul's greater charter for inclusivity – "There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women: you are all one in union with Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.28), and asked ourselves whether this charter could apply to gay and lesbian people too.

We grappled with the argument that if in the Scriptures God is primarily a God of covenant relationship who blesses all forms of faithful relationships, then what God condemns is promiscuous, covenant-free sex – not committed gay partnerships.

Perhaps not surprisingly in an evangelical church like Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, many felt strongly that we could not welcome people in a gay or lesbian relationship into committed church membership. In the ensuing discussion I made the following statement:

> "As I reflect on Scripture, I keep coming back to the fact that Jesus ate with sinners: Jesus sat down to eat with women who sold their bodies and with businessmen who cheated others; and in doing so, he scandalised the religious people of his day. He scandalised them, because in those days to eat with a person was a sign of friendship, a sign of acceptance. This is what so upset the Pharisees. Listen to the way in which Jesus defended himself: 'People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. Go and find out what is meant by the Scripture that says: "It is kindness that I want, not animal sacrifices". I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts' (Matt 9.12-13). If we are to be followers of Jesus, then at the very least we need to welcome people regardless of their sexual orientation – regardless of their sexual practice. We need to welcome them to our services, welcome them to our home groups, and welcome them even into our homes. That at the very least is what Jesus would do."

Thankfully, although the overwhelming majority of members felt that all same-sex relationships were inherently sinful, whether or not that relationship was stable and committed, there was nonetheless a clear acceptance that gay and lesbian people were indeed welcome in our church. For that I was grateful. We could still say that for everybody, including gays and lesbians, 'Central Baptist Church is a place to belong'.

17. Encouraging personal growth

Bringing people to Christian maturity

The ultimate goal of pastoral care is presenting "everyone mature in Christ" (Col 1.28). Yet all too often pastoral care is perceived as comforting the hurting, rather than enabling people to grow and develop in the faith. Martin Thornton, in his classic book *Spiritual Direction*, put it this way:

> "It is curious that what we ambiguously call pastoral care is seen as something entirely negative. It invariably suggests the dispensation of human benevolence with a sprinkling of Christian saccharin: helping those in trouble, counselling the disturbed, solving human problems. This is the ambulance syndrome, implying that

> Christianity might alleviate suffering but that it has nothing more positive to offer. The pastor is there to pick up the pieces after an accident, and barring accidents he is out of a job."[232]

Paul, by contrast, in Col 1.28 implied that pastoral care is about bringing people to Christian maturity. Pastoral care is about discipling, it is about mentoring, it is about facilitating growth. To quote the Apostle: "It is Christ whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (NRSV). Or in the words of the GNB: "We preach Christ to everyone. With all possible wisdom we warn and teach them in order to bring each one into God's presence as a mature individual in union with Christ."

In the first instance, Paul was no doubt attacking the intellectual and spiritual snobbery of those within the Colossian church, who saw salvation as a long drawn out process, in which perhaps only a few could graduate. By contrast, Paul believed that the Gospel is for all; and that everyone should grow and develop in the faith. In effect, we have here the Pauline equivalent of the Great Commission, where the call to make disciples involves not just 'baptising' but also 'teaching'. The universality of the Great Commission is reflected in Col 1.28 by the three-fold use of the word "everyone".

Pastoral care is not just about listening, empathising, and counselling. Pastoral care involves teaching, instructing, and training. So Paul reflecting on his ministry in Ephesus, wrote: "I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20.20). There we see that pastoral visitation involved teaching; and if Col 1.28 is a guide, then it was not teaching for the sake of teaching, but rather teaching for the sake of enabling people to grow and develop in their faith.

