



The
Pastoral
Care
of
Children

Daniel H. Grosseohme, BCC

The Pastoral Care of Children

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Daniel H. Grossoehme, MDiv, BCC

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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

For David, whose memory inspires me to care for children
and their parents as if they were my own family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reverend Daniel H. Grosseohme, BCC, is Director and Founder of the Pastoral Care program at the Children's Hospital Medical Center of Akron, Ohio. An ordained Episcopal priest, Reverend Grosseohme is a board-certified chaplain in the Association of Professional Chaplains and a member of the Executive Committee of the Assembly of Episcopal Hospitals and Chaplains. In addition to direct caregiving duties, his research interests center on how children, youth, and adults use religious language to talk with God about emotional healing and the issues they confront.

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Foreword

When Jesus reveals the truth of the kingdom of God to his disciples, he places a child in their midst and says, "Here. Here before you is the access to the very heart of God." Daniel Grossoehme understands what Jesus means.

This book is filled with wisdom and practical advice for anyone who cares for children, but it is mostly a book about prayer, about life, about relationships—that is—about the very heart of God.

"Groundedness," Daniel Grossoehme writes, "is very important to pastoral care. Being grounded in relationship to someone, and especially being bound to someone larger than one's own self, is the very essence of religion."

As I read through these pages, it was not long before I discovered that it is a book that is, in the most gracious way, asking me about my own groundedness. If I am going to provide pastoral care to children, then I should be ready to answer some questions for myself. Am I a person who is grounded in prayer? Can I talk about God and the love that God has for us? Can I stand before mystery? Can I name and speak the truth? Am I able to wait? How hard is it for me to be playful? How am I in the silence? Have I faced and come to terms with the reality of my own death? What does it mean to be faithful? Do I see a child as a gift from God? And can we love the child within each one of us? Where do I find blessing?

Daniel makes it clear that the gifts for pastoral care belong to us all if we are willing to enter the dying and rising that these questions require. And, as Daniel answers the questions that he has asked us, we realize that he is taking care of us, the caregivers, as well.

I will return to this book again and again because it is wondrously and carefully written, and it should belong to every person who seeks to care for children. It comes forth from Daniel's own groundedness,

and through his compassion and good sense, we come to understand that Jesus is right—with the children one finds the very heart of God.

Daniel Grosseohme shows us how wide the entrance to the kingdom of heaven really is.

The Right Reverend J. Clark Grew II
Bishop of Ohio

Preface

This is a book about doing pastoral care with people under the age of eighteen. If you have picked up this book, I assume it is because you want to do this work and want to be very intentional about it. What follows is based on what children and youth have taught me in congregations, youth groups, and hospitals, about what God and their congregations mean to them. It is based on my experience, however, and comes with some of my biases and assumptions about pastoral caregivers.

I sought to make no assumptions about the ordination status of caregivers. I have used the term “pastoral caregivers” to denote any persons engaged in this work, whether clerical or lay. When I restrict something to the ordained, I have used either “priest” or “ordained minister” for clarity, but these instances are few. I also assume that the caregivers are not primarily pediatric hospital chaplains, but persons in congregations, Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) students, and chaplains in community hospitals who do not deal with children on a daily basis.

I assume that if you want to do pastoral care of children, you are also willing to do some work by reflecting theologically on what you encounter. In perhaps no other pastoral setting do questions about God arise as when children are involved. I believe that the first time you grapple with these questions ought not to be when you are staring over a child’s figure in an intensive care unit bed at distraught parents who have just asked you why God would do this to them. I have, therefore, outlined my theological thinking to date, not because it is particularly correct, or even well done, but as a model. The final set of biases arises because this book is the result of a CPE-trained Episcopal priest who does liberal theology. Read my offering, and then, as Jesus said, “Go and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:37, KJV).

Finally, this is not primarily a book about techniques. I have tried to provide a balance between praxis and theological reflection. There is

no mysterious technique into which I can initiate you and turn you into someone you are not already. It is mostly a book about attitudes and relationships, both yours with children and between children and God. At the same time, there is a different approach because children have unique needs. Even though we are all former children, we forget what that experience is like, and I have sought to outline an approach that takes into account their particular needs.

I hope that you have picked out this book because you want to do pastoral care with children and youth well. When I first thought I discerned a call toward ordained ministry, I had no idea this is where I would find myself. I have resisted comments people frequently make about it taking a special person to do this work. What it takes, I have found, is someone who is willing to care an awful lot and to set aside some assumptions and fears in order to listen carefully. In spite of the pain and the tragedy I have seen, doing pastoral care with children and youth is an awesome and holy and wondrous ministry. Having children or youth talk with me about their beliefs always reminds me of Moses and the burning bush. It is a scary experience, and it is also a wonderful and sacred space. I hope that this book helps you discover this for yourself.

Daniel H. Grossoehme

Acknowledgments

I will always be deeply indebted to those who contributed to this book by forming me as priest and person: the children and youth of Christ Church (Glendale, Ohio), Holy Communion Church (Washington, DC), St. Matthew's Church (Brecksville, Ohio), and St. Peter's Church (Akron, Ohio); and those who have been patients at the Cleveland Clinic Hospital and Children's Hospital Medical Center of Akron. Several individuals have been very influential, and their thinking continues to be reflected in how I do pastoral care. These mentors include the Reverend Gerry Niklas, the Reverend Pat Persaud, the Reverend Ron Morgan, BCC, and the Reverend Dr. Ed Kryder. My colleague at Children's Hospital, Dianna VanNatter, RN, MSN, reviewed and commented on the mental health chapter. I am especially indebted to the Reverend Rod Pierce, BCC, of St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital (Houston, Texas) who read every page of the manuscript and sent it back full of questions for me to reflect on. I deeply value what you all have given to me, and this book is better because of your efforts. As much as these people have contributed to my makeup, this book and any mistakes it contains are, finally, my own responsibility.

