An Account of the Theology and Practice of Pastoral Care, in Dialogue with Carrie Doehring and Andrew Purves

Introduction

Pastoral care represents a foundational expression of Christian ministry, yet its theological assumptions, methodology, and ethical dynamics remain subject to significant debate. Caregivers are continually challenged to respond faithfully to human suffering while maintaining theological integrity, attentiveness to individual lived experience, and rigorous accountability for the power inherent in the pastoral encounter. This essay critically examines the theology and practice of pastoral care through contrasting two contemporary pastoral theologians: Carrie Doehring, an American feminist pastoral theologian and ordained Presbyterian minister, offers a relational, intercultural, and experience-centred model. Her framework emphasises the complex influences of culture, narrative, and power dynamics upon pastoral interactions. In contrast, Andrew Purves, a Scottish-born Presbyterian theologian, argues that Christian pastoral care must be grounded in participation in the continuing, active ministry of Jesus Christ – rather than reduced to pluralistic therapeutic assistance.

I bring Doehring and Purves into dialogue with my own formation and practice within Counselling Ministry, an itinerant Christ-centred ministry in the Surrey Hills. Together they represent a key tension between experience-centred reflexivity and Christological orientation, yet I argue their approaches are mutually corrective: Doehring guards against theologically sanctioned paternalism, while Purves prevents ministry from drifting into therapeutic individualism detached from the gospel. This essay explores how their insights can be integrated within an ethically responsible and theologically grounded model of care. I conclude that such an integration aligns closely with our ministry's commitment to measured spiritual interventions, accountable practice, and discernible outcomes in Christian care.

A Summary of Doehring and Purves Pastoral Theory and Practice

Doehring and Purves were chosen because they represent a fundamental dialectic in contemporary practical theology: the tension between experience-centred reflexivity and Christological, doctrinal orientation. Doehring understands pastoral care as a relational and intercultural practice shaped by the experiences, beliefs, and social contexts of those involved. In *The Practice of Pastoral Care*, she argues that interpretations of suffering are mediated by theological assumptions and cultural frameworks (Doehring, 2015). Her call for "radical respect for alterity" (2015, p. 1) challenges caregivers to recognise the distinctiveness of those they serve. Her warning against "premature meaning-making and the expert trap" (2015, p. 65) is especially important. A caregiver's desire to help can become harmful when professional expertise or religious conviction imposes meaning before a person can articulate their own understanding of suffering. Doehring's emphasis on "theological accountability and reflexivity" (2015, p. 6) similarly requires practitioners to examine their assumptions and use

of power. Pastoral care consequently becomes a collaborative process of listening, interpretation, and discernment rather than the delivery of authoritative answers.

Purves, however, insists that Christian pastoral theology must retain a distinctly theological foundation. He identifies "the fundamental connection between the Christian doctrines of God, redemption, and hope, and the pastoral ministry of the church" (Purves, 2001, p. 4). Pastoral care is therefore more than compassionate conversation. It participates in Christ's continuing ministry and interprets human life through Christian understandings of God, sin, grace, and redemption. For Purves, the primary agent in pastoral care is not the pastor but the risen Christ himself; effective ministry flows from participation in God's redemptive action rather than from human wisdom, technique, or therapeutic expertise alone (Purves, 2004, pp. 17-21). Indeed, he warns that when pastoral practice becomes detached from its theological centre, it risks becoming a form of practical atheism in which ministry depends predominantly upon human capacity rather than divine action (Purves, 2004, pp. 1-5). A genuinely Christian pastoral theology therefore understands pastoral care as participation in Christ's ongoing ministry, with the pastor serving not as the source of transformation but as a witness to and instrument of God's reconciling work in the lives of others.

