Trinity, Polyphony and Pastoral Relationships

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The author explores the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to shed light on the nature of the pastoral ministry. Using the trinitarian term, “polyphony” (David Cunningham) for this purpose, he explicates unity and difference as key polyphonic categories in the doctrine of the Trinity. The author suggests that the polyphonic notes sounded by pastoral caregivers are toughness and tenderness, woundedness and health, wisdom and folly, and communion, nearness and distance.

Assuming that you once took a course on the doctrine of the Trinity, it may well be that your experience was something similar to mine. As the professor recounted the attempts throughout the ages to explain how threeeness and oneness go together you wondered what in heaven’s name any of this has to do with life in the real world. Since I failed in my days as a theological student to get excited about the possibilities of trinitarian theology, for a very long time the thought of picking up a book on this great mystery of the Christian faith never crossed my mind. Everything changed recently, however, when in a post-graduate seminar a colleague of mine used Pat Fox’s recent book, God as Communion, to develop a theology of pastoral leadership. Feeling inspired by the pastoral possibilities, I began to do some research and in the process discovered that there has been a significant turn to the practical by theologians as they develop their trinitarian thinking. This is not some esoteric doctrine, they say, but rather one that is able to richly illumine and shape contemporary Christian living. In my reading I found some very interesting applications. Some theologians addressed areas such as therapy, psychological development and politics. Others have used the doctrine of the Trinity to develop an understanding of ministry and certain other pastoral issues related to it. Still others have used the light of trinitarian thinking to illumine our general approach to the moral life.

Though these new developments take on a variety of shapes and colors, what unites them is a common concern with relationality. At the heart of the mystery of the doctrine is the fact that the Three indwell each other in love. Given that relationship is absolutely central in pastoral care, it might

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1 P. Fox, God as Communion (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001).
be expected that an exploration of the Trinity would be fruitful in this area as well. Identifying what some of these fruits might be is the challenge that is taken up in this article. Two quite different theologians will be used to help us in our task, David Cunningham and Colm Gonton.

In his insightful and highly original book, *These Three as One*, David Cunningham develops three “marks” of the Trinity in human existence: namely polyphony, participation and particularity. These three terms identify core realities in the life of the trinitic God. But they also point, argues Cunningham, to core realities in human living. Since we are created in God’s image, it is to be expected that there will be a “paralleling” between the divine and the human. It is the first mark that we will be concentrating on here. Polyphony is a technical musical term and it refers to the playing of a number of notes simultaneously in such a way that none of the notes are so dominant that they mute the others. In relation to the Trinity, it refers to the way in which simultaneous difference exists as a homogeneous unity.

I want to suggest that polyphony is an imprint of the trinitic God in the ministry of care. That is, faithful and effective pastoral relationships constitute a reflection or a paralleling of the polyphonic relationality in the Godhead. While there are a number of polyphonic categories that could be developed, and some of these will be alluded to, I will concentrate on two sets: wisdom and folly, and communion, nearness and distance.

Alastair Campbell’s pastoral image of the wise fool is both unusual and profoundly illuminating. Campbell points to the circus clown as an example of wise folly. Amongst the circus professionals he or she appears as an amateur, and yet his or her spontaneous and carefree escapades are the result of careful training and planning. In our pastoral visitation we do not have the sophisticated structures of the psychotherapist to carry with us, but yet in our unstructured, sometimes light, sometimes deep conversations—when they are helpful—we employ a great deal of skill and we need considerable wisdom. We need the wisdom to join with the other in managing the space well.

The idea of “personal space” is one that Colin Gunton develops in his trinitarian reflections. The persons in the Godhead need space to be “there is differentiation in the one God,” and so do the humans created in the divine image. When there is a compression of the interpersonal space there is a failure to respect others. Too much space, on the other hand, means that there is no possibility of communion “the problem of individualism.”

Taking our cue from Gunton’s analysis, I will be suggesting that effective pastoral visitation involves a polyphony of communion, nearness and distance. We usually think of communion with the other in terms of drawing near. Empathic relating involves an attempt to close the interpersonal space. We think and feel ourselves into the inner spaces of the other. Communion cannot be sustained, however, in the absence of due regard for appropriate distance. The other needs “space to be.” We need the wisdom and discernment to be able to read the signs well and to judge when to move in and when to move away.

Since polyphony is the central term we will be using, it is well to begin by describing it more fully. Polyphony, as I have just indicated, is one of three

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"marks" discussed by Cunningham. The idea of a mark of the triune God on human existence is a controversial one in trinitarian theology. I will need, therefore, to begin the discussion on polyphony with a reference to this debate.

