

HOLINESS VOLUME 3 (2017) ISSUE 1

Holiness & Pastoral Relationships

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Editorial

Andrew Stobart

I

The Wesleyan Methodist Conference, meeting in Liverpool in 1820, was faced with the (then) unprecedented situation that Methodist membership was in sharp decline. The previous year had recorded a net loss of 4,688 members. What was to be done? Enshrined in the Minutes of that 1820 Conference was a set of resolutions on pastoral work, by which the Methodists present sought 'to cultivate more fully the spirit of Christian pastors'.¹ Among the range of measures adopted, 'increased pastoral intercourse' with Methodist people 'at their own homes' was recognised as an 'absolute obligation'.² It was clear to the Conference of 1820 that a renewal of pastoral relationships was vital for the health and holiness of the Church.

Holiness, indeed, was of paramount importance in the pastoral renewal the Conference envisioned. Concerned as they were with 'the perilous exposure of our Members to the manifold fascinations of worldliness', the Conference expected its ministers to show 'unremitting diligence' in conducting pastoral visitation, which included 'giving seasonable counsel', 'exhorting them to a faithful and loving observance of all the duties of personal and family religion', and, perhaps the most happy phrase of all, 'kindly inquiry into their Christian experience'. No one was exempt from this careful pastoral exertion: 'the aged, the infirm, the sick, and the poor; let us keep watch over the lukewarm and the careless; and let us pay special attention to backsliders'.³ Pastoral visitation was for the whole Church, and for the wholeness of the Church.

The term 'kindly inquiry' presents possibilities for our conception of pastoral relationships today. 'Inquiry' draws attention to what is obscure. Pastoral inquiry

seeks to acknowledge and cultivate identity in Christ, which otherwise may be choked by 'the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things' (Mk 4:19), withered by difficulty (4:17), or snatched away by God's Enemy (4:15). The mystery of our Christian identity is 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3:3), yet pastoral inquiry seeks to bring this hidden root of life to our waking attention. Such inquiry is 'kindly', not merely in its manner – and, indeed, not always in its manner, since the Liverpool Conference certainly envisioned a robust edge to pastoral visitation not normally associated with 'tea with the vicar' – but also in its fruit. The kindly outcome of pastoral inquiry is maturity in faith, a wholeness of the spirit, and faithfulness in discipleship.

But whence does this kindly outcome originate? The Liverpool resolutions commend 'the reading of a suitable portion of Holy Scripture, and prayer', but neither these activities themselves nor the person who introduces them into the pastoral visitation are ultimately responsible for growth in Christian identity. The reading of Scripture and prayer are means of grace that connect the pastoral encounter with the originating source of all kindly outcomes: the kindness of God. God's kindness, according to Scripture, is not a vague divine quality, for God's kindness has 'appeared' in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Titus 3:4). God's kindness takes bodily form – both then in Jesus and now in us, through the Spirit whose intent is to renew us into the image of Christ (Gal 5:22). In the kindly inquiry of pastoral work, the kindness of God appears in daily life. Heaven intersects earth; the fear of death is swallowed up by the hope of resurrection; the excluded come to know they are graciously included; and God's kindness redraws the boundaries of our lives.

II

'Boundaries' are a significant motif in this issue. It is striking that having set out to compile an issue on 'Holiness & Pastoral Relationships', the articles that have independently arrived share an unintentional preoccupation with what we might call boundary issues. Bill Mullally's excellent reflections in 'The effect of presence and power in the pastoral supervisory relationship' draw our attention to the various boundaries which must be navigated for pastoral supervision in the Church to be effective. As he puts it, 'Whenever one is in the presence of another, power dynamics exist, and establishing and upholding mutually respectful boundaries is core to creating meaningful presence' (p. 22). Mullally's reflections help to emphasise the importance of the supervisory covenant,

which happily forms part of the new supervision practices currently being implemented throughout the Methodist Church in Great Britain.

Pastoral work is most acute along boundaries: between health and illness; life and death; hope and despair. A number of shorter articles explore how embodying God's kindness at these boundaries often means crossing, blurring or even transgressing them. Christopher Collins invites us to reconceive our relationship with the dementia-diagnosed, no longer seeing dementia as a boundary-limiting pastoral engagement. Paul Gismondi and Catherine Minor walk us along the boundary of death, from the perspective of parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy respectively. Elizabeth Dunning reflects on the all-too-familiar boundary reached when a Methodist society decides to cease to meet. In God's kindness, through the kindly inquiry modelled in these articles, the boundaries of existence in each of these cases are redrawn. The dementia-diagnosed are understood to be angelic missionaries; the fear of death becomes an invitation to faith; the horror of human suffering is the holy ground where resurrection is encountered; and the closure of a chapel is viewed as 'a good death'.

Jane Leach's contribution to our series on John Wesley's sermons, reflecting on his 1786 sermon 'On Visiting the Sick', offers pointers that enable us to navigate across the boundary from merely social conversation to truly pastoral conversation. Utilising the ability of art to prompt us across boundaries of perspective and see the world through the eyes of others, two devotional pieces in this issue offer opportunities for reflection on intercessory prayer (based on John Reilly's *Healing of the lunatic boy*) and on the identity of those for whom we care (based on Eddy Aigbe's *Self Portrait*).

Jimmy Dunn's Fernley-Hartley Lecture, 'Why four Gospels? Why only four?', considers why the boundaries of the canon were drawn as they were around the Gospels as we have them. This striking study by an internationally renowned biblical scholar has important implications for pastoral work. As he puts it in his conclusion: 'This is the wisdom and strength of our New Testament with its four Gospels, providing both an example of how diversely the same gospel could be told, and a challenge to us to retell the good news of Jesus today with equal or equivalent effect' (p. 54). Telling the gospel all over again with equivalent effect in terms that resonate in each context is the true art of pastoral conversation.

III

A final section of this issue offers reviews of some recently published books and booklets, which may be of interest to our readers. It is the intention of this journal not simply to be yet another outlet for theological wordsmiths, but rather to be a stimulant that more of God's people will develop a love for focused and sustained theological reflection. Another resolution from the Liverpool Conference of 1820 exhorts us: 'Let us meanwhile "stir up the gift of God which is in us", and improve our talents by close study and diligent cultivation.'⁴ For all the learning of the past two centuries, this is as necessary an exhortation for us now as it was then. If this journal prompts you to dig still deeper into our rich theological resources, and to apply yourself with greater energy to speak of and to and for God with care and liveliness, then it will have served a worthwhile purpose.

Andrew Stobart
Commissioning Editor
February 2017

Notes

1. Liverpool Minutes 1820, 'Resolutions on Pastoral Work', I, found in *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Volume 1, Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1988.
2. Liverpool Minutes 1820, VII.
3. Liverpool Minutes 1820, VII.
4. Liverpool Minutes 1820, II.



The effect of presence and power in the pastoral supervisory relationship

Bill Mullally

THE REVD BILL MULLALLY serves in the Methodist Church in Ireland and is currently President of the Methodist Church in Ireland. His doctoral research explores supervision in ministry, and he has been appointed as a Reflective Partner to the Methodist Church in Britain to research the implementation and outcomes of their supervision process.

mullally1@gmail.com
Cork, Ireland

This article addresses the important elements of presence and power in the pastoral supervisory relationship. It is based on qualitative research, which used a questionnaire methodology with six Methodist ministers, all of whom had taken part in group pastoral supervision for a period of two years. The aim of this research was to gain insight into their experience of the supervisory process. The article explores how an open, authentic and trusting environment can be created within the pastoral supervisory relationship that has regenerative and healing potential, whereby ministers will be better able to face the challenges of ministry. It contends there is a need for well-qualified, skilled and spiritually sensitive supervisory support for ministers. Such pastoral supervisors will understand the dynamics of power and presence to create a sacred space for ministers to 'come apart and reflect a while'. This covenant relationship creates transformational possibilities for those who commit to the journey.

GROUP SUPERVISION • PASTORAL SUPERVISION • PRESENCE • POWER •
SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP • SUPPORT FOR MINISTERS • PASTORAL
SUPPORT • MINISTER BURNOUT

Introduction

Paul Vitello reports in the *New York Times*:

Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could.¹

While this is an American report I believe a similar pattern is emerging in the United Kingdom. Daniel Sherman, from PastorBurnout.com, says:

Those in ministry feel they don't know where to turn when they have a family or personal conflict or issue. They feel unable to meet the needs of the job. They report severe stress causing anguish, worry, bewilderment, anger, depression, fear, and alienation. They would leave the ministry if they had somewhere else to go or some other vocation they could do. Congregations don't know or understand the nature of pastoral stress.²

My own personal journey as a minister, now in the Methodist Church in Ireland, holding responsibilities at local, national and international level, has convinced me that pastoral supervision can be a key instrument in developing greater resilience in ministers to effectively deal with the tasks and challenges they face.

In order to give meaning to the term 'supervision', I offer a well-captured explanation by Hawkins and Shohet followed by a definition from the Association of Pastoral Supervisors and Educators:

Supervision is a joint endeavour in which a practitioner, with the help of a supervisor, attends to their clients, themselves as part of their client/practitioner relationships and the wider systemic context, and by so doing improves the quality of their work, transforms their client relationships, continuously develops themselves, their practice and the wider profession.³

Pastoral supervision offers pastoral workers a retreat from the demands of their responsibilities where resourcing and reflection

can occur within a regular, planned, intentional, bounded space. It provides a safe place where pastoral workers can be supported and challenged to become the best practitioners they can be for the benefit of the people they serve.⁴

In this article, I explore two key issues that influence and affect attaining a supervisory space that is both sacred and safe for those who participate in pastoral supervision. As I have reviewed, engaged and reflected on the discourses within the literature concerning the purpose and process of pastoral supervision, I found little is said about presence and even less about the dynamics of power. In my experience, these crucial elements of presence and power within the supervisory relationship are not often reflected on, acknowledged or openly addressed, but they exist and influence the individuals involved in both a conscious and a subconscious way. The existence of these dynamics can affect the processes of communication, vulnerability and transparency, which in turn can determine the depth of the trusting relationship and consequently affect the supervisory experience and benefit. This article investigates how a deeper knowledge of these two elements within pastoral supervision could enhance and develop the supervisory experience as a transformational encounter for those involved, which will better support the ministers concerned and equip them to face the challenges in the Church today.

This article reveals the qualitative data from the findings of a research questionnaire, which was compiled and distributed for the purpose of exploring, recording, analysing and drawing conclusions about the significance of presence and power within the supervisory relationship. Six Methodist ministers, who each took part in one of two supervision groups, and who had not previously experienced pastoral supervision, took part in this empirical study. After participating in supervision for a period of two years, they were asked to complete the questionnaire. They were asked how the elements of presence and power might enhance and develop the supervisory experience, or distract and obstruct meaningful pastoral supervision. The findings of the questionnaire were collated to determine what factors of presence and power might assist in making pastoral supervision productive, safe and desirable.

The author guidelines of the journal *Reflective Practice* provide a framework to promote critical reflection on formation and supervision in ministry in various contexts and from diverse Christian traditions. The guidelines state:

Good practice relies on ongoing reflection. The capacity for critical self-reflection is an essential dimension of any habitus for ministry and religious leadership. Pastoral Supervision is itself a practice that occurs in relationships that encourages such critical reflection in ministry.⁵

I undertook this research as part of my own reflective practice and offer its results for publication in the hope that it will contribute to the reflective development of clergy supervision in other contexts. Having been supervised and having offered supervision myself for a period of almost 40 years, within different contexts, I am convinced that a central and crucial element of effective supervision is the supervisory relationship. Rogers states that a deep human encounter lies at the centre of all helping relationships, commenting, 'If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur.'⁶ I have found that, for some, engagement in supervision presents a scenario of personal exposure and accountability which makes them feel threatened and unable to participate. In my experience of initiating voluntary pastoral supervision groups among clergy there was an unwillingness to engage in supervision by 20 per cent of those invited. This may be for many different reasons, not least trust, confidentiality, cultural identity and personality influences. The perception and use of power, together with the influence of presence, are the two factors further discussed in this article.

My thesis is that supervision is influenced by the sense of safe presence, that is itself influenced by perceived or real power within the dynamics of the supervisory relationship. In order to examine my thesis about the effect of presence and power in the supervisory relationship, I took a practical approach consisting of an empirical study of the topic, using a questionnaire to collect insights from a sample group. The participants were all ordained Methodist ministers from Ireland, who were colleagues who volunteered for group pastoral supervision. The purpose of the questionnaire was to record, analyse and attempt to draw conclusions about the significance of presence and power within the supervisory relationship and what assists to make it productive, safe and desirable. The questions were designed to be open-ended, and were intended to give the participants the opportunity to explore their perceptions of these two elements, without any prejudice or leading. This article had its beginnings in a Doctor of Professional Studies in Practical Theology through

the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester. As such, the research proposal and ethical permission for the questions and evaluation thereof were monitored through the university. The questions are attached in an appendix.

Pastoral supervision in ministry

As the term 'supervision' is fraught with confusion and misunderstanding, I commence with a broad overview of the concept and a specific explanation, as it applies to my field of research for this article. If one reflects upon it, supervision is received by us in one form or another throughout our whole lives: parental supervision, educational supervision, work supervision, professional supervision, and so on. Feinberg says that 'the term supervision falls victim to ... death by a thousand qualifications'.⁷ Supervision conjures up the notion of oversight, seniority, greater experience and more responsibility. There is often a connection between supervision and power over a person who is less experienced and in need of monitoring, evaluation and control. There are times when this is necessary or even essential. Pohly comments on this notion: 'Supervision is a term that is loaded with baggage ... It suggests a hierarchy of superiority/inferiority and dredges up threatening associations with the past.'⁸ Yet supervision, helpfully understood and practised, can have profound effects on those who participate and can lead to life-changing outcomes, both personally and in the workplace.

Carroll says, 'Supervision has been around for over a century and in that time it has developed substantially.'⁹ While this may be true within the professional caring industry, in my experience this is not the case in formal pastoral supervision within the Church.

According to Pohly, the theological and biblical roots of supervision are planted in the covenant concept of Hebrew/Christian tradition.¹⁰ God's covenant with Israel was one of promise and response. God offered life with a condition of accountability: 'I will make of you a great nation' (Gen 12:2) and 'you shall keep my covenant' (Gen 17:9).

Accountability and support for the safe and authentic practice of Christian ministry is an essential part of our Christian DNA and is necessary for accountability to God, self and others. There have been several initiatives in launching supervision in the Christian environment generally, and within the

Methodist Church in Ireland and Britain specifically. As early as 1999, the Methodist Church in Britain was advocating supervisory practice as an essential part of the practice of ordained presbyters.

In 2015, as a result of recommendation 7 of the Courage, Cost and Hope report on the Past Cases Review, it was agreed that 'a system of structured supervision for ministers be instituted to address the identified weakness in relation to accountability and support in terms of safe practice'.¹¹ This process is currently working through a pilot project.

The Methodist Church in Ireland began supervision training for its superintendent ministers responsible for supervising probation ministers in 2011, which has produced fruitful engagements and normalised the experience of giving and receiving supervision. However, pastoral supervision has not been officially extended to all ordained ministers as yet.

The Association of Pastoral Supervisors and Educators (APSE), founded in 2009, has been particularly proactive in promoting high standards of pastoral supervision. Part of their vision is:

- to provide a system of accreditation for pastoral supervisors and educators in pastoral supervision
- to support initiatives in the training of pastoral supervisors
- to foster groups for the support, accountability and continuing development of pastoral supervisors
- and to encourage conversation among the various traditions and contexts of pastoral supervision and pastoral supervision education.¹²

However, despite these efforts, there is still a failure to adequately support those in ministry, or to create space for processing and resolving issues, at both a personal and an organisational level.

In this article, the supervision context is understood to be pastoral in nature and approached from a Christian viewpoint. Pastoral supervision is defined by the Association of Pastoral Supervisors and Educators as being a

regular, planned, intentional and boundaried space; with relationships characterised by trust, confidentiality, support and openness that gives the supervisees freedom and safety to explore

the issues arising in their work. It is spiritually and theologically rich work within a framework of understanding in dialogue with the supervisee's worldview and work. It is psychologically informed, contextually sensitive and praxis based. It is a way of growing in vocational identity, pastoral competence, self-awareness, pastoral interpretation, quality of presence, accountability, spiritual/theological reflection, response to challenge, and mutual learning; and attentive to the issue of fitness to practice.¹³

This definition lays out a helpful structure for a healthy and open pastoral supervisory relationship. I believe, however, the matter of exploring the 'issues arising in their work' should be consciously taken a step further. As proposed by Miller and Rollnick and Page and Wosket, supervision should create a safe space for internal processing and also be a partnership in which the supervisor and supervisee work together to draw forth the supervisee's own inner knowledge.¹⁴

This acknowledging of and working with the supervisee's interior knowledge and experience is of particular significance within pastoral supervision, which Holton calls the 'Intentional reflective practice that engenders transformative learning'.¹⁵ Its aim is

to widen the discussion from a factual base (what is happening) to a meaning-making process that helps us read the facts or make sense of the facts through adopting a spiritual stance of wonder, awe, mystery, stopping, critical reflection, wisdom, contemplation, and stillness.¹⁶

Thus the term 'pastoral supervision' refers not to supervision specifically for pastors or ministers, but rather the term refers to the pastoral approach within the supervision. Following the pastoral example of Christ, called the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11), pastoral supervision implies an encounter that practises a caring attitude and a peaceful presence, necessitating a careful use of power to create a safe space and spiritual openness. Pohly affirms this when he speaks of 'Christ's own oversight and shepherding'.¹⁷

Presence in the pastoral supervisory relationship

Presence can mean different things to different people. While the comments included here were given by the respondents who took part in group supervision, it is recognised that many of the aspects mentioned could be transferrable to the context of one-to-one pastoral supervision.

Respondents mentioned that effective supervision occurred when those involved were 'intentionally meeting for a singular purpose' and were 'willing to participate and share'. What is evidenced here is the need for participants in supervision to be clear about the purpose of their meeting.

A key aspect of pastoral supervision, which was appreciated by one respondent, is the presence of others who hold similar understanding of ministry. Even within a comparatively homogenous group of ministers from the same denomination, diversity must be taken into account, including gender, marital status, sexual orientation, age, place of origin, and the individual background and context within which each person was raised.

One respondent also noted that the supervisory dynamic itself takes on its own identity: 'The relationship can develop its own "personality" and can proceed at its own pace according to the needs and inclinations of those involved.' A similar comment described 'a kind of "energy transfer" between people who are keenly in tune with one another'.

The respondents indicated the benefits of pastoral supervision, understood through the lens of 'presence'. I have chosen to quote their actual words, since these give some sense of the significance, depth and multifaceted dimensions of their understanding of the supervision encounter:

- 'The presence of each other – to give encouragement and accountability.'
- 'This heightened alertness embraces the relationship with the other members present and enables me to focus more intently on the role and value in this encounter. There is also a sense in which the words of the other people assume a stronger resonance as they come under closer and more focused scrutiny.'
- 'We were there to focus on each other, and nothing else ... through the gentle, sensitive probing of others, these issues were clarified, sometimes simplified, sometimes made easier to address for the person in question. The "presence" of others allows different perspectives to be considered.'

“Presence” can be a two-way process – it is as we listen to others, issues in our lives can become clearer.’

Thompson captures something of this dynamic experience when he says that ‘a rigorous exploration is undertaken to discover how a theological perspective may illuminate, interrogate and suggest alternative ways of acting, in a process that also sheds new light on that theological perspective.’¹⁸

Respondents’ comments also indicated that they experienced their peers in the group as ‘there for them’, and that their presence communicated ‘love, fellowship and support’. This is central to a meaningful supervisory experience in which one can hear oneself think: ‘Each other person there with a sensitivity to one another enables it to be an easy environment in which to speak.’ This quality of presence within pastoral supervision creates a thinking environment that can be very different to that which is common in our culture, or even within many church interactions. Our Western culture is one that tends to emphasise: ‘Think the way others are thinking. Think to impress. Think to avoid ridicule. Think to get a promotion. Think to out-manoeuvre.’¹⁹ Even if the ‘thinking’ is not as obviously a ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality, as described by Kline, ministerial inclination can often be to ‘rescue’ the other. In contrast, the pastoral supervisory experience, as mentioned in these quotes by supervisees, is a different and more helpful way of encountering one another: ‘Our desire, with the best intentions, to provide a solution to an issue can blind us to the fact that a colleague needs help and space to find his/her own solution.’ This is described by one respondent as ‘having the “presence” of mind to resist offering what one thinks is the answer but more importantly helping them to find the answer in themselves; often with pertinent questions’.

The value of pertinent questions, identified by the respondent, is amplified by Davys and Beddoe, who comment, ‘Supervision is about asking questions which in turn lead to more questions. This develops learning, which is not necessarily about answers.’²⁰ This process relies upon the awareness and listening skills of the group members, as expressed by one respondent: ‘Presence ... takes effort, particularly to listen, as we’re used to waiting for the gap in conversation and giving our opinions.’

Pastoral supervision is an opportunity for the participants to develop the practice of becoming more consciously present to themselves, to their thoughts, their emotions and physical responses, and to their own inner experience, using all their senses – listening, sight, and so on, to engage with the other. Silsbee defines presence as a ‘state of awareness, in the moment,

characterized by the felt experience of timelessness, connectedness and a larger truth.²¹ This heightened attention benefits not only the individual but also the group process, as one respondent commented, 'the more present the person, the more they take in.'

The responses to a question about the concept of being present to oneself and others were particularly rich, and are quoted verbatim here:

- 'Being "fully present" the giving of time, genuine attention, thought, prayer etc – in a word, love.'
- 'Being present in a physical sense, aware of where I am.'
- 'Being intentional in laying aside of all other distractions and applying concentration.'
- 'Being engaged – your body can be there but mind absent – and fully "there". Being present ... means listening, being willing to participate and share.'
- 'Being present means giving oneself wholly (as wholly as is possible.)'
- 'Being aware of the importance of this particular moment in time ... heightened alertness to this context.'

One response indicated that choosing to be fully present can deepen empathy: 'We try to imagine how we would feel and how we would act if we found ourselves in that situation.' The benefit to self of the pastoral supervisory process was described by another respondent as a 'sense of assurance, well-being and deep down sense of peace'. This empowering experience, which is both exemplified and facilitated by a competent supervisor, is expressed in one respondent's metaphor: 'We should, perhaps, think of ourselves as midwives – we assist others to give birth to solutions!'

This metaphor gives some indication of the process of pastoral supervision, where the answers lie within oneself, and other group members assist in bringing these awarenesses, clarifications and alternative perspectives into consciousness.

Another metaphor that may be helpful in comprehending the experience of pastoral supervision is that of the journey to the promised land, which Brueggemann termed an 'ongoing pilgrimage'.²² This was a journey experienced in company with others. In the words of one respondent, 'The

presence of others enables us to learn from the perspectives of each other. It helps me to appreciate that whatever I am going through is not necessarily as uncommon as I might otherwise have perceived it to be.' In other words, pastoral supervision is an opportunity to explore territory that one has not explored before, to travel intimately alongside others sharing not only the conversation and the nurture but also the beauty, the silences, the challenges and the discomforts, while all the time having a sense of a distant destination that is not yet in sight.

While the pastoral supervision group journeys as a community, there is also an individual response. Such individual responses are also recorded throughout Judeo-Christian history. Each story of the Bible is also 'an account of human response'.²³ One respondent commented upon this human struggle to respond: 'Sometimes the Power of God's Spirit confirms ... [the] decision you should take, and this realisation can be unsettling and uncomfortable.'

This brings us to another aspect of presence in the pastoral encounter: the presence of God. It is to be noted that a number of different expressions of Divine Presence were given by members of the two groups of clergy participating in this research, when asked to articulate their understanding of presence. Whereas one respondent suggested 'something more akin to energy and enablement', others referred very directly to a personal presence, using the terms 'Jesus', 'Christ', 'God' and 'Spirit'. Research respondents indicated the intention of the group was to 'meet together in Jesus' name' with 'the Presence of Christ in their midst'. There was also an acknowledgement of Jesus as 'the Lord of the Church' and that we 'meet as his church and sit under his ultimate authority, in all we say and do'. In one group the lighting of a candle was offered as a symbol, 'indicating and inviting the Presence of God. It was expected from that moment on our minds were being guided by God, whose desire for us all is peace.' Several respondents expressed their understanding of the perceived purpose of this Divine Presence: 'to guide, influence, encourage, reassure and stimulate'; 'help shape the discussion and the spirit in which it is conducted'; 'illuminate things and brings clarity, leading to appropriate responses'; and be a Presence, 'creating feelings and emotions, influencing opinions and decisions taken'. Others referred to the benefit of this Presence as a 'sense of assurance, well-being and a deep-down sense of peace that God is ultimately in control', and 'God is very present in the silent reflection and spaces, or pauses, which are integral to meaningful pastoral supervision'. This Presence also 'brings the right perspective and order to the gathering'.

As observed by one respondent, 'The Presence of God is vital to the dynamic of supervision.' The experience of Divine Presence within the pastoral supervisory relationship is underpinned by the truth and promise of the 'one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Eph 4:6). God's presence is not only found in the mystical and invisible but also in the way in which the group members are present to each other and witness each other's experience. A parallel experience can be seen in Jesus' encouragement to his disciples: 'Let us go off by ourselves to some place where we will be alone and you can rest a while' (Mk 6:31). He models the need not only for acts of kindness within community but also for an opportunity to draw apart to reflect with one another and to be still to hear God.

What is essential, despite the different terminology used to express the sense of Divine Presence, is the way group members encounter one another as they share their own 'history', as articulated by Ballard: 'God is present "by, with and under" the historical reality of the creature. History itself can thus be sacramental, the place of meeting with the divine.'²⁴ There is in pastoral supervision the opportunity to see and reflect the compassion of Jesus. Edward Schillebeeckx reminds us that 'human encounter with Jesus is, therefore, the sacrament of encounter with God.'²⁵

When pastoral supervision is an encounter with God, through God, in God and one another in the spirit of love, God is at work. The Apostle John affirms, 'No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us' (1 Jn 4:12). God's love in us becomes the transformational agent for the other's growth and well-being.

As already discussed, the pastoral supervisory process creates a sense of 'pilgrimage', and at the personal level there may be a parallel with Christ's journey to crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. This can be understood as a need to 'die' to old habits and mindsets in order to enable a new and different way of being. This is an ongoing journey that will take a lifetime to accomplish.

All bring our own expertise and experiences, our prejudices and ignorance to the process ... and need to work through them, perhaps unlearn them, so that they do not get in the way and suppress the voice of the Spirit. We also have to be open to learn new things about ourselves, about God, about the world, that can either be exciting or fascinating or, perhaps, fearsome and difficult. It is necessary to work through them and come out the other side.²⁶

The pastoral supervision journey can provide fellow pilgrims who offer helpful support and accompaniment during the joys and challenges of ministry.

Despite the many benefits mentioned above, it is important to note that there may be concerns about how the psychological safety of the supervision experience could be compromised if boundaries are crossed. Depending on the nature of the relationship between the people involved, it can sometimes be uncomfortable to be under such close scrutiny. Disclosure does not come easily to everyone and there may be occasions when some invisible but significant line may be unhelpfully crossed.

We build relationships through the quality of presence. For those who are in Christian ministry, the supervisory relationship is determined by both the presence of God and the presence of human encounters, both with self and others. Meaningful presence is determined by effective boundaries, which are themselves reliant on the wise use of power. Thus the issue of power within pastoral supervision needs to be reflected upon to ensure that neither the presence of the Divine, nor the presence of each participant, nor the dynamics of the group itself, is clouded or contaminated.

Power in the pastoral supervisory relationship

An understanding of power in the pastoral supervisory relationship is 'better explored than ignored',²⁷ because, as put bluntly by Morgan, 'Power influences who gets what, when and how.'²⁸ Power can be defined simply as 'the medium through which conflicts of interest are ultimately resolved'.²⁹ I propose that the quality of presence may be helpfully established or contaminated by the use or misuse of power, a link which I seek to clarify here.

This ever-present yet mostly invisible element, termed 'power', needs to be understood and acknowledged for successful pastoral supervision to take place. The role of the supervisor, and his or her understanding and use of power, is essential to developing the most helpful interaction. The use of power modelled within pastoral supervision may well impact the way the minister uses power within the Church. 'Powerlessness ... tends to breed bossiness rather than true leadership. In large organizations ... it is powerlessness that often creates ineffective desultory management and petty, dictatorial, rules-minded managerial styles.'³⁰ Benefiel and Holton advocate that 'the goal [in supervision] is always critical reflection and professional growth, not power or

control. The problem with power and control in the supervisory relationship, as elsewhere, is that it does not circulate; it tends to accumulate, to become increasingly asymmetric.³¹ In light of these difficulties, how can power be exercised properly, especially within pastoral supervision for the purpose of ministerial growth and accountability?

