

Ordinary pastoral care: Deconstructing the concept of 'crisis' in practical theology

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In pastoral care literature the idea of 'crisis' is prevalent. This observation can also be made concerning the discipline of practical theology. The emphasis on transformation and change in practical theology entails the presumption that its main scope is to deal with crises that need to be addressed. This chapter challenges the use of 'crisis' in practical theology and specifically in pastoral care theories. The name of the field 'pastoral care and counselling' stresses the therapeutic turn and it frames the field as fundamentally problem-oriented. Though crisis-language is virtually everywhere in pastoral care studies and methods, the textbooks, however, also look beyond crisis. Pastoral anthropology provides a significant indicator: pastoral care practices deal with a human being *coram Deo*, 'before the face of God'. The second half of the chapter suggests a broader scope of the field of pastoral care. It suggests three perspectives for a reconstructed pastoral theology: the everyday life of ordinary believers, an interest in spiritual formation, and a reassessment of the local congregation.

Introduction

The COVID19 pandemic caused large and small crises, both in personal lives and in societies. There was global uncertainty about the health implications of the virus. Governments had to improvise and act quickly without the necessary virological knowledge. There was a widespread anxiety among populations paired with the increasing trauma of death tolls in densely populated areas. Many grieved over one or more loved ones; many suffered increased domestic violence, or experienced severe social isolation or mental problems because of the lockdowns. Groups of people felt that their personal freedom was severely restrained which resulted in anger and resistance to government policies. The pandemic thus did not just cause one crisis, it consisted of *multiple crises*.

How should practical theologians respond to this situation full of crises? How did pastors act during the pandemic? Did they use digital means to

reach out pastorally? How did the restrictions impact the practice of hospital chaplains (Haußmann and Fritz 2021; Byrne and Nuzum 2020)? That pastoral care is a discipline that is about helping people is evident from a glance in contemporary introductions to practical theology. The language of transformation, change, and improvement is paramount in pastoral care literature. Yet when we pay closer attention to the conceptual and theoretical language in the discipline, the discourse of crisis is inescapable. This raises the more fundamental question: how the concept of 'crisis' is being used in practical theology?

In this chapter, I explore the idea of 'crisis' in the field of practical theology. I start with a general observation concerning practical theological discourse and its development. Next, I focus upon pastoral care in particular: how does the concept of 'crisis' influence pastoral care discourse? I suggest that we need to deconstruct the notion of 'crisis' in order to reassess pastoral care. Finally, in response to this





critical assessment the final section provides a few constructive theological suggestions to open up a post-crisis perspective for pastoral care and counselling. It is concluded that though humans often experience all sorts of crisis, ordinary life should be approached with spiritual openness that moves beyond the discourse of crisis.

The Idea of 'Crisis' in Practical Theology and the Task of Deconstruction

Practical theologians study all kinds of crises in communities, in churches and in societies. For example, in 2016 I participated in an international research group that studied European preaching during a period that was ill-termed 'the European Refugee crisis' (2015–2016). The project resulted in a collaborative presentation at the 2017 IAPT conference in Oslo (Pleizier and Kaufmann 2018). This study in the field of preaching is not an exception rather it fits a broader pattern. Studies in pastoral care and counselling often choose crisis-related topics about specific mental or societal problems that make people suffer and that call for pastoral care. Practical theologians have extensively studied all sorts of critical issues such as marginalization, migration, race, mental illness, palliative care and decolonization (Miller-McLemore 2019; Swinton and Mowat 2016).

