

Contact

ISSN: 1352-0806 (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yprt19>

The Pastoral Approach in Prison Chaplaincy

John Cooper (Chaplain)

To cite this article: John Cooper (Chaplain) (1970) The Pastoral Approach in Prison Chaplaincy, Contact, 32:1, 20-27, DOI: [10.1080/13520806.1970.11759201](https://doi.org/10.1080/13520806.1970.11759201)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13520806.1970.11759201>



Published online: 26 Aug 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View related articles [↗](#)

THE PASTORAL APPROACH IN PRISON CHAPLAINCY

JOHN COOPER
*Chaplain, H.M. Prison, Bristol*¹

The Pastoral Approach

All understanding of the word Pastoral stems from the perspective of Man's relation to his Creator. God the Father is the one and only true shepherd, and from his comprehensive, persistent and continual care all of the meaning of Pastoral comes. All those who are called shepherds are shepherds on his behalf, reflecting his care, be they religious or secular pastors. So we might say that to understand the meaning of Pastoral is to express care in terms of the life of the Godhead. We live out in our situation the apparent futility of Christ's Incarnation and suffering, for the cross is at the heart of all ministry. The key-word then for Pastoral Care is compassion, suffering with others.

Wholeness

If we choose a theme "Making Men Whole" it must assume that we have some pretty clear idea of what it means to be whole. The first requisite of wholeness is that a man must be seen to be a totality, body, mind and spirit, and not separated into compartments. Secondly, man cannot however be whole by himself. He is whole only when related to others. Therefore wholeness is also corporate. And thirdly wholeness is not complete if it is static. Man is only whole when he sees himself in perspective, if he has a vision of his significance in the plan of things. Wholeness is fulfilled in worship.

The two key-words of this paper then we have summed up as *Pastoral*, the manward movement of God, his care, and *wholeness*, the Godward movement of man in response to his care, resulting in wholeness. The two meet and are fulfilled in Christ. He is the first whole man, whole through the cross on which he bears man's unwholeness. Wholeness then is ultimately eschatological. Because of this, although we start

1. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Prison Department of the Home Office.

our work with a clear vision of what wholeness is, it does not permit the gaining of short-term easy answers, but is a goal to which we aim within the context of pastoral care. We accept men therefore as they are, unwhole, and bear that unwholeness within the pastoral relationship, changing some a little, but seeking to obey all.

Unwholeness

In the men we serve we find the very reversal of what we gave as a concept of wholeness, a brokenness in individuals, a breakdown of relationships and a retreat from the challenge of everyday situations, a loss or total absence of meaning, direction or significance, both personally and in life generally, and certainly as absence of true worship of God. But the prisoner is no different from the man in the street in his problems and reactions, save in a matter of degree. He is the unwhole man par excellence, he represents, whether realised in his life or not, a life of inexpressible suffering. It would be bad enough if we had only this situation to deal with but added to the man's unwholeness are the pressures of institutional life. The prisoner has lost those few relationships that are meaningful, he has lost a balanced community with the presence of women, children, and various age groups. He suffers from sexual frustrations and the loss of liberty of action which so robs a man of dignity. And the stigma of prison confirms him in his failure and despair.

I should now like to say something about our approach to our work within the definitions of Pastoral and Wholeness, in four areas.

1. Our Personal Work as Pastoral Counsellors.
2. The Corporate Work of the Church inside.
3. The Work of the Whole Team.
4. Our Relationship with the Whole Church.

1. Personal

We have said that the essence of pastoral work is compassion, being incarnate in a suffering situation, and that in our work we confront men in the depths of despair and suffering. But how does one become incarnate in their situation?

It is said that the chaplain walks on a fine line between staff and prisoners. I don't believe this is true. The men see

him on the establishment side. Nor would I say necessarily that the priest must be on the "cons" side of the line, in order to be incarnate. What he should be is to be seen as a man in contact with the real situation in prison, on the shop floor, in industrial terms. We can learn here from chaplains in industry who have no authority and no position. In recent years religious have been used more and more inside and parallels are often drawn between their lives and those of the prisoners. Surely their acceptance by the men is due to more than these parallels; it is that they come without official position and meet the men where they are; they come to them from beyond the system. I am not suggesting that a chaplain should be utterly withdrawn from everything that goes on in the institution, on the contrary he should be highly involved, but that he should only be identified with what is pastoral (e.g. case conferences) and should, as Christ, be set against what is unpastoral.

