

District Probationers Group

Offering pastoral care to people through the Occasional Offices is a major aspect of the church's pastoral ministry. At our November meeting the group spent time looking at the different ways we approach such requests, the assumptions that people sometimes bring to conversations and the expectations they have of the church and those who exercise ministry. The group looked in detail at our experience of requests for baptisms and funerals, how those requests are made, what lies behind such requests, our own response to them and how congregations can engage with them in creative and fulfilling ways.

The session began by looking at some definitions of Pastoral Care. To what extent did they reflect our own understanding, which did we find the most or least helpful. Each member of the group then attempted to make a list of those qualities we would like to see in those who might offer pastoral care to us and then reflected on whether we match up to the high expectations we have of others.

In our discussion on baptism a wide ranging list of issues emerged for us around our own practice and that of our congregations. What do we hope to have been achieved through meeting with the parents when explaining the service to them? When is the best time for baptisms, only when it is All Age Worship, or is it also possible when the Sacrament of Holy Communion is being held? What follow-up is available after the baptism and how effective is this in keeping in contact with families? Both parents and God-parents make promises in the service which assume some faith commitment, how do we engage with families who seek baptism but are not part of church life? Is it appropriate to ask families to attend worship for a number of Sundays prior to the baptism as a requirement or condition? Are there circumstances in which we might refuse baptism and what might those be? How do our congregations respond to baptism families present in worship, do they see them as a nuisance or an opportunity?

Given the multi-cultural nature of many of our congregations we then explored some of the cultural practices and traditions which pastoral ministry can require of us when a child is born and a family seek support from us.

The group then looked at how we offer pastoral support to people at times of bereavement, how funerals are planned, the role of the congregation in offering support to people, the assumptions and expectations that we sometimes have to deal with and the variety of cultural practices which people expect to be followed after a death, prior to, during and after a funeral. The group recognised the importance for ministers of familiarising themselves with the variety of cultural practices present within our multi-cultural congregations and when speaking to families it is important to get a very clear sense of what it is they are expecting of us and how we can ensure they can be included in a sensitive and meaningful way.

Conversation then led on to look at the wider context in which these Occasional Offices are being requested and how some clergy can find them unrewarding since they can require a considerable amount of time and effort but don't appear to sustain any meaningful or lasting relationship between the family and the wider church congregation. Yet they remain a significant contact point with people, many of whom have little association with the church, and if they are done well they provide a challenging and rewarding opportunity for ministry and service.

The group valued the opportunity to share experiences and approaches when people come to us at these significant moments in their lives and look to the church to offer them support and care.

A. Cameron Kirkwood (District Probationers Secretary)