

Growing a caring church

Practical guidelines for pastoral care

Wendy Billington

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The need for pastoral care

'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'

JOHN 15:12–13

The compassion of Jesus

The word 'pastoral' conjures up for me a picture of a shepherd gathering together his wandering flock of sheep on the hillside above the Lake of Galilee—lovingly tending, leading, protecting and nurturing them. In John 10:11, Jesus calls himself the 'good shepherd' who would lay down his life for his sheep. Accordingly, the cross, where Jesus gave his life for us in perfect obedience and with infinite compassion, should be a starting point for our pastoral care. As we survey the wonder of the cross, it should move us to show something of that divine compassion to others in both word and deed. As we turn the pages of the Gospels, reading of Jesus' earthly ministry, we are able to contemplate in wonder the love and compassion he showed to those he met who were in physical, spiritual, mental or emotional pain—and his commandment is for us to love one another as he loved us. What a privilege it is to be able to channel and communicate God's love in response to his love for us!

Having this attitude dispels any conflict of priorities we may feel between mission and pastoral care. Preaching Christ and demonstrating his love are facets of the same gospel, with words and deeds operating hand in hand. Paul tells the Colossians to clothe themselves with compassion (Colossians 3:12) as they come face to face with the pain of suffering. The hurting people we meet

in our everyday lives, trapped in a variety of personal problems, are no different from those whom Jesus himself, the Colossians and others living at that time encountered. Joys and sorrows, births and deaths are part and parcel of life throughout all generations, requiring the same response of compassion and love.

Relational community

We are created to have relationships with both God and with one another. John Donne's famous line 'No man is an island' reflects the wisdom and reality of this truth. As Christians, we are in a relationship of mutual love and care for one another, and that love and care will involve us in helping one another, both spiritually and practically. We enter a relationship in which we can bring God's love and his word to nurture others. We read in Mark 2 of the paralysed man whose need moved his friends to action, so that they brought him to Jesus for forgiveness and healing. May we, too, be moved with compassion to bring a needy person to Jesus to receive his forgiveness and healing touch.

Within a home group setting, we can learn to move away from an individualistic approach to pastoral care and offer care to one another as a community of believers. I love the Greek word *koinonia*, which has no exact equivalent in the English language but can be taken to mean 'unified fellowship'. In Acts 2:42, Luke describes this community life, which the Spirit brings, when he writes that the first believers 'devoted themselves to... fellowship'.

Tackling concerns

As we enjoy *koinonia* with one another, at any one time within our groups there is likely to be someone whose life needs a bit of attention—some kind of 'needle and thread' repair. The way we

tackle the repair, and with what tools, will vary according to the need. Perhaps it is helpful to see the group leader as an overseer of the repair kit, offering the various needles and threads to members of the team, to use for whatever mending task comes to light. The process of repair with the needle may be quite painful and the resultant patch a bit flawed, but it will be a lot better than the vulnerable gaping hole that it is replacing.

It is a joy and a privilege to be involved as a band of believers in such repair work, and this book is designed to encourage us not to take the soft option of ignoring a particular concern, but to develop an awareness of our members' needs and become better equipped to meet them. If a listening ear is required, we might want to address the barriers that prevent us from listening well, to improve our skills. We might also want to learn how to respond to a crisis, relationship problem or major life change in our own experience—or, when appropriate, to refer the situation to others.

Counter-productive attitudes

As we care for others, we may well come face to face with obstacles that are difficult to overcome. The Christian is as vulnerable to problems as the non-believer. Because we have a personal relationship with an all-loving God who forgives and indwells us by his Holy Spirit, we sometimes encounter a belief and expectation that we should be able to 'cope' with problems, and any failure is interpreted as stemming from a lack of faith. This attitude can exacerbate any existing difficulties. Denying that there is a problem can be another way of making things worse. Some people are afraid to admit to it because they believe they will lose credibility in the eyes of the church, so they take the easier option of continuing to act normally as a member of Christ's body, not asking for help and hoping that the problem will go away.