While both approaches are theologically serious, they differ in focus. Doehring emphasises the ethical exercise of pastoral power, whereas Purves grounds pastoral care in Christ's continuing ministry. Nevertheless, I regard them as critically complementary, together they support a model in which theological commitments remain accountable to reflective scrutiny, informed consent, critical examination of power-relation, and safeguarding. These concerns are not merely theoretical; they also shape how pastoral caregivers understand their own experiences, convictions, and formation. Consequently, the next section explores how my own journey has influenced my understanding and practice of pastoral care.

Personal Formation and Theological Identity

My understanding of pastoral care, first as an Anglican and later as a Charismatic Evangelical over the past forty years, developed through recognising that churches can faithfully proclaim redemption while failing to create environments in which wounded people experience safety, compassion, and restoration. Moving between these traditions persuaded me that theology is embodied and interpreted through lived experience rather than encountered as an abstract system of ideas. Experiences within church leadership, together with a personal commitment to healing and reconciliation, revealed a blatant disconnect between theological proclamation and pastoral reality – leading me to question whose interests pastoral practice serves, whose voices it privileges, and how claims to spiritual authority are justified.

This perspective has led me to value personal narratives and lived experience. Doehring's observation that "human beings are embedded in relational webs that inevitably result in limits and conflicted choices" (2015, p. 112) resonates strongly with my own experience of ministry. Too often I observed distress being met with simplistic spiritual explanations rather

than careful listening. Consequently, I have become increasingly attentive to the narratives through which people understand themselves, their relationships, and their suffering.

Like Purves, I do not believe pastoral care should be reduced to psychological adjustment or the therapeutic use of Scripture alone (Purves, 2001, p. 69). For me, being Christ-centred involves both fidelity to Scripture and attentiveness to how Christ is encountered in lived experience. Scripture does not replace experience but helps interpret it faithfully. While my pastoral convictions remain Christ-centred and transformative, I value the insights of psychology and reject any false divide between therapeutic sensitivity and theological faithfulness. Neither empathy nor doctrinal certainty alone ensures good pastoral practice; both must be judged by their impact within the pastoral relationship.

Rather than reproducing either Doehring or Purves, I model and honour personal agency while remaining attentive to God's transforming presence. I recognise that this practice is limited by my own biases and assumptions, which may hinder genuinely empowering relationships. Equally, the language of healing, prophecy, or deliverance must never pressure individuals into interpretations they do not freely embrace. Personal formation therefore remains an ongoing discipline of self-examination. Experience and theological assumptions inevitably shape how I perceive and respond to those seeking care. As Percy argues, pastoral ministry should remove barriers that obscure encounters with Christ (1998, p. 28). Yet my own interpretive frameworks may sometimes create such barriers. Jesus' question to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk. 10:51), therefore challenges me to inquire before interpreting. This is particularly important in itinerant ministry, where questions of authority, discernment, and accountability arise as everyday pastoral concerns.

Counselling Ministry: Context and Challenges

The significance of these theological and personal commitments becomes apparent within the practical realities of Counselling Ministry. We support Christians experiencing psychological, spiritual, and personal difficulties through counselling, prayer, prophetic discernment, healing, and deliverance ministry. For example, I counselled a woman whose anxieties had previously been interpreted as evidence of insufficient faith. During our initial conversation, she expressed relief at being able to describe her experiences without an incompetent or imposed explanation. This encounter reinforced Doehring's concern that pastoral authority shapes how suffering is interpreted and understood.

When people are distressed, pastoral interpretations carry significant weight. Doehring describes this risk as the potential to "foreclose" meaning by imposing explanations that limit alternative understandings of suffering (2015, p. 67). Prophetic impressions may be meaningful but are not infallible. When presented as unquestionable explanations for suffering, they can discourage exploration and disagreement. Discernment must be open to correction: Proverbs 18:13 reminds believers that answering before listening is folly, while Galatians 6:2 portrays care as sharing burdens rather than exercising control.

