

CLINICAL PASTORAL EDUCATION

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“My God is bigger now and my relationship to Him more vital, making me more evangelistic . . . CPE certainly helped my self-understanding and in so doing enlarged my concept of God.” “If no other benefit is derived, I have found a better relationship with God. That in itself thrills me.” These comments come from Asbury graduates who took a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) while students at the Seminary. They were among several who responded to a letter requesting an evaluation of their clinical experience while at Asbury, asking that they describe in what way CPE has subsequently been helpful to them in their ministries.

It may seem surprising that some students can testify that they grew in their understanding of God and developed a deeper relationship with Him while training in a clinical setting. But in CPE students grapple with issues of ministry that quite naturally focus on their own identity as persons and ministers, and hence on their relationship to God. Other areas of growth claimed by the men who responded to the above-mentioned letter include self-understanding, self-acceptance, an easier acceptance of others, a greater sensitivity and ability to respond effectively to people’s needs and problems, and development of a more relevant pulpit ministry.

What Is CPE?

CPE’s distinctive contribution to theological education is found in its emphasis on the careful study of persons, living human documents, under close supervision. This approach is designed to enhance a minister’s perception and understanding of others and to stimulate his

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own spiritual maturation. There are at least three goals in a CPE program. (1) The minister is encouraged to carefully re-examine his pastoral identity and to make an honest self-assessment of his personality as well as his performance. (2) The development of knowledge, skills, and techniques for pastoral ministry is fostered, utilizing important insights into human behavior being made available by the behavioral scientists. (3) The minister is challenged to correlate his theological perspective with his experiences of ministry in crisis situations, so that he thinks theologically about his daily pastoral contacts.

Within the framework of the average CPE program are the following structures: (1) clinical assignments, each student being assigned to a hospital ward, prison section, or some defined area where he actually functions as pastor or chaplain; (2) seminars related to the student's daily experiences in the clinical setting, including presentation of case reports; (3) "housekeeping" sessions where program details are worked out; (4) regularly scheduled supervisory conferences; (5) interpersonal group meetings in which the goals are usually the development of personal insight and an experience of Christian community among the students and the supervisor. Strong emphasis is placed on peer group interaction and the development and pursuit of definite, specific learning goals by each student. Often students participate in planning seminars and take responsibility for material they wish to discuss with the supervisor in supervisory sessions. CPE supervisors insist that the student take initiative and responsibility for his own learning.

The setting in which this form of pastoral education has been developed has generally been health and welfare institutions, such as hospitals and prisons, where one meets a concentration of persons in crisis experience, and has opportunity for observation of and contacts with specialists in other helping professions. Several programs are being developed in parish settings since most students taking CPE are committed to the parish ministry. Whatever the setting, CPE is designed to foster more sensitive, responsible pastors whether their ultimate mission be the local parish, military chaplaincy, or foreign mission field.

In 1968 the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) was organized, growing out of several denominational and interdenominational organizations, to set standards and to certify supervisors for CPE on a national scale. The standards that have been developed are high yet minimal, leaving room for considerable flexibility and creativity on the part of CPE supervisors. CPE has been defined by the ACPE in terms of units of training. A unit of CPE is at least four hundred hours

in an accredited program. This may be in a full-time program over a spread of ten to twelve weeks, in an extended program of sixteen hours per week for thirty weeks, or in any of a variety of other schedules. The fall and spring programs conducted at Eastern State Hospital, Lexington, Kentucky, for Asbury Theological Seminary are on a thirty hour per week for fourteen weeks basis, to integrate the program into the seminary calendar and to provide students with an opportunity to take other seminary courses simultaneously.

CPE's Thrust Toward Self-Understanding

Anyone who is genuinely committed to respond to the needs of persons, as is the competent pastor, should continually seek growth in self-understanding. CPE provides an excellent arena for increased self-awareness. So much of ourselves—our traits and our motives—is not readily available to our conscious experience, but is what is often called pre-conscious, or just below the surface of our awareness. To make the pre-conscious conscious takes help, help from colleagues who are willing to be honest with us, help from persons trained in personality and interpersonal dynamics. This kind of help is available in CPE. In addition, there is the assistance in self-understanding given by those whom the minister seeks to serve. In the usual CPE setting, where there is a concentration of persons in crisis, the patient or inmate is very likely to feed back honest appraisals of the minister. People in crisis are less likely to hide behind their usual masks, and their consequent openness is an asset to the minister searching for growth in self-understanding.

The IPR (interpersonal group) is especially designed to encourage the minister's self-awareness. In the IPR, the members, both students and supervisor (and, at times, members of other disciplines), "covenant" together to develop a community of trust, where each member feels reasonably comfortable to be open about himself, about his negatives as well as his assets. The recognized leader of this community is the Christ, who is always leading us from personal darkness into light. IPR should provide opportunity for ventilation of feelings toward one another, and for genuine expressions of warmth for each other. Feedback from peers helps one to look at himself more honestly, to become aware of facets of his personality that he has previously hidden from himself. This is done in a context of mutual acceptance, so that members become progressively open and self-aware as they realize their acceptance relieves the necessity to deny more uncomfortable dimensions to their lives.

As a result of IPR and other CPE experiences, members grow in humility as they are able to see more clearly their personal limitations;

they also develop a greater sense of dignity as God's children when they discover gifts and talents that He has given. As they experience more acceptance, they also grow in the experience of God's grace, a profound experience for some students who have been masters at self-criticism but short on self-acceptance. In the long run, self-understanding and self-acceptance go hand-in-hand. It is a religious experience where God in Christ is acknowledged as the One who understands and accepts us totally.

CPE As Continued Education

CPE serves as a continued education experience for many pastors who have had years of parish ministry. It is a useful experience, since the more mature pastor already brings a body of raw data and conclusions from his own pastoral experience and can use CPE as an opportunity to re-evaluate his pastoral ministry in the light of his parish work. New insights, self-awareness, and techniques gained from CPE can make his future ministry more rewarding and effective.

The ACPE annually publishes a listing of all accredited programs offered in the United States, as well as those offered in Canada under the standards of the Canadian Council for Supervised Pastoral Education. A copy of this directory can be obtained from any local center with a CPE program, or by writing:

Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc.
Interchurch Center, Suite 450
475 Riverside Drive
New York, New York 10027

Persons unable to get involved in a CPE course may well benefit from the journal sponsored by the ACPE, *The Journal of Pastoral Care*. More information is available through the ACPE's New York Office.

CPE's distinct contribution to theological education lies in its emphasis on supervised learning from living human documents. It enables the pastor to become a more effective vehicle to be used by the Holy Spirit as a blessing in the daily lives of the people to whom the pastor ministers. Self-understanding, together with sensitivity, openness, and responsiveness to others, enables God to use the minister more fully as an instrument of divine love and healing.