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PROCESS OF COMPASSION: PASTORAL CARE DURING SCHOOL CLOSINGS

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Catholic education in the United States continues to face mounting economic challenges. Dioceses are being challenged with the painful reality of closing Catholic schools that have long served communities. These school closings leave behind wounded and disillusioned professionals. The Process of Compassion Workshop was developed to provide personal and professional help for healing so that teachers could move forward in their careers. This article provides a theoretical framework with action research to care for the dedicated people school closings leave behind.

PROCESS OF COMPASSION

On February 24, 2005, the Archdiocese of Chicago announced the closing of 23 elementary schools affecting 500 Catholic school teachers, and 4,000 students in the Chicago-land area (Brachear & Dell'Angela, 2005). Demographic shifts and financial deficits were cited by the archdiocese as the reasons. This announcement came after months of self-study by archdiocesan officials about the fiscal viability of a number of the inner-city Catholic schools. The process of self-study had a detrimental effect on the morale of a large number of schools within the archdiocese, producing a palpable sense of fear, frustration, and anger among Catholic educators serving in the archdiocese's neediest neighborhoods. The frustration increased as the date for the announcement of closures came closer, and the rumors that as many as 40 elementary schools would be closing in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The authors believed that the faculty and administration of these schools needed support and assistance. Their search for programs found that little had been done to systematically provide the types of personal support that would help school leaders to minister effectively and lead through a traumatic time of transition. As a result, the Process of Compassion Workshop was developed by faculty whose expertise lay in the areas of educational leader-

ship and human services and counseling. The workshop's goal was to provide leaders of these elementary schools with the tools they would need to cope with their own feelings about the closures and to assist their students and their families as they struggled with their feelings.

The process of assisting the archdiocese began with the design of a mission statement for a day-long DePaul University workshop. Because the goal was to reach more than just the participants, a bound booklet and website were also a part of the planning process.

FORMULATION OF THE MISSION STATEMENT

DePaul University's Educational Leadership and Human Services programs offered their resources to the Archdiocese of Chicago for schools and parishes considering the process of transition and closure. In cooperation with the Big Shoulders Program for Professional Development, this workshop considers the nature of transition and loss. It looks at strategies and interventions that might assist the schools and parish communities. With a bound booklet and website, it prepares school and parish representatives to cope with loss, grief, and career transitions, particularly for teachers 55 years and older. Whether a school or parish will be closed shortly or in a designated time cycle, the process of loss and grief begins.

Those not associated with the day-to-day operation of schools find it difficult to understand why parents, teachers, and students are upset. However, those intimately involved in the life of the school understand that this place is more than just a service distribution center; it is the home of a learning community and a faith community. Therefore, the tragedy of a school closure for students, parents, and faculty is that it is the abrupt ending of a series of relationships and the dismantling of a community that has been built over the course of decades.

Sergiovanni (1994, 1996) challenged the notion that the organization structures of schools and businesses are, or should be, identical. Building upon the framework of the conception of *gemeinschaft* (Tönnies, 1887/1957), Sergiovanni described schools as communities, built on a foundation of caring that carries with it a moral responsibility on the part of each member of the community for the success of the community. Catholic schools by their nature are called to be communities. The bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) reaffirmed the role of community in Catholic schools in their 2005 statement *Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Schools*.

These Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the fourfold purpose of Christian education, namely to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced,

service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of our God is cultivated. (p. 266)

Earlier, the bishops of the United States in their 1972 pastoral message, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, declared

Community is at the heart of Christian education not simply as a concept to be taught but as a reality to be lived. Through education, men must be moved to build community in all areas of life; they can do this best if they have learned the meaning of community by experiencing it. (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972, §23)

The bishops called for all Catholic education, formal and informal, to have at its heart the lived experience of community. Therefore, it should not be surprising that those intimately involved in Catholic schools mourn the loss of their community when their school closes.

