

## Review

Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2015, 223 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-0-664-23840-7, £20.99/\$30.00.

**Reviewed by:** Revd Dr Mark Cobb, Senior Chaplain and Clinical Director of Therapeutics & Palliative Care, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Sheffield, UK  
Email: mark.cobb@sth.nhs.uk

Chaplains operate in complex and contested spaces where they have to learn among other things to map the territory they cover, speak the different languages of the various parties they encounter, span boundaries between the sacred and the secular, and maintain a theological integrity and responsibility. Without an understanding of this multi-layered context a chaplain's attempt at ministry and care can be misinformed or misaligned. Similarly, without a self-aware and reflective understanding of themselves chaplains may not notice the imprint of the institution on their practice and beliefs or the personal toll of attending to distress and suffering. Consequently the practice and theory of pastoral and spiritual care embodied by the chaplain must be capable of operating within this complex space and making a coherent whole out of the chaplain's inner world, caring relationships, institutional role, faith community and wider social context.

In 2006 Carrie Doehring, an academic and ordained minister, attempted a systematic and rigorous exposition of spiritual and pastoral care that took seriously the social context of practice. Her original book did not become well-known in the UK, and now nine years later Doehring has published a revised and expanded edition that deserves not only to be more widely read but recognized as an important contribution to the discourse and practical discipline of pastoral care. The significance of this book for chaplains is that it is written out of a solid foundation of practical theology, steeped in the wisdom of pastoral practice, and with a commitment to intercultural care that is respectful of the unique worldview of the care-seeker and premised on collaborative and co-creative approaches.

The knowledge base for pastoral and spiritual care is well-covered in this book including the role of empathy and compassion, relational boundaries, and interpersonal communication skills, and these are brought to life through the use of well-chosen case studies and verbatims. Doehring critically reflects on these situations by bringing into play relevant theories, research and practices from other fields, such as the communication styles and skills of Motivational Interviewing and various theories of loss and grief. However, what makes this book much more than an extensive pastoral primer is the rich theological reflexivity embedded in the text as a necessary and distinctive discourse. Doehring shows how to explore the lived beliefs, values and practices of care-seekers and to discern where they are theologically life-giving or life-limiting. She also expects this critical awareness and insight of pastoral caregivers, arguing in a substantial chapter on theological reflexivity that, “Without such theological self-knowledge, exploration, discipline, and accountability they [spiritual caregivers] are likely to harm care seekers by imposing their own unexamined beliefs and values on them and/or judging them in ways that are self-affirming and self-protective” (p. 86).

The claim of the subtitle to Doehring’s book is that it takes “a postmodern approach” by which is meant a contemporary understanding of the way in which knowledge is understood as provisional, limited and contextual. In terms of religion the postmodernist account has the conditions of secularism and pluralism undermining the credibility and authority of religion, but at present, it appears that traditional modes of religion are not so much superseded but persist alongside other forms of formal and informal spirituality involving those who might “believe without belonging” as well as those with a more indeterminate secular position. Whatever the actual situation chaplains find themselves in they have to make sense of this complex milieu in which the challenge is to find ways of caring for people through spiritual beliefs, meanings and practices that are life-giving for the individual and also retain integrity for themselves as chaplains. This book takes on this complex challenge with skill and humanity and reminds us that the theological distinctiveness of chaplains should also be central to our reflective practice.