

THE PRESENCE APPROACH, AN INTRODUCTORY SKETCH OF A PRACTICE

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Prof. Dr. Andries J. Baart, 2002

Global view of the presence practice

Professional social workers stick to a characteristic way of handling social problems. Usually they try to reformulate the stagnations in a client's life, opening them up for theory-driven diagnosis. In so doing, they change the client's acting – often chaotic and failing – into a rather orderly, well-defined problem that can be situated in a systematic, construed configuration of understandings of causes, effects and remedies. As a rule, solutions are a compromise between what the client wishes to achieve and what methodically can be done, controlled or reasonably predicted. In order to induce the solution, the social worker adds, according to the previously determined plan and only temporarily, some expertise to the client system, which guarantees an efficient, effective and competent procedure. Having thus “intervened”, he or she withdraws as soon as the job is done or time and money are spent; in the worse case, the intervention may be unsuccessful and the case may appear hopeless.

Though more detailed distinctions and precision are possible, it will not be difficult to recognise in this picture the average care provider and social worker, and, more generally, the methodology of their care giving. This is approximately how the physician works, as does the welfare worker, health visitor, district nurse, youth helper, urban renovator, community organizer, community center worker, educator, rehabilitation officer, et cetera. Even the pastor adopts this course of action. Most have been trained in this tradition and are paid to employ it. This approach enjoys a sufficient rate of success and therefore has significant social value.

Nevertheless, there is a very different way of handling social problems. In this paper it will be presented as a preferable methodology, offering advantages that have been neglected of late. To start with, we will give a general impression of this approach, which we call the “presence approach”. The differences with the earlier-mentioned “intervention approach” are striking. Next, we describe in detail how this alternative approach is carried out – its methods, attitudes, themes, professional roles, goals, values, results and effects – developing step by step our argument in favour of the “presence approach.” This article rests heavily on our research (1993-2000) in the field of urban mission, carried out in several poor and disadvantaged neighbourhoods and districts in the Netherlands. A comprehensive disquisition of our findings and the theoretical framing of the research can be found in Andris Baart, *Een theorie van de presentie* (Utrecht 2001).



The neighborhood pastoral ministers we have investigated work in an entirely different manner. Characteristic of them is that they *are there for others* without focusing directly on problem solving. Problem solving can indeed emerge from their efforts, but that is not their overt intention. The most important thing these pastoral ministers bring is the faithful offering of themselves: being there, making themselves available, coming along to visit and listen, drinking coffee together or sharing a meal, completing a small household project, running errands, accompanying another on a doctor visit, going for a walk together, visiting a grave site, sending a birthday card, playing together on the street, being there when a child takes its final swimming test. Countless examples could apply.

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Many of these forms of pastoral outreach are less rosy than those just described. At times the neighborhood pastoral ministers are present to severe domestic violence, problems stemming from addictions, and structural problems that threaten communities as a whole. Probably one is little inclined to qualify this conduct as “professional,” let alone would one put it on a par with social interventions mentioned earlier. But it is important to keep in mind that the presence approach does not orient itself to solving identified problems as such. *Instead the focus goes to the cultivation of caring relationships, and the approach is deemed successful even when there is no evidence of concrete problems being solved.*

This alternative to more “professional” or instrumental forms of outreach, which we call the ‘presence approach’ has been the subject of a seven-year-long qualitative, practical-theological research. The research has studied the work of professional pastoral workers who, in line with the presence approach, work and live in resource-poor neighborhoods. In very specific terms, we have described the practice (identifying methods and patterns) of these pastoral ministers. We have attended closely to variants within their approach and have studied preconditions and effects, taking into account the reactions of neighborhood residents as well. On the basis of these explorations and descriptions, we have published a far-reaching “theory of presence” (Andries Baart, *Een theorie van de presentie*, Utrecht 2001). In the present sketch we will not go into the underlying theology, but will offer instead a sketch of the practice of presence, as a means of introduction.

