Are you facing a situation in your church that will require pastoral care over a long period of time? If you don’t have a situation like that now – you will in the future. Are you ready for it?

Caring for people in the local church is challenging work. As a pastor, I remember numerous occasions where a need for long term care arose. These were always challenging situations and ones that caught the church by surprise. Over the span of a decade, though, I began to see some pretty obvious things that were essential for providing good long term care. I compiled these ideas into a chapter for my doctoral thesis which I have updated to publish here. I must say that I learned these things simply by watching brothers and sisters in Christ pour out their lives in sacrificial love to friends and loved ones who were in need. Perhaps it will help you to prepare for the pastoral care demands that will come your way sooner or later.

The Problem and God’s Call to “Keep love constant.”

Sometimes the need for long term care can be challenging if a church is not prepared in advance. What does it look like to persevere in pastoral care? Sometimes people’s struggles are long lasting.

What are some of those long term crises: a spouse who suffers a stroke and is incapacitated; care for the elderly; Alzheimer’s, teen pregnancy, a child with autism, or simply a family with ongoing counseling and pastoral care needs. All of these represent some of the issues that can prove challenging to a church.

What are some current societal realities that make this issue so important?

- Traditional extended-family care is no longer the norm. My wife and I experienced this as parents of small children. We were not surrounded by extended family and we relied heavily upon the friendships that we had in the body of Christ for years! And this opportunity for service not only blesses the family in need, it also shows the gospel in action to those outside the church who see the care that is given.

- The following statement confirms this breakdown in extended family care:

  We are a nation on the move with little in savings, little nearby family support, and health insurance that either does not cover policyholders completely or is non-existent. Split families, step-families, extended families, and no family at all—each add their own peculiar mix of problems and solutions. No wonder illness is scary. Roles are no
longer rigidly defined and it is anyone’s guess where support will be found in a crisis.\textsuperscript{1}

What incentives and imperatives do the Scriptures bring to this challenging area of gospel ministry and pastoral care? Two passages are important for the task: 1 Peter 4:8 and Ephesians 3:14-19. In 1 Peter 4:8, we are called to “love one another deeply.” The word translated deeply can also mean “constant”. “Keep love constant” would be a good translation. The word describes something that is stretched or extended. The love of the saints keeps stretching, in both depth and endurance.

This connects nicely with Ephesians 3 where Paul prays that we would “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge…” Persevering love grows out of the Gospel. You must start here if you are going to find the strength and incentive to go the distance with people. Within the context of 1 Peter 4:8, we are then called to “offer hospitality without grumbling” as well as utilize both word and deed gifts in the situation.\textsuperscript{3}

**Some Strategies to Provide Long Term Pastoral Care**

What strategies should be in place and ready to be activated in these kinds of situations if pastoral care is going to thrive?

- **Basic Care Should Already Be In Place**
  Small groups, Sunday school classes, other groupings, and a basic care committee need to be in place (moving transitions, welcome committee, new baby, meals, etc.). If there is not a culture of care at this level, then it will be even harder when the need for long term care arises. Any and every church should develop a care ministry that begins here and covers the basics. Make this a ministry team that includes men and women.

- **Form a Small Group to Oversee Care When A Specific Need Arises**
  When long term care needs arise, the critical first step is to form a small group to respond and manage the care. Having a group, instead of a single individual is critical to preventing helper burn out.

  Begin the process with someone making contact with the family and asking for permission to form a care group. Suggest names and/or ask them for people with whom they will feel comfortable. Asking for permission needs to pervade the entire process or the family will likely feel micro-managed. Having the family grant permission honors them and communicates that though things may be hard, they are not out of control. A good support group can provide stability. They need to listen to the family, ask good questions, receive good information, see the needs, ask for permission to act, organize a system that includes all who want to help, implement and oversee the plan daily, make changes when necessary, and remain flexible.

- **Preferably Don’t Make an Elder or a Deacon the Organizer**
An elder or deacon may be on the team but should not lead it because their focus should be on providing oversight and care for the care-givers. Usually you can identify someone outside the elder or deacon board who has strong administrative gifts to provide leadership and structure for the small group care team. Elders and deacons may certainly assist and be involved but they should be thinking about the pastoral needs of the care group itself. In addition, the elder and deacon can provide a good link to the larger elder/deacon board.