At the same time, pastoral ministry cannot abandon prayer or spiritual practices. Christian pastoral care participates in Christ's ministry and therefore addresses more than psychological symptoms alone (Purves, 2001, p. 69). Yet theological conviction neither guarantees healing nor replaces appropriate clinical responses. Situations involving suicidal ideation, safeguarding concerns, or significant mental health difficulties require assessment, referral, and professional collaboration. These realities demonstrate that pastoral care cannot rely solely on goodwill, intuition, or spiritual conviction. Sound pastoral judgement requires resources that inform discernment, challenge assumptions, and provide accountability. The next section therefore considers the theological, pastoral, and psychological sources that shape my approach to care.

Wider Sources of Authority in Pastoral Care

My pastoral understanding draws on Scripture, Christian theological tradition, prayerful discernment, counselling, and lived experience. These sources are complementary but not interchangeable. For Christian pastoral care, Scripture and theology provide foundational orientation. As Purves (2001, p. 90) argues, the pastoral tradition, represented by figures such as Gregory the Great, John Chrysostom, Richard Baxter, and Martin Bucer, reminds practitioners that pastoral work requires theological formation, moral responsibility, and disciplined care. Nevertheless, as Doehring contends, such traditions must be interpreted in conversation with contemporary understandings of trauma, culture, and power.

In assistance, Leanne Payne's work on healing prayer has significantly influenced my understanding of spiritual ministry. Her description of Christ as "Mediator-Priest and Intercessor" underscores the importance of Christ-centred rather than personality-centred ministry (Payne, 1994, p. 70). Nevertheless, confidence in prayer must never become certainty about outcomes. Similarly, Scripture can be interpreted in ways that become controlling when detached from context, community, and pastoral discernment. Appeals to biblical authority or tradition therefore require the same humility, reflexivity, and accountability demanded of other pastoral practices. As Percy argues, unequal power relationships within the Church can foster dependency, manipulation, and abuse; making accountability an essential safeguard for healthy pastoral practice (Percy, 1998, p. 109). Therefore, alongside theological sources, psychological perspectives contribute essential insights. Rogers's concept of unconditional positive regard (1957), Gestalt attentiveness to present experience (Fritz Perls, 1969), Herman's work on trauma recovery (1992), and Pargament's research on religious coping (1997) each illuminate different dimensions of human suffering and resilience and inform practice with ongoing discernment. Prayer cannot replace clinical assessment, tradition requires ongoing critique, and psychological concepts should not be applied mechanically.

Faithful pastoral discernment requires both theological conviction and attentive engagement with human experience, reflecting God's invitation in Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, let us reason together." Yet identifying sources of pastoral knowledge does not itself define the purpose of

pastoral care. The remaining question is what these resources are intended to achieve in the lives of those seeking help.

The Aims of Pastoral Care

Having considered the sources that inform my pastoral care, I now turn to the goals toward which that care is directed. The primary aim of my pastoral practice is to accompany people towards greater wellbeing, restored agency, and a more truthful engagement with their lives before God. While pastoral care may involve crisis intervention or symptom relief, Christian ministry seeks a deeper transformation encompassing relationships, identity, discipleship, and spiritual growth.

Because pastoral care and ministry frequently overlap, ambiguities can arise. Ken Blue's critique of Christian ministry reminds practitioners not to become preoccupied with those perceived as spiritually afflicted while neglecting relational contexts, material needs, and social responsibility (Blue, 1987, p. 95). Likewise, personal testimony may inspire ministry but should not become a universal template for interpreting another person's experience. Instead, pastoral care should create conditions in which people are heard while retaining responsibility for their own decisions. No caregiver can guarantee outcomes, and ongoing suffering should not automatically be interpreted as a failure of faith. Transformation is often gradual and difficult. Pastoral care must therefore resist measuring success solely by symptom relief, dramatic testimony, or spiritual experiences. For example, Payne suggests that surrendering false refuges to God may initiate a painful process of transformation that cannot be equated with immediate relief or recovery (1994, pp. 149-162). For Purves, pastoral care participates in Christ's continuing ministry of discipleship (2001, p. 118), a purpose that cannot be reduced to psychological adjustment alone. Yet, as Doehring argues, suffering must also be understood within its relational and cultural context (2015, p. 110). Caregivers should therefore resist imposing predetermined narratives and allow meaning to emerge through dialogue, particularly when working with shame, relationship breakdown, or religious distress. People often need space to lament before they can articulate hope. Such restraint requires humility, accountability, and reflective supervision (Herman, 1992, pp. 218-219).