The Work of the Presence Practitioners

In the following description of the work of neighborhood pastoral ministers, who employ the presence approach, we concentrate on their relationship with neighborhood residents, though the pastoral ministers do have (sometimes intensive) contact with social workers, educators, community officials and church leaders.

General set-up and design

Characteristic of the neighborhood pastorate we have investigated is that it by design operates with-

out a predetermined pastoral identity, agenda or focus of attention. It gains form and content from more or less incidental encounters, which over time grow into longstanding contacts and trusting relationships. In the context of maintaining and deepening such relationships, the pastoral ministers normally come into contact with integral social systems of the neighborhood (whole families, whole streets, etc.).

The pastoral ministers, as much as possible, enter into the lives, journeys and histories of the neighborhood residents in ways that are not predetermined. In the course of this slowly developing association emerges an articulation of hopes, pain, shortcomings, satisfactions and needs. Insofar as one can speak of objectives for the pastoral ministry of presence, they come directly out of this process of articulation. The actual design for the ministerial work, then, comes as the result of long-lasting, open-ended processes and not as the product of plans developed ahead of time.

Methods and instigation

Methodologically speaking, this sort of neighborhood pastoral outreach is only possible through long-term non-interventionist exposure to life in the neighborhood, the acquisition and maintenance of an exposure oriented disposition and, thereupon, the gradually developed professional strategy of presence. Belonging to this overall methodology we find the following catchwords: patience, unconditional attentiveness and receptivity. The neighborhood pastorate makes free use of rather loose and mixed contact forms that attach themselves closely to the ordinary patterns of daily life in the neighborhood, adhering to local rhythms, familiar structures and prevailing languages. Over time exposure leads to intense forms of engagement and the assumption of (overseeable, role-appropriate) responsibilities. This overall methodology is designated, as we have said, as the *presence approach*.

On the level of individual methods, special emphasis goes to the winning of trust, the maintenance of personal contact and participation (support / coaching) in the handling of existential questions and critical moments of decision. Typically, the professional interventions in such circumstances are either

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purely instrumental or are gratuitous. By “instrumental,” we mean: helping with a concrete task or solving a practical problem. By “gratuitous,” we mean: being there “for its own sake” if there is something to celebrate, grieve, live through or discuss. But in the execution of such instrumental and gratuitous handlings, the pastoral minister seeks opportunities to bring to articulation underlying histories, feelings, uncertainties and to systematically thematize the same. In this way often other, more involved problems and experiences come to the surface. This all happens in an open structure, on the go, and not according to a strict schedule or in the confidence of a quiet office. Such forms of contact usually start with one member of the social system (family, club, street), but we often see that the presence ministers strive for involvement with the whole system. *And that is also necessary to be able to understand something of the daily social context in which the problems or happy events present themselves.* In light of that, we see methods that are directed to the opening up of communication channels, the enlargement of handling repertoires and social base, the formation of networks around people, and the development of community and social empowerment. Of course, several skills, techniques and strategies are part of the methods that the pastoral ministers use to position themselves in the network of the Church and regular social welfare system. The main issue for the last example is especially focused on cooperation, in which the neighborhood ministry needs to find the right balance between affiliation and distance and between the development of its own identity regarding loyalty to its own mission (which is not always the same as the social welfare work) and the functional attunement for that work.

Themes and roles

Often the neighborhood residents do not lay out clear questions or problems for the pastoral ministers. In many cases, life is just being shared. At crucial moments, but also in less tense moments, often this results in an appeal to the pastoral minister and sometimes this results in specific requests for help, or the pastoral minister himself / herself draws attention to points of stagnation in life. *The first and most dominant theme in the pastoral contact are ordinary life stories and the actual conduct of life*

of the neighborhood residents, who are often marginalized and socially deprived.

But if we look at the more specific requests for help, then there are three basic themes: (1) themes on the surface (or: domain sector); (2) roles and expectations; (3) in-depth themes.

