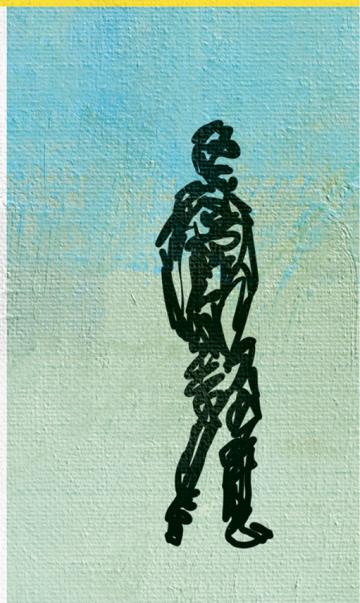


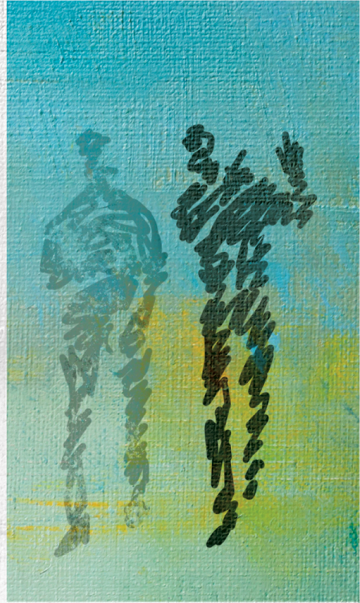


D E N I S E M A S S E Y

CARING

Six Steps for
Effective Pastoral Conversations

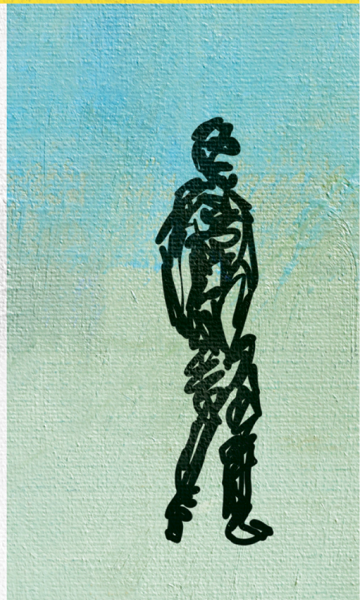




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Chapter One

STEP 1: CONNECT WITH GOD, SELF, AND OTHERS

The focus of this chapter is the first step, which is to connect with God, self, and others. These connections will help you to be prepared for your ministry conversations and to begin these conversations well. Focusing on being connected with God, yourself, and other people is a way of life that gives you long-term, ongoing preparation for ministry conversations. Preparing yourself for helping conversations can also happen in the hours or days before the ministry encounter. Finally, as pastoral conversations begin, you will guide people to connect with God, their own inner wisdom, and other people, including you.

Your Long-Term Preparation

If your way of living includes connecting with God intentionally, then you will be more prepared for your own connection with God to be a deliberate part of your helping conversations. You will also be more prepared to guide your congregants to connect with God at the beginning of a conversation in which they

seek your guidance. I hope that you practice spiritual disciplines that help you connect with God on a regular basis. These disciplines could include prayer, meditation, journaling, and many others. If you have allowed these practices to fall away, I encourage you to renew your own practices to communicate with God and to experiment with new ways of connecting with God.

Connecting with your own inner world intentionally throughout your life will also prepare you to do so during ministry conversations as you guide your parishioners to connect to their own inner wisdom. Developing greater self-awareness is a long-term, ongoing process that will help you to be prepared for pastoral conversations. Methods for connecting with yourself should be practices that you do regularly. Journaling, mindfulness, and noticing your feelings and thoughts are techniques that will help you bring more self-awareness to your pastoral conversations. Another fruitful avenue is working with a coach, spiritual director, ACPE pastoral educator, or therapist. Understanding and connecting with the deeper and wiser part of yourself provide significant groundwork for supporting your parishioners in solving their problems or reaching their goals.

Developing strong relationship skills will also prepare you for ministry conversations. Awareness of other people, empathy, and compassion will improve your ministry. Listening well is a skill to be developed over time that will enhance your pastoral conversations. Empathic listening will be discussed in chapter 2. Clinical pastoral education, therapy, and spiritual direction are all resources that can help you grow in this area.

You are providing long-term preparation for your parishioners whenever you teach them how to connect with God, such as through sermons, Bible studies, retreats, and individual or group

spiritual guidance sessions. You can focus on topics like how to pray, how to use scripture as a tool to connect with God, how to journal with the goal of connecting with God, and how to heal any difficulties in connecting with God. Look for resources from the literature of spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, Christian spirituality, and specific disciplines like prayer, meditation, and journaling.

Along with preparing people ahead of time spiritually, you will also want to communicate practical matters about your policies of providing care. You will be better able to connect to yourself and the person with whom you are ministering if you have clear policies in place for how you provide help for your congregants. How many sessions you offer, how you work with people, what level and understanding of confidentiality you use, and how you deal with the need for a referral are all matters that you will want to clarify for yourself and your congregants.¹ You can communicate your policies to your congregants ahead of time in a variety of ways. Hospital and institutional pastoral care departments will have written policies provided to patients and residents in accordance with the procedures of the institution. Churches could make pastoral care policies available in church covenants, on websites, or in written documents available to people before their first appointments.