In Col 1.28 Paul uses two words for such instruction. The first word (*noutheteo*) is translated into English as 'warning' (NRSV; similarly GNB) or 'admonishing'. It is a negative word, in the sense that it involves putting things right;. 'straightening out muddled or immature thinking'. The second word (*didasko*) is the normal Greek word for 'teaching'. It is a positive word, in the sense that it involves straightforward imparting of knowledge and skills. These two negative and positive approaches to learning are also found in 2 Tim 3.16 where Paul says that Scripture is useful for "teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instruction for right living" (GNB). Here we have a reminder that Christian maturity involves not simply growth in understanding, but also growth in grace: Christian maturity does not just involve the mind, but also the will. It is not knowledge for learning's sake, but learning for living's sake.

Exercising spiritual direction for everybody

Pastoral care involves spiritual direction with a view to promoting growth. Margaret Guenther likened the art of spiritual direction to spiritual midwifery. "When in doubt", she wrote, "I always assume that God is at work, that is, the person is pregnant."[233] While there is truth in that metaphor (see Gal 4.19), I prefer the alternative metaphor of children growing into maturity. The new life is already there and to be seen, but many have yet to mature and to reflect the life and love of Jesus in their relationships one with the other (1 Cor 3.1-3); they are still at the John 3.16 stage and have not really developed any further in their Christian lives. For various reasons they have got stuck in their walk with their Lord, and they need to be helped to get going and growing again. Others have become stunted and twisted in their Christian development; they have been Christians for many years, but they have never received any real form of encouragement or discipline. Pastoral care is about helping people to grow, encouraging people to deal with those cancers that threaten their spiritual lives, enabling them to deal with past hurts and gain the courage to forgive and move on.

If pastoral care is to promote growth, then pastors must be prepared to take the bull by the horns and speak about spiritual things to their people on an individual basis. It always seems strange to me how so many of us shy away from our spiritual calling. We are happy enough to offer all kinds of practical help, where needed, but we back off when it comes to dealing with the 'cure of souls'.

We smile – and rightly so – at the way in which in earlier times young clergymen were advised to go about their pastoral visiting:

> "At your first visit to the inferior families after the customary civilities, the following questions may be asked. What books have you?… Do you read some part of the Scripture daily?... Do you meditate on what you

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[232] Martin Thornton, *Spiritual Direction* (SPCK, London 1984) 9-10.
[233] Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1992) 93.

> read?… Do you pray to God in secret?... do you examine yourself as to the state of your soul?... Have you any family prayers?... Do you attend public worship?... Do you take your Bible to church with you?... Do you show the text to the absent?... Do you learn it by heart and frequently think on it in the following week?"[234]

For all the faults of such an approach, one has to admit that at least it was concerned with people's relationship to God, even if there were no questions about how they related to one another. If pastoral care is to have any depth, then it needs to go beyond passing the time of day with people. It means that when we visit, we read Scripture and reflect on how it applies to our walk with Christ. It means that we are concerned for a person's spiritual well-being, and not just their physical well-being. Pastoral care is not just about showing love and friendship, but about helping our brothers and sisters journey forward in their faith. In a gentle and sensitive manner, we need to 'confront people' and ask them about their spiritual lives: where they have been, where they are now, and where by God's grace – and maybe with our help and the help of the church – they would now like to go.

Donald Bubna suggested pastors making a 'spiritual inventory call' and asking such questions as:

- What's one joy and one struggle you're experiencing in your life or ministry?
- How would you describe your walk with God this past year?
- Where do you feel you would most like to grow as a Christian?
- Could you give me a thumbnail sketch of your spiritual history?
- How did you first come to believe?
- In your devotional life, what's one thing you've recently discovered?
- How would you finish this sentence: 'I feel good about my walk with God when…'?
- What have been some of the ups and downs of your spiritual life since you came to faith?
- How has our church helped you in your spiritual development?
- What do you need from me as a friend and fellow believer to go on to maturity in Christ Jesus?[235]

Pastoral care is not just about finding out how the children are doing or how their parents are keeping, but how they are developing in their Christian life. Pastors need to ask their people how they are getting on with the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading and prayer, not with a view to grading them, but with a view to seeing how we can help them. Likewise they should feel free to raise areas where they feel relationships might not be right, and to see how those relationships with God's help might be put right.

