Pastoral Care Committees

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What is a Pastoral Care Committee?

A pastoral care committee provides a structured way to care for those within the congregation in times of personal crisis. Often pastoral care is offered informally whenever ministers or lay people attend to the spiritual needs of those in crisis. However, when a congregation grows in numbers and the minister can no longer respond to the needs of all of the congregants, it is often necessary to create a formal structure to ensure that all those in the midst of a life crisis are offered support.

Pastoral care committees generally offer two types of care—material and spiritual. The first includes providing meals, transportation, sending flowers and letters, or making telephone calls of concern or condolence. Many congregations rely on one or two volunteers to coordinate and organize phone trees, e-mail lists, and other ways to inform the community of the material needs of one of its members. The second involves providing emotional and spiritual care through supportive listening, communication, and companionship.

Members of a pastoral care team may be asked to support those going through life transitions (retirement, disability, moving into a facility for elders), those who are sick and dying, bereaved, shut-in or troubled by addictions, or those in professional or relational crisis. Pastoral care may at times involve visiting people in nursing homes and hospitals, and interfacing with those institutional cultures and staff.

How are Pastoral Care Committees Formed?

The core of members who form the pastoral care committee may be appointed or self-selected. Some may have particular gifts in caring skills; some may have had the experience of caring for family or friends, or as a community volunteer. Others may have a strong interest in, and commitment to, a ministry of caring. Ideally, a pastoral care team will include members with differing gifts and skills.

Usually, the minister provides the initial leadership in the formation and functioning of a pastoral care team. Here, a minister may direct the activities of the pastoral care team by assigning a member to care for a particular congregant. On the other hand, in larger congregations, the pastoral care team may have a coordinator whose primary responsibility is to plan the training, and direct and evaluate the activities of the pastoral ministry, and support its members. In this case, the minister may simply collaborate with the coor-
What Skills are Needed for Pastoral Care Giving?

While pastoral care is not the same as counseling, committee members still need specific training in caring skills to become effective and compassionate visitors. These skills include listening and communication, knowledge of the impact of grief and loss, problem solving, ethics of care, spiritual assessment and evaluation in order to identify resources and know when and how to make referrals. Initially, committee members should receive training in these basic skills. This can vary from a two-day workshop to a multi-day format, depending on the depth of skill members want to have before they begin serving as a team member. Each congregation will need to structure training sessions according to the needs of the membership.

Following the initial introductory training, additional training is highly recommended. Members of the committee should commit themselves to participate in regularly-scheduled meetings designed for continued education, support, and team building.

How Does a Pastoral Care Committee Market Their Services to the Congregation?

It is important for the pastoral care team to have formal recognition from the ministry it supports. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. A formal mission statement can be created. The minister, Board and Religious Education staff can work side-by-side to promote awareness of pastoral care issues. The pulpit, newsletter, and other communication vehicles within the congregation can also support the work of the committee. Educational programs for adults and children can address issues about illness or crisis, but also support healthy living habits through disseminating information and teaching skills that promote well-being.

Periodically, the Pastoral Care Committee can take part in congregational meetings to inform the community of their activities and to encourage new members to join.

What is the Value of a Pastoral Care Team to the Congregation?

A well-functioning pastoral care team is one significant way in which a congregation can take responsibility for the guidance, support, and spiritual care of its members. Those in crisis often benefit greatly from the care and concern of others. When we give of ourselves to others, we create the possibility of deeper and more intimate connections with others. In this way, providing pastoral care is a way of building and sustaining a feeling of community among members of the congregation.

One of the benefits of active participation in a faith community is the opportunity for people to engage in activities that help them identify their gifts and make meaningful contributions. Living our values, doing what matters to us, and helping others is incredibly important. What we have learned from many religious traditions is that generosity of self is one way to a healthy and meaningful life.