

## *What is a caring congregation?*

A short forty years ago, I learned that pastoral care was an activity of the ordained. Care was a professional task and vocation, and clinical training was necessary to responsibly enact it. The relationship between the care giver and the care receiver was one of distance, as the former held some skill or knowledge that the latter lacked. Primary resources for understanding the caring transaction were the psychological sciences, and “therapist” and “client” did not meet in community living.

Fourth, for the Christian, the “care giver” and “care receiver” are one. Neither lives out of a permanent role, and the person who receives care at one moment in time may offer the “giver” care at another time. Concerns of mutuality and equal regard define the brothers and sisters in the Church, and this affects the ways in which we care with and for one another.

Fifth, while insights from psychology and the other human sciences are indispensable, the primary resources for the care giver are the treasures of the Church: the congregation itself as a hospitable community of care; liturgies and rituals of a people seeking to ground themselves in their primary relationship with God; prayerful intentions to receive strangers and offer sanctuary, celebrate shared stories and grieve with one another in the many losses and sufferings of living

and dying.

Another way to say this is to note the three models that have defined pastoral care historically: the classical model which has come to us through biblical, historical and theological study; the clinical model which focuses upon the dynamics of the persons involved; and the ecclesial model, the Church or congregation, where a community of God’s folk seek to be a place of mission and care and justice in God’s world.<sup>1</sup> Each of these models is necessary for wholistic practices of care, so congregational care always seeks understanding from the Christian classics, the human sciences (especially the psychodynamic disciplines), and the nature and goal of the Church (ecclesiology).

### *How Does It Happen?*

So how does one call forth a caring congregation? Three perspectives help. First, leadership can nurture a shift toward emphasizing the importance of ordinary care. In the Western culture of North America, those who offer the most hands on care tend to be the least valued. The practical nurses or attendants in nursing homes who care for our relatives’ bedsores and diapers, daily routines and

# The CARING Congregation

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Now I teach pastoral care within a division called “Congregational Formation.” Not all of my students are seeking ordination, and many of them are second career persons with experience as nurses and teachers, lawyers and salespeople, social workers and owners of small businesses. Without disdaining the truthfulness in what I learned many years ago, I am inviting them to learn how to call forth caring congregations, not only caring individuals, and to place my earlier knowledge within a different context that is theologically grounded. In many ways, this shift redefines pastoral care.

### *Pastoral Care Redefined*

First, the responsibility for care goes with baptism and not ordination; each Christian is called to care.

Second, care is a human and not a professional function; one does not need certification to be aware of the human needs for care and how best to act to meet them.

Third, caring is a spiritual and theological orientation, and not primarily a clinical one. The Church as a context in which care is offered and received is not the same as a mental health professional or therapist’s office.

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social existence, are the lowest paid and least valued of care givers in our culture.

Second, members of a congregation can seek to better understand and develop their own caring practices.<sup>2</sup> Gathered together in prayer and Bible study, they can be invited and guided to look at themselves as they practice hospitality with one another, newcomers, members of the communities in which their church is located, and sisters and brothers throughout the world. Perhaps as they seek to understand issues of ecology, they might reflect on practices of simplicity and stewardship that would embody their care for the planet. They might ponder the appropriate ways to experience Sabbath in a stress-filled culture, or share their own faith stories. Perhaps they can better recognize their actual practices as they suffer together through times of death and despair, loss and bewilderment. Members of one church, in pondering their own practices of hospitality, discovered that they were viewed as strangers by persons with whom they shared community life. They had to change their self-perception as the hospitable group that received others!

Third, a program of intentional lay ministry can be developed. Many models are available as persons seek to be more intentional and better trained caregivers and listeners to others in their congregations. There are alternatives to Stephen Ministries, including one grounded in Benedictine spirituality, and competent and compassionate lay persons, with appropriate guidance, have developed grief groups, divorce recovery groups, and groups of adoptive parents to meet particular needs. Congregations can support and affirm the person who establishes a phone calling system for the frail elderly and participate in gatherings with cancer survivors. "Little support communities" can develop around a variety of needs and concerns, and discipleship groups can offer a depth of sharing and intentional community.

One of my friends has said that a caring congregation is a treasure in itself,<sup>3</sup> and that these treasures are intended for a hurting, suffering world. A congregation's integrity as a worshipping community, with its rituals and practices of hospitality, is about care. It is not a congregation which DOES care, but the congregation itself IS care. Through its carefully constructed liturgies it offers

meaningful frameworks for persons seeking to better understand how to live in the world as God's folk.<sup>4</sup> Through the ritual of coming to Table together, the inclusiveness of Christian community is experienced along with healing. Our rituals welcome the newcomer, whether by birth or adoption, or through programs

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of evangelism or simply the drop in "church shopping." A caring congregation is present at our many dyings, seeking to accompany persons toward a "good death," trying to assure that they will not be abandoned or isolated as they approach death. A caring congregation, nurtured in the perspective that the giver and receiver are one, will "see" each person as one with gifts to offer, whether that person is developmentally disabled, physically handicapped, or of a different political, ethnic, racial or sexual orientation. The most important result of this new "way of seeing" will not be meeting their need for care (as perceived by us), but rather will be our seeing them whole and with something to offer the congregation.

The caring congregation is a place, a sanctuary, where our human stories are connected with God's story, and where our puzzling narratives find a place in the presence of the One who heals and sustains, guides and reconciles, liberates, empowers and nurtures. In the caring congregation, each person is called to such participation.

### *A Difficult Pilgrimage*

Your caring congregation will discover itself engaged in God's mission—not

only "doing" mission programs, but being missional at its center. The pilgrimage toward becoming a more caring congregation is a difficult one. Surely we are called to love and care for one another, but in the attempt we discover how truly difficult it is. The caring congregation may discover that it is not sure it wants "neighborhood kids" using its facilities, or may wonder if the layettes it is making should go to young girls who are unmarried but planning to keep their babies. There may be struggle about what caring Christian parents want to teach their junior highs about human sexuality, or how a symbol of care for one group may be a symbol of oppression for another, i.e. the presence of the American flag in the sanctuary. A congregation that struggles together about issues of human sexuality may find shared vulnerabilities that deeply touch their relationships, and conversations about accessibility may find different points of view on how to spend limited funds. Even here, in the midst of the struggle, a congregation practices care: the care of learning how to have dialogue with persons who hold different points of view. Indeed, this care may embody hope for an entire culture that finds public discourse divisive.

What better gift can we offer to meet the needs of human beings in their sufferings and joys, diversities and hungers than a caring congregation? And how wonderful that every person, every child of God, can be part of the gift.

God's blessing on the journey. □

1 Patton, John. *Pastoral Care in Context* (Westminster, 1993)

2 Bass, Dorothy, ed. *Practicing Our faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Jossey-Bass, 1997)

3 Gill-Austern, Brita. "Rediscovering the Hidden Treasures for Pastoral Care," *Pastoral Psychology* Vol. 43, No. 4, 1995.

4 Anderson, Herb and Foley, Ed. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, (Jossey-Bass, 2001)



(See p. 27 for other resources recommended by Peggy Way.)

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