- **Identify a Group Leader**
  This point person not only provides leadership but also serves as a buffer and communication channel between the family and the broader body of Christ. Notice the concentric diagram below. See how the family is helped and protected by this small group. But group leadership should not stay with any one person indefinitely. Rotate the point person as needed.

- **Invite outside Expertise to Advise the Group**
  The care group should invite a trained person to help them understand the issue and provide basic information and perspective on how the situation or crisis will affect the person and family. The more information you gather at this level the better. Depending on the nature of the problem, this could mean consulting a social worker, a medical professional, a counselor or any other type of specialist who can bring specific expertise to the situation.

- **Group Should Meet Weekly (at least at first)**
  Evaluate. Have the point person with the family bring concerns to the group and allow the point person to send more information and questions to the family. Good communication is crucial (see next point). This is why the relationships described in the concentric circle diagram are so important.

  The schedule can be reduced as the situation becomes less acute. Email connections with the group may help to keep everyone informed and familiar with their responsibilities.
• **Promote Good Communication**

With the small group formed, it is vital that they communicate clearly with the broader church about what the ongoing needs are. They can also protect the family from being overwhelmed during the early stages when everyone will want to help. Many churches now have websites where new information can be posted regularly. If there is no website (and you may want to do this in addition to the website) it is always wise to include information in a bulletin insert. Another suggestion is to have a designated phone line with messages and the ability to receive information for people to offer help. Try to avoid one person having their home phone as the place where information is relayed. Purchase a cell phone and publish that number. Have each person in the small group be a point person for a week at a time. Make sure everyone in the church knows how things are going to be handled and encourage everyone to participate in the way that has been outlined. Only emergencies should bypass this process.

• **Be Attentive to Phases of Care**

One of the challenges of long term care is the gradual and difficult adjustment to the extent of the problem. Here are some phases a family might go through:

- **Deer in Headlights Phase**— the family needs someone to help them think clearly. Sometimes people need to be reminded to eat! This is the place where people step in and remind the family that not all is caving in and that they are surrounded by a loving community of believers who will shoulder the burden together with them. This is the beginning of the crisis. If you have any idea that it is long term, mobilize a care group.

- **This Isn’t Going Away Phase**—the family and those involved get a clear picture early on that this is going to be something that will not be resolved quickly and that long term care will be needed. At this point you need to ramp up care to handle the indefinite time frame. This is where the small group needs to be involved. One thing that is important to communicate to the family is that you will be there for the long-haul. You need to mean that. There are people in your congregation who are at stages and seasons of life that can be more available (singles and empty nesters). This is a wonderful place for them to serve.

- **Settling In Phase**—the small group and helpers are in a groove. The family is out of crisis mode and beginning to return to a more normal routine. Although life has been radically disrupted, the family has adjusted and is beginning to take more responsibility for their own day to day needs. This is when the small group overseeing things will need to re-evaluate what the ongoing needs are, how they will be handled, and how to guard everyone from burn-out.

- **This Is the Way It Is Phase**—at this point, the small group needs to decide what the family’s ongoing needs will be and what the family can begin to
Some Thoughts on How to Provide Long Term Pastoral Care - Timothy Lane

It is also crucial to attend to the needs of those who have been caring for the family. This, to me, is where the elder and deacon in the group need to focus. They are there to care for the care-givers. This protects both officers and care-givers from burning out.

- **Be Aware of Financial and Legal Needs**
  Insurance covers less and less medical care and very little in the way of counseling. In most churches, mission committees have large budgets. Why not increase the size of the Mercy/Care budget to prepare for these types of crises.

  Also, there are ways to set up funds for families to help off-set costs. Develop a filing system to help the family keep up with the bills. Bring in a financial planner if it is going to be long term. Seek the advice of a lawyer if needed. It is important to always do this with the family’s permission. If possible, have one person from the small group present at these meetings.

- **Combine Word and Deed.**
  This is a form of care that early on will be largely deed oriented, but the longer it goes the more the Word component of care will become important. In general, unless you are going to equip your care-givers to speak wisely, it is best to encourage them to err on the side of listening, but in the long term that is not sufficient. In the midst of long term suffering there is a cry for understanding. It is here that we need to equip our people to give wise, time sensitive, biblical, Christ-centered counsel as people ask the difficult questions. Helpers can never go wrong by focusing on the Psalms. This may be an opportunity to teach and equip your church. Again, have a trained person assist you in providing good information along with a biblical perspective to help the care-givers think and act and speak in sensitive ways in light of the specific crisis issue.

