A Brief Guide to Pastoral Care

The best pastoral care starts with recognizing that we are not trained or licensed mental health professionals. We are not here to diagnose or treat anyone in any way, nor should we function with the expectation that we can “fix” a problem. That being said, there are a number of skills that can be honed to provide appropriate and pastoral forms of care to young people, or anyone. These include:

Active Listening- *“All verbal messages are codes—language equivalents of our feelings, but not the feelings themselves.”* – Philip Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People*

Active listening is a means of making sure the person we are caring for is heard and understood. This includes presenting oneself as engaged in the conversation through eye contact, head nods, etc. In addition to this however, active listening includes the practice of reflecting, giving feedback, in our own words, about what we have just been told.

**Example:** One of your youth repeatedly asks “What time is it?”

An active listening response might be, “It sounds like you’re worried about the time, is that true?” They may be worried for a number of benign reasons, including boredom or hunger, but also for reasons such as anxiety about returning home on time, which in turn might be the product of something else.

Other active listening phrases: “What I hear you saying is…” “It seems as though…”

Also important to active listening is the idea of “meeting someone where they are”. Active listening presupposes that an individual has good reasons for feeling or behaving the way they are; the active listener avoids statements that make value judgments on the feelings and behaviors of the other. In other words, active listening requires an unconditional acceptance of the one to whom we are listening.

If you have faced a similar situation to that of the person you are talking with, it can be appropriate to express empathy and understanding through that experience. However, sharing such an experience should never come at the expense of the person in need of care being the focus.

Prayer- *“Pray without ceasing”* 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Prayer is the most readily available tool we have as Christians in caring for one another. Praying pastorally is a means of both acknowledging God’s presence in a situation and making people further aware that they have been heard.

**Example:** Offering a prayer for a person dealing with anxiety- “gracious God I thank you for the chance \_\_\_\_\_ have had to talk today. I lift them up to you Lord and ask for the all-encompassing peace of your presence to be with them. As they prepare to face \_\_\_\_\_, give them strength and confidence. Calm their troubled spirit, show them the depth of your love for them. We pray in the holy name of Jesus. Amen.”

Ultimately, the eloquence of your words will matter much less than the overall act of prayer. The Holy Spirit does the work!

Be Aware of Cognitive Development

Children and youth are constantly developing as they grow, but it is imperative to remember that individuals grow at different paces. A concept that is completely clear to one 10th grade youth (for example) may take much longer for another youth of the same age to grasp. Be sensitive to this!

Refer, Refer, Refer

Very often, a young person needing care simply wants to be heard and understood. This can be enough for the issue to be “resolved” (though again, we do not fix problems). However, if you have the sense that someone you are responsible for is in need of deeper care, speak to your pastor about how to find the appropriate resources (they should have access to them).

Recognize Your Limitations

If, for example, you are asked a theological, ethical, or relational question that you do not feel qualified to answer, do not be afraid to say “I don’t know.” Do not be afraid to find and speak with someone who might have the answer (recognizing that they might not either!).