

Guiding Principles for Churches to Support Carers

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

One in eight adults in the UK has a caring role, and it's estimated that during the course of our lives, one in three people will have a caring role for a person living with dementia. With this in mind, it is likely that most church families - if not all - will have carers in their congregation. The following guiding principles have been developed with input from carers attending the Carers Connected zoom calls.

SEEING

While not everyone who has caring responsibilities would call themselves a 'carer', this does not mean that a person does not provide ongoing emotional, spiritual and practical support. An essential first step in a church offering support for carers in their church family is to recognise the presence of carers. While a carer may be a close family member, a person's main carer may be a church friend or neighbour, or even offering caring support from a distance, so it's important not to assume who is or isn't a carer.

LISTENING

Many carers experience 'carer stress', loneliness or social isolation, often putting the needs of the person they are supporting before their own. While caring for someone may deepen relationships, in a recent UK carers' survey, 87% of participants stated that caring had a negative impact on their mental health.

Offering a listening ear without judgement can be a huge support for carers, when offered in the context of practical support. It is essential for churches to recognise that just as a carer may offer ongoing emotional, spiritual and practical support, a church in turn needs to offer holistic support to carers.

Timing is everything - carers are unlikely to open up in front of the person they are caring for, as they won't want them to feel like a burden, and they may also be reluctant to put dampeners on a social event by being open about the challenges they are experiencing.

"From my experience of being a carer, it needs the other persons to take initiative to ask the right questions in order to open up conversation in which the carer can express themselves. So those of us who want to 'listen' may need to be proactive in helping the carer to be able to talk. I had a structured time with our vicar once every three weeks, which was a lifeline for me. That may not work for everybody but I believe it could be of real value to many (ie to arrange a definite time for meeting). Apart from that I found there were friends at church who knew how to ask questions or share thoughts which showed their support and understanding and so enabled me to speak more openly about my situation at the time."

PRAYING

Rather than simply saying, "I'll pray for you," asking carers, "Is there anything I can pray for you at the moment?" allows them to be specific in their prayer requests, and means that we are not making assumptions about their needs.

A carer may also like to hear your prayer requests. It's important to recognise what a carer contributes to church family life, as well as what support they may appreciate.

ENABLING AND INCLUDING

Carers may be restricted in their attendance but they are still part of the church family and want themselves and their loved one to feel included. We need to be intentional about this so that carers do not feel marginalised or overlooked. This could be as simple as ensuring they are kept updated with news.

Carers and the person they are caring for should be enabled to serve with a safety net, where appropriate, especially if serving has been a part of their life within the church. How this is worked out will be different for each individual, depending on their gifts and abilities. It could be enabling them to do the Bible reading, lead a Bible study, welcoming, and so on. Participation is so much more important than perfect performance in the context of church family. But we also need to provide a safety net, a back up plan B, so that someone can step in at the last minute if needed, when caring responsibilities become unpredictable.

OFFERING PRACTICAL HELP

When a church family is considering the support it can offer to a carer, it's important to be 'open handed' in the offer of help. For example, rather than assuming that the person would like their shopping to be done on their behalf, they may value the offer of sitting with the cared for person, so they can continue getting their own shopping.

At the same time, it's good to be specific about the help you are able to give, as people are less likely to take up the offer of, "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"To offer to spend time with the cared-for, so that the carer can have time on their own, for whatever they would like to do is such a precious gift, as often the other person is so dependent on them."

If you have no idea of what practical support would be helpful, a good question to ask is, "What would help you the most at the moment?" And keep asking, since this may change over time, and it's not always easy for people with caring roles to immediately think what might be helpful.

Consider creating a directory of help that people are willing to offer, maybe support with lifts, gardening, DIY, emergency back up or baking. Help may not initially be needed or requested, but it's important for carers to know that the church family is ready to help in specific practical ways, and the offer will continue to be open.