**Polyphony and Trinity**

In referring to the marks of the Trinity, Cunningham is establishing a link with Augustine's notion of the *vestigia trinitatis*. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine never tires of finding psychological images to assist in understanding the Trinity. He refers, to give just three of the twenty examples, to the lover, the beloved, and the love; to the mind, its knowledge and its love; and to memory, understanding and will. The reason, he thinks, that these images are so helpful in gaining insight into trinitarian relations is that they represent imprints of the divine.

A vitally important image for Augustine is the last mentioned of the three above. The three psychological faculties of memory, understanding, and will are distinct and yet there is a mutual indwelling. The interrelationship exists because there is a "mutual comprehension," and this mutual comprehension in turn indicates a fundamental equality between the faculties.

...[W]herever of intelligible things that I do remember and will, it follows that I also understand. My will also comprehends my whole understanding and my whole memory, if only I make use of the whole of what I understand and remember. Therefore, when all are mutually comprehended by each one, and are comprehended as wholes, then each one as a whole is equal to each other as a whole, and each one as a whole is equal to all together as wholes, and these three are one life, one mind, and one essence."*

Some theologians believe that far from shedding light on the nature of the trinitarian relations, the search for the *vestigia* is quite unhelpful and even dangerous. Barth's fundamental concern is that the search for images of the Trinity constitutes an elevation of reason over revelation. What is construed as interpretation ("saying the same thing in other words") is in reality illustration ("saying the same thing in other words"). What begins as an attempt to shed light on the doctrine of the Trinity ends in a neglect of the centrality of God's Word. All the data we need to guide us in constructing our theology of the Trinity, argues Barth, may be found in the biblical narratives. Guntor concurs with the general thrust of this objection, pointing out that the flow of illumination when using the *vestigia* can too easily be established as from world to God rather than the other way round. However, it is also clear that Guntor is not opposed to the idea of the marks *per se*. He engages in an attempt to find an analogy between the relational structure in the created order and the perichoretic relations (mutations = mutual indwelling) in the Trinity. In providing a warrant for this approach he writes: "If God is God, he is the source of all being, meaning and truth. It would seem reasonable to suppose that all being, meaning and truth is, even as created and distinct from God, in some way marked by

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*See *The Trinity*, trans. S. McKenna (Boston, MA: St Paul Editions, 1965), Book 8 onwards.
*See K. Barth, Church Dogmatics I.1.8.3, *Vestigia Trinitatis*.
*See C. Guntor, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, p. 121, n. 18.
its relatedness to its creator.”11 As long as the position of revelation is not compromised, Gantos is happy to work with trinitarian analogies.

Against Barth’s objection, Cunningham argues that while the primacy is clearly with revelation, we do need to attend to the question of how we receive God’s truth.12 That is, the narratives pointing to the doctrine of the Trinity do not simply speak for themselves. We need to find the tools that can help us in our task of hearing and understanding. The set of psychological images developed by Augustine is one such tool. The testimonia not and cannot produce wholly new knowledge, but they can and do help us understand more fully what has already been made known to us through the scriptural narratives.

Clearly, we cannot resolve the question of the validity of the testimonia here. But perhaps enough has been said to indicate that it may well be possible to use the approach without compromising the primacy of revelation.

As we have just seen, Cunningham values the idea of the testimonia. At this point, it is necessary to say more about the mark of the Trinity that he calls polyphony. The chief attribute of this technical musical term is “simultaneous, non-excluding difference; that is, more than one note is played at a time, and none of these notes is so dominant that it renders another mute.”13 Cunningham goes on to suggest that a theological perspective informed by polyphony would challenge any view that claims that any two contrastive categories must necessarily work against each other. He is putting in a plea for the avoidance of false dichotomies in theology. In such dichotomous thinking, increased attention to one category is seen to necessarily imply decreased attention to its contrastive partner. This he refers to as the “zero-sum game.”14 In this theological game, a greater emphasis on the humanity of Christ must diminish the divinity of the Word; a focus on divine immanence necessarily leads to a downplaying of God’s transcendence; and so on. Those who avoid playing the “zero-sum game” will find that they are able “to think in terms of simultaneous difference that need not be synthesized into a single, homogeneous unity.”15

