



20 years of European Chaplaincy – 10 years of ENHCC
Chaplains in the future – giving and receiving
London, 16–19 September, 2010

Chaplains and personal growth

Director of Hospital Chaplaincy Kirsti Aalto
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
kirsti.aalto@evl.fi (after January 28, 2011: kirsti.aalto@welho.com)

1. Growing towards an adult faith

Integral to developing an adult faith is having the courage to represent the Kingdom of God and, as a hospital chaplain, daring to use the powers invested in you. Supporting you in this growth will be spiritual guidance, the pastoral care provided for you personally, and the support of your parish. Studies in pastoral psychology also help. Structuring your image of God: of what parts does my image of God consist? ‘God’s grace is more important than any amount of one person’s faith.’ (Eero Huovinen, Bishop Emeritus of Helsinki)

2. Growing towards a well-constructed, integrated identity

Part of the growth of identity is developing the ability to identify any shadows and dark holes in one’s own background and to recognise that one’s own family history can, along with burdens, also bring wealth. It also means understanding, and accepting without anxiety, the differences in people, including that they may have a different sexual orientation.

The Swedish chaplain and author Lars Björklund tells the story of how he once asked an elderly clergyman how he could officiate at a funeral, a baptism and a wedding all on the same day without losing himself in the process. The old pastor thought for a moment before answering, ‘I’m not supposed to be sad at a funeral, but simply give room for grief. I don’t need to be joyous at a christening, but give room for joy, and I certainly don’t need to be in love at a wedding ceremony ...’

This growth is supported by supervision, peer group support, and life itself.

3. Growth is finding a balance between your own sense of guilt and a sense of duty

Such a balance helps you recognise what it is that motivates your own caring and enables you to set limits. And having set a limit, what do you feel when you say ‘No’? Which is something each of us needs to practise in our various roles: as chaplain, friend, parent or child, as a human being, helper or therapist. This partly addresses the question of whether I am my brother’s keeper.

4. Love for others is the ability to feel sympathy, to have patience with people and to respect them

Part of loving others is a continuous process of learning to listen.

5. Growing towards courage and authority

Building our courage and authority prepares us for facing life’s difficulties. We need to recognise the time and place for absolution, to develop the ability to confront, to be direct and to point out conflicts. In so growing, we find support in experience and silent knowledge.

6. Daring to keep a distance and the ability to set limits

One of the greatest risks in caring work is compassion fatigue. To avoid it we must learn how to keep our distance and to set limits.

After seven years of working in pastoral care with dying patients, hospital chaplain Hanna Hella-Aro writes, ‘I began to feel exhausted by continuously working with dying patients and their families. The burden of death, the smell of it and the feel of it on my shoulders – it became too much. I was partly aware of my compassion fatigue, but mostly it was subconscious – I was so drained of empathy that in the last few years I was practically “running on empty”. When I had the sense to give up and was instead assigned to wards that were less exhausting, I had more energy and felt I had more space to function in my own life. That is why I say it is a blessing in my work today that I found it in me to give up before I became more exhausted.’ (*Sielunhoidon Aikakauskirja [Journal of Pastoral Care]*, No. 21, 2009)

7. Learning a reflective work mode, assessing work and getting feedback

Church employees rarely get feedback for the work they do. Supervision and consultations help you to adopt a work mode that is more open to reflection, and similarly beneficial is getting the chance to talk with your colleagues and peer groups.

Helpful methods of work assessment include: supervision, your own notes, verbatims, and keeping work diaries.

8. Trusting your own intuition, gathering together the ends of threads, getting ready for the next conversation

These are all professional skills. Young workers may wish there was a handbook to guide them through a variety of different situations. But, little by little, they come to realise there is no such book. Instead, you are allowed to trust your own intuition. What is it that satisfies a person in a dialogue? When Lassi Pruuki, Th.D, put this question in an article in *Sielunhoidon Aikauskirja* [*Journal of Pastoral Care*], No. 21, he suggested three factors:

- the experience of sharing
- the expression and formalising of your own experiences
- the opening up of new points of view

Pruuki describes a structured dialogue and the ‘remembering of the future’, which is part of such a dialogue.

9. Tolerating your own helplessness

Learning to accept your own helplessness entails a growth from omnipotence to realism, a process that is aided by supervision and psychotherapy.

According to Lars Björklund, ‘Sometimes it’s a question of really not doing anything, but trusting that your presence is enough. But even if we manage to let go of the idea of doing something, we can still retain the wish to see the person we meet healing or their situation improving. I dare to claim that our wish can sometimes be experienced as a demand and that can then lead to our letting the person down. In some extreme cases the same risk exists if we give something to the person we meet. In the void that is created when we do nothing, wish for nothing and give nothing, a meeting can take place. When we meet a person without expectations and demands, they are strengthened and become visible.’

10. Accepting that depression sometimes comes, yet depression is not death

Psychotherapist Pirkko Siltala speaks of a creative depression which carries a person forward, away from the ‘graveyard bed’. (The term *graveyard bed* is from Julia Kristeva.)

Siltala suggests that one of the basic questions we as human beings must ask ourselves is whether we are capable of loving ourselves in all our

faulty, unfinished imperfection. In an omnipotent world, there seems little room for such qualities.

* * *

Become hope for the person you are helping

Martti Lindqvist (1945–2004), Adjunct Professor of Healthcare Ethics, often spoke of the need for anyone working in pastoral care to become the hope of the person they are helping. He ended his book *Toivosta ja epätoivosta* [*Of Hope and Despair*] with the words: ‘Hope is the ability to wish that there will be a tomorrow.’

In all caring work, a view of hope is central: the minister is not alone in carrying a patient’s hope or that of a patient’s family and friends. Carrying hope is a collaborative effort, and can be likened to weaving a common web unto tomorrow and to a tomorrow beyond that.

Anyone working in pastoral care, including a psychotherapist, is a container person, as the language of therapy speaks of the container function. He or she hears many stories. Telling is a cleansing, cathartic experience, it is important to verbalise, to tell out loud of the evil you may have encountered, but also of the wrongs you yourself have committed. It is good to speak of that which could not come to be, even though you had dreamt of it and built much on that longing. That which we have had to forego is also present in us. (Martti Lindqvist)

Along with the people that health care chaplains and psychotherapists meet, they gather together pieces of life history, pieces that make up the cloth of life, its full image, and – finally – gratitude.