The home group

This book is written with leaders in mind, and particularly leaders of home groups. Maybe you are in a small church, leading the one and only home group; or, like myself, you are in a large church, leading one of many such groups; or perhaps you are a member of a cell church. The material in this book is relevant to all, irrespective of model and size. A vital role of the home group is, I believe, to apply the truth of the Bible to everyday life, enabling members to help one another to adopt a significantly different lifestyle from those encouraged by current culture and social norms. Members are also called to come alongside those who, due to their brokenness, are unable to function effectively in God's service and in response to life's demands.

As a body of believers, we all have a responsibility to encourage one another and to create a climate in which everybody can be supported, cared for and loved. These, I believe, are just some of the aspects of church and home-group ministry for all Christians, irrespective of where they may be in their own faith journey. The leader's role within the home group is to build up loving relationships between members, giving support and encouragement to them in their witness as Christians within the wider community. This ideal is not easy to achieve but, if we help one another by sharing our diversity of gifts, great things become possible and our church will grow into a loving and caring fellowship.

As we communicate God's word of forgiveness and eternal life to the people around us, Jesus, who brought healing and comfort into the lives of everyone he encountered, is our model. For our wider society to see a community of believers offering love and care to others can, in itself, be a powerful witness.

I believe that, drawing on our own times of suffering, we can bring comfort and help to others. Through my experience of a personal bereavement in my early 30s, I have a small measure

of understanding for those bereaved of a loved one in their early adulthood. When faced with cancer, I began to explore Christianity and the meaning of life; and so, when I am alongside others diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses, I have confidence that God will ultimately use their suffering for good purposes in their lives. The devastating experience of a broken marriage has given me a passion for doing all I can to help people build foundations for long and lasting marriages. Although we may like to analyse the reasons behind marriage breakdown, the important issue is what we do afterwards with all the shattered pieces. Looking back on my life, at one time it resembled a house that had been bombed but not demolished, and God enabled me, with the support of friends, to restore and rebuild what had been broken down. I have accepted Christ's forgiveness and freedom from past hurts and allowed him to bring about transformation in my life. All this is a learning process, and I know I will have L-plates on until the end of my days here on earth. Throughout the learning process, I endeavour with Paul 'to be content whatever the circumstances' (Philippians 4:11).

So I offer this book as a practical tool, grounded in scripture and based on my observations and experiences, both within my own life and in my role as a pastoral worker in a relatively large church. The stories recounted do not relate to any particular individual except with his or her permission. The issues addressed are those that we might meet in any walk of life. It is with God's needle and thread, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, that we, the body of Christ, can seek to heal the brokenness in the lives of our fellow pilgrims.

Centres of growth

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:6-8

Why have small groups?

Over recent years, small groups have gradually begun to play a significant role in the life of our churches. By following the example of the New Testament church and meeting in small groups in homes, we are provided with an ideal setting for spiritual growth. Indeed, Jesus himself ministered within a small group.

This book is written from a small-group perspective but the issues addressed are relevant to us all as we share the love of Jesus with others. Those of you who have no home group structure in your church may feel you would like to explore ways to establish such a structure. Some advice on this is given in the Conclusion.

I belong to a large church with around 600 members, so it is impossible to get to know everyone. For many years, we have had groups gathering in people's homes across our town, most of which meet every two weeks on a Tuesday evening for two hours, with occasional get-togethers at other times for shared meals and social events. Churches vary in the way that their small groups are set up: some groups are defined by age categories or by geographical locations; some emerge from a 'Christian basics' course. Limiting a group to between eight and twelve people enables everyone to participate and share more easily. Thus the group provides a small loving family to which each member has a sense of belonging and

within which all can be nurtured and built up into the body of Christ.