Studies usually combine two aspects: the use of empirical research methods and a normative-strategic perspective with terms like 'improvement,' 'redefinition,' 'reframing' or 'transformation,' either with a therapeutic (coping) or a prophetic (critical) emphasis. For instance, in pastoral care studies 'improvement' often means helping people to cope with their situation mentally, spiritually, relationally, and culturally. In studies of preaching, 'transformation' often entails the view that preachers should provide critical perspectives on everyday life or political situations. Practical theologies that combine empirical research with a coping or critical perspective, use terms such as 'prophetic' or 'critical' and provide research cycles that start with empirical research and end with a perspective on transformation (Browning 1991; Heitink 1999; Osmer 2008). The volume *Conundrums in Practical Theology* uses the metaphor of the 'canary in the coal mine' to understand the work of practical theologians and stresses that practical theological research may contain conceptual dilemmas, but these

almost always overflow into more deeply felt and lived quagmires, reflecting social inequities and political injustices that reverberate across academia and the marginalised publics to whom we hold ourselves especially accountable. (Mercer and Miller-McLemore 2016, 3)

Crisis permeates practical theology, and thus affects the self-understanding of the field. Therefore, the second layer of the concept of 'crisis' concerns a meta-perspective: is practical theology a *science of crisis*?

In his recent book *Collaborative Practical Theology* Henk de Roest challenges this paradigm of crisis. He mentions three critiques of the dominance of crisis discourse (Roest 2019, 146–50). First, the rhetoric of crisis legitimizes strategies for change. He quotes Thomas Frank: "The rhetoric of crisis [...] lends credibility and force to the speaker's proposals for reform and action." Further, it seems that modernity has drawn attention to itself and generated an anthropocentric approach to practical theology. Are we critical enough if we do not question secular and post-secular prepositions? Citing Gerrit Immink, De Roest suggests that if human consciousness has lost the sense of divine things, it may well be that the interest in the field loses its sensitivity for religious practices as practices of revelation. Thirdly, De Roest argues that "the characterisation of practical theology as 'science of crisis' may reduce the scope of practices to be researched" (Roest 2019, 150). Added to this, a self-critical approach also needs to take into account that crisis-discourse in practical theology is often a Western response to the challenges of modernity and post-modernity in the light of the perceived loss of the relevance of church practices and faith.

Therefore, it appears that practical theology is in a permanent state of crisis. One indicator is the ubiquity of the notion of 'transformation' in practical theological models. Don Browning ends his classic *Fundamental Practical Theology* with 'transformation' as the goal to which the discipline is directed towards (Browning 1991, 278–94). Transformation appears in various conceptualizations. It is dressed in the language of strategy (Heitink 1999), of pragmatism and leadership (Osmer 2008, 175–218) and of normative evaluation (van der Ven 1993, 60–76, p. 152–156).

The dominance of crisis-discourse, however, raises a few questions.

1. Is practical theology fundamentally a discipline of change? The focus on transformation as a response to perceived crises suggests that practical

theology has not deeply enough integrated Friedrich Schleiermacher's view that practical theology is fundamentally a *theory* of practice rather than a science of application.

2. When the concept of 'crisis' appears in scholarly discourse, we need to inquire how it is constructed and to what kind of 'real crisis' it refers to. What real crisis in empirical reality is indicated? Further, how the focus on the idea of crisis narrows the field and what topics are neglected? 'Crisis' may easily become a construction of researchers in order to create a sense of urgency for their own agenda without clearly demarcated empirical realities.
3. In studying the empirical referents of 'real' crises, practical theologians should ask what their role or vocation should be or whether and how theology is part of the identified crisis. Not every economic or political crisis is necessarily a theological crisis. Even if everything might be theological, that does not mean that every perceived crisis counts as a religious crisis or as a crisis that should be addressed theologically. If culture and politics defines what counts as a crisis the implication might be that theology has given away its distinctive agenda.

These three questions give way to a *deconstruction* of the idea of crisis in our discipline. In the remainder of this chapter I start carrying out this task for the field of pastoral care and counselling.

The Current State of Research in the Field of Pastoral Care

Deconstruction begins with the very name of the field 'pastoral care and counselling' since the term 'counselling' conceives of pastoral care as 'therapy' and thus conceptually points to problems and crises in human lives and communities.

