What is Pastoral Care?

Within various denominations and non-denominations there are competing definitions for the position of ***pastor***: Preacher, teacher, arbiter, hand holder, adviser, etc… While it is true that the ordained pastor does each of these tasks, most people recognize the pastor as the one who teaches and proclaims God’s Word, and administers God’s Sacraments. But there is one more important task. Pastor as *seelsorge*. *Seelsorge* is German for “care/cure of souls.” Call it pastoral care.

What is ***pastoral care***? To answer, let me ask another question. What should you expect of your pastor when you’re sick, having surgery, hospitalized, unable to attend church, or in spiritual distress? In every time of need, you ***can*** and ***should*** receive the Word of God individually from your pastor to comfort you when you are troubled by your sins, to strengthen you when you struggle in this life, and to give you counsel and guidance from God’s Word. That is pastoral care.

Your pastor cares for each member of St. James, not only through the public preaching and teaching of the Word of God, but also by bringing that Word into your home, when you are hospitalized or homebound, or when our conscience is burdened by sorrow, grief, or shame. When you have a physical ailment, you seek a physician. When you have a spiritual ailment, you should seek a physician of souls… a shepherd of souls who will provide pastoral care.

Lutherans have a long tradition of pastoral care. Pastors are known for making visits both regularly and in emergency cases. They show care both by “showing up” but even more, by “showing up with Jesus”. They bring Christ to the situation. God works through His means. Baptism, Absolution, the Word, and the Lord’s Supper, all are tools of pastoral care, in which members of the church are cared for. Prayer based upon Scripture begs God to be present. Psalms speak to all conditions of life in this fallen world. The Absolution delivers forgiveness of sins and releases you from guilt. The Lord’s Supper forgives your sins, delivers life and salvation, and strengthens your faith to confront the struggles that Satan throws in your path.

While new travels quickly through the grapevine, the grapevine rarely reaches the pastor. This is why, as your pastor, I wish to know when you have a need. I want to provide for you the care my Lord has charged me to dispense. Be assured that your private struggles and sins are kept in confidence. Possibly pastors have violated this oath before in your experience. The pastoral office is not a gossip office. I stand on my ordination vow to never divulge sins confessed.

There is an intersection of pastoral care with service to the neighbor. Jesus has charged every Christian to care for their neighbor. When we are sick or in need and perhaps as we struggle with sin, shame, and despair, we can and should seek the care of our fellow Christians. No one is alone. In our age of privacy laws and violations, this has become more difficult. While some Christians may unintentionally gossip, many faithful Christians want to keep you in their daily prayers, to visit you in your need, and provide as best they can. To keep your struggles, whether in body or soul, to yourself is to prevent your fellow Christians from fulfilling their vocation as a brother and/or sister in Christ.

This is a blessing God has given you. It is a blessing to this congregation. It is an available blessing to your community. Your congregation cares for you, and your pastor wishes to visit with you and sharing God’s Word with you. As we are all together in fellowship through the body of Christ, we care for each other. The Lord does miraculous things through His means of the Spirit! Lutherans care for one another and Lutheran pastors care for their flock.

God’s peace is yours! Pastor Sutton