Spiritual direction is the right of every Christian. Admittedly Thomas Merton felt that spiritual direction was not necessary "for the ordinary Christian. Wherever there is *special mission or vocation* a certain minimum of direction is implied by the very nature of the vocation itself."[236] But every Christian has a vocation; every Christian has a ministry to perform. Gordon Jeff was right when he said "*some kind* of spiritual direction is helpful for every Christian person."[237]The question is, 'How?' How can spiritual direction be made available to every Christian person?

Gordon Jeff proposed that as many members of the church as possible be encouraged to go and talk with someone two, three or four times a year about their Christian journey, and especially about how their prayer life is going on. He envisaged a church cutting down on its level of activity so that there would be more time "for prayer, for real meeting, for talking about the things that really matter. Clergy may find themselves less in control, but acting far more as 'enablers' who help to release the God-given potential already existing within their members."[238]

All that sounds fine, but how can that become a practical reality? To whom would all these people be turning for spiritual direction, two, three or four times a year? Surely not to the pastor? In any but the smallest of churches that kind of pastoral care would not be possible.

The way forward is to be found in helping those with whom pastoral care is shared in the church, to gain a vision for pastoral care as being about growth and development. Unfortunately many pastors fall down here. For where pastoral care is shared with other 'caregivers' in the church, it tends to focus on helping the troubled, rather than prodding the comfortable. In my experience 'caregivers' see their task in primarily supportive terms such as encouraging the bereaved, visiting the sick, and helping the elderly. True, a pastoral team may be concerned for members who seem to be falling away and are no longer attending church services as regularly as they might. But what about all those people

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[234] Quoted by Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (SPCK, London 1980) 115.
[235] Donald L. Bubna, 'The Spiritual Inventory', *Leadership* IX (Fall 1988) 69.
[236] Cited by Gordon H. Jeff, *Spiritual Direction for Every Christian* (SPCK, London 1987) 3.
[237] Gordon Jeff, *Spiritual Direction* 3.
[238] Gordon Jeff, *Spiritual Direction* 96, 97.

who sit in their pews Sunday by Sunday, who are fit and healthy, whose families are fit and healthy? What about their spiritual needs?

A way to enable those engaged in pastoral care, as also other key leaders, to gain the vision is to let them experience this kind of pastoral care. Rather than in the first instance talking about the need for members generally to grow and develop, pastors need to speak to their leaders about their need to grow and develop. If pastors were to give basic spiritual direction to their leaders, there would be an appreciable 'spin-off' in the church. There would be a 'filter-down' effect. In theory at least, one could imagine spiritual direction spiralling downward in a pyramid type shape.

Much as I would love to see spiritual direction on an individual basis becoming a reality for everybody, in practice I do not think it feasible. But there is another way forward. Life and growth do not simply have to be promoted on an individual basis. They can be encouraged on a group basis too.

18. Growing through small groups

Small groups can be a key to developing spiritual maturity.

A commitment to speak the truth in love to one another

A small group offers the opportunity for growth and development. Listen to Paul: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph 4.15,16).[239] Within a small group Christians through their interaction with one another can provoke one another and encourage one another in their overall Christian development.

Many years ago George Whitefield said: "My brethren, let us plainly and freely tell one another what God has done for our souls. To this end you would do well, as others have done, to form yourselves into little companies of four or five each, and meet once a week to tell each other what is in your hearts: that you may then pray for and comfort each other as need shall require. None but those who have experienced it can tell the unspeakable advantages of such a union and communion of souls.... None I think that truly loves his own soul and his brethren as himself, will be shy of opening his heart, in order to have their advice reproof, admonition and prayers, as occasions requires. A sincere person will esteem it one of the greatest blessings."

It was at this time that John Wesley built into his class meetings a system of 'mutual accountability'. Each time the early Methodists met in their classes, they had to ask these four questions of one another:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said or done of which you doubt whether it be a sin or not?