The Process of Compassion Workshop began with a panel, consisting of a principal of a school that was closing, a parish council representative of an African-American parish, and an African-American sister who facilitated the retreat for closure of that parish. Each participant told of his or her feelings, experiences, insights, and prayers in a segment called "Closings and Confusion," speaking for 30 minutes. The panel members asked a question for the small groups to discuss at each table. Small group discussion, for 20 minutes, was followed by a large brainstorming session of 10 minutes, when the facilitators of the small groups reported their reflections. The sharing gave concrete examples of where the group was in the loss process. It also gave an indication of the intensity of the emotion in loss by workshop participants. Often, examples of comments by the principals, teachers, and staff members were used by the presenters on loss.

What follows is a description of the three core elements of the program: an understanding of the process of grief and loss as well as the tools for ministering within the context of a school closure, the process of participants beginning to look at their own future, and providing a prayerful challenge to continue ministering in this wounded setting, even as the participants are smarting from their own woundedness.

The morning sessions helped participants examine the nature of grief and loss both theoretically and experientially on both personal and group levels. From this examination of grief and loss, the participants were led to think of ways in which they might ritualize the closing of the school as a way of providing a venue for expression of grief for members of their school community. The afternoon session focused on career transitions. School administrators and staff were provided with resources and encouragement to assist

them in their job search. The day ended with a prayer service, based on the theme *The Wounded Healer* (Nouwen, 1972).

The Process of Compassion Workshop was intentionally designed to address the particular needs of the professionals serving the elementary schools being closed in Chicago. Because this workshop focused exclusively on the teaching professional, it can easily be applicable for high school administrators and teachers who are also facing school closures.

THE MORNING WORKSHOP SESSION— LOSS AND TRANSITION: WHAT IS IT?

Various theories related to grieving from death, such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1970); numbing, yearning, and searching for the lost, disorganization, re-organization (Bowlby, 1980); alarm, searching, mitigation, anger, guilt, and gaining a new identity (Parkes, 1972), were presented to understand the stages of loss. Concentration on stages recovering from trauma was explored from Herman's framework (1992). These stages include safety, remembrance, mourning, and reconnection. Because degree of intensity of emotion from the loss was considered an important variable, Zullo's (1989) research on transition was used for normal transition and its effects (see Table 1).

For example, teachers younger in age, having graduated recently and beginning their teaching careers, were more likely to transition to another school without great difficulty. The portrait of transition (Zullo, 1989) seemed more appropriate for them. Teachers that are over 55 years old, particularly teachers in their early 60s, might find it more difficult to secure employment. The older teachers were a target group of concern for the Process of Compassion Workshop. The degree of intensity of emotion stemming from the loss of their teaching positions was higher for these older teachers. Herman's framework (1992) of safety, remembering, mourning, and reconnection was meaningful to them as many older teachers had a longer tenure at the school that was closed. Seeking the individual agenda of loss for each teacher, questions were asked about unfinished business: "What is 'unfinished business' for me? What 'sticks' in my memory and keeps coming back to me like a 'broken record'?" These questions provoked discussion in the small discussion groups.

Table 1

Portrait of Transition

Elements	Effects
Normal transition	A time of opportunity Increased vulnerability Heightened potential Missed opportunities return
Emotional	Fear Anxiety Embarrassment Depression Breakdown in meaning
Behavioral	Confusion Irritability Poor work Distractible, migratory attention Withdrawn relationships
Physical	Sleep disturbances Psychosomatic difficulties

Note. Source: Zullo (1989)

CHILDREN AND LOSS

The worst fear of a child is abandonment (Bowlby, 1980). Loss and transition can touch into that fear for children. The developmental stages of understanding grief for children were explored from the framework of Gibling and Ryan (1991; see Table 2).

Table 2

Developmental Stages of Understanding Children's Grief

Years of age	Developmental stage
1-3	Very little understanding of idea of loss-affective memory traces
4	Very limited concept of loss; is aware that loss is connected with sadness
5	Concept of loss is more accurate and factual; loss can be "reversible"
6	New awareness of loss with an emotional response: afraid of abandonment
7	Has an interest in the causes of loss: "Did President Bush order the school to close?"
8-9	References to loss now made to logical or biological reasons for loss "Egyptian Dead" concept (ritual/symbol – favorite toys, flowers, food, water) connected with school closure

Note. Source: Gibling & Ryan (1991)

Counseling Interventions with Children

Ryan and Gibling (1997) presented central principles in counseling children in transition, including staying with the perception of the child. Exploration of the child's inner image of the school transition experience can help the understanding of the child. With older children, open-ended questions were the most helpful. For younger children, the use of art therapy and drawing pictures can give clues to their inner image as they experience school transition.

