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The healing dynamics of space. Relational and systemic therapy in pastoral care to people suffering from poverty.

ABSTRACT

To deal with poverty in a constructive way, is often hampered by perceptions which deprive poor people from their human dignity. Despite diaconic actions of help and outreach, the challenge to contextual pastoral care is to create a space where people can rediscover their human dignity despite the limitations of poor conditions. Poverty is not only a lack of provision and supply; it often resides in a feeling of inferiority. A hermeneutical model for counselling both the poor and the rich is developed in order to foster a courage to be as well as to help people how to respond to severe poverty in a constructive way and manner. A paradigm shift in God-images and schemata of interpretation is proposed in order to create a theological space of grace for the poor.

INTRODUCTION

One could argue that pastoral care without action, without the diaconic function of the church and ministerial projects targeting the causes of poverty, is virtually ineffective, deprived from any relevancy and credibility. On the other hand, one could argue and say, the reason why poor people experience helplessness and hopelessness, despite several helping schemes and programs of outreach, is that they do not feel understood and accommodated by society. Due to stigmatisation, suffering people often feel marginalised. People suffering from poverty, become intrinsically “poor people”, i.e. people who experience themselves as third class. Within the rat race of technological development and measured by norms and values set by affluent society and processes of globalisation, suffering people often feel inferior and deprived from dignity. At stake is the question: How is it possible for pastoral ministry to give back to people their human dignity in order to help them not to survive, but to live fully a human life despite severe suffering and poverty? The challenge to pastoral ministry is inter alia to help people to hope and to discover dignity and identity.

The objective of the article is not to focus in the first place on programmes and projects, but on attitudes and the pastoral art of understanding. It is an attempt to focus on the healing dynamics of relationships and the link between a pastoral hermeneutics and the social problem of poverty.

The basic assumption is that besides all precautionary measures and preventive strategies, poverty in Africa seems not to be eradicated easily. Poverty is to a certain extent a reality for which there is probably no easy answers, remedy or cure. However, it should be addressed by pastoral care in order to help people not to lose their human dignity and identity due to the limitations caused by poverty. Pastoral ministry has, apart from developing effective projects of outreach, also the task to help people how to live a meaningful life and how to discover human dignity despite poor conditions.

AIDS, as linked to poverty in Africa, has become a pandemic. In South Africa more than four million are HIV positive. If this devastating scenario is true, pastoral care needs to provide a model for healing and is challenged to create a space wherein people can rediscover their dignity. This space should provide people the opportunity to develop a “courage to be” within the parameters of the “Christian art of hope”.

The further assumption is that stigmatisation and discrimination can often be linked to perceptions created by “schemata of interpretation”. Fixed ideas fed by a process of conceptualisation in which culture, doctrine and God-images play an important role, are often the reason why privileged people isolate themselves from suffering and create a space of distance rather than becoming involved. Negative perceptions are often the reason why congregations and communities do not understand. Hence the reason for social aloofness and insensitivity.

1. Schemata of interpretation within a pastoral hermeneutics

By hermeneutics is meant the event of *hermeneuein*, i.e. the transfer of meaning within a process of communication. *Hermeneuein* indicates interpreting, explaining or translating (Rossouw 1980:17). Hermeneutics therefore has to do with explanation, with speech, with translation, with communicating a message, with interpreting something for people who want to hear and understand (Smit 1998:276). Hermeneutics describes the science or principles of interpretation and illuminates the movement of understanding and communication between two entities or texts within contexts.

According to Hodgson (1994:10-11), a theological hermeneutics consists of two movements. The first is a *critical-interpretative thinking* which entails a *backward questioning movement* from the interpreter, through the textual media, to the root of the revelatory experience and actual message. The second movement is a *practical-appropriative thinking* and *existential-contextual experience* from the root experience (message) *forward*, via the media, to the interpreter (self-understanding, identity) and his/her context (situation). The presupposition is that both the backward and forward movement will instil meaning and point to new future orientation.