Three types of studies permeate the pastoral literature. First, there is a fast growing body of literature on chaplaincy studies and spiritual care. While spiritual care is primarily located in healthcare chaplaincy and many studies concern the domain of palliative care, spiritual care is increasingly studied in other contexts, such as prison or military chaplaincies. Understandably, the field of spiritual care is very much oriented towards crisis. Chaplains and other spiritual care professionals find human beings in vulnerable situations and wrestling with all sorts

of existential crises. Spiritual care involves coping with suffering (Weaver 2012), with death (Ferrell 2017) or with moral injury and moral distress (Carey et al. 2016).

A second type of study in the field of pastoral care and counselling consists of those that address specific pastoral topics including disabilities, woundedness, and mental impairments. This literature also reveals a significant ambiguity. On the one hand, mental issues such as dementia are experienced as crises in human lives (Mason 2020). They entail suffering and bring limitations. Pastoral care is often directed towards coping with such painful situations. On the other hand, it is emphasized that these human conditions should not create exclusion, and that human dignity should not be dependent upon social or psychological conditions. In this vein, Anna Katherine Shurley stresses the unique gifts of persons with intellectual disabilities. Her person-centered approach to pastoral care proposes the development of inclusive practices: collaborating, empowering, calling, playing and witnessing (Shurley 2017). Thus, despite the fact that pastoral studies often concern problematic areas such as bereavement, mental illness, or physical suffering, there also seems to be an inherent critique regarding a one-sided orientation towards crisis. These studies already signal the need for a deconstruction of the dominant discourse of crisis.

The general overviews of the field of pastoral care aim to introduce students and professionals to the many approaches in the field of pastoral and spiritual care and counselling. Often, however, the textbooks demonstrate a bias towards crisis. Two examples of highly valued introductory texts illustrate an orientation towards crisis. The influential Dutch textbook by Ganzevoort and Visser (2007) organizes the content of pastoral care practices by critical emotions, such as grief, anger, shame, and fear. These critical emotions point to crisis-like situations that call for pastoral care. Similarly, the German pastoral theologian Christoph Morgenthaler deals with crisis in almost every topic that he raises: the single human being is put into the perspective of 'conflicts' (*Konflikte, Ambivalenzen*), the chapter on human beings in relationship has crisis and divorce right at its center, and an entire chapter has been reserved for 'a human being in crisis' addressing suffering and cancer, vulnerability and mental crises, suicide, and finally bereavement (Morgenthaler 2009, Chapters 6–9).



Pastoral care practices have always engaged with those in need, the vulnerable and the weak. Yet, several tendencies in the recent history of pastoral care and counselling have strengthened the crisis-orientation in the field.

First, current methodologies in pastoral care and counselling – besides providing pastors with very practical approaches that are also often argued for theologically – reflect the influence of the therapeutic paradigm. The fact that the field is labelled with the therapeutic concept of ‘counselling’ in the English-speaking world is telling. This paradigm has framed pastoral care practices into the discourse of therapy: pastoral care is for those who need the help and the sustaining efforts of pastoral workers. Despite the client-centred approach, and the use of the economic rather than pathologic term ‘client’ for the care seeker, the therapeutic paradigm approaches people in churches and chaplaincy contexts as persons with problems and crises that need to be solved, accepted or coped with.

Further, quite a few methods in narrative and therapeutic pastoral care stress the importance of transformative moments in counselling. These transformative moments may emerge when experienced reality becomes connected to alternative realities such as the kingdom of God (R. Ganzevoort and Visser 2007, 121). In pastoral encounters the transformative moment can be structured like Biblical parables and moves from recognition, distancing, disclosure towards response. Similarly, according to Capps who adopts insights from the literature on ‘change,’ “reframing shifts the client’s framework from a negative to a positive one” (Capps 1990, 25).

Finally, the paradigm of crisis-oriented pastoral care has been framed theologically by the ‘father’ of practical theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher. He argues that every request for pastoral care signals a personal lack of confidence in God. Since parishioners are free subjects with their own ‘direct access to the divine Word’ the religious instruction that takes place in corporate worship should be sufficient. According to Schleiermacher, this means that

‘whenever such requests are made, as ministers we are to use them to increase the spiritual freedom of our church members and to lead them to such clarity *that no further request will be made*’ (Schleiermacher 1988, 55, italics added).

