

The Transformative Story / Impact of CPE on my Life

Roy Alexander (2006)

I find it difficult to imagine how my life would have been without CPE and on my continuing involvement in CPE as a supervisor. I know where I was prior to CPE and the issues that were a major part of my life – issues that were manifested in a great deal of anxiety and that limited my ability to function openly. I may well have changed without the influence of CPE but whether I would have stayed in ministry, or how I would have functioned in ministry without CPE, is hypothetical. What I do know is that the influence of CPE has shaped my life - personally and professionally - in a healing, healthy way since early in the 1970's.

History

I was the second son in a family of four children whose parents were deeply committed to the Christian tradition through the Methodist Church. My father was a home missionary from 1924-1952, retiring from ministry at the age of 58 for health reasons. My parents had limited possessions and income but for them the most important factor in their lives was their faith. I experienced my father as being stern and authoritarian and whose life was the church. Interestingly, parishioners described him as a faithful pastor, compassionate and, in at least one comment, "a saint". Just prior to his death, in his 80th year, I got an insight into what drove him and what I sensed was the burden of the fear of failure that may have influenced his life. He left school at a young age with no secondary school education and, after being a farm labourer for a number of years, he offered as a home missionary in the Methodist Church. He had no formal theological education because home missionaries did not go to theological college and were not ordained. Home missionaries were paid considerably less than ordained ministers and their parishes were generally in rural areas. While growing up I had no idea of what his struggles may have been. Everything he did was according to his understanding of what obedience to God meant. My mother was a quiet, unobtrusive person, whose life revolved around caring for others, including her family. From early in her life she took on the responsibility of caring for her parents as well as for people outside of her family. Along the way, I internalised my parents' care for others in a way that was unhelpful for me, in that I perceived other people's needs to be more important than mine. My parents' constant prayer was that their children would grow up to be "Christ's faithful soldiers and servants". Though now seeing life through a different theological framework to them, I have come to appreciate their deep love and devotion. One of the outcomes of the impact of CPE on me has been to see my parents through gentle and gracious eyes. In some way their care and concern for others rubbed off on me - given that my passion in ministry has been the provision of good pastoral care.

My memory of those earlier years is of me being painfully shy around others and through my teenage and early adult years lacking confidence, particularly in relationships. I had a low sense of self-worth. Consequently, I lacked a trust in my own ability to achieve, and deep within me held the belief that I did not matter to others. The one place where I experienced a sense of fun, joy and exuberance was in the area of sport. I loved team sports and the camaraderie even though my ability to perform better in the various sports was probably hindered by my cautiousness and lack of confidence. My "call" to ministry, to this fragile vessel, went hand in hand with a sense that ministry would offer me a place of importance. While not being able to name it as such at the time, I was living with strongly held ambivalent feelings of both wanting to be a minister but fearing what that would mean. From a much later perspective I can see how much that was a very human journey of "identity".

Much of what I have described continued through my time in theological college and then on to my experience as a parish minister. While enjoying the community and doing the pastoral work I struggled with preaching and leadership expectations - my own and others - in the parish. It was becoming clear to me that not only was there an identity issue but also a theological crisis. My college years coincided with the '*Honest to God*' debate. That kind of theological revelation was incredibly freeing for me and began a journey of finding my own way as well as a theological basis for my life rather than dependency on my parents' understanding of what it meant to be Christian. At the end of my four years in my second parish – a place where I had been part-time parish and part-time hospital - I was described at my farewell as the "questioner".

Toward the end of my time in the parish I undertook a three-month chaplaincy training programme – a programme modelled on CPE - which I was required to do for my accreditation as a chaplain. Six months later I did a CPE programme with an accredited CPE supervisor. With the support, pushing and encouragement of the supervisors from those two programmes I applied for entry into CPE in the USA. I will forever be grateful for the trust of those supervisors. At times I wondered whether their desire for me to do CPE was because they thought I needed "straightening out"; at other times I had a thought that perhaps they saw potential in me that I did not see in myself. That confusion - and inability to recognise that I had anything to offer - reflected an ongoing personal struggle: about who I am (identity), my place in life (professional role) and theological basis for life (meaning).

The Impact of CPE

Personal

The task of identifying - specifically and globally - the impact of CPE is beyond words. The impact lies in the experience of being involved in a methodology that required participants to face personal and professional issues. The outcome has been a journey in confidence, of working through authority issues and claiming my own authority. In other words, the inner journey with all its changes has had an impact on all aspects of life.

Relationships

The personal growth enabled me to enter into stronger and deeper relationships; in particular, enabling me to live comfortably with the intimacy of the pastoral relationship.

Professional

In my early years in ministry I never envisaged the possibility of standing alongside other health professionals or being an educator of others. CPE has been the means of giving me the skills to be both a healthcare chaplain and a pastoral educator and to do so with competence. To achieve that I have had to enter into the training that was required to be accredited in both areas of work. CPE heightened my pastoral skills so that I am able in a full way to offer my pastoral care that is gentle, compassionate, respectful and non-judgemental.

The methodology of CPE has been the key to my growth. The emphasis on small group work and individual supervision meant there was no place to hide. At least, for me. I had to take responsibility for my own life. My commitment to growth - personally and professionally - has been marked by tenacity and a dogged determination to make the most of CPE. However, it wasn't always like that and there were times when CPE was just plain hard slog.

The gift of CPE was that it was always within a supportive and encouraging environment - but always challenging. In particular, I recall my time in Denver - of two years in an environment with staff I respected (and sometimes feared) and colleagues I loved.

The action-reflection method of learning, the focus on personal growth and self-awareness as keys to providing effective pastoral care, and the challenge to integrate those learnings and insights with theology has been critical to my journey in ministry.

Theological

In my early years in ministry I disliked preaching and struggled with my own theological understandings. Chaplaincy meant I could move away from what felt like a life of struggle without any significant moments of hope. Ever since my move away from parish ministry I have been on the periphery of the church. But, those early struggles were less about theology than about self. While not anticipated at the time, the move to chaplaincy meant doing some specialised training, and in time, involvement in CPE. And, it was there that the real issue - facing myself - took place.

The paradox now, as I stated in a recent paper, is that as my theological certainties have decreased, my ability to offer effective care and supervision has increased. For me, that has been the outcome of integrating my theology so that I am able to stay in those places where people are deeply troubled and provide empathic pastoral relationships.

Conclusion

The impact of CPE on my life is not just in my personal growth or in the quality of my pastoral work. Just as importantly it is in the work of supervision, of being involved in the lives of others, whose issues remind me of my own struggles and triumphs. There is a desperate need for effective pastoral carers. I have a deep and abiding commitment to what CPE has to offer in this important area.

What was begun over many years ago has been an amazing journey. I'm overwhelmed by the trust and encouragement of many people who have shared that journey with me.