In today's terminology, small groups are growth groups. In the words of Clinebell: "Growth stimulating relationships are warm, caring and trustful, at the same time they are honest, confronting and caring. Caring + confrontation = growth."[240] We all like to be encouraged; few of us like to be confronted. But that is a necessary part of the growth process.

Small groups can be likened 'weight watchers' meetings, where the individuals commit themselves to a programme of change and use the rest of the group for support and encouragement in their tasks. To quote Clinebell again: "In growth groups, the growth perspective is central. It functions like a pair of eyeglasses, permitting leader and group to see each other in terms of what they can become."[241] In other words, growth groups encourage potential, they encourage maturity.

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[239] Not to speak the truth is in fact not to love. See Ralph Martin, *Ephesians*: "To rob one's neighbour of that right [to the truth] and thereby of the freedom to respond to the real situation, is to dehumanise him or her."
[240] Clinebell, *Growth Groups* 81.
[241] Clinebell, *Growth Groups* 4.

A commitment to being open with one another

The mere fact that a group meets within a home every week or two is no guarantee that its members will truly function as living cells of the body. People can meet together until the cows come home, but they may never truly build one another up in love. Small groups can only begin to be successful, when there is a joint willingness to be open and honest with one another.

Openness is not easy. If people are to be open to one another, they must throw away their masks; and throwing masks away is dangerous, because people will see them as they really are. This then proves not a little embarrassing – indeed is not nakedness of any variety embarrassing? People are seen not to be as 'loveable' or as 'spiritual' as they would have others see them. Yet as we open ourselves to one another, we discover that we are not the only spiritual pygmies; few, if any, are living the ideal or 'normal' Christian life. It is only as we are honest with ourselves and with one another, that we begin to make any true progress in the Christian life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: "Just as surely as God desires to lead us to knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves... God is not a God of the emotion, but the God of truth. Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it is and should be in God's sight... When the morning mists of dream vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship."[242]

Life within a small group is costly, but without paying the cost, one cannot receive the reward. In the words of Bruce Milne: "You cannot have true fellowship 'on the cheap'. It is not available at some 'bargain counter' of the Spirit. A fellowship which costs nothing is almost invariably also worth nothing."[243] Similarly John Mallison, commenting on Bonhoeffer's concept of 'cheap grace', wrote: 'Cheap grace in small group life is Bible study without action, prayer without creativity, fellowship without care and concern, sharing without honesty, community without contracts."[244]

A commitment to help one another in our walk with God

One form of a 'community with a contract' are 'covenant' groups, where the members covenant with one another to help one another in their walk with God. The roots of such a covenant are found in the relationship that David and Jonathan had one another. They made a covenant together (1 Sam 18.3, 4; also 23.18) and thereby strengthened one another's hands in God (1 Sam 23.15, 16).[245]

The early Baptists made a great deal of this concept of covenanting together. Thus John Smyth and his followers at Gainsborough in 1606 covenanted together "to walk in all Christ's ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them". Smyth defined a "visible community of saints" as "two or more joined together by covenant with God and themselves... for their mutual edification and for God's glory". God covenanted to be their God, while Christians entering this covenant agreed to obey all God's commandments.

Some time ago I was preaching in Downton Baptist Church in the New Forest. In their church covenant of 1793 the members committed themselves not only to the Lord, but also to one another. Among other things they promised: "to watch over each other's conversation and not to suffer sin upon one another so far as God shall discover it to us, to stir each other to love and good works, to warn, rebuke and admonish each other with meekness according to the rules left to us by God"; "to bear each other's burdens, to cleave to each other in all conditions wherewith God in his wise providence may exercise us"; and "to bear with each other's weaknesses, failings and infirmities with much tenderness, not discovering [disclosing] to any without the church nor any within, unless according to the Gospel rules".