Remembering that for a child, the central concern in transition and loss is abandonment (Bowlby, 1980), our caring more than our words becomes a

part of the way they remember the closing of the school. Ritual, symbol, and storytelling are important processes to digest the reality of losing the school community.

What comforts children through transition and loss is presence, being there and letting them know that people care about them and will help them find their place in the new school. Providing children with the words to describe feelings of fear and anxiety is also comforting as these emotions arise sometimes because they cannot name the emotions inside their inner world. Routine also helps as the children feel safe in a regular routine they can count on daily. Telling the story of the school legacy and reminding all of the children that they are a part of that legacy can help them feel a sense of pride and esteem.

COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

The Archdiocese of Chicago prepared not only a booklet for the closed schools to anticipate the needs of the parents and families, but a CD that illustrated geographically the nearest available Catholic schools to receive their children. This prepared anticipation of recruiting the children into other Catholic schools yielded a good response of the children affected by the closings remaining in Catholic schools. The deanery meetings of the school principals helped communication in this process of transition.

Parents in financial need can be assisted by the closing school with communication to other Catholic schools, investigating scholarships or financial arrangements for families with many school-age children. The grief process and other complicating factors affecting the families can be addressed by asking questions found in Figure 1 that relate to their concerns of safety, remembrance, mourning, and reconnection (Herman, 1992).

Figure 1. Group Process Questions for Retreat Format or Small Groups (Herman, 1992)

SAFETY

- Ethical guidelines: Be confidential! Be compassionate! Be communicative!

REMEMBRANCE

- How long have you been at the school?
- Where were you when you first heard “the news” that the school might close or it was suggested that closure might be a possibility?
 - What was your immediate feeling?
- In the present moment, what do you know about the school’s future?
 - What supports you? What energizes you?
 - What is difficult or draining for you?
 - What do you fear the most?
 - What hurts you? What disappoints you?
- As you look back, what will you miss the most?
 - Students and their stories?
 - The faith community from pastor, pastoral staff, principal, other teachers, staff (secretaries, cooks, maintenance people), parents, and families?
 - The stable *heimat* or routine of having work and the meaning and purpose it brought to your life?

MOURNING

- As you mourn, consider your call as educator: what attitude do you have or what do you do that you wouldn’t change, but bring with you in the next stage of work?
- What feeling do you have now as you possibly transition to another stage in life?
- What do you fear the most in the transition?
- Does this loss trigger you into the memory of another loss in your past? What feeling?
- What will you miss the most?
- Who is the source of grief for you? Who hurts you?
- Smedes (1984) says that reconciliation is a process that includes hurt, hate, a need for healing, and a desire to walk with other people once again. Where are you in that process about the school closure?

RECONNECTION

- As you transition, what is your main hope? What will happen to you? Who will care for you?
- What is your supportive network? What could we do to make the school closing easier for you?

COUNSELING INTERVENTIONS WITH MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The loss of this community may not be the first loss of a teacher, staff person, or principal in the school. To help the workshop participants, a handout on the personal history of loss (Zoppo, 1993) was used to help them reflect on multiple losses in their lives (see Table 3).

Table 3

Personal History of Loss

Experience of loss	In my own life	In my school
Acknowledgement	What was my first reaction?	What was my first reaction?
Expression	What did I feel?	What did I feel?
Adjustments	How did I react?	How did I react?
Reintegration	How did I change?	How did I change?
Resolution	How do I reflect about the event?	How do I reflect about the event?
	What do I believe about myself?	What do I believe about myself?
	What has loss/transition taught me?	How do I cope with loss/transition?
	In the future, what about this loss do I dread?	Spiritually, in loss, what comforts me?