Power in the Church is an interesting and sometimes confusing concept. We seek and trust in the power of God (Eph 6:10–11). We are living in the age of the Spirit, whose power draws out and leads to the completion of what Jesus began (Acts 1:8; Jn 14:25–26). In relation to power, the New Testament writings identify a set of functions for the oversight of the first Christian congregations as the new covenant community:

Bishops were to 'take care of God's church' (1 Tim. 3:5); deacons were those who served (1 Tim. 3:13); and elders whom Paul had earlier called 'overseers', whose duty it was 'to shepherd the church of God' (Acts 20:28) were to exercise 'rule' over others (1 Tim. 5:17), though precautions were urged that they should 'tend the flock of God ... exercising the oversight ... with humility' (1 Pet 5:2–5).³²

However, 'power can often be considered a dirty word in church circles', state Leach and Paterson. 'A proper emphasis on servanthood in ministry can easily be confused with a refusal to name and exercise properly the power that the authorisation of the church confers and with which charismatic gifts are invested.'³³ Christian leaders have power, both divine and human, which is used in and through the church and the community of faith. A discerning spirit, and great wisdom, is required to know when to exercise power over others and when to empower; when to exercise God-given authority and when to make room for the power of God to move and inspire other individuals, groups and the community.

The notion of 'authority' is therefore inherent in the concept of power and its use. The common perception of authority is that it belongs to a person who has been given power to make and enforce decisions. It can also refer to someone who is an expert (authority) in a field (eg supervision). A clear understanding of the authority/power dynamic is crucial, because it affects the way pastoral supervision is offered and the ways in which those involved will relate to each other. In order to arrive at a greater understanding of the dynamics of power within the pastoral supervisory relationship, it is helpful to consider the five types of power identified by French and Raven: reward,

coercive, legitimate, expert and referent.³⁴ Johnston gives a succinct definition of these types of power, the first four of which he explains here:

Briefly, reward power is evident when the person with power has the capacity to offer a reward or benefit to the one they seek to influence. Coercive power exists when, rather than reward, punishment can be inflicted for failure to comply. Legitimate power involves situations in which a person believes that the one with power has a recognised right to exercise authority by virtue of the number of things including but not limited to cultural conditioning and social or organizational structures ... Expert power is grounded in knowledge, experience or ability that a particular person may have or have access to which is needed by others.³⁵

It is evident, from above, that some of these forms of power will not be helpful within a supervisory context, and that power needs to be wisely used. Manipulative, enforced or dominant power can negatively affect the pastoral supervisory relationship. The fifth type of power, referent power, which can be defined as the ability of a leader to cultivate the respect and admiration of his followers and lead by example,³⁶ is a helpful use of power in the supervision process.

Supervision provides the opportunity for the expert power of the supervisor to develop referent power within the supervisee/s: 'Referent power is not coercive or rewarding in nature, rather it is by virtue of the strength of association that power is transferred from one to another.'³⁷ Furthermore, Johnston proposes this 'referent power ... could well lead to the exercise of a more healthy power within the wider church context, which in turn can impact community at large.'³⁸

Alongside human power, divine power also needs to be recognised in the pastoral supervision encounter. Pastoral supervision within a ministerial context holds at its centre the belief that God is present, and ultimately holds the power, directs the activities, inspires the mind and heart, and brings about change. 'For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them' (Mt 18:20). One respondent remarked, 'The Power of God gives someone the courage to share, listen and respond appropriately to a pastoral situation. There can be a kind of "energy transfer" between people who are keenly in tune with God and one another.'

Respondents to the questionnaire identified that 'the power of God always enhances and develops the supervisory relationship' and that God is 'the source, the driver, the power of change and progress'. They used words such as 'energy' and 'enablement' to describe this power: the 'strength that comes from the Presence of God's Spirit'. One respondent stated, 'Sometimes the Power of God's Spirit confirms what we already know and what we should do.' Perhaps Brueggemann is following a similar thought when he states, 'Theological reflection is the training of the imagination so that we are freed to discern the Spirit and to let the Scripture, in all its maddening obscurity as well as glory, lead us where it will.'³⁹ He goes on to say that the Bible provides us with 'an alternative identity, an alternative way of understanding ourselves, an alternative way of relating to the world. It offers a radical and uncompromising challenge to our ordinary ways of self-understanding.'⁴⁰

The book of Hebrews declares, 'the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' (Heb 4:12). For those who are of like mind and spirit the use of Scripture can strongly inform attitudes, convictions and decisions and be a persuasive power in the transformational thinking.

Even with Christian leaders who seek to follow God, power dynamics introduce challenges and opportunities with regard to perceived and actual power. 'Power operates in the "in-between" spaces in contexts and relationships. Just as a leader cannot lead without followers, individuals and groups cannot exercise power independent of context and relationships.'⁴¹ Johnston notes, 'the interactions within the group influence the resultant contribution of each member.'⁴² Part of the role of the supervisor is 'to monitor and facilitate the development of the group and the way it relates, in particular this involves attention to power dynamics and group plot.'⁴³ 'Groups do not happen. They are all created and nurtured,' says Bolton.⁴⁴ The task at hand and the desired outcome should direct and influence the nature of presence and the practice of power. If there is an unwillingness to be present or no sense of spiritual encounter, or misplaced or misused power, by any in the supervisory relationship, it will undermine the essential elements of a sacred and safe space for all.

The issue of power naturally raises the issue of vulnerability. One respondent commented, 'Opening oneself to others makes one vulnerable. As human beings we are sometimes slow to do this – to give others "power" over us.'

Another respondent wanted to acknowledge 'the power of certain individuals due to their role/seniority in the church, and how this had potential to negatively influence the supervisory relationships'. For instance, a person's role might influence where a minister might be appointed in the future. Despite attempts to mitigate these concerns, it was mentioned that they were 'still lingering'. This raises the question as to whether a person who holds a position of authority over the supervisee/s can effectively fulfil the task of a pastoral supervisor, or whether there is a danger that the person's role could potentially obstruct or distort the supervisory relationship (and/or the group process).

Leach and Paterson emphasise that the team leader needs to be alert to the complexity of the dynamics of their own power.⁴⁵ The supervisor has the power to use or not to use his or her power as best suits the needs of the supervisee/s at that particular time in that particular context. Some sense of this is perhaps reflected in one respondent's comment: 'The power of the District Superintendent being the same as everyone else in the room as a non-enforcing presence of human power has great potential.'

Spoelstra and Pienaar state that 'only the strong can afford to be weak ... in fact, the strong, by being weak become even stronger'.⁴⁶ I suggest that an effective pastoral supervisor needs to embrace this 'weak power', which at times Jesus modelled, in order to create safety and space for their supervisees to experience self-examination and pastoral encounter. 'The Pastoral Supervisor is therefore always a powerful person and needs to be aware of that power and use it for good.'⁴⁷

However, power is not only an aspect of the authority attached to the position of an individual but can also be inherent in the nature and behaviour of any participant in pastoral supervision. Certain people hold more power because of their personality. Indeed, one person can have power over another even though their roles may be equal. This is important for the pastoral supervisor to recognise, since

to be trusted with the story of another is to be given power. The more honest and vulnerable a person is encouraged to be, the more powerful will be the interventions we make and the more important it becomes that we are in touch with what the Holy Spirit is doing and with the dimensions of our own personalities and experiences that are likely to get in the way.⁴⁸

To summarise, pastoral supervision raises the issue of power, especially where one of the individuals in the supervisory context holds a role of authority. Miller and Rollnick recommend a style which allows the supervisor to meet his or her professional responsibilities and at the same time create the space for supervisees to grow, learn and develop their unique ways of knowing and engaging within a range of work settings⁴⁹. What can make the supervisory relationship safer is the naming of power issues and, where necessary, clarifying dual roles. The supervisor needs to be explicit if it is necessary to evoke legitimate power within the situation. This covenant relationship, which we will discuss in a later section, enables the issue of power to be transparent. This leads us, therefore, to consider the important notion of boundaries in pastoral supervision.

Boundaries: the intrinsic link of presence and power

Whenever one is in the presence of another, power dynamics exist, and establishing and upholding mutually respectful boundaries is core to creating meaningful presence. A safe, secure and compassionate experience of the presence of the other, inviting the presence of God, is needed within pastoral supervision in order to enable being present to oneself – the opening of one's 'inner gate', not only to one's inner thoughts, but also to one's bodily reactions, emotions, anxieties, dreams, intuitions and vulnerabilities.

For such a level of safety to exist in the pastoral supervision relationship, clear boundaries are required. Ministers, like all human beings, are likely to cross boundaries inadvertently, even though being well intentioned. For instance, we are prone to telling others what they 'should' do or think and we attempt to assert power over the person's internal processing, rather than create the listening presence for the other person to hear their own wisdom. Issues of damaged boundaries are invariably linked to power being wielded inappropriately:

A helpful analogy in this regard is one's own skin – a flexible membrane that both protects one from infection and damage and contains that which is within. Without the boundary of our skin there would not be adequate containment for us or for others. It is interesting to note that when we cross the boundaries of appropriate social conduct, our metaphors of speech relate closely

to that of breaking the boundary of skin; we refer to a person 'being abrasive', of 'feeling wounded' or 'scarred'.⁵⁰

Appropriate boundaries are essential for the healthy functioning of the supervisory relationship, but when issues of power arise, helpful boundaries are at risk of being breached. The pastoral supervisor must encourage respectful boundaries, which keep all concerned adequately contained, for the benefit of the supervisory process and the supervisees. When all concerned in pastoral supervision are committed to holding such boundaries, the personal power of each individual is released. However, when one party ignores boundary needs, then both the safety of the relationship, and of the supervisee's personal power to create the change needed for self, are at risk. Personal power can be seen as the power to navigate one's emotional faculties in order to respond helpfully, rather than react, in all forms of communication. This personal power is the by-product of practising healthy boundaries, of knowing what is 'me' and 'my stuff' and what is not – what is 'you' and 'your stuff' – while remaining committed to the supervisory task at hand. When we empower others by practising healthy boundaries, we ourselves become empowered to be part of meaningful change. A description of such effectively boundaried space that allows for personal reflection and growth is captured in the 1 Corinthians 13 passage on love. We can easily give a nod to the wise counsel of this Scripture without reflecting on its pertinence in our own relationships. Within pastoral supervision, do we traverse boundaries by hurrying in with our solutions, or do we offer patience and love for the other to take as long as they need to 'hear themselves think' through the challenges they face? 'Love is not proud' – but do we 'dishonour' when we arrogantly propose solutions? Do we 'protect' the other person's reality? Do we 'trust' that the other will find their own path, when we compassionately and patiently listen without judgement? Whether in one-to-one or group supervision, the effective pastoral supervisor holds the boundaries, or at least ensures their immediate repair if breached, to retain the sacredness of this listening space.

Proverbs 25:28 states, 'Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.' The pastoral supervision covenant is an agreement to uphold helpful boundaries to ensure each person's emotional containment, which is essential for psychological well-being. An effectively boundaried supervisory space enables the supervisor and supervisees to 'stay in their own psychological skin' and not invade or damage the space and integrity of the other. By keeping within one's own boundaries, one is able to see the other

person's perspective, recognise one's own perspective (how life is within my skin) and leave the other free, yet supported, to make the choices they need to make for themselves. In this lies the power of pastoral supervision.

Kadushin emphasises that

the supervisor must accept, without defensiveness or apology, the authority and related power inherent in his [or her] position. Use of authority may sometimes be unavoidable. The supervisor can increase its effectiveness if he [or she] feels, and can communicate, a conviction in his [or her] behaviour.⁵¹

Pastoral supervision is a mutually respectful, collaborative approach, between supervisor and supervisee. However, within this setting there is no such thing as 'complete confidentiality'. If within the supervisory relationship something is disclosed that is unlawful, or of a nature that requires reporting, the supervisor is obliged to report such details, ideally in collaboration with the supervisee. The issue of confidentiality needs to be detailed in the working agreement before supervision begins.

The feedback from research respondents and relevant literature convinces me that pastoral supervision is a helpful practice, where the expert power is used to develop referent power. It provides a suitable and effective means of supporting leaders in ministry and establishes a way of interacting that encourages deeper listening skills, which leads to deeper respect, deeper understanding and greater self-discovery. This process invites the presence of God and evokes that presence to self and to others.

Implications

Despite the possibilities that supervision offers, or perhaps because of them, there has often been, in my experience, a resistance to the idea that ministers could significantly benefit from participating in pastoral supervision. Many think that it is intended only for those new into the ministry, or that attending pastoral supervision is a sign of weakness: that self-exposure will minimise their status and reveal their vulnerabilities. Others are concerned that, because of the confidential nature of their work, they cannot reveal or share, either about others or about themselves. Unless the pastoral supervisory space is proven to be safe and beneficial, those who are suspicious and guarded about a supervisory process that is unfamiliar to them will hesitate to venture in.

Feedback from the respondents in my research illustrates that the implications of power and presence need to be recognised and addressed, in order to create a safe, transformational, sacred space within the pastoral supervisory relationship. It is envisaged that as some ministers share their experience of the blessing of effective pastoral supervision, those who are reticent are likely to reconsider their viewpoint. The means of achieving this objective are varied but essential if pastoral supervision is to be successful. I propose that they include:

- A positive personal conviction of the need to participate in pastoral supervision.
- A commitment to a covenant relationship of quality.
- An appreciation of the vital role of the pastoral supervisor.

The importance of personal conviction

When one considers attendance of pastoral supervision, the issue of whether attendance was instigated by personal conviction or by the mandatory requirement of an institution (ie, in this case, the Church) has interesting implications. Personal arrangement gives one the opportunity to be voluntarily involved, to choose one's own pastoral supervisor or supervisory group, to influence the agenda and to hold one's own sense of personal power. By contrast, the institutional requirement of supervision is frequently identified – whether justifiably or not – with mentoring or line management. Such supervision often has the institution's needs for productivity, control and outcomes at its centre and is often guided towards those ends. While these goals are necessary for the successful running of an institution they often fail to meet the deeper personal needs of those being supervised.

I contend that there is need for pastoral supervision in the Church that attends to those personal needs, because if the minister does not have the support he or she requires, he or she may be prone to burnout or disillusionment, leading to ineffective work, potentially creating more conflict issues within the community and greater risk of health challenges that would impact productivity or could even lead to resignation. The needs of the institution are better served when its members have the professional support that can contribute towards their self-motivation and commitment, empowering them towards achieving their desired goals, including their personal well-being. Thus,

the Church ought to be actively promoting and financially supporting ministers to receive pastoral supervision, while also giving them a degree of flexibility in choosing how it might take place.

Commitment to covenant relationship

To achieve the balance of power that is required for the delicate and yet potent work of pastoral supervision, the creation of a supervisory covenant is essential. Such a covenant is similar but not identical to a contract. According to Pyle and Seal, covenants and contracts have common elements, but also significant differences:

Contracts are based on responsibility; covenants are based on relationships. Contracts define boundaries and bind, covenants provide for growth and becoming. Contracts are legalistic and enforceable; covenants focus on accountability and redemption ... covenant is intentional. It grows out of our relationship with God. God's covenant with us colours and shapes our understanding of our covenanting with each other. It provides structure for relationships, with God and others.⁵²

In biblical terms and in Christian practice the term 'covenant' is used to describe a mutual agreement of structure and accountability. Pastoral supervision, according to Pohly, affirms the relational nature of the covenant between God and people, which has as its objective, 'the well-being and mission of an entire nation.'⁵³

This covenant relationship that exists between God and self enables those in Christian service to exercise the same covenantal relationship with each other. Hawkins and Shohet state:

Supervision is a joint endeavour in which a practitioner [minister], with the help of a supervisor, attends to their clients [parishioners], themselves as part of their client practitioner [parishioner-minister] relationships and the wider systemic context, and by so doing improves the quality of their work, transforms their client [pastoral] relationships, continuously develops themselves, their practice and the wider profession.⁵⁴

The supervisory covenant creates the context and purpose for pastoral supervision, explores the goals of this 'pilgrimage' and consensually determines how it is managed.

In the Methodist Church in Britain's Supervision Policy, it states that the 'Methodist model of supervision ... be an expression of our covenant relationship with the Conference'. The aims of supervision are *normative*, *formative* and *restorative*, and they are 'to ensure that the vocation and work of the minister is valued and nurtured and ensure that health and well-being issues for ministers are addressed'.⁵⁵

However, attending to the supervision covenant is not simply an institutional responsibility, but also demands an explicit personal responsibility. This ensures that the framework of health and well-being which is being nurtured through pastoral supervision is personal to the minister.

The vital role of the pastoral supervisor

The professionalism, training and insightful skills of the pastoral supervisor are essential to the effectiveness of the supervisory process. Leach and Paterson remind us that 'to sit with someone as their supervisor is to be in a position of power ... Awareness of the power you have and how to use it for the good of those you work with is an essential dimension of all Christian practices'.⁵⁶ Unless the supervisor gives attention to creating referent power, thus facilitating a meaningful presence to self, to group and to God's Spirit, the much-needed benefits of pastoral supervision are unlikely to be achieved. Hawthorne asserts that there may be times when the supervisor abdicates or manipulates power. She states: 'With the role of supervisor comes the responsibility to be aware of your own power and learn ways of utilising this power in ways that are: appropriate, well intentioned, anti-oppressive and sensitive to the particular background of the supervisee'.⁵⁷

The effective pastoral supervisor has an awareness of how crossing boundaries and mishandling power affects the sense of presence in the supervisory relationship, obstructing or contaminating the potential work of the supervisees. As Benefiel and Holton state, 'supervision is always alert to the issues of equality, to the call to respect deep democracy and its many voices, to be open to change in perspectives'.⁵⁸ The supervisor, in order to effect greater presence to self, to others and to the issue at hand, requires the ability to recognise and call to attention those thought patterns that are blocking progress: 'Supervisors are

challenged to enhance the quality and depth of the supervisory conversation by making the questioning of assumptions a contextual necessity.⁵⁹

While there is discussion regarding the inherent, asymmetrical power balance in the pastoral supervisory space, it could be helpful to further explore whether this issue with power has less to do with the tasks of supervision and more to do with the attitude and skill of the supervisor. As observed by Weld:

Key to enabling the transformative function in supervision is the supervisory relationship, which should be built on a foundation of openness and honesty, providing a working partnership that models respect, care, empathy, careful use of humour, challenge and holistic recognition of the worker as a professional being.⁶⁰

It is important to note that the work of an effective pastoral supervisor is in itself challenging and that it should be required of the supervisor also to be receiving supervision, as advocated by Leach and Paterson.⁶¹ Supervisors themselves require a reflective space to ensure that the crucial elements of presence and power are understood and effectively managed, in order to create a pastoral supervisory process that generates a healthy, transformative, reflective space for others.

Conclusion

Daniel Sherman asks the question:

Where does a pastor go when he is discouraged, when he is burned out, or when he is facing challenges in his congregation? If he turns to his church leaders he risks sharing information that is very personal and perhaps hurtful. If he tells people in his congregation, it may be misunderstood or even used as a weapon against the pastor. So where can he or she go? Where does a pastor go when the church or congregation is the problem?⁶²

This article has shown that professional pastoral supervision is an essential and beneficial practice for those in ministry and for the wider Church. It is an area that needs to be developed and 'normalised' in the lives of those who respond to this vocation.

I propose that training of pastoral supervisors needs not only to include the skillset required but also to explore the issues of power in creating a mutually

respectful presence and sacred space. This way of being present to ourselves and to the other is only possible when we shift our mindset, including the language we use, from one of hierarchy to one of collaboration.

This collaborative approach is endorsed by Benefiel, who identifies the need of an organisation to provide an environment where there is congruence between work and our moral/ethical values and family responsibilities, in which everyone is treated justly:

people can find meaning, significance and success through work, and where personal and workplace values align to greater outward harmony and inner spiritual life ... to grow holistically and build relationships themselves while they are serving.⁶³

She also notes that when these factors are in place it 'improves care'. Christian care, by its nature, is to bear one another's burdens, give preference to one another in honour and do good to all people. In the name of Christ, in ministry and mission, we love one another and build one another up (Gal 6:2; Rom 12:10; Gal 6:10; 1 Thess 5:11).

To achieve this vital improvement, the various aspects that determine effective pastoral supervision, including presence and power, require adequate reflection. Such reflection is imperative to creating a safe, open, authentic and trusting environment within the pastoral supervisory relationship, which in turn has the potential to impact the ministers' personal well-being and their greater sphere of influence, including family, church and community. Pastoral supervision also creates an awareness of the importance of maintaining healthy boundaries, which help each person to navigate the issues of power and presence successfully.

Pastoral supervision not only improves one's quality of work, but also enables the supervisee to reflect on how to create balance, as different boundaries are negotiated. This healthy balance attends to the time given to relationship with parishioners, colleagues, family and friends, as well as to other aspects such as professional and private life; it also attends to the boundaries between home and ministry, and the balance between administrative tasks, ministry, pastoral duties, study and personal well-being. Balance created through pastoral supervision includes the creation of time and space for one's own spirituality, connecting the supervisee with Divine presence and power, which in turn empowers healthy ministry within the people of God.

Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE

This research questionnaire is intended to explore, record, analyse and attempt to draw conclusions regarding the significance of Presence and Power within the Supervisory Relationship.

Please answer the following questions, bearing in mind your thoughts and experiences when you first engaged in Group Supervision, and having now experienced Supervision.

Please answer the following questions. It should take about 40 minutes and there are 10 questions. The information will be used to compile an evaluation on these elements of Supervision and the results will be used in an article on this subject.

Your views are an important part of this exploration, and as such your honest opinions are valuable.

Each question should be limited to a maximum of 200 words.

A. The Effect of 'Presence' in the Supervisory Relationship

- A1. What do you understand by the term 'Presence' in Supervision? (Give as many understandings of 'Presence' as possible.)
- A2. Having defined your understanding of 'Presence', what are some of the elements of 'Presence' that you have recognised in Group Supervision?
- A3. In what ways do these elements of 'Presence', that you have identified in question A2, enhance and develop the Supervisory Relationship?
- A4. In what ways do these elements of 'Presence', that you have identified in question A2, distract or obstruct the Supervisory Relationship?
- A5. Any other comments/suggestions about the issue of 'Presence' that you would like to offer?

B. The Effect of 'Power' in the Supervisory Relationship

- B1. What do you understand by the term 'Power' in Supervision? (Give as many understandings of 'Power' as possible.)
- B2. Having defined your understanding of 'Power', what are some of the elements of 'Power' that you have recognised in Group Supervision?
- B3. In what ways do these elements of 'Power', that you have identified in question B2, enhance and develop the Supervisory Relationship?
- B4. In what ways do these elements of 'Power', that you have identified in question B2, distract or obstruct the Supervisory Relationship?
- B5. Any other comments, suggestions about the issue of 'Power' within Supervision that you would like to offer?

Notes

- 1. Vitello 2010.
- 2. Sherman 2010.
- 3. Hawkins and Shohet 2012, p. 5.
- 4. Association of Pastoral Supervisors and Educators (APSE) 2015.
- 5. *Reflective Practice* 2013.
- 6. Rogers 1961, p. 33.
- 7. Feinberg 1968, p. 46.
- 8. Pohly 1993, p. 2.
- 9. Carroll 2007, p. 34.
- 10. Pohly 1993, p. 9.
- 11. Methodist Church in Britain 2013–15, p. 41.
- 12. APSE 2015.
- 13. APSE 2015.
- 14. Miller and Rollnick 2013, p. 15; Page and Wosket 2001, p. 103.
- 15. Holton 2010, p. 197.
- 16. Benefiel and Holton 2010, pp. viii–ix.
- 17. Pohly 1993, p. 10.
- 18. Thompson 2008, p. 27.
- 19. Kline 1999, p. 31.
- 20. Davys and Beddoe 2010, p. 239.
- 21. Silsbee 2008, p. 21.
- 22. Brueggemann 2001, p. 10.
- 23. Ballard 2011, p. 38.

24. Ballard 2011, p. 38.
25. Schillerbeeckx 1963, p. 15.
26. Ballard 2011, p. 45.
27. Hawkins and Shohet 2012, p. 122.
28. Morgan 1997, p. 170.
29. Morgan 1997, p. 170.
30. Kanter 2001, p. 343.
31. Benefiel and Holton 2010, p. 138.
32. Pohly 1993, p. 10.
33. Leach and Paterson 2010, p. 138.
34. French and Raven 2001, p. 321.
35. Johnston 2004, p. 11.
36. Study.com 2016.
37. Johnston 2004, p. 11.
38. Johnston 2004, p. 16.
39. Brueggemann 2001, p. 37.
40. Brueggemann 2001, p. 10.
41. McGraw Hill Small Group Communications.
42. Johnston 2004, p. 87.
43. Leach and Paterson 2010, p. 163.
44. Bolton 2005, p. 204.
45. Leach and Paterson 2010, p. 164.
46. Spoelstra and Pienaar 1999, p. 131.
47. Leach and Paterson 2010, p. 138.
48. Leach and Paterson 2010, p. 138.
49. Miller and Rollnick 2013, p. 5.
50. Mullally 2016.
51. Kadushin 1992, p. 112.
52. Pyle and Seal 1995, p. 50.
53. Pohly 1993, p. 10.
54. Hawkins and Shohet 2012, p. 5.
55. Methodist Church in Britain 2015.
56. Leach and Paterson 2010, p. 4.
57. Hawthorne 1975, p. 179.
58. Benefiel and Holton 2010, p. 138.
59. Benefiel and Holton 2010, p. 138.
60. Weld 2012, p. 130.
61. Leach and Paterson 2010, p. 164.
62. Sherman 2010.
63. Benefiel 2005, p. 150.

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Why four Gospels? Why only four?

James Dunn

PROFESSOR JIMMY DUNN is Lightfoot Professor Emeritus of Divinity at the University of Durham, and a Methodist local preacher. His many books include a three-volume history of the first 120 years of the faith (*Christianity in the Making* trilogy), and commentaries on Romans, Galatians, and Colossians and Philemon.

j.d.g.dunn@btopenworld.com
Chichester, UK

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Why four Gospels? Why only four? These were not questions which troubled John Wesley. For him a more pressing question was how to relate the gospel and the law: whether the law should always be preached first, to make an audience conscious of their sin and need, prior to the preaching of the gospel.¹ But 'Why four Gospels?' and 'Why only four?' are questions that need to be asked today – and given a firm and clear answer.

The questions arise because we know that there were more than four Gospels written in early Christianity. J. K. Elliott, in his collection of documents making up *The Apocryphal New Testament*,² lists what some may regard as an amazing collection, including: the Jewish-Christian Gospels (the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, the *Gospel of the Nazaraeans*, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*), as well as the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and *The Preaching of Peter*. He adds various fragments of Gospels on papyrus. Then he lists a sequence of 'Birth and Infancy Gospels', including *The Protevangelium of James* and *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, followed by 'Gospels of the Ministry and Passion', including the *Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Peter*. He concludes Part I of his collection with a sequence of texts under the heading 'The Pilate Cycle'.

Wilhelm Schneemelcher's collection³ is still more elaborate, adding the *Gospel of Philip* and a variety of Gnostic Gospels, like *The Gospel of Truth*, the *Pistis Sophia*, and other Gospels attributed to the Apostles as a group, or under the name of an Apostle, or under the names of holy women, or attributed to an arch-heretic like Cerinthus or Marcion. We could add, for example, the *Dialogue of the Saviour* and the *Apocryphon of James*, not to mention the fairly recently discovered *Gospel of Judas* and the controversial *Secret Mark*.

So it is clear that our questions have point. Given that there were so many Gospels written in the first two centuries, why did historical Christianity limit the canonical Gospels to four? Why only four? Let me begin by setting the scene towards the end of the second century.

Irenaeus settles the issue

It has to be admitted that the issue in the second half of the second century was not as finalised as we might like to think. The credit for finalising the issue can be accorded to Irenaeus. In his great *Against Heresies*, he states definitively:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world

in which we live, and four principal winds ... it is fitting that she (the Church) should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh.

He goes on to give his famous identifications: of Matthew as a lion 'symbolizing His [Jesus'] effectual working, His leadership, and royal power'; of Mark, 'like a calf, signifying His sacrificial and sacerdotal order'; of Luke, who 'had, as it were, the face as of a man – an evident description of His advent as a human being'; and John 'like a flying eagle, pointing out the gift of the Spirit hovering with his wings over the Church' (*adv. haer.* III.11.8).