1. On the surface, one is struck by an enormous breadth of themes. Contacts bring attention to far-ranging matters, which include: health and hygiene (including addiction problems), housing, work, personal financial issues (including welfare payments, pensions, debts, insurance, taxes), parenting and family issues, sexuality, social problems (including violence, loneliness, difficulties with neighbors), access to social welfare resources, and confrontations with bureaucratic institutions. The presence practitioners, in other words, do not operate in relation to a specific domain. They cross domains, as the requests do.

2. On the level of expectations, roles and practices, we see that the presence practitioners above all (literally) live with others, make room for their stories and, where necessary, help these stories to greater fluidity. Sometimes that happens, as in cases where children are involved, in more practical than “narrative” ways.

In almost all cases the pastoral ministers are recognized as such, and on occasion explicit questions are put to them concerning the Church, religious beliefs, or life’s meaning. They also fulfill simple ritual roles. But that is not the priority of their work. They do not seek to evangelize others. The pastoral ministers appear to function often as confidants and as identification figures, as possibilities for attachment and as orientation point, and as bearers of social-cultural capital. Such trustworthy and safe figures are a rarity in the designated neighborhoods and often come to be exceptionally valued. These roles become fulfilled through a mixture of (especially) empathic and (less frequently) confrontational engagements. In a metaphorical sense, the pastoral ministers have the role of acquaintance, friend, brother or sister, good neighbor or parent. Neighborhood residents use such terms to describe

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the presence practitioners, often because of the affective dimension of their mutual involvement.

Against this background, it is possible to help people make progress amid their daily challenges and bring them into contact with existing social (institutional) resources (such as health care providers, government programs, educational opportunities, Church programs, etc.). Besides this, we see that in many cases neighborhood residents are helped to sustain and endure, even when their circumstances have (inescapably) remained substantially unchanged. And sometimes nothing else can be done beyond signalling risks and problems and transferring those signals to the appropriate agencies (medical confidant, case worker, etc.), or, when possible, mediating contacts.

3. Thematically speaking, the neighborhood pastorate is most deeply concerned with identity, coping and orientation questions: neighborhood residents have lost their way, are ready to give up, have lost faith in themselves or the system. They spoil each other's lives, they muddle through, or, most commonly, they are of no account, unseen: neither appreciated nor esteemed nor heard. The point of entry for contact with such persons and the problems they face is not by way of the problems themselves but by way of unplanned forms of incidental contact made possible by the pastoral ministers ongoing presence in the neighborhood.

Objectives and values

The objectives and values – in and of themselves worthy of thoroughgoing theological reflection – which lie behind this practice, center on the recovery and maintenance of the dignity of the most marginalized neighborhood residents and the offering and mobilization of helpful means to that end. An important source of such help is the pastoral minister himself: whose baggage and personality stand in interchange with possibilities of the neighborhood residents themselves. Special emphasis goes to uncovering, celebrating and holding on to *the good* that easily becomes oppressed; in the same vein, the pastoral ministers strive – in contrast to what is usual in the regular welfare work – to create ample room for the processes of articulation, deliberation and decision making concerning (tragic

and painful) dilemmas and to find meaningful, sense-making references for the stagnating life. So, they also try to break *the evil*. Evil in its manifold shapes, like injustice, the transgenerational destiny of poverty, dominant feelings of fear, powerlessness and worthlessness, conditions of violence, never-ending antagonisms and the long lasting experience of being socially redundant.

The presence practitioners strive in such environments to affirm the fundamental dignity of the persons they come into contact with, disregarding the question of whether the lives are successful or not. At the same time they activate possibilities for individual development (“becoming the one you are”). They keep their eyes open for processes that easily lead to social (self)exclusion, deviance and the lack of respectability, while seeking to nurture possibilities for participation in social networks that offer personal validation. At this point the practice becomes political. As a rule, the practitioners make use of organic social structures that are already near at hand: they do not attempt to create new structures, projects or groups. Although the pastoral ministers invest energy in bringing others to social resources that can be of help to them, again, the focus is not on the quick elimination of problems. Neighborhood residents understand and appreciate this.

