

I Want Pastor to Visit Me: The Pastoral Role Within African American Pastoral Care

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We all have a responsibility to care for one another. It is a mandate that is consistent with the Christian mandate to love one another as God has loved us. To the extent that caring is human, there are a variety of ways that everyone can express care as a simple expression of one's humanity. For those who have been called and chosen for ministry, these very human expressions take on a special quality of relationship and responsibility for attending to the human suffering and the life of the congregation. In order to truly live out this human and Divine mandate, we must first be aware that everyone is suffering under some weight that comes from living.

The heart of pastoral care is the Divine-human connection. Suffering is human. Caring is human. And although God cares about humanity and human suffering, many see caring as solely a pastoral function resulting from the view that the pastor is the Divine representative. It is important that care activities rely on Divine intervention, but it is not necessary for the caregiver to be an ordained clergy person for care to take place. An evaluation of the actual practice of pastoral care in the



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African American church reveals ordained and lay ministries of care to be central to the African American pastoral care tradition. We have been able to survive the traumas of our American experience due to our communal ethic of care.

Although there has been a communal ethic of care within the African American church, an ethic which declares that all have a role and responsibility for caring, the preference among church members has been for the pastor to be the person who addresses the care needs of persons in times of crisis. This article offers an overview of the African American pastoral care tradition and suggests a rationale for maintaining a praxis approach to caring for the community.

PASTORAL THEOLOGY AS THE GROUND OF PASTORAL CARE

Pastoral theology begins with the understanding that humanity has been created in the image and likeness of God, and God cares for our well-being. Its concern for the Divine-human relationship means it tends to stand alone among other helping approaches. It helps us to reflect in ways that other approaches do not consider. The discipline's attentiveness to the Divine-human relationship demands a concern for faith issues. Therefore, it is attentive to the questions of what it means to live as a faith community. Because pastoral care is a theological discipline, it employs biblical texts and church doctrines as primary sources for reflection. Naturally, psychological theories are also employed but they are basically used as interpretive tools for exploring the human condition and analyzing the pains of life.

Pastoral theology desires to eliminate human suffering. It is attentive to the oppression we experience in life but is not always interested in bringing liberation. When focusing on the African American community, a pastoral theology that does not hold liberation as central is less appropriate for interpreting and transforming the African American crisis. Pastoral theology is genuinely concerned about the people who suffer from the pains of loss and transitional crises, but it rarely addresses the liberating actions necessary to break the traumatic bonds of systemic evil. The oversight of liberation activities is problematic when diagnosing and transforming African American suffering. Our suffering does not just involve the pains of loss and transitions that are a part of growth. Our suffering also includes the traumas caused by individuals, institutional racism and sexism. We suffer due to class struggles resulting from chronic economic problems. We struggle to keep our hopes alive for something better. Yet we live with the constant fear that the better will never be attained.

WHAT IS AFRICAN AMERICAN PASTORAL CARE?

In order to better understand African American pastoral care, let us consider what the term is describing by defining the term in reverse order. Speaking in more general to specific ways, "care" has to do with concern, passion, and compassion. All persons have the capacity to express concern, passion, and compassion for others whether it is a situation of crisis or not. So then, "pastoral care" has to do with qualifying the nature of the concern, passion, and compassion that is expressed. The way one qualifies the care informs the context and practice. Health care communicates a particular context and practice. A physician's care may communicate, perhaps, a different context and practice. At the very least, to specify that someone is under a physician's care communicates expectations and the nature of the relationship that is intended to address the ailing condition. To speak of pastoral care, therefore, is to speak of a particular relationship that shapes the nature of the care. Traditional definitions of pastoral care often emphasize the mutual concern of Christians for each other.