An example of this polyphonic thinking can be found, suggests Cunningham, in the relationship between action and passion in God.16 When God is active there is an expression of divine sovereignty and freedom, but at the same time God demonstrates passivity through a submission to the actions of others. Action and passion in God, then, are like two notes played simultaneously in a piece of music. When God acts there is no constraint on the divine action, and yet God enters into relationships with human beings. This willingness to engage with humankind indicates a corresponding willingness to be “moved” by us. Cunningham contends that the whole of Jesus’ life manifests this dialectic of action and passion:

At times he is supremely active, narrating the nature of God’s Reign, embodying that Reign through exorcisms and healings. At other times he is clearly acted upon: he is given birth, raised in a Jewish home, questioned by the religious leaders of the day, driven away by angry crowds, and—most obviously—arrested, interrogated, tried, stripped, mocked, and crucified. That the incarnate God can

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12 See D. Cunningham, These Three are One, p. 100.
13 Cunningham, Ibid., p. 128.
14 Ibid., p. 131.
15 Ibid., pp. 142-143.
be "acted upon" by human beings in this way is a testimony to the polyphony of action and passion in God.27

In relation to the doctrine of the Trinity, the fundamental polyphonic categories are unity and difference. The task of the early church fathers was to defend against assaults on one or other of the two poles, Arius and Eunomius, for example, developed notions that undermined the coequality and coeternity of the Three. Since the Son was born, argued Arius, there was "a time when he was not." While Eunomius was of the view that "there is the Supreme and Absolute Being, and another Being existing by reason of the First, but after It though before all others; a third Being not ranking with either of these, but inferior to the one, as to its cause, to the other, as to the energy which produced it...."28 On this view, there is a hierarchy in the Godhead with the Father at the top as the Supreme Being, the Son a rung down, and the Spirit a further rung down.

Sabellius, for his part, undermined the distinctions in the Godhead. According to him, the one divine substance manifests itself in three modes. This substance metamorphoses itself, as the need arises, to act in the mode of the Father, or of the Son, or of the Holy Spirit.29

In their responses to these challenges, the key category for the Cappadocian Fathers was relation. The three persons of the Trinity exist in a perfect communion. In this communion, there is no severance or division: "[H]e who receives the Father virtually receives at the same time both the Son and the Spirit...."30 Basil is here upholding the unity in the Trinity. He is careful, though, to hold this in proper tension with the distinctiveness of the Three. There is a "proper peculiarity of the Persons delivered in the faith, each of these being distinctively apprehended by His own notes."31 Three persons in communion is the summary line in the Cappadocian approach.

The category of relation is also central in Thomas Aquinas’ trinitarian theology. For Aquinas, God is Being-Itself. Thus, the nature of God is To-Be. "In De Deo Trino," writes LaCugna, "[Aquinas] shows that the To-Be of God is To-Be-Related. Thus, while God may be the supremely actual and simple existent, this existence is personal, indeed, tripersonal, by virtue of the differentiation of divine persons in relation to each other."32 The starting point for Thomas in developing his understanding of God as the To-Be-Related is the two procession in God.33 These are the procession of the Word, which Aquinas calls generation or begetting, and the procession of Love, which he refers to as "spiration" ("breathing out"). These processions, in turn, imply four relations: fatherhood, sonship, spiration and procession.34

While there is no consensus on how exactly to interpret the idea of person, everyone is agreed that it does not refer to a center of consciousness.

27Ibid., p. 143.
30Ibid., p. 139.
31Ibid., p. 139.
32Ibid., p. 153.
33See Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, V. la.27.4-5.
34See ST V,qa.29,4.
There are not three entities in the Trinity, each operating out of its own particular consciousness. Rather, there are three relations, and these relations indwell each other in love.

The Trinity is a polyphony in which three distinctive notes are sounded without any one note muting any other. We need now to inquire as to the role of polyphony in pastoral care.

**Polyphony and Pastoral Care**

Pastoral care is a demanding and subtle ministry because of its polyphonic nature. The caregiver needs an interpersonal style in which contrasting qualities are held together in an homogeneous manner. In developing his three images for pastoral care, Alastair Campbell points up the polyphony in the ministry of care. Campbell refers to the **toughness** and the **tenderness** of the shepherd, to the **woundedness** and the **health** of the wounded healer, and to the **wisdom and folly** in the wise fool. I’ll discuss the first two images briefly, but it is the third, and less well-known, image that I want to concentrate on.

