Care-Full Listening
Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice

MOST PASTORS ARE GOOD LISTENERS. THEY KNOW HOW TO OPEN UP A CONVERSATION AND INVITE PEOPLE TO SHARE THE PAIN, STRUGGLES, AND SIGNS OF GROWTH IN THEIR LIVES. MANY PASTORS STOP THERE AND FAIL TO HELP THE MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION FORM A COLLECTIVE STORY OF WHERE THE PEOPLE OF GOD ARE BEING LED.

Ethnography is a structured method of participation and observation that equips pastors to listen more carefully and intentionally to the collective stories of a community of faith.

Pastoral counselors have long understood that the process of telling one’s story and being well heard can bring change, healing, and hope. When a person tells his or her story to a careful listener, something shifts for the teller. In the best case, the speaker experiences insight, subjectivity is enlarged, hearing (someone) to speech in theologian Nelle Morton’s famous phrase is a profoundly life-giving activity.
I have taught ethnography to ministerial students for more than six years, approaching it as a pastoral practice analogous to individual pastoral listening. Ethnography can give religious leaders “ears to hear” their people’s own deep wisdom and longing for God. This form of pastoral research opens a door through which deep stories emerge: personal stories, communal stories, faith stories. These stories have the power to calm and to comfort, as well as the power to disturb and to disrupt life as usual. When pastors or rabbis conduct ethnographic research in their ministry settings, the power of storytelling and pastoral listening whirl together in a heady mix of honesty and new revelations, invigorating relationships and shared ministry in new ways.

Pastoral ethnography takes the methods of qualitative research and congregational studies and presses them into pastoral theological service. This approach elicits complex sociocultural narratives of congregations and communities and honors differences as well as shared meanings and practices. Most critically, this is a method for nurturing the emerging theological insights and practices that promote social justice within the community and beyond it. It is a form of “emancipatory praxis” that can spark theological growth and change.  

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My primary field is pastoral theology. In recent years, this field has shifted away from an exclusive focus on care and counseling for the individual—the one lost sheep who has gone astray—and toward more communal and contextual models of care, which consider the entire 99 left on the hillside and the conditions of the hillside, as well as neighboring environs and the wider world. This model gives rise to such questions as, “How can a religious leader intelligently care for the whole congregation and the wider community of which it is a part?” And, “How can congregations themselves begin to respond in more faithful and prophetic ways to the ‘living human web(s)” both within and beyond the local group?”

While this approach relies upon the extensive body of literature in the fields of congregational studies and sociology of religion, it involves a shift in focus toward pastoral theology throughout the entire research process. Pastoral ethnography is a more theological practice, as it asks students to identify their own theological positions in the process and to ask such questions as, “Where is God in this setting?” or “Where is God in this story?” This approach returns to basic questions of faith—even in dying or mean-spirited congregations—in search of stories of hope. As Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley put it in their book Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals, “…storytelling is an act of hope, and even defiance, because it carries within it the power to change.” Pastoral ethnography is also a more consciously pastoral activity as it explores the particular values and longing for God in a community. Pastors listen for their “deliberative theology,” which may be directly discussed, as well as their “embedded theology,” which is revealed through story or practice. This requires reverence. Care-full tending of pastoral relationships during the research process creates an opening for mutual spiritual growth. The research is conducted to deepen relationships between and among researchers and research participants, and to enhance the quality of theological conversation and liberative practice among members of the community.

Over the last six years, I have been privileged to learn how these dynamics play out in local ethnographic studies my students have conducted. These studies have addressed such topics as race, church growth, multiculturalism, and the relationship between spiritual practices and social justice work. They have explored diverse contexts of ministry, including congregations, youth groups, denominational agencies, nursing homes, retirement communities, hospice groups, theological schools, and college dormitories. The students have listened to the stories of Hmong immigrants, of Korean students’ wives, of church members engaged in cooperative ministries, and of pastors in cross-racial or cross-cultural ministry appointments.