In my church, attending home groups is optional but encouraged. Each home group consists of 12–16 members who meet together to study the Bible, exploring its application in daily life and sharing in prayer. Our groups are considered as centres of pastoral care within the wider church, and the leaders and their deputies have the ultimate responsibility of caring for their group's members, although they may share this task with other people in the group. Each group tends to work out its own strategy within the common framework and develops a character of its own. From my own experience, I see it as essential that the home group leaders do not feel isolated and that the church provides some system of support and supervision for them.

How are the groups structured?

Our groups are centrally planned in two ways. First, the group to which we belong is selected for us by the member of clergy who has overall responsibility for all the home groups. These selections are not made by geographical criteria (that is, by where we live) but are loosely based on which church services we attend, with a few groups emerging directly from our 'Christian basics' course, which we run each term for people wanting to explore the Christian faith. Second, all the groups normally use the same study material. Some churches link their study group material with the Sunday sermons, but we don't take this route.

The groups themselves are changed every three or four years. For some members, there is relief when the life of the group ends, but for others it can be painful. Many of the leaders we appoint are commuters with demanding jobs, having to make a real effort to be home in time for the 8 o'clock start of the meeting. Families are encouraged to host the evening, enabling

both partners to attend without the need for babysitters.

Many of you may have different ways of organising and running home groups, dictated by the size of your church, location, style and leadership approach. In some churches there is one group, led by the minister, who may be reluctant to hand over leadership and responsibility to others, even if they are more gifted in such ministry. We haven't necessarily got it right in my church and are the first to admit that some groups struggle. When we see God at work through his Spirit, changing lives, and when we see a deepening of relationship and love for God and each other, however, we are encouraged.

Barriers to growth

One of the barriers to a thriving home group can be a reluctance both to share doubts, fears and concerns and also to challenge and pose questions. In a group where most people are very articulate, know their Bibles well and seem to have 'got their act together' spiritually, those who are less confident and knowledgeable can be intimidated and discouraged from offering their thoughts or sharing needs. Talking with a few of the 50 per cent or more of my congregation who don't belong to a group, I have found that they are reluctant to open up to other Christians, for fear of not being listened to or understood, or of being judged and marginalised. They may well enjoy the companionship of a bridge club or social club and be able to share something of themselves in that context, but it is often on the spiritual level that they fear exposure. Whether their fears are groundless or not, these people are prevented from experiencing the joy of true Christian closeness and fellowship.

If we are prone to be judgmental ourselves, we should remember Jesus' words: 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?' (Matthew 7:3). The importance of creating an environment where

each person feels at home, secure and accepted is crucial to the effective functioning of a group. At the close of each evening, each person should go away feeling affirmed and encouraged.

Another barrier to sharing may be the nature of the circumstances that people are facing in their own personal lives. It may not be easy, appropriate or right for them to share certain concerns in detail. It is vital that we respect this fact and pray regularly and consistently for individual members, whether they have been able to share openly or not. As we build an atmosphere of acceptance, greater openness and sharing may result.

Don't be intimidated by all of this! We may have a vision of a perfect home group in which each member is loved, nurtured and cared for and where everyone grows in Christ-likeness, but that situation is not going to exist in reality this side of heaven. The focus of this book is about learning ways in which we can pastor one another so that we can live more fulfilled lives and function more effectively as members of the body of Christ. I pray that you may glean something from what I have written to help achieve this objective.

We are each on a journey and have a story to tell. The springboard for this book lies in the experiences of my own journey, which you will read about in the following chapter.

Suggestions for further reflection

- Reflect on ways in which your home group can create a safe environment where each person will feel at home and accepted and will be able to grow as a Christian. Identify anyone who does not appear relaxed and work out how you can help.
- Work out ways in which you can share responsibilities within your group.
- Discuss the expectations of your group and how they are being met.

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- If you don't have home groups in your church, consider approaching your minister to discuss the possibility of starting one.