Hence, in this perspective pastoral care is for the weak and it should only be used to make pastoral care superfluous again.

Crisis is part and parcel of pastoral care literature, its studies and methods. The textbooks, however, also look *beyond* crisis.

In Morgenthaler’s introductory book on pastoral care, we find two indicators for an alternative approach. First, when he discusses ‘human beings before God,’ he moves toward spirituality in pastoral care (*Spirituelle Seelsorge*); a type of pastoral care that understands being human and guides human beings within a complete and full reality (*umfassende Wirklichkeit*), (Morgenthaler 2009, 220). Second, in reflecting upon the local church as the location for pastoral care and counselling, Morgenthaler obviously mentions crises (for instance in families) but also mentions traditional Protestant ‘visitation’ (*Hausbesuch*). Despite contemporary hesitations around pastoral visitation, this kind of pastoral care is less crisis-oriented and it mostly addresses everyday life: “a lot of people enjoy a visit of a pastor, in their rental apartment, at their farm, in their living room or in the elderly home” (Morgenthaler 2009, 317). Earlier, Michael Wilson pointed to the notion ‘health’ in relation to pastoral care practices in the light of the dominant medicalisation of care, both in healthcare institutions and in Christian communities (Wilson 1975, 1988). Whether in times of health and trouble, Wilson argues that it is ‘normal human community, whether a family, a team, a group, or a tribe, that an innate urge to love and be loved finds ways of expression.’ (Wilson 1988, 103) Pastoral care is broader than the ‘caring for casualties of life,’ he adds.

Morgenthaler’s assumption that ‘a lot of people enjoy a visit of a pastor’ and Wilson’s view that we have to ‘put abnormality firmly in the context of normality’ (Wilson 1988, 106) is confirmed by an empirical study among church attenders in The Netherlands. Asked about their desire for pastoral care, a ‘general interest in people’s lives’ is mentioned most often (Pleizier, Zijlstra-Koning, and Meulen 2021). It signals the need for a kind of pastoral care that moves beyond problems and crises. This expectation for pastoral care invites a reconstruction of pastoral care as ‘ordinary care.’

Towards a Post-Crisis Approach to Pastoral Care

Empirical research is rather scarce in the field of pastoral care in local churches. There is hardly any data about how many people receive pastoral care

and what kinds of pastoral care take place (Pleizier, Zwijze-Koning, and Meulen 2021). As a result of ongoing secularization, local Christian churches suffer depleting membership which severely impacts the availability of professional pastoral care. Pastors with larger congregations also deal with time constraints. These pastoral time constraints create a crisis-defined pastoral care in many parishes: pastors do only pastoral care in situations in which it is necessary.

Also, parishioners often feel that they are only eligible for pastoral care when they face some kind of crisis. In many cases, when pastoral care is offered, it is rejected because people feel they do not need it. This may be one of the reasons why it often seems that the classic practice of 'house visits' does not seem to work the way it did (Drechsel 2015, 98–99). The typically Protestant practice, in which pastoral care is offered to all parishioners regardless of their personal situations is framed within a broader understanding that pastoral care is for those with problems. This leads to the spontaneous response: 'I don't need a pastor; I don't have any problems for a pastor to address.'

Empowered by studies that address pastoral care for victims of sexual or domestic violence, or for those who suffer from mental disabilities, parish pastors are able to act more professionally and feel more confident in pastoral encounters. However, persons with mental disabilities also have specific contributions to make in parishes. This suggests the need for another paradigm. Yet, the fact that they are often treated as 'difficult people,' still assumes the discourse of 'crisis.'

Even though the paradigm of crisis is very much present in current congregational pastoral care practices, it is precisely the context of the parish that reveals the need for a 'beyond crisis' approach of pastoral care. Such a post-crisis approach to pastoral care practices moves into the direction of regular care practices or 'ordinary pastoral care.' To explore the outlines of 'ordinary pastoral care,' I offer three tentative theological statements to re-envision what a post-crisis type of pastoral care might look like in the context of regular parishes. These statements suggest a research agenda for the field of pastoral care by providing a framework for reconstructing pastoral care practices beyond crisis.

