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CARING FOR EACH OTHER

ASHLEY M. WILCOX

Pastors wear a lot of hats. Pastors' roles include preacher, worship leader, provider of pastoral care, counselor, teacher, and administrator. And those are just the official expectations. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, a pastor also ends up being a “social worker, chauffeur, cook, financial advisor, community organizer, babysitter, philanthropist, marriage counselor, cheerleader, [and] friend.”¹ In a church with a large staff, these roles may be divided among several people, but then the lead pastor also has to manage several employees. In a church with a solo pastor, the pastor either has to do all of these tasks or rely on strong lay leadership.

Two of the primary tasks that any church expects from a pastor are (1) preaching (or leading worship) and (2) pastoral care. Being able to deliver a message and taking care of those in the community in need are fundamental to the pastoral role. But these two things—preaching and pastoral care—require very different gifts and skill sets. Pastors tend to be better at one or the other, and it is important for the community to fill in the gaps. Otherwise, the community will suffer because they are not getting what they need from the church, or the pastor will suffer because they are spending time on work they are not naturally gifted nor equipped to provide, or both.

In my own work and ministry, I usually focus on the first part, preaching and vocal ministry, but here I am going to look more at pastoral care and, specifically, how Quakers are providing pastoral care for each other. Pastoral care is most powerful when it involves “communities of care” rather than expecting one person to take full responsibility for all of the pastoral care in the community.² In this formulation, the pastor is one person among many who cares for the congregation.³ Communities of care bring together laity and clergy to offer ministries of care to each other and to those outside of their congregation.⁴

This pastoral care includes caring for the community members' spiritual, emotional, and physical needs, which often are connected to

each other. For example, a member may feel that God is distant after the loss of a job, or the death of a family member, or in the midst of a medical crisis. A sense of spiritual anxiety may be connected to the anxiety of rising student loan payments. In a community of care, the people providing pastoral care may ask spiritual questions as well as questions about what is going on in the person's life, physically, emotionally, and financially.

This is one of the places that Quakers have developed a structure that responds to the different gifts in the community. Instead of expecting the same person (or group of people) to take on both the vocal ministry and pastoral care, Quakers have recognized that individuals may feel called to be ministers or elders. Ministers, traditionally, give vocal ministry and other forms of outward witness, and elders are those who are led to support the spiritual needs of the community as a whole. We have formalized this separation in committees called Ministry & Worship and Care & Counsel. This is true of programmed and unprogrammed meetings, and it is one of our strengths as Friends.

One example of a pastoral Quaker meeting that has adopted a community care approach to pastoral care is First Friends Meeting in Richmond, IN. This program, which they now call the Care Team, began in 1989. The pastor at the time made hospital calls but did not make many visits to members who were homebound.⁵ The Ministry & Oversight committee expressed a concern, and the pastor encouraged them to develop a Visitation Group whose members would regularly contact the homebound. The Care Team has been ongoing since then, providing meals, shopping assistance, transportation, and doing odd jobs. The Care Team also likes to plan something special around the holidays, such as a luncheon for people in assisted living, or sending Easter baskets to share with people in the retirement community.⁶

Each person on the Care Team chooses one or two people from the homebound list that they would like to contact at least once a month. There is also a Coordinating Team, which meets monthly to discuss special needs in the community. Each person on the Care Team sends their contacts to the clerk of the Coordinating Team and she puts them into a table to see who has gotten contacts and who they need to reach out to. There are no terms for people on the Care

Team; they stay as long as they feel called to the work. The previous pastor of First Friends was on the Care Team, but most of the pastoral care is provided by others in the community.

The clerk of the Coordinating Team said that the Care Team responsibilities expanded greatly for people who are homebound, which now includes basically everyone! They have not been able to do visits in person due to COVID-19, but the regular phone calls and cards have been a way to keep people connected to the meeting, especially those who don't use Zoom. The Care Team has regular workshops and trainings for people on the team, including a recent workshop on compassion fatigue.

