



Ways to be a Caring Church COMMUNITY

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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*“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.”*

– John 13:35

Pastoral care is one of the most powerful ways we can demonstrate the love of God to one another. It must not be left to the minister and elders alone; God calls *all of us* to love each other. How well we care for each other will influence how well we care for our neighbours. The following ideas will help you build or strengthen the culture of caring in your church.

OFFER CARE TO ALL The aim of creating a culture of caring in your church is not simply about strengthening relationships between people; it is also a sign of the kingdom of God and strengthens our relationships with God. When a person is welcomed, understood, and supported by others in the church community, it shapes their perception of God’s love and acceptance. It is important that *everyone* receive support in a church community. Keep an eye out for those whose needs often get overlooked, including those on the peripheries of the community as well as those who are often the caregivers instead of the receivers of care.

MAKE CARING AN EVERYDAY PRACTICE It is important to attend to the needs of people who are going through crises; however, it is also important to show interest and care for people in your church community regularly. Ask people how they are doing and genuinely listen to what they say. Look for opportunities for simple acts of kindness. Speak words of encouragement.

LISTEN AND ASK GOOD QUESTIONS Caring for others means responding to what they need, which requires that we listen carefully and ask good questions. When someone is telling you about something that is going on in their life, listen without interrupting, judging, or jumping in to fix or solve. Do not assume that you know what someone else needs, even if you’ve been through similar circumstances. Respond with compassion and, if appropriate, ask what form of support they would appreciate from the church: “I hear you saying that this situation is leaving you feeling _____. Is there anything that we can do to support you?”

BE PRESENT Caring for others is as much about “being” as it “doing.” Sometimes it is important to put aside our desire to be helpful and instead focus on simply being present. Remember to ask if your presence is something the other person would find helpful before showing up. While you are by their side, take the cue from them as to what they need. Sometimes spiritual practices, such as prayer or scripture reading, will be helpful. Other times, just your presence as they go about their everyday life will be what they need.

SPEND TIME WITH EACH OTHER IN SMALL GROUPS It is impossible for ministers and elders to get to know each congregant well enough to have a full awareness of what is going on in their lives and everyone has different levels of comfort about sharing the details of their lives. Therefore, it is important to have small groups (formal and informal) that gather on a regular basis. Think beyond Bible studies; groups that go out for breakfast after the service, groups that meet at a local coffee shop, groups that go for a Saturday morning walk together. In these groups, be intentional about checking in with each other and praying together.

REACH OUT There are many reasons we hesitate to reach out to someone we suspect may need support. Sometimes we assume that someone else has already reached out; other times we worry we might be a bother and don't want to seem intrusive. There are ways of reaching out that are not overbearing: send an email or text, call and leave a message, send a card in the mail, or connect with them via private message through a social media platform. Keep the message simple: "I am thinking of you. Please let me know if there is anything you need." Do not be offended if you do not receive a reply. The important thing is that you offered your support and opened the door for them to express their needs.

FOLLOW UP Once an obvious time of need is over in someone's life, oftentimes support ceases. As church communities, we are called to continue to be present and supportive. It is important to follow up after you've supported someone through a challenging time. Connecting on important days, such as the anniversary of a loss or around the holidays, is good, but it is also important to connect during the regular times in the person's life. Send an email or text when they come to mind, mail them a card or present, invite them out for coffee, and look for opportunities for acts of kindness.

ENCOURAGE ELDERS Elders play an important role in pastoral care in Presbyterian congregations. Encourage elders to connect with members on a regular basis. Visits are great, but elders can also host a potluck or dinner party for households in their care, send birthday greetings, meet for coffee, or organize a small group. One of the most important things an elder can do is show a genuine interest in the lives of others in the congregation: make a point to connect with people when you see them in church or out in the community, ask good questions and listen carefully, remember details about them, and don't forget to pray for them!

CREATE OFFICIAL LINES OF COMMUNICATION The last thing you want as a church is for someone who needs pastoral care to fall through the cracks. While it is great to have informal networks of care in the church, it is also important to have a specific team of people with gifts and training in pastoral care. Information on how to contact this team should be available to all members of the church. Consider creating a pastoral care request form that can be filled out in the pews or online.

BE PREPARED FOR CARING GESTURES

- Have lots of homemade soup available in the church freezer ready to be delivered. Share this soup with those in crisis, but also with those who need a little extra encouragement.
- Prepare a list of congregation members willing to make food for others when needed. Free online meal coordinating websites, such as Take Them A Meal, work well for coordinating meal schedules: <https://takethemameal.com/>.
- Have beautiful cards available to be signed and delivered; do not forget to follow up. While cards immediately after an event are great, it is important that people don't feel forgotten later.
- Set aside money that can be accessed easily when needed for pastoral care situations.