Practising Pastoral Care

Integrating Counselling Theory

My method of pastoral care emerges directly from these objectives. If the aims of care include restored agency, truthful self-understanding, and deeper engagement with God, then the practices employed must reflect those commitments. Consequently, my approach combines attentive listening, Gestalt-informed counselling, theological reflection, and prayerful discernment in ways that promote both ethical accountability and spiritual attentiveness.

Carl Rogers's concept of unconditional positive regard provides an essential relational foundation, while Gestalt-informed practice encourages awareness of present emotions,

bodily responses, and relational dynamics. Equally important is Doehring's assertion that "theological reflexivity is part of spiritual integration" (2015, p. 86), which informs my commitment to understanding how individuals interpret their situations and the support they seek. James's exhortation to be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19) likewise challenges the temptation to move prematurely towards interpretation or intervention.

Integrating Prayer

Prayer remains an important aspect of my ministry. However, spiritual practices must be voluntary and grounded in Christ rather than the caregiver's personal authority (Purves, 2001). Likewise, Payne understands prayer as an expression of dependence on Christ rather than a means of control (Payne, 1994). Nevertheless, neither conviction permits prophetic impressions to be presented as unquestionable truth. Instead, I invite reflection rather than agreement, explain the voluntary nature of spiritual interventions, and accept refusal without penalty.

Pargament's analysis of religious coping highlights both the benefits and risks of spiritual practices. Prayer may foster connection, meaning, and hope, yet religious beliefs and practices can also intensify distress when used coercively or when suffering is attributed to insufficient faith (Pargament, 1997, pp. 180-186). Consequently, prayer ministry requires informed consent, shared expectations, and a focus on the individual's wellbeing, particularly where there is a history of religious manipulation or trauma.

Power Dynamics & Leadership

Doehring's critique of power raises important questions for my practice as a male Christian counsellor. I do not understand her work as a rejection of male caregivers or Christian doctrine. Rather, she challenges forms of authority that become unaccountable or silence the lived experience of those seeking care. Although Purves appears more sanguine with hierarchical structures, experiences of spiritual abuse and religious manipulation require explicit safeguards. I therefore discuss power dynamics, potential outcomes, and limitations of pastoral interventions openly with clients.

I am cautious of approaches that collapse distinct sources of authority into a single framework. While R. C. Sproul argues that Scripture remains the primary authority for Christian belief and practice (1984, p. 12), Herman demonstrates that recovery often depends upon the presence of a skilled and trustworthy helper who can offer support that a person temporarily struggles to access independently (1992, p. 193). These perspectives address different dimensions of pastoral care: Scripture provides theological orientation, while the helping relationship provides a context in which healing and growth may occur. Pastoral authority is therefore not inherently oppressive. While pastoral relationships inevitably involve asymmetries of knowledge, responsibility, and spiritual authority, these must function transparently, consensually, and accountably rather than coercively – particularly as I too was once on the receiving end of all we have been discussing.

Similarly, Kenneth Pargament's work highlights how religious beliefs and practices can either support coping or intensify distress (1997). Vulnerability therefore requires pastoral interventions to be evaluated regularly for both ethical impact and effectiveness. When concerns exceed my competence, I arrange appropriate referral and utilise supervision as a means of reflection and support. Continued engagement with current pastoral theology, counselling research, and safeguarding practice helps ensure that my ministry remains informed, responsive, and open to development.