Pastoral care is the ministry of sharing responsibility for the well-being of another. As such, it is attentive to the developmental and predictable crises of the human experience. When life seems to be shaken and without a stable foundation, pastoral care offers support and stability. During crisis moments, the pastoral caregiver symbolizes the presence of God and declares the assurance that the person in crisis has not been abandoned by God in their time of uncertainty and need. Most often perceived to be a ministry that springs into action during the time of loss, there is also a social justice dimension to the practice of pastoral care that attends to human suffering which results from societal oppressions. This dimension of pastoral care exercises the liberating aspects of the Gospel and seeks to restore people to human life.

Next, it is important to recognize that pastoral care, even as a disciplinary tradition, has been culturally influenced. The way one engages in the expression of mutual concern for others is directly related to what is emphasized by the culture that one most closely identifies with. Consequently, locating pastoral care within the cultural container of America declares the thematic concerns for the theory and practice of pastoral care. Acknowledging the legacy of rugged individualism along with the historical practice of defining who can be an American through identifying the characteristics deemed to be the most acceptable, pastoral care, American-style, has traditionally determined our caring concerns to be structured around individuals in crisis.

Finally, African American pastoral care is a uniquely focused way of expressing mutual concern. It mobilizes the concern, passion and

compassion for suffering Black folk through an emphasis upon communality with the intention of restoring Black folks to a life of relationships. There are several features of African American culture that influence and even prescribe our pastoral care. Those components are:

- African American culture is a crisis-oriented culture, a resistance culture, a survival culture.
- African American culture as an oral culture responds best to a care that consists of narratives, both Biblical and contemporary.
- African American spirituality is a critical component of care.
- African American culture has been organized around the principles of family and community and not individualism.
- African American culture holds humanity to be a highly valued principle of existence, which is often communicated in the language of respect.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN COMMUNALITY UPON AFRICAN AMERICAN PASTORAL CARE?

Life, in the African worldview, is an intimate and integrated web. This web of connection, which is life, views all of life as spiritual. One result of this understanding is a special sense of responsibility for the well-being of everyone and everything. There is recognition that human actions or inactivity have an impact upon all of life, making us responsible for the maintenance of the connections. To emphasize this perspective, one view of the world holds that human beings are the priests who mediate between the spirit world and nature.

Communality is essential to what it means to be African, no matter what tribe or which region of the continent one comes from. The key features that guide African communality are spirituality and responsibility. African spirituality is more than an engagement of spiritual matters like prayer. It is also more than an engagement of the spirit world like talking to ancestors. African spirituality is the acknowledgment that life is in everything. Moreover, it is not just the acknowledgment but the engagement with *all* aspects of life. African spirituality is a process that integrates all parts of the human self with other selves. It integrates individual and collective lives with all other realms of existence, including nature, humanity, spirit world, and God's world. Spirituality makes all of one's parts a unified whole, all of one's relationships harmonious and whole, all of one's ritual practices purposefully relational.

Spirituality makes the one Many and the many One. Through spirituality, one person is connected to the masses. As a part of the masses, spirituality connects the masses in solidarity. It is the spiritual

interconnectedness of all people and all things that situates the individual within the world. One's identity comes from one's connectedness to the community, and without that connection, there is no identifiable being. We know ourselves because we are known by others in the community.

This sense of self, which is a collective sense, makes understandable the statement, "I am because we are; and because we are, I am." An individual life is given meaning only within the context of the life of the whole community. This also means that one's responsibility extends beyond one's self. The individual "me, myself, and I" is substituted with "we and us." According to this view, we are as responsible for the well-being of others as we are for ourselves; and if we do not consider others, we do not care for ourselves. "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) is embedded in African communality.

Before the advent of Christianity on the continent, the local congregation of African traditional life was the entire village. Within that context, the chief had a sacred charge from God to guide the people with spiritual discernment and justice. In that sense, the chief of the African village was no different from the anointed kings of Israel. Within the sacred space of the village, because there was no church building, the integrative process of spirituality became a daily-lived experience. Through the guidance of the chief or priest, rituals were performed for harmonious living. All persons present were joined together in the sacred process of ending isolation. Through participation in village activities, all parts of the self became an integrated whole with the community and nature and the Divine.

