

## THE EXPRESSION OF GOD'S CONCERN

... one of mankind's most insistent needs is the interpretation of religion in terms of service and the attachment of religion's enormous driving power to the tasks of service.

—Harry Emerson Fosdick<sup>1</sup>

Service has emerged as a clear theme in our earlier chapters. We discussed the lay potential for it and the spiritual basis of it while observing that true community results from it. Our concern here is to focus more closely on some of the practical features of a caring relationship.

### THE ART OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is the process by which individuals overcome their isolation. It is basic to all relationships, for it is the means by which we secure and sustain the social support we need for emotional survival.

#### Ways of self-expression

The most commonly recognized feature of communication is the ability to express ourselves in ways which will be understood by others. It is helpful briefly to review the many ways in which we can send messages to other people. In the process, we will become aware of the variety of ways in which other people may be communicating something to us.

#### \* SENDING MESSAGES

Basically, communication is either verbal (the more precise) or non-verbal (sometimes the more compelling).

- List the non-verbal ways in which people can send messages (i.e., through their behaviour or manner).

46

Another problem is that each of us hears other people in our own distinctive way. We all know how several people listening to a particular speaker could carry away with them quite different impressions about what was said.

One way of checking how accurately we have "heard" the other person is to reflect back the message as we have received it. If we have not grasped the essential points to their satisfaction, we can be corrected.

JOE: I don't know. Nothing we say seems to get through to our daughter. We try to talk to her and take an interest in what she's doing. But she just avoids us, calls us "old freaks" and tells us we don't understand the younger generation. . . . We're really worried about her school grades. But we dare not raise THAT subject—she's likely to blow up in our faces. I wish there was some way. . . .

VISITOR: You'd like to get through but you don't know how.

JOE: Yes, that's it . . . though this thing really bugs me. You know, Bill's kids aren't like mine. I mean, what's wrong with us—where have we gone wrong?

VISITOR: You feel responsible for your daughter's behaviour?

By reflecting back the message as we are receiving it, we can communicate to others that we are "with" them, so to speak. We also offer an opportunity to be corrected if we are wrong.

3. *What level do we respond at?* There is the opportunity to respond to people's needs, as we learn about them, with emotional support as well as practical help. These constitute different levels of assistance.

We can also influence the depth of the encounter by the character of our verbal responses. The following excerpt illustrates how some responses we make can encourage people to give us more information while others can focus on the sharing of feelings which, in the long run, may be more significant.

BILL: . . . and then my wife turned to me and really went mad. She blamed me for the way the kids

48

- Next time you are in a Sunday school class, public meeting, church service or any other social setting, or even watching television with the sound turned down, make a note of the non-verbal messages you can pick up from people.

- In what non-verbal ways does communication occur in your family (or among the people you work with)? What are some of the subtle ways people send messages without saying anything?

#### Patterns of response

We commonly think of communication as something we do to others rather than as receiving messages that other people send to us. That is, we think of it as something active. In stressing the other side of communication, we do not want to give the impression that it is passive. People do not absorb messages like a blotting paper absorbs ink. And yet, our word "listening" has come to be understood passively. That is why recently, when groups have been set up to teach us the art of listening, they have been prefixed by the word "creative". By talking about "creative listening" we remind ourselves that listening is a responsive process.

Perhaps we are recovering something of the significance of the ancient Hebrew word to "hear", which meant both listening and obedience. It had a responsive element built into its meaning. This is how listening must be understood in pastoral relationships.

In pastoral (or any) relationships, our ability to respond depends at the very least on the following considerations.

1. *Can we refrain from talking?* This doesn't mean permanent silence. It does mean that talking is not always appropriate. David Boyd writing on this subject remarks:

If you listen, you will not be forced into the position of giving advice on a problem, about which you know very little. . . . The art of listening . . . means not saying certain things, learning to hold your tongue when you have nothing to say—and most of the time when you think you have something to say.<sup>2</sup>

2. *Have we heard correctly?* There are many ways in which a message from one person to another can become distorted in transmission and reception. Sometimes, of course, people simply do not communicate clearly. Sometimes, too, they may send two messages at once which contradict each other. There are occasions when people's behaviour, manner or tone of voice give us quite a different impression from the things they are saying.

