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Unravelling the Ministry of Pastoral Mediation

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This article was prompted by co-mentoring reflections with colleagues involved in pastoral ministry within Church and mediation services in other public bodies; its relevance is confined to adult interpersonal conflicts but could be modified for wider applicability. And, while I endorse the kenotic virtues of compassion, kindness, forgiveness and reconciliation that underpin *pastoral practice* in a Christian context, nevertheless I have a sense of disquiet surrounding a number of questions and dilemmas intrinsic to pastoral mediation *in vivo*. What follows is an exploration of pastoral mediation in the Christian context, a brief review of extant styles of mediation and the responsibilities of the mediator. I attempt to unravel selected entangled strands and to propose an *alternative* process in the hope that corporate conversations will be fostered by this effort.

Conflict is a reality for all social groups but so also is the need to repair injured relationships and restore 'right relationships'. More often than not, conflict tends to be embedded in *negative reciprocity*, a situation of negative responses to negative actions, each response builds on the last, and quickly escalates to combative, argumentative interactions. Norm violation, manipulative behaviours, unintended mistakes, misuse of power, etc. can act in concert, adding to the cumulative effect, as individuals seek to defend their own interests.

Over time mediation practices have evolved, structured processes ranging from non-adversarial to more adversarial approaches covering a spectrum stretching from informal, oral, and non-binding styles to more formal and binding processes of arbitration such as tribunals, pre-trial arbitration, and public courts. More recently, Church, State, local communities, and organisations are leaning into informal, non-adversarial, non-binding approaches

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UNRAVELLING THE MINISTRY OF PASTORAL MEDIATION

to mediation practices, encouraging co-operative problem solving which can prove less time consuming, less costly and reduce adverse collateral fall out. The quest to further develop and refine practices that cultivate cooperation in restoring relationships and human harmony is an ongoing endeavour.

CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

Christians are resourced with biblical traditions and principles that set out rules for engagement and resolution. Matthew 18.15-17 offers a vignette of fraternal conversation and the role of the Christian community in the service of the common good: ‘... if your brother wrongs you go and speak to him alone ... if he does not listen, take one or two more ... if he refuses to listen report it to the community ...’. Sanctions can be applied if there is no change. But the best of strategies is never straightforward and fall short of aspirations.

The term ‘pastoral’ suggests that throughout history a common cause of conflict centred on livestock. For example, Hamar nomadic pastoralists in southwest Ethiopia had in place a third-party mediator to manage conflict arising from moving livestock across land. For them, the third party was like an elder, a ‘*bond friend*’ or *anamo* – a special type of institutionalised friendship with the people in conflict, tasked with restoring peace.

Pastoral mediation in the Christian context is founded on the relatable metaphor of a good shepherd. God laments the maltreatment and exploitation of his flock by leaders who ignore the weak and must be held accountable and sanctioned. God offers us a way of being pastoral – ‘... bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong ...’ (Ezekiel 34.16).

Accordingly, pastoral mediation can be regarded as gift to the Church, an invitation to deep spiritual practices of forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration and healing. Paramount to exercising power as *Love* (analogous to shepherd and sheep) are gentle guidance, unobtrusive control, facilitative communication to understand each other’s concerns and work out reparative solutions together in a spirit of mutual care, respect and compassion.

MEDIATION STYLES

Practices vary and are as diverse as there are personalities; core principles are upheld, but practices can be nuanced differently. Styles may overlap as most mediators often adopt a hybrid approach, blending the strengths of different models aligned with their own skillset to best serve participants.

THE FURROW

A *facilitative style* enables disputing parties to articulate and understand each other's interests through the interplay of two juxtaposed questions: what do you, party 'A' want for yourself, and what does party 'B' want? (and vice versa). The goal is to maximise the agency of disputing parties, working together to explore mutually acceptable outcomes, find their own solution and take responsibility for both the decision and its consequences.

By contrast, the *evaluative style*, suited to pre-trial cases, tasks the mediator with appraising the validity of proposed solutions, informed by their legal background and subject-matter familiarity. The outcome is still determined by the parties but influenced more directly by the mediator.

Different again is the *narrative style* which tends to suit in situations where the disagreements are of a more personal nature. Non-directive, the mediator's focus is on safety of the space and quality of presence. The disputing parties take a step back from their disagreement and tell their 'story' ... from each individual's perspective and how they are disposed to the other. The aim is to support parties to create a new story leading onto a shared resolution. A skillset in mental health is of benefit in dispelling confusion or ambiguity in each other's perception as they tell and re-tell the story.

