

PASTORAL CARE OF SOCIALLY VULNERABLE GROUPS

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Abstract:

The article *Pastoral Care of Socially Vulnerable Groups* focuses on the meaning and importance of pastoring socially vulnerable individuals. It outlines the important points of this pastoral care, including the provision of support and care to people in distress. It presents different perspectives, methods and practices in terms of pastoral care. It sees as central the importance of building a relationship of trust and a holistic approach to individuals at risk of social exclusion. The paper highlights the central role of pastoral care in supporting those facing poverty, homelessness, addiction and other forms of social exclusion. It looks at opportunities for social inclusion, alleviating stigma and promoting awareness of one's values through faith and inclusion in the Christian community. Explores the opportunities and challenges facing the pastoral care of socially vulnerable individuals in today's social environment.

Keywords: discrimination, spiritual support, community, pastoral care, assistance, socially vulnerable groups, social commitment, social exclusion.

Introduction

Social vulnerability is a condition in which individuals or groups of people are alienated or isolated, even partially, from the social, economic, cultural or political processes of a given society. This phenomenon can take many forms and can affect a wide range of individuals' lives. Social vulnerability is often associated with poverty, discrimination, unemployment, and lack of access to education and health care, but also with limited opportunities to participate in social life.

Factors that can contribute to social vulnerability, including structural inequalities, include discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, social class or other factors. The consequences can be severe and include not only material deprivation but also mental, emotional and spiritual suffering.

The pastoral care of socially vulnerable groups is an important aspect of society that focuses on providing support and care to people in distress. Pastoral care in this context is not limited to religious organisations but includes a wide range of professional and voluntary activities aimed at improving the quality of life of vulnerable people.

This article will focus on the importance of pastoring socially vulnerable groups, highlighting some aspects of the support provided. The cornerstone of this care is the role of individuals, families and communities.

Pastoral care is not only about providing material help but also about building intimate relationships with individuals to overcome their difficulties and find the way to a full life. Pastoral care aims to support individuals or groups to achieve a better quality of life and to cope with difficult life situations. We will focus on how pastoral care can help to promote social integration, alleviate stigma and promote independence for those in difficult life situations.

Social vulnerability and the majority of society

Preventing and combating social vulnerability usually involves comprehensive approaches at the level of governments, social programmes and education. Creating an inclusive society that respects and promotes diversity can play a key role in reducing social exclusion. Social exclusion is a complex social phenomenon that refers to a condition where individuals or groups of people are alienated or excluded from ordinary social life. This condition can take different forms and can affect individuals or entire communities.

Social exclusion has a negative impact on the individual, the community and the majority of society as a whole. The socially excluded also often face discrimination and stigmatisation. These two concepts are closely related. They reflect negative attitudes or behaviours towards individuals or groups based on different characteristics. In essence, both attitudes can have serious consequences for those involved. It is important to remember that different organisations may have different approaches to pastoring the socially vulnerable and that the field often combines multiple aspects, including spiritual, emotional and practical oversight of individuals and communities in distress. Social exclusion is often complex and the interaction of these factors can lead to different levels of exclusion (Vágnerová, 2014).

Types of social exclusion

The types of social exclusion can often be complementary and interacting, so addressing them requires a comprehensive approach taking into account different factors. Social exclusion itself can take many forms and manifestations, for example:

- Economic exclusion - people can be socially excluded due to a lack of financial resources, which can lead to poverty, unemployment and limited access to basic needs such as housing, food, and healthcare. All of this can then lead to limited opportunities to participate in society.
- Social isolation - sometimes people or groups perceive isolation from society. This may be due to limitations in social relationships, lack of friends, family relationships, and involvement in community life.
- Discrimination - discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or other factors can lead to social exclusion.
- Health problems - people with chronic illnesses or disabilities may face social exclusion due to physical or mental limitations.
- Educational exclusion - lack of access to education can cause social exclusion because people do not have the opportunity to develop their skills and abilities. There are also difficulties in obtaining employment and limited opportunities for personal and professional development.
- Separation from family and community - the loss or possible absence of family or community support can lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion.
- Migration and homelessness - the lack of anchorage in society due to cultural, linguistic and religious barriers often leads to exclusion from the majority

society.