Note. Source: Zoppo (1993)

An example of the spiritual implications of loss can be taken from spiritual writers. In this workshop, the words used to portray the influence of St. Louise de Marillac with St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (McNeill & Higgins, 2002) evidence loss in both saints' lives:

I had been looking at my life in one way...
 And then things happened to destroy it...
 To change it...
 And in the midst of the destruction,
 In the midst of the changes,
 I remained faithful to God.
 I held on, and God created something new. (pp. 252-264)

To address closure concerns, Giblin and Ryan (2005) gave a series of questions that could help principals as they prepare teachers and staff to

leave and as they prepare to welcome new teachers and staff. First in closure concerns were the conditions, including such questions as length of stay at school and the degree to which the school served as a support system. Expression of emotion involved expression of feelings or postponement of feelings as well as reaction to others' feelings. Consideration of the history of loss with each teacher or staff person experiencing multiple losses can take an emotional toll. Getting to the unique impact on each person was complicated by how fast the transition to another school seemed possible. Perhaps, the teacher or staff person desired career assessment and movement to another career. Finally, financial considerations played an important role in the concerns of those affected by the closure. How much time did they have for keeping benefits? What was the status of their family situations? Was the teacher a sole-provider?

Principals that focus on the coping strategies of the teachers, staff, or families address the strengths that each one brings to the situation. A discussion of their concerns (i.e., child care, further education, mobility, spousal financial status, benefits, and need for counseling in the form of brief therapy) can assist with transition time. Exploration of strategies that would support the strengths of each person such as journaling, art therapy, guided imagery, or career services could give ways to continue dealing with the loss and its unique impact, particularly, in the summer after the school is closed and crisis-time with the children has passed. Summarizing the options available to the person's discernment and inclusion of their first step of action can be helpful.

SCHOOL RETREAT FORMAT TO ASSIST CLOSURE PROCESS

Group process can be used to remember favorably, through storytelling and shared experiences, the closing of the school. A sample format using Herman's (1992) stages of loss would include the safety theme in the ethical guidelines for retreat participation of being confidential, compassionate, and communicative. The day would be constructed with facilitators and group members having 90 minutes for the theme of remembrance using the questions found in Figure 1. After a 20-minute break, 60 minutes discussing the theme of mourning would be followed by lunch and private reflection for another 60 minutes. The theme of reconnection would be the focus for 60 minutes, and the day would conclude with the prayer ritual (Zander, 2005).

Small groups of seven to eight members are ideal for effective group process. Having more than 12 members can lessen the intimacy of the group. A group facilitator would help the participants by selecting questions that would be appropriate and then, use skills of attending, without distraction,

with each member, as well as reflecting and tracking what is said within the group.

A period of private reflection helps the participants of the retreat bring their thoughts together and gain insight from the feedback of the group members. The prayer segment (Zander, 2005) can bring in the ritual and symbol needed as the group walks throughout the school.

PRAYER RITUAL FOR REMEMBERING AND TELLING THE STORY OF OUR SCHOOL

Zander (2005) gives a framework for the faculty, staff, and students to tell the stories of the school community, honoring what is the reality of the school community presence. Zander states that “remembering allows us to raise up what has taken place, to recall stories of learning and shared faith, of relationships with each other, with children and parents through our stories, faith and tears as well as laughter” (2005, p. 1). A procession is initiated where the group moves from one classroom to another classroom. The use of symbols such as banners, holy water, and the ringing of chimes or bells is encouraged. Each person carries an unlighted candle. The process of storytelling and reflection is repeated in each space.

The principal or designated leader invites everyone to take some quiet time to write a litany prayer. Each person receives four or five pieces of paper with the following “If (name of the School) had only opened its doors, and... (complete it with a sentence that expresses how the school made a difference), it would have been enough. Response: “Thanks be to God!” (Zander, 2005, p. 2). A final prayer ritual includes a reading and the concluding prayer.

