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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Gilbert Kirby

Writing from a wealth of pastoral experience, Gilbert stresses the need for a church to be a caring community in which the varied needs of its members are met by concerted action. The qualities needed by one who is helping another, the nature of what is involved, the resources available and many of the practicalities in terms of technique and discernment are touched upon in an introductory way.

The church as a caring community

'The Church must be above all a caring community. It must accept people as Christ Himself accepts them, which is just as they happen to be' (Ruth Fowke in *Coping with Crises*).

In the UK and in some other countries particularly since the second world war, there has emerged a welfare system which embraces the needs of the young, the old, the sick, the mentally and physically handicapped and the under-privileged. The more idealistic see in this a demonstration of how Christian principles may be applied to the life of a community. Others see subtle dangers in a society where everything is done for people from the cradle to the grave.

There are, of course, many flaws in the system. Officials are often seen as rather remote and self-important figures. There are people who do not fit into any of the established categories of help. The system makes it relatively easy for scroungers and those who are work-shy.

In this comparatively new situation there has come into being a whole army of social and welfare workers, working within a new set of disciplines and often using new jargon. This development obviously affects the thinking of Christian people. The professionals have taken over many of the tasks in society formerly undertaken by the church. Of course, the church could rightly lay claim to having pioneered many aspects of the modern welfare state. The fact remains, however, that more and more matters which were once left to voluntary societies are now undertaken by the state. Happily, in many cases, there is good co-operation between statutory and voluntary bodies. Many Christian people are discovering their true Christian vocation in employment, after the necessary training, within the state system and make up in

terms of Christian love for what they may lack in professional expertise.

Clearly, duplication is to be avoided, but in many communities there is great need for certain facilities which it is within the power of the local church to provide: the church must let it be known that it is *there to help* and to concern itself for all age groups and for all sections in the local community. This may be done in a variety of ways:

Caring for the young

The nursery school or playgroup organized by the local church may be an expression of our care for children, and at the same time a means whereby contact is established with local families — ‘mums and toddlers’ groups serve this function too. The Sunday school, together with holiday Bible clubs, is a further activity organized in the interests of children, and youth organizations, whether uniformed or otherwise, may also have their part to play, as will coffee bars and youth clubs.

Caring for the elderly

The day centre for senior citizens may meet a local need and, at the same time, give an opportunity for evangelistic outreach. Occasional outings and other social activities for senior citizens are further means of expressing care.

Caring for people in general

The church should be aware of local facilities provided either by the state or by voluntary organizations, and should seek to supplement these, and also to close any gaps that may exist in the services provided. In some areas there is a call for information services, a help service for the housebound, the provision of cars for those visiting hospitals, etc.; wives’ groups and men’s contact clubs will be appropriate in many situations.

Churches, in becoming involved in various forms of social services, are able to provide an auxiliary to the statutory services. In future, the church’s involvement with social work will be manifested increasingly through the personal involvement of its members through local institutions in their own neighbourhoods.

Caring people

We must never forget that the church is made up of individual persons

and if it is to be a caring church, then its members must be caring people. In these days, we speak a great deal about *pastoral counselling*. This is just another way of referring to our caring concern. Let us look briefly at the nature of this ministry.

The counsellor's qualifications

To whom do men and women turn in their need?

1. To someone they know and like.
2. To someone they respect and trust and who has credibility.
3. To someone who is interested in them as people.
4. To someone whom they feel is competent and experienced and who can respect confidences.
5. To someone who has clear insight into human nature, who is 'fully there'.
6. To someone who is without partiality, capable of objectivity and truly honest.
7. To someone who has time for them and is available to them.
8. To someone who is not easily shocked.
9. To someone who, whilst being first and foremost a man or woman of God, is also a man or woman who is 'worldly wise'.
10. To someone who clearly knows God, has a living faith and is prepared to rely upon the Holy Spirit.

If you want to help others you must be able to convey concern without control, interest without pressure, warmth without manipulation: as Psalm 37:30-31 (Living Bible) says, 'The godly man is a good counsellor because he is just and fair and knows right from wrong'.

The nature of pastoral counselling

Pastoral counselling involves first and foremost an *understanding of people*. It represents a relationship in which one person endeavours to help another to understand and solve his difficulties of adjustment to society. The pastoral counsellor seeks to break through everything superficial and symptomatic in order to reach the real need. His responsibility is that of probing, recognizing and understanding, and he must take into account the background from which the person comes.

Pastoral counselling implies caring for human beings as persons in all the varied aspects of their nature, and endeavouring to help them to become integrated and mature persons. 'Broadly speaking, the special aim of pastoral counselling may be stated as the attempt to help people

to help themselves through the process of gaining understanding of their own inner conflicts' (Seward Hilter, *Pastoral Counselling*). The counsellor should be able to feel with the one being counselled, to *sense* where he is psychologically. As W. L. Carrington has pointed out:

The aim of pastoral counselling . . . is not to give advice nor is it to provide ready-made solutions to various personal problems . . . it is to create a *personal relationship* of such quality that the counsellee will feel able progressively to unburden his pent-up emotions, and let go his deeply buried psychic defences. In this way alone will most people gain the necessary insight, and sufficient awareness and release of their creative abilities. Then, they are in a position to look at their problems, and themselves, more objectively, and in further discussion with the counsellor to work out their future attitudes and actions. The experience of such help will generally enable such people to grow to greater maturity and social responsibility.