- It is undeniable that political or labour exclusion, for example, has an impact on social vulnerability. Also, exclusion in terms of criminal history or age (Opatrný, 2014).

Feelings of alienation can have negative effects on an individual's physical and mental health and overall quality of life. Working to strengthen social bonds, promoting inclusion and respecting diversity are key steps towards prevention and solutions. Professional support, social programmes and community initiatives can play an important role in supporting people who feel alienated.

Social engagement

Social engagement is a term that refers to the active involvement of individuals or groups in social issues or problems to make a positive contribution to the groups' society in activities or projects that have a positive impact on society or address social issues. This engagement can be voluntary, organised through non-profit organisations, or can be part of an individual effort for change.

Social engagement plays an important role in building a strong and responsible society. It helps individuals to engage in issues that affect their community and the world around them and contributes to overall social and cultural development. It can be motivated by compassion, the pursuit of justice, a desire for change and an awareness of social responsibilities.

Several key elements of social engagement include:

- Volunteering - is one of the most widespread forms of social engagement, where individuals volunteer to help an organisation with a charitable purpose.
- Activism - is to push through the necessary changes in society, whether through protest or petitioning, or participation in campaigns or events that seek to change or improve specific social, political or environmental issues.
- Community involvement - includes active participation in local projects, organisations or activities that strengthen community bonds and improve life in the region.
- They provide support and assistance to people in need, whether financially, practically or emotionally.
- Social engagement - may include participation in various educational programmes or workshops to raise awareness of social issues and stimulate discussion. It also includes promoting inclusiveness, combating discrimination

and promoting equal opportunities (Martinek, 2010).

Some socially committed individuals focus on changing systems and structures that ultimately lead to social or environmental problems. They provide public education on social issues, and education can be a key element of social engagement.

Caring for socially vulnerable groups from a pastoral perspective

Pastoral care for the socially vulnerable is a form of spiritual and emotional support provided to people facing various social difficulties and vulnerabilities. This care may be provided by churches, religious organisations or voluntary groups interested in helping those in difficult situations.

The term pastoral care is usually used in a religious context - especially in the tradition based on Christianity and refers to the help and support provided by clergy within religious or church communities. It can be understood as care in the light of religious values and beliefs, to strengthen faith, offer support and contribute to the development of the Christian community (cf. *Jas* 2:15-17). The term pastoral care can have many meanings - it always depends on the context and religious tradition. Pastoring socially excluded people is an important aspect of pastoral work in the church. It involves specific efforts and care directed towards those facing various forms of social exclusion.

In terms of pastoring the socially vulnerable, this may include providing support and assistance to people facing various disadvantages such as poverty, homelessness, unemployment or other difficulties.

The aim of pastoral care for the socially vulnerable is not only to address the practical needs of these people, such as access to food, clothing or housing but also to provide support for spiritual needs and emotional stability, which often takes place based on specific social challenges, such as the aforementioned homelessness, poverty, unemployment, etc. It is also necessary not to neglect encouragement in difficult life situations. This can include prayer, personal conversations, group meetings, sharing religious values and principles, and helping people find strength in their faith or spiritual beliefs. Pastoral care for vulnerable groups often combines practical and spiritual aspects as it seeks to look holistically at the person and their needs (Opatrný, 2013).

A key element of this care is empathy, understanding and an active effort to help people overcome social difficulties, with an emphasis on providing support not only physically, mentally, and emotionally but especially spiritually.

Elements of pastoral care for the socially vulnerable

Spiritual support is the sense of providing spiritual guidance and encouragement to people in difficult situations, by providing a space to share religious or spiritual questions, prayers, spiritual direction, religious teaching, advice, support and counselling to promote spiritual growth, or providing Bible study support.

Prayer and prayer support is an integral part of this. Prayer and spiritual support are a key element of pastoral care. Prayer can be directed to the specific needs of individuals and the community. Religious ceremonies - services, baptisms, weddings, funerals - are also provided as part of spiritual support and pastoral care.

Emotional support in the sense of providing a space for expressing emotions, listening, encouraging, understanding and addressing the emotional needs of vulnerable people. The emphasis is on building emotional support during difficult times. Providing psychological and emotional support is crucial as socially vulnerable individuals may experience greater pressure and stress.

Individual care, listening and counselling, are because every person is unique and so are their needs. Thorough listening, interviewing and analysis of the situation and needs lead to individualized and effective help (Nakonečný, 2003).