The challenge right now is to make an analysis of these schemata of interpretation which influences both the backward movement of critical-interpretative thinking as well as the forward movement of practical-appropriative thinking. It thus becomes the task of a pastoral hermeneutics to mediate new possibilities of being and to transform and empower poor people to discover meaning and hope. A pastoral hermeneutics, applied to poverty should therefore reveal the intentionality behind the perceptions of society towards poverty. It should disclose these patterns of thought which influence the meaning of pastoral actions, because viewing pastoral actions as texts necessarily focuses our attention on the task of “understanding the meaning of pastoral actions” as well as the challenge to discover “how pastoral actions are world-disclosive for those they influence” (Capps 1984:35).

Schemata of interpretation can be called “frames”. Goffman (1974) describes frames as definitions of situations that are built up in accordance with principles of organisation, which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement. Stated more simply, “frames are the ways we perceive events or circumstances. They are the guidelines that shape reality for each of us. Frames may be seen as patterns by which we put together and interpret information and experiences” (Stone 1994:233).

The reason for focusing on these schemata of interpretation is the basic assumption that a pastoral hermeneutics as a theological endeavour, is deeply rooted in belief systems displaying a very specific understanding and interpretation of God. For example, a theistic understanding of God in terms of apathy, immutability and distance, is very difficult to link with the despair and the

helplessness of poor people. “A theology that maintains the image of deity based on a power principle that can only comfort the comfortable is a flagrantly disobedient, not merely a doctrinally distorted theology” (Hall 1993:134). Pastoral theology within the context of AIDS and poverty cannot any longer be chaplain to a theological imperium, which safeguards only the interests of the rich over against the suffering of the poor. “Powerful peoples demand powerful deities – and get them! But the deities created by empires seldom survive the empires that fashioned them: for supernatural power has nothing to say in the face of our finally unavoidable, natural weakness” (Hall 1993:108).

Within the history of Christian doctrine, several different schemata of interpretation can be identified due to the interplay between theology (doctrine) and culture.

- The *Hellenistic schema*. In this model, God is interpreted in terms of a causal and logical principle. As the cause of all things and events, God is viewed in terms of immutability and apathy. The Platonic notion of a God unaffected by suffering, leads to the following principle: *God’s immutability and the principle of causality*.
- The *metaphysical schema*. God’s transcendence is understood as being remote from historical events. Essentially, revelation implies God’s concealment. Behind revelation “another God” exists. The otherness of God therefore introduces an ontological schism between God and our human existence: *God’s transcendence – God as ultimate Being*.
- The *imperialistic schema*. According to the Constantine paradigm, God’s Kingdom should be understood in terms of militant power. God reigns as a “Caesar” and determines every sphere of life. Ever since, it has been a real danger to fashion God in the image of the “cultural gods” – the imperial rulers of the Egyptian, Persian and Roman empires. The church gave unto God the attributes which belonged to Caesar (See also Inbody 1997:139). The church becomes a cultural institution with God as the official head of a powerful establishment: *God’s omnipotence – God as Pantokrator*.
- The *patriarchal schema*. God acts as the great Patriarch and dominates human beings. Therefore, God’s actions in suffering are regarded in terms of purification/edification and retribution. As Patriarch, human beings face a very stern God: *God as an authoritarian Father*.
- The *hierarchical schema*. Life is viewed as an ordered system. At stake are position and differentiation. The latter is structured in terms of importance, status and position along the same lines of class differences. In such a model, the tension between superiority and inferiority determines people’s understanding of God: *God as royal King, Lord and ruling Judge*.
- The *economic and materialistic schema of wealth, achievement, development and affluence*. God becomes an official and public idol: the God who safeguards prosperity. He is then high-jacked to serve our selfish needs. Belief becomes a religion – it misused as a good investment to bypass tragedy. The kingdom of God becomes a stock exchange: *God as Director and Manager*.
- The *political and societal schema*. Due to the role of liberation theology, God becomes a liberating God who sides with the oppressed, takes care of the underdog as well as those discriminated against. The kingdom of God is then interpreted in terms of the exodus theme and our human dream for freedom and endeavour for justice by means of violent intervention: *God, the Liberator and “Freedom Fighter”*.