The shepherd image is of course a traditional one. Shepherds in the ancient Near East expressed a tender care for their sheep, but they also needed a hardness to survive. Given the climatic conditions of Palestine, shepherding was a strenuous and hazardous occupation. When the weather was dry, it was necessary to move the sheep over long distances in search of greener pastures and more ample supplies of water. While on the move, the shepherd had to contend with threats from robbers and wild beasts. To be sure, he needed to gently care for his flock, but he also needed to be quite robust and strong to deal with the attacks of human and beast. Campbell puts it this way:

> We can see at once that there is a mixture of tenderness and toughness in the character of the shepherd. His unsettled and dangerous life makes him a slightly ambiguous figure — more perhaps like the cowboy of the "Wild West" than the modern shepherd in a settled farming community, yet loving and caring at the same time."

Campbell is not, of course, advocating a "tough guy" or "tough gal" approach in pastoral care. What he is pointing to is a need for a virtuosity that reflects that of Jesus. He was one who sounded notes of both rough courage and gentle love, and so must his under-shepherds.

While those of us in the pastoral ministry have sometimes thought of our frailty, vulnerability and hurts as liabilities, the image of the wounded healer says to us that these dimensions of our humanity can be resources for us. Campbell reminds us, though, that wounding in and of itself is not a power in bringing healing to others. It is only when we have found hope in shadow experiences that we are able to bring some light through our presence. "Wounded healers heal because they, to some degree at least, have entered the depths of their own experiences of loss and in those depths found hope again."

We are by now very familiar with these images of shepherd and wounded healer (although Campbell brings a freshness through his interpretation). But the third image is less well known to us. An important dimension

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*Rediscovering Pastoral Care, p.27.*

*Ibid., p. 43.*

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in pastoral care, according to Campbell, is indicated by "the dishevelled, gauche, tragic-comic figure of the fool." His description of this character is multi-faceted. I will concentrate only on the two elements that are most relevant to our current concerns; namely, the simplicity in folly and the folly of the clown.

In order to draw out the simplicity in the figure of the wise fool, Campbell begins with the thinking of Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly.* The simpleton or "natural fool" in medieval times was contrasted with the "artificial fool," the court jester. Natural fools lack the capacity for reasoning. They have very little knowledge to work with and they cannot penetrate the subtleties and complexities that characterize the relationships of others around them. But this lack of sophistication, observes Campbell, results in a "refreshing directness" in their engagement with other people. The wisdom in the simplicity is that it exposes pomposity, insincerity and self-decepcion.

Now of course we cannot pretend to the simplicity of the natural fool. When we attend to this image, however, we are able to strip away some of the layers of "adult wisdom" that hold us back from honest, straightforward relating. Simplicity in our engagement with others means a higher level of spontaneity and directness. It also means that it allows us to draw near to the other. The verbosity of sophisticated conversation is a liability for us. "We use words to distance ourselves from experience - our own and other people's - and so lose the simple sense of nearness - nearness of nature, of other people and of God."

The natural fool is one source of learning for us; the circus clown is another. Campbell draws on Heike Faber's insights in *Pastoral Care in the Modern Hospital.* Faber compares the way a minister operates in a hospital setting to the work of a circus clown. The analogy with the clown can be established on three fronts: he is one of many circus acts, yet he has his own unique role; he presents as an amateur in the midst of a troupe of highly trained professionals; and his act is one of creative spontaneity yet it is only possible because of careful preparation and training. Campbell suggests that this analogy can be taken to apply to pastoral care as a whole. "[P]astoral care must avoid the temptation to turn its 'clown act' into the polished performance of the trapeze artiste, the lion tamer, or the juggler. The folly, the scandal of pastoral care, is that it describes the stumbling efforts of the non-professional to care for others."

Now Campbell is not wanting to make excuses for dedicated incompetence in the pastoral ministry. Caregivers need a high level of training and preparation to be effective. The clown, after all, may appear to be stumbling in a carefree manner from one uproarious encounter to the next, but we know that each step in the act has been assiduously prepared for. Like the clown, we are amateurs who use a high level of skill. We need the wisdom and the virtuosity to sound a range of notes in our pastoral engagements that all blend together. Toughness mixed with tenderness, woundedness and health, and a folly that is also wise; these notes need to expertly played in the polyphony of care.

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*ibid.* p. 47.
*See ibid.* p. 48ff.
*ibid.* p. 64.
*See ibid.* p. 58ff.
*ibid.* p. 70.
A Case of Wise Folly

Andrew Lester recounts an experience from his pastoral ministry that illustrates well the “clown act” that Campbell suggests is pastoral care. It concerns a visit to a little girl in hospital.