Your Short-Term Preparation: Before the Conversation

When the person asks you to help him with a problem, you might hear indications that his concern does not fall within the parameters of a CARING pastoral conversation. If it is clear that

the situation is a crisis, you will want to provide crisis ministry immediately.² If it is clear that the person is looking for help that does not involve problem-solving, such as information or education, you can provide it in this initial conversation or make an appointment to address the question later. If you are unsure what your parishioner is requesting and the situation is not a crisis, you can schedule an appointment to meet with him. As you then follow the CARING process, the first two steps will help you determine the best type of conversation for helping the person.

Just after the congregant has asked for an appointment is a good time to communicate the essentials of your policies about providing spiritual care to people. Depending on the circumstances and the language that your parishioner understands, you might want to clarify that you provide “pastoral care” or “spiritual care” or “ministry.” You should be clear that you do not provide mental health care or psychotherapy or counseling, but that you can refer him to professionals for these services if needed.³ It is also important to communicate the limits to confidentiality in your ministry conversations, taking into account the laws of your state. For example, your own ethical convictions and/or the laws in your state might necessitate your reporting plans for suicide or homicide, or evidence of elder or child abuse to agencies that will work to keep people safe. Reviewing the literature of ministry and determining these policies for your setting is part of your overall preparation for helpful conversations.

It is also a good idea to clarify how many sessions you provide for your congregants. I recommend setting a limit to the number of sessions to allow for good stewardship of your time and your responsibility to the entire congregation. Following the guidance of pastoral care texts, you will want to decide your own policies

about the number of sessions you will offer. Some topics can be addressed in a session or two. I believe that three or four sessions is a good limit for most ministers. Some experts consider six sessions as the most that a minister should offer about any particular topic.⁴ If a person needs more assistance than can be offered in a limited number of sessions, then a referral for specialized or longer-term help is in order.

The CARING process taught in this book is designed to be completed in one conversation. Many times this methodology guides your parishioner to make an action plan in one session that will be sufficient help for her. At other times, you might have more than one conversation about the same topic, and each conversation should follow all six steps of the process. As you grow more experienced with the process, you may find yourself modifying it for your own work, perhaps conducting the first half of the conversation in one session and the second half in a later session.

When a congregant schedules an appointment, the person is indicating readiness to receive your help. The issue is possibly a problem that she has wrestled with for some time. You can help the person by expressing hope and confidence that you can guide her to seek God's help and develop a plan that will address her concerns. You could speak of coaching the person to solve her problem. Another alternative would be to spell out your approach by saying something like, "I will help you explore your situation, listen to God and your own inner wisdom, and come up with a plan of action." Experiment with finding your own way to describe how you help people to solve their problems.

When a conversation has been scheduled, you have time to pay attention to your connections with God, yourself, and your congregant before the meeting. You prepare the way ahead of time

for a powerful conversation that will help the person grow to be more loving as he solves his problems. You can experiment with how far in advance to prepare for your ministry conversations. Looking over your calendar a few days to a week ahead in order to pray and prepare for your ministry conversations can be a meaningful practice.

An advantage of doing so is that you have time to address any concerns that you notice about ministry with this person at this time. You might feel uneasy or reluctant to help a particular person who is on your calendar. While you may be tempted to believe that these feelings are a failure on your part, there is a better way to understand them. Feelings are a sign that something needs your attention. In fact, Gretchen Rubin, bestselling author about happiness and habits, postulates, “Negative emotions like loneliness, envy, and guilt have an important role to play in a happy life; they’re big, flashing signs that something needs to change.”⁵

Your feelings of unease or reluctance to help someone might be signaling you that something needs to change. You can ask yourself several questions in order to heed the message of your reluctance. Is there something you need to do to be better prepared? If your conversations with this person tend to go badly, review the issues and make the changes needed. You might choose to consult with a colleague or supervisor to clarify the issues and your best response.

Is your reluctance to see the person coming from any of the issues David Switzer lists as reasons to refer? Some of Switzer’s guidelines are straightforward, such as referring persons who show signs of psychosis or depression, or who are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Additional guidelines for referral are more subtle but also important, such as you don’t understand what is happening, you

are anxious when you are with the person, or you want to stop others from helping the person.⁶ Switzer's guidelines for when to refer are well worth reviewing and committing to memory.

If the situation calls for referral, you can draw from several resources in pastoral care. Switzer offers guidelines about how and where to refer. He outlines the importance of time, sensitivity, and skill in making a referral so that people do not feel rejected. He describes both the process of communicating about referral and the specifics of referring to people, agencies, institutions, or programs.⁷ Margaret Kornfeld, in *Cultivating Wholeness*, devotes an entire chapter to preparing for referral.⁸ She concludes the chapter with guidelines for referral that include introducing the idea early in the pastoral conversation, gathering data, organizing the information, and choosing an appropriate resource.⁹

Of course, when you feel uneasy about ministry with a particular person, you can also pray about the difficulties that you are sensing. Even if you are unaware of any issues, praying about your upcoming ministry encounters can be powerful preparation for the ministry conversation. You will also benefit from the habit of taking a few minutes before your appointments to prepare by connecting with God, yourself, and with your understanding of your parishioner's needs. Scheduling conversations with a cushion of time before and after for prayer and reflection will make your ministry conversations more deliberate, constructive, and powerful.