These schemata of interpretation indicate that a theological hermeneutics is inevitable a cultural endeavour. Culture and context flavour our taste for a specific deity. Culture therefore refers to the human structures within a concrete context as shaped by needs, values, norms, rituals, symbols and

language. Culture is the endeavour through which humans transform their immediate environment into a living space. In the words of S C Bate (1995:241) culture "... represents the human locus of a people's context. It is the site of the humanization of the *oikos* and thus the site where the meeting occurs between the Church as the human community of faith and the world as the human community in life."

Rather than to apply an imperialistic interpretation of God which serves only the needs of people in the global village (from above), I would rather opt for an empathetic and pathetic interpretation of the divine which can be linked to a globalisation from below, i.e. an understanding of God in terms of an encounter and identification with the suffering of people at grass-roots level. Rather than to approach economical issues, as linked to poverty, from the hierarchical perspective of the haves, a globalisation from below reflects on poverty from the perspective of the have nots and from an understanding of common needs and distress.

A pastoral theology which focuses on the creation of a healing space for understanding and acceptance (a space of grace and love) wherein suffering people can be encouraged to hope, should shift from transcendence and power as it befits a patriarchally and hierarchically conceived deity in the service of ecclesiological imperialism, to an understanding of the divine presence in relational terms – God's being-with. Hence the reason to opt for an understanding of the suffering and living God in terms of partnership, companionship and friendship; Emmanuel: God-with-us.

Space has inter alia to do with interconnectedness and relatedness, with presence, values, norms, meaning, perception and attitude. Theologically speaking, the space of the living God in this world is the space of Christ in our place (substitution). This is what R Anderson calls Christopraxis: the ministry of Christ for the world (1989:11). Christopraxis as a revelation of God's being-with-us, is the service of God for the humanising of persons. "This Christopraxis unites advocacy and diaconia so that actions of 'being there' are accompanied by actions of 'bringing there' tangible assistance and deliverance" (1989:26).

Christopraxis in pastoral care as an empowering ministry, is about the creation of a space for healing which displays God as Friend, Partner and Companion. "God is rather a revealing presence, a Companion – "your God". It is accordingly the object of the church's profession, not to demonstrate that God must be, but to bear witness to God's being-there, being-with, and being-for the creature" (Hall 1993:147). This being-there, being-with and being-for, should create a *space for healing* within which people can be empowered to use hope in a creative and imaginative way.

2. Pastoral therapy: the creation of a space for healing and the instilment of hope as a new state of being: the courage to be.

Pastoral healing is about salvation. Traditionally *cura animarum* has been understood as the care of souls. With "soul" is then meant that kind of qualitative principle of life (*něfěs*) as displayed within a very specific disposition or condition before God. Healing theologically thus refers to the event of being transformed from a condition of death into a condition of life. This new condition is an indication of a new state of being: being accepted unconditionally by grace and being restored into a new relationship with God; i.e. a relationship of peace, reconciliation and forgiveness.

Soul furthermore refers to a systemic structure of interrelatedness and interconnectedness. It also gives an indication of the quality of human life as well as the intentional directedness of being towards meaning and ultimate life goals. Healing therefore in pastoral care refers to pastoral acts and intentions which emanates from salvation (see E A Allen, 1995:18-23). It also opens up new avenues of understanding what our human vocation is about. It refers to a new sense of direction