THE AFTERNOON WORKSHOP SESSION— CAREER TRANSITIONS

The first part of the Process of Compassion Workshop was focused on addressing the personal and spiritual issues of the participating teacher. However, the second half of the workshop looked primarily at assisting the teachers in transitioning into another teaching position or into another profession. A majority of the participants had been teaching in Catholic schools for many years. Consequently, the teachers’ knowledge of the job market was out-of-date and their skills for job searching had become obsolete. The afternoon presentation was entitled, “Career Transitions.” There were four parts to the presentation: (a) “Determine Your Interests”; (b) “How to Research for a New Job”; (c) “Strategies in Doing Job Searches”; and (d) “Resumes and Electronic Portfolios.”

DETERMINE YOUR INTERESTS

The presenter made the critical connection between the materials of the first half of the workshop on loss and transition and determining one's interests. The emotional, psychological, and spiritual work must come to some healing before a person can successfully determine his or her own interests and move on in his or her career. It was highly encouraged that the participants work through the loss and begin framing their career transition more as an opportunity for personal growth and professional development. This kind of positive and proactive attitude will present most favorably to future employers.

The first step when considering a career change is to list all the activities, interests, and hobbies you enjoy when not working. Ironically, it is often from this list that people discover a new career field worth pursuing. The workshop participants were encouraged to think creatively and outside-of-the-box when considering what interests them. Furthermore, it was suggested that participants share and discuss their interests with trusted family, friends, and colleagues.

Holland's (1966) career theory and the Holland Type Hexagon were presented as theoretical contexts for determining interests and possible career options. Holland offers a user-friendly framework for conceptualizing, discerning, and considering all possible occupations (Sharf, 2002). Holland views the choice of vocation as an expression or an extension of a person's personality. Therefore, self-knowledge and recognizing the most conducive work environment can help determine vocational choice. There are six work environments and personality types to be considered: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Because people have a wide variety of interests, no one can be described by one type. Holland uses a three-letter code to explain the many possible combinations of environments where a person can work successfully. As a result, the Holland framework offers people a considerable variety of career options.

The participants were invited to explore their career options by investigating interest and career inventories, free and for purchase, that are available on the Internet. For example, the participants could purchase Holland's (1966) inventory, the *Self-Directed Inventory* on the web (Holland, 2001). In addition, The Career Key website (Jones, 2005) provides a free career test based on Holland's theory.

Another helpful instrument that identifies personality types is the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI; Myers, 1998). The MBTI complements and works well with the *Self-Directed Inventory* (Holland, 2001). A brief explanation was provided about the MBTI and the different personality types. The participants were given a list of websites that provide free versions of the MBTI.

HOW TO RESEARCH

Once a person has determined his or her interests and narrowed his or her career options, the next step is to research career preferences. The best-known resource for researching a career in print is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Other online resources were explained and made available to the participants: (a) Occupational Information Network, <http://online.onetcenter.org>; (b) <http://www.salary.com>; and (c) the National Association of Realtors' salary calculator, <http://www.homefair.com/homefair/calc/salcalc.html> (Wolfinger, 2000).

JOB SEARCHES STRATEGIES

Participants were told not to underestimate the effectiveness of contacting and talking to networks and contacts. In addition, informational interviews should be an integral part of the networking and job-hunting plan. An informational interview involves talking with people who are currently working in the field to gain a better understanding of an occupation or industry—and to build a network of contacts in that field.

Attending job fairs is another means to make contacts and gather information. Career Services at Eastern Illinois University (<http://www.jobsvr.eiu.edu>) provide information about job fairs and other online resources. A list of local job fairs and dates was provided to the participants.

The internet provides many general job banks to search and research jobs. Job banks allow you to use keywords in searching for specific skills, locations, job titles, or specific businesses and professions. The job banks are also utilized by employers when searching for potential employees. There are some job banks that are free and other sites that require registration and/or a fee for use. Job banks offer many different services to both job seekers and employers. Some job banks allow employers to post job openings and job seekers to post their resumes. One job bank, for example, called 4Work.com (<http://www.4work.com>) will email job seekers when a job opens that matches their specific interests (Wolfinger, 2000).

Other helpful resources are alumni career centers that are attached to colleges and universities. The participants were encouraged to contact their university's career center to inquire about alumni contacts working in their professional field. The career centers can provide industry information, expertise, education, and practice interviews

The participants were also given a list of online job resources in five categories: (a) education, (b) nonprofit, (c) government, (d) employment/staffing agencies, and (e) volunteerism.