How was it that Irenaeus could be so emphatic on the point that there are only four Gospels worthy of consideration? He certainly knew of other views on the matter and devotes his major work to refuting them. But should we be so dismissive of these others? In several cases we do not have a copy of the text itself, only some scattered allusions and fragments – the Jewish-Christian Gospels being a significant case in point. Others, like the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Truth*, draw on some Jesus tradition but have clearly been heavily influenced by Gnostic views – as evident, for example, in the *Gospel of Truth's* repeated emphasis on knowledge, as bringing enlightenment to those shrouded in a fog, lost in ignorance and darkness, drunk or sunk in a sleep. They show how the early Jesus tradition was elaborated by what became a strong second-century movement of thought which we generally put under the heading of Gnosticism, whose characteristic features cannot be traced back to Jesus. The opening words of the *Gospel of Judas* – 'the secret revelatory discourse in which Jesus spoke with Judas Iscariot for eight days, three days before he celebrated Passover' (*Judas* 33:1–6) – are typical of a message which cannot claim to be drawn from earlier Jesus tradition and can only attribute its teaching to Jesus by claiming that it was given secretly.⁴

The fact that so many of these documents were retained and are accessible to us only through the quotations and references made by Church Fathers probably tells its own story: that none of these documents made a wide and sustained appeal in the early centuries, in each case being treasured by only a few. The most interesting of them is the *Gospel of Thomas*, discovered in a complete form as part of the Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in 1945–46. This contained a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, without narrative framework. What caught the attention was the substantial overlap between the *Thomas* sayings and the Synoptic tradition. Of the 114 *Thomas* sayings, 42 contain close parallel material to the Synoptic material. If the less-close parallels

are included, that takes the comparable number to 63 sayings within *Thomas'* 114. Since the *Thomas* sayings usually include more material, the actual percentage of the parallel is less than 50 per cent; something over 50 per cent of *Thomas'* sayings lack parallel with the Synoptic tradition. That is still a significant number, and, not altogether surprisingly, there was a move to regard *Thomas* as of equal or nearly equal significance with the four canonical Gospels. Given the degree of parallel material, should not *Thomas* be set alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and included in a revised New Testament? *Thomas* shows that we are *not* limited to the *four* New Testament Gospels; should we not include the *Gospel of Thomas* with them – a fifth canonical Gospel?⁵ Hence the questions which make up our title: Why four Gospels? Why only four?

It's when we look at *Thomas'* distinctive material that the questions begin to arise.⁶ First, Jesus is presented as 'the Living One'. His significance is that he brought saving revelation. Jesus' death and resurrection hardly feature. *Thomas* focuses almost exclusively on the revelation attributed to Jesus, his gospel introduced as 'the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down'.⁷

Second, *Thomas* proclaims a characteristically Gnostic message. It speaks for those who believed that their true nature and spiritual home is different from their existence in this world. They have come from the light and have been caught in the corruption of the flesh.⁸ The problem addressed by *Thomas* is that so many are unaware of their true nature and origin, lacking knowledge of the contrast between their true nature and their present existence.⁹ Hence the characteristic Gnostic message: the good news is for those imprisoned in the fleshly physicality of this world, who need to be released by the knowledge of their true being and counselled on how to act now to ensure their return to that kingdom.

What a close study of the *Gospel of Thomas* reveals, then, is that whereas *Thomas* has taken over a good deal of the Jesus tradition which we find also in the Synoptics, *Thomas'* primary gospel is drawn from a different source. It is drawn from an analysis of the human condition which we do not find in the earlier Jesus tradition and offers a different solution. There are points of contact, of course; otherwise *Thomas* could not have drawn in as much Jesus tradition as it has. Themes of light and life provided a common currency. But the central message of *Thomas* was not that of Jesus or of the Jesus tradition, even though it could take over so much of the Jesus tradition. The basic narrative which

holds the *Thomas* tradition together is distinctly other than what we find in the Jesus tradition of the New Testament. The distinctive message of *Thomas* comes from a source and an explanation of the human condition which is not to be found elsewhere in the Jesus tradition of the New Testament Gospels. The recognisable Jesus tradition in *Thomas* was essentially a bolt-on addition to a framework which originated from a different perception of reality from that of the Jewish scriptures which provided the context of both Jesus' message and that of the New Testament writers. In short, the basic narrative of *Thomas* is too distinctive and too different from the other first-century indications of the impact made by Jesus for us to find a root for the *Thomas* perspective in either Jesus' mission or the early Jesus tradition of the New Testament Gospels.

The historical reality, then, is that the *Gospel of Thomas* has probably made a bigger splash in the twentieth century than it did in the second. Our lack of knowledge of it prior to its discovery at Nag Hammadi in the 1940s strongly suggests that it did not have much impact in early Christianity. The fact that it never seemed even to occur to Irenaeus to include *Thomas* in his list of Gospels, even as a claim which had to be refuted, suggests that we have given *Thomas* far more status and significance than it actually achieved in the early centuries. At any rate *Thomas* does not require us to alter our main questions: Why four Gospels? Why only four? For us it is more interesting to know why *Thomas* was rejected.

Why four?

If one of the fascinating features of early Christianity is that the leaders refused to count as Gospels any more than four, it is equally interesting to know why they chose as many as four. Why not a single Gospel, proclaiming that there is only one gospel? 'This, and this alone is the true gospel'; 'This is the only message of salvation!' We know that there were indeed some attempts to come up with a single Gospel. Irenaeus tells us that Tatian 'separated himself from the church' and evidently returned to Syria, where he probably composed his *Diatessaron*, the first (preserved) harmony of the four canonical Gospels, dated probably in the period 170–175. It became the standard Gospel text in the Syriac-speaking churches till the fifth century, when it was replaced by the Peshitta version of the four separate Gospels, because its author had been dismissed as a heretic. Then there was Marcion, who wanted to split his version of Christianity away from the Old Testament, who took Paul as his great hero,

and who accepted only one Gospel, a diminished version of Luke, setting aside Jesus' confession that the Maker of the universe is his Father. I confess to not a little unease when the Old Testament is so often bypassed and ignored in church services today, remembering that a direct line can be drawn from Marcion to the Holocaust. An alternative could well have been to focus on Matthew – Matthew who provided the basis for regarding Peter as the chief disciple and the rock on which the Church should be founded (Mt 16:18–19), in effect, the first pope. Should not Matthew be regarded as *the* Gospel?

The answer is no! Matthew's status certainly was very firm in a church which came to regard Peter as its first pope and Rome more and more as its central base; but in the first two centuries there were several different centres of the new movement. Mark, although little quoted in the second century, was probably saved by the historical memory of Mark's association with Peter, and perhaps as a collection of Peter's own teaching. Tatian had no hesitation in including Mark in his *Diatessaron*. Luke, as the first of a two-volume work, Luke-Acts, was too much associated with Paul to be passed over, despite Marcion, Paul being more famous even than Peter for his mission work in spreading the gospel to Gentiles. And John, not least by virtue of his somewhat uncertain identification with the disciple whom Jesus loved,¹⁰ though later than the other three Gospels, could hardly be set aside. And so we find, looking through the second century, that it is these four Gospels which are most often cited and drawn on, with others in comparison only rarely referred to.¹¹ These, these four, were the Gospels.

An important and indeed decisive factor is given in the history of the word 'gospel'. The noun 'gospel, good news' (*euangelion*) is one of several terms which Christianity owes to Paul: 60 of its 76 occurrences in the New Testament appear in the Pauline corpus. Indeed, it is very likely that we owe the use of the word in Christian vocabulary to Paul. He probably derived it from the Hebrew verb, *bsr*, 'to bring good news', especially as used by Isaiah. Much reflected on, at Qumran¹² and evidently by Paul, were two of Isaiah's verses:

Isaiah 52:7 – 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces (*euangelizomenou*) peace, who brings good news (*euangelizomenos agatha*), who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns".'

Isaiah 61:1 – 'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news (*euangelisasthai*) to the poor ...'

And Jesus was evidently much influenced by the same passages if Luke's account of his preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth is anything to go by (Lk 4:16–21) – as is probably confirmed by the memory of his reply to the Baptist's query as to Jesus' mission: 'Tell John ... the blind receive their sight, the lame walk ... and the poor have good news brought to them (*euangelizontai*)' (Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22). So Paul was no doubt stimulated by both Isaiah and the Jesus tradition in drawing a noun from the verb, *euangelion* from *euangelizesthai*, a noun which summed up the good news brought by Jesus, which summed up the significance of what Jesus had done. Paul would also no doubt have been aware that the noun was used in his own day, usually in the plural and especially of the good tidings of Caesar's doings. But for Paul it was the singularity of the good news of Jesus which was the focus of his attention – *the* gospel.

What is interesting for us at this point is the fact that Mark takes over this word *euangelion* 'gospel' and uses it to sum up the story he was about to tell. He introduces his account of Jesus' ministry with the words, 'The beginning of the good news/the gospel of Jesus Christ' (Mk 1:1). It is as though he was reacting to Paul's use of the word to focus his message regarding Jesus' death and resurrection. Mark's reaction was in effect to say: the good news/the gospel of Jesus does not focus exclusively or entirely on his death and resurrection. Jesus' whole ministry – from his baptism by John, climaxing in his death and resurrection – is an integral part of the good news. And Mark emphasises the point in several places in his narrative, by inserting into the tradition of Jesus' teaching references to 'the gospel'. So, for example, he summarises Jesus' preaching as a call to 'repent', with the addition, 'and believe in the gospel' (Mk 1:15).¹³

So Mark marks the transition from the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection to the good news of his whole ministry. And indeed by introducing his account as 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ' (1:1), he also marks the beginning of the transition from the good news of Jesus' mission to the good news which is the *account* of that mission. Because of Mark's use of the term 'gospel' to sum up Jesus' mission, and his account of that mission, we can begin to speak of the Gospel of Mark. So it is to Mark in particular that we owe our understanding of the gospel as the good news of Jesus' ministry, climaxing in his death and resurrection. And as with Paul, it is always the singular, the good news focused on Jesus' mission climaxing in his death and resurrection.

And this is precisely the point where the canonical Gospels are to be distinguished from the so-called Gospels which came later. Matthew, Luke and

John followed Mark's lead in presenting the good news of Jesus as an account of his ministry leading up to his passion and rising again, whereas the other Gospels that came later consistently focused on Jesus' teaching – as though the good news was primarily knowledge (*gnōsis*) that would dispel ignorance. Should they even be called 'Gospels'? Probably not, since it was Paul and Mark who gave the term its technical Christian meaning, as a summary reference to Jesus' mission climaxing in his death and resurrection – the good news for sinners, not just for the ignorant. And of the candidates for the title 'Gospel', only four, the canonical four, meet that qualification.

Why four, when three are so similar?

One of the most interesting things a student of the Gospels can do is to sit down with a synopsis of the Synoptic Gospels, the first three Gospels in the New Testament canon. In a synopsis the three Gospels are set down side by side, in three columns, with the same passages in the two or three Gospels set out in parallel.¹⁴ Some of these parallels are more or less word for word, one Evangelist either copying the other or both drawing on a common source. Others have much less word-for-word agreement, but it is the same story or teaching that has been recorded. When I studied the Synoptic tradition intensely years ago the phrase which kept coming to me was 'the same yet different'. Evidently it was the same story, the same teaching, but the Evangelist or his sources had told or used it differently. What also became clear was that often the chief point of the story or teaching was more or less word for word. But the introduction and the conclusion were different, more distinctive to the context in which the Evangelist was recording the tradition or to the point that he wanted to draw from it.

A classic example for me was the story of Jesus healing the centurion's servant, in Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10. It is clearly the same story that they are telling: the centurion asking for Jesus to minister to his sick slave; with the exchange between the centurion and Jesus being more or less word for word, climaxing in Jesus' amazement that 'not even in Israel have I found such faith' (Mt 8:10; Lk 7:9). And yet, the two tellings of the same story are different. In Matthew the centurion comes to Jesus personally to beseech his help, whereas in Luke the centurion does *not* come personally, counting himself as not worthy to meet Jesus face to face. The endings of the two accounts are different again, with Matthew incorporating some teaching from elsewhere in the Jesus tradition, before agreeing with Luke that the slave had indeed been healed.

What do we learn from this, and from many other examples like it? We learn, first of all, that the Evangelists were not concerned to record the Jesus tradition with pedantic accuracy. They could draw from the same recalled episode in Jesus' life different lessons: here, for example, for Matthew it was a story of *faith*, for Luke a story of *humility*. Whether the centurion actually came personally to speak to Jesus or only sent some friends with his message was not very important. What mattered was that his plea for help and Jesus' response were retained word for word in the different tellings. It was the same story, but told differently – and so differently that the two accounts were technically irreconcilable. Did the centurion come personally, or did he not? That is a question which could trouble fundamentalists, but it evidently did not trouble Matthew or Luke.

This is precisely what we should expect, after all. The Jesus tradition was being recited and reflected on in many different parts of Palestine, Syria and modern-day Turkey, etc. It was being interpreted and applied, different stories and teachings variously combined to provide instruction and guidance. Mark, for example, has clearly drawn on memories of a day in Jesus' life in 2:1—3:6. He goes on to provide a sequence of parables, including Jesus' rationale in telling so many parables (4:1–34), then a sequence of miracle stories set round the Sea of Galilee (4:35—5:43; 6:32–52). But through all these variants a clear picture of the one being remembered emerges. The impact made by Jesus on his first disciples is clearly evident in the stories they told and the teaching they rehearsed.

The distinctive message of each Evangelist is clearly to be seen, along with the different ways they wanted the good news of Jesus to impact the hearers when their Gospel was read to them.

Mark

A striking example is Mark's 'messianic secret'.¹⁵ Mark has, of course, no doubt that Jesus was Christ, the Messiah of Jewish expectation. And at the centre of his Gospel is Peter's confession of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi: 'You are the Messiah' (Mk 8:29). But it is clear that Jesus' function as Messiah was likely to be misunderstood. Indeed, when in response to Peter's confession in Mark's account, Jesus immediately begins to speak of his rejection and death (8:31), Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him (8:32). This is not what Peter had understood by messiahship. Mark reinforces the point that Peter, and all those he represented, had to change their ideas about Jesus' mission by quickly

adding Jesus' two further predictions of his passion (9:31; 10:33–34) and showing Jesus as resolute in his determination to go to Jerusalem (10:32).

It is presumably to prevent and avoid the misunderstanding, Peter's misunderstanding, of Jesus' messiahship as something lordly and triumphant, that Mark in his telling of the story maintains that Jesus kept his messiahship secret. Hence we have Jesus regularly commanding those healed by him to be silent.¹⁶ That too is Jesus' immediate response to Peter's confession (8:30). And after Peter's, James' and John's experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus immediately orders them to tell no one what they had seen until it could be understood in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection (9:9). Other indications of Mark's messianic secret are his emphasis on Jesus' desire to remain hidden,¹⁷ his noting that several of Jesus' healings were performed in private,¹⁸ and the number of occasions when he indicates that Jesus gave his instructions to his disciples in secret.¹⁹

Another notable and distinctive feature of Mark's Gospel is his repeated use of the adverb 'immediately', far more than the other Evangelists. It is this which keeps the story moving and adds to its sense of excitement. For example, the fishermen called by Jesus 'immediately left their nets and followed him' (1:18). And when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, 'immediately the girl got up and began to walk about' (5:42).

We should not fail to notice the distinctiveness of Mark's ending of his Gospel. Not unlike the other Evangelists, Mark climaxes his telling of the story of Jesus with the report that the tomb where Jesus' dead body had been laid had been found empty, and further that 'a young man', presumably an angel, had announced that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead and would be encountered in Galilee (16:2–7). But the story then ends with a somewhat unexpected conclusion: 'So they went out and fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid' (16:8). Of course, we can assume that Mark wanted to imply that the story did not end at that point and in that way. Of course his typical readers and audiences would know that the story went on to include them, and their experience of the risen Christ. But it is doubtful whether Mark's intention was as effective as he presumably intended. None of the other three Gospels followed his lead; their retellings climaxed in accounts of several appearances of the risen Christ. And those who used Mark itself were evidently less impressed by his ending than they should have been and added endings which echo those of the other Gospels, though these in effect miss what Mark intended.

Matthew

The distinctiveness of Matthew's Gospel begins with the fact that he pushes the beginning of his account back from Jesus' baptism to his birth (Mt 1—2) and provides a fuller and better conclusion (28:1—20). Mark emphasised Jesus' role as a teacher, but Matthew provides more teaching. Rather strikingly, Matthew groups the teaching into five 'sermons',²⁰ the first prefaced with the note that Jesus went up a mountain (5:1). That this echo of the five books of Moses was no doubt deliberate is confirmed by Matthew's note that the infant Jesus' escape from Herod to and from Egypt was to fulfil the words of Hosea (Hos 11:1): 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Mt 2:15). Equally notable is the way Matthew uses the first of Jesus' sermons to affirm the law, with a strength which would probably have surprised Paul and Mark: 'until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter ... will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven' (5:17—20). Evidently Matthew had no qualms in presenting Jesus as a new Moses. Equally distinctive of Matthew on the same point are Jesus' repeated warnings against *anomia*, 'lawlessness',²¹ a term which appears only in Matthew. And part of the same concern of Matthew is his account of repeated occasions in which he depicts Jesus as redefining the law in dispute with Pharisees.²² Evidently Matthew retells his story of Jesus in a post-70 situation in which the Pharisees were the principal Jewish leadership to have survived the disaster of Israel's war with Rome and were beginning to redefine Israel's calling round the Torah.

An equal concern of Matthew was to emphasise that Jesus was the fulfilment of Jewish hope and expectation. Here we should certainly notice the distinctively Matthean insistence that 'All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet', going on, in the first case, to cite Isaiah 7:14 (Mt 1:22—23). The same note becomes a repeated and distinctive emphasis throughout Matthew's Gospel: this happened to fulfil what had been spoken by the prophet.²³ More striking is the distinctive Matthean emphasis that Jesus embodied the divine presence. This is signalled in the first chapter by the quotation from Isaiah 7:14: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', to which Matthew adds the explanation, 'which means "God is with us"' (Mt 1:23). And it is reinforced thereafter by Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as not only the bearer of wisdom but to be *identified* with divine Wisdom. Where Jesus ben Sira bids his readers, 'Put your neck under Wisdom's yoke, and let your souls receive instruction'

(Sir 51:26), Jesus ben Maria, Matthew's Jesus, says, 'Take *my* yoke upon you and learn from *me*' (Mt 11:28).²⁴

Equally striking and distinctive of Matthew is the degree to which Israel was the focus of his mission. The opening prediction that Mary will bear a son has the added instruction: 'You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (1:21). And the initial mission of Jesus' chosen twelve disciples begins with the striking note: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10:5–6). Equally striking is Jesus' initial response to the Canaanite woman's plea for help: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (15:24).²⁵ We should add though that even more distinctive of Matthew's portrayal of Jesus is his consistent emphasis on Jesus' openness to Gentiles. He begins with a genealogy in which the only three women named (Tamar, Rahab and Ruth) are all Gentiles (1:3–6). He begins his account of Jesus' mission with the Baptist warning his audience not to rely on the fact that Abraham was their ancestor (3:9), and reports Jesus as warning that the heirs of the kingdom may well be thrown into outer darkness (8:11–12). Further on, Matthew has Jesus warning that the kingdom of God will be taken away from Israel and given to a people who produce the fruits of the kingdom (21:43; similarly 22:8–9). And he concludes his Gospel with Jesus giving the great commission to make disciples of all nations (28:19; see also 24:14). So a Jewish Gospel intent that the good news of Jesus was for Gentiles as well is a good classification of the Gospel according to Matthew.

Luke

Luke tells the same story, but again with his own distinctive emphases. For example, every so often he inserts the note that Jesus was praying: at his baptism in the Jordan (3:21); he withdrew into the wilderness to pray (5:16); he spent all night in prayer before choosing the twelve disciples (6:12–13); he went up the mountain, and it was as he prayed that he was transfigured (9:28–29). Again Luke does not refrain from referring to Jesus as 'Lord' in his own telling of the story, but the first time any of Jesus' disciples refers to Jesus as 'Lord' in his narrative is after Jesus' resurrection (24:34). Equally striking is Luke's emphasis on the Spirit: the Spirit inspires those referred to in the birth narratives;²⁶ but Luke does not hesitate to emphasise that Jesus went to his period of temptation at the leading of the Spirit and that he returned from that time of testing 'in the power of the Spirit' (4:1, 14). And it is Luke alone who shows Jesus beginning his preaching in Nazareth's synagogue with the citation

from Isaiah 61:1: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor' (Lk 4:18). Again, it is only Luke who records Jesus as rejoicing in the Holy Spirit (10:21), and only Luke who shows Jesus as emphasising that the heavenly Father is keen to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (11:13).

Equally distinctive of Luke is his emphasis that Jesus' mission was to and for the benefit of *sinners*. It is summed up nicely in his introduction to the three parables of the lost things/people: 'The Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them"' (15:2). This is also emphasised in the parable of the Pharisee and publican, which only Luke records, in which the effective prayer is that of the publican saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner' (18:13); and again in Luke's distinctive account of Jesus' readiness to go to be guest of Zacchaeus, a man whom the crowds dismiss disdainfully as a 'sinner' (19:7).²⁷ Again distinctive of Luke's Gospel is his emphasis that the gospel is good news for Gentiles. The note is struck already in Simeon's paean of praise in the Gospel's introduction: 'Mine eyes have seen thy salvation ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (2:30–32). It is only Luke who, in describing the mission of John the Baptist, rounds off the quotation from Isaiah 40 with the words, 'and all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (Lk 3:6). And only Luke extends Jesus' preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth to remind his hearers that Elijah and Elisha ministered to Gentiles (4:25–27). Nor should we forget that it is only Luke who recalls Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan (10:30–35), and only Luke who tells the story of the ten lepers healed by Jesus, of whom only one returned to give Jesus thanks – 'Now he was a Samaritan' (17:11–19).

Nor should we forget that it is particularly in Luke's Gospel that we see Jesus' concern for the poor and recognition of the perils of power and wealth. Already in the first chapter, Mary's hymn praises God who 'has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away' (1:53). It is in Luke that we find the first beatitude, 'Blessed are you poor', complemented by the first woe, 'Woe to you that are rich' (6:20, 24). It is only Luke who records the parable of the rich fool (12:13–21), and Jesus' instruction that when a banquet is to be given those invited should be the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind (14:12–14, 21). And only Luke who tells the story of the rich man who feasted sumptuously every day and of the poor man, Lazarus, who lay at his gate uncared for (16:19–31).²⁸ Not least, we should not forget that it is Luke who particularly notes the role of women in Jesus' ministry. Women are prominent in the opening birth narratives (Lk 1–2). It is only Luke who recalls the women,

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and many others who gave active support and financial help to Jesus in his mission (8:1–3); and only Luke who tells the story of Mary and Martha (10:38–42). Luke alone records Jesus' observation that it was only because of a widow's persistence in asking for justice that an unrighteous judge vindicated her (18:1–8); and Luke alone records Jesus' concern for the 'daughters of Jerusalem' who stayed faithful to Jesus on his final journey to Golgotha (22:27–29).

In short, what this brief survey clearly reveals is that the story of Jesus could be told differently; that the same account of Jesus could be told in various ways and with differing emphases. The Synoptics richly illustrate the same motif – the same, yet different. This, we might note, underlines the dangers of a fundamentalist approach which wants to stick rigidly to the text and which warns against any diversion from it. On the contrary, the Synoptic accounts show how variously the story of Jesus could be told, and how the same story could be differently expressed. The proper conclusion is not that these are the only ways that the story of Jesus should be told, but rather that they illustrate the diversity of the ways in which the good news of Jesus should be circulated. If these were the different ways in which the same story could be told, then what does that say to us now about how differently the same story may be told today?

And the same point is re-emphasised by our fourth New Testament Gospel – the Gospel of John.

Why is John so different?

Many people assume that John is a Gospel just like the Synoptics. They do not seem to be aware of how different John is from the Synoptics. Let me remind you of how different John's Gospel is. For example:

- In the Synoptic tradition Jesus is remembered as speaking typically in aphorisms and parables. In contrast, in John, Jesus engages in lengthy dialogues and circuitous discussions and does not use parables.²⁹
- In the Synoptics the central theme of Jesus' preaching is the kingdom of God, whereas in John the kingdom of God hardly features in Jesus' speech.³⁰

- In the Synoptics Jesus speaks little of himself, whereas in John Jesus speaks much of himself, notably in the striking 'I am' statements ('I am the bread of life' – John 6:35, 48; 'I am the light of the world' – 8:12; 'Before Abraham was, I am' – 8:58; 'I am the resurrection and the life' – 11:25; etc), which have only weak parallels in the Synoptics.
- In the Synoptics Jesus speaks of repentance and forgiveness quite often but speaks only occasionally of eternal life. In contrast, in John Jesus speaks of repentance and forgiveness only once (20:23) but speaks regularly of eternal life.

Confronted by such differences it is not credible to explain them simply by assuming that the Evangelists drew differently from a wider and more generally known Jesus tradition. Is it credible to argue that the Synoptics completely ignored the lengthy dialogues which John uses, and also most of the Johannine Jesus' talk of eternal life, while John ignored almost all of the tradition of Jesus speaking about the kingdom of God, even though it was the principal theme of Jesus' preaching according to the Synoptics? Above all, is it credible to assume that the Synoptic tradition was unaware of the great Johannine 'I am' assertions or ignored them? Quite frankly, the only obvious answer to both questions is No! John certainly retains the Gospel format first given by Mark, beginning with Jesus' encounter with the Baptist and climaxing in the Cross and Resurrection. But evidently he saw his task as different from that of the Synoptics – not so much simply to recall *what* Jesus had said and done during his mission, but to bring out the *significance*, we could justifiably say the significance of Jesus' mission.³¹

He does this partly by giving further emphasis to what the Synoptics had already claimed for Jesus. That Jesus is Messiah is a more central theme in John than in the Synoptics. In the opening chapter he is already acclaimed Messiah by Andrew in speaking to Peter (1:41). In speaking to the Samaritan woman whom he encountered at the well, Jesus confesses to be Messiah (4:25–26). Jesus' messiahship is debated throughout the second half of John 7. To affirm that Jesus is Messiah has already become a ground for expelling someone from the synagogue (9:22). Martha confesses Jesus as Messiah in 11:27. And John states as his reason for writing his Gospel 'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah' (20:31). So John greatly strengthens that motif.

Even more he strengthens the theme of Jesus as the Son of God. In a unique phrase, he emphasises that Jesus is 'the one and only Son'.³² And in John God

as Jesus' 'Father' is vastly more prominent than in the Synoptics.³³ Equally striking are the distinctive notes in John. The Baptist testifies, 'I have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God' (1:34). In the same opening chapter, Nathanael confesses, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God!' (1:49). Martha's full confession is, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God' (11:27). And a consistent note throughout John is that Jesus has been authorised and sent by the Father.³⁴

If these christological assertions are shared with the Synoptic Evangelists, but strengthened by John, a further Johannine emphasis is quite distinctive. It is that Jesus not only brought the word from God, he *was* the Word of God incarnate. John makes this clear in the Prologue to the Gospel. Unlike Matthew and Luke he begins not with the birth of Jesus, but with the Logos (Word) as the agent of creation. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... All things came into being through him', climaxing in, 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (1:1, 14). The genius of this identification was that *Logos* was familiar to both Jew and Greek. Jews were long accustomed to their scriptures' talk of the word coming to patriarch and prophet, and of the heavens made 'by the word of the Lord' (Ps 33:6). And in Greek thought *logos* was a term ideally suited to refer with equal facility both to the word unexpressed and the word expressed. This is what the term enabled John to indicate: that Jesus was the mind of God expressed, expressing the inexpressible and making the unknowable known. John used it to indicate not simply that Jesus brought the word from God, like the prophets of old, but that the word *became flesh* in Jesus. No one had ever made such a claim before. It took the gospel into a new dimension, addressing minds trained in Greek philosophy, challenging them to a degree that surpassed all that Hellenistic Judaism had attempted thus far. This was not an Evangelist simply trying to preserve and pass on what Jesus and the first disciples had first proclaimed. This was an attempt to draw out the full significance of Jesus for a different and more sophisticated audience. It is John 1:14 that shows most clearly that John was not content simply to provide another Synoptic recollection of Jesus' ministry. His aim was to show that Jesus spoke not simply to Jewish teachers and disciples but also to minds seeking to explore what the true reality of the world was. But he did it, we should not forget, within the framework of a mission of Jesus which began with John the Baptist and climaxed in his death and resurrection. This is gospel indeed, not simply looking back, but looking forward to new audiences, and not simply

repeating the Jesus tradition already established by the Synoptic Evangelists, but seeking to re-express it for a new and changing audience.

Somewhat surprisingly John did not extend the Logos Christology explicitly through the rest of his Gospel. Instead he developed the equivalent thought of Jesus as the embodiment of divine Wisdom. This was a more familiar Jewish way of speaking of God's interaction with his creation and his people – more familiar particularly in Jewish Wisdom tradition. Thus Proverbs 3:19 – 'The Lord by wisdom founded the earth' – and the great Wisdom hymn of Proverbs 8, where Wisdom declares: 'When he established the heavens, I was there ... Then I was beside him, like a master worker' (8:27, 30). Most striking is the way Wisdom is explicitly identified with Israel's scriptures. In ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), 'Wisdom praises herself' and there follows a hymn in praise of Wisdom, climaxing in the identification: 'All this is the book of the covenant, the law' (Sir 24:1, 23). Similarly in Baruch, a lengthy hymn in praise of divine Wisdom (Bar 3:9–37) concludes: 'She (Wisdom) is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures for ever' (4:1).