Practical assistance providing concrete material aid in the form of food, clothing, accommodation or other basic needs. The aim is to improve practical conditions and minimise the problems faced by socially vulnerable individuals. Support for basic needs for socially vulnerable people is a key element in the process of combating social exclusion. Basic needs include the most essential aspects of human life, such as food, housing, healthcare and education. Providing help and support in crisis, such as the death of a loved one, illness or other difficult life situations.

Community engagement, involvement in community activities and the creation of projects and programmes that aim to strengthen social cohesion and mutual aid in the community. Active community involvement can be supportive and create a strong network for those at risk. Joint activities and projects can strengthen the sense of belonging. Creating a safe space where people feel accepted, respected and supported in their journeys and challenges. It is important to have empathy for their situation and not assume that everyone experiences the same problems or has the same needs. Inform other members of society about the specific challenges faced by particular individuals.

Inclusion in the church community is an important element of pastoral care

as it involves support in finding a spiritual identity and place within the church. In this way, they can find support and friendship. Inclusion may include active participation in worship, Bible study, participation or active assistance in church activities.

The fight against discrimination and stigmatisation is one of the challenges, as is the fight against labelling. The Church has the capacity to act as an advocate and promoter of justice and equality, to promote a change in attitudes in society and to defend the rights of those who experience injustice.

State of alienation from society

Socially vulnerable individuals often experience feelings of alienation from the community. Alienation refers to a condition in which an individual or group experiences feelings of isolation, exclusion or disconnection from the social community or wider environment. This condition can have different causes and manifestations.

Alienation from the community can have serious consequences for an individual's physical and mental health. People who experience alienation may be more susceptible to mental illness, feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem. Addressing alienation requires a comprehensive approach, including the provision of social support, opportunities for social inclusion and improved social, economic and cultural conditions (Nákonečný, 2003).

Some of the main factors associated with alienation from the community:

- Social isolation, where lack of social interaction and interpersonal relationships in the community, but also in the family, can lead to loneliness and isolation. This results in emotional or physical alienation.
- Lack of acceptance such as lack of emotional support or feelings of acceptance can create alienation. Some people experience the feeling of not being respected in the community.
- Poverty, unemployment and economic hardship can lead to alienation from the community as individuals may not have access to basic needs and opportunities.
- Disrupted intergenerational relationships, where conflicts or disrupted family or community relationships can contribute to alienation.
- A sense of loss of meaning, goals or purpose can lead to alienation from the community. Often these feelings accompany mental illnesses such as

depression or anxiety, the individual may not be able to engage in social life (Martinek, 2010).

Working to strengthen social ties, promoting inclusion and respecting diversity are key steps towards preventing and addressing alienation from communities. Professional support, social programmes and community initiatives can play an important role in supporting people who feel alienated.

Principles and practices of pastoral work

Pastoral care for the socially vulnerable seeks to combine a spiritual dimension with practical help to provide comprehensive support for people in difficult life situations. Organisations and groups undertaking this form of pastoral care can work in partnership with other humanitarian and social organisations to respond more effectively to the needs of those who are socially vulnerable. The aim is to take a holistic approach to caring for the individual, taking into account their spiritual, emotional and practical needs in the context of social vulnerability.

Pastoring the socially excluded is spiritual and pastoral work aimed at providing support, love and religious guidance to people facing social exclusion. Spiritual leaders play a key role in providing care, encouragement and hope to these individuals.

Clergy, pastors can set an example for their community by showing love, care and justice to the vulnerable. This can inspire others to adopt a similar attitude.

Pastoring the socially vulnerable should be sensitive to the unique needs and challenges of this group of people. It aims to bring hope, love and opportunities for positive change into their lives.

Pastoral work with socially vulnerable people requires a sensitive and comprehensive approach. Here are some general principles and practices that can be useful and bear fruit in pastoral care:

- Empathy and understanding - the ability to empathise and understand is the basis for effective work with socially excluded individuals. Seeking to understand and respect their personal stories, experiences and feelings. It is imperative to give respect and deference as we show to anyone else.
- Low-threshold services - to create an environment that is friendly and safe for socially excluded individuals. Provide services that are accessible and low-threshold to reduce barriers to participation.
- Building trust, as trust is a key element. Work to build trust between the

clergy or religious community and socially excluded people. It is imperative to be reliable and keep promises. An individual approach is also necessary, as each person may have unique needs and it is important to treat each person as unique. Understand needs, goals, and abilities and choose plans that are tailored to specific situations and individuals.