RESUMES AND ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIOS

The final part of the career transitions segment focused on the role and importance of the professional resume. The participants were highly encouraged to either compile a new resume or update their present resume. In most cases, the resume is the gateway document that determines if prospective job candidates are invited for a face-to-face interview. Employers receive many resumes each day and they often quickly skim through them. Therefore, it is important that one's resume catch a prospective employer's attention and interest (Literacy Education Online, 2005).

There are several principles that need to be present when planning a resume. First, and most importantly, resumes need to be attractive and have eye appeal. Those seeking employment want potential employers to notice their resume buried beneath the many other resumes. Also, of important consideration is the professional image and message that a resume can communicate to potential employers. Second, resumes ought to be clear and easily readable. It is advisable to avoid lengthy narratives with too much detail. Therefore, it is important that information be carefully selected to highlight qualifications. Third, resumes should be organized according to pertinent professional areas or categories. The following categories of information are usually included in resumes: (a) identification which includes your name and contact information; (b) professional objective; (c) education background; (d) experience; (e) other professional activities and honors; and (f) references (Literacy Education Online, 2005). It was suggested that the participants list their experience before their education on their resume. The number of years and diversity of experience in education are often the most marketable items in gaining future employment. Fourth, it is recommended that participants ask other professional colleagues to proofread and offer critical feedback on their resumes.

Finally, it is important not to include any personal information such as age, marital status, disability, or religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds in a resume. Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; 1990), and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA; 1967), it is illegal to discriminate in any aspect of employment. Moreover, it is illegal for potential employers to inquire about personal information other than job qualifications and experiences.

The job market expects professionals to be more and more knowledgeable and proficient in technology. Besides a well prepared paper resume, the participants were encouraged to develop an electronic portfolio on the Internet. The electronic portfolio demonstrates to potential employers some of your technology skills. It also makes your professional information more widely available to potential employers and interested parties.

The participants viewed a video about career portfolios by Bongsu-Petersen and Childs (2004). The video presentation outlined the role of the portfolio, how to organize a portfolio, and how to make the portfolio electronically available for employers. The participants were shown several demonstration electronic portfolios of DePaul University's graduate students in Human Services and Counseling. Finally, the presenter offered assistance to any participants needing any help in establishing an electronic portfolio.

THE FINAL SEGMENT OF THE WORKSHOP—THE CHALLENGE TO MINISTRY WHILE GRIEVING

The final segment of the program was a concluding prayer and reflection on the theme of the wounded healer. Based on the title of Nouwen's (1972) book, the service called individuals to the realization that ministry to students, parents, and colleagues was not suspended because of their own brokenness, but rather that their personal pain and suffering should become a source from which they can draw in ministering to others. The service was twofold: first a reflection on the Paschal Mystery and our own sharing in that mystery was offered, and second, an outward action that called each participant to offer a blessing prayer for another person at their table was presented. This was no mere sharing of pain. Rather, it was each participant allowing his or her own experience of being wounded to soften his or her heart toward the other in his or her woundedness. The opportunity for participants to minister to one another was a powerful closing to the day.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Programs such as the Process of Compassion Workshop are successful only with a spirit of collaboration. The cooperation of the Office of Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the financial and office support of the Big Shoulders Fund, and the generosity of the president of the university, who saw the project as an extension of the Vincentian mission, made the program a reality. The common goal of these diverse institutions was simple and straightforward: to provide support and show appreciation to those individuals who have dedicated their lives to these Catholic schools.

The level of stress among administrators and staff of the archdiocese's struggling schools began long before the closure announcements. Many administrators, faculty, and parents felt abandoned, hurt, or betrayed. The goal of the program was not simply to offer information, but to provide a space for participants to process their own grief and to have the opportunity to experience the care of a wider Church community. Despite a sense of political tension during the process of announcing the closures and the after-

math, the contentiousness of the politics was not allowed to be the focus of the day. The informal written workshop evaluation responses with the simple response, “Thanks for caring,” were evidence of the success of this pastoral goal. The challenge for each of the participants has been to provide compassion to those committed to their care.

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