

# Pastoral Care Basics and Resources for LDS Leaders

## Theological Framework

1. **The Most Important Part of Pastoral Care Is Presence.** In a pastoral situation, you are there to provide unconditional care. Your role is to let people share what is on their mind and heart without judgment. You are there to help people become aware of God's presence by being a presence of unconditional love yourself.
2. **God Is God, You Are God's Servant.** You are not a "stand-in" for God; you are God's servant. As such, you have authority only insofar as you treat those under your care with love, dignity, and honor. This means respecting their agency without manipulating or shaming them. We can't control what others do; we can only hold space for one another to be as authentic as possible. As the Doctrine and Covenants teaches, "When we undertake...to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the power and authority of that man" (D&C 121:37).
3. **You Are Called to Share Grace.** God is the one who forgives sin through the atonement of Jesus Christ. It is not up to you to determine when or if someone is forgiven; it is up to you to help those who struggle to feel forgiven understand that they have *already* received forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Forgiveness is a gift of grace from God, and your job is to share it freely, not to manage it.
4. **God Is the One Who Heals.** Most pastoral care situations are ones in which there has been hurt caused by sin, illness, death, or other tragedy. Such situations always need healing. Remember that *God* is the one who heals, not you. You are there to be a loving presence in the face of pain and suffering. Leave the healing in God's hands.
5. **We Can't Earn Worthiness.** Worthiness is not something we can "earn" but is given to us by the grace of Jesus Christ. A theological framework that assumes worthiness can be "earned" will always create significant harm. Keep in mind that no one is "worthy" except God alone (see Luke 18:19, Mark 10:18). By grace, God invites us to participate in his worthiness, but it is not something we can "accomplish" ourselves.

## Best Practices

1. **Listen More than You Speak.** You might be tempted to try and "solve" people's problems for them. Avoid this. Instead, hold space for them to share what they are feeling and experiencing. A good rule of thumb is to listen at least 70% of the time and to speak no more than 30% of the time.
2. **Listen Actively.** When you are listening to understand as opposed to listening to speak, it is a very different experience. Check in to be sure you're comprehending what they're

trying to communicate. Say things such as, “What I’ve heard you say is XYZ. Is this correct?” You haven’t truly listened until you can repeat to them what you’ve heard, and they’ve responded, “Yes! That’s exactly it!”

3. **Attend to Your Own Responses.** When you are listening to others, particularly when you are dealing with difficult situations, you will have emotions arise in your own heart: anxiety, fear, shame, sorrow, judgment, a desire to fix things, and more. Remember that your responses are your responsibility. You are there simply to hold space for the person and to welcome the Holy Spirit. This is much, much harder than it sounds. Many pastoral care providers find therapy useful for this; you might want to consider finding a therapist to help you process your own emotions and experiences if you find it difficult.
4. **Pray.** Pray with those you visit. Pray *for* those you visit. Pray for guidance. Pray for help. You cannot do this without God.
5. **Know Your Limits.** As an LDS bishop, branch president, stake president, or person with another leadership calling in the LDS church, you are entrusted with the care of your people. There are many situations where you can be helpful. But you are not a trained professional. Know when a situation needs to be referred to professionals. Here are several situations you should not handle, full stop. Refer to a trained therapist or perhaps even law enforcement when you encounter any of the following:
  - Reports of sexual activity with or by anyone underage, particularly if it is a pre-adolescent child or if an adult or someone significantly older has initiated the sexual contact;
  - Reports of abuse of any kind;
  - Marital difficulties;
  - Significant family conflicts;
  - Addictions;
  - Depression, anxiety, or other mental health concerns.

## Things to Avoid

1. **Don’t Assume Confidence.** Let the person you’re visiting with share what they want to share. They don’t owe you their confidence; you must earn their trust. Don’t ask detailed or excessively personal questions, particularly when your relationship is at an acquaintance stage. Let the conversation and relationship evolve organically. Trust the Holy Spirit’s work in each person’s life. If and when a person desires a deeper pastoral relationship with you, they will come to you.
2. **Don’t Pry for Details in Confessional Situations.** Confession is sacred. When you are hearing someone’s confession, let them confess what is weighing on them, and leave the rest alone. You do not need “details” of the sin. Do not pry for more than what they willingly share.
3. **Don’t Ask Explicit Sexual Questions.** Never, ever, ever ask explicit sexual questions—particularly of minors, but truly of anyone. You don’t need to know specific sexual acts,

positions, frequency, etc. It doesn't make an ounce of difference to God, and frankly, it is voyeuristic and inappropriate—arguably abusive. If a person is beginning to divulge explicit sexual details, say, "I don't need to know the specifics. Let's talk more about how this experience has impacted you and less about the experience itself." Redirect the conversation with questions such as: "How is this affecting your relationship with God?", "How are you feeling about yourself?", and "Where do you think God is in the midst of this right now?"

4. **Don't Follow Up Excessively.** There are stories of well-meaning priesthood leaders following up repeatedly with people who have confessed sin in an attempt to help them avoid sin in the future. This is very controlling and inappropriate. Never do this. If someone under your care needs help overcoming an addiction or another sort of compulsive behavior, refer them to a professional such as a therapist or addiction recovery specialist.

## Resources

- Mormon Mental Health Association providers: <http://www.mormonmentalhealthassoc.org/mmha-clinical-providers>
- Introduction to the Pastoral Conversation: <http://www.pastoralezorg.be/cms2/uploads/elisabeth/file/pastorale%20gesprekken/Introduction-to-Pastoral-Conversation-skills.pdf>
- RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network): <http://rainn.org>
- *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* by Eugene Peterson