By adopting this research practice, the pastor becomes a learner who can better read the shared knowledges and habits that constitute the culture of the congregation. Observing religious practices, the social interactions that comprise and surround them, and the material aspects of the group’s communal life—its art, artifacts, architecture, and landscapes—adds historical substance to the larger narrative. If the interviews conducted are open-ended and the pastor is nonjudgmental and nonargumentative, he or she will usually learn something new. Thus the practice of research can become a form of holistic pastoral listening that attends to the range of meanings, experiences, desires, and theologies that people express through diverse idioms.

When my students engage in research projects in their local ministry settings, they are often surprised by the outcome. Many come to this task reluctant and afraid. “I approached the group with my request for interviews with some trepidation,” one student wrote. “Would they even agree to the project? Would
they perceive it as a violation of privacy or meddling? Would they be reluctant to sign a formal document such as a consent form?"

Janice Trammell-Savin, a doctor of ministry student, used her study to probe the experience of the members of the search committee of her current congregation during an interim ministry. Because these committees usually operate with a high degree of confidentiality, they often lack a safe space in which they can talk about their difficult and vital work. Jan was particularly concerned that the committee members might not want to talk with her, especially since there is an unspoken rule that interim ministers not influence the search process. As it turned out, the members of the search committee did agree to be interviewed, and they later told Jan that the interviews gave them the opportunity to reflect on the spiritual aspects of the search committee experience and to tell their stories. In listening to these stories, Jan was deeply moved. She interpreted the life and growth of the committee as “the body of Christ in microcosm, and what the entire church might be like at its best.” One of the pastoral theological implications of Jan's ethnographic work was that she began to re-imagine the role of an interim pastor as one that provides a “debriefing” opportunity for search committee members.

Teaching ethnography to students of ministry can have a dramatic effect on their formation. Practicing ethnography requires students to view their congregations or field education sites as places of learning rather than as practice grounds where they get to expound upon their newly honed theologies and test out their skills. In my view, this is the most important shift a pastoral leader can make. When students try this, they are often transformed. They come to see themselves and their vocations in a different light, and they experience a new kind of engagement with the people they are called to serve. Through the ethnographic encounter, they learn not only about their people but also from them.

Ethnography offers students of ministry a chance to gain the experience of practicing respectful listening and honest engagement rather than offering religious leadership as a top-down exercise of authority over people. There is level of mutuality or reciprocity that takes place in this listening, speaking, and sharing process that involves the pastor. It requires the pastoral ethnographer to cultivate a genuine desire to learn. This key shift in “pastoral posture” is one that often must be tried out in order to be believed.

In reflecting on this kind of shift in her understanding of ministry, Michele Van Son writes:

“I am ashamed to admit that I’ve “made it” to the level of certified candidate for ordained ministry believing that I could study, consult, and teach congregations without being affected. Learning about ethnography and the transformative impact it can have on communities of faith has inspired me to make it the focus of my ministry. This transformation that comes through the humble study and learning together with the community only takes place within the intimacy of faith, trust, and openness. This will never be achieved through a survey or PowerPoint presentation, but rather by my listening authentically with my whole self, emptying myself of the illusion of objectivity, and experiencing as best I can the totality of fears, dreams, hopes, visions, pain, and divine purpose of community life. I am for the first time frightened of my own call. I am afraid of where this listening, emptying, and experiencing will take me. I recognize that the “secular standards” of success do not apply in this realm. If I continue to rely on those secular standards of practice, I will offer a vacuous ministry. . . . I’ve learned from ethnography that my challenge is no longer to identify success, but rather evidence of the Spirit at work.

As Michele’s reflections indicate, pastoral ethnography transforms the researching pastor as much as the congregation that is being studied. The research process promotes authentic telling and listening to stories of faith in the midst of the ordinary practice of ministry. When students start to bear witness to the honest sharing of parishioners, they are often surprised and moved, and led to imagine a more genuine and faith-full pastoral identity and congregational imagination. “Participant observation of a congregation’s culture,” notes Thomas Edward Frank, “is a doorway into its imaginative life. It is also a path into the resources of theological imagination.”

This approach offers a way for pastoral leaders to harness the power of social research to transform their pastoral practice and the group’s common life and work in the world. ♦

NOTES
2. Portions of this article are drawn from Mary Clark Moschella, Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008). Used by permission.