The African American Church embodies and embraces African communality. This is because the African American Church is a reproduction of African village life within America. People will always find a way to maintain the things most important to their lives. I observed the truth of this for African America while in Ghana. I was present during a number of village meetings and communal rituals. At every gathering, I was fascinated by the formulaic resemblance of the village meetings to the worship services of the African American Church in the United States. Without being aware of it, we have maintained the rituals of village life within the life of the church.

Just as the chief, who was sometimes also priest, sat as the supreme authority within the village, the Black preacher has been regarded as the supreme authority of the church and the prime emissary of the community. The chief has a Queen mother who serves as advisor and social conscience; the pastor/preacher has had his (because the Church has been patriarchal) Queen mother in the form of a "Mother of the

church.” The chief has his linguist, who is not a translator as much as he is an interpreter and megaphone of the message from the chief. One speaks to the linguist rather than directly to the chief. At times, the linguist also has the task of affirming the truth spoken by the chief. The Chair of the Board of Deacons often fills the role of the linguist. The Chair makes the public pronouncements that reinforce the vision of the pastor through moments of emphasis and as the leader of the “amen corner.” The chief’s elders became the pastor’s joint board comprised of the deacons and trustees (or stewards). Finally, the people’s overall involvement as the community is expressed within the village and church by the call-and-response of the people. We have not only retained African life, we have extended it here in the United States.

THE FOCUS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PASTORAL CARE

The discipline of African American pastoral care re-frames the challenges of Black life to bring hope out of despair, inspire joy where there is sorrow, and heal the brokenhearted. Drawing from the same roots as Black Theology, African American pastoral care has always had a concern for Black suffering and the hope of freedom. The practice of African American pastoral care expresses the dynamic relationship between story, testimony, and the Spirit/spirit to bring courage and renewal out of the pain and suffering wrought by this world. Story and testimony are critical spiritual expressions of the oral culture that is African America. And for the African American, spiritual expressions are also liberating expressions. Testimony is the spiritually liberating story of an individual told to re-enforce the person’s faith as well as to build the faith community. Testimony builds hope and encourages endurance. As a nurturing process, testimony is an important part of the African American pastoral care tradition.

African American pastoral care is interested in the liberation of African Americans. It focuses on African American life in particular and is attentive to African and African American culture, spirituality, religion, and faith. African American pastoral care is rooted in human beingness, in “somebodiness,” and in community. Therefore, pastoral care concerns that are not rooted in the particularities of African America tend to be inappropriate approaches to African American life, or at the very least, not considerate of the full extent of the trauma of African American people. “Rooted” in human beingness means the approach is alive, dynamic, life-giving, and emphasizes communality, that is, our humanity is woven into all of our relationships. We are communal beings always related to the Divine, extended family, marriage, siblings, and neighbors. African American pastoral care not

only seeks to improve our quality of life, it also seeks to restore our relationships and to launch a counter-attack against the evil that assaults our lives.

While an essential component of African American pastoral care is African spirituality, black and womanist theologies are critical resources for healing the wounded African American soul. Black and womanist theologies force us to explore our experiences with evil while maintaining a focus on the presence of God within the African American. Our protracted traumatic existence means that evil and suffering continue to inform and impact our lives. Without the resources of African American spirituality, womanist and black theologies, our hopes for change are limited. Our spirituality compels us, and our theology declares that we shall be free, someday. Our inspired imagination gives us hope for today and tomorrow.

THE THEMATIC MINISTRIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PASTORAL CARE

The ministries of African American churches are the direct outgrowth of our African heritage and our African American experience. Each activity is intended to feed our spirits, reform our opinions, transform our grief, and improve our quality of life and relationships. Although preaching is considered the centerpiece of the African American Christian Church, it is best to think of it in the context of an oral culture. Through preaching, our history is kept alive, our pain is therapeutically addressed, our education is never ending, our knowledge of news events is kept current, our political climate is interpreted, and our hope for justice is made flesh. African American preaching is "nommo" at work. Nommo is the generative acts of word and sound. Notes, tones, and the spoken word transform situations. Nommo is the power to make all things new. The various ministries of the church are introduced and given shape during the preaching moment. Although ministry is more than preaching, without preaching most ministries would remain uninitiated. And because most of the caring that takes place is done in a communal context such as worship, preaching is critical to African American pastoral care.