The *transformative style*, also used for personal disagreements, tends to be more structured and directive than the narrative style, repairing the relationship but also aiming at resolving the dispute in tandem. This means first identifying the genesis of the presenting damage (e.g. dismissive vs affirming interaction) to repair the relationship then seeking to resolve the conflict through resetting perceptions and posturing – mindful that 'whatever is received, is received according to the manner or nature of the recipient'. The mediator is tasked with de-escalating emotionally charged exchanges by reframing hurtful communication/language. In this way conflict can be redefined – both parties seeing the presenting conflict from a more unified position, prompting more constructive engagement. It is then left to parties to determine their own solution.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MEDIATOR

Responsibilities of the mediator can be viewed as spread across *three* aspects.

Firstly, is pre-mediation which seeks to ensure that each of the disputing parties has a sufficient grasp of all the elements involved to inform rational consent to participate, including that there is no guarantee of a successful outcome. Initial conversations set

in place a proposed draft framework (terms of reference) for the process and familiarise each of the disputing parties including their support companion with what is involved. This will serve as a working foundational guide to be adjusted in the course of the real time process.

Technically, a prototype framework involves providing *preliminary information* to establish what the disputing parties need to know around *consent* to participate in the process. Discussion centres on its voluntary nature, that both participants and mediator are free to leave the process at any time without assigning a reason. Details of the scope/limits, desired outcomes, the participants, mediator/s, logistics, etc. are established. The intended *structure* is teased out regarding schedule and format of meetings in tandem with the *process* of how the meeting will be conducted re opening statement, submission/story telling by each party, etc. *Ground rules of shared understandings* safeguard the ‘pastoral container’ to best serve its task. Key elements include the process being conducted on a *without prejudice basis*, confidentiality, GDPR compliance and underpinning core values of goodwill, safety, trust, respect, non-judgement, impartiality and fairness.

When the real time process begins the mediator’s responsibilities may be summarised as follows:

- To oversee the effective functioning of the pastoral space or ‘*container*,’ that it is welcoming, remains safe, with the aim of promoting cooperation and respectful interactions that engender harmony and trust.
- To facilitate disputing parties to tell their story, understand each other’s story, identify their experience of ‘being wronged or misunderstood’ etc. and identify what they each want from the process.
- To maintain non-judgemental and impartial acceptance of disputing parties as they make themselves known as unique individuals with their own unique experience.
- To awaken the most mature motive of which the person is capable in order to strengthen a person’s agency to make own decisions.
- To steer the direction of discussion without dominating or straying from the central focus on the search for options/solution to enable disputing parties to reach mutually agreeable resolution and achieve durable peaceful outcomes.
- To possibly offer non-binding recommendations for resolution as appropriate while being clear that it is up to the parties to freely choose the outcome they desire.

Finally, *post-mediation* tasks the mediator with oversight that the outcome is discharged in an appropriate and timely manner. Where the outcome of the process is not agreed or acceptable, alternative pathways can be explored e.g. lay arbitration, legal arbitration, public courts process or otherwise for consideration if the disputing parties so wish. In addition, the mediator agrees the timeframe for provision of follow-up outreach support and directs GDPR compliance regarding information in hand.

ENTANGLED STRANDS

Below, I untie and hint at a number of identifiable strands that warrants fuller discourse elsewhere.

There is a tendency or culture to regard the injured party as holding sway within the pastoral container and often shunned is the mediator's own measure of legitimate control and power in the service of the task. For example: voluntary and rational consent to participate in the process requires a reasonable capacity to make an informed, logical and rational decision to include concomitant consequences and this necessitates deliberation. Patent behavioural and mental health challenges can manifest as excessive control in defiant, aggressive and reactionary behaviours; unregulated speech and emotions that can spiral into suicidal ideation/self-harm; a paranoid perception of mistrust, currently under medical care etc. Presenting threshold for stress tolerance is to be appraised as a duty of care.

The presenting conflict (immediate) tends to awaken inner hurts from the past, early life story. While original wounds continue to heal over time with protective scars, they are also known to enlarge as past wounds act like a magnet to attract current injuries, fusing together the immediate with remote. The search for resolution is likely to be a multi-faceted performance art framed by underlying woundedness and projected on to immediate conflict, thus adding to the complexity of the process.

It is universally accepted that some conflicts might not be resolvable as external strive tends to reflect *deeper internal psychic compromise*, satisfaction being elusive and possibly spiralling outwards in persistent forensic quest (perennial discontent). In such instances intentional work with deeper underlying issues may urge finding appropriate professional help or extending conversations to look for other pathways to intercept hopelessness.

Closely aligned to the above strand is that of *resistance*. To resist something or someone is to try to ensure, known or unknown to ourselves, that some outcome would not happen. That we might

be protecting our sense of self [and sometimes the problem] and miss an opportunity for self-development. Since we do not always know what we are resisting – even that we are resisting - we are dependent on the recognition of others who by their word and actions show us our resistance. What I am unwilling or unable to engage with remains elusive.