So far, I have been talking about ways that Friends have done pastoral care well, but there are definitely areas in which we could improve. Unfortunately, some Friends are wary of naming the gift of pastoral care. There are various reasons for this. Some Friends feel uncomfortable publicly recognizing or acknowledging any kind of gifts.⁷ Others specifically do not like the sound of “pastoral care” as a gift because it is so tied up with a pastoral system. Alternatively, Friends may think in terms of talents and skills instead of gifts.⁸

This lack of naming creates problems for Friends. First, it fails to recognize that God has given the gift to the community, not just the individual who holds it.⁹ This can isolate the person who feels called to pastoral care. Second, it can disconnect those called to pastoral care from the places they can use that gift in the meeting. If the meeting sees the Care & Counsel committee as slots to be filled, it may be filled by anyone and those with the particular gifts may be left out.¹⁰ This results in “secret pastors” within the meeting—those doing pastoral care work without the support and accountability of the meeting. Finally, it denies those called the guidance that the meeting could provide, through prayer, mentorship, and training. Think how much more our meetings would benefit by naming and nurturing these gifts!

I started this article by listing many of the different roles pastors are expected to fill. One of the consequences of all of those expectations is widespread clergy burnout. Anne Helen Petersen describes this burnout in her excellent newsletter article, “the contours of clergy burnout.” She says that it is a combination of a feeling of calling with

massive student debt, the stress of social media, unlivable wages, and the pressure to work all the time at one job “while also making time for a second job to buoy you financially.”¹¹ Petersen includes first-hand accounts from faith leaders in various denominations and religions, sharing how this path is burning them out.

Friends are not immune to ministry burnout. I have been in public ministry for over a decade now, and I have watched some of my closest friends burn out and leave Friends altogether. And this is another reason it is important to separate the roles of minister and elder: ministers are in need of pastoral care. Ministers and pastors have all the same stresses and concerns as everyone else in the community: financial, emotional, and physical (especially this year!). We need to talk about debt! Many ministers have high amounts of student loan and credit card debt, which they are expected to manage on their own and never talk about. If there are others in the community with named gifts of pastoral care, they can check in on the minister and see how they are doing.

But it goes beyond just naming the gift of pastoral care—we need to name other gifts and see where we can take burdens away from people who are not called to carry them. Ministers in the Religious Society of Friends wear a lot of hats. In addition to the ministry they may feel particularly called to, ministers end up filling so many more roles: especially education and fundraising. How much more could ministers be doing if they could just focus on their call instead of educating and fundraising?

We can lighten the load for each other by each doing what God is calling us to do. We can do this. We can recognize gifts and encourage people to grow in their gifts and callings. We can give people training, support and accountability, and places to exercise their gifts. Let’s set up systems to educate Friends about naming and supporting ministry. Let’s strengthen our corporate discernment and corporate support—we can’t leave all of this to the individual. This way of caring for each other will strengthen the life and witness of the Religious Society of Friends.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1993), 32.
- 2 Kathleen D. Billman, “Pastoral Care as an Art of Community,” in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, ed. Christie Cozad Neuger (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 10.
- 3 William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 92.
- 4 Billman, “Pastoral Care as an Art of Community,” 10.
- 5 Barbara Blake, *First Friends: Care Team* (2019).
- 6 Interview with Barbara Jenkins, November 13, 2020.
- 7 Martha Paxson Grundy, “Christ Teaching Us,” in *Walk Worthy of Your Calling: Quakers and the Traveling Ministry*, Margery Post Abbott and Peggy Senger Parsons, eds. (Richmond: Friends United Press, 2004), 127.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* (Philadelphia: Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2007), 110.
- 10 Ibid., 97–98.
- 11 Anne Helen Petersen, “the contours of clergy burnout,” September 24, 2020, <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/the-contours-of-clergy-burnout>