Results and effects

The presence approach is not a wonder drug and makes little of the existing apparatus of social intervention-help provision superfluous. Presence practitioners have time and take time, and they work to ensure that the time available remains “free” (i.e., not filled with secret plans and professional intentions). Out of this standpoint they get to know people and their environment more deeply and find themselves better prepared to assess what is at hand in social situations. They are also in a strong position to share history and build trust with the neighborhood residents. They know and are known by the people of the neighborhood and thus are able to understand local dynamics on multiple levels and contribute to those dynamics in rich ways.

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It appears that, for people who are “socially redundant,” it is a blessing that, besides being served by professional care givers and resource providers, they also have the opportunity to share their experience with others who are more consistently and fully present to that experience. Because presence practitioners also share the daily, nonproblematic and even joyful moments in the lives of neighborhood residents, they make room for the other to shine as a successful and proud person – as joke teller, loving partner, queen of the kitchen, devoted parent. This is not only a great good in itself, but it “helps” too. The integralism of the presence approach is one of its strong advantages. In contrast with domain-specific forms of social outreach, the presence approach crosses domains and disciplines and immerses itself in the depth of personal history and the breadth of multiple social networks. This contrasts sharply with more specialized types of intervention, which involve processes of “screening and intake” and which apply select remedies to specific problems with specific populations – often such parcelling out and fragmentation are necessary, but it is not the way life is lived, let alone traumatized and chaotic lives.

Contained within the values and functioning of the presence approach is a sharp critique of the bureaucratic violence that “the poor” undergo, whereby their story, their dignity and their “problem” (they only thing they possess that bestows them an identity) are all too often too quickly and easily dispensed with. However reasonable, fair and efficient a bureaucracy strives to be, the weakest members of society rarely experience it that way, and that is a serious problem. That there are, as in the presence approach, people who are available without preconditions for access, who will not judge you by your language use, who are free to share lesser and greater moments with you, is a rare good and deserves imitation.

Often, the problems that the presence practitioners encounter are – regardless of whether we believe it or not – simply insoluble and some people turn out to be incorrigible. Other problems need nearly endless time. Other problems relate to the tragedy and the contingency that are parts of life itself. Still others are so firmly attached that they seem likely to

pass only with the generation itself. For such problems, the monomaniacal determination to hastily eliminate problems (through the power of subsidies, programs, new techniques) has the potential to be counterproductive and even destructive. In that context, a trusted and familiar figure who knows how to listen attentively is worth more than an expert tattler. Without giving in to passivity and defeatism, it must be acknowledged that some problems offer no hope for resolution, and it can be of great help to be able to acknowledge as much without the professional needing to withdraw.

The presence *theory* – our primary interest – starts where these descriptions and analyses of practice end, and tries in social-scientific, philosophical and theological terms to specify why the presence approach works and is of value and which understanding of common humanity it implies.

Further readings

If one wants to know more about the research, practice and theory of the presence approach, see Andries Baart, *Een theorie van de presentie*, Lemma, Utrecht 2001 (2nd edition). On specific aspects of the presence approach and on specific fields of application, Andries Baart wrote recently:

