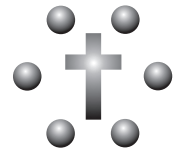




Pastoral Care in Small Groups

Quick Start Guide 8



This resource is for small group leaders and/or those with specific responsibility for pastoral care in a small group (this could be a different person to the leader). Further training is recommended. This guide is also recommended as a handout for use in helping the group understand how to better care for each other.

Why is pastoral care of central importance in small groups?

Pastoral care as well as Bible study and prayer is central to small groups because:

- As Christians, we are called to care for one another—Galatians 6:2 tells us to ‘carry each other’s burdens’ (NIV).
- The small group is a great place for care to happen as relationships deepen.
- The Minister or Elders cannot realistically visit everyone often but the small group meets on a regular basis.
- If someone has a particular pastoral need, there may be different members of the group who can help because they have experienced something similar (2 Corinthians 1: 3-4) or who can provide practical assistance.

What are the limitations of pastoral care in small groups?

There is a huge amount of care that can take place in groups but some areas need care above and beyond this:

- Bereavement – the group can provide great support along with extra care from the minister or visiting team.
- Particular difficulties such as depression, addictions, major crises – specialist help should be sought (such as the counselling service provided by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland). The person responsible for care in the small group should know who to contact for the next step – normally the minister or pastoral care coordinator.
- Sometimes people are reluctant to open up in a group about a specific issue other than those mentioned above and a one-to-one meeting is better – this could be arranged with the minister or other appropriate person.

What are the principles of pastoral care everyone should remember? (all the time!)

If the following principles are not followed much damage can be caused, if they are, much good can result:

- Pastoral care in the small group is the **group caring for each other**—the small group leader does not become a replacement for the Minister or Elder (unless he/she is the Elder for people in the group).
- If it is shared in the group it stays in the group! Confidentiality is crucial for maintaining trust. The exceptions are if the information is already public; the person says clearly it **can** be shared; or if the person who shares is endangering themselves or someone else (then the leadership **must** refer it to an appropriate person).
- Care must be Christ centred – the person should be encouraged to put their trust in Christ while still receiving the support of the group. The group (or anyone) should not take the place of dependence on Christ as saviour.
- Be open and honest in sharing and others will be encouraged to be too – but don’t pressurise them to share.
- Be empathetic – try and understand what is like to be in their shoes (and don’t say ‘I know how you feel!’)
- Be very wise in giving direction – ask yourself: is this helpful, Christlike, biblical and the right time to say this?
- Avoid a judgemental attitude. Everyone who is a Christian in the group has been saved by grace and should be particularly conscious of this if someone shares a struggle with sin...
- But don’t help others make excuses for their sin – help them know the forgiveness of Christ.

How can pastoral care happen in a small group?

We may be more used to thinking of pastoral care in a one-to-one conversation. How can it happen in a group?:

- Through Bible study – being transformed together by God’s Word means that it encourages and challenges us. Group members can share their insights and experience which can be pastorally helpful to everyone in the group. For example, a Bible study on what it means to be a godly parent, being a Christian at work, coping with stress, illness or even bereavement (but leave this for a later date if a group member is recently bereaved).
- Through praying for each other – this is a great way to make care Christ centred and dependent on him.
- Through offering practical help – offering to make a meal, help with a move, give a lift, help with a simple task someone else finds too difficult all speak volumes of God’s love in action (for those in or outside the group). Do be wise about giving money (it can complicate things) – practical help or perhaps a voucher is better.
- Through arranging to visit a group member who is ill at home or in hospital or is bereaved.
- Through keeping in touch with group members who have not been attending recently. Express concern: not ‘why weren’t you there?’ but ‘we missed you, is everything OK?’ (leaders could choose to delegate this).
- Through arranging to meet up to chat if the small group meeting is not enough to share a particular burden – this could be with a leader or someone in the group but wisest if male with male and female with female.

How can we get better at pastoral care as a group?

- Send some of the group on pastoral care training (at least one of the leaders should have some training).
- Individuals could read a practical book on pastoral care like *What Could I Say?* by Peter Hicks (IVP).
- Have some Bible studies with a pastoral focus. Psalm 23 is a good starting point. Learn what the Bible says about God comforting us in suffering, strengthening us in tough times and guiding us on right paths.
- Create space in the meeting for people to share. This could be when refreshments are served or before prayer.
- Remember that care isn’t just responding to problems – it’s also about growing in spiritual maturity, deepening relationships with each other and God and supporting each other in the different ways we serve God.

How can I be good at listening... and sharing?

Listening well shows you care. Just being listened to can be of great help – it also informs us how to pray or help.

- Listening requires concentration! Try to switch off from other thoughts like the great advice you might give.
- If someone is sharing and you haven’t understood ask for a question for clarification – it shows that you care about what is said (and avoids you praying for their mother-in-law when it was actually their aunt who was ill!).

In small groups we also need to be good sharers. Unlike a one-to-one conversation, time is a bit more limited.

- Share enough but avoid speaking too long. For example say briefly what happened/is happening, how it made you feel and perhaps what you would like the group to pray for.
- Be open but take care not to share inappropriately, e.g. giving confidential knowledge you have about others without their permission or a particular sin you struggle with that is better talked about one-to-one.