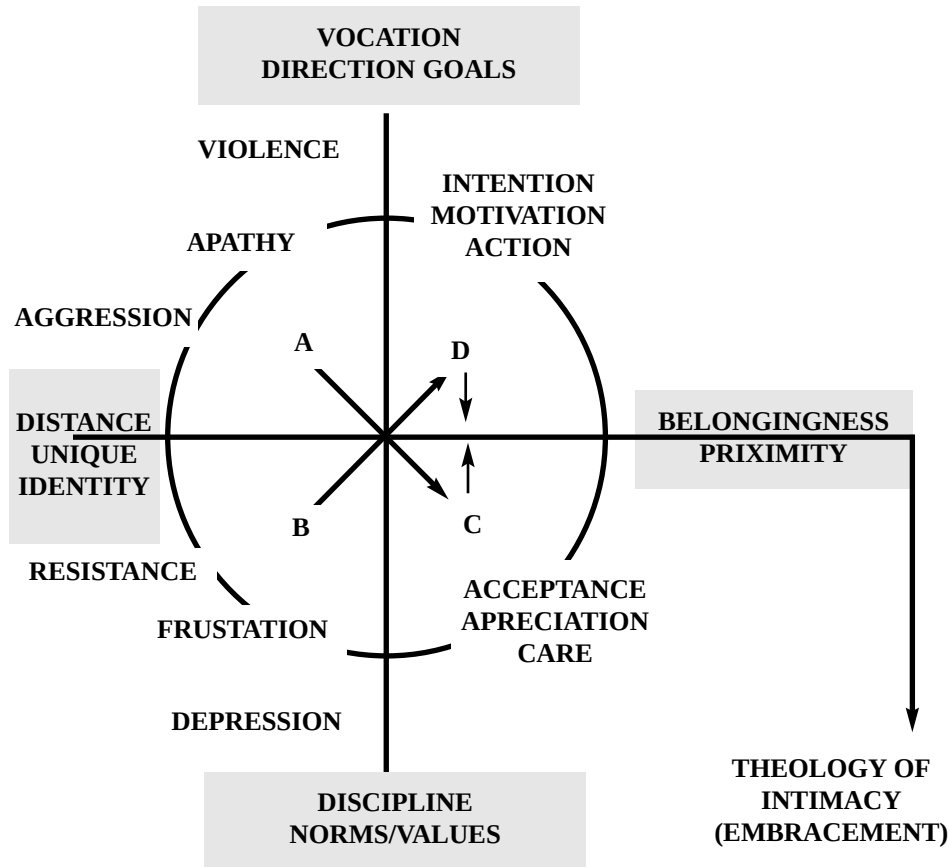
which instils meaning and reflects the contextual implication of the gospel for life issues. Pastoral healing is faith care displayed as life care. To put it into the words of J de Gruchy (1989:32): Salvation as healing and humanisation, "Healing is that which enables us to be fully human in relation to ourselves, our society and our environment" (1989:43). This means that even a person who is physically disabled, or indeed terminally ill, even suffering from severe poverty, may nevertheless be more healthy than the self-centred hedonist for whom a healthy body has become a fetish, and wealth and importance the supreme value of life. We then turn health into an idol which can rob the human being of the true strength of humanity. Health could therefore pastorally be redefined as a sense of meaning which empowers humans to hope, a sense of human dignity which encourages humans to be; pastoral health is the strength for human existence in the light of God's co-existence: being-with.

With space is pastorally meant an atmospheric environment of positive self-regard and self-understanding: a relational and systemic setting within which one feels accepted, accommodated and embraced (*Heimat*/at homeness). It refers to a quality of being-with and a constructive dynamics of interaction brought about by emotions, attitudes and positions. Space also reflects a set of boundaries as well as new possibilities or opportunities. It can be described as a field of meaning for discovering directedness and interconnectedness caused by the dynamics of relationships and established by processes of communication and interpretation.

If space in therapy refers to the quality of the dynamics of human encounter, the following two dynamic polarities can be identified: (a) the experiential and emotional polarity of *distance* (uniqueness and identity) – *Proximity* (intimacy and the sense of belongingness), and (b) the motivational and intentional polarity of discipline (norms/values) – vocation (direction/goal setting).

A constructive understanding of the dynamics of poverty (the tension between the haves and the have nots, as well as the difference in perceptions between the rich and the poor) implies that the interplay between poverty and wealth in a society (demarcated by the global economics of the market place) is determined by four components: how poor and rich understand and view their uniqueness and identity; how they communicate and establish a relationship of proximity (sense of belongingness within a pastoral encounter of embracement) while dealing with emotional issues such as need-fulfilment, expectations and role-fulfilment; the ethical dimension of norms and values which determine life styles, quality of livelihood and life views (philosophy of life); the important dimension of vocation, i.e. the commitments of people towards goals which can set projects in place.