47

misbehave all the time around the house. She said I was just an overgrown kid myself! She said that I was a lousy lover and such a useless husband that she wishes she'd never married me!

Response for

INFORMATION: What happened then?

FEELING: Feels pretty devastating.

Information responses evoke details on what happened. Some people, with very little encouragement, could continue for hours on this level—and get nowhere. Certainly, we need some information to help us understand the situation. A significant encounter, however, will focus on feelings.

#### \* REFLECTIVE RESPONSES

Working in pairs, and taking turns at talking and listening, practise the art of reflecting back the *essence* of what the other person is saying. (Don't just repeat the words! Wait until the person has talked for a while before attempting to capture the impact of what he or she is saying.)

If you have trouble in thinking of something to talk about, one of the following topics could be used.

- What you feel like when you first get up.
- How you feel about pastoral visitation.
- An experience you would like to have again if you got the opportunity.
- Your favourite (or most hated) television programme and why you like (hate) it.
- What you would most like to change about your church.
- What you appreciate most in a friend.

Make a conscious effort to focus for a time on information so that you understand the basic situation. Then see if you can evoke how the person *feels* about the experience he or she is describing by the nature of your responses (feeling responses).

49

## THE PROCEDURE OF CARING

Eventually, questions of procedure arise. How do we initiate and sustain meaningful pastoral relationships?

### \* FINDING APPROPRIATE RESPONSES

We have, in our minds, some notion of how we would prefer people to respond to us in certain situations. However, others may feel differently.

A useful exercise which can be performed in groups is to ask people how they would prefer you to respond to them in some situations.

The exercise is performed in pairs. After you have asked several questions of your partner along the lines suggested below, move to a new partner and ask the same questions, noting the answers. A partner need not answer a question if he or she prefers not to.

*How could I help you most—*

- if you were depressed?
- if you were really cut up about something?
- if you were feeling out of things?
- if you were feeling sad?
- if you were feeling "up tight" about a personal problem?
- if you felt like withdrawing from social activities?
- if you had dropped out of church life?
- if you were feeling guilty about things you had done?
- if you were really mad about something?
- if you were confused about something?
- if you were really anxious about something or someone?
- if you felt really confident about your beliefs and someone had raised doubts in your mind?
- if you wanted to feel more included in things?
- if you were really in a bind?

You can no doubt select your own responses. But here are some possibilities which may attract you.

50

by arguing  
by telling me off  
by leaving me alone  
by just phoning to say you  
cared  
by challenging me to change  
by giving advice  
by including me more in  
things  
by telling me it's O.K.

by removing the threats  
by listening without inter-  
rupting  
by ignoring me  
by practical help  
by clarifying the alterna-  
tives  
by sitting with me without  
saying much

After spending some time in pairs with several different partners, discuss your findings in the larger groups—not so much the specific answers as the overall pattern, noting the variety or uniformity of responses. What is the pastoral application of what you learned?

### *The creative use of contacts*

For alert and sensitive persons, even the most casual encounters can become opportunities for significant pastoral help. This does not mean, of course, that every time we meet someone we start a pastoral relationship! We would drive ourselves and our friends mad! Rather we are talking about being available and able to capitalize on situations where people clearly want to talk to someone about their need.

A comprehensive, systematic programme of pastoral care within the church in which contact is maintained with all persons has several advantages:

- Tensions or crises which might be brewing within individuals or families can be dealt with before they reach explosion point (secondary prevention).
- No one in the church community feels socially neglected.
- When people do have special needs arising in their situation they will be familiar with their particular pastoral visitor(s) and feel more inclined to call them.
- Some people do not feel inclined to talk about more intimate concerns until they have built up a relationship of trust with someone over a period of time.

In making creative use of casual encounters, the following guidelines may prove useful.