Chapter 1

The Nature of Pastoral Care of Children

I am sometimes apprehensive when I attend social functions for the first time. Sooner or later, I know someone will ask me what I do for a living. Even if I reply a bit vaguely, "I work in a hospital" or "I am an Episcopal priest," a follow-up question often elicits the fact that I am a pediatric hospital chaplain. This, in turn, is usually followed without a pause by a comment that takes the form of, "Oh, that must be so hard! All that suffering!" At some level, I expect those responses from the general public. What I was not prepared for was hearing similar comments from my sister and brother clergy, many of whom had been doing pastoral care substantially longer than I have.

Many persons find the prospect of working with children intimidating. In this book, I want to suggest a framework for understanding and providing pastoral care to children that is rooted in being able to express thanksgiving for children *per se*. Care for God's youngest children is rooted here in the act of thanksgiving for the gift of children. Jewish theology is rooted in the adoption of the Hebrews as God's chosen children; the Scriptures bear witness to their developing understanding of what that meant. Christians believe that God gave humanity the gift of a child in Christ. For them, this is the child that breaks open the cycles of life and time. Christians who give thanks for that Child can ground themselves in that thanksgiving to seek and serve Christ in the children around them today.

If that premise is the skeleton of this book, what makes the whole body function is understanding what is unique about pastoral care to children and families and how one might go about it. This is the topic of this book. Before proceeding to a discussion of the major pastoral needs of children, it is necessary to understand how chil-

dren develop and the kind of thinking and spirituality they are capable of as they mature.

The reality of illness, trauma, and disease, when it occurs in children, is such that it creates an emotional tension. When people are confronted with the reality that these things can and do occur to children, they often seek to create an emotional distance from this reality. When suffering happens to children, it reminds us that no one is truly "safe," something we would like very much not to be true. These words, which make assumptions about doing pastoral care with children, also reflect a certain amount of discomfort on the part of clergypersons themselves. They may feel inadequate to the task and may not even feel called to a ministry of pastoral care. Pastoral care for children also brings up theological questions more readily—questions that have no clear and simple answers. Questions that begin "Why would God . . . ?" remind pastoral caregivers that, whatever it is that we bring to the children and families, sure and certain answers are not always part of our offering. And that causes a certain amount of discomfort and anxiety for pastoral caregivers, making it easier to talk with the parents than with the children or to avoid doing pastoral care with children entirely.

One clergyperson has related several times how in fifteen years of ordained ministry, he has never presided at the funeral of a child—and feels he is living on "borrowed time." If the pastoral care of children is a source of anxiety, it can also be a source of great joy and can be a great opportunity to learn what we really believe about God and how God operates in people's lives. The calling to be a pediatric hospital chaplain may be a unique calling, but good, solid pastoral care of children and their families can be undertaken by any person willing to put forth a bit of effort to listen to how kids talk and to what they believe about God.

The comments some people make about how emotionally difficult they find providing pastoral care to children to be serve to illustrate the confusion we feel about the suffering of children and who should tend to it. If pastoral care of children can be made to sound "different" and "special," then it becomes easier to let a specialist do it and to then permit persons based in congregations to focus their energies elsewhere. In contrast to that notion, the ordination rite for an Episcopal priest contains the instruction at the bish-

op's examination of the ordinand, "You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak . . ." (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1979). The rite leaves no ambiguity that every ordained person is to provide care to everyone, regardless of age. Yet there is no reason this care must be the sole responsibility of the ordained. The baptismal covenant, as printed in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), calls for all Christians to "serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself . . ." and to "respect the dignity of every human being" (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1979). The words from the rites of Christian initiation and ordination point in two similar directions. Everyone, including the youngest child, is deserving of pastoral care, and anyone may be the provider of that care.

WHAT IT MEANS

There is no single definition of "pastoral care" (much less pastoral care of children) to which everyone subscribes. Most people nod their heads sagely when they hear the words "pastoral care" as if everyone knows what is meant. There are, in fact, quite a few perspectives on what constitutes pastoral care; they are like each individual facet on a gemstone held up to a light that reflects differently from each facet. Each of these perspectives has a worthwhile insight into the pastoral care of children.

Clebsch and Jaekle define pastoral care as "helping acts, done by representative Christian persons, directed toward the healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns" (Clebsch and Jaekle, 1964, p. 4). One of the strengths of this definition is the implicit affirmation that this ministry is not limited to the ordained or licensed members of a congregation. Some persons *are* set apart for this specialized ministry, but ordination is *not* a requirement. Clergy do not have an exclusive claim to this ministry. "Representative Christian persons" is a way to affirm the uniqueness of the acts. Pastoral care is more than glad-handing people, and it is more than simply asking children at coffee hour how school is going or how their favorite sports team is doing. Simply speaking to children and youth does not necessarily communicate that they are recipients of