

Public Theology as Pastoral Encounter: A Response to Lucinda Mosher

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When I was a hospital chaplain some years ago, I met a Jewish man who had a particular problem with prayer. He was upset that he could no longer pray the words of the Lord's Prayer (his term). It very much surprised me that he wanted to pray that prayer or that he would call it that. The prayer itself is based on Jewish prayers, and it makes no assertions about the lordship of Christ. Christians make those assertions by calling Jesus "the Lord" and giving him possession of the prayer, but he was teaching the disciples how to pray in a very Jewish way. Despite this, I was initially unsure how to proceed respectfully.

In conversation with the man, I asked him about what praying "Abba" and "Our Father" meant to him. As he shared about his relationship with his daughters and how he had become estranged from them, he realized that his prayer to God the Father was blocked because of his own difficulties being a father to his daughters during his illness. There were trespasses he could not forgive on their part, and on his own, and so asking God to "forgive [him his] trespasses, as [he] forgave others" was impossible. Jesus's role in the prayer was the role of any child of God, addressing God his Father and asking for the help only God can provide. It was Jewish monotheism without the trinitarian relationship I would have naturally assumed gave Jesus the authority to teach others how to address God. For this man, Jesus had the authority of a rabbi helping others to access their own relationship with God. In this interfaith pastoral encounter, the Jewish man had opened up to me a deeper reading of this familiar text.

Though the man was Jewish, he was using the prayer Jesus taught his disciples in the form that Christians derive from our Scripture. His spirit reached out for a resource that, though entirely in accord

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with Jewish teaching, would not make an exclusivist Christian or Jew happy. The man was doing interfaith theology, and he and I were able to work on his spiritual issues not despite the different readings of the text but because of them. The man eventually invited me to pray the prayer that Jesus had taught his disciples. I did this, knowing that it did not in any way represent an admission that Jesus is Lord. I would not have tried to pray with this man in this way had he not asked for it.

Reflecting on the encounter with a supervisor, I realized that while I remained committed to the idea that one should pray this way because the incarnate Son of God had the authority to teach it, an observant Jew could find the same authority to pray that prayer from its roots in Jewish Scripture and prayer practices. The man had transformed my perspective. We were both bringing our own spiritual and theological resources to the encounter.

As a priest, I was unable to read Lucinda Mosher's approach to public theology in the "multireligious neighborhood" without thinking about such encounters and my ministry context in the Diocese of Virginia. Alongside ministering to practicing Episcopalians, I inevitably find myself ministering to persons of other religions and those who profess no religious beliefs. No doubt the scene above will be familiar to priests and chaplains across the country. Interacting with persons of different faiths requires sensitivity and a willingness to step outside one's own theological home. The frame of public theology as pastoral encounter has become invaluable in such encounters.

In responding to Mosher, I seek to enrich an understanding and practice of public theology in conversation with pastoral practice. This might be possible by clarifying the *nature* of the "public" in pastoral encounter (see above), by describing pastoral *presence* in a multireligious public, by emphasizing a multidisciplinary that is *lived*, and by equating interfaith dialogue more closely with pastoral *care*. Beyond Mosher's depiction of public theology, I suggest that the practice and value of *vulnerability* is something public theology could adopt from pastoral practice.

As an interfaith chaplain and now a priest inhabiting my own interfaith neighborhood, I have needed the resources of Christian theology to provide compassionate care to others who do not share my theological commitments. Equally, I have had to be judicious in using such resources when working with patients and talking with persons

outside my faith community. By thinking of myself as a theologian with a particularly constituted “public” to address, I have been able to be present with others not of my faith in an authentic way, but without proselytizing. I am working in the “multireligious neighborhood” in a personal and vulnerable way, which means that my public faith commitments intersect with my pastoral practice.

To be *present* in such a multireligious neighborhood is to be present as a person in formation at two levels. Public theology requires reflective and open discourse (we might call this “public formation”) while maintaining a position in a religious tradition that has public warrants like creeds, scriptures, or other communal criteria (we might call this “community formation”). Spiritual care outside the religious community of a chaplain’s origin is public theology. Mosher’s appeal to the incarnational nature of public theology is instructive here. Spiritual care across theological and religious difference is often “incarnated” in practice with little attendant theological or religious language. It is, like public theology, enacted first for the common good.

This pastoral work for a common good beyond the chaplain or priest’s own community takes place, by definition, in a pluralist or multireligious space. Because the practice of chaplaincy requires a high level of self-reflectivity, Christian chaplains are constantly thinking about their own inherited and constructed theologies while they interact with those they care for and with colleagues who may not share those commitments. Here is a *lived* multidisciplinary and collaboration in spaces served by a range of caring professionals and sometimes within an ethos where healing explicitly precludes faith commitments. Chaplains cannot avoid being theologians in dialogue with multiple publics. Living on the border of many religions and none causes some chaplains to avoid sharing their own faith commitments. Others, in contrast, hew so strongly to their own theological orthodoxies as to be unable to act with what Mosher calls “convicted civility” or to have a “global perspective” on their own religion’s interaction with others. If, in light of Mosher, more chaplains took seriously interfaith dialogue as pastoral *care*, the common good in care institutions would be served more effectively. Pastoral caregivers in hospitals and other institutions have a public to care for, and the individuals in that public do not necessarily know how to live their own faith on the border of someone else’s. They may not know where they are, and having a chaplain who is theologically committed but open to

dialogue may help them to situate themselves and to relate to others who do not share their beliefs. Pastoral care becomes public theology in such instances of bridge building.

Beyond Mosher's depiction of public theology, the intersection of this emerging field with pastoral care will suggest further characteristics or deepen already-identified characteristics. Chief among distinct characteristics from pastoral encounter is the value of vulnerability. As a Christian pastor working from a tradition that allows for an inclusive approach to spirituality, as Mosher recognizes, I work in the landscape of vulnerability. L. William Countryman defines a priest as "any person who lives in the dangerous, exhilarating, life-giving borderlands of human existence, where the everyday experiences of life opens up to reveal glimpses of the HOLY—and not only lives there, but comes to the aid of others who are living there."¹ I find this image of borderlands helpful because pastoral work so often requires boundary crossing. From the willingness of a hospital chaplain to simply enter a room and ask about a visit, to a prison chaplain going through the necessary security, to the military chaplain living in dangerous and often politically ambiguous places with troops at war, pastoral caregivers participate in this priestly activity of locating the holy for people and offering it to them. This vulnerability, it seems to me, does not only describe pastoral encounter, but it could enrich a definition of public theology.

Most often, in pastoral crises, I have encountered people who in a sense do not know where they are. They are vulnerable. Priests and other pastoral caregivers must help those they work with to understand the terrain and to bring forth their own spiritual resources to navigate it. Often people do not seek pastoral care because they do not know they need it, or they seek it only because they have an institutional expectation that the priest or pastor will be there for them. Chaplains and caregivers are also vulnerable. As they operate outside the bounded nature of their churches, synagogues, mosques, or temples they must, in a very real sense, define their own authority in this public. This involves the vulnerable practice of finding a careful balance between hiding or overexposing one's own theology for the sake of those seeking care and comfort (Mosher rightly references the powerful possibility of transformation). There are many vulnerable

¹ Louis William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1999).

publics in today's world who may benefit from a transformed pastoral theology. A public theology that recognizes such vulnerability, and that values the witness of those prepared to be vulnerable for the sake of the common good, will enable life-giving community in the multi-faith neighborhood.