The chaplain of the past who filled many roles which have now been stripped from him leaving him, some say, to do his real work. But has the stripping gone far enough? A real Incarnation involves emptying, stripping, kenosis and only when this is achieved can we do anything.

When we are there with men in their situation, we look not for the hopeful and treatable cases only; the most precious gift we have is our understanding of the Cross, and thus we can give point to suffering, help a man to face reality in acceptance of his situation and use that suffering for growth.

Within this relationship, which is very much a listening, soaking-up one, we confront men with the challenge of the love of Christ. There is in this, judgment, example, and leadership. In distinction to some other disciplines we are judgmental, for the man is judged by the holiness of the Christ, the difference between him and Christ. Christ's holiness is example, but as holiness does not reject, and draws man rather across the gulf. This is the leadership of the pastor.

2. The Corporate Approach

It is easy to think of pastoral work only in terms of individual work, seeing ourselves as parallels to social caseworkers. And it is true that we have a particular skill in dealing with men, in that we are trained in the application of

religious truth to individual lives. But our ordination makes us symbols of the unity of the whole body of Christ and its pastoral concern for all. To us falls the leadership and organisation of that care wherever we are. We have to set our priorities straight, accepting time spent in the office, if it is for the right reasons of making services more meaningful; and accepting time spent in organising group activities and gathering together others within a pastoral team. In doing these things time can be spent more effectively than rushing around as the great individualist doing everything ourselves.

All we can do corporately by means of services or group activities will seek to enact the love of God for all, to give men significance and dignity, acceptance and fellowship. It will seek also to break down barriers between fellow prisoners, between the staff and prisoners and between outside and inside. In order to tackle the loneliness the men all feel it is vital to bring in as many people from outside as possible, clergy, students and laity, to be involved in our life. Everything should be done as ecumenically as possible. Not to do so would be to deny the corporate nature of being Pastoral. Not to do so also would rob us of the right to ask for a united staff team.

There is a story that always pleases me. The wife of a prisoner told me that she had been waiting in the Department of Health and Social Security in Bournemouth for her money one day, (18 months ago). In the room with her, talking quite openly about their recent time together in a Prison were four men. Their conversation came round to chapel in prison and they all agreed that it was only in chapel that they felt truly human. This was an unsolicited testimonial to the worth of services when we might feel a little cynical about "nick" religion. But this seems typical. The men often see chapel as the centre of the prison community, indeed the only place with any sense of community and belonging.

Of course it is in the Eucharist that Pastoral Care and Wholeness are summed up. Christ in his sacrifice is present in our situation, feeding, reconciling, supporting and giving new life. Here is the focal point of our ministry. In Bristol we have the Eucharist every day—the men are taught that this is offered for them and is the basis of the Christian life and a few come each day, but all know that it is done for them as

an intercession; the whole person is presented before God each day.

So often the men closest to us with whom we might think we are being successful turn out not to be so, but the men who have been helped may have had little personal contact but have been through the corporate fellowship and loving care of the church, and letters after discharge testify to this. Also there are many in prison whose problems are so deep that they cannot face them and talk about them and to try and make them do so would be a terrible presumption for men must surely at least be free to keep their counsel. In the spiritual fellowship of the Body of Christ they are supported, fed and grow, but some things are between them and God. We cannot stop, we cannot be in on it all.

I would like now to mention as part of the pastoral team the Prison Visitors. Their main function is to become the prisoners' friends and additionally and in conjunction with the welfare officers who attend all our meetings, some see men's families whilst inside, and help with jobs. Some also maintain contact with men on discharge; some visit in the hospital; one (who is a youth leader) is visiting young prisoners, and will in time run a club for them; another, a well-known writer, helps men interested in writing; and two help to run the Church Club, one of whom, who is regional organiser for the Scripture Union, aids us with visual aids for discussion groups. All these schemes are in their infancy but they do help Visitors to a fulfilling stewardship of their talents that helps the men and the work of the church.