The Christian counsellor is concerned not only with man's relationship with his fellows, but even more with his relationship with God. He is a 'therapist of souls'. His greatest needs are empathy, compassion, care and love.

Equipment for the task

The first task of a would-be counsellor is to learn to know what the world looks like through spectacles other than his own. He needs to develop a sensitive awareness of people as such. The counsellor has to create an environment in which the person concerned will feel comfortable enough to give expression to the feelings, problems and conflicts which he has come to talk about:

It is really impossible to exaggerate the tremendous disadvantage under which the preacher, educationalist or social reformer labours when he lacks a knowledge of human nature — its dynamic tendencies, its controlling sentiments, its conscience and its reason (J. C. McKenzie, *Souls in the Making*).

We are wise to use the insights of psychology into the nature and personality of man to 'know what is in man' (John 2:25) and to understand his motives, conduct, tensions and self ideals. Psychology will not replace vital Christianity in pastoral ministrations, but it can inform and guide the search for a deeper understanding of the life of a man. 'The pastoral function,' writes W. L. Carrington in *Psychology, Religion and Human Need* (p.40), 'may be seen as the never-ending attempt to bring all the available resources of knowledge and inspiration to the fullest service of people, to help them to lay hold of the Christian gift of

abundant life from the beginning or at any period of life, or to recover it when they have lost it.'

The experienced counsellor will always have in mind a need to look for problem-relating insight whereby a person comes to understand himself more fully, and for a solution in which advice is given as to how the situation may be met in a more constructive and helpful manner.

The counsellor needs to respect the person being counselled, and to accept him as a person. Furthermore, he needs to be aware of his own attitudes and feelings, biases and prejudices. He needs to convey warmth to the person being counselled so that he may speak freely. A comfortable and relaxed atmosphere is essential. The person to be counselled should be encouraged to state his purpose in coming for counselling, and to share what is uppermost in his mind. The counsellor in turn must be a good listener, and give to the one being counselled his undivided interest and attention. Every reaction and gesture should convey both interest and sympathy — non-verbal communication. To ask a person to reveal confidences before his own confidence is won is to court defeat. It is essential to be careful about the manner and tone of voice in which questions are asked. It is the counsellor's task to help the person to bring into the open those thoughts, attitudes and feelings which are emotionally charged, and which centre around the problem and conflicts he has come to discuss.

Counselling is time-consuming — an interview would normally last not less than one hour, and might go on for longer. Usually one interview is insufficient and further appointments have to be made.

An occupational hazard of the counsellor lies in the fact that in counselling, the projection of strong feelings of either love or hate stemming from unresolved conflicts in a person's earlier relationship with parents is not uncommon and can be embarrassing.

Method and technique in counselling

The first stage involves the unburdening of the mind whereby the person is encouraged to pour out, unreservedly, his fears and worries and tensions. The counsellor is simply a creative listener, seeking to accept and understand the feelings of the one being counselled without passing judgement.

The next stage aims at *clarification* whereby the one being counselled, by means of creative questioning, begins to recognize his own reactions, feelings and needs.

The third stage is reached when the counsellor is able to place the problem, by now isolated and identified, in a *Christian perspective*. The

one in need is brought by questioning and careful prompting to see for himself the implications of Christian truth for his or her own problem.

When a pastoral counsellor directs the attention of the one being counselled to spiritual things he is passing from pastoral counselling to pastoral *care*, and at this stage much wisdom is required. Personal testimony on the part of the counsellor can be of great help here. In the ultimate, the successful pastoral counsellor is the person whose attitude to life and to other people, as well as his own walk with God, reveals the tremendous depth of his understanding.

Some practical points to watch

1. Ensure against interruption — be ready to give undivided attention.
2. Never minimize a problem however trivial it may seem to you.
3. Do not give counsel until you are sure you understand the problem.
4. Be well informed and be knowledgeable regarding sources of helpful information and assistance.
5. Discern between the genuine and those who merely enjoy being counselled.
6. Be discreet in all you say — and especially so with the opposite sex.
7. Have suitable literature available either to give or lend.

As Christians, walking in the steps of the master, we shall soon discover that caring is costly, but at the same time, it is rewarding. We must always remember that, like Christ, our concern must be for the *whole* man — body, soul and spirit. Our caring is a measure of our credibility. The poor, the sick, the outcast, the downtrodden were objects of Christ's compassion. Jesus offered proof of his messiahship by his ministry to the concrete needs of the suffering and the afflicted (Matthew 11:5). The parable of the good samaritan demonstrates that our responsibility for our neighbours extends to anyone in need and leaps over the barriers of race and class at personal cost of time, money and danger. Faith without works is dead. The quality of our love for God is shown in our practical love for our fellow men and women (Matthew 25:34-46).