Your Connection with God

Just before the conversation begins, you would be wise to pay attention to your own connection with God, yourself, and your parishioner. Breathe deeply to deliberately connect with God. In

many spiritual traditions, the breath is an honored way to connect with God. In the Christian tradition, breath carries many symbolic meanings. God breathed the breath of life into human beings at creation.¹⁰ Jesus breathed on his disciples and invited them to “receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). One deep deliberate breath can reconnect you with God at the beginning of a conversation (or anytime, really) especially if you are intentionally seeking to experience God’s presence.

If you are anxious about how the conversation will go, a deep breath to connect with God will remind you of the help and support God provides for you. If you are worried or distracted about something else, breathing deeply to connect with God can help you bring your focus to this particular parishioner. If you are prone to take on other people’s feelings or anxieties, a deliberate connection with God through your breath can help stabilize you.

Prayer is an obvious way to connect with God prior to a ministry conversation. You might begin with acknowledging your reliance upon God and your desire to be of service to God and the other person. You can ask for help with any particular challenges that you foresee. You can connect with the love of God that undergirds you and your parishioner, which goes before you, and which exists within you.

Your Connection with Self

As you connect with the love of God that is within you, you are also connecting with the deeper and wiser part of yourself. This aspect of yourself is important to notice in your ministry. Theologians and writers about Christian spirituality refer to a higher, wiser, and larger part of ourselves. The ancient term for this aspect of ourselves is the soul. For example, St. Teresa of Avila

says, “Because we have heard and because faith tells us so, we know we have souls. But we seldom consider the precious things that can be found in this soul, or who dwells within it, or its high value.”¹¹ Richard Rohr uses the term “true self” for the soul that he labeled “God-in-you.”¹² Rohr describes the soul as “vast, silent, restful, and resourceful,”¹³ and he reflects, “Your soul is much larger than you! You are just along for the ride. When you learn to live there, you live with everyone and everything else too. . . . Inside your True Self, you know you are not alone, and you foundationally ‘belong’ to God and to the universe (1 Corinthians 3:23).”¹⁴ Psychotherapist and author about the spiritual aspects of human life Christina Grof says, “The deeper Self is benevolent, loving, and wise.”¹⁵

I am not claiming that all of these authors are referring to precisely the same aspect of ourselves. Nor am I suggesting some type of synthesis of these ideas. I do want to illustrate a mysterious truth that my experiences with personal growth, spiritual growth, and ministry have taught me. Human beings do have a higher, wiser, deeper, larger, and true aspect of ourselves that we can learn to access for help and guidance. Accessing your own higher self and guiding your parishioners to do so can significantly improve your ministry conversations.

Before the conversation begins you can set your intention to listen to your higher self. You can also intend to be wise and discerning about which ideas are from your higher self and which are from another part of you, such as unloving and unwise beliefs that you absorbed from other people. A spiritual director once told me that I sometimes confused the voices of my higher self and the Holy Spirit with the voices of my tyrannical conscience that had been formed in part by extended family and culture. He taught

me to ask the questions “Is it true?” and “Is it loving?” to help me discern the differences.

As you are connecting with the higher, wiser, more loving part of yourself, you can become aware of any concerns that you have about ministry with this person at this time. If you are tired, if you are worried about something in your own life, if you are distracted by a personal or church issue, set those things aside in order to give your congregant your full attention. As the conversation begins, you can intend to stay connected with yourself throughout the conversation. Some of the best insights about your parishioner’s needs will come from paying attention to your own responses to the person as the conversation develops.

Your Connection with Your Parishioner

Before the conversation begins you can take a deep breath and become aware of your pastoral concern for your parishioner. Notice your common humanity and your common faith. Be curious and open to learning something new about this person.

A number of items regarding your connection with your parishioner are important as you are preparing to begin your conversation. Remember that it is your job to guide people to create the changes they desire. It is not your job to change them or to make something happen. This knowledge allows you to let go of the burden of having all the answers, knowing everything, or pretending that you do. Through your relationship with your parishioner, you can help that person access the resources of her higher self. You facilitate the person’s connection with her higher self, and she listens for answers and wisdom. As you emotionally connect with your parishioner, you do so as the facilitator of the person’s discovering her own wisdom rather than as the one who is expected

AN EFFECTIVE, COMPASSIONATE SIX-STEP MODEL TO HELP OTHERS SOLVE PROBLEMS

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 **Abingdon Press™**
www.abingdonpress.com

Cover Art: Tim Lacapra

Cover Design: Jeff Moore

RELIGION/Christian Ministry/Counseling & Recovery \$18.99 US

ISBN-13: 978-1-5018-8458-0



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