- ❑ “De eigen waarde van betrokkenheid”, *Markant* 1999/1, pp. 33-66;
- ❑ “De oogst van de dag”, in: *Verslagboek Studiedag “Samen in de buurt / Op weg naar 2000*, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 12-20; also in *Markant*, 1999/2, pp. 44-49;
- ❑ “Verder dan het lege hart en de hoge borst”, *Tijdschrift voor de Sociale Sector*, 53(1999)10, oktober 1999, pp. 4-11;
- ❑ *Raken aan het geleefde leven*, 's-Hertogenbosch 2000 (freely to order at +31 (0)73 6134134);
- ❑ “Zich afstemmen op de onafgestemden. Hoe professionals marginalen kunnen bereiken”, *Sociale Interventie* 9(2000)1, pp. 4-21;
- ❑ “Ruimte om bij het vreemde te blijven”, *Markant* 2000/3, pp. 11-30; new, slightly rewritten version in *Sociale Interventie* 2002/2, pp. 15-27;
- ❑ “Interpreteren van presentiepraktijken”, in A.J. Baart and F. Vosman (red.), *Theologie in de*

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- wijk: *studiedag*, Utrecht/Den Bosch 2000, pp. 8-12;
- “Verpletterend gewoon”, *Kontaktblad Federatie VPW Nederland*, 2001/1, pp 8-10;
 - “Hoe kom je erbij? Over mogelijke taken van vrijwilligers”, in: *Katholieke betrokkenheid op de samenleving, daar staan we voor. 25 jaar KCWO*, Hengelo 2001, 9-18;
 - “De kunst van het aansluiten”, *MO-Samenlevingsopbouw*, September 2001, # 182, pp. 40-46;
 - “Angst voor het alledaagse en de betekenis van presentie”, Rotterdam: DPC 2001
 - “Het verlangen erbij te zijn”, in: *Studiedag Pastoraat Oude Wijken Rotterdam, het verslag*, Rotterdam: Dekenaat Rijnmond 2001, pp. 10-21
 - “Importbeperkingen. Presentiebeoefening en de verruiming van cliëntverhalen in het humanistisch raadswerk”, *Tijdschrift voor Humanistiek* 2002/2 (in press)
 - “Meer gelijk dan eigen: vermaatschappelijking en presentiebeoefening”, in: Doortje Kal (ed.) (2002): *Teksten over kwartiermaken*, Den Bosch: Actioma (Series: *Actioma-berichten* 2002/2), pp. 25-51.
 - *Aanzetten tot een theorie van de Derde Partij met behulp van de presentietheorie*, Actioma, Den Bosch and LCO, Den Haag 2002 (60 pp.)
 - *Qualität des Lebens am Rande des sozialen Daseins*, Diakonische Verband Deutschland 2002 (approx. 20 pp; in press).
- Special attention to the presence approach is given by Dr. Doortje Kal, mostly in the context of initiatives aiming at the social integration of people with a history of psychiatric problems, see:
- Doortje Kal, *Kwartiermaken. Werken aan ruimte voor mensen met een psychiatrische achtergrond*, Boom, Amsterdam 2001 (dissertation);
 - “De waarde van nabijheid. Over de betekenis van de presentiebenadering,” *Passage*, 10(2001)3, pp. 154-161;
 - “Men zoekt een mens en krijgt een functionaris,” *PSY*, 2001/4;
 - “Erbij blijven,” *Sociale Psychiatrie*, 20(2001) 61, pp. 17-20;
 - together with Dr. Majone Steketee she has interviewed Andries Baart: “De kern is aandacht,” *Deviant June* 2001, nr. 29, pp. 26-29;
 - with Annemiek Onstenk she wrote: “Kwetsbaar en zorgzaam burgerschap. Ruimte voor mensen met een psychiatrische achtergrond,” in: R.P. Hortulanus, J.E.M. Machielse (eds.), *Modern burgerschap*. Elsevier, 's-Gravenhage 2002, pp. 55-67;
 - she is the editor of: *Teksten over kwartiermaken*, Den Bosch: Actioma (Series: *Actioma-berichten* 2002/2);
 - she is also the editor of: *Radiocle aansluiting. Over de presentiebenadering en de geestelijke gezondheidszorg*, Den Bosch: Actioma 2002 (collected lectures and articles).
- See if desired also: www.actioma.nl; the website of the presence approach is still under construction.