

Diagnostic Variables for Pastoral Assessment

Russ Seger, D Min.

Chaplain, Chadron Community Hospital, Chadron NE

This session will explore the role that active spiritual diagnosis plays in assisting both the patient and the patient's family to come to terms with spirituality or the lack-there-of in end-of-life issues.

Objectives:

Develop a basis model for pastoral assessment

Define seven pastoral diagnostic variables that lie at the heart of pastoral assessment.

Propose a strategy to assist the patient to weave their understanding of spirituality into the fabric of their lives

Introduction:

When I first began my work with Hospice, spiritual assessments was little more than a short religious inventory – that encompasses questions regarding the name of one's faith community, pastor's name, baptism and maybe some questions about funeral arrangements. In recent years, however, assessments have become more substantive to get at questions of purpose and meaning. Ministry to the dying has some particular challenges that Hospice has to deal with, but our task is still to encourage God's uniting energy, to assist the dying and their families in their journey to wholeness.

A. Basic Model for Pastoral Assessment

1. The first assessment focuses on words like strength, peace, love, and responsibility.
Where does one find these things?
2. The second assessment focuses on symbols.
How do these objects symbolize what is important in the person's life?

B. Suggested Diagnostic Variables for Pastoral Assessment

1. **Awareness of the Holy** – What, if anything, is sacred to a person? Does the person know what a feeling of reverence is? Have they ever experienced awe or bliss, and in what situation? Do they rule out mystery or shy away from anything transcendent? Are there expressions of idolatry in their choice of priorities?
2. **Providence** – How does the person feel about God? Do they see anything good or friendly in the world, or does it seem bleak? Do they wonder about God's will for them in a particular way? Does the person trust people? Do they trust God? What expressions are there of hope and despair?

3. **Faith** – Is the person’s stance toward life affirmative or negative – to what degree? Are they enthusiastic or lukewarm about their life? Does the person embrace life or shy away? Are they engaged or committed to life? Is the expression of their religion expansive or restrictive in regard to their daily life?
4. **Grace** – Is the person able to see himself as forgivable? Do they resist grace (the gift of unconditional love)? Can they be grateful? Do they recognize how much they have received in life, and not just earned or taken? Is there an openness to being blessed – can they receive love?
5. **Repentance** – Can they see their part (responsibility) in their problems in life? Are they willing to change their behavior? Do they assume too much responsibility for their problems? How could repentance be expressed in their life?
6. **Communion** – Does the person feel a part of, or separate from, nature and others – are they in touch or estranged from their surroundings? Are they alienated from any particular group or person? Do they feel guilty for this alienation? Are they reaching out to others? Are they reaching out for God? Do they see themselves as cared for?
7. **Vocation** – Are they cheerfully participating in life? Do they have sense of purpose? How do they feel about their ‘task’ in life right now? Do they see themselves as contributing to the improvement of the world? Are they contending against evil? What would they like to accomplish in their life?

Adapted from Paul Pruyser, *The Minister as Diagnostician – Personal Problems in Pastoral Perspective* (Westminster Press, 1976)

C. Propose a Strategy...

...By redefining our understanding of spirituality and taking it beyond the religious trappings of church dogma.

1. **Soul:** The vital mysterious wild core of our individual selves; an essence unique to each person; qualities found in layers of the self much deeper than our personalities. Soul is not meant to be understood like solving a problem. Quite the opposite, it is the appreciation of the paradoxical mysteries of life.
2. **Spirit:** The single great and eternal mystery that permeates and animates everything in the universe, and yet transcends all.