In John the echoes of what is said about Wisdom are frequent. Wisdom 9:17–18 celebrates how Israel 'was saved by wisdom', and John celebrates that God 'sent his Son in order that the world might be saved' (Jn 3:17). Ben Sira rejoices that Wisdom will give those who fear the Lord 'the water of wisdom to drink' (Sir.15:3), and Wisdom affirms that 'Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more'. In John 4, Jesus says to the woman at the well, 'Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty' (4:14). In Proverbs Wisdom makes the invitation, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine that I have mixed', and ben Sira gives assurance that 'She [Wisdom] will feed him with the bread of learning, and give him the water of wisdom to drink' (Sir 15:3). What else can the Johannine Jesus be referring to when he gives his invitation in similar terms: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty' (John 6:35)? That the Johannine Jesus is presented as the incarnation of divine Wisdom is even more apparent than that he is the Word become flesh.

There are several other distinctively characteristic emphases of John's presentation of Jesus which should not escape notice. It is in John that Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment: 'that you love one another, just as I have loved you' (13:34–35).³⁵ Distinctively Johannine is his individualism: each eats Jesus' flesh and drinks his blood (6:53–58); each believer drinks the water he gives

(7:37–38); each sheep hears his voice (10:3–4, 16); each branch is rooted in the vine (15:4–7). The Johannine Jesus emphasises to the woman at the well that worship is not tied to a specific cultic centre: ‘The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth’ (4:21–23). Notably there is no mention of apostles or prophets or teachers. Instead Jesus quotes Isaiah 54:13: ‘They shall all be taught by God’ (Jn 6:45). And the promise of the Spirit is that ‘he will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you’ (14:26). Even more noticeable is the fact that John seems to play down Jesus’ baptism and last supper, passing over each without mention, and that he qualifies the great bread of life discourse in chapter 6 with the terse reminder that ‘It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life’ (6:63). It is this absence of reference to what were presumably already well-established features of corporate church gathering and worship which has suggested to some that John practised and commended what later would be called conventicle Christianity, a less structured and more individualistic worship.

In the light of these distinctive features the question inevitably arises whether John in his reworking of the Jesus tradition went too far. The question is reinforced by the fact that John’s Gospel appealed to the Gnostics more than did the others – the Gnostics working with a sharp polarisation of flesh and spirit, seeking for delivery from physical fleshliness, and assuming that salvation could only mean release from the flesh. So the question arises whether John, in his representation of the good news of Jesus, overemphasised Jesus’ divinity and played down his humanity. Did he so emphasise Jesus’ divinity that his humanity was only apparent? The answer is a definite No! The emphasis of John 1:14 is clear: ‘the Word *became* flesh’. John did not say what the Gnostics would have liked: that the Word appeared as flesh, in fleshly guise. No! ‘The Word *became* flesh.’ Those who have accused John of ‘naïve docetism’, putting the primary emphasis on the following clause – ‘and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son’³⁶ – have ignored or played down John’s primary emphasis. The glory that was seen was that of the incarnate Jesus, the Word become flesh, whose ministry climaxed in his death, a genuine death, and his resurrection. That was his glory.³⁷

All this shows someone who was prepared to take some risks to ensure that the gospel is heard to speak to all conditions and situations. This was an attempt to speak meaningfully well beyond the original context of Jesus’ mission, an attempt to show that the gospel of Jesus was immediately relevant

to those caught up in the fashionable philosophising of the day. It was dangerous, as the history of John's acceptance within the New Testament canon clearly shows. The fact that the first known commentary on John was written by the Gnostic Heracleon in the latter half of the second century is a clear indication that John drew very near to the boundary which other and later treatments of Jesus transgressed. But it was precisely his insistence in John 1.14, that the Word became flesh, and his presentation within the structure provided by Mark, climaxing in Jesus' death and resurrection, which ensured that John was retained within emerging Christianity as what we might call a canonical restatement of the gospel.

The interesting question which John raises, then, is this: which is the best precedent for today – the Synoptics' presentation of Jesus, or John's?

Conclusion

So the answers to our questions become clear. Why four Gospels? Why only four?

First answer: why four *Gospels*? Because the term 'gospel' was given its distinctive definition by Paul focusing on Jesus' death and resurrection. Mark expanded that definition to include the mission of Jesus climaxing in Jesus' death and resurrection. And the other Evangelists who followed suit were deemed to define and express the good news of Jesus definitively.

Second answer: why *four* Gospels? Because the Synoptic Gospels showed that the gospel could not be confined to one format or version. The Synoptic Gospels showed that integral to the gospel focused on Jesus is its character as the same yet different. To limit the story of Jesus as though only one version is authentic is to strangle it. The Synoptics highlight the danger of a fundamentalist approach, as though only one version could be truly authentic. They show that even when the gaze is directed backwards, what is to be clearly seen is that Jesus – the same Jesus – was remembered differently, and that the story of Jesus could be told diversely, even when sticking to the gospel form.

Third answer: why a *fourth* Gospel? Why John? Because John shows how far the 'same yet different' formula could be extended. John shows that in reaching out to audiences further removed from the Palestinian context of the Synoptics' accounts there has to be a bold restatement of the gospel. To reach a more diverse and diversely educated audience there has to be some willingness to

take risk – to retell the story of Jesus in terms which might be misinterpreted, but with the climactic account of Jesus’ death and resurrection always as ensuring that the feet remain firmly on the ground.

Fourth answer: why *only* four Gospels? Because the four Gospels – Mark, Matthew, Luke and John – quickly established themselves as the authoritative records of Jesus’ ministry, and became definitive of what a written Gospel should be. And because others which followed, like the *Gospel of Thomas*, precisely by neglecting the character of a Gospel as a ‘passion narrative with an extended introduction’, effectively gave up the claim to be rightly called a ‘Gospel’.

These answers should be important for Methodists, not simply because they show how justified John Wesley was in seeking to bring the gospel to those whom it had passed by, and to bring it out in faithfulness to its essential character. But also because they provide a challenge to all Christians today – Methodists included – to bring out the relevance of the good news of Jesus to the changing circumstances of today, just as the New Testament Evangelists sought to demonstrate how clearly and fully the good news of Jesus spoke to their own day. This is the wisdom and strength of our New Testament with its four Gospels, providing both an example of how diversely the same gospel could be told, and a challenge to us to retell the good news of Jesus today with equal or equivalent effect.

Notes

1. See his letter to Ebenezer Blackwall, dated 20 December 1751.
2. J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
3. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha: Vol. 1, Gospels and Related Writings*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991.
4. For further detail and discussion, see my *Christianity in the Making: Vol. 3, Neither Jew Nor Greek: A Contested Identity*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015, §§44.4–44.8. I will refer to it as *CiM* 3.
5. So, for example, R. W. Funk and R. W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New York: Macmillan, 1993; S. J. Patterson et al., *The Fifth Gospel: The Gospel of Thomas Comes of Age*, London: T & T Clark, 2011.
6. In what follows I draw on *CiM* 3, §§43.2–5. Most helpful are the two works by A. D. DeConick, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and its Growth*, LNTS 286, London: T & T Clark, 2005, and, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, LNTS 287, London: T & T Clark, 2006.
7. *Gospel of Thomas* Incipit, 52, 59, 111.
8. In *CiM* 3, pp. 392–393, I cite *Thomas* 3:3–4, 18, 19:1, 49, 50, 67, 83, 84, 111:2–3.
9. In *CiM* 3, pp. 393–394, I cite *Thomas* 3:5, 28, 29, 56, 70, 80, 87, 112.

10. John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20.
11. There are surprisingly few indications that Mark was known and used. This is in large part because Mark had been almost wholly absorbed by Matthew, so that allusions to Mark are hard to distinguish from allusions to the more popular Matthew. Even so quite a number of allusions to Mark are evident; see *CiM* 3, §44.8a.
12. Note particularly 11QMelch 2:15–24 and 4Q521.
13. See also Mark 8:35 and 10:29; and further *CiM* 3, pp. 193–194.
14. B. H. Throckmorton, *Gospel Parallels: A Synopsis of the First Three Gospels*, New York: Thomas Nelson, 1957, is the classic English text. K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1988, is the standard fourfold Gospel synopsis.
15. This was first noted by W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, 1901, ET Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971. See further my 'The Messianic Secret in Mark', *Tyndale Bulletin* 21 (1970), pp. 92–117, reprinted in C. M. Tuckett (ed.), *The Messianic Secret*, London: SPCK, 1983, pp. 116–131.
16. Mark 1:34, 43–45; 3:11–12; 5:43.
17. Mark 1:35, 45; 3:7, 9; 6:46; ...
18. Mark 5:37, 40; 7:33; 8:23.
19. Mark 4:34; 6:31–32; 7:17; 9:2, 28–29; 13:3.
20. Matthew 5:3—7:27; 10:5–42; 13:3–52; 18:1–35; 24:2—25:46 – all with the same ending.
21. Matthew 7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:12.
22. Matthew 5:20–22, 27–28; 7:12; 9:13 and 12:7 (Hos 6:6); 15:17–20; 22:37–40; 23:2–3, 33; 24:20.
23. Matthew 2:15, 23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9.
24. See also Matthew 11:19 and 23:34, 37–38.
25. See also Matthew 2:6 and 19:28.
26. Luke 1:15, 17, 35, 67; 2:25–27.
27. See also Luke 5:8, 30, 32; 7:34, 37, 39; 15:7, 10.
28. See also Luke 4:18; 12:33; 18:22–25; 19:8–9.
29. The nearest is John 15:1–6 – 'I am the true vine.'
30. References to the 'kingdom': Matthew 47x; Mark 18x; Luke 37x; John 5x, in only two passages (John 3:3–5; 17:2–3).
31. John thinks of Jesus' miracles as 'signs' (notably John 4:54; but see also 2:18; 6:14, 30; 10:41; 12:18).
32. John 1:14; 3:16, 18.
33. J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (1966), ET London: SCM Press, 1967, provides the striking statistics for reference to God as 'Father' in the words of Jesus – Mark 3, Q 4, special Luke 4, special Matthew 31, John 100 (30, 36).
34. John 3:17, 35; 5:19, 26, 30; 6:38; 12:49–50; 14:31.
35. See also John 14:21; 15:10, 13.
36. I refer to a notable attempt by E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (1966), ET London: SCM Press, 1968, p. 26.
37. Glory is a particular theme of John's Gospel – *doxa* 18x, *doxazein* 23x.



Reimagining dementia: seeing ourselves more fully in the dementia-diagnosed

Christopher Collins

THE REVD CHRISTOPHER COLLINS is a Methodist presbyter currently serving in the Wolverhampton Circuit.

christopher.collins@methodist.org.uk
Wolverhampton, UK

How does the Church respond to the increasing number of dementia-diagnosed within our communities? This paper argues that the Church inhabits Kitwood's 'standard paradigm' of dementia, which focuses on the loss and decay of the person. This diverts our attention away from a more theologically nuanced understanding of the person and personhood. Using Lartey's Theological Form model of action and reflection, I will reflect on the pastoral experience of caring for the dementia-diagnosed and seek to promote an alternative theology of personhood as relationship based on Moltmann's 'social trinity' explored through the creation narrative of Genesis 2. This will allow us to develop an alternative model of pastoral care which enables us to see the 'angelic mission' of the dementia-diagnosed.

DEMENTIA • PERSONHOOD • PASTORAL CARE • TRINITY • PERICHORESIS

Introduction

Friends who are dementia-diagnosed have the ability to make us laugh and cry. This ethnographic study of local churches' responses to dementia has identified their difficulty in living with dementia-diagnosed friends. This is because the Church often inhabits the 'standard paradigm'¹ of dementia which focuses on the 'loss' and 'decay' of the person. Using Emmanuel Lartey's Theological Form model of action and reflection,² I seek to promote an alternative theology of personhood as relationship based on Jürgen Moltmann's 'social trinity'³ explored through the creation narrative of Genesis 2.⁴ Not only does this alternative paradigm recognise the valued personhood of the dementia-diagnosed but places them, along with all who are differently abled, as 'angelic missionaries'⁵ to the community who enable us to recognise our own personhood more fully. When we recognise that we are angelic missionaries to one another, we inhabit that very Methodist ideal that there is no holiness except social holiness; that is, we can only become fully in God when we seek God in and through each other.

Methodology

The observations made in this article have arisen out of my own pastoral practice. The churches on which my reflection is based have an age profile that is older than their surrounding communities; in addition, the rate of dementia diagnoses within these congregations is growing. This context is not unique and the reflections in this article have a broader applicability than the churches out of which this reflection grew.

Engaging with the congregations as someone offering pastoral care placed me in a 'liminal' space, being both a part of and standing outside the group.⁶ Thus my reflections are ethnographic,⁷ requiring me to be open to my own biases⁸ as well as others' biases towards me. At the time this study began, my mother was beginning to display the symptoms of a dementia diagnosis, which inspired a greater interest in the study that was always present in my mind when encountering the dementia-diagnosed.

Secondly, attention must be paid to the method. The genesis of my study was formed through a reflection on a pastoral conversation with Edward,⁹ a man suffering from advanced dementia. It quickly became clear that responding to his dementia was part of the sacred narrative of Edward and his family and

friends, in which this response was intricately woven together with their personal experiences of the condition. I considered that the most appropriate way to gather data to enable deeper theological reflection was through further pastoral conversations with sufferers, their carers and those within the congregation who offer pastoral care. These conversations form much of the evidence used in this article.

A theological reflection on how a local church can engage with dementia sufferers using Lartey's Theological Form

Starting with an experience with Edward

Edward gripped my hand as I tried to lead us in prayer. Edward, suffering with dementia, displayed signs of unease by my presence and showed no recognition of me or what I was saying. As I reflected, I began to question whether my pastoral care approach to Edward, and several others who suffer with dementia in various stages, was adequate, appropriate or life-affirming for any of us. I find each sufferer difficult to visit. Is this, I asked myself, because of the anticipated chapters in my own living document that will encounter dementia? Or is it a case of needing to learn a new set of skills? Or is it because the narrative I am inhabiting, and helping to write, concerning dementia-related issues might be incongruent with the lived experience of Edward and others.

Situational analysis – the narrative so far and its informants

To identify a narrative to inform future practice, it was important first to explore the local churches' espoused (that is, what they say they do) and operant (that is, what they actually do) theologies¹⁰ and praxis concerning dementia. Brian told me about his wife Rita, who is in the advanced stages of dementia. He said that he did not visit her often because he had already 'lost' her and he grieved for her as though she had died. The voice of bereavement is loud within the congregations I studied, and is supported by other observational comments, such as 'Edward is not the Edward we knew'. For many, this is how the harsh realities of dementia are described. Jon Stuckey writes that Alzheimer's, a form of dementia, 'can steal memories ... personalities ... [and] bodily functioning'.¹¹ The loving person we remember has been transformed into a dependent person robbed of the personality we once loved.¹² The individual has become a stranger.

But is loss the only narrative? Christine Bryden, a dementia sufferer, challenges this experience of the loss of self when she asks, 'Exactly at what stage do I cease to be me?'¹³ Bryden determines herself differently from the definitions and assumptions made by those who view her disease as robbing her of herself.

The transition from friend and lover to stranger is reflected in the reaction of the congregation to the changing person before them. When Edward is present I see that he is largely unacknowledged. Congregants speak to his wife Lisa about him but are reluctant to speak with him. It is as though Edward might exist elsewhere but the person before them is a stranger. One person told me their reticence to speak was because they didn't think they should try talking to him because he was a stranger and he wouldn't understand anyway. In another situation, a man will talk for his wife, who is in the early stages of dementia, even when she is addressed directly. For many, this reluctance stems from a fear of interaction. There is a fear of upsetting them, causing them stress, or of receiving an unexpected reaction. For the most part, personal interactions in the church community are predictable, but dementia makes them less so.

There is a broad body of literature and range of organisations helping to raise awareness and engagement with dementia-care issues from which churches can draw. This should be embraced and celebrated. For example, the charity Livability has a 'dementia-friendly church' initiative¹⁴ and MHA have published guides on pastoral visiting and worshipping with dementia sufferers.¹⁵ Such literature seeks to change the operant culture of engagement through the use of space, imagery, language and welcome. On one level such initiatives will help to include Edward. On one level such initiatives will help to include Edward and they encourage the church to offer ministry that allows the dementia-diagnosed to know that they are embraced by a loving and caring God. However, they are frequently interpreted by congregations as forming carer-client relationships where the role of the carer is to convince the dementia-diagnosed that God holds them rather than enabling a natural sense of a mutually growing community.

The issue of the kind of relationship we are creating comes into sharper focus when we feel we must measure our success by the reaction we get. For example, a group from a local Methodist church visit a care home for the dementia-diagnosed once a month. They sing hymns, read Scripture and pray. Often, in the chatter on the way back to the car park, the group assess whether the session was good or not by how much 'interaction' they had encouraged

through the singing. If no one joined in they wonder about the value of what they are doing. If the residents are particularly disruptive that week, then members of the local church can feel their time has been wasted. Do we only think we are successful if we notice that residents recognise the hymns or if they sit and listen intently? If we do not see such a response, we feel that our initiative has been ineffective and wonder if there is any value in continuing.

In other conversations, we discuss the frequency of taking extended communion to dementia-diagnosed members, often revealing a reticence because 'they can't participate'. Exclusion can arise unintentionally because of the expectation that the inclusion of the dementia-diagnosed is the sole responsibility of specially trained members of the congregation, or from the assumption that it might be more appropriate to engage with the dementia-diagnosed through specialist groups.

To my mind, many of these perspectives on the dementia-diagnosed derive from a powerful but misappropriated definition of dementia. Dementia, we are told, is a progressive disease in which brain cells die, leading to mental and physical loss of function.¹⁶ The World Health Organization says that this makes a person 'progressively different and less able as they lose the ability to retain new information or recall previous memories, even of close relatives, together with loss of cognitive ability and changes to social behaviour'.¹⁷ These medical symptoms make friends with dementia unknown and unpredictable, which in turn makes our attempts at integration difficult. Swinton argues that our expectations of the dementia-diagnosed are constrained by such definitions, which support Kitwood's 'standard paradigm' of dementia, which always focuses on the *loss* of dementia and in which we often fail to recognise the *person* who is dementia-diagnosed.¹⁸

Re-examining our theology

The stark realisation from this is that our operant theology of dementia is one of decay and death, given prominence by the power of the definitions associated with dementia. Our pastoral response focuses on the family and carers of a dementia patient. There is little mention in this theology of 'resurrection', and the voice of hope is silent. Peter Kevern observes, when asking the question of where God can be found in dementia, that dementia represents a 'slipping away'¹⁹ of personhood. This presents a challenge to theology: how do we recognise personhood? What is it and can we find it in dementia?

So, what is personhood? Often, we recall someone by remembering their 'something' and thus define 'persons' by what they *do* rather than the *human* who displays those properties.²⁰ The Australian ethicist Peter Singer argues further that personhood is functional, reliant on an awareness of self, context, relationships, communication and curiosity.²¹ With this functional definition of personhood, when the patient has no function they are no longer a person. This is a bleak perspective on personhood and in condemning the dementia-diagnosed it raises analogous questions for the newly born who might also be relegated as non-persons according to Singer's definition. Given that the Psalmist declares that each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made, knitted together in the womb,²² is there an alternative notion of personhood that derives value despite function?

Bernd Wannenwetsch argues an alternative paradigm is found in the second Genesis creation story, in which Adam only becomes aware of himself when he relates to Eve; he cannot conceive of himself without Eve. Adam could not have gained such self-recognition through his relationship with the animals under his dominion. Wannenwetsch argues this is because only Eve was of Adam's bone and so only Eve could reveal what humanity is, and enable Adam to recognise himself.²³ Phyllis Trible makes the point that the Hebrew '*adham*' is often translated as *Adam* in Genesis 2 but *human* in Genesis 1. Therefore, Adam begins as a creature embodying both male and female and only becomes a man in the paradigm of man and woman.²⁴ Personhood is not, then, an objective characterisation but rather a subjective and relational concept. Kitwood argues that our personhood depends on relational recognition of self with the other.²⁵

This relational approach is a rich theological seam. In *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, Jürgen Moltmann explored the concept of a relational understanding of the Trinity. Perichoresis, he explains, allows the three Persons of the Trinity to be individual yet find their fullest expression through their interdependent relationship.²⁶ John Zizioulas argues that this is a model for all relationships, in that through our communion with each other we affirm our identity. We are not individuals who coexist, but rather persons who mutually exist.²⁷

Zizioulas's argument requires fluidity in relationships, rather than an emphasis on particularity. As Volf rightly points out, without the aim of ultimate fluidity there will always be a closed boundary between individuals.²⁸ Such closed boundaries give rise to the risk that we revert back to the type of personhood

defined by Singer, the particularity of functionality. In the case of dementia, dementia itself can be the boundary for both the diagnosed and those around them, since the presenting effects of the disease define the diagnosed and their relationships. This could create what Kevern calls a 'dementing society' in which there is more harm than good.²⁹ It seems that a natural counterbalance to the dementing society is to advocate for fluidity of relationships to enable the creative opportunities of relationships with the dementia-diagnosed.

A consideration of the perichoresis of the Godhead also encourages us to give reasons why we should hold the dementia-diagnosed in relationship. First, Walter Brueggemann argues that God and Adam will always be in relation because God breathed life into Adam.³⁰ This means that Adam, and hence humanity, will always be in relationship with God.³¹ Second, Zizioulas and Swinton both offer christological arguments to move the imperative for personhood found in relationship beyond being focused exclusively on the Trinity. For Zizioulas, it is not simply that humanity replicates divinity, but rather that Christ embodies all who are 'in him' within the Trinity.³² For Methodists this should not be an unfamiliar idea since we talk of sanctification as becoming fully formed in the image of Christ. This is emphasised by Swinton who uses Bonhoeffer's Christology of Christ 'being-for-us' to argue that when Christ is for us, whether we recognise it or not, then we have an equality before God. Therefore, if Christ is for me and Edward, then I must be for Edward too. So it is through Christ that our mutuality in communion with each other and with the Trinity exists.

Having understood our personhood to be defined by the relationships in which we are bound through Christ to be part of the perichoresis of the Trinity, the next important question is how this theological argument helps to form a response to the situation and begins to find the voice of hope.

Theology and situational analysis in dialogue

The theological argument I have sketched so far contrasts the espoused and operant theologies of the Church. The question is whether these theological ideas will stand up to the scrutiny of the situational experience. The situational analysis suggests that the dementia-diagnosed becomes a stranger and appears less of a person. In many ways, the situational experience voices Singer's conclusion of the impact of dementia on personhood. Is Edward less of a person if he no longer functions like the person he is sitting next to or in the way he used to? When I looked at my own mother, did I see a person whom

I still affirmed through my relationship or did I see a non-person? Surely my answer must be that I see a person, because I am still in relationship with her, and nothing can diminish that. This view is upheld by writers such as Bryden and Maureen Russell. Russell has written of her relationship as carer for her great-aunt through the lens of feminist theology. She concludes that resisting her great-aunt's power in their relationship would mean that their relationship becomes asymmetric. This would deny her great-aunt a vital role of mutuality³³ in which she and Maureen could continue to discover their own personhood. Maureen's great-aunt reveals to Maureen something of Maureen's personhood that reminds her of her humanity and delivers Maureen from the delusional functional understanding of herself. In other words, it allows Maureen to see herself. This is what Wannenwetsch calls the angelic mission of the disabled.³⁴

To recognise the angelic mission of the disabled means that we are forced to listen for their voices and to recognise the gifts that the dementia-diagnosed bring. John Hull, the Christian theologian who explored the deep impact of blindness through his own experience, recognises his blindness not so much as a defect but as a gift of a different capacity.³⁵ In the same way, through our relationships with the dementia-diagnosed, we need to recognise the gifts they offer to the community – different as they may be.

The dialogical contrast between situational and theological analysis led me to conclude that there is sufficient scope to explore a new theological response to the life of the dementia-diagnosed within the life of the Church. I will now go on to explore the actions that will facilitate the further exploration of this theme.

A suggested response

The crucial response to our dementia-diagnosed friends is a commitment to a longer-term sustained engagement, which I have so far argued should be one of deepening relationships with the dementia-diagnosed. In its purest and most fluid embodiment, this must be permissive of engagement in the entire life of the church. Underpinning this engagement is the observation that in the Genesis narrative God *presents* Eve to Adam.³⁶ This, Wannenwetsch argues, reminds us that forming relationships will not happen instinctively.³⁷ If they did, then our operant theology and praxis might already be inherently different. Therefore, we must focus on actions that are designed to facilitate encounters in which personhood can be formed through relationship.

The first action, which we have already begun in our context, is to engage key members of the congregation in theological discussions about personhood and about the place of members like Edward. This has begun to expose the church to a different, possible 'normative'³⁸ theology, recognising the angelic mission of the dementia-diagnosed. However, there are still further issues and ideas that need to be discussed and challenged.

Second, the church must move beyond the idea that 'success' in our relationships is measured by certain signs of recognition and participation. This approach will create and sustain asymmetric relationships and deny the positive impact that the dementia-diagnosed have on us. Further, the opportunity for mutual growth in relationship relies on equality and openness for all parties to be influenced by the other. We need to take seriously their confusion and ask why we never thought of it like that. We need to take seriously and celebrate what they celebrate; we must listen to their stories and tell them ours. We must learn to see faith as they see it, often stripped bare of our pretensions and masks, because it will deepen our faith rather than threaten it.

Practically, of course, many feel ill-equipped to deal with members like Edward, which often leads to the care of the dementia-diagnosed within the church becoming a privatised concern in separate groups run by specially trained people. This approach naturally creates a carer–cared-for relationship to a greater extent than the expected pastoral care relationships within the church community, and inhibits the expression of the gifts that Edward and others like him can bring to the church. Therefore, Edward's full participation in the whole life of the church, as would be possible to the non-dementia-diagnosed, needs to be facilitated in a less threatening way. The creation of a small group to pay particular attention to Edward at church would alleviate some of the fears. The group would ensure that Edward is safe and others are safe around him by being trained to manage Edward and the presenting features of his dementia.

Fourth, there is the possibility of extending this to the inclusion of members who are housebound or in residential care. This population find it difficult, if not impossible, to attend church regularly. So how might this approach engage with them? It is important to recognise that no action we take as a church will ever be perfect and we have to live within the constraints of physical ability. However, this does not mean that such members are forgotten within the church community. The idea of a 'visiting team' could be considered in our context where relationships can be continued over time. Other ways of

remembering the housebound before the congregation are being explored: for example, naming them in the prayers and specifically extending Holy Communion to them, to enable us to grow in faith together.

Finally, it is to be noted that implementing these actions will not birth a perfect community or reflect a perfectly formed theology. Instead, we need to continually observe, reflect and act, remembering that Lartey's Theological Form is not a linear process but will demand that these actions form the basis of the next iteration of action and reflection.³⁹

Conclusion

I have argued that there is a different narrative that these local churches, and many other churches like it, could inhabit in order to enable the dementia-diagnosed to be recognised as something more than their diagnosis. I have argued for an alternative theological paradigm of personhood based on the perichoretic model of the Trinity, viewed through the lens of the Genesis 2 creation narratives in which we are bound together through our common creation in the divine image and by our relationship with Christ. This approach enables all who are differently abled to be acknowledged as angelic missionaries to the community. Whether or not the church will have the intent to live together differently as a community and design ways to allow these pastoral encounters to happen is yet to be seen.

Notes

1. T. Kitwood, 'The Dialectics of Dementia: With Particular Reference to Alzheimer's Disease', *Ageing and Society* 10 (1990), pp. 177–196, and in Swinton 2012, pp. 39–41.
2. Lartey 2000, p. 132. The 'pastoral-cycle' developed by Emmanuel Lartey has a strong emphasis on the situation which forms the genesis of observation and response. It takes a 'multi-perspectival' approach, considering both the situation and theology in a dialogical tension to tease out possible responses. Intentionally circular and iterative, the model allows a perpetual reconsideration of the experience as each response creates new experiences for reflection. The model begins with an experience which is then analysed in the 'situational analysis' of stage 2, which seeks insights from other perspectives. Stage 3 considers the theology that could form a response, and this is then held in dialogue with the situational analysis in stage 4, before a potential response is formed.
3. Moltmann 1981, p. 174.