A 20th century example of small groups covenanting together is found in the following covenant adopted by the National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C:

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[242] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* 15.
[243] Bruce Milne, *We Belong Together: The meaning of fellowship* (IVP, Leicester 1978) 25.
[244] John Mallison*, Building Small Groups* 16.
[245] Jonathan "strengthened his hand in God" (NRSV), "helped him find strength in God" (NIV), "gave him fresh courage in God". Mary J. Evans, *The Message of God* (IVP, Leicester 2004) 132 commented: "Even the strongest faith sometimes wavers and the value of an understanding friend at these times cannot be underestimated."

"Covenant groups are an expression of our life in Christ and cannot reach their potential unless He is an active member of the group. Our life and strength flow from Him; therefore we can take joy in his presence and express what He is accomplishing in our group as a member of it. His Word is our guide to all of life and therefore it should be used as the groups feel the need. It is out of His Word that we identify the following covenant dynamics:

1. The covenant of Affirmation (unconditional love, agape love). There is nothing you have done, or will do, that will make me stop loving you. I may not agree with your actions, but I will love you as a person and do all I can to hold you up in God's affirming love.

*2. The covenant of Availability***.** Anything I have – time, energy, insight, possessions – are at your disposal if you need them. I give these to you in a priority of covenant over non-covenant demands. As part of this availability I pledge regularity of time, whether in prayer or in agreed upon meeting time.

*3. The covenant of Prayer***.** I covenant to pray for you in some regular fashion, believing that our caring Father wishes his children to pray for one another and ask him for the blessings they need.

*4. The covenant of Openness***.** I promise to strive to become a more open person, disclosing my feelings, my struggles, my joys and my hurts to you as well as I am able. The degree to which I do so implies that I cannot make it without you, that I trust you with my needs and that I need you. This is to affirm your worth to me as a person. I.e. I need you!

5. The covenant of Sensitivity. Even as I desire to be known and understood by you, I covenant to be sensitive to you and to your needs to the best of my ability. I will try to hear you, see you and feel where you are, to draw you out of the pit of discouragement or withdrawal.

6. The covenant of Honesty. I will try to 'mirror back' to you what I am hearing you say and feel. If this means risking pain for either of us I will trust our relationship enough to take that risk, realising it is in 'speaking the truth in love, that we grow up in every way into Christ who is the head'. I will try to express this honesty, to 'meter it', according to what I perceive the circumstances to be.

7. The covenant of Confidentiality. I will promise to keep whatever is shared within the confines of the group in order to provide the 'permissive atmosphere' necessary for openness.

8. The covenant of Accountability. I consider that the gifts God has given me for the common good should be liberated for your benefit. If I should discover areas of my life that are under bondage, 'hung up' or truncated by my own misdoings or by the scars inflicted by others, I will seek Christ's liberating power through my covenant partners so that I might give to you more of myself. I am accountable to you to 'become what God has designed me to be in his loving creation'."[246]

Within such a group the dynamics of human potentials growth groups can come into play. For human potentials groups major on helping us "discover and use more of our latent resources".[247] In addition Christian growth groups can help us discover and use more of the resources that are available in Christ. Christian growth groups may become a corporate expression of spiritual direction.

The role of the pastor is not to be present at such groups, but to give the vision for these groups to be set up and to see that appropriate training is available for the leaders. There is no 'magic' in groups *per se*; what counts is the purpose which causes people to come together in groups. In this case the purpose is that of spiritual growth.

19. Developing the concept of a spiritual check-up

If we want to ensure that we keep fit and well, then ideally we should make an appointment with the doctor once a year to undergo a physical check-up. What is ideal in the world of physical health is also true in the world of spiritual health. If we want to ensure that we keep spiritually fit and well, then we need to undergo an annual spiritual check-

[246] A covenant developed by Louis Evans, cited by John Mallison, *Building Small Groups in the Christian Community* 68-69.
[247] Howard Clinebell, *Growth Groups* (Abingdon, Nashville, 2nd edition 1977) 3.

up. Ideally a spiritual check-up is best undergone with a 'soul-friend': for it is easy to deceive ourselves and not to see ourselves as we really are. However, it is also possible to engage in a 'DIY' check-up. But whether we do it by ourselves or whether we enlist the help of a Christian friend, the important thing is that we do it.

