

DEVELOPING A MELANESIAN APPROACH TO PASTORAL COUNSELLING

Pastoral Care in a Theological Training Context

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Definition

According to Howard Clinebell, pastoral counselling involves the utilisation, by persons in ministry, of one-to-one relationships, to enable healing empowerment, and growth, to take place with individuals and their relationships.¹

From the Christian point of view, the above definition can be understood as a Christian mutual concern for relationships. This concern includes the well-being of individuals within the congregation, the extended family, in both small and large communities, whose lives are being both enriched, and challenged, by other cultures.

The concept of mutual concern (pastoral care), and counselling, always plays a very important role in our Melanesian societies. It is part of our traditional social and religious structure, which sometimes can be called “cultural counselling”. The approach, here, is directly related to, and only has meaning in, a particular culture and customs of our people, all through the Melanesian region. Traditional cultural counselling covers both social and religious matters, and its aim is not only to advise and instruct the individual, but also to settle problems that concern the whole community.

The Importance of Traditional Values in Melanesia

The search for a Melanesian approach to pastoral counselling can be best understood, and found, within Melanesian traditional values. Such values vary, according to many different languages, and tribal groupings, and customs. However, one of the most-common values within Melanesian society, is that of a “traditional community”. Although the shape and size of the community varies from one society to another, the group of people, which is essential for

¹ Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1990, pp. 25-26.

biological survival, emotional support, and meaning, is always of the greatest importance for the people in Melanesia.

“Community” is not simply an abstract concept, but represents people, who are closely linked to one another, which is the very fact that makes the members of a community more important. It must be clarified here, that a number of people are held together, within the community, by a web of special relationships. Firstly, there is a relationship that unites the individual members of a community. The right of each person within the community is unique, and must always be respected, according to one’s own status. For instance, the status of chiefs (big men), uncles, the brothers, and mothers-in-law, married people, elder brothers, and brother and sister relationships, is always respected, accordingly.

Secondly, relationships with the ancestors are always considered to be very important. It is believed that the dead have not gone away from the community, but live in a different existence, and remain part of the social unit. The people of a community are required to have a proper relationship with the dead, in order to avoid problems and sufferings.

Thirdly, relationships with the other neighbouring communities are also essential for the life of the community. Members of other communities are always respected, according to their status. The relationships vary, accordingly, but the fact is, that disturbed relationships with neighbours can bring harm, both to the individual, and a community. Fighting and death, with poisoning, and other associated problems, are some of the aspects, and results, of such broken relationships.

Finally, the importance of relationships to the total environment is symbolised by the various spirits and powers. Therefore, a broken relationship to the environment, to one of the spirits or powers, would bring sickness and suffering to either an individual or a community.

These are the relationships that maintain a Melanesian community, and so lead to a fullness of life. They can be seen as the channels for a better life. However, if there is strife, sickness, suffering, or death, the first move is to search, and locate, the cause of the problems. This can be done, by asking the question, “Which relationship has been broken or damaged?” The community is required to find out which relationship has been broken, as proven by the

persistence of problems and sickness. Any physical treatment is not effective at this point, unless a broken relationship is first mended.

The mending of such a relationship can be seen as pastoral counselling, at this point. It is the task of this consultation to search for a Melanesian approach to mend these broken and damaged relationships. However, the following are some suggestions, which might stimulate our discussions, in searching for a better, and relevant, Melanesian approach to pastoral counselling, today.

The introduction of the cash economy, and the accompanying changes to our Melanesian traditional society, have brought a new kind of picture, in the minds of young Melanesians today, of what it is to be a community. For instance, the present system of education is always geared towards educating children, or students, for jobs, rather than education for skills. It used to be the task of a Melanesian community to educate the children for skills. Such a task is now being neglected, but the community assumes that the teachers in the schools have done it. Every year, thousands of children drop out from schools without skills. They have to create some skills for themselves, without the help of a community. They have no skills for making bows and arrows, so they have to make home-made guns instead. They have no skills for building traditional houses, so they have to go around burning down buildings. They have no skills for either fishing or hunting, so they have to move to urban areas, fishing and hunting in the pockets, and shops, of others. These are some of the signs, and examples, of broken and damaged relationships within our Melanesian communities that need to be addressed immediately.

The Suggested Forms of Melanesian Approaches to Pastoral Counselling

1. There is a need to develop a sense of awareness, and responsibility, among students in theological schools and lay training centres. This can be done, in theory, but, above all, it must be put into practice, through regular visits to parishes, by both staff and students.
2. Pastoral counselling is already part of our Melanesian traditional system of education. Students and ministers must be taught, and encouraged, to revive it among the people of various communities. Elders must continue to pass on wisdom and advice to younger generations.

3. It is already part of our Melanesian social structure to have traditional social patterns of counselling. For instance, Melanesian society was built on a chain of authority, ranging from the chief (big man), at the top, down through various leaders, and people with special responsibilities, to the ordinary members of the community, and their children.
4. Pastoral counselling is not limited to being done by one particular person, like the minister, today. It is a community responsibility, and participation.
5. Pastoral counselling is not a technique, or something we read from books, but skills, based on wisdom and experience.
6. Pastoral counselling must be seen, in terms of respect, and obedience, to the older people within the community. In counselling, use a member of a group, a family, or clan, rather than a separate individual.
7. Use a group of people within the community, and discuss the summing up, with the summing up to be done by the elder or chief.
8. Use ritual actions of purification, cleansing, and compensation.

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