  For example, when someone has a terminal illness, it is inappropriate to tell them they will make it in an effort to be upbeat and positive. One of the reasons is that you don’t know God’s sovereign will for the person and it will also possibly give the impression that the person is not trying if they get worse.

- **Don’t Underestimate the Importance of Scripture**
  The Scriptures give a person and family words to express themselves in godly ways and it constantly pulls them out of the temptation to just dive inward and become cynical. The following psalms might prove helpful: Psalm 4, 18, 23, 27, 40, 42, 121, 130, and 142.

- **Focus on Everyone Involved**
  When responding to a crisis and looking long term, it is important to focus on the whole family not just the individual who is at the center of the crisis; the spouse and children, if it is a family. What kind of care and encouragement are they receiving? The suffering of the person at the center is also bringing suffering into the lives of those around the person. Heart issues and pastoral care will be needed for them as well. Think of creative ways to encourage and support those around the person who is at the center.
• Pay Attention to the Little Details
Get a list of foods that the family can and cannot eat so when meals are brought—they are suitable. Child care: depending on the age—homework, school activities, things that continue. Transportation; Hospital contact: have someone do this for the family daily. Listen to doctors with the family to help them hear. Don’t forget to pray with the family regularly. Keep elders/deacons/pastors informed. Housework. Yard work. Groceries, errands, paying basic bills, etc. daily life stuff! In situations like this, mistakes are inevitable. Learn and adjust along the way.

• Don’t Bypass the Heart Issues of the Care Givers
This is a form of suffering that will reveal the heart. Not just the heart of the sufferer but the care-givers of the sufferer. The call to love that perseveres shows our true colors! Be attentive to what is getting revealed and be prepared to remind people of the gospel. Activists who burn out need to be reminded that they are not establishing a record of righteousness or burning karma by doing service. Others jump in and back out when they are afraid of getting too immersed. They need to be helped to see that love is persevering and that they can grow in and through this. 1 Peter reminds us of how God is working in the now to refine and help us grow. This is true of everyone who is involved. It has been amazing to me to see the maturity produced in individuals and churches that have gone through intense, long term care like this. It has also caused sin to boil to the surface. Several years after all the care has been provided, there may be a need to redress wrongs and help people pursue reconciliation. One thing is certain; you and your church will not remain the same.

Conclusion
No church is perfect but a prepared church will respond better when these difficult problems come. Though many will volunteer to help out in an immediate crisis, it is the long term needs that strain the resources of the church and reveal its weaknesses. To keep love constant is a challenge but Christ calls us to meet the challenge with his help.

Helpful Resources
Here are three books you might find helpful as you think about these issues:


another in our union with Christ. It can be a useful book to help your congregation begin to move in the direction of practical ministry to others that may include long term care.


---

1 This article is excerpted and adapted from Tim Lane’s Doctor of Ministry thesis titled: “Counseling in the Local Church: The Pastor as Shepherd and Equipper” completed at Westminster Theological Seminary in 2006. This content appears as chapter VI of the thesis with the title of: Pastoral Direction for Long Term Care.


3 Other passages that bear on this kind of care are: In I John 3:16-18 we are called to love in deed not just words. Caring for person’s felt needs through practical deeds. I John 13:1-17 call us to love despite the circumstances, recipients, or our stature. James 2:1-26 issues a call to real faith expressed in caring for those who are helpless. Galatians 6:1-5 calls us to exhibit real love by seeking to restore sinners gently with all humility. Colossians 3:12-17 tells us that character precedes ministry. Care-givers need the gospel in order to be useful. If not, they will not love well.

***

**About the Author**

Timothy S. Lane, M.Div., D. Min. - Tim is executive director and faculty member at CCEF and has been counseling for almost 20 years. He has Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary and experience in both campus and pastoral ministry, including serving as a pastor for ten years. He is the co-author of CCEF’s *Transformation Series Curriculum, How People Change, and Relationships - A Mess Worth Making.*

---

Note to Readers: Please feel free to print this article to use for yourself or to share with a friend or your pastor. For all other uses, see copyright provisions below.

© 2009, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication should be reproduced, copied or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation. Inquiries should be made in writing, addressed to CCEF, 1803 East Willow Grove Ave, Glenside, PA 19038

Some Thoughts on How to Provide Long Term Pastoral Care -Timothy Lane