Evaluation and Future Development

Reflection on my current practice reveals several priorities for future development if pastoral care is to remain both theologically authentic and ethically responsible.

A key priority is strengthening trauma-informed care. Trauma affects trust, memory, bodily responses, and relationships in ways that spiritual reassurance alone cannot address. Many churches continue to rely on narrow understandings of trauma shaped by biomedical definitions that restrict its meaning to events involving actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. However, Holton and Snodgrass argue that such definitions fail to recognise the diffuse, cumulative, and socially embedded nature of trauma within individuals and communities (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023, p. 337; Strange, 2026). Herman's work highlights the importance of safety and the gradual restoration of agency (1992, pp. 155-214), while Bessel van der Kolk emphasises the embodied dimensions of traumatic experience (2014, pp. 205-236). These perspectives caution against assuming that spiritual interventions alone resolve traumatic distress and emphasise the gradual character of recovery.

Culture

Another priority concerns cultural awareness. Pastoral encounters are shaped by identity, power, and social location (Doehring, 2015, pp. 51-68). Cultural humility does not require me to abandon Christian convictions; rather, it requires me to distinguish between the gospel itself and my own cultural assumptions. Purves likewise grounds pastoral practice in God's redemptive work rather than human preferences (2001, pp. 57-74). At the same time, attention to power remains essential. Percy warns that uncritical ecclesial authority can reinforce inequality and silence vulnerable people (1998, pp. 95-115). Consequently, practices such as prayer, prophetic ministry, and deliverance require careful discernment. Spiritual interventions become harmful when people are pressured to accept particular interpretations or blamed for continuing distress.

Here, Shelly Rambo's theology of "remaining" offers an important corrective to approaches that move too quickly from suffering to resolution (2010, pp. 105-129). Faithful accompaniment may instead require space for lament, uncertainty, and the recognition that some questions remain unanswered. My future development requires holding Christological conviction and cultural humility in creative tension, exercising intuitive pastoral judgement, a capacity that no textbook can fully explain or systematise.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that responsible Christian pastoral care requires a critical integration of Christological conviction, psychological understanding, cultural awareness, and ethical accountability as well as scrutiny of power-relation. Doehring's relational approach challenges premature interpretations, cultural insensitivity, and unexamined pastoral power (2015). Purves, meanwhile, insists that Christian pastoral ministry must remain grounded in participation in Christ's continuing ministry and in the doctrines of God, redemption, and hope (2001).

Doehring and Purves are often treated as competing voices, yet I have argued that each exposes the other's limitations. Purves prevents pastoral care from collapsing into therapeutic individualism, while Doehring prevents it from becoming theologically justified paternalism. My analysis of formation and ministry context has shown why both concerns matter. The experience of the woman discussed earlier demonstrates that these debates are more than theoretical. Her relief at being heard before being interpreted underscores the importance of attentive listening and reminds us that prayer, prophecy, healing, and counselling can each contribute to pastoral care. However, no intervention should be assumed beneficial simply because it is offered with sincere intentions or religious conviction. This is why engaging with a wider variety of perspectives, including Herman, Rambo, van der Kolk, Pargament, Percy, Perls, and Payne, matters. Their knowledge of trauma, meaning-making, spiritual experience, relational dynamics, and human flourishing provides additional lenses of practice refinement.

Many who seek my itinerant ministry do so because of deeply negative and historic experiences of pastoral care. Consequently, establishing trust requires more than theological conviction; it requires a demonstrably different experience of authoritative concern. By encouraging agency, pastoral care becomes a shared process rather than a mechanism of control, enabling individuals to discern and author their own pathway toward healing, restoration, and deeper communion with the Triune God. This aspiration, which I often describe as the *Gold Standard* of pastoral care, encapsulates the central argument of this essay.

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