Normally when we have a physical check-up some of our blood is taken for the purpose of analysis. I want to suggest that when it comes to a spiritual check-up, we use the following diagnostic questions. I have taken the basic functions of blood within the human body and made them analogous to the nurturing, cleansing, helping and serving aspects of the Christian life.[248]

Testing the red blood cells (oxygen carriers that support life)

1. Do I look forward to worshipping with God's people on a Sunday?
2. Do I belong to a small 'growth' group?
3. Do I engage in some disciplined form of regular Bible reading and prayer
4. Have I read a Christian book this past year?
5. o what extent am I growing in grace and in knowledge of the Lord Jesus?

Testing the white blood cells (disease fighters for inner cleansing and renewing)

1. Am I a more accepting, forgiving, loving person that I have been?
2. Am I less likely now to gossip or criticise others; am I less greedy and less impatient?
3. Are my motives increasingly less self-centred?
4. Do I find myself using, encouraging or competing with others?
5. Do I ever tear another person down in jest or in anger?

Testing the platelets (blood clotters that staunch the wounds of living in a hurting world)

1. Have I found someone to help me bear the burdens of life?
2. Am I able to share my joys, hopes and dreams with others?
3. When someone in jest or in anger tears me down, how do I handle it?
4. How do I cope with failure?
5. How do I cope with success?

Testing blood pressure (hyper tension and exercise)

1. How do I deal with pressure, at work, at home or at church?
2. Am I able to 'tithe' my income, trusting God to supply my needs?
3. Am I exercising my gifts within the body of Christ?
4. Do I open my home to others, especially to people who are lonely or new in the church or in the neighbourhood?
5. Have I been able recently to explain to neighbours or colleagues why I am a Christian?

Testing for inadequate blood cells (an imbalanced spiritual diet)

1. Do I live a balanced life, having time for family, for recreation, and for personal growth?
2. Do I live a balanced Christian life, having time to 'be' as well as to 'do', and time to 'do' as to 'be'?
3. How able am I to relate my faith to what I do during the week?
4. To what extent is my life characterised by joy?
5. Would others call me an 'enthusiast' in whom God is clearly seen?

Here then are 25 searching questions. It will take time to give a thoughtful and considered response to them. Ideally the 'lab' work is best done with a fellow Christian.

[248] Sadly, I have forgotten the source of my inspiration.

Conclusion

Pastoral care is not the unique province of the pastor. It is a task to be shared with others. On the other hand, it is not a task to give away. I am concerned by the number of pastors who no longer seem to be interested in caring for the flock. The role of being a charismatic preacher or an effective leader or a missionary strategist has captivated their minds instead. But pastoral care is of the essence of pastoral ministry. Furthermore, it is one of the great privileges of pastoral ministry. No other person in the fellowship has the entry that we do into the homes of our people. No other person is able to draw alongside people in their joys and in their sorrows as a pastor. Paul Cedar rightly declared: "We give up an essential ministry when we give up pastoral care. Pastoral care is not only one of the greatest needs of our fast-growing impersonal society, it is also a unique privilege of the pastor."[249]

In this chapter we have sought to reflect on some of the roles and skills a pastor needs to develop in order to pursue excellence in the role of pastoral care. In conclusion let us reflect for a moment on the key quality of pastoral care: love. Much as I am committed to encouraging pastors developing professional skills in ministry, it is undeniably true that what ultimately distinguishes a competent pastor from a great pastor is love for people.

Loving people can be a joy. It is a joy when people respond to our love. It is a joy to see those whom we love fulfil their God-given potential in Christ. But loving people can be a pain too. It is painful when people do not respond to our love. It is painful too when people wander away and fail to fulfil our hopes and aspirations for them. "Good pastors have heart problems", wrote Kent Hughes.[250] He went on:

> "To have a pastor's heart it is necessary to have a heart problem – an enlarged heart. To be effective pastors, we must enlarge our love and make ourselves vulnerable. And when we do that it is inevitable that we will experience a godly angina, a deep and piercing pain of the heart."