This week I made an initial pastoral call to meet six-year-old Candice, who was in hospital with a serious intestinal blockage. The nurse told me that Candice was usually verbal and felt well enough that day for conversation. However, when I tried to begin a dialogue she looked down at her bed and at the far wall. For several minutes, I tried every trick I know, all in vain. She was uncomfortable, caught off guard in some manner. Finally, I bid a weak, and frustrated, goodbye, indicated that I would return later, and retreated in defeat.9

When Lester returned, he tried a different approach. He brought along his puppet, Fuzzy. Fuzzy performed the role of taking the attention off Candice, and helping her relax and gain confidence. The initial conversation was between Lester and Fuzzy. Fuzzy “inquired” as to why Candice was in the hospital. He went on to ask questions about the medical devices being used, such as the IV tube. Finally, he asked if the entry needle for the IV was causing Candice pain. To which Lester replied, “I don't know. You'll have to ask Candice.” In this way, the little girl was gently brought into the conversation.

Many of us will be able to relate very closely to Lester’s initial experience. We come to a pastoral encounter with a relatively high level of theological and pastoral sophistication and sometimes it all seems to count for nothing. In a word, we feel naked. Naked and ashamed we slink off. Lester walked away embarrassed, but to his credit came back to try again. In order to make a connection with Candice, he needed to let go, to do some shedding. He needed to let go of the “adult wisdom,” to lose his “bag of tricks” for snaring the attention of a child, in order to enter into the simplicity of play. Lester had to shed the feeling that playing with puppets is foolish and join in the folly of Fuzzy.

To become a skilled puppeteer is not the point. Indeed, the more expert the performance the greater the risk that the act of pastoral care will fail. Lester’s aim was not to entertain Candice, but rather to draw near to her in her experience of illness and hospitalization. Others come into the hospital with talented performances to brighten the day of the children. But Lester wants to meet Candice, to come close to her, and his amateur skills are enough. The focus is not on the clever way he uses Fuzzy, but rather the puppet provides a soft focus for the pastoral relationship. Such is the simplicity and the virtuosity of the caregiver.

This soft focus is made possible through the creation of space. While Candice is attending to Fuzzy, there is a safe distance between her and Lester. The puppet is used by Lester to close the space at a pace that feels comfortable for Candice.

Co-managing the Space

The idea of space and of achieving the right kind of space is critical in pastoral relationships. Space is also a key category in trinitarian theology, as Colin Gunton shows. In his essay, “The Human Creation: Towards a

Renewal of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei," Gunton wants to go beyond the approach to the imago that centers on reason. He is aiming for a relational ontology—something that is unachievable if rationality is the focus. A stress on reason "encourages the belief that we are more minds than we are bodies, with all the consequences that has: for example, in creating a non-relational ontology, so that we are cut off from each other and from the world by a tendency to see ourselves as imprisoned in matter."

Gunton uses the category of space to help shape his relational ontology. This space, however, needs to be correctly defined. If there is too much space in the relational sphere there is a fall into individualism. Mutual participation in relationships implies a certain nearness. Too little space, on the other hand, is also a problem. When the other sits on top of me, so to speak, I lose my freedom. She fails to make room for me and so shows a lack of respect for my otherness.

In developing his theological anthropology, Gunton picks up on the notion of the Greek theologians that God is a communion of persons. Each person is distinct and yet the Three indwell each other and so share in an essential unity. A close look at this understanding of the Trinity, suggests Gunton, will provide us with the right conceptualization of relational space.

We have a conception of personal space, the space in which three persons are for and from each other in their otherness. They thus confer particularity upon and receive it from one another. That giving of particularity is very important; it is a matter of space to be. Father, Son and Spirit through the shape – the taxis – of their inseparable relatedness confer particularity and freedom on each other. That is their personal being.

Gunton picks up the relational cues here to shape his anthropology. We are created in the image of God and it is therefore to be expected that rationality will be fundamental to our humanity. That is to say, if God is a communion of persons involving mutual participation, we will experience our humanity in its relatedness to others.

The structure or taxis of human community is a relationality that involves both participation (nearness) and otherness (distance). The space between us has to be the right kind of space: we need "the space to be." "To be a person is to be constituted in particularity and freedom – to be given space to be – by others in community. Otherness and relation continue to be the two central and polar concepts here. Only where both are given does stress is personhood fully enabled." In other words, relationality is polyphonic. We need to play the notes of otherness and participation in harmony if we are to establish the right kind of relational space.