- Personal contact, visiting and listening, as the physical presence of a clergy member strengthens social support and assistance, which in turn helps to create a spiritual community. Listening is an essential element of effective communication, enabling people at risk to communicate their stories, concerns and needs. As part of visiting and listening, clergy can lead individual or group prayer times, which are an essential element of pastoral care, as prayer is a means of expressing hope, faith and commitment to change in difficult times.
- Mental health promotion - socially vulnerable or excluded individuals often face mental health challenges. Mental health promotion should be part of the assistance provided and, where necessary, provide them with specialist care, especially in cases of trauma or crisis. If an individual is experiencing trauma, for example, pastoral care can and should offer a space for expressing grief, finding meaning and building hope, as spiritual issues and conflicts can surface in difficult life situations. This is where some form of education about religious and spiritual issues should then come in and can strengthen the individual's faith.
- Practical help - this includes help in areas such as finding work, housing, education and healthcare. By taking practical steps, you can help to improve one's living conditions. Offering opportunities for education and training is also part of improving the position of a vulnerable person. Improving skills can increase the chances of getting a job and better integration into society.
- Community engagement - one of the important aspects is community engagement. Community support can play a key role in overcoming social exclusion. Working with local organisations and other entities. Pastoral care should include family support, joint prayer and support for family ties.
- Strengthening self-confidence - Strengthening the self-confidence of socially excluded individuals promoting self-perception and identifying their abilities and strengths is also one of the prevention programmes to reduce the risk of returning to social exclusion. This may include support to maintain employment, social skills and personal development (Opatrný, 2014).

Conclusion

Pastoring the socially excluded can be a challenge, but it can also bring deep meaning and value to the church community. It is about caring for one another, sharing love and breaking down barriers that can separate people from others and God's love.

Working with the socially excluded requires patience, openness and commitment. It is important to be aware that each individual has their own story and journey, and the approach should be respectful and supportive.

Pastoral care in socially difficult situations should be respectful of the individual's needs. Its aim should be to strengthen the spiritual, emotional and social stability of the individual in accordance with his/her values and religious convictions. Each person is unique and loved by God, so we treat even the socially vulnerable individual as God's chosen.

It can be concluded that the pastoral care of the socially excluded plays a key role in building bridges between society and those on its margins. It is a mission that requires empathy, love and patience, but also the ability to see the possibilities and value of each individual. Working with these people is not just a matter of aid and charity, but rather a process of active involvement, understanding their needs and finding ways to integrate them fully into society. The focus should be not only on providing material assistance but also on mental health support, skills development and creating space for social integration.

Clergy working with these people become agents of God's love and justice, and their efforts can bring transformation not only to individuals but to entire communities. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the success of pastoring the socially excluded is not just about quick fixes, but about building relationships over time and gradually developing trust. Empathy, respect and the ability to listen to the needs of individuals play a key role in this work.

But this is not only a task for the Church, but a challenge for the whole society. It is essential to work with non-profit organisations, public institutions and businesses to develop a comprehensive approach to tackling social exclusion. Creating safe spaces, promoting education, employment and psychosocial care are key components of this process.

Pastoral work on social exclusion should be promoted and developed across the different churches and religious communities. This not only demonstrates love for our neighbours but also reflects the biblical imperative to help those on the margins of society. Overall, pastoring the socially excluded is not only a moral imperative but also a means of building a more fairer and compassionate

society where each individual can find support and opportunities for personal development.

Cooperation with public institutions, non-profit organisations and other entities that can provide support in the field of professional services and programmes aimed at social inclusion is also an important aspect. At the same time, it is important to recognise and respect each person's individual stories and experiences, as each case of social exclusion is unique.

In today's world full of challenges and differences, pastoring the socially excluded has the potential to be a light of hope and love. Although the path to an inclusive society can be difficult, the work of pastoral workers inspires and points the way to a fulfilled and full life for all. We need to be aware of this challenge and seek common solutions that will lead to building a better and fairer society for all of us.

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