The next *three* strands cross over into faith and belief.

A theological view is that the *Benevolent Spirit* is present in all and over all in the pastoral space as captured in the biblical imagery of *holy ground* (Exodus 3.6). Regardless of their visible psychological or psychic disposition, each person is endowed with grace and virtues, neither are liberty and Divine charity necessarily suppressed. Christians tend to have a lively confidence that God acts in/through/in spite of our broken human nature to prosper us. Pastoral action is not merely human initiative but aims at divine action to elicit the best of human nature within the pastoral space as a microcosm of the Christian community. The mediator is called to be the symbolic figurative presence of Christ in embodying boundless acceptance. The ultimate goal of the pastoral process is that participants and mediator alike are enabled to yield more fully to their own salvific plan; that God's goodness prevails.

But what if the mediator and participants do not enjoy the benefits of a thriving faith life? Where one lives with a repressed, if not annihilated seminal belief system, a sense of an all-encompassing Benevolent Presence might be smudged and goodwill difficult to sustain.

Forgiveness is a sort of healing of memory with the potential to make what is broken whole again. In a culture that tends to be overly sensitive to felt 'victim status' efforts to resolve are always partial but not sufficient to move onwards. Therapists and spiritual guides are gradually learning that navigating the elements of co-complicity and self- forgiveness are pivotal to the process of self-healing (in contrast to over-ascribing blame and responsibility on external forces). Restorative listening affords ample opportunity to recount the conflictual experience (catharsis) to help to alter the contours of one's lived narrative and open pathways to forgiveness of self and other.

Now I turn briefly to the *occupational hazard* of the mediator. The container is a messy, emotionally charged place and the mediator is not immune to the composite stress generated and can act these out known or unknown to oneself. Common occupational hazards include eliciting commendations; harbouring unrealistic expectations that distort central focus; running out of patience and rushing to premature advice to run ahead of situation; diverting or diffusing lament etc. to name a few! The pastoral container also

THE FURROW

has an unsettling way of casting us back into earlier life dramas in front of one's parents (regression) and then thrusting us forward towards any person who might be interested in one's wants, needs or preoccupations – in this case such a person is the mediator! The dynamics of transference and counter transference can distort interactions (feelings/reactions based on someone else in the past are 'transferred' on to the mediator and vice versa) that frustrate progress. Overall, the human condition can be stretched at scale to sustain focus on desired outcome.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Christian theologians share the view that the heart of pastoral mediation is faith-based with a rebellious trust in the all-encompassing watchful gaze of the Benevolent Spirit; *its central goal is healing* one's core spirit. The mediator symbolises the figurative *Presence* embodying the Christian virtues of boundless acceptance and compassion, but the human condition is broken and can be contrary despite best efforts.

Recognised as a form of pastoral exercise of *power as Love*, analogous to a shepherd and his sheep, multi-faceted questions and dilemmas continue to challenge and stretch practitioners and participants alike in their efforts to reach desired outcomes.

I am of the view that Christian mediation is a composite process with three distinct goals, though interwoven and blended together: *restoring* 'right relationship,' *resolving* conflictual interactions and *healing* core spirit.

It might be cautiously optimistic to experiment with a two-tiered process of *pastoral arbitration* and *pastoral mediation*; each tier is independent yet interconnected. In this case, *pastoral arbitration* seeks to restore harmony and reconcile conflict while *pastoral mediation* concerns itself with deep spiritual healing and may follow in time, perhaps a long, long time.

Pastoral arbitration resembles the use of a third party as a fraternal figure (*anamo*) with disputing parties tasked with restoring relationship in tandem with resolving conflict. The pastoral arbitrator meets each of the disputing parties to help them to identify and understand their mistake (recognition); agree to accept their share of fault (admission) and to take better care to avoid them in the future (reformation). In the marvel of the moment, admission of co-complicity in a spirit of shared trust can unlock the door to self/other forgiveness (reconciliation). Ritualising the conclusion of agreement and the exchange of a gesture symbolise restoration is complete.

I argue that a cohort of pastoral arbitrators who are relatable, skilled communicators with a measure of Christian virtues, can emerge from the *local Christian community* and be resourced with appropriate training, mentoring, and support. This model with its blend of private and joint meetings can assure more intentional engagement by disputing parties so that learnings can be transferable and sustainable; less fraught with complexities and a more cost-effective way (human and fiscal) to deliver potential outcomes. In addition, where noticeable recurring underlying issues stand in the way of progress, within the safety of the fraternal space, professional intervention could be encouraged and supported by the pastoral arbitrator.

It follows that a faith-based process facilitated by a *pastoral mediator* can then home in on the singular purpose of healing one's *core spirit* to recover intrinsic capacity of *being and becoming* to yield more fully to one's own unique divine plan of salvation.