While there are a variety of caring ministries that could be identified, I would like to suggest five pastoral care ministry themes that are of particular importance. They are the ministries of pastoral care in times of crisis, family, education, community revitalization, and social justice. Each theme supports our struggle for freedom and our fight for dignity as human beings. No single ministry is more important than another. In fact, each ministry theme supports the other themes.

The first, pastoral care in times of crisis, is the ministry of sharing responsibility for the well-being of another. Caregivers offer support and stability to persons in times when life seems to be shaken and without a stable foundation. Considering our traumatic history and our struggles of everyday life in America, community crisis has been the constant state of our being. We have been able to survive due to the quality of care we have given one another. During times of suffering or loss, the pastoral caregiver symbolizes the presence of God and declares the assurance that the person has not been abandoned by God in their time of uncertainty and need. When sufferers ask the questions, "Why" and "How long," the pastoral caregiver must nurture the sufferer to speak their own answer using the resources of faith and spirituality.

African American pastoral care also has a social justice dimension that attends to the suffering which results from societal oppressions. This practice of pastoral care exercises the liberating aspects of the Gospel and seeks to restore people to human life. Because of the dehumanizing legacy of what it has meant to be African in America, African American pastoral care has high regard for the souls of Black folks. It is an approach rooted in human beingness and "somebodiness." "Rooted" in human beingness means the approach is alive, dynamic, life giving, and emphasizes communality. Consequently, African American pastoral theology seeks to restore our relationships and to launch a counter-attack against the evil that assaults our lives. The emphasis is upon healing. The method tends to be group work. The health concern is the restoration of dignity.

The second, family, is the ministry of helping people to survive through the promotion of relationships. The destruction of the African family by those who have desired to control our lives has been a prime objective since the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. From the moment of our incarceration on the African continent, family groups, whether determined by blood, marriage, village, or tribe, were separated. After we were transported to North America, the family bond continued to be disrupted. The systematic attempt to prevent us from bonding as a social group was an effort to make us depend only upon our captors. Our survival, however, was not dependent upon those who enslaved us. We maintained the belief that family was essential for defining our humanity and sustaining our daily living. Our commitment to family was nurtured and encouraged by African American Christianity.

Through the creative reproduction of African family life, we enhanced an extended family system that functioned in opposition to

the social setting. The context made it illegal for us to marry, but we still developed marriage rituals as a sign of our commitment to family. The auctioning of family members by the landholder constantly disrupted family units, but that never deterred us from maintaining family as an important value. Love was identified as an important force in life, and family ties were not limited to blood ties. Adoption, therefore, played an important part in the establishment of family during Antebellum period.

After the reconstruction period, family disruption was wrought by terrorism and migration for employed. The lynching of African American men and the rape of African American women by European American men believing themselves to be defending their homes are prime examples of the terrorism we have known. Members of families or the nuclear family would leave the extended family with the hope of improving employment opportunities. During these dramatic experiences, the church remained a vital connecting point for family values and extended family unity. The church helped to maintain our esteem and dignity by a support system that encouraged relationality and human compassion.

The third, education, is the ministry of equipping people for life. Working to correct the atrocities of the USA, the church set an educational agenda into action. Education was thought to be the primary vehicle for realizing power hopes of freedom. To counter the inequities built into the American social system, the African American Christian Church established schools and colleges to prepare people for equal participation in the wider society. Separate educational systems with unequal financial resources did not mean that the quality of our education was inferior. The church worked diligently to educate people, in counter-cultural fashion, against a system intent upon molding us into inferior beings.