4. Wannenwetsch 2007, p. 188.
5. Wannenwetsch 2007, p. 192.
6. Frank 2000, p. 82.
7. Moschella 2008, p. 4.
8. Moschella 2008, p. 32.
9. The names of individuals have been changed to protect their anonymity.
10. Cameron 2012, p. 13.
11. Stuckey 1995, p. 75.
12. Goldsmith 2008, p. 120.
13. Bryden 2005, p. 152.
14. See: <http://www.livability.org.uk/church/dementia-friendly-churches/> (accessed 23 September 2014).
15. MHA 2011a and MHA 2011b.
16. Goodhall 2013, p. 174.
17. World Health Organization 1993.
18. Swinton 2012, pp. 39–41.
19. Kevern 2010, p. 174.
20. Spaemann 2006, p. 257.
21. P. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 86, cited in Swinton 2008, p. 25.
22. See Psalm 139:13–14 (NRSV).
23. Wannenwetsch 2007, p. 188.
24. P. Tribble, 'Depatriarchalizing', *Biblical Religion* 41(1) (1973), pp. 30–48, p. 34.
25. Kitwood 1997, p. 8.
26. Moltmann 1981, p. 174.
27. Zizioulas 2004, p. 106.
28. Volf 1998, p. 411.
29. Kevern 2010, p. 178.
30. Genesis 2:7.
31. Brueggemann 2009, p. 60.
32. Zizioulas 2004, p. 106.
33. Russell 2001, p. 18.
34. Wannenwetsch 2007, p. 192.
35. Hull 2013, p. 181.
36. Genesis 2:22.
37. Wannenwetsch 2007, p. 188.
38. Cameron 2012, p. 13.
39. Lartey 2000, p. 132.

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Fear and faith: reflections on ministry and death

Paul Gismondi

THE REVD PAUL GISMONDI is currently serving his curacy in the Church of England at Holy Trinity, Sloane Square (London) and the Sandringham Group of Churches (Norfolk). Having spent most of his career in the City of London, Paul studied at Westcott House and Trinity Hall, Cambridge.

gizmo@cantab.net
Sandringham, UK

An experience of observing a cremation instigates theological reflection on the fear of death. Using Laurie Green's model of action to reflection, and then reflection to action, the article moves through three cycles of theological reflection, exploring first the author's response to the crematorium, then a subsequent encounter with a family during a funeral visit, and finally a conversation with colleagues. Each cycle produces further insights: the universality of death; the particularity of death; and a final glimpse of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Through this, the author explores the interaction between his fear of death and his faith.

DEATH • FEAR • FAITH • CREMATION • FUNERAL MINISTRY • BEREAVEMENT

An image

Perhaps the most striking thing was the *ordinariness* of the place: the white concrete-block walls; the bright, efficient lighting; the well-scrubbed floors; the polished stainless-steel doors; the neutral, institutional smell; the competent workers going about their tasks with a businesslike attitude. It could have been a high-tech factory, or a laboratory. Because I had never been to a crematorium before, my training incumbent, John, had the idea to show me the ovens. One was working, on its door a small white card with some details relating to the deceased, and through its window I could see, amid the raging flames and smoke, the distinct, charred ribcage of a human carcass in the process of its cremation.

Some background

Much theological reflection seems to want to answer questions of what one might have *done* or *said* in a particular situation, but here I want to explore what I *felt* and *believed*, more specifically, the interaction between my fear of death and my faith. Even speaking of a 'fear of death' makes me 'at best guilty of a simplification or of shorthand',¹ since there are at least four interrelated fears:

The fear of being dead.

The fear that one will die, that one's life is going to end.

The fear of premature death.

The fear of the process of dying.²

The image of the burning corpse forced me, then as now, to confront not only that multifaceted fear of death but, even more urgently, how that fear seemed an indictment of my faith – a faith that, as a priest, I would promise through my 'life and doctrine'³ to proclaim, a faith where God's 'perfect love casts out fear'.⁴ I approached my parish placement with a sense of trepidation over the inevitable funeral services in which I would be expected to participate; trepidation, but also the conviction that this was something I needed to face, both for my own selfish reasons in the certainty of my own inevitable demise, and also in preparation for the ministry I was seeking. Being able to minister around death is a key competency of the role.

So my reflection is twofold: what did I learn about myself, about the interplay between my fear and my belief? And how can what I learned make a difference to me as a priest? In this, I am conscious of the teaching of St Augustine that ‘the twin consequences of original sin, ignorance and weakness ... are epitomised in fear of death.’⁵

A method of theological reflection

I was able to participate in several funerals over the course of my ten-week placement, and, in reflecting theologically on them, I believe Laurie Green’s method to be the most useful. Its pattern comprises ‘looking intently ... moving on to explore analytically’ so that we can try to ‘perceive the important values’⁶ inherent in the situation; and then moving on to further reflection, where a second cycle occurs, that of paying attention to how ‘Christian heritage helps us look at the world ... but also that the world will in turn help us to look afresh at our Christian heritage.’⁷ This spiral, ‘which moves around continually from action to reflection and action to reflection,’⁸ works as it fuses the cycle of reflection with a sense of progress over time. It is what a thoughtful and self-aware person might do intuitively, but, crucially, it provides a template for organising the interplay of experience, teaching, thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, it implies – or at least asks the question about – growth. There were two specific incidents during my placement which provide the raw material for reflection: the episode described above and, weeks later, a conversation with a bereaved family. Between these two moments I had the opportunity – almost the need – to consider the theology. Thus, there was some preliminary reflection on the first incident which did indeed influence my approach to the second. Since then I have been able to reflect more deeply on both by sharing the experience with my fellow students, and have reached an understanding which will inform how I face these twin issues – of fear and belief – going forward.

The first experience

The visit to the ovens occurred after my first funeral. This was for Albert, a 70-plus retired lorry driver who had had a massive heart attack. John and I visited his widow, brother and sister-in-law in a tiny house in a rough part of town. I remember their strong Norfolk accents and sensed that these were hard-

working, salt-of-the-earth people: naturally reserved, close-knit and unlikely to share their feelings. They seemed to lack any religious belief whatsoever, more interested in the post-funeral arrangements. What was my role here? Was I interfering in some way? Would they be offended at being guinea pigs for a trainee priest? At the same time, I recognised the innate, easy power John had: here he was the expert, not only in matters of religion but in matters of the death ritual, including the practical, seemingly mundane arrangements – hymn selection, readings, choreography, etc. Without any real anchors in terms of relevant experience, social connection or a clear role, my fear of death, intermingled with my own awkwardness, became almost embarrassing.

When it came to the funeral itself, my main thought was how *non*-religious it all seemed, much more a civic, council-sponsored occasion, far from an event ‘to reaffirm the continuity in Christ of the living and the dead’.⁹ Even in the discussion with the bereaved beforehand, which formed the basis of the address, I was aware of the ‘tension’ between our need ‘to be consoled by narrative paradigms and our suspicion that they falsify a less comforting and more chaotic reality’,¹⁰ our need to smooth over the rough edges and paint a happy picture. During the funeral itself, I noticed a subtext of avoiding the confrontation of death: the crematorium modelled on an upturned Viking longboat, reflecting the history of the area and a rather romanticised version of sending people off; the tastefully landscaped garden of remembrance; the non-offensive but attractive bare brick walls inside; the order of service to ‘Celebrate the Life’, featuring a photo of ‘Bert’ in happier times. Even the undertakers seemed militaristic, not reverential, in the way they performed their duties, bowing at the coffin, clicking heels, marching in unison. The overall effect matched a ‘critique of the contemporary Western funeral as brief, austere, impersonal, professionalised, meaningless and poorly attended’.¹¹

At the crematorium, my role was to do the reading, my favourite, ‘I am the way the truth and the life.’¹² The words seemed hollow as I read them, trying to elicit a glimmer of belief from the tiny congregation during the pared-down service within the ‘required framework’ of the Church of England *Common Worship* guidelines.¹³ Because of the lack of the music, poetry, setting and community of my own tradition and experience, the proceedings seemed awkward, the Scripture pedestrian, the ritual mechanical; nothing within it to reinforce a faith which might have given me some insight or some strength with which to combat my fear. Once the mourners left, I made that uncomfortable visit to the ovens, and this became something of a turning point on my journey.

Exploration

My placement was in a 'suburban' parish outside a market town that served a population of 7,000 with an electoral roll of around 200. Led by an energetic vicar in partnership with his deeply committed wife and an enthusiastic curate, the parish seemed to approach death as a useful evangelical opportunity. The benefice Mission Statement, 'to create a Community with God at its heart' and specifically 'to take the gospel out into the community',¹⁴ made funerals a key manifestation of the church's perceived mission. My colleagues showed no signs of fear of death in their ministry, so that my own issues seemed both trivial and 'un-Christian'. While geographically close to my home, the parish was well outside my comfort zone, both socially and in terms of my own churchmanship. This exacerbated my anxiety. Nor was it particularly reassuring to be always introduced as someone studying to be a priest 'at Cambridge', as though that meant I might know all the answers. I worried constantly that I would say or do something to offend someone, but I genuinely wanted to help; and by widening my experience, I hoped I might have the opportunity to deal with my issues.

Certainly the sight of that burning corpse will always punctuate the memories of my time there, forcing me to acknowledge my fear of confronting death. Researchers describe this reluctance to face death as 'the idea of "successful avoidance" accompanying a system of taboos regarding all death related things'.¹⁵ Apparently I am not alone in this innate human response: 'Since fear has to do with risks of survival, it is natural that fear and death should be close partners'.¹⁶ My journal at the time suggests I asked myself the question, 'What is the fear?' Was it the multiple fears of the pain, the ultimate loneliness and the helplessness of the act of dying? Or was it the fear that Christ's promise that 'everyone who lives and believes in me will never die'¹⁷ was simply not enough for my feeble faith?

We don't really 'do' death in our twenty-first-century, secularised Western world. Not that we shrink from reports of natural disasters, terrorist atrocities and murders; or avoid death as a subject of films, fiction and even video games; but somehow, the more we watch it, the less we feel comfortable in discussing it. 'We cannot cope with death because we lack a set of images that tell us that "it is all right to lie down in good time to die, dependently leaving it to God to raise us up again"'.¹⁸ So a variety of different, sometimes contradictory, approaches swirl about: 'few believe in a hereafter without God, but many believe in God without affirming a hereafter'.¹⁹ One study suggests, 'the

number of people who believe in life after death has decreased to less than 50% of the population', but the pattern of belief is impossible to assess on any 'scientific basis in sociology'.²⁰ Another relatively recent study claims 29 per cent believe that at death 'nothing happens, we come to the end of life',²¹ and the rest believe any number of different theories. Yet, even starting from a confessing perspective, 'beyond Christian fundamentalism few address themselves to hell; indeed, even heaven receives little attention by comparison with a this-worldly focus'.²²

I myself have seen my parents, much of my family and many friends and colleagues die; I am expert at attending funerals and writing letters of condolence. Yet I feel that, in the mysterious trade of death, I am still a novice. In this I am apparently not alone: 'we are not often very skilled at expressing the numinous in our religious ritual', and funerals, like other church services, seem 'less successful at providing occasions to express conflicting emotions'.²³ Not only am I ill equipped to confront death, I am terrified of dying, despite my faith. Perhaps surprisingly, investigators say both that 'religious orientation does not necessarily reduce concern with death' and, more tellingly, that believers are 'more likely to be made anxious by thoughts about death'.²⁴

Initial reflection

Turning to the separate but interrelated spiral of theological reflection in Green's method, humanity has wrestled death and the fear of death for ages, touching the very heart of faith: 'except for man, all creatures are immortal for they are ignorant of death; what is divine, terrible, incomprehensible, is to know that one is mortal'.²⁵ After this first incident, my theological response was an avalanche of sometimes confused ideas and phrases, all of which reinforced the idea that 'as far as Christian orthodoxy is concerned it consists, very largely, in an assault upon the fear of death. In St. Paul ... death is described as "the last enemy to be destroyed"'.²⁶ If that is so, surely my fear became an indictment of not only my faith but also my formation as a priest.

Looking at that burning body made all the interrelated doctrinal questions we had been studying suddenly relevant. I thought first of the arguments of Justin Martyr and Tertullian on the resurrection of the body, asking, as they sought to counter their contemporary critics, 'Is it not impossible that the bodies of men, after they have been dissolved, and like seeds resolved into earth, should in God's appointed time rise again and put on incorruption?'²⁷ Even Calvin

wrestled with the issue of 'the resurrection of bodies that suffered corruption' and found an answer in the 'infinite power of God'.²⁸ I thought of the opposing twentieth-century views on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus himself, without which, to my mind, there can be no faith: Pannenberg's argument, 'the assertion of the reality of Jesus' resurrection appear[s] as historically very probable',²⁹ seemingly at odds with Bultmann's claims that the 'resurrection cannot prove the value of God because we cannot prove one act of faith by another'.³⁰ I thought of the nature of sin and forgiveness; the long history of the debate in the Church about whether we can 'influence the fate of the dead by the prayers of the church universal ... or settle the fate of the dead by the local congregation' who used to 'make judgements about who was fitted for Christian burial (and by implication heaven)'.³¹ Was the trucker – who lived outside the whole apparatus of repentance and forgiveness which forms much of the Church's liturgy – now forgiven and enjoying eternal life? I bewail the hypocrisy of a society which claims not to believe, but still expects heaven. Yet when the Psalmist writes, 'you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit',³² I wonder exactly what I believe that means. These questions of sin and death, resurrection and faith cannot possibly have a proper airing here, but my overarching sense was that, at the place where I needed my faith most, I seemed to have it least. And that image kept returning: the simple end of a once-living body, efficiently disposed of, very much a this-world phenomenon, not the gate to eternal bliss.

Yet gradually, almost as a result of the constant internal battle, I grew weary of it. Instead of my fear I focused on the simple universality of it all. Accepting that burnt body as the 'blight man was born for',³³ but also considering 'that to fear death itself is to live every moment of one's life in terror of a certainty that common sense tells us we must face and faith teaches us to embrace for love of God',³⁴ I could perhaps park my doubts and assuage my fear. I began to appreciate the familiar words, 'we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it',³⁵ the recollection of happy, funny incidents; finite life on earth and the need to use well the time God gives us. The sense, perhaps relief, of an ending.

An initial response

That experience in the crematorium removed one element of mystery, and it helped me to understand the role of the Church and the priest, in the context of confronting that immutable but universal certainty: the ashes that remain.

The ritual we could perform became both a 'corporal' and a 'spiritual work of mercy';³⁶ the fire not 'as purposefully destructive but as a positive sign of God's purpose'³⁷ for the body at the end of life; the value of having someone to say words of comfort – 'suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee';³⁸ the value of symbols – flowers, clothes, gravestone; the value of the memories and the favourite music; the value of the tea and drinks and sandwiches afterwards; the value of the process. I could do this.

I participated in other funerals as they arose over the course of my placement, and while the fear remained, I was less nervous, less awkward. I grew in confidence in writing and leading the prayers, and in my conversations with the families of the deceased. I recognised those universal needs.

The second experience

From this more ordered, if still fearful, perspective, I was able to gain some new insight at a funeral visit at the end of my placement. In a way, I had been through one of Green's reflective 'spirals' and was able to experience the ritual from a more self-aware perspective. The image from the crematorium, however, remained. John and I arrived at another modest but well-cared-for bungalow to find a mournful pair of grown sons, a doleful daughter-in-law, grandchildren and dog in the adjoining room (out of sight but noisy) and a widow who, with something approaching terror in her manner, said, 'You need to help me ... I don't know what I am supposed to think.' And, at that moment, I recognised those words. They were, perhaps, at the centre of my fear: the 'not knowing'.

Her husband, having slipped and fallen into the pool in their garden, apparently drowned or had a heart attack. First the neighbours and then the paramedics had tried to revive him. He survived the trip to the hospital and died there. Slowly, details emerged. He had been a docker, a hard man with Victorian values, family issues, sons perhaps not close to each other, one the favourite.

Another exploration

I was, by now, acutely aware of my own power to harm and heal here, but more amazed by the holy ground we occupied. What had begun as anxiety at having to relive the events of the past few days and of trying to discern the dim

outlines of their faith, became the process whereby the family grew together, the history of the dead man giving meaning to the stories of their lives together. In that way 'the words and language not only express, but construct the experience of grief':³⁹ the rugby-playing son seeing in his father's failings reasons to amend his own life, great and growing candour within the family, and the sense that we were *all* discovering the truth together. 'A spirit of openness which echoes and offers up the love of God.'⁴⁰ A great sense of blessing overwhelming the fear.

My fear also sprang from 'not knowing'. Not knowing the answers to all those interrelated questions about what happens, about what I believe, about what it means. Yet, in the context of this exploration with the family – piecing together the memories and reactions for the prayers and the address – the unknown became somehow less terrifying. It wasn't the universality of death that I had discovered, but its particularity. 'Death gives a particular life its full value.'⁴¹ Perhaps my role as a priest was to be there for *this* particular story, for *these* people at *this* moment. Not to expect conversion, not to expect immediate closure, and not to expect great revelation. Perhaps my fear itself was a gift of both solidarity and vulnerability in ministering at that particular point: creating the space for the 'facing and experiencing of memories, good and bad and making some sort of whole from which the future can make sense.'⁴²

Suddenly the words 'Let the dead bury their own dead' seemed to resonate.⁴³ I saw that the *process* of the sacrament is for the living, that 'it is through human relationships that we come to a sense of our identity and through their loss that we come to know grief.'⁴⁴ A requiem mass with hymns, incense and an eloquent eulogy was no more valuable than the simple visit to the crematorium. This was *their* unique moment. It was about the dignity of each person, of human life; of course, of the deceased, but, in a different way, very much of the bereaved. Completing 'this journey with the dead' allows us to 'become more attuned to the needs of the living.'⁴⁵ My 'own Christian interpretation of "overcoming death"' could lay 'not in an ignoring of death but in the acceptance of life as a daily gift ... expressing the biblical idea of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection.'⁴⁶ And in that hope, I saw one answer to the fear of the unknown that I and that widow shared.

While I thought I was wrestling with the theology surrounding death, and the practicalities of being a priest, I was really wrestling with myself. My fear was not simply fear of death but of not knowing about death. In this, using the cycle

allowed me to organise, to find a place for and to examine the flood of thoughts and emotions. The first turn of the cycle had left me with the universal, the second with the particular. My knowledge and availability grew as I had 'paid attention' to what I was learning about myself. Along the way, I began to identify the patterns in the strands of fear and belief and to at least acknowledge the 'not knowing'.

Further reflection

From a theological perspective, however, the greatest learning came from a further cycle of exploring these episodes with my colleagues. During this session, one suggested I think about Jesus' own fear. At that point I realised that in trying to digest conflicting, almost overwhelming amounts of Scripture and doctrine, I had neglected what was perhaps the most important passage, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.'⁴⁷ He died the most humiliating, painful, lonely, unjust death. Jesus had been terrified; he had lived my fear.

A deeper response

Through these cycles of reflection, I have confronted something deep inside my own self, and have been surprised at what I have learned. I am content that I will never become an 'expert' at death. My fear will not disappear; indeed, it is one part of my humanity that Christ himself assumed in his incarnation. I see that recognising my fear should reinforce not diminish my faith. Fear comes from not knowing. Not knowing about death is of course axiomatic in this life, but not knowing is also almost a *precondition* of faith. At the epicentre of not knowing, I found the image of Jesus, sweating drops of blood. Reflection illuminated my very specific journey, but this image somehow balanced and transformed the image in the crematorium.

In returning to what I feel and believe, I hope that the relationship between fear and faith might evolve as I experience death from the different perspective of ministry. It seems almost certain that each individual experience will bring with it unique lessons about this great mystery of death, some further refinement of the questions which persist. I hope that rather than looking at

the ritual simply as an occasional office, as part of the way the Church serves the wider community, I might instead appreciate the opportunities inherent: to be open to my own vulnerability, to share something genuine of myself, and to perform a really great service for the people left behind. I hope that, when they remember the deceased, they remember the Church that was there for them in the care, professionalism and empathy I might offer. Most of all, I hope we might collectively marvel at the glimpse of Jesus revealed in and through what we feel and believe about the deceased. If 'Christian belief lives with the scandal of particularity',⁴⁸ then every life honoured in this ministry becomes both an embodiment and a reminder of the entire history of salvation which is at the centre of faith.

Notes

1. Warren 2004, p. 4.
2. Warren 2004, p. 4.
3. The Book of Common Prayer 2004, 'Prayers: In the Ember Weeks, to be said every day, for those that are to be admitted into Holy Orders', p. 41.
4. John 4:18.
5. Dodaro 2004, p. 216.
6. Green 2009, p. 82.
7. Green 2009, p. 78.
8. Green 2009, p. 19.
9. Ainsworth-Smith and Speck 1982, p. 84.
10. Holmes 2015, accessed online, 23 October 2015.
11. Hockey 2001, p. 203.
12. John 14:6.
13. Bradshaw 2006, p. 208.
14. Church Profile, 'The Benefice of ... 2009'.
15. Klaus G. Magni, 'The Fear of Death', in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 132.
16. Davies 2005, p. 137.
17. John 11:26.
18. Spohn 1999, p. 57.
19. Pierre Delooz, 'Who Believes in the Hereafter', in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 47.
20. Delooz, in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 38.
21. Douglas Davies, 'Contemporary Belief in Life after Death', in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 131.
22. Davies 2005, p. 167.
23. Ramshaw 1987, pp. 32–33.
24. David Lester, 'Religious Behaviours and Attitudes', in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 122.
25. Warren 2004, p. 1, quoting J. L. Borges, 'The Immortal'.
26. Douglas Davies, quoting 1 Corinthians 15:26, in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 133.

27. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*.
28. Douglas Davies, 'Theologies of Disposal', in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 72.
29. Pannenberg 1968, p. 105.
30. Rudolph Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in Bartsch (ed.) 1953, p. 40.
31. Sheppy 2003, p. 97.
32. Psalm 16:10.
33. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Spring and Fall', in *Poems*, 1918.
34. Tillyer 1987.
35. 1 Timothy 6:7.
36. Burying the dead (corporal) and comforting the sorrowful (spiritual) in the Roman Catholic Church as described in the newsletter of the Parish of Our Lady and the English Martyrs, Cambridge, 6 December 2015.
37. Davies, in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 76.
38. The Book of Common Prayer 2004, 'At the Burial of the Dead', p. 332.
39. Michael Anderson, "'You have to get inside the person" or making grief private: image and metaphor in the therapeutic reconstruction of bereavement', in Hockey, Katz and Small (eds) 2001, p. 136.
40. Ainsworth-Smith and Speck 1982, p. 82.
41. Paul Dunblon and Andre Godin, 'How do People Speak of Death', referring to E. Minowski, in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 60.
42. Ainsworth-Smith and Speck 1982, p. 54.
43. Luke 9:60 and Matthew 8:22.
44. Davies 2005, p. 25.
45. Rich 2013, p. 196.
46. Davies, paraphrasing Schweitzer, in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 134.
47. Luke 22:44.
48. Sheppy 2003, p. 17.

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Beyond horror: mapping the contours of holiness in an acute hospital

Catherine Minor

THE REVD CATHERINE MINOR is a Methodist presbyter and a full-time hospital chaplain in the County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust.

revcminor@gmail.com
Darlington, UK

Reflecting on the experience of hospital chaplaincy in an acute hospital in the north-east of England, this article explores the conviction that God is with us both in and beyond horror. Echoes of Scripture are identified in a number of pastoral encounters, which help to illustrate the presence of God in the midst of horror. The work of chaplaincy also points to God's presence beyond the horror of present pain and death, turning the hospital into 'holy ground'.

CHAPLAINCY • HOSPITAL • DEATH • DYING • PASTORAL CARE • HOLINESS

Introduction

This article reflects on how holiness is embodied in a small patch of the NHS, an acute hospital in the north-east of England, and focuses on my daily practice with others as a hospital chaplain.

I am a 52-year-old single woman, a baptised Christian and a Methodist Presbyterian. I have known God to work very powerfully in divine and human experiences of health, healing and wholeness. First, as I was coming to faith as an adolescent a team of very skilled people, including a surgeon, saved my life. It later transpired that the surgeon was a Christian. Later I was an occupational therapist; occupational therapy being a discipline that sets out to promote health, wholeness and quality of life – surely the gospel in action. Third, I saw God at work most powerfully as my mother was dying. We had two weeks from her diagnosis to her death, and in this time she came to faith. One of the gifts she left me is my understanding that death lies within God's healing purposes. In the vocabulary of the NHS, Mother died a good death, which means that she enjoyed a life in good health followed by a time of compressed morbidity before death. We were very fortunate that it was possible for Mother to die in a hospice.

These three events equip me on a daily basis as I go into work. My personal Christian experience leads me to expect, to anticipate and to know that God is present in the hospital. In the hospital, amid all that is good, such as people offering care and working together, we are likely to encounter horror and catastrophe on a daily basis. My conviction is that God is with us in daily horror, and on the other side of horror.

Institutional context

To map the contours of holiness in a place takes time, and we need to make time intentionally to get to know the context and to build up relationships as we go out on what is holy ground.

There are many committed, fine people working in the NHS here in the north-east of England. The region faces many difficulties: we have higher than average rates of alcohol and drug addiction (older drinkers turning to sherry and Bailey's, as a specialist nurse colleague tells me, surely signs of hopelessness); very poor child dental health; an increasing number of young

women with learning difficulties who are subject to sexual exploitation; and a significant number of older people who arrive in hospital malnourished.

The culture of the NHS is increasingly target-driven, which can often stifle individual initiative and decision-making. Sometimes the NHS can feel like a political football and it can be enervating to work in an institution under such scrutiny, which is the subject of endless media stories that are often unfavourable, especially in relation to the contentious issue of funding. It is therefore immensely encouraging to see letters in the local paper or obituaries which acknowledge good experiences of care. I reflect that it is a deeply holy thing to offer encouragement.

We see perseverance modelled daily as ward staff in particular go into shift after shift to be with people who may be acutely ill, frightened, angry or in pain, often while those same staff are carrying their own concerns about their own health, family or financial resources.

The NHS is a human institution, and one of the largest employers in the country. As such, it is a flawed institution run by flawed people, and so sometimes things do go wrong. Some events are labelled 'never incidents', in the sense that checks should be in place to eliminate the possibility of the mistake happening; nevertheless, these incidents do happen, perhaps as a corporate outworking of Paul's understanding of the human condition wherein sometimes, even when we set out to do the right thing, we can still fail.¹ Clearly the consequences of something going wrong in the hospital may be life-changing for a patient, or indeed for the person who carried out the failed procedure.

The collision of life and death

Sadly, as a chaplain, I am often called to the labour ward to bless a baby that has died either before or shortly after birth. When birth and death collide something is dreadfully wrong and, for the parents at that point, all hope is lost. God is present as skilled nurses and midwives continue to administer pain relief; as members of the hospital medical illustration team take photos of the child for the parents to keep; as the bereavement support officer offers help with paperwork to prove the child had an existence so that local registrars may register the birth and the death. Each year the chaplains hold a special Baby Loss Service to help the parents.

In the immediate aftermath of the loss a chaplain may be invited in to bless the baby. At this point a simple prayer will affirm that God treasures all life, no matter how short or long, and that, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has shown us that death does not have the last word in our life.

In my first Advent as a hospital chaplain the hard reality of pregnancy loss revealed to me in a new way the extent of the risk that God chose to take in the Incarnation. What if Mary and Joseph had known this acute sadness? Mary took a huge risk in cooperating with God; in those days a Jewish woman had a one-in-three chance of dying in childbirth. I found one baby loss funeral that Advent even grimmer than usual. The young parents attended the crematorium alone (this may have been their choice) and it seemed to me they could so easily be the Holy Family.

Experiences of 'horror' in hospital can be enlightened by reflection on Scripture, which in turn can help the chaplain to recognise God's holy presence in the situation.

Recognising holiness

Holiness is a defining quality of God. Rowan Williams has written recently that holiness evolves throughout the Scriptures.² In the Hebrew Scriptures, God's holiness is ascribed to God by the angels, as the Seraphs proclaim in Isaiah 6:3. Here God is set apart, since no one could look on God and live. As events unfold into the New Testament, it is another angel, Gabriel, who is present to announce to Mary that her son Jesus, as God's son, will also be holy.³ Holiness is now incarnate.

One of the early Church Fathers, Athanasius, wrote about the Incarnation: 'He became what we are that we might become what he is.'⁴ In the Epistles, holiness becomes a marker of God's people as we increasingly reflect the glory of God in our daily lives. Our calling as Christians is to live a life of sanctification; that is, throughout our lives we are called continually to choose to cooperate with God in the lifelong process of becoming holy by drawing closer to God and entering more deeply into our common humanity.

For Williams, John's Gospel presents the crucifixion as the ultimate holy act as Jesus embraces the Cross. In the Hebrew Scriptures God is often set apart; whereas in the New Testament God, as we know him in Jesus, allies himself with the totality of our human experience, including suffering and catastrophe,

going beyond the city walls to accept death in its most humiliating and shameful form. Holiness is recognised in the Cross.

But holiness is also recognised in the people of God who are called together by Jesus. In the New Testament the holiness that characterised the Temple in Jerusalem now permeates Christian people. In 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 we become holy as we work with the Holy Spirit in our lives.

During a sabbatical from circuit life and work I undertook a 30-day silent retreat and followed the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius. As part of the retreat the Lord invited me to call to mind the faces of the people in my life who show me Godliness, and then he asked me very directly if I would like a vision of the Holy Spirit. Of course I said yes. When I looked again, I saw the same faces. We recognise a holy person through what they embody and the degree to which the fruits of the Holy Spirit are shown in their lives.⁵ To put this more simply, I turn to L, a woman in her nineties in the South Wales Valleys who once said to me, ‘You see, Catherine, we’re the Bible for people who don’t go to Church.’