The aim in pastoral relationships is to draw near to the other person. There is always an interpersonal gap because she is she and I am I. There are two inner worlds involved in an encounter with another person. As John Savage puts it: "[T]his gap is a result of trying to interface between two worlds. One is the external world that I perceive through my senses. The second is the inner world of my brain, where I must constantly interpret both that which is going on inside me, as well as attempting to bridge..."

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"See G. Gunton, The Promise of Trinitarian Theology, pp. 101-121.
"Ibid., p. 165.
"Ibid., p. 113.
"Ibid., p. 117.
the gap that occurs when I try to make contact with the outside world. I try to close this gap through empathy. I want to think and feel myself into her inner universe. At the same time, I need to give the other space to be. It is judging when to move in close and when to make some room that is a core art in pastoral relationships. It could be said that this pastoral art requires a capacity to play a polyphony—a polyphony of communion, nearness and distance. We usually associate communion with coming close to the other, but unless there is also appropriate distance there cannot be a real meeting between us. Communion is established when two people are able to draw near while at the same time making space for otherness.

I went to see Ruth at the request of one of my parishioners, Joan. The two had met at an ecumenical bible study, Joan had observed that Ruth was finding it very difficult to cope with the Multiple Sclerosis she was suffering from and asked her if she would like a visit from me. On my first visit to Ruth’s home we had spent about half an hour getting to know each other when I decided that it might be time to raise the issue of her illness. She had been talking about a friend who had been having some personal problems, and I took the opportunity to provide an opening for her to talk, saying: “And you have been having a real struggle with your MS.” Prior to this line, Ruth had seemed very comfortable with me. I felt that there was a good rapport developing. What happened in that instant took me totally by surprise. Ruth completely froze up. Her face went blank and she simply stared, making no response at all. I realized immediately, of course, that I had moved in too close too quickly. I remember feeling shame. I felt that I had violated Ruth in some way.

Reflecting back on the experience, I wonder if there was something else happening other than the fact that I had misjudged Ruth’s readiness to talk about her personal struggle. Gunton interprets “personal space” as making room for otherness. Providing personal space is allowing the other to be herself, to be the fullness of her personhood. Perhaps part of the reason Ruth felt assaulted by me is that my lead-in comment was perceived by her as an attempt to shrink her personhood to within the bounds of her disease. It goes without saying that this was not my intention. I was attempting to move in close to the pain of her personal struggle; I wanted to be able to make an empathic connection with her experience of her illness. She experienced something else though. It felt to her like the expansive space in which she lives and moves was being shrunk down.

What transpired over the next few weeks seems to confirm this interpretation of my failure in negotiating the interpersonal space. After the sudden and dramatic breakdown in the rapport between us, I quickly shifted back to safe ground. To my great relief, Ruth seemed to recover her composure and was quite happy to talk with me again. Nevertheless, at the end of our time together it took some courage to suggest that I might return. Over the next four visits we talked about her family, about her former career, about her interests, about everything except her disease. I must say that it felt a little strange, given that I had been invited to come because she needed someone to talk to about living with MS. The only mention in those weeks came in an oblique form in the prayer at the end of our time together. But I decided that I should not raise the issue, but rather wait

upon Ruth. Finally on the fifth visit it all came tumbling out. We had been chatting for a while when Ruth excused herself. She came back with a pile of literature on MS and she talked very freely about the disease and how it was affecting her and her family.

A very deep pastoral bond developed between Ruth and I. She began attending my church and over the next two years we got to know each other very well. Indeed, a lovely friendship developed between us. Out of our struggle to manage the space between us, in my sometimes stumbling efforts to move near and to make some room, there came an experience of communion.

Conclusion

The notion of the Trinity is not some esoteric doctrine that has little or nothing to do with the practicalities of Christian living. It has been argued that along with its applications in areas such as ethics, ecclesiology, and politics, it also casts considerable light on the pastoral ministry. Just as the divine communion exists in and through polyphony, so too pastoral relationships require the capacity to sound polyphonic notes. In the pastoral ministry we need the virtuosity to hold together toughness and tenderness, woundedness and health, wisdom and folly, and nearness and distance.

In our reflections, the last of these polarities was especially important. Mastering the art of managing with the other the interpersonal space is crucial in pastoral care. We aim in our pastoral relationships to establish communion through drawing near, but we also need to make room for others. If the ministry of care was only about learning how to move in close it would be challenging enough. However, what makes it especially demanding is that at the same time we need to give the other person space to be, room to be herself. Communion, nearness and distance are the categories in the trinity at the heart of pastoral relationships.