

# THE SAFETY NET - A CASE STUDY IN THE EXERCISE OF PASTORAL CARE

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## **The Task**

As minister of a large town centre church, I am responsible for caring for some 300 people who have committed themselves to membership of our church, together with many others who are part of our worshipping congregation or who are associated with the many midweek activities which are an expression of the mission and ministry of our church. In such a context pastoral care inevitably has to be shared if it is to be effective.

## **Underlying Assumptions**

1. Our current ministerial team is made up of three fulltime ministers: in addition to myself as senior minister we have an associate minister (with responsibility for the over-55s) and a youth minister (with responsibility for the under-25s).
2. Along with other task-oriented teams, we have a small pastoral team responsible for overseeing the work of pastoral care in the church. This team is made up of six members, each of whom is responsible for a particular 'area' of the town. Each 'area' is subdivided into four or five care-groups, each of which is led by one or two individuals (often a couple) who in turn are accountable to the member of the pastoral team who is responsible for their area. The pastoral team is led by one of the deacons. My associate and I meet with the pastoral team at their six-weekly meetings.
3. To help us know what is going on in the church we have adopted the use of 6x4 'yellow cards' which are inserted into the front cover of our hymnbooks, and are also always available at the door of the church. On one side is space for visitors to make themselves known; the other side is for regular worshippers to use. At every service mention is made of these cards and everybody is invited to fill them in and return them to one of the ministers.

**Pastoral care is exercised in our church by:**

1. **Every Member**

- \* Encouraging, praying and caring for one another (Every time we welcome new members we promise to 'love, encourage, pray for and care for' them)
- \* giving information on yellow cards (These cards form the agenda for much of the pastoral work of the church)
- \* contacting pastoral team leader and/or ministers (We can only care if we know!)

## **2. Formal/informal networks**

- \* organisations caring for their members (e.g. the Brigades, Thursday Fellowship for older people, and friends caring for one another - sometimes we forget that friends can also be representatives of the church)
- \* passing on information from the 'grapevine' to pastoral team/ministers (don't assume we know because you know)

## **3. Care group leaders** (everyone known to us by name is linked to a care group)

- \* praying for those in their care (prayer is an expression of care)
- \* visiting and listening (ideally everybody in the church should receive at least one visit a year)
- \* communicating with pastoral team leaders (often informally)
- \* meeting together regularly for training, planning & sharing (this month we are focussing on guidelines for caring for the elderly)

## **4. Pastoral team members**

- \* overseeing and coordinating pastoral care
- \* meeting regularly for prayer and sharing of information
- \* visiting people in their areas
- \* maintaining contact with care group leaders
- \* organising 'newcomers' events
- \* welcoming newcomers and introducing them to members able to offer hospitality
- \* organising occasional social activities for their areas (e.g. at Christmas)
- \* bringing recommendations for the revision of the church roll (normally an annual agenda item for the May church meeting)

## **5. The pastoral team leader**

- \* liaising with the senior minister
- \* encouraging pastoral team members
- \* appointing visitors to those requesting membership
- \* keeping the church roll up to date
- \* together with the senior minister updating the church handbook

- \* knowing the names of all who worship with us, ensuring that people are followed up when absent for more than two weeks
- \* encouraging people in their spiritual journey (pastoral care is not just about helping the hurting)
- \* hospital visiting
- \* liaising with social services (this is important when someone needs specialised, professional help)
- \* ‘trouble shooting’ when necessary (helping to overcome the inevitable misunderstandings which arise from time to time)

## 6. The ministers

- \* supporting leaders
- \* counselling people in time of ‘crisis’ (those who need long-term counselling are always referred on to professional agencies)
- \* visiting the hospitalised
- \* encouraging personal growth of members through visiting
- \* building bridges and sharing faith with non-Christians through visiting
- \* following up newcomers by letter and visit (every newcomer who signs a yellow card receives a note from the senior minister)
- \* being available in the ‘pastoral centre’ (that is one reason why the ministers work from an office in the church building)
- \* exercising pastoral care through preaching and worship (our preaching and leading of worship is influenced by our pastoral work during the week)
- \* preparing for and following up weddings, funerals, dedications and baptisms
- \* general visiting (there is no better way of getting to know one another than seeing people in their home)
- \* caring for older people (the associate minister’s particular responsibility)
- \* caring for younger people (the youth minister’s particular responsibility)

**In conclusion:** Inevitably the system is fallible, because it involves people, and so from time to time people fall through the net. Nonetheless an amazing amount of pastoral caring does go on in our church. I am grateful for the many people who in quiet and unobtrusive ways express love and concern to others. As ministers we are privileged to have so many willing to share the task of pastoral care.