51

1. Indicate interest ("How are things going for you lately?") without being nosy ("People say you're getting a divorce").
2. If people are throwing out cues for help ("I'm really worried about John") a sensitive response may encourage them to talk about it if they want to ("What is it that troubles you?" or perhaps preferably "Is it something you wish to talk about?"). This latter response gives people the opportunity to opt out if they wish.
3. It seldom helps to push. Let people come at their own speed. If they don't seem inclined to talk at present, we can still reassure them of our future availability ("If you ever want to talk about it, don't hesitate to call").
4. Avoid threatening responses. In general, people don't like reference to their "problem". Their reaction tends to be defensive (It's not really a PROBLEM!).
5. Reassure people, where possible, that it is not especially abnormal to feel the way they do. Many people are scared to talk about their situation for fear that others will think them exceptional.

### \* AN EVALUATION OF TWO RESPONSES

Select two people to read the following dialogue aloud (or read the passage for yourself if you are on your own). Discuss (or reflect on) the effect that Bill's responses had in the first example and compare it with Mary's impact in the second. Which encounter was more effective? Why?

JIM: I can't see our family coming on this trip with yours, Bill. I don't know, we're having difficulty making both ends meet at present. Jill wants to go out and work, but she shouldn't have to do that. Her place is in the home.

BILL: Too right it is! These women just don't understand economics. Pity you can't come. Why don't you borrow some cash? Everybody does it these days.

JIM: No. I can't do that. Jill's just too much of a spender, that's all.

BILL: Yeah. I have the same problem with the wife myself. Aw—come on. You'll have enough cash by Christmas.

JIM: No. I don't think so. I'm sorry. We'll have to sort things out at home a bit before we consider anything like that.

BILL: Don't be so negative. You'll be O.K. Look, here are some brochures from the travel agency. I was just down there a few moments ago, and . . .

52

JIM: I can't see our family coming away on this trip with yours, Mary. I don't know, our family is having difficulty making both ends meet at present. Jill wants to go out to work, but she shouldn't have to do that. Her place is in the home.

MARY: It sounds like things aren't too good for you at present.

JIM: No. We seem to get into a lot of arguments. I know I don't earn much in my job and Jill is very clever. She could earn a lot more at her profession. It's just that—Oh, I don't know.

MARY: You can see the need for money and yet Jill going to work is a bit hard to take.

JIM: The thing is, she's more popular with the kids as it is. If she becomes the breadwinner, too, what good am I in the family . . . may as well leave. . . .

MARY: You really feel out of things—like "who needs me?"

JIM: Well in a way. I know with this women's lib. now and all that, I should be looking at this more. It just seems so complex. I'm worried about the kids, too. You know, if Jill goes out working. . . . They say now with equal pay coming in the whole cost structure will be pushed up. You've almost got to have two members of the family working to keep afloat. I don't know, the whole thing's so confusing.

MARY: Look, I've got to go now. Do you think you and Jill could pop 'round for a cup of coffee with us some time and talk about things a bit.

JIM: I'll ask her. I think we'd both like that. Thanks. Maybe we should talk it through with someone else.

### *Sustaining a helping relationship*

In later chapters we shall be exploring some of the kinds of responses which might be helpful in specific situations. At present, our concern is to identify some general principles which apply to most instances of human need.

1. *Understanding the situation.* This involves some grasp of how the person stands in relation to the circumstances which concern him/her.
2. *Understanding the feelings.* Once we have the general framework of the situation in mind, the relationship should develop some sensitivity on the level of feelings.

53

3. *Balancing emotional caring with practical help.* Sometimes, it is difficult to change how we feel until we DO something about our situation. When we sense that we can accomplish something our feelings automatically improve. Most relationships will need eventually to function on the practical level of action.

4. *Balancing our help with their resources.* It is tempting and possible in a helping encounter to do too much for others. Of course, many needy people are willing to permit this and some will be skilled in making us feel guilty if we fail to do more than we are already! Being helpless has its rewards. However, a primary goal must always be to encourage others to assume as much responsibility for themselves as possible.

5. *Overcoming resistance to help.* Many people resist help, even when they need assistance. Some guidelines may help people to conquer this resistance within themselves.