Love it is which binds a people together. Love it is which provides a climate conducive for spiritual growth. Love it is which empowers preaching and motivates missionary endeavour. Love it is which gives pastors authority and enables them to fulfil their calling. Pastors seeking to live out the call must ever be mindful that love is the "still more excellent way" (1 Cor 12.31).[251]

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[249] Paul Cedar, 'The unique role of the pastor', 18 in *Mastering the Pastoral Role* (Multnomah, Portland, Oregon 1991) by P. Cedar, K. Hughes & B. Patterson.

[250] Kent Hunt, 'Maintaining a pastor's heart' 139 in *Mastering The Pastoral Role* (Multnomah, Portland, Oregon 1991) by P. Cedar, K. Hughes & B. Patterson.

[251] Scholars are divided on how to interpret the parable. Is it first and foremost the parable of the sower – or is it the parable of the soils? Is it a parable of encouragement where the focus is on the kingdom or is it a parable of challenge where the focus is on discipleship? Is it an assurance to the disciples that in spite of all the disappointments and failures, ultimately God will win out and there will be a bumper harvest? Or is the parable addressed to the crowd, urging them to listen to the word as preached by Jesus? James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* 129 writes: "The parable of the sower is usually interpreted as a parable of soils, seeing the hardened g round, rocks, thorns, and good soil as examples of wrong or right discipleship. But the parable is more than a metaphor of human psychology or attitudinal states… The parable represents the historical in-breaking of God's kingdom in Jesus, the sower of the gospel. The astounding harvest in v8 is an important clue that the growth is not owing to human activity but to God's providential power". Similarly G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Paternoster, Exeter 1986) 130: "The parable provides us with a representation of the effectiveness of the sovereignty of God in the mission of Jesus, making a decisive beginning despite all opposition and anticipates the final glory to which God is guiding the present."

About the author

Ordained in 1970, Paul Beasley-Murray taught in the Protestant Theological Faculty of Congo/Zaire from 1970 to 1972. From 1973 to 1986 he was pastor of Altrincham Baptist Church, Cheshire, which quadrupled in size during his ministry. From 1986 to 1992 he was Principal of Spurgeon's College, London, during which time the student enrolment doubled. From 1993 to 2013 he was senior minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, which experienced significant growth and he led the church through a £2 million redevelopment programme. He is currently Chairman of both the College of Baptist Ministers and of Ministry Today.

A prolific author, he has over 350 articles to his credit, for the most part reflecting on the practice of ministry. His writings currently in print are *Radical Believers: The Baptist Way Of Being The Church* (Baptist Union 1992, and translated into Czech, German and Norwegian; revised edition 2006); *Radical Disciples: A Course For New Christians* (Baptist Union 1996; revised edition 2005); *Happy Ever After?* (Baptist Union 1996; revised edition Amazon 2016); *Radical Leaders: A Guide For Elders & Deacons In Baptist Churches* (Baptist Union 1997; revised edition 2005); *The Message Of The Resurrection: The Bible Speaks For Today* (IVP 2000: also published in the USA and translated into Burmese, Chinese, Romanian and Korean); *A Loved One Dies: Help In The First Few Days* (Baptist Union 2005; revised edition Amazon 2016); *Joy to the World: Preaching at Christmas* (IVP 2005 – also available in a special OM edition in India, Nepal, Oman, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait); *Transform Your Church! 50 very practical steps* (IVP 2005); *Baptism, Belonging and Breaking Bread: Preparing for Baptism* (Baptist Union 2010); *Leading Teams in Larger Churches* (2010): www.teal.org.uk; *A Retreat Lectionary* (Society of Mary & Martha 2012); *Church Matters: Creative Ideas for Mission and Ministry* (Amazon 2016).

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