What each and every one of us embodies as Christians is crucial as people do evaluate us to see if we are people of integrity. Eyes are on us. One colleague remarked recently, ‘Do you know, Catherine, you’re the only vicar [*sic*] I know?’

Holy presence, holy Scripture

In all contexts holiness is expressed through relationship as God continually desires to draw people to himself through Jesus. A key component of relationship is presence, and the chaplain has the opportunity to model that God is present at all times and in all places, one moment holding and blessing a baby that has died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in the presence of the child’s family, and the next moment taking part in the wedding of a nurse colleague.

Time and again the hospital chaplain is present as death, perhaps the ultimate impenetrable mystery, is faced. Death lies ahead for all of us. To journey with a person who knows they are dying and with those around them is a huge privilege. The hospital can be a place of excoriating truth as things we value – the things we may think make us who we are – are stripped away: our health, our vitality, our accomplishments, our ability to self-care. In response we may begin to ask key questions: is my life worthwhile? Am I being punished? What will happen to the people I love when I die?

Often the chaplain encounters people at a moment in their lives when medicine can do no more and the questions may be huge. It is enormously humbling when a dying person's chief concern is for those who will survive them. There are echoes in Scripture. In John 14, at a point when Jesus knows his own death is at hand, he is concerned to prepare the disciples from whom he is soon to depart and he reassures them by promising the presence of the Holy Spirit. Recently a woman of great faith was diagnosed with a rapid, aggressive form of cancer. She immediately called her minister to her bedside in order to plan her funeral. I have seen some Christians make a huge impact by the manner in which they faced their own death.

Holiness in pastoral relationships is shaped by the engagement we have with Scripture, with ourselves and with those around us. It requires that we remain alert and attentive as Scripture unfolds around us each day.

At times of catastrophe the chaplain may be called upon to stand with bereaved parents and to acknowledge that, at that point for the parents, all hope is lost. The Scriptures engage with all our human responses and the Psalms voice the depths of human distress on occasion, as in Psalm 6:6–7: 'I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief.'

In the book of Job we read of a man who came to wish he had never been born (Job 3:1–3). Three of his friends attempt to respond: Eliphaz's response is to focus on his own woes (4:12–16); Bildad's response is to infer that Job has sinned (8:3–6); while Zohar appears to believe that God has turned against Job (11:5–12). Finally, Elihu becomes angry with Job. None of these are particularly fruitful responses. Ultimately it is the presence of God (Job 40—42) that transforms life for Job. It is not helpful to construe suffering as a problem to be solved; rather, to borrow the words of Neil Richardson, 'No experience is wasted if in it we experience God.'⁶ Unlike Job's friends, chaplains are at times called to silence, as there are moments when only silence is adequate.⁷ A silent presence may be deeply healing.

In the hospital the chaplain has the deep privilege of accompanying people at key moments and the chaplain needs to be anchored and grounded in the narrative of faith. When we search the Scriptures we hear much written in the human register that addresses events likely to unfold in the hospital. In many of the circumstances referred to above – on the labour ward, for instance – we hear an echo of Matthew 2:18, the lamentation of Rachel as she weeps for her dead children.

In the hospital the chaplain needs to be alert to the fact that people may be frightened and that fear may present as anger. In the New Testament the disciples know fear in Matthew 8:23–27 as they face drowning. Phyllis Tribble identifies fear as a theme in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament.⁸ 'Do not be afraid' is the most frequently occurring command.

Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl, is so fearful she runs away from her mistress Sarai who is treating her harshly (Gen 16:6). It is in this fearful state that she encounters an angel of the Lord right in the wilderness by a spring (Gen 16:7). This frightened young slave girl is the first person in Scripture to be visited by such an envoy. At times, it may be very important to give people permission to feel fear, in order for them to then encounter God in the fear.

The events surrounding the crucifixion are shot through with fear and we may only speculate as to what prompted the words Jesus spoke from the Cross in Matthew 27:46, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' A presbyter, then living with cancer, became exasperated with those who kept telling her there was light at the end of the tunnel. One day she snapped and said, 'I'm not interested in light at the end of the tunnel; I want light in the tunnel here with me now.'⁹ Chaplaincy seeks to reveal the presence of God that accompanies us wherever we go. This work is characterised both by being present and by listening for the echoes of Scripture in the situations that are faced day by day.

Chaplaincy invites us to consider God's presence at all stages of life. As increasingly we are living for longer, a visit to the Elderly Care Ward causes us to reflect deeply: what is it to be human? Here I encounter many people who seemingly come to consciousness in hospital, unaware of what has happened to them, or why they are in hospital. Many things can be disorientating, such as a urinary tract infection or a stroke, or a fall that precipitates a hospital admission. On this ward we encounter people who may have lost their speech temporarily or permanently; here we encounter people living with dementia and other degenerative neurological conditions.

Here, holiness lies in remembering that each person continues to be a beloved daughter or son of God, irrespective of their medical status or condition. It means continuing to treat them with respect when, perhaps in the eyes of the wider world, the person is no longer useful (for example, no longer economically active). This ward really brings us face to face with our common humanity as we recognise that we are all on our way to the Elderly Care Ward unless death intervenes.

Death itself remains a taboo subject and yet holiness requires of us that we keep company with Jesus who also died. For this reason, we are wise to engage with death, to prepare ourselves and to help others before death approaches. Death can be a gift that helps us to refine and to identify what really matters to us. A chaplain may participate in specific circumstances in emergency weddings on the ward or in ITU: these are deeply moving events when a person can go from being a bride or groom to widow or widower in a matter of hours. It is a reminder that death is the ultimate backdrop to our lives, as we draw closer to God in the present.

The hospital as holy ground

In conclusion: holiness can be found in the hospital, as life and death are encountered day by day. Chaplaincy enables God's people intentionally to explore this piece of holy ground, secure in the knowledge that God is present and in Jesus knows what it is to be fully human, and in the confidence in God's ability to transform people and situations.

In my experience, the hospital is a distinctive context, in that it can function as a place of truth when all our props and distractions are taken away. As a Roman Catholic deacon colleague notes, in Luke 8 some soil is fertile and receptive, and in hospital the ground can often shift under us and focus our attention on ultimate matters. The ground of people's lives here in hospital may be better prepared for the Lord to help them make sense of their lives.

The holiness of our common humanity is continually at the forefront as we together face times of illness, despair, pain and fear and look for God in them. Equally, there are times of joy and delight: for example, blessing a live baby, hearing and sharing in laughter, and remembering that, of course, most people do go home after an admission. The mystery that is God is glimpsed in birth and death, and the Scriptures equip us for holiness as they pay careful attention to our range of human experiences – including fear on occasion – revealing to us the God who is continually seeking us out and who longs to engage with us.

The hospital as a place of life and death reveals to us the magnitude of the risk that God took in the Incarnation. The hospital chaplain is called upon to walk the boundary between life and death regularly; in so doing, the reality of Jesus' resurrection putting death in its place becomes more acute. We see holiness

in the hospital as we explore together the God who is ultimately greater than and able to contain our horror. This is holy ground, as we encounter Jesus who enters into all things with us: with us in horror, and waiting for us on horror's other side.

Notes

1. Romans 7:19–20.
2. Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*, London: SPCK, 2016.
3. Luke 1:35.
4. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, para 54.
5. Galatians 5:22–23.
6. Neil Richardson in a private conversation.
7. Ecclesiastes 3:1–8.
8. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984.
9. In a private conversation.



A good death? Pastoral reflections on closing a chapel

Elizabeth Dunning

THE REVD ELIZABETH DUNNING is a Methodist presbyter currently serving in the Brownhills and Willenhall Methodist Circuit.

elizabeth.dunning@methodist.org.uk
Walsall, UK

This article reflects on an experience of the closure of a chapel, exploring ways to challenge the assumption that closure is a failure. Noting the lack of intentional resources to aid churches considering closure, the author identifies the Passion and resurrection narratives as a biblical model for the stages of church awareness of change. Reflecting on these narratives enables the closure of a chapel to be considered as a fitting conclusion to work accomplished, as 'a good death'.

CHURCH CLOSURE • DEATH • GRIEF • HOLY WEEK • FUNERAL

We sit around the table in the church hall as I reiterate the proposal on which we are about to vote – the decision to cease to meet as a society. In other words, the closure of the chapel. I ask for those in favour to raise their hands. I look around the small group as hands are raised – some more reluctantly than others. One or two look at the table as they do so, perhaps unable to look at each other. It is a unanimous decision. The chapel is to close. I find that tears well in my eyes, and I ask the circuit steward (also a local preacher) to pray for us. His prayer is one of comfort and assurance in God's future.

In this article I offer some reflections on the process of closure of chapels and the impact these processes may have upon a congregation. I cannot say that I speak from a wealth of experience of having closed chapels. In fact, I've been directly involved with only one. Yet, I have listened to and talked with many other ministers and congregations who have been through the experience. Each circuit that I have known has had chapels close in the recent past. The closure of a chapel resonates beyond the immediate congregation – chapel closure doesn't happen in isolation.

I offer these theological reflections in a pastoral context as I see that change and death are themes in the closure of chapels. Yes, there are practical aspects in these conversations – the logistics of death if you like. But while the closure of a chapel can be dominated by practicalities at the end, it all happens within the context of pastoral care and concern.

The times they are a-changing

When I began my first appointment as a probationer minister I knew I might be responsible for closing chapels; in the last months of that same appointment, this became a reality. A church for which I had pastoral responsibility took the decision to close.

It may seem somewhat ruthless or lacking in hope to anticipate closure of chapels. For me, such a conviction came from a realisation that Methodism, the denomination which has run through my family's history for generations, will look very different by the time I come to 'sit down' from when I was accepted into full connexion.

We don't have to go far to find information about the changes in Western Methodism – statistics on declining membership and participation. I have no

intention to rehearse that story here. The Church is changing because society is changing. Change is inevitable. How churches respond, though, is variable. Some congregations seek to connect with their communities as they change; other congregations are fighting the dying of the light. It's not unusual to find both responses within the same church.

Responding to change

Much is written and said about exploring new approaches to mission, outreach and discipleship that connect with the current age, and I welcome these. Of course we should be responding to and connecting with the communities in which we find ourselves, seeing where God is at work and getting alongside that work. There are so many resources available to churches and individuals for this purpose that we are spoilt for choice. But having now walked with one congregation through the decision to close their chapel, I find that actual resources to support such a journey are less abundant.

Why is this? Perhaps such resources would be seen as portents of doom; after all, what leader would be welcomed to a church if they arrived with a course 'Close Your Chapel in Five Easy Steps' under their arm? Perhaps such resources could be seen as assuming the worst, as lacking in hope or trust. Do we really want to admit openly that a church has reached the end of its life?

The process of closing a chapel thus needs some revision. I believe that the closure of a chapel need not be seen as a failure of hope or trust or discipleship. I believe that it can be an opportunity for discipleship, and resources supporting the process of closing chapels belong with the resources and projects around mission, outreach, discipleship and growth.

Closing time

The fact is, closing chapels isn't easy. If anyone says it is then they're not doing it properly, or at least not in a way which is caring of the people and of the heritage of faith in that place. Pastoral issues aside, it's just complicated – forms, permissions, surveys, agents, solicitors, legal language. They say that the death of a partner or moving house are two of the top five most stressful life events – perhaps we might add the closure of a chapel too.

In my experience, it takes time to close a chapel well. In the chapel for which I had responsibility, we spent at least 18 months having intentional conversations about the future of the fellowship in that town. Sometimes these conversations were held, with food, after worship, sometimes at church council meetings. We looked together at the different options that the congregational members had offered themselves – do nothing, become a class of another church, merge with another church on a new site, change the style of worship.

Even if I considered some of the ideas as unlikely or unviable, I knew I needed to take the ideas seriously, giving them appropriate attention. At each point I took time to summarise the conversations and reiterate the decisions we had taken, making sure that all the members were kept informed even if they were unable to be at each meeting. These intentional meetings, with the corresponding notes and letters, gently encouraged an honest assessment of the current situation for the church; we were not going to leave our heads in the sand. I acknowledged that this was difficult for them, and that to have such conversations required courage and honesty. We gave space to talk about the heritage of the chapel and how it was woven into the lives of those who were members: memories of childhood, families and loved ones.

This process also meant that we took time to talk to others, and to the circuit in particular. There was also care and concern from our ecumenical neighbours in the town. In sharing the conversations with others, there was a sense of assurance that the congregation was not walking this path alone but with others, who would hold them in prayer. As it became clearer that closing the chapel was more likely, I spoke of believing in a ‘good ending’. As I wrote to them in one of the pastoral letters:

I believe in a loving God who can, and does, do new things, who does bring new life. I also believe in seasons – times for beginnings, and times for endings. Sometimes, in order for new life to happen we have to let go of things – places, ways of doing things. These may be things which are precious to us, and I know that that can be difficult. Stepping out in faith sometimes requires courage.

It was this careful journey we took together that led us to the point of making the decision to close the chapel.

Biblical narratives

It is vital that we use biblical narratives to inspire and inform our conversations as fellowships of faith. In the quote from my pastoral letter above, there is the hint of Ecclesiastes ('For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven'¹).

As I reflect on the journey this one congregation took towards the decision to close, as well as on similar stories from other congregations responding to changes around them, I feel there is resonance with the Holy Week and Easter narratives. Chapels or individuals can be placed at different points in the Passion and resurrection narratives:

- Some are living through Palm Sunday – all is going well, the numbers are high and everyone is involved and excited.
- Some are in the middle of Holy Week – the euphoria of Palm Sunday has gone and the ominous clouds are gathering; they remember the numbers of Palm Sunday and are wondering what's changed. Why are people no longer joining in?
- Some are on Maundy Thursday – there is much that is familiar, the same rituals and services, but there is also a strong sense that something is about to happen, something risky, something important. Choices are to be made.
- Some are at Good Friday – death has occurred. The worst has happened. The chapel has closed. All is finished.
- Some are on Holy Saturday – the day of limbo, of the numbness of mourning; no sight of what is ahead other than nothingness.
- Some are on Easter Sunday – resurrection and new life beyond the grave, fresh and exciting.
- Some are at the Ascension – still new and joyful, but with a growing awareness, 'We've got to do this by ourselves now.'
- Some are at Pentecost – at the birth of the church, a deeper discipleship, a willingness to step out in faith and experience what God has in store.

If we desire Pentecost for our churches, then we have to be prepared to go through Holy Week and all that this journey entails. We first have to pass through death, in the conviction that it is possible to have a good death.

Death is something after all

The key to going through significant changes, including the closure of chapels, is to face up to the actuality of death: the death of 'the way things were', the death of a particular chapter in the life of a chapel, the death of the ways we do things now, the closure of a beloved building. Part of living with death is grief. Grief is what happens as we process the reality of death. Grief is not to be avoided, rather it is to be accepted, worked with, and woven into the tapestry of our lives. Grief is not the failure of faith or absence of hope.

Perhaps there is a temptation to deny or smother grief when congregations face significant changes or the closure of their chapel; maybe we want to put on a brave face and be resolutely cheerful because we must show that we trust in God's future. Showing grief or uncertainty might suggest we don't trust God after all. But denying grief is denying something of the human and divine experience. Jesus wept, even though he knew God's power to restore life. Jesus' grief belonged to the story of hope.²

Ours is a faith of hope in the Resurrection and new life; that faith is lessened if we do not admit to the reality of death as well. Ours is not an acknowledgement that 'death is nothing at all';³ but rather the conviction that 'death has lost its sting';⁴ ours is a faith which speaks of a love which is stronger than death.⁵ In a society which makes death a taboo, surely we ought to be courageous in speaking about it, because we have something hopeful to say about death. As our funeral liturgy says:

In the presence of death,
Christ offers us sure ground
for hope and confidence and even for joy,
because he shared our human life and death,
was raised again triumphant
and lives for evermore.
In him his people find eternal life.⁶

Therefore, the death of 'the way things were' or the death of a physical chapel can be something about which we can speak openly, honestly and hopefully. When a loved one dies, do we not mourn like everyone else? So too we may be open and honest about the hurt, the grief, the guilt, the numbness, the anger, and the bewilderment which experiencing the closure of a chapel can bring. But let us also weave the hope of faith into these words and actions.

Not failure

Earlier I pondered that one reason for the apparent resistance to talking openly and positively of the closure of chapels is that closure often represents failure. The closure of a chapel might represent the failure of the congregation, the minister, the circuit; but deep down it might suggest a failure of faith and faithfulness, a failure of trust in God and God's power. We look at churches which are flourishing in numbers and wonder what they are doing differently. I remember when I spoke with some members of a chapel which had closed and found there was a common refrain: 'if only we had ...', or, 'if only they had ...'.

If there has been a failure, then the next step is to ask 'Whose fault is it?' I have heard the accounts that place the blame at others' feet – 'the circuit abandoned us', 'the minister didn't do enough', 'people left us'. I rather think anger and hurt directed at others could be a way of avoiding deeper feelings of personal guilt. Maybe we don't want to ask 'Was it our fault?' 'Was it my fault?' These are far more uncomfortable questions as they call us to doubt the quality of our discipleship: 'Am I a good enough Christian?' I know I asked myself if there was more I could have done for the chapel which decided to close. It wasn't easy to see the hurt of those congregational members and take responsibility for leading them through this pain.

In the light of this, church closure can create a crisis of faith for the individuals involved and for them collectively. Not only might we question the quality of our own discipleship, but we might question whether it's all been worth it. Have we backed the wrong horse (to use a thoroughly un-Methodist analogy)? If God is all-powerful and the Church is to be triumphant, then why has this happened to us?

I want to say that chapel closure is not synonymous with failure. This has a biblical resonance. When Christ died on the Cross, there were those who thought this was the failure of the Jesus-experiment. The followers who encountered the risen Christ as they returned to Emmaus⁷ were full of the sense of bewilderment, confusion and disappointment: 'But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.'⁸ Before long, they discovered that Jesus' death wasn't failure but triumph, which could only have happened *because* of death, not *in spite* of death. In John's Gospel, Jesus precedes his speaking of his own death by using the analogy of wheat:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.⁹

Why should this not also be the case for chapels? The closure of a chapel building could be the beginning of new life. The building may have new uses for the community; the fellowship may travel and offer new life to other congregations; the release of resources and the release from the cares of tending a chapel building (which we know can be onerous) may be life-giving for the members.

Closure of our chapels may also represent the fulfilment of faithful discipleship in a particular time and place. The history and heritage of many of our chapel buildings often reflect given points in the history of a community: the small chapels on the edge of villages built for the farm workers when agriculture was less mechanised; the large city-centre churches which were a religious rejoinder to the Victorian passion for imperial (or imperious) civic buildings. Society and communities have changed. The population lives and works in different patterns and different places; as such, it may be that the original intention for the building is no longer relevant. Many of our buildings have adapted and are adaptable to the changes, but for some a time may come when it can be said, 'well done, good and faithful servant.'¹⁰ How a chapel closes could reflect the faithful acceptance of Simeon as he beholds the Christ-child for whom he'd waited so long:

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'¹¹

Perhaps, at times, closure can happen with that sense that 'our work here is done'.

A good death

It is in the nature of the itinerary of ordained Methodist ministers that we move on. We cannot always walk the entire path with a congregation. The church council meeting at which my congregation decided to close the chapel was the final meeting I had with them. A couple of months later I moved away from that circuit; the congregation had a new minister to walk with them to the final service at the chapel and to decisions about the future of the chapel building.

However, I had already begun to ponder how I would approach those final months if I were still their minister, and had begun to plan how I might enable them to reach 'a good death'. This was the 'Course for Closing Chapels' that I feel is missing in the array of resources available today, using biblical themes to explore the different emotions and thoughts as we walked together towards the final service. While the practicalities of closure would need to be discussed, the focus would be more upon drawing out ideas of faithfulness, discipleship and hope.¹²

If closing churches continues to be part of the life of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, it is essential that we learn together what makes for 'a good death' for a church. This can only be done by engaging with the biblical narratives about resurrection and death, and with our tradition, which sees the possibility that death is the fulfilment of one portion of life and the opening onto another:

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath;
and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my nobler powers;
my days of praise shall ne'er be past,
while life and thought and being last,
or immortality endures.¹³

Appendix

A GOOD DEATH: FOUR SESSIONS FOR CHAPELS THAT HAVE DECIDED TO CLOSE

1. Sharing our stories – remembering the heritage of the chapel, of the community and of individuals.
 - Exploring the heritage using the following prompts:
 - When and why people started attending the chapel.
 - How they and their families' stories were linked to the chapel, perhaps through key events such as births, marriages and deaths.
 - Key moments in the chapel's history.
 - How the chapel has been part of the community over the years.
 - Using photos or mementos to create a display which represents the journey of faith of the chapel and its people, and how the chapel's story and the individuals' stories are woven together.
2. Thinking about the seasons of life – focusing our journey of faith and discipleship.
 - Using Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 to explore the seasons of life.
 - Looking at the resources of our hymns to speak about our journey with God.
3. Exploring emotions around death and dying, grief, and moving on from a chapel.¹⁴
 - Anger – Psalm 13; Psalm 22; Jonah.
 - Wilderness – the Israelites in the desert (Exodus); Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11); Psalm 22.
 - Lament and sorrow – for example: Lamentations; Psalm 84; Psalms 42 and 43.
 - Relief/fulfilment/acceptance – for example: Simeon's song (Luke 2:28–32); Psalm 131; 'lost parables' (eg Luke 15:1–10).
 - Remembering – for example: Psalm 84.

- Reconciliation and forgiveness – for example: Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32); Jesus and Peter (John 21:15–19).
- Death and resurrection – for example: John 12; 1 Corinthians 15.

4. Planning the final service and related events together.

- Reflecting on the funeral service together and considering what might be echoed in the closing service.
- Allowing the people to shape the worship.
- Thinking about who to invite from the church and community to enable the chapel's story to have a good end.

Notes

1. Ecclesiastes 3:1.
2. John 11:17–44.
3. Henry Scott Holland (1847–1918), 'Death is nothing at all'.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:55.
5. Romans 8:38–39.
6. *The Methodist Worship Book*, London: Methodist Publishing House, 1999, p. 449.
7. Luke 24:13–35.
8. Luke 24:21a.
9. John 12:24–25.
10. Matthew 25:21.
11. Luke 2:28–32.
12. An outline of this course is included as an appendix.
13. Issac Watts (1674–1748), *Singing the Faith*, London: Methodist Publishing House, 2011, no 79.
14. The resource *Seasons of My Soul: Conversations in the Second Half of Life*, published by The Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of England (London, 2014) could be usefully adapted for this.



What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?

‘On Visiting the Sick’: the art of pastoral conversation

Jane Leach

THE REV'D DR JANE LEACH is Principal of Wesley House, Cambridge. She teaches and supervises in the fields of practical theology, ministry, supervision and the dialogue between psychology and religion, and is a regular contributor to Radio 4's Thought for the Day.

jl332@cam.ac.uk
Cambridge, UK

This article is a transcript of a lecture delivered as part of the first series of Wesley Memorial Lectures given at Wesley Memorial Church in Oxford in July 2016. Originally entitled ‘Speaking of God in Private’, this lecture was followed by a second, ‘Speaking of God in Public’. It is included here as part of the ongoing journal series exploring what the sermons of John Wesley have done for us, and it stands largely unchanged from its first delivery in order to retain its texture and tone. This article addresses the questions of why in Western culture it is a problem to speak of God in personal conversation; why this is true even within some churches; and whether there are any pointers towards how intentional conversation about God might be recovered in the contemporary Western context in the sermon of John Wesley’s of 1786, ‘On Visiting the Sick’.

EVANGELISM • HUMANISM • LANGUAGE • PASTORAL CONVERSATION • PRAYER • PRESENCE • SECULARISATION • VISITATION • WESLEY • WESTERN CULTURE

Introduction

I am grateful for this invitation to explore the theme, 'What language shall I borrow – speaking of God in private?' This article engages in conversation with a sermon of John Wesley's from a contemporary point of view, addressing the urgent question of how we speak of God in today's world in ways that make sense to all concerned.

At least two questions are begged by this topic. First, what is the urgency in speaking of God? Second, why consult John Wesley?

What is the urgency?

We are living in turbulent times in which many cry out for direction and for leadership as the bankruptcy of our political system and elite is exposed. Rising numbers of migrants, rising sea levels and the rise of popular nationalism with its xenophobic and racist overtones are all causes of serious concern for anyone who believes in God's commitment to the whole inhabited earth. Yet speaking of God produces deeply ambivalent reactions both in public discourse and in personal conversation. Many people are suspicious of the motives of Christians; many people are disengaged from and disillusioned with institutions of all kinds; religious expressions of terrorism and of oppression are demonstrably part of the problem that the world faces. In this context, whether in public or in private, those who are serious about witnessing to a God of justice and love have to face the question, 'What language can I borrow, with which to communicate effectively the deep things of God?'

The first urgency, I believe, is that God's is the wisdom that the world desperately needs to inform public life. The second urgency is of course bound up with the first but focuses our attention on the lives of individuals as people for whom God deeply cares because their hearts will be restless till they find their rest in him. A third urgency might be cited, and this concerns the figures on church decline. If we cannot speak of God in ways that make sense to people within and beyond our churches, then our churches will not grow. 'Evangelise or perish' was a slogan of Billy Graham's in the 1960s. 'Evangelism is the main thing' is the way that Martyn Atkins put it to the Methodist Conference of 2011. Yet there is a danger in such pragmatic logic, as he noted in the General Secretary's written report that year, that we fall into instrumental thinking – that we come to see the perpetuation of the Church as we know it as an end in itself and those we seek to evangelise as a means to our end, rather than

understanding ourselves as people called to love those whom God loves and to share with them what we have come to know of God, because they, too, are God’s creatures and they too are beloved.¹

Why converse on this subject with John Wesley?

The second preliminary question is ‘Why converse with John Wesley?’ Of course, I am a Methodist and this article was first delivered as a lecture in Wesley’s Oxford, but the reasons run deeper than that. As someone who began their academic life as an undergraduate historian, my instinct is often to ask whether there is anything to be learned from other times and places that might help us to reframe the demands of our own context and reform our own practices. This is a way of paying explicit attention in our theological reflection not only to the Bible and to our experience but also to the tradition of the Church in which we stand so that we can reason in relation to all three.

A further reason for consulting Mr Wesley on these subjects is because he was both an evangelist concerned to reach those who did not know Christ and someone who knew that the life of faith needs nurture and care if it is to be sustained – he was a committed practitioner who both spoke of God in public and in private in an age in which it was not always considered polite to do so.

The art of pastoral conversation

Pastoral visiting is perhaps the most obvious context in which many of us might expect to consider the question of how to conduct pastoral conversation, but there are lots of contexts that I would like us to hold in mind as we explore what speaking of God in private might entail:

You might imagine yourself by a hospital bed visiting a fellow member of the Church, or in your living room explaining to a stranger in a dog collar what your parent or partner or child believed or did not believe and how you want the funeral to be. You might imagine yourself writing an email or responding to a social media post about the events of someone’s life that have left you lost for words. You might imagine yourself confronted by someone who is street homeless and who is asking you for money. Or that you are wearing a street pastor uniform and sitting with a young woman, rather the worse for wear, who has lost her handbag; you might be sitting in the church coffee lounge after the Sunday service or on a weekday, or you might even be in a church fellowship group.

In asking you to think like this I am deliberately wanting to blur the distinction between pastoral care and evangelism. Pastoral care might in recent generations have been primarily problem-focused and resourced by psychological theory. In some contexts, such as schools, pastoral care no longer has any explicit link with the care that God offers as the Good Shepherd. Yet in earlier generations pastoral care meant 'care of God's flock' – whether narrowly understood as the sheep who hear the Shepherd's voice, or more broadly understood as all for whom God cares. Reversing the trends of the second half of the twentieth century, in more recent revisionist times, pastoral theologians have been keen to re-root the one-to-one care offered by representatives of the Church more explicitly in the resources of the Christian tradition, seeing the role of pastoral care as helping people to grow in faith or even come to faith through the challenges that life brings and helping them to engage directly with the God who cares for them, through prayer, the Bible and the sacramental life of the wider Body of Christ. This is not to deny the wisdom of psychological insights (there is still much for us to learn), but it is to claim, with Walter Brueggemann, that pastoral care is essentially a liturgical enterprise in which the voice of God must be allowed to speak: 'The theological ground for such a practice is that health [emerges] out of the memory of the tradition that has long mediated life and health to this community.'²

Meanwhile, it might be argued that evangelism in the twentieth century was primarily conceived as the presentation of the Christian faith to those unfamiliar with it or unconvinced by it, in the hope of introducing them to saving faith in Christ. In this way, evangelism has often been explicit in its use of the resources and language of the Christian tradition. A frequent criticism of evangelism so conceived, however, has been that even in one-to-one conversation it has often been in broadcast mode.