3. The Whole Team

We have asserted that man is a whole, a single personality with many facets which cannot be separated. So it would follow logically that those disciplines which work for a man's wholeness should themselves be welded into a coherent whole team. Any attempt to separate that team into distinct department and roles is, in effect, an attempt to do the impossible, to separate the human being we are trying to make whole. In addition to this logical point is the emotional one that the man in trouble, wanting help, will not discern the root cause of his problem and to whom he should turn, he will simply cry for help. He must have a recognised right to approach anyone in the team he wants. He will respond

primarily to the person he feels cares the most, or is most available. So each member of the team must be sensitive to the various skills of the others so that all may combine to bring those skills to bear on the problems that come anyone's way. It should follow logically that in the Prison Chaplain's situation with every sort of discipline working in close proximity, there should be the closest team-work with illuminating insights emerging as a result. The answers to the questionnaire,² however, confirm that this is not happening. Thus it would be dangerous to try to suggest, in the absence of insights, what should be happening, as I don't think that truly relevant things can be said about our situation unless they grow out of a real situation of people working together committed to a concept of the united team with the insights coming out of that situation.

Within these limitations, however, some positive points may be made. There is, for example, a widespread recognition of the *need* to work together. And there is a greater acceptance of the chaplain and his ministry than we sometimes think ourselves. As well as this, however, a clearer recognition is needed where every member of the staff is a potential pastor. Here one should note the numerous tributes paid to prison officers in replies to the questionnaire. If prison chaplains are truly shop-floor men we will be able to support officers in their work and also learn from them. The officer is in a sense the basic pastor in the place and the one we work with most. Nevertheless, as was said in the replies, insights were gained through inter-disciplinary communication into the individuals and their specific problems, but never into the corporate way we do our jobs. Each discipline of course has its own problems, such as those of doctors, governors and chaplains who are seen as authority figures, as well as those of the newer ones who are still finding their feet, and although all disciplines are pastoral there are differences of degree because of opportunity and role expectation. As one reply put it, "The other disciplines are pastoral but they lack the last 10 per cent of compassion". It is the challenge of Christ's total compassion.

2. In preparing this paper, Mr Cooper sent a questionnaire to all full-time Prison Chaplains, 80 per cent of whom replied.

4. The Church Outside

The man inside lives in his heart on the outside, if he has anything there. So it is right that we should be involved in aiding his life outside whilst he is inside, and giving him continued support after discharge. It is thought by many that the Church has no place in after-care, that it is done officially. But there is, surely, more work than any number of people can deal with. Once a man leaves an institution he will usually reject anything that labels him ex-prisoner. Only the very inadequate hold ties. If help is needed, it will have to be not from officials but from sympathetic people from a caring society and the Church if it is really being the Church in a locality is the *embryonic caring society*, the fold of Christ that shepherds, tends, and leads. There is no clash between statutory services and the Church, both have a function, and the Church in a sense can develop itself, representing ordinary grass roots society in a particular area as a hand-maid to the statutory services, bringing before them particular instances of need beyond their capacity and encouraging out of its life vocations to official service, in and out of prison. For these reasons, our contact with the Church at large must be close, but apart from that we need the Church to minister to us, we need shepherding, we must not be allowed to lose the vision that we are part of the mystical body, not part of a religious department in the Home Office.

The answers received with regard to contact outside were impressive. Parish priests seem to be visiting their people inside in increasing numbers, and most chaplains encourage this. Obviously the man's real life is outside and contact should be maintained. To say we are the parish priests of a particular institution is rather to erect barriers and create a false parish. (Can one call a prison a community?—No!) Of course priests visit local more than training prisons for obvious reasons. But there are exceptions where parish priests are notified of arrival of their men in prison and when visiting meet the staff in direct charge of the men.

The use of parish priests in connection with problems and with following men up depends of course on how much chaplains are prepared to use them. Some priests, as one person commented, feel that seeking lost sheep was too time-consuming in a busy programme. Others are fearful of this field but the overall impression is that parish priests in

the church at large are used frequently for family visits and help. Particular comment was passed on the great knowledge of so many parish priests of their parish and people and of the *immediacy* of the help available. They are prepared to do anything in a crisis. Obviously our contacts have to be done in liaison with prison officers and others involved but there is in the church a fund of non-official help available, representing the care of society in general.

Chaplains' personal contact with the church depends very much on temperament and the theology of the church. Some will see nothing wrong in jogging along as a loner, but most full-time chaplains are in close contact with their dioceses and seem to be very much part of the local church, many receiving very enthusiastic support from their bishops.

I have said nothing in this paper intentionally on the *role* of the chaplain. You cannot define separately the role of leaven in a lump that only gives life through being lost in the whole. So is the church's work. Besides I have described being pastoral as living out the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. To be obsessed with role is to doubt these. Live these and our whole is fulfilled in the crying need of men in society.