Everyday Lived Religion: Ordinary Believers

The first statement:

Ordinary pastoral care orients itself toward the *lived religion* of ordinary Christian believers.

The concept of 'lived religion' or 'everyday theology' is a well-known and often-used concept in practical theology (Streib, Dinter, and Söderblom 2008; Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014; Wilson 1988; Sremac and Jindra 2020). 'Lived' is put against the theological; the everyday 'real' against the idealized 'blueprint' (Healy 2000). More specifically for the Christian faith, Gerrit Immink suggests the notion 'lived faith' (Immink 2005). The notion of 'faith' helps us to think about the reality of life 'before God,' and the reception of, and response to, God's promises. Lived religion, or lived faith, reflects the current condition of believers, whether they feel very religious or not or whether they live happy lives or not. It focusses upon everyday religion, rather than upon problems and crises.

A pastoral care paradigm beyond crisis orients itself towards this lived reality of religion and faith. Pastoral care-givers show a simple interest in how faith is expressed in human lives and how the Christian religion is embedded in the lives of everyday believers. Eberhard Hauschildt coined the term 'everyday pastoral care' (*Alltagsseelsorge*) and considered the birthday-visit an opportunity for pastors to display their genuine interest in the ordinary lives of parishioners. He cites Wolfgang Steck to emphasise that the origin of pastoral care can be found in the everyday life (Hauschildt 2016). According to Wolfgang Drechsel, the parish is the primary context for everyday pastoral care (Drechsel 2015, 57–66).

In such a paradigm pastors are curious about how the Christian faith transforms lives, how it helps people to cope with all kinds of circumstances, and how belonging to a religious community provides a narrative to live by. Those engaging in pastoral care demonstrate an existential interest in the lives of people and in the ways parish members, young and old, live out their Christian lives. Existing pastoral approaches, however, remain indispensable, such as the therapeutic insight that the conversation as such has caring qualities, or the good practice of narrative approaches, that pastors should pay attention to the narrative structures of life-stories.



Therapeutic and narrative approaches thus provide valuable methods for ‘deep listening’ and for engaging in existential conversations. Yet in the proposal of everyday pastoral care, they are subsumed under the larger interest of lived faith.

The Life of the Soul: Spirituality and Spiritual Formation

The paradigm of ordinary pastoral care stimulates the pastor ‘to listen to the soul,’ as Jean Stairs puts it (Stairs 2000). Hence, the second statement:

Ordinary pastoral care orients itself to the life of the soul.

The life of the soul is richer than the problems and crises that emerge in a person’s life. Though spiritual formation and spirituality constitute a broad field, this has recently been rediscovered as an area for pastoral care (Meulen 2013; Barber and Baker 2014; Pembroke et al. 2022).

‘Spirituality’ can be aptly summarized with a term used by Corinna Dahlgrün: the ‘search for God’ (*die Suche nach Gott*) (Dahlgrün 2009). Dahlgrün opens her rich presentation of all kinds of Christian spirituality with five entrances to the search for God: in solitude, in the presence of other people, in everyday life, in the community of Christians, and in the search for divine forgiveness. Other notions that relate to spirituality, spiritual guidance or spiritual formation are ‘discipleship,’ ‘living a Christian life’ and the dogmatic concept of ‘sanctification.’ Though coming from different Christian traditions, they all point to growth and transformation within human beings that has to do with life in connection with the self, with others, and with God. These aspects contribute to a dynamic and rich understanding of ordinary pastoral care as care for the soul.

Pastoral care that takes spirituality or spiritual formation seriously as a goal in and of itself, deals with questions like: what does it mean to live a Christian life; how does my Christian faith interact with my place in society at large; how am I to shape my Christian life in relation to others in the various communities that I participate in, both ecclesial and non-ecclesial? These questions emerge when people are invited to reflect upon their lives as Christians, regardless of whether they feel that they are experiencing a critical situation in their life.