The thinking and practice of evangelism, like pastoral care, has also moved on. It speaks increasingly of accompanying others on their journeys rather than imposing our own. It uses passages of Scripture like the Emmaus Road narrative of Luke 24, suggesting that we need to listen to where people are at before we start to unpack the Scriptures with them; suggesting that we need to make a journey too, not staying on the comfortable territory that we know well, but opening ourselves up to being the guest in other people's language forms, other people's homes, other people's worlds, and finding what God is doing there.³

In the twentieth century, pastoral care and evangelism may have been on separate tracks and often sponsored by very different parts of the Church

(perhaps you know with which track you identify) but our twenty-first-century Western culture is demanding something different from us in which pastoral care is relearning something about how to speak of God in private; and evangelism is learning something about how to listen to and accompany people on the journeys they are on. The demand that we address this is urgent because of the impoverishment of the life of the Church when we have lost a credible language in which we can speak about God to one another in private and so put one another in touch with the holding and the healing of God in our daily lives; and because if it is true that we cannot effectively hold one another in faith, then surely we cannot expect to offer the life of faith credibly to those who wouldn't think of looking to Christianity or to Christ for what they or the world needs.

In order to make progress in understanding how we might speak of God in private in ways that make sense to us and to others I want us to spend some time thinking about three things:

- 1 the Western cultural context and why speaking of God is a problem
- 2 the culture of our churches and why speaking about God is sometimes a problem even there
- 3 what we can learn from John Wesley's sermon, 'On Visiting the Sick', about how we might conduct one-to-one conversations in a variety of settings in which we might be able to put one another in touch with God.

Why is speaking of God a problem in Western culture?

Alan Billings, lifelong theological educator and sometime tutor at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, near Oxford, speaks in a book of 2010 of the need for contemporary Christians to 'make God possible' or to make even the 'idea' of God possible and the person of God 'findable' because he believes that it is no longer obvious to many people how to do this. He points out that although for the last 1,500 years most people have associated with organised religion, this is increasingly not the case.⁴

Why is this? First of all he names the various processes of secularisation as being to blame. Since the nineteenth century there has been a steady decline in the visibility of the Church in public life and a steady decline in the numbers of

people engaged in Christian practice, and so Billings argues that belief in the world-view represented by Christianity has declined. People no longer turn to the Church to mediate the boundary between the mundane and the sacred because, he proposes, many people have come to believe that 'this is all there is'. Under these conditions, there is no such boundary any longer to be negotiated.

Of course, it is equally possible to argue that it is the decline in Christian belief that has led to the decline in Christian practice. And in this case the rise of scientific-rational modes of reasoning that require evidence-based thinking rather than faith-based testimony, the problems of suffering raised by the First World War, and an increasing awareness of pluralism through the processes of globalisation are often cited as contributory factors.

For our purposes, perhaps it is enough to note that a decline in Christian practice and a decline in Christian belief are mutually reinforcing factors in the creation of a culture in which there is no longer a shared language for speaking about existential things:

Imagine a funeral at which the minister's role is to create a shared sense of the 'we' who are gathered, but without a shared sense of what it is that 'we' are gathered here to do ... perhaps we are not even gathered around a person's body such that our common purpose can be described as the reverent disposal of their earthly remains. 'We' are probably not here to declare our faith in the resurrection of the body; 'we' are probably not here to take comfort and draw hope from the familiar words of Scripture; 'we' are probably not here to commend the person to God's eternal care (let alone God's judgement). Even if we are, we lack a shared language in which to do it, for the words are no longer familiar and the beliefs referenced have lost their anchor in the lives and stories from which they arose.

This does not, of course, mean that there is no interest in the spiritual journey. Hay and Hunt, for example, in a survey of 2000, found that 76 per cent of respondents admitted to having had a spiritual experience:

We know from the research we have done that most people's spirituality is a long way from institutional religion. This spirituality has little doctrinal content, and few people have more than the vaguest remnants of religious language to express their experience of God.⁵

This lack of shared language makes communication between Christians and others about things that matter a tricky business. I don't know how many *Star Trek* fans there are reading this but I have often used a particular episode starring Jon-Luc Picard in order to illustrate this problem. On board the *Enterprise* there is a universal translator (hopefully rather better than Google translate). This enables the crew to converse with the new cultures they encounter. On one occasion a culture is encountered that speaks only in proper nouns. Picard can work out that these are a shorthand for stories, and that the stories have foundational meanings for those initiated, and yet because he does not know the stories behind the words, he cannot communicate ... it's as if they are saying to him, 'Joshua at Jericho' or 'Jesus at Emmaus' or 'Paul at Athens'.

The seriousness of this problem becomes clear when we try to speak of God, because when Christians speak of God we speak of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; we speak of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; we speak of God in three Persons, weaving together the whole creation. In so doing we speak of a God with a defined character and track record – a God with whom we have a history. While those of us who are part of that community might dispute the meaning of our shared history or its implications for our understanding of the enduring character of God, we nevertheless have a great deal in common to draw on in which the referent of the word 'God' remains relatively stable. But bringing God or Jesus into conversation with someone who does not have that hinterland is like introducing an unstable compound into an experiment.

Most people are not encountering the word 'God' as a neutral category; rather, they are bringing their own notions to it. For example, the throwing off of institutional forms of religion as part of a postmodern turn towards the individual, and the postcolonial sense that Christianity was a tool of oppression, means that God and God's ambassadors, for many people, are suspect. Rowan Williams may have argued in a recent book⁶ that the structure of our language, even as we curse, makes room for God in a way that cannot be substituted, yet the existential longing for meaning and security that Williams associates with the word 'God', for those not so steeped in the Christian tradition, will be mixed up with a whole range of confused, negative and oppressive meanings that our culture is carrying.

To these factors, Billings adds the disproportionate representation in the media of a humanist perspective that he believes is pervasive. This is a narrative in which we simply drop the troublesome and redundant references to God.

Billings summarises this media 'creed' by using the 2009 literature of the British humanist society for enquirers:

- Humanism is a philosophy or way of life that puts human beings at the centre.
- The only authority human beings can appeal to is human reason.
- Beliefs should be proportionate to the evidence and an open critical mind should be kept if the evidence is inconclusive.
- There are universal values shared across human societies that arise out of human needs and the needs of societies.
- All human beings have the capacity to think for themselves about morality.
- We should act in the interests of social harmony and the common good.
- Where there are conflicting values we should decide between them on the basis of the likely consequences.
- This world is all there is.
- The idea of life after death is incoherent.
- Our only survival is in the memories of others and in what we each achieve and leave behind.
- Life has no ultimate or transcendent meaning but only the meanings we each give to it.⁷

Billings concludes that the temptation for many is to see humanism as Christianity without supernaturalism and (crucially) without church. In such a context, Billings argues, the challenge for the Church is not so much to get people over the threshold of our buildings (lots of people will come if we don't mention God), but to make God possible within people's mindsets and habits of thinking and experiencing.

Disappointingly, Billings does not spend much time in his book discussing how we might actually do this, but he does offer some hints that come from his experiences of conducting interviews with churchgoers as part of his academic research. He observes that within many churches belief is not discussed. Social activities predominate, but these often leave people isolated with their questions and without contexts in which to challenge these pervasive humanist values.

Why is speaking of God a problem even in some church circles?

Further reasons why traditional churches find it difficult to speak about God in personal conversation are discussed in the Report to the Methodist Conference of 2005, *Time to Talk of God* (hereafter, the Report).

The Report draws a sharp distinction between the kind of conversation that people had with the Jesus of the Gospels and the kinds of conversation people have in churches:

Jesus converses with his disciples who are often shown as slow-witted, selfish and flawed. He converses with those who approach him for help – often women who remain nameless such as the Samaritan woman at the well or the Syro-Phoenician woman or outsiders such as the Roman centurion or Zacchaeus the collaborator ... There is humour and anger; irony and passion. There is room for individual response. There is room for mutual learning. We do not always get told what happened next – so we need to go away and talk about it ourselves.⁸

What we might observe from these stories about Jesus' communication is not only that his conversation partners are treated as living, thinking subjects who have genuine questions to be answered, nor even that the Bible is written in such a way as to invite us to wrestle with our own questions, but we might also notice that in conversation about the things of God people are being led into encounter with God. Healing happens. Forgiveness is received. Self-righteousness melts away. Money is redistributed. Community is recreated. Conversation about God with Jesus is not only an intellectual exercise – it is an invitation into a changed way of living. What is needed, the Report argues, are contexts in which questions about God and about life can be addressed. Yet this is not only about contexts in which intellectual questions can be debated such that God can be made credible within contemporary patterns of thinking, it is also about contexts in which people of faith can put each other in touch with the God who heals and forgives, who challenges our self-righteousness and selfishness, who leads us into different ways of relating to others politically, economically and socially.

By contrast, the Report characterises many of the traditional churches' practices as blocks to this kind of conversation:

The exercise of seeking God and learning how to love and serve God in our lives is deeply attractive, but also perhaps quite frightening. So it is that the Church, which exists to support that search, that love and that service, somehow manages to frustrate its own ends by providing a culture where conversation around this most important of topics is effectively, if unconsciously, blocked in a variety of ways.

- Identifying taking a church role with being a disciple
- Church 'business' that crowds out all other types of conversation
- Socialising that actually only welcomes particular kinds of people
- The culture of niceness
- Avoiding difficult subjects
- Not expecting faith to be discussed
- Fellowship groups that have no purpose but do not die
- Fellowship groups where it is not safe to disagree
- Failing to understand that people have different needs at different times of life.⁹

Methodist theologian Clive Marsh is quoted in the Report saying, 'Fellowship is about openness ... rather than ... a context within which answers to questions are assumed, party lines must be adopted and people's actual issues, questions, doubts and affirmations are not taken seriously.'¹⁰ One minister is quoted anonymously as saying, 'I read out to my pastoral visitors the bits from Standing Orders that entail talking with people about fulfilling the commitments of membership, and they were frankly horrified.'¹¹

The Report concludes that if churches are to become again places where people are able to speak about God, then this requires time and intentionality.

- We need to free up spaces in the diary when we are not doing church business.
- We need to practise speaking to God and to each other in contexts that are purposeful and intentional otherwise social conversation will take over.
- We need preaching that opens us to transformation and raises the

expectation that we should be discussing our faith and our lives and being accountable to one another for our growth in discipleship.

- We need to free up ministers, deacons and lay workers for more in-depth conversations.

Changing a culture takes time and perhaps it is not surprising that 11 years on from *Time to Talk of God* many of the same issues persist. For those well steeped in Methodist ways of thinking it will already be possible to detect the influence of Mr Wesley on this Report’s conclusions, for, according to American Methodist scholar Tom Albin, John Wesley not only introduced people to the possibility of a relationship with God, he provided a structure within which it could be sustained.¹² For these reasons the Report bears rereading and its conclusions being used as a way of auditing the life of our churches so that we might make structural changes that would support a change of culture that would enable the sustaining of a dynamic faith in a world dominated by the humanistic assumptions of the political and media elites.

What can we learn from a conversation with John Wesley?

Beyond this general point about the structures of church life, in this article I want to focus upon an activity that Wesley considered to be part of the fabric of Christian living: visiting the sick. The text of Wesley’s that I have chosen for us to consult is his sermon ‘On Visiting the Sick’, preached on 23 May 1786 on the text Matthew 25:36, ‘I was sick and ye visited me.’¹³ It challenges us to think about four questions:

- 1 Who should visit?
- 2 Why should we visit?
- 3 How should we visit?
- 4 Whom should we visit?

Who should visit?

Beginning with the question, ‘By whom is this duty to be performed?’ Mr Wesley’s answer is ready: by all that desire to ‘inherit the kingdom’ of their

Father. For him the visiting of others in need is not a specialist ministry which belongs only to the few but a basic Christian duty that, like reading the Bible and prayer and regular receiving of Holy Communion, forms part of the framework of the Christian life.

He spells this out in talking about the gifts that different kinds of people bring to visiting others – the rich, their resources; the poor, their prayers; the old, their wisdom; the young, their energy. There follows a rather purple passage on the contribution of women:

You as well as men are rational creatures. You, like them, were made in the image of God; you are equally candidates for immortality; you too are called of God, as you have time to 'do good unto all men'.¹⁴

Ironically I suspect if we were able to analyse Methodist statistics for those who undertake pastoral visiting now, the burden of the argument would need to be different: 'You [men] as well as women are rational creatures. You, like them, were made in the image of God; you are equally candidates for immortality; you too are called of God, as you have time to "do good unto all men".'

It is not that Mr Wesley does not recognise that particular people might be appointed to visit on behalf of a congregation. As part of his support of women's ministry he cites the biblical evidence about the role of deacons like Phoebe (Rom 16:1); but his primary rationale for Christian people to visit the sick is drawn from Matthew 25: 'For thus saith the Lord, "Come ye blessed; inherit the kingdom; for I was sick and ye visited me".'

Implicit in this injunction to all Christians to visit the sick is the answer to Wesley's next question: why visit?

Why visit?

For Wesley the rationale for visiting at a basic level is that it is a command of Jesus (in Matthew 25:36) and a way of meeting with him in the person of those in need.

The verb 'to visit' comes up a lot in the Bible and most often it is God doing the visiting. In the Old Testament, when God visits, it is about a specific experience of God's grace or God's judgement. Modern translations often change the wording to make the contextual meaning clearer but in the Authorised Version the language of visitation is clear. So, for example, in the book of the Exodus the Lord's visit is in the form of his promise to deliver Israel from Egypt: 'And the people believed: and when they heard that the Lord

had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped' (Ex 4:31); while in Jeremiah's account the Lord's visit brings judgement on a people who have grown fat and sleek at the expense of the poor and needy: 'Shall I not visit for these *things*? saith the Lord: shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?' (Jer 5:29).

In the New Testament, when God visits, it is most usually a way of talking about God's presence in human flesh in the person of Jesus. This is not a fleeting visit, but a decision by God to dwell with his people: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people' (Lk 1:68); 'Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us' (Lk 1:78). This 'visit' by God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth thus sheds light. It sheds the light of God's grace upon all who dare look at the light, but also reveals the parts of ourselves that are in darkness and need bringing to light for forgiveness and healing.

When God visits, that visit is not incidental; it is not superficial; it is about truth; and it is about our lasting good. This pattern is revealed in the actual visits that Jesus of Nazareth made, such as the one to the home of Martha (and Mary and Lazarus): 'Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home' (Lk 10:38).

Here, Jesus visits Martha and Mary. If you remember the story, these are people he loved. Yet, this is a visit that involves truth-telling that is difficult, concerning the relationship between the sisters and their relationship with him. While Jesus cares for the lasting interest of both of them, his visit delivers not only comforting words but challenging words. Martha tells him what is the matter: 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.' But Jesus is coming from a different place, and offers to Martha a different way of approaching things.

None of this biblical material features in John Wesley's sermon on visiting the sick. Nevertheless, he believed pastoral visiting to be a means by which God's presence might be mediated, not only to the person visited, but also to the person visiting:

It is generally supposed that the means of grace and the ordinances of God are equivalent terms. We commonly mean by that expression, those that are usually termed 'works of piety' – hearing and reading the scriptures, receiving the Lord's supper, public and private prayer, and fasting. And it is certain, these are the ordinary

channels which convey the grace of God to the souls of men. But are they the only means of grace? Are there no other means than these, whereby God is pleased, frequently, yea, ordinarily, to convey his grace to them that either love or fear him? Surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace.¹⁵

To undertake a pastoral visit, then, is not to go in the place of God to sit in judgement over others or to bless them; rather it is to seek to make an occasion during which God's presence and power might be experienced. In this way, a pastoral visit might be understood as a means of grace which, if approached in the spirit of seeking to meet with God, will reliably lead us and others, together, into God's presence.

How might we understand that to happen? As one person puts themselves at the disposal of another for their deep good, God becomes tangible. God is revealed. God visits. When this happens it touches both people. Paul Fiddes, Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Oxford, puts it like this: 'God happens in an interweaving flow of relationships like those between a father and a son, opened up and deepened by currents of the Spirit. Grace is God's dwelling with us ... in ecstatic moments of love.'¹⁶ This is something that I learnt about as a probationer minister when visiting an elderly woman in hospital. Struggling myself with depression at the time, I used to visit her at home. Having listened for a long time on one occasion, I ventured, 'Sometimes you just want to curl up in a ball,' and she stared at me as if the world had changed colour: 'You know,' she said. Weeks afterwards I visited her in hospital. It was now afternoon but the staff had been busy and she had not been washed. Having once recognised our common humanity I could not leave the washing undone. And as I soaped and rinsed and dried her face she looked at me and I at her, both of us knowing ourselves beloved, knowing that God was visiting with us.

To me, this story is an illustration of what Wesley has to say about the importance of actually being present in person and not relying on just sending money for the relief of material needs.

For Paul Fiddes, this is the stuff of sacramental life. For him, 'The whole point of a sacrament is that it is made of weak and fallible stuff in itself, but is a doorway into the life of the triune God.'¹⁷ And it happens through the willingness of those involved to be present to each other and to the love at the heart of existence that transcends them both.

How should we visit?

If we are engaged in pastoral visiting in order to make an occasion for God’s presence and power to be experienced, as Mr Wesley puts it, ‘How may we do this most to the glory of God, and to the benefit of our neighbour?’

First, it is instructive to note that John Wesley recommends a structure for a visit:

- 1 Seek God’s help in prayer.
- 2 Inquire of the person’s outward condition (and respond as you can).
- 3 Inquire of the person’s soul.
- 4 Offer any help you can ‘if any of them begin to fear God’.
- 5 Conclude with prayer.

While no interpersonal encounter should be conducted according to such a rigid formula so that there is no room for the conversation to flow or for the Holy Spirit to move, if a conversation is to be intentionally focused on the things of God then some notion of the elements it might involve and the order in which they might come can be very useful.

This point has already been made in a general way in the *Time to Talk of God* Report, which recognised John Wesley’s emphasis on the need for structures that sustain the culture you want to develop. This is particularly important when explicit conversation about God involves swimming against the cultural tide. As Alan Billings points out, the claims of secular humanism are not only affecting those outside the Churches but also the mindsets of many of us within the Churches. If we do not have opportunities within the structures of church life to learn how to put each other in touch with God, then we too are likely to drift with the tide away from a sense of God’s power and presence.

The need for some kind of structure to be in place in order to promote intentional pastoral and spiritual conversation is something that I learned in the practice of hospital chaplaincy. For the purposes of teaching volunteers and student ministers in this context, we have used in this matrix.



While social conversation may be important in order to establish some kind of trust and relationship, in the time-limited context of a 20-minute visit in which there may be urgent needs to address, it is important to help pastoral carers identify how and when to move the conversation to a different plane:

- 'How are you?' is a social question.
- 'How are you today?' is a more pastoral question.
- 'How are you coping?' implies a willingness to go deeper.
- 'What gives you strength to help you cope?' sharpens the focus towards the spiritual.
- 'Might I pray with you?' is a ritual question.

To draw on another tool that might operate as a structure for deeper than social conversation, we might draw on the basic patterns that underlie worship. In worship the basic structure might be articulated as follows:

- welcome into God's presence together
- listening to God's word in the light of God's world
- responding to God's word in God's world
- being sent into God's world.

In a pastoral conversation a basic structure might in fact look rather similar:

- welcome into God's presence together
- listening to God's word (an individual's needs) in the light of God's world
- responding to God's word (an individual's needs) in the light of God's word
- commending (the individual) to God as they face what is before them.

Having noticed that Mr Wesley commends a structure for pastoral visiting, I now want to pay some attention to the different elements of that structure and to think about what these elements might suggest to us about pastoral conversation in our own contexts.

First, before and during any visit Wesley begins by recommending that we pray:

Before and through the work, from the beginning to the end, let your heart wait upon him with a continual supply of meekness and gentleness, of patience and long-suffering, that you may never be angry or discouraged at whatever treatment, rough or smooth, kind or unkind, you may meet with.¹⁸

This is about preparation – becoming alert ourselves to God's presence that we might be a channel of his grace. But it is also about confidence. What is it that will give us confidence to hold whatever it is with which we are to be entrusted, but a confidence that God can hold it even if we can't? Another way to put this is to think about Christ's role in creation as explained in Paul's letter to the Colossians: in Christ, all things hold together.¹⁹ When we go on a pastoral visit, it is not we who need to hold the person together, even if they are disintegrating before our eyes. It is ours to hold them in prayer before God in Christ, in whom we can have confidence that both we and they are held.

How, in practice, do we do this? A friend of mine who is a minister has an icon of the Resurrection above the chair in which people sit who come to see him. It reminds him that however dark and difficult the circumstances the person is in, his job is to hold that person in the light of Christ's Resurrection. It is this that gives him courage to go into dark and difficult places with people without fearing that he will get lost. If you are visiting someone in hospital or in their own home, you can't take a great icon with you, but you can perhaps wear a cross, or put a text in your pocket, or carry your Bible as a way of helping yourself remember that this is not about your ability to fix something or someone, but about helping the person you visit to become aware of God's presence and healing power.

Second, Wesley recommends that we pray for and with the person: 'Above all give them your prayers. Pray with them; pray for them; and who knows but you may save their souls alive?'²⁰

Perhaps we no longer share a confidence in the framework of this last statement: what do we think our souls are in need of saving from? Perhaps we believe in life before death, but not really life after death any more? Perhaps prayer too is an unstable substance, for many people not the warp and weft of a lifetime's relationship with the ground of their being, but a last resort form of cosmic ordering that rarely gets results. Yet articulating what needs to be said to God is so important if we are not only to communicate *about* God but potentially put people in touch *with* God. In my ministry it has so often been

at the point of prayer that release for people has finally come. Yet this is not something I was ever trained to do: I arrived at my first funeral interview in my probationer appointment knowing that I needed to pray and found that I did not have the words. The practice of pastoral prayer took time to develop.

In some contexts, of course, prayer is best done silently. But often it can be important to offer words aloud with someone, simply placing their troubles and concerns directly into God's hands. It can be done using our own words, or it can be helpful to learn some of the prayers of others which can sometimes capture what in the moment we might struggle to say and which well-worn path might help us both to find our way into an awareness of God's presence.²¹

Third, Wesley makes it clear that it is important to be present to the actual person in front of you and their real needs, which may be material or emotional or spiritual. This can be costly as we realise that some needs are great and need urgent attention. As Wesley points out, 'One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them.'²² But at the emotional level also, the needs of others can be disturbing because they remind us of our frailty, of our mortality, of the impermanence of the things that we take for granted. This can be frightening and, if we are honest, most of us avoid that which frightens us. We tell ourselves that it is better to leave people in peace when they are bereaved or have been made redundant or are depressed because they need the space or because our visit will make them feel worse. Of course, this is not to deny that sometimes people in difficult circumstances do need space or a break from thinking about it all; yet more often people need to talk and to try to make sense of it all, and, in truth, our unwillingness to go can be more about our own self-protection than about their needs.

One of my favourite verbs in the New Testament is the Greek verb *splanchnizomai* – which means, literally, 'I am churned up in the guts'. Jesus in all sorts of encounters²³ was willing to be disturbed, to change direction, to act, to use the power he had to make a difference. Wesley's injunction to go and be physically present, to go out of our way to find out what people's real needs are and to do what we can to alleviate distress, is a clear reflection of Jesus' mode of being with people.

Fourth, implicit in this way of being is a deep listening if we are to engage in successful communication of any kind. Notice that Wesley points this out with his repeated use of the word 'inquire'. This is no mere precursor to the delivery of a set piece about God, but rather is to be a genuine enquiry as to the person's

health and well-being, an enquiry that implies a genuine and compassionate paying attention to body, mind and soul.

Fifth, while listening is important, so too, however, is speaking. John Wesley expresses this in pastoral conversation as the need to bear witness: 'May you not begin with asking, "Have you ever considered, that God governs the world; that his providence is over all, and over you in particular?"'²⁴ In this way Wesley recommends pastoral visiting as an opportunity for opening up questions of God's presence and activity, and this is important not only among those who already believe and are already part of the fellowship, but also for those who most need to sense God's presence in their lives. Notice, though, his sensitivity to the person concerned. We are not to persist in offering people our own experience of God if they are not 'beginning to fear God'.²⁵ In other words, the purposes of pastoral care are deeply vitiated if we are not attentive to the actual needs and receptiveness of the person in front of us.

Sometimes, though, as we have observed already, the problem is not that the person is not wanting to talk about existential things, but rather that the traditional language won't work. In our cultural context, Wesley's doctrinal opening would sit very oddly in a pastoral conversation or even in a mission encounter, and yet because the search for meaning is real, and because God's holding of the human race is real, we need to try to find ways of communicating that allow for what the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer called the 'fusion of the horizons of meaning'.²⁶

Drawing on this concept, the American pastoral theologian Charles Gerkin argued that those offering pastoral conversation are 'more than anything else, listeners to and interpreters of stories'.²⁷ However, he noted that pastoral care involves more than listening to stories because the person offering pastoral conversation does not come empty-handed to the conversation but brings their own life experience. The person who offers pastoral care as a Christian is someone whose experience is being shaped by the story of the Christian community and its tradition. The task of such a person in conversation is to bring their experience and that wealth of tradition into conversation with the particularity of the life story of the person with whom they are engaging. While in more *modern* (as opposed to postmodern) and doctrinaire times, this might result in a question such as that asked by Wesley, 'Have you ever considered, that God governs the world; that his providence is over all, and over you in particular?', in our own age, the language that can bear God needs rather to be co-created and arise from a fusion of horizons rather than the dominance of

one horizon over another. This is precisely the point being made by Male and Weston in their work about third-space evangelism, referenced earlier, in which both the care-seeker and the care-giver need to go on a journey to a new space into which God is calling them.

By way of example, in his book *Stronger than Death*, Anglican priest Roland Riem retells a story told by hospital chaplain Anne Townsend. She tells the story of her relationship with Jean, a woman of no particular religious practice with whom at first Anne struggled to communicate at depth. Over the weeks, as Jean's cancer progressed, they discovered a mutual connection with Southend. For Anne this had been a place of new beginnings, where her children had been born. For Jean it was the place of childhood holidays. As Jean grew weaker they would go in memory together to Southend and walk along the pier and eat candy floss, until one day Jean said, 'We keep on talking about Southend ... Am I ever going to get there in the end ... or will I get lost on the way?' Anne swallowed back the tears and responded, 'You'll be there very soon, Jean ... that other Southend is quite close now ... not too far to go.' Whereupon Anne reports that Jean relaxed, closed her eyes and within a couple of hours had died. Anne comments:

Jean and I learned to love one another, and our differences made this a kind of miracle. But the legacy she left me is even more precious: she taught me that eternity can be spoken of in a language I would never have thought of using.²⁸

Sometimes our language about God needs to be freshly minted and is not transferable. At others, it is a question of making space for the reinvestment of traditional language with fresh meaning. In my first appointment I visited a family whose adult son had committed suicide. At first they avoided referencing the manner of his death for fear that I would pronounce judgement, and instead concentrated on the funeral in which they said they wanted no religious content. Once I'd put down my notebook and invited them to tell me what had happened, instead of worrying about the details of the funeral, they explained their own terrible sense of guilt, and when I was not judgemental either of them or of their son, they expressed their confusion at why the Church 'had changed its mind about burying suicides in consecrated ground'. At the second meeting they wanted to talk about heaven and hell: what did this language mean? And as I struggled with them to express something of what that largely metaphorical language is about, using instead

the metaphor of God's remembering of us (in the sense of recalling our life, but also in the sense of putting back together that which has been shattered), the dead man's brother became very angry. 'I can't believe I've been left to live all my life with these Sunday school ideas about heaven and hell.' When it came to planning the service, they chose in the end the most traditional form. And afterwards the brother came to shake my hand: 'I see how powerful the language can be now,' he said.

Whom should we visit?

We have already rehearsed the way in which, during the twentieth century, pastoral care and evangelism had become separated and the way in which during the twenty-first century they are coming back together. For Wesley, they were one and the same; indeed, for him pastoral visiting was not primarily a matter of visiting people who were signed-up members of the Methodist societies. Rather he advocated visiting people according to their need, whether they were Christian or not. Neither did he restrict visiting to those who were physically ill, but those who had any kind of needs of mind or body.

Of course, in any contemporary town or village or city, there are many needs, but Wesley's approach raises for us a question of priorities. In his 12 Rules of a Helper of 1753, he said, 'Go always, not only to those who want you but to those who want you most.'²⁹ Perhaps if we were more intentional about some of the other structures of church life (like band meetings) in which the first Wesleyan Christians were nurtured in faith through explicit conversation about the ups and downs of their lives, then there would be more of us practised in the art of pastoral conversation who might be confident to engage in the kind of encounter in which God's presence might be welcomed in the contexts where such encounters are most needed – on the street, at the food bank, at the job club, wherever they may be.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to help us address three overarching questions:

- 1 why speaking about God is a problem in Western culture
- 2 why speaking about God is a problem even within some of our churches
- 3 what we can learn from John Wesley's Sermon 'On Visiting the Sick' about speaking about God.