SPACE THERAPY



The philosophy behind this hermeneutical model for space therapy, is that people's experience of worth within relationships, is determined by the affective and experiential polarities of distance and proximity (the human quest for intimacy), as well as by the normative polarities of vocation and discipline. These polarities demarcate a space wherein different positions are possible: A = apathy; B = frustration/victim; C = appreciation (care/acceptance); D = motivation (intentional actions). These four positions display attitude and create the quality of communication within the human encounter. The quality of the overall dynamics is determined by a theology of grace and intimacy; i.e. to be accepted unconditionally without the fear for isolation and the anxiety to be rejected (embracement).

Apathy demarcates a problematic position. People move either in terms of their commitments to violence or in terms of their resistance to aggression. Frustration is an indication of a victim position. Frustration therefore demarcates a problematic position where people can move either in

the direction of depression (helplessness and hopelessness) the more they are aware of norms and values that cannot be established within their desperate situation, or in the direction of resistance the more they become aware of their uniqueness and identity.

The value of this hermeneutical model to, for example the problem of poverty in pastoral ministry, is that it helps people (both the haves and the have nots) to understand the dynamics of space. Within pastoral ministry space means the creation of an understanding which challenges people to change their attitude. When one understands one's position within the undergirding dynamics of space, it helps one to shift position. For example from A (apathy) to C (acceptance); from B (frustration) to D (motivation/action). The movement for change is always into the opposite direction and quadrant; A is the shadow of D and B is the shadow of C. Both C and D should be viewed as supplementary to one another.

The application of this model within pastoral therapy implies the following. In order to be healed, people need to shift their position and change their attitude. A space for healing is created if one shifts from A (apathy) to C (acceptance), and from B (frustration) to D (intentional action and motivation). To care for suffering people, the focus should be on the two dynamic positions of motivation (D) and acceptance (C). Position C implies and presupposes a relational network and support system which can embrace the person despite severe poverty.

The social problem of poverty cannot be addressed meaningfully if people and society approach suffering people from a position and attitude of apathy and frustration. These positions also inflict apathy or frustration on poor people. Positions of motivation and appreciation create a sense of dignity which inspire people to respond in a more responsible way. At the same time people are encouraged to set new goals in life. They are challenged to start with appropriate actions which lead to new creative opportunities for living.

This hermeneutical model can help people in a more advantaged position, to understand both the violence/aggression of suffering people, as well as their resistance or depression due to a continuous exposure to contextual poverty. As for example: the violence of gangsterism on the Cape flats and townships, is often a manifestation of apathy and frustration which on their turn conceal deep-seated aggression, resistance and depression. If society can understand how these dynamics determine the being functions of suffering people, it can contribute to foster a space wherein healing can take place.

3. Guidelines for a pastoral theological ecclesiology directed towards counselling the helplessness of poor people.

In an article on poverty in the Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling, G Polk (1990:927) points out the necessity for a new approach towards counselling poor people. Traditional counselling modalities are generally seen as "middle class", primarily of an unreachable value system and offered to those who can pay a consistent and long-term fee for the service of "talking".

In the poor townships, pastors may discover soon that methods and goals of pastoral counselling are virtually ineffective on grass-roots level. Pastoral caregivers often come across scepticism, hesitation and resistance. According to G Polk, the reasons for this resistance are: (1) distrust for the helping persons; (2) lack of patience; (2) need for immediate gratification; (4) poor educational background; (5) pessimism about the future, and (6) disvaluation of goal-directed plans.

W Jordaan (2001:8) refers to the dormant energy of violence beneath the surface of poverty. He calls it the silent enemy of violence, which can be connected to poor health, malnutrition; physical weakness; incapability to work; the lack of support systems such as disrupted families

and marital relationships; the abuse of children and women; crime; ineffective life skills as well as a violent outlook towards life. Over a long period of time and through many generations, poverty becomes a stance in life. It creates a *desperate passivity* which manifests itself in three different modes:

- A sort of *learned helplessness*. Poor people do not anymore respond to shocking events or any setbacks in life. They develop an apathy because they know that their struggle is a helpless case; a war without effective weapons.
- A silent and *passive acceptance of help*, advice, projects and solutions which are forced on them (with good intentions) from above. They are forced to respond to the wishes of their benefactors. The initiative for change starts elsewhere and is hierarchically forced from above. Poor people don't anymore believe in themselves. They just accept the fact that they are incompetent. To wait in patience without hope becomes the slogan of the poor.
- *Passive rage* gathered over a long period of time. Helplessness becomes internalised fury, a violent act towards one's own ego. When passive rage built up enough energy, it can be triggered by any political act of injustice or oppression. Violence becomes the only vehicle to express this "inner rage" and to create the illusion: we are doing something.