African American pastoral care continues to maintain its legacy of promoting freedom through education. The church continues to equip young people with the skills for appropriate social engagement. Many of our most significant national leaders have been churchmen and women who received their primary education in the church. Through encouraging memory, building confidence through public speaking, mining the talents of the arts, promoting creative writing, and stimulating healthy debate, the church mentors future generations. Through workshops, seminars, conferences, college fairs, college tours, and college scholarships, the church invests future generations. Through retelling the stories of our past and inspiring a vision for our future, the church declares our liberation. There are two idioms that

have to do with knowledge. One says “what you don’t know won’t hurt you,” and the other says “knowledge is power.” To these, the church says, the things we have not known have hurt us and knowledge is the key to our future.

The fourth, community revitalization, is the ministry of loving neighbor. Because communality is a significant feature of the African American identity, most African American churches have ministries that seek to improve the quality of life for the neighborhood residents and members of the church. These ministries express a clear sense of responsibility to and for every person within and surrounding the church. As a principal, communality declares the welfare of humanity to be every person’s responsibility. The principle emphasizes that when tragedy befalls people, the members of the community must fulfill their ritual responsibilities for everyone to be able to move beyond the tragedy. The interdependent nature of all things means that we must be attentive to everything and everyone in our surroundings. Churches have responded to this principle by developing housing and economic empowerment programs.

Many churches work to change the social centers of its surrounding area. A significant portion of African American pastoral care language centers around house and home. Although it may seem that this language is focused on the here after, there is an eschatological quality to house and home articulations. The safety and security of that place called home is fully acknowledged by the church. Consequently, many churches are engaged in housing development programs while seeking to make neighborhoods more secure and prosperous. The economic development components of these ministries include the development of business centers, job training programs, and employment services. The churches whose ministries include community revitalization are not only showing the love of neighbor, they are showing community responsibility as active agents of change.

The fifth, social justice, is the ministry of liberation. The church maintains African America’s traditional theme of freedom through ministries would seek justice and liberation for the people. And this land where state and federal legislation was drafted against us, the church has been our judge advocate against the life denying forces of America. Although the nation espoused freedom and justice for all, the social and political agendas were designed for the benefit of others. As a people desiring to experience our human “inalienable rights,” the church became our most significant vehicle for social change. The African American Church has initiated most every major movement for social justice in African America. During the times when the church

was not in the lead, the church has been a participant reformer by inspiring the people to resist identifying with the negative images associated with our being.

With ministries based upon our interpretation of the life of Jesus, the church confronts the world. Although liberation is frequently presented through the language of salvation and justice described as the activities of God, the church engages or speaks plainly about political activities, responds to social crises, and develops relief services. Due to the admonishment to be “as wise as serpents and harmless as doves (Matthew 10:16),” sometimes the very subtle social justice resistance activities of the church are seen as escapist. We have never, however, thought ourselves to be anything other than social beings with social responsibility, nor have we ever been blind to the injustices of our condition. Furthermore, because African spirituality declares there is no separation between the spiritual and the physical worlds, striving for our spiritual freedom has simultaneously meant striving for our physical freedom.

I WANT PASTOR TO VISIT ME

As you can see, African American pastoral care is far more extensive in its expression than most people tend to acknowledge. The skill-based ideas that most people have about pastoral care regularly reduce pastoral care to being only about visitation. And because African Americans have had a high regard for those who have been called by God into ordained ministry, there has been a strong tendency to desire the pastor as the one who visits and prays when trouble comes. We have tended toward an understanding that says that pastoral care is about the person who comes instead of being about the type of care that is given. If, however, we are truly going to be faithful when we say that “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (James 5:16b),” then we must accept the ministry of pastoral care to be a community-wide responsibility. For indeed, the pastor is not the only one in the community who is righteous, and the work of pastoral care, in its fullness, requires that the entire community seeks to fulfill the call of God “to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly (Micah 6:8b),” even as we love God with our entire being and our neighbors as ourselves.

NOTE

This article contains significant excerpts from Lee H. Butler, Jr., *A Loving Home: Caring for African American Marriage and Families* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

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