As I conclude, there are some key considerations that I would encourage us to take from this conversation with Wesley's sermon. First, pastoral conversation is a basic building block of the Christian life; not a specialist ministry for the few but the means by which we keep one another in faith and introduce others to that faith. Second, pastoral conversation has an almost liturgical structure that needs learning, but that can provide a robust container by which we are able to handle the deep things of God and of our lives. Third, pastoral conversation needs not to be considered an internal church practice, nor a practice that attends only to material or emotional needs, but rather a practice that puts people in touch with the God we meet in Jesus Christ. Fourth, pastoral conversation might be a context in which we can learn to build bridges between old language and new meanings, and between old meanings and new language as we seize the courage to search for a new horizon of meaning. Not every form of words we find will have resonance beyond the particularities of the conversation in which it is co-created; and yet, each new communication will give us confidence that God may yet speak and be spoken of in ways that make sense to us and to generations yet to come.

Notes

1. Atkins 2011, para 67: 'A feature of poorer evangelism is always to suppose that we are recruiting for the Church rather than inviting a person to experience God's supreme love which shapes, reshapes and fills their life, and so transforms the world for good. To be sure, Christian discipleship takes place in a community and we would contend necessarily so. But this simply reinforces the point that essentially our Christian communities (churches) do not exist to perpetuate their status quo but rather to provide a mutually fertile environment for growing in Christ, with permeable membranes that enable others to join and do likewise.'
2. Brueggemann 1991, p. 178.
3. Paul Weston, in Male and Weston 2013, commends something he calls third-space evangelism. First-space evangelism, he suggests, involves inviting people to come to us. Second-space evangelism involves going out to preach where others are. Third-space evangelism focuses on process rather than on the crisis of conversion and expects that movement will need to take place in both parties towards some new shared understanding of God's power and presence.
4. Billings 2010.
5. Hay and Hunt 2000.
6. Williams 2014 .
7. Billings 2010, pp. 142–143.
8. *Time to Talk of God* 2005, p. 44.
9. *Time to Talk of God* 2005, p. 67.
10. *Time to Talk of God* 2005, p. 73.

11. *Time to Talk of God* 2005, p. 72.
12. Albin 2002, argues: 'All church historians agree that the small-group structures of early Methodism provided the practical support for the process of Christian formation and deepening discipleship. Each of the key Wesleyan theological understandings concerning God's gracious will and mission was supported by distinct small-group structures that could sustain people within a formative community that could help them understand and experience the truth of God in Christ through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.' <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/christian-formation-and-mission-in-early-methodism> (accessed 8 September 2016).
13. Text quoted in the Authorised Version as used by John Wesley.
14. Wesley 1786, para 3.7.
15. Wesley 1786, para 1.
16. Fiddes 2000, p. 281.
17. Fiddes 2000, p. 296.
18. Wesley 1786, para 2.3.
19. NRSV, Colossians 1:17, 'He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'
20. Wesley 1786, para 3.4.
21. Wesley 1786, para 2.6: 'Be sure to conclude every meeting with prayer. If you cannot yet pray without a form, you may use some of those composed by Mr. Spinckes, or any other pious writer. But the sooner you break through this backwardness the better. Ask of God, and he will open your mouth.' Wesley himself clearly regarded set pastoral prayers as something that can be used but really should not be needed. It has to be said, however, that his own vocabulary had been deeply influenced by the prayers of the Church through daily attendance at Holy Communion and the saying of the daily office. He had plenty to draw on in the moment in order to pray extempore with others.
22. Wesley 1786, para 1.3.
23. For example, Matthew 9:46; 14:14; 15:32; Mark 1:41; 20:34; 6:34; 8:2; Luke 7:13.
24. Wesley 1786, para 2.4.
25. Wesley 1786, para 2.5.
26. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes about the limitations of human perspective using the concept of horizon as the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. This limitation cannot be overcome simply by seeking to understand a situation from another's point of view; rather Gadamer argues for a 'fusion of horizons' in which existing and potential horizons are not subordinate to nor separate from one another, but involve both rising to encompass a new shared horizon.
27. Gerkin 1984, p. 27.
28. Riem 1993, p. 48.
29. Wesley 1753, rule 11.

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‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ A reflection and intercession based on Mark 9:14–29 and on John Reilly’s painting, *Healing of the lunatic boy*

Janet Morley

JANET MORLEY is a writer, speaker and retreat leader, who used to work for the British Methodist Church's Connexional Team. She was the first commissioning editor of *Holiness*.

morleyjanet@ymail.com
Sheffield, UK

JOHN REILLY (1928–2010) offered modern interpretations of many stories from the Old and New Testaments through his oil paintings. His distinctive use of geometric patterning and jewel-like colours make his work instantly recognisable.

John Reilly, *The healing of the lunatic boy* (1958) from the Methodist Modern Art Collection, © TMCP, used with permission.



At the very centre of the gospel narrative there is the story of a dramatic healing of a child, whose desperate father struggles to have faith that his son can ever be made well. The child is unable to hear or speak, and he frequently suffers major fits which place his life in danger. Like many healing stories in Mark, the story is presented as an exorcism, in which Jesus has the power to command the forces of evil to surrender.

The context is crucial. After seeking to teach them about his suffering to come, Jesus and three of his disciples have been on the mountain top. Peter, James and John have witnessed Jesus being transfigured in light, accompanied by Moses – the great leader of the Israelites who spoke to God ‘face to face’ – and Elijah – the prophet who was expected to return in preparation for the Messiah. It is as if the glory of God has broken through the bounds of ordinary life, and the true underlying reality of things has been suddenly revealed. Meanwhile, the disciples who were left behind have been approached by the suffering family of the boy, but they have failed to help him. Some scholars believe that each of Jesus’ exorcisms is symbolic of the grip of evil in certain situations. Here, where the spirit is deaf and dumb, even the privileged disciples who accompany Jesus on the mountain top have been shown to be deaf to the language about the Cross, although they are instructed by the voice from heaven to listen. And in what they say, the disciples are way off mark. Peter babbles about constructing booths, ‘for he didn’t know what he was supposed to say’.

Jesus’ appearance as he comes down from the mountain clearly fills the crowd with awe – perhaps his face is shining like that of Moses returning to his people after receiving the Law. Perhaps there is even an echo of the story of Moses’ ominous return from the mountain top to discover that the people’s faith in God has wavered, and they have begun to worship a golden calf image instead. But whatever Old Testament echoes Mark may be employing, he shows Jesus immediately engaging with the messy situation in front of him, asking what everyone has been arguing about. He waves no magic wand. Instead he asks about the child’s symptoms and their duration, as the controlling spirit throws the boy into a deadly convulsion there and then. Combining compassion and challenge in his conversation with the father, Jesus then demonstrates his authority over evil by commanding the spirit to go, taking the child by the hand and lifting him from what looks like death.

In this evocative painting by John Reilly, we see depicted the moments just before and just after the exorcism. On the right of the picture, in grey darkness,

is the boy being convulsed and thrown to the ground, his eyes wide, staring and fearful, his limbs twisted. Either side of him are two adults – perhaps his parents, perhaps the disciples who failed to heal him. They look anxious and desperate to help; yet their arms seem to flail. Each is enclosed in their own trap of torment; they are paralysed and helpless as evil rages before them and within them. Their body shapes echo the contorted shape into which the boy's body has been thrown. By contrast, on the left, the figure of Jesus stands calm and strong, and the boy himself is standing up, watching Jesus, his body posture echoing the strength and dignity of the one who has healed him. Both of them are bathed in the light and power of God, which seems to have been brought from the mountain top to bless this child. But it is as if these figures are in another world adjacent to, but untouched by, the grey world of suffering and evil in which the others are trapped. How can we move from one to the other?

That is exactly the dilemma of anyone who tries to pray about the suffering of the world or about their own suffering. This is why prayer is so hard; we feel that we are locked into confusion and have no access to hope. Prayer is an act of courage, which dares to believe that we can step out of what binds us so closely, into the light of God. Christians over countless generations have found the cry of the child's father echoes the ambivalence of their own faith: 'I believe; help my unbelief!' We seek to pray not only because we believe but in order that we may believe better.

Questions to ponder

- When you look at Reilly's painting, which part of it draws your eye first? How does it affect the meaning of the picture for you, if you 'read' it from left to right, rather than right to left?
- Have you ever experienced prayer (either your own prayer or that of others on your behalf) which effectively released you from feeling stuck or trapped, helping you to move into the light of God?

A prayer

Lord, we believe: help our unbelief

Lord of light and compassion,
we live in a turbulent and violent world
where it is hard to believe in your power to stop evil in its tracks.
We feel helpless to protect even the children:
those who have no place of safety in conflict,
or are themselves trained to war;
those who are targeted by sexual predators and traffickers;
those who suffer and die from conditions we could easily cure.
We long for your help, your power to command evil to surrender.

Lord, we believe: help our unbelief

Lord of strength and calm,
we live with turbulent hearts and minds, and fragile bodies,
where it is hard to believe in your power to transform our lives.
Look on us in our confusion, our distorted thinking,
our despairing or resentful feelings,
our sense that we are controlled by forces, desires and fears
that mean us harm.
We long for your help, your power to command evil to surrender.

Lord, we believe: help our unbelief

Lord of love and power,
we have no power to help ourselves,
or make a difference to our world.
Take us by the hand and lift us out of all that traps us;
make us stand next to you, strong and calm
able in your light to see what is true and what is false,
renewed with strength to command evil in your name,
and work for the coming of your kingdom in this world.

Amen.



Reflections on *Self Portrait*, by Eddy Aigbe

Gillian Houghton

GILLIAN HOUGHTON is a Methodist minister with an interest in art as an expression of faith and spirituality. Her ministry is divided between conventional circuit work and her artistic endeavours.

revgillian@btinternet.com
Harrogate, UK

EDDY AIGBE is best known for his bold, textured and abstracted portraits. These paintings combine symbolism, colour and line, to express matters that affect our human psyche.

edy4sure@gmail.com
Birmingham, UK

Self Portrait © Eddy Aigbe, used with permission.



Holiness and pastoral relationships together constitute an invitation to consider an individual with great care and in this article I invite you to consider Eddy Aigbe's *Self Portrait* with attention and attentiveness, as if he were someone with whom you will have a pastoral encounter.

If we are to form good pastoral relationships we must see well and take time to gaze and notice. As we gaze at this self-portrait we may be tempted to turn away, for what we are offered is a challenging stare and all too often we are uncomfortable when faced with such a regard. It is only when we look really carefully, however, that we can start to know an individual.

As we look attentively now at this portrait, we notice its variety of colour and tone, we notice the contrast between head and hand, our eyes begin to explore. We see the cool blues of the head contrasted with the warmer yellows and browns of the hand. As we gaze, we begin to appreciate the detail and recognise the care with which this portrait is painted. We see individual brushstrokes, we notice the play of light and shadow, we look at the detail of eye, nose, ear, mouth and hand. Just as the artist has taken great care with this image, so too God has taken great care with the creation of each individual (Ps 139). It is just such care that we need to take as we approach an individual, for in pastoral relationships time to notice is important. Relationships cannot be rushed, and yet frequently time is the one thing lacking.

Let us now consider this picture in a little more detail. This is a self-portrait and yet half the face is covered by a hand. So what does this hand tell us, for even without words the position of the hand reveals something? Perhaps we are reminded that no one reveals all of themselves to another, and in our pastoral relationships we should not seek to know all. Or perhaps this hand may be an indication of weariness – I have seen much of the world and I am tired of looking. I have seen too much and can bear no more. In order to protect myself and maintain my resilience I need to withdraw, to take a step back, to present only a partial picture. Whatever the reason for the shielding hand, we are required to accept what is being offered, respect whatever defences and boundaries are put up and recognise that relationships are built on trust, trust that needs to be earned by us through our care and respect for the other.

As we look more closely at this shielding hand, we may notice the signs of wear, this hand has worked, but we may also notice the warmth of its colours, in marked contrast to the cool colours of the head. Perhaps this mirrors the emotional health of the individual, meeting the world with warmth and an

outward appearance of well-being, while holding in the mind a sense of distance and detachment.

So let our gaze be drawn to the head itself, the lustrous cool blue suggesting a certain withdrawal, a sense of not offering everything to the viewer. The lips are sealed. This person is not ready to talk, and this can lead to frustration on our part as we seek to build a relationship. What is he not telling us? Why is he hiding? Why does he not trust us? When silence is offered, we must be prepared to accept it, to treasure it and to ponder in our hearts what this might mean.

In this half self-portrait we have one ear and one eye. This one ear reminds us not only that we should listen very carefully, with both ears, but also that our interlocutor may not be listening fully, or may selectively hear what we say. We must be prepared for and accepting of this behaviour, acknowledging how frustrating we may find that, and then placing our frustration to one side, for our frustration has no place in this relationship.

Finally we come to the one eye: the one eye that looks at us with challenge and courage and shows depth and possible suffering. This eye cannot be avoided, but is not a comfortable experience. So it is in life when another gazes at us, we do not like to be stared at. We feel the danger, experience a vulnerability as we wonder what they see in us that we may be trying to hide, or of which we may feel ashamed. Such a gaze is uncomfortable and our gaze within a pastoral relationship needs to be tempered by this knowledge. We are here to see, but not to threaten or challenge (or at least not in the initial stages of building a pastoral relationship). We will want patiently to explore and discover what may lie behind the challenge.

Having looked in detail, we step back and look again at the whole. We begin to consider what life history this individual may choose to share with us. In pastoral care we may be privileged to hear a life story that has never been told. Frustratingly we may also find ourselves in a situation where the story is withheld and we will need to consider what it is about us that hinders the telling. We may need to work patiently, to look carefully and to ask gently the questions which will enable us to see truly who this person is. Building such a relationship is time-consuming and can be quite frustrating, but this gaze challenges us to take the time, to overcome the defiance and defensiveness, to sit with the challenge and not to be discouraged.

We have one further and significant perspective to bring to this pastoral encounter. By virtue of our faith we seek to build a pastoral relationship in line

with Christ's mandate to love one another (Jn 13:34–35 and 15:12, 17) and as a reflection of the love we know from God in Christ. We look with the eyes of faith and reflect on how our faith colours our approach.

Here is someone whom we believe is made in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and is loved by God, just as we are loved, and is known by God, just as we are known (Ps 139:1–2, 13, 15). Our approach must reflect this, laying aside any prejudices or preconceptions, remembering constantly that in Christ we are all equal (Rom 10:12), and that as we attend to this person we attend to Christ himself (Mt 25:45). His gaze may question us. Are we willing to live with his possible unwillingness to share all? Can we care for him well? Can we be trusted to show him love in all circumstances? Can we be trusted to bear his burden? Can we bear his pain? Can we, indeed, be as Christ to him?

We may view this person in the light of other Scriptures, perhaps ascribing to him words from the psalms, eg Psalm 13 or 88, or other Scripture may come to mind. The more we gaze upon him, the more we learn about him, the more readily we will find Scripture to support us as we seek to understand and love him.

However we approach the building of a pastoral relationship, we bring to this conversation our love of God, our belief in God's love for all and our understanding of Christ's many teachings about our care for others. We cannot be faithful to Christ if we do not approach each person we encounter as Christ himself.

As we prepare to leave this portrait, this encounter, it is appropriate to remember that this is a self-portrait, and as we look we are also challenged to confront ourselves. What impact has this encounter had on our own spiritual life and growth? What have the feelings and thoughts engendered by this meeting taught us about ourselves and our relationship with God and God's people? How close are we to loving one another as Christ has loved us? How close are we to reflecting truly and constantly God's love for us and the world?

This self-portrait is a challenge to us, to consider carefully our pastoral relationships, to devote ourselves with great care to this work and to learn from such pastoral encounters how we too may experience spiritual growth.

Postscript from the Editor

Gillian Houghton's reflection for this journal was based on her response to Eddy Aigbe's painting. Eddy has provided the following interpretive paragraph giving a narrative context for his self-portrait:

My self-portrait was an intense study and expression of a depressive state in my life. The entire production process was profoundly therapeutic and was inspired by the need to seek an artistic means to heal a self-destructive condition. The large orange hand is a spiritual reference of God's healing and protective power. Protecting my vulnerable and fragile side, keeping me together while I was being healed. The exposed side of my face depicts what others saw (or what I wanted people to see). It still helps me both mentally and spiritually, till this day. It is a powerful testament to God's strength and importance in our lives, giving us the assurance that '... We shall overcome'.

How does Eddy's narrative enhance your understanding of his self-portrait, and of Gillian's reflection?



Reviews

Challenging Bullying in Churches (Grove Pastoral 145), Rosemary Power (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2016), 30 pp, £3.95 pbk/digital

Imitation and Scapegoats: Pastoral Insights from the Work of René Girard (Grove Pastoral 146), Simon J. Taylor (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2016), 30 pp, £3.95 pbk/digital

It is noteworthy that two consecutive publications in the Pastoral Series of the ever popular Grove booklets should find their focus on the reality of conflict and bullying in church communities.

Simon J. Taylor's subject is the thought of René Girard. Those familiar with Girard's work will know that it has funded a vast range of human enquiry from social anthropology to economics to atonement theology. As Taylor notes, quoting the theologian William C. Placher: 'Anyone who can entitle a book *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* without a whiff of irony is not addressing small questions in a small way.'

In chapter 2, Taylor provides an admirably concise summary of three pillars of Girardian thought: mimesis, scapegoating and its application to the Bible. He then proceeds to discuss how each might inform and aid pastoral practice in chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Crudely summarised, Girard suggests that human desire is based on the imitation (mimesis) of the desire modelled by others. I want the latest smartphone because my friend has one. In non-trivial contexts, this then escalates to violence where the phenomenon of 'scapegoating' a sacrificial victim provides a safety valve through which society's violence can be focused and quenched.

Though noting the economy of words demanded, I wondered if Taylor might have included Girard's insight that the trigger to the escalation of mimetic violence is invariably a perceived or real scarcity of resource or other threat to the community. It occurred to me that these are conditions with which many church communities could readily identify. They might also be fruitfully applied to the experience of contemporary global politics.

In Girardian thought, the effectiveness of the sacrifice is predicated on the anonymity of its victim. Chapter 5 then proceeds to discuss Girard's argument that the Bible, uniquely in the whole corpus of human literature, describes scapegoating from the perspective of the *victim*. Thus scapegoating is exposed for what it is. As I read I was reminded of the literary-feminist perspective of Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* as worked examples.

In my view, the way in which Taylor harnesses Girard's survey of human cultures on every continent throughout human history in order to provide a link with the reality of bullying in the Church is compelling. It is also disarming, for it provides that indispensable tool in conflict mediation: that of releasing guilt associated with behaviours that need to be addressed by locating them in a broader sociological context. The logical outworking of the biblical witness is to call the Church to a courageous naming of contemporary scapegoats at every level of society.

Rosemary Power's *Challenging Bullying in Churches* marries real-world anecdote to concrete strategy. At times I struggled with the structure of the booklet, perhaps because the work breathlessly alerts us to the variety of forms and subtlety of bullying in the church context. The author's experience in conflict mediation and depth of theological reflection safeguards the work from a descent into polemic, and her heart as a pastor is evident in her call in chapter 4 for the pastoral support of both victim and bully. The ecumenical scope of her survey releases the reader from cynicism about the structures and practices of their own denomination. The result is arresting.

A recurrent theme of the work is the insistence that the Church needs to learn from the good practice of the public and third sector. It suggests that trade unions, mentioned some eight times, might provide a practical link to such expertise. I wondered whether, having been alerted to the issue, the Church was really so irredeemably incapable of developing competent internal structures. I do not resist engagement with external scrutiny, but if such conflict escalates in the professional context which the author offers as an exemplar to

the Church, the first question addressed by the employment tribunal is 'Did the organisation follow its own *internal* bullying and harassment procedures?'

Writing from the perspective of the Methodist Church in Britain, I note that Power references the 2015 Methodist Conference Report, *Positive Working Together*, in the opening of chapter 2 and would be interested in her assessment of how well this report satisfies the shortcomings raised.

Grove booklets excel at signposting the reader to further reading, and Power's introductions to the works of Hugh Halverstadt, Colin Patterson and Alastair McKay in chapter 3 are salutary, for they offer reasons why church communities are particularly vulnerable to unchecked bullying behaviours. We are therefore offered the opportunity not just to confront bullying when it occurs, but to address the endemic vulnerability of our communities.

I was left with the view that regardless of important distinctions between the relationship of the Church to church employees and office holders, it is essential that we all engage in the development of, and submission to, robust systems of mutual oversight and external accountability.

It is consistent with Christian vocation to develop the professionalism for which we aspire to be respected.

Andrew Emison

Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook, Jane Leach and Michael Paterson
(2nd edn, London: SCM Press, 2015), 320 pp, £25.00 pbk

Given the present efforts to introduce pastoral supervision to ministers across the Methodist Connexion in Great Britain, Jane Leach and Michael Paterson have done the Church a great service by providing this revised edition of their guide to the practice of pastoral supervision. Written by experts who have helped to shape the field, *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook* offers a comprehensive and detailed companion for all who are embarking upon a supervision journey, or who wish to reinvigorate an ongoing supervision relationship. There are substantial revisions and additions to this edition, so satisfied consumers of the first 2010 edition would be well advised to take a second look.

Although the book begins with a brief working definition of pastoral supervision – ‘a relationship between two or more disciples who meet to consider the ministry of one or more of them in an intentional and disciplined way’ (p. 1) – it will take careful digestion of the subsequent ten chapters for the reader to fully grasp the richness of the practice. The chapter titles utilise Jane Leach’s characteristic term for pastoral theology – ‘Attending’ – and survey various aspects of the supervisory process: ‘Vision’, ‘Process’, ‘the Present’, ‘the There and Then’, ‘the Here and Now’, ‘the Body’, ‘the Story’, ‘Context’, ‘Group Matters’ and ‘Endings’. If you know what you are looking for, then the clear structure will enable you to dip into the handbook at the right place for particular assistance. However, with its lively prose, and plentiful examples from the authors’ own experiences, this is also a book that can be easily read from cover to cover.

One of the gifts that this book offers to the Church is that it sets pastoral supervision clearly within a confessional framework. While being conversant with a wealth of literature from relevant other disciplines, and knowledgeable of supervisory practice in other contexts, Leach and Paterson unashamedly promote a vision of pastoral supervision that sits within the practice of local Christian ministry, whether in circuit, parish, chaplaincy or education. Each chapter begins with a passage of Scripture, which is skilfully woven into the subsequent theme. Unlike other works on supervision that, while helpful, need to be translated into the context of Christian ministry, here is an exploration of pastoral supervision that is immediately at home in the Church.

The text is peppered with helpful diagrams ('The three-legged stool of supervision', 'The drama triangle', 'Supervision rhombus'), and at the end of each chapter a series of exercises offers supervisors and supervisees structured opportunities to develop and enhance their practices. Many of these exercises have broader applicability (such as for staff meetings), though this perhaps merely emphasises that the skills of pastoral supervision are useful far beyond the supervisory context.

Pastoral Supervision is a challenging book to read, not because of any opacity in its language – it is almost always lucid and engaging – but because the book itself is an example of the careful attention it is trying to promote. By describing pastoral supervision as a rich and enriching practice, this book inspires a thirst for such rigorous, intentional and disciplined reflection on one's own ministry, in company with others. With the reality of pastoral supervision on the near horizon for those who work in the Methodist Church in Great Britain, this book is an essential read to increase confidence in a process that 'helps those who minister to ensure that the gifts they have received are not kept for themselves but shared as generously and effectively as possible with others' (p. 13).

Andrew Stobart

Human Being: Insights from Psychology and the Christian Faith, Jocelyn Bryan (London: SCM Press, 2016), 282 pp, £25.00 pbk

Jocelyn Bryan seeks to bring insights from psychology and theology (including from biblical narratives and Christian experience) into dialogue in the task of understanding and caring for human beings. Reflecting the 'narrative turn' in many disciplines, Bryan identifies narrative as a bridge between the two disciplines and as a starting point for conversations between them (although her territory and conversations are wider and not confined to a focus on narrative alone). Bryan's work in effect surveys and discusses several points of connection between the two fields, and many resources and insights pertinent to those points of connection, thus offering an increased awareness for both fields, as well as particular insights for understanding 'human being'.

Whether familiar with the territory or gaining new insights, readers will appreciate Bryan's commitment to her task and diligence in undertaking it, in a book that is well produced and accessible in style. I would quibble that Bryan might have displayed greater awareness and acknowledgement of the available insights from other potential conversation partners (without expecting her to have written a different book). For example, although she acknowledges that historically much academic psychology is 'reductionist' and observationally based, much contemporary psychotherapy adopts a more qualitative and experiential approach that arguably offers more immediate and extensive insights for understanding human stories, personalities and relationships (yet it seems that 'psychology' and 'psychotherapy' are forever wary of each other, even before we get to theology!).

Additionally, I sensed a degree of unevenness within the book: some theological statements, or conclusions about human experience (in the periodic illustrations supplied), occasionally appeared to be unsupported 'assertions' (however potentially valid) that were lacking in a fuller reasoning or a greater underpinning in pastoral or therapeutic practice or research; this contrasted with Bryan's more substantive handling of (especially psychological) theory. Consequently, to a degree, the book also seemed to move between being more academic and intended for the academic world, yet at other times intended more widely for encouragement and awareness within the

community of faith; maybe this was intended, and it is richer for seeking to be and do both.

Certainly the book invites attention, both from those starting out and from those with existing awareness of the insights to be gained from a dialogue between psychology and theology. Having built a platform in her initial chapters, Bryan's subsequent chapters (the major part of the book) offer a rich resource of summaries and insights, conversations and critiques. The chapters cover 'Personality' (including, for example, various personality theories and Christian perspectives), 'Goals and Motivation' (including a discussion of 'sin' and becoming 'Christlike'), 'Social Being' (premised on our fundamentally relational existence), 'Emotions', 'Self-Regulation', 'Self-Esteem' and 'Memory and Ageing'. Each chapter weaves biblical and other narratives together with psychological insights.

Inevitably some theories and ideas receive more rigorous attention than others, but the ground covered is extensive, and Bryan's subjects and discussions invite increased theological, self- and interpersonal understanding. This is a wide-ranging distillation of relevant knowledge and reflection into a stimulating contribution to theory and practice.

James Tebbutt

On Augustine, Rowan Williams (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 211 pp, £25.00 hbk

These essays are extremely good, extremely technical, very difficult and deeply rewarding. Considerable knowledge is taken for granted. They do not comprise a systematic overview of Augustinian thought; rather, a slightly uneven set of essays on selected themes.

Augustine's fourth-/fifth-century God ordered all things 'by measure, number and weight' (Wis 11:21). Augustine considered authoritarian (even violent) coercion in the Christian household and the Christian state to be the justified, shameful consequence of original sin, generating widespread opprobrium in recent decades. Williams is unapologetic. 'What is interesting about Augustine is not the attitudes he shares with his contemporaries but what is unique to him' (p. 191). 'Interesting' things are insights concerning the human self, the Church, evil, the secular state, how we may seek a God we do not know, and trinitarian relations. Most exciting and difficult is Williams' confessedly provisional teasing out from the sprawling Augustinian corpus an understanding of *sapientia* (divine wisdom) as the essential thread that renders coherent the life of the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, and our own search for the God who first reveals himself not in us but in others.

The chapter 'Insubstantial Evil' is penetrating and helpful. That Augustine's evil does not actually exist enhances, rather than diminishes, evil's diabolic reality in our lives.

The chapter on the Psalms may well astonish. 'All the Psalms can be heard as Christ speaking – the Head taking on the "voice" of the Body, the confused, needy, strident, unhappy voices of flesh and blood human beings' (p. 133). Thus worshippers become one with the finite-yet-infinite mind of the incarnate Word. No wonder missals and prayer books relegate the New Testament witness to the sidelines.

Preaching is theology's litmus test. Williams on Augustine's view of preaching: 'Scripture is beautiful and must be so if it is to move us to love, which arises from delight; likewise, preaching must be beautiful, not as a matter of impressive ornament but through its appeal to what most deeply attracts, the

self-giving love of Christ' (p. 57). Williams on preaching: 'Without a belief in a love without self-directed interest, we may find that the gospel of a human community beyond faction and rivalry is harder to preach than we might have imagined' (p. 74). And a warning from Williams about the context in which preaching is offered: 'A society unclear about what moral wants it should nurture in its citizens will produce minds largely incapable of understanding moral crisis and moral tragedy' (p. 160).

Conventional scholarship claims that the West, following Augustine, prioritised the unity of the Godhead whereas the East, following Gregory of Nyssa, prioritised Spirit at the price of true unity. Williams thinks he has discovered a new Augustinian doctrine of *sapientia*. His own appraisal:

So far, then, from Augustine's trinitarian theology dealing inadequately with the Holy Spirit, it succeeds, for the first time in the history of Christian doctrine, in giving some account of how and why the Spirit is intrinsic to the trinitarian life – a task which not even the most sophisticated pages of Gregory of Nyssa manage with any great clarity. (p. 184)

About that, we shall surely hear plenty more.

Michael P. Wilson