An affluent society often responds to this kind of violence in a judgmental way: the wealthy blame the poor. The effect is: the poor becomes victims of their own desperate and helpless situation. Unemployment is then viewed as an exponent of laziness and sloth. At the same time poor people is blamed for a lack of a spirit of enterprise and entrepreneurship. Beggars cannot be choosers.

If one compares this stance to the view of scripture, a total different approach to poverty emerges. In an article on combating poverty in the Old Testament, U Berges (2000:227) points out that the theology of the Bible reveals a very aggressive approach to poverty. In the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy the focal point is not in the first place poor-relief, but the combating of poverty.

The Old Testament does not approach the question of poverty abstractly. Rather, it links it very specifically to the person of the poor. Covenant code sees the social problem of poverty from the angle of liberation and solidarity. The deepest social rift was not that between poor and rich in general, but between creditors and debtors (Berges 2000:250). And it is exactly because of this social rift that injustice occurs and insensitivity generates.

The Hebrew word for poor, *dal* refers to people who are insignificant and of low standing. *Ani* and *anaw* refer to the need, distress and destitution of the poor. They are often the oppressed and exploited in society and in need for liberation. Poverty is an appeal to acts of compassion, mercy and charity. Hence the need for a pastoral hermeneutics which focuses very specifically on the transformation of negative attitudes and perceptions.

IN CONCLUSION

The above diagram offers a new approach to the understanding of the suffering of the marginalised. It challenges pastoral caregivers to display empathy and sensitivity for the predicament of the sufferer. Translated into a pastoral ecclesiology to poverty and AIDS, a space of grace implies the following pastoral actions for healing:

- *Seeing*: a perception and vision created by unconditional love.
- *Listening*: an attitude and aptitude of empathy, which lead to the creative act of replacement/substitution. To replace oneself in the position of the other, presupposes the

sacrifice of love. Listening then becomes an act from *below* (the position of the victim) and not from *above* (the position of the benefactor).

- *Understanding*: the application of a schema of interpretation which emanated from *a theology from below*: the God-with-us (companionship, partnership).
- *Identification*: to shift your position from apathy to acceptance; from frustration to accommodation. (The poor are not always loveable).
- *Relating*: to become involved in the systemic network of interconnectedness and shared humanness.
- *Structuring*: to develop a policy of decision-making which incorporates the needs, dignity and creative imagination of the sufferer.
- *Acting*: the design of programmes and projects in which the sufferer is invited to take initiative and accept ownership.
- *Supporting*: to start with small support groups within caring communities and congregations.

Pastoral care is more than an individualistic, nondirective, client-centred model of counselling. Pastoral care implies a comprehensive and holistic approach which deals with humans within the systemic dynamics of a human encounter. Such an encounter is embedded in cultural contexts and determined by schemata of interpretation. Listening skills should be supplemented by more fundamental hermeneutical skills which are sensitive to space. The fostering of an environment of intimacy should be the outcome of a Christopraxis of grace which accepts people unconditionally. Such a space of grace and unconditional love is constituted and established by a condition brought about by salvation (substitution).

Salvation in terms of the marginalised, the stigmatised and the suppressed rage of helplessness, should be translated into pastoral actions of caregiving. Salvation should pastorally be translated into the restoration of humanity. Health thus becomes a new state of being, a condition of hope where people discover within the space of grace a courage to be; i.e. their human dignity.

Pastoral health then refers to a space which enables people to be fully human in relation to themselves, the society and their environment. If health implies the imaginative and creative power of hope as emanated from the resurrection power of Christ, and if health implies the strength for human existence, even those who are seriously ill or suffer from the helplessness of poverty, can will to be healthy without any optimism or illusions. Health then becomes the courage to be despite the limitations of life.

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