Initial Pastoral Visits and Communication in Depth

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ABSTRACT: Pastoral visits undertaken as a way of combining pastoral research on anniversary grief with a systematic plan for home visitation became a learning experience for the pastor. Three verbatim conversations with church members who donated flowers for the communion table during worship are reported. These conversations are reflected upon in light of the phenomena of anniversary grief and in terms of D. W. Winnicott's theory of communication.

In a former interim ministry, in addition to crisis work, I had wanted to engage in some home visitation of parish members. Owing to the limits of the interim period, I did not have time to visit every member. Since my major concern was the pastoral care needs of the congregation, I wanted the visits to be significant and not simply chitchat. A survey of the pastoral care periodical literature of the last decade revealed only a handful of articles containing clinical or verbatim material from the parish, especially from pastoral care conversations in contrast to pastoral counseling. The results of this survey added to my desire to put pastoral work on display with some kind of completeness. Then an idea came that offered a solution to parishioner selection and to the desire for significant conversation: learn the story behind the flowers on the altar. I do not know how many times I have read a line in a church bulletin like, "The flowers on the altar today are given in loving memory of Joan Wood by Bob and Ann Cliff," without knowing the significance of the memorial tribute. Who is this who is being remembered and why? In what ways was he or she significant to those now giving honor? Often such pastoral care questions either did not occur to me or remained unasked. So I decided that each week I would visit whoever had contributed the altar flowers. During the course of the visit I planned to initiate discussion of the occasion of the flowers.

In implementing this structure of pastoral visitation, I had certain expectations and thoughts. I expected to learn of the important anniversary times in...
the lives of these people: times of sadness around the date of death of loved ones—times when in subsequent years a pastor might visit or send a note. In previous parishes I had made records of the dates of funerals and weddings. I kept a chronological file of these times of sadness and joy so as to take appropriate initiative at such anniversary times. Altar flowers at times are also given to celebrate joyful occasions.

I was motivated in part by intellectual curiosity in relation to the literature on anniversary grief. According to Van Gennep, mourning "is a transitional period for the survivors, and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of integration into society (rites of lifting the mourning)." The communal rites of mourning beyond the time of the funeral and the rites of lifting mourning have virtually disappeared in our society because of our emphasis on privacy, individual differences, and autonomy. To give flowers for the altar may be a self-selected way of engaging in a rite of reincorporation. Further research might attempt to confirm or disprove this hypothesis. For example, interviews with those seeking to donate flowers might take note of where the person is in the grief process as well as the length of time since bereavement.

I was aware also of my own anniversary feelings around the time each year of the date of my father's death. And I had in mind the many tender feelings that go with flowers: flowers that express love, that say thanks, that repay social debt; flowers perfunctorily given; flowers of mourning; flowers given but unacknowledged; flowers that welcome or say bon voyage; flowers worn on father's or on mother's day—red for the living, white for the dead; flowers that celebrate—a wedding, birthday, or anniversary; flowers for the sick or dying; flowers for the first dance, prom, or recital; flowers at the birth of a child; flowers in memory and honor that adorn the altar.

I visited each flower donor in the week following the gift. After each visit I wrote a full verbatim report from memory, including my own observations and impressions. (The identity of the persons involved has been thoroughly disguised in order to maintain confidentiality.) In the next section I shall present three reports of pastoral conversations along with a description of a change in my approach. My emphasis shifted from altar flowers and anniversary grief to how in-depth communication is possible in initial visits in the midst of the mundane and the ordinary. In the final section I shall offer some analysis and reflection in light of Winnicott's theory of communication.

**Verbatim reports**

The conversations are reported as accurately as I can remember, with some changes made to prevent recognition. Omitted material is summarized parenthetically in the text, as are my observations.