

LOCAL FRIENDS

Helping ordinary people care for one another

The Local Scheme

Summary

As well as improving the pastoral care of the church fellowship and providing a valuable service to the wider community, establishing a *Local Friends* Pastoral Care Team can also develop the skills and build the faith of ordinary members of the congregation, so enabling more Christians to be released into active ministry.

Details

Background

Pastoral care in the local church operates in two primary ways: through relationships and through referrals.

Most pastoral care operates through personal relationships: some of it as a natural outcome of everyday living, and some as intentional expressions of skill and compassion. We all need human contact, and to feel that we matter to others, that we are valued for ourselves and not just for what we can do; we all need times when we can talk through questions, issues and frustrations – not because we want to be given the answers or be told what to do, but simply because the act of talking things through is helpful.

Every now and then, we need something more than this ordinary level of contact and care: we have a need for help or advice which goes beyond the ability of the people who are normally around us. At this point, we ask for help, or someone who has been supporting us suggests that we would benefit from someone with some specific skills or experience. At this point, the ordinary process of caring for one another in everyday relationships needs to be supplemented with some additional help, often by someone with some specialist experience or training.

The aim of the Pastoral Care Team is partly to provide the more specialised care when it is needed; and partly to encourage, support and mentor all the members of the community in caring for the people around them, to the best of their ability. Their most important work is ‘equipping the saints for the work of ministry’ (Ephesians 4:12). Some of the wider community will develop particular skills and aptitude in this area and be welcomed into the team, but most will simply care for others alongside their main area of ministry and calling.

Role

The role of a Pastoral Care Team is not to provide all the pastoral care for a church or community, but to encourage others in this work and to provide a backup service, specialist support when it is needed. It needs to be a team of people, rather than a single individual, for a number of reasons.

- **Availability.** Nobody can be available all the time, but when people need this help, they often need it quite urgently. Holidays and the occasional period of sickness should not limit the availability of pastoral care.
- **Support.** If one person provides pastoral care to everyone else in the group, who provides pastoral care to that one person?
- **Accountability.** Whatever formal accountability structures are in place, people generally only feel accountable and behave accordingly if they are in a real relationship with others who have a genuine knowledge and understanding of what they are doing. In practice (even within the Christian community), it is the existence of a real team which most significantly increases the chances of everyone acting according to the highest moral standards.
- **Workload.** Pastoral care can, at times, demand a good deal of concerted effort. If another significant need occurs at these times, it is unrealistic (and unfair) to expect one person to juggle all the competing requests.

Implementation

A *Local Friends* scheme can be run by a single local church, or by a group of local churches working in partnership. The simple way to establish a local scheme is by allowing an existing Pastoral Care Team to provide the service; if there is no functioning Pastoral Care Team, we can help you establish one.

Selected medical professionals refer people to the scheme. They have to be 'selected' so that we know who they are, so that we can ensure they understand the scheme and have a reasonable set of expectations, and so that we can limit the number of people referred to the scheme.

The local scheme coordinator makes a connection between the person referred and one of the *Local Friends* volunteers, who will then arrange to visit – possibly accompanied, for the first visit at least, by another volunteer.

The volunteers who visit and seek to provide the pastoral care are members of the Pastoral Care Team and functioning as a part of their local church. They act as part of the local church, but within the framework and guidelines agreed with *Local Friends*. This way, the relationships all function at the local level, but *Local Friends* provides the framework – acting as a sort of 'dating agency', putting people in touch with one another and undertaking the initial vetting.

If there is no existing Pastoral Care team, then volunteers will need to be recruited. This is normally done by presenting the need and opportunity to the whole church, and then asking interested people to talk to their church or homegroup leader.

Vetting of potential volunteers is done on the basis of trust: does their church leader (who may, in practice, be their homegroup leader) trust them to do this kind of work, and are they willing to be accountable to their church leader for what they do in this role?

As the work develops, the team can begin to involve other people in the visiting when they have determined that ordinary human contact is the primary need, thus widening the capacity of the Pastoral Care Team and developing the ministry potential of the church members.

Concerns

The primary concern of most churches is the issue of capacity: we don't have enough volunteers to cover the activities we are already committed to; we are already over-stretched; our members don't have the skills or experience to do this sort of work; and so on.

In response to these concerns, a number of points can be made.

The most important of these is that Local Friends is not only asking you to do more work – care for more people – but it is also offering to help you in a variety of ways. Our aim (and our experience in similar work in the past) is that you will find you are receiving far more than you are giving.

Beyond this, we would like to offer the following observations.

- Any functioning church will already be providing pastoral care for its members.
- Many, perhaps most, churches, would benefit from improving the quality of the pastoral care provided.
- Recognising and valuing the pastoral care role, and planning to receive help in the way it is delivered, is likely to improve the quality of pastoral care.
- If the people currently providing pastoral care are stretched to their limit, there is a serious problem with the pastoral care provision.
- Many churches wish to improve their connection with their local community.
- Jesus commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves: it's not an optional extra; if we provide pastoral care for one another, we have an obligation to offer care to those outside our fellowship.
- As ordinary Christians discover that by making themselves available to love others in simple and practical ways, they grow in their faith and discover new ways to love and serve others; people who thought they had nothing to offer start to serve and start to grow and find new ways to contribute to the Body of Christ and the wider community they live in. By providing new ways of service, we grow the Christian workforce.

For more details, please visit our temporary web page:

- <http://localfriends.pbworks.com/>