In a recent experiment with pastors and parishioners a new method of spiritual formation was

tried. Its outcome showed that openness—for what is significant for the parishioner according to the principles of counselling—can be meaningfully combined with topics in the Christian faith, contributing to an atmosphere in which spiritual formation can take place within the setting of pastoral care (Pembroke et al. 2022).

Pastoral Care as Ecclesial Practice

Finally, the third statement:

Ordinary pastoral care practice finds its origin in churches and faith communities and aims to create and maintain communities of faith.

An interest in everyday life and a focus on spirituality or spiritual formation understood as living a Christian life, makes ordinary pastoral care in parishes a function of the Christian community. Pastoral companionship and an interest in the soul point to a unique feature of parish care: it moves beyond the individual and connects with the larger community of faith. In other words, pastoral care in parishes is an *ecclesial practice*. According to Wolfgang Drechsel ecclesiological notions such as *ecclesia* or *koinonia* belong to the ‘grammar of pastoral care’ (Drechsel 2015).

Two types of relationships are important here. First, pastoral care is an expression of the community of faith: it is a function of religious communities to care for (spiritual) wellbeing. The pastor represents such a community of faith (Hauschildt 2016, 61).

Second, ordinary pastoral care in parishes entails reconnection to a broader community. The modernist and crisis paradigm often isolates the individual. John Patton (2005) introduces a communal contextual paradigm for pastoral care. The community of faith is not just the ‘context’ in which care takes place. It is also the outcome of care: the practice of pastoral care creates and maintains relationships among believers. When a parishioner meets with a pastor, the pastor represents the larger community of faith to the parishioner.

Pastoral care as an ecclesial practice also shapes its foundational understandings. Stephen Pattison critiques the notion of ‘pastoral’ in ‘pastoral care.’ In his critique he both integrates historical aspects and challenges a one-sided clericalism. In his own definition he understands pastoral care as “that activity, undertaken especially by representative Christian

persons, directed towards the elimination of relief or sin and sorrow and the presentation of all people perfect in Christ to God” (Pattison 2000, 13). Though this definition opens up debates around spiritual care, intercultural, and interreligious care, Pattison’s approach understands the nature of pastoral care in theological terms and terms that belong to the vocabulary of the church.

Conclusion

Ordinary care presents a specific outlook of pastoral care in parishes. When compared to chaplaincy settings, two differences become apparent. First, chaplaincy care is most often care for the individual, often related to an institutional context (hospital, prison). Secondly, spiritual care offered by chaplains is mostly crisis-oriented. On the other hand, ordinary care, finds its primary context in the parish or the faith community (Drechsel 2015).

Some have suggested that pastoral care will gradually turn into spiritual care due to secularization. The assumptions of a commonly shared Christian faith no longer hold; diversity and plurality in parishes, not only in Western Europe, call for an approach that resembles spiritual care: care in the public domain with a sensitivity for spiritual and intercultural diversities (Nauer 2015). However, pastoral care within the Christian communities will remain a distinct practice among the many varieties of pastoral and spiritual care. Intercultural approaches, such as Emmanuel Lartey’s, also provide constructive approaches to pastoral care that move beyond the focus on problems and crisis. Lartey’s proposal of pastoral care as ‘empowerment’ emphasises ‘the fact that there is something good, something of worth and value within human persons as they presently are’ and the pastoral task is to build up ‘the unnoticed strengths and resources within and around people and communities’ (Lartey 2003, 58, also p. 68).

We are in need of a post-crisis paradigm to avoid neglecting significant pastoral and spiritual practices. Regular or ordinary pastoral care is one of those practices. There will always be ordinary people, and their ordinary lives, with or without crises, remain worthy of pastoral attention. In the coming years practical-theologians will certainly be intensively engaged with all sorts of crises. However, a critical and constructive attitude is needed with respect to the dominating discourse of crisis.

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