- (a) Don't move too far too fast. Patience is important and permits people to move at their own pace.
- (b) Offer as much support as possible so that people will feel secure enough to trust the relationship.
- (c) Recognize that when people do not want to talk about something they are probably not ready emotionally to handle it—they have not yet summoned the resources to cope.
- (d) Keeping the encounter focused on positive goals so that it doesn't get bogged down in introspection.
- (e) Avoid a domineering approach where the other person could feel manipulated or threatened.
- (f) Do not focus on the whole situation at once. This tends to overwhelm the person, fostering feelings of hopelessness. Tackling a problem in manageable proportions develops a greater sense that the situation can be mastered.

6. *The importance of action.* Ultimately, the aim of many helping encounters is to enhance the other person's ability to live a creative life. A person must move beyond talking about a problem or even expressing feelings concerning it. Some people's problem is that they like to talk about their problem! And they revel in the bad feelings it generates every time they narrate it. Appropriate action is frequently the aim toward which a helping encounter should be directed.

54

### Changes in a helping relationship

The nature of our pastoral relationship with a person inevitably changes as the character of their needs alters. Clearly, for example, we are involved with people in a different way during the peak of a crisis than we are when the crisis has passed. In some senses we may be needed less. However, we ought to guard against abandoning people as soon as the most acute stage of their crisis has passed. It is a sad state of affairs if some people feel (as many do) that they can only receive attention when they generate a crisis. Such people are likely to "produce" critical situations again and again.

Sometimes, too, a pastoral association will reach a point where the person seeks more specialized help. Again, it is important to remember that we still have an important supportive role to play. Sometimes we may be able to introduce them to some new friends or group activities. Thus we have become not only a source of help but a doorway to new opportunities.

### The mature relationship

What we are seeking is a mature relationship with other people, within which concern can be expressed and help offered. Mature caring has deep roots and seeks a sensitive understanding of the feelings of others. When maturity marks our approach, we are able to communicate availability without imposing; to express interest without prying; to offer our views without coercing; to encourage rather than to lecture and to share our lives openly rather than to cramp the relationship with a confined aim. We could contrast mature with immature patterns of caring in the following way.

IMMATURE CARING	THE MATURE ALTERNATIVE
1. Involvement for its own sake. Zeal without a related sense of purpose.	1. A clear sense of why we are involved. Enthusiasm coupled with purpose.
2. Shallow approach. Concern with superficial things without any sense of closeness or depth.	2. Sensitivity to the deeper needs, feelings, hurts and hopes. Level of intimacy.
3. Concern to impose our ideals and beliefs on others.	3. Encourage and support people to explore and decide for themselves the things which are true, trustworthy and of value.

Continued next page

55

4. Preoccupation with giving advice and insistence on others following it.

5. Treating others as the target (object) of our crusading zeal. Others become statistics and things.

6. Oversimplified view of human need and behaviour. Simplistic solutions.

7. Using religious truth to deny or smother human feelings. Excessive reassurance.

4. Sharing our views and convictions as something important in our own experience while leaving others free to respond in their own way.

5. Treating the other as a person (subject) worthy of our respect.

6. Recognizing the complexity of human need and behaviour. Deeper response.

7. Drawing on religious resources as a source of courage to face human need. Compassionate understanding of human feelings.

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> H. E. Fosdick, *The Meaning of Service* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1921), p. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Boyd, Jr., "Techniques of Pastoral Counseling" in Farnsworth, D. L. and Braceland, F. J., *Psychiatry, the Clergy and Pastoral Counseling* (Minnesota: St. John's University Press, 1969). pp. 27, 28.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Three useful books on the counselling process written for lay people and building on the normal church functions which lay people would fulfil are:

J. W. Drakeford, *Counseling for Church Leaders* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), focuses especially on how lay people can offer counselling help as part of their ministry today, thus following the tradition of religious leaders from biblical times.

R. Rozell, *The Sunday School Teacher as Counselor* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960). Explores the ways in which teaching encounters can become pastoral opportunities.

C. W. Shedd, *The Pastoral Ministry of Church Officers* (Richmond Virginia: John Knox Press, 1965) outlines the principles of pastoral calling and suggests a basis for organizing ministry. It discusses the kinds of calls church officers are likely to be making and suggests ways of handling them.

### Communication skills

R. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963).

### Using the skills with specific groups

P. B. Irwin, *The Care and Counseling of Youth in the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).