

Pastoral Care Guidelines for Church Leaders **Aiming for good practice in formal and informal teams/groups**

Pastoral Care is compassion in action, practising the love of our incarnate God.

We hope and pray that our church family spontaneously loves one another and so fulfils the law of Christ (Gal. 6 v 2) In other words, we are all pastoral carers to one another.

It is true also that some members of our family are particularly gifted pastorally and also that some of our church family have particular needs or occasionally run into difficulties. Also, it is important that we keep in touch with those who are on the edge of church life or outside it entirely.

For some of these reasons and more, church leaders might want to set up a more formal way of caring for one another involving the practice of pastoral skills, supporting one another in this ministry and providing a safe place in which to respond, think and pray through situations together. Ideally this should be done in a group with a qualified pastoral minister or professional, and those called and affirmed in pastoral ministry.

What follows are markers for good practice with links to more detailed explanation where necessary. All of these areas should be considered before any formal pastoral care group is set up and if one is already in existence, it is important to ensure these conditions for good practice are being adhered to.

Those setting up the group need to keep to the principles and practices of the '[Guidelines for the professional conduct of the clergy](#)'

What is needed to ensure good and safe practice for groups or teams:

- Having a shared understanding of what you and your team mean by pastoral care:
 - visiting? or phone or zoom?
 - more formal unstructured contact?
 - hospitality or focussed pastoral conversations?
 - a mixture of all these?
- Having a shared theological understanding of pastoral care ministry as a church community?
- Each member of the team should be selected for their gifts, reliability, **self-awareness, learning capacity, and emotional stability** (some of these can grow with training but the foundation needs to be in place). This does not mean that a pastoral carer (including the clergy) must be angelic. It means that they need to have sufficient personal awareness and to know their blind spots, which we all have. Without this, they will not be able to be open to others and to respond in non-judgemental ways. The team needs the confidence of the convenor that they are called to this ministry and not simply self-selected.
- **Confidentiality**
Confidentiality is necessary in order that trust can be maintained in the pastoral relationship; those cared for need to know that information they share is not passed on. There are exceptions which can be clarified; where there is a safeguarding issue and when the pastoral carer needs to share information with colleagues. The latter will need to be worked out beforehand or agreed along the way. This may sound straightforward but can be complex in a church setting.

- **Support and supervision**

Pastoral carers need support because pastoral care is emotionally draining at times. We may need to go back to the group and share what has happened, feelings we are left with after a meeting with someone either because we need some insight or just because it can be draining. Very importantly, we may need to share an experience because someone else can see something differently and so help us to understand either ourselves or another person better.

A team is needed whose members **support** one another and provide an accountable space for ministry. At least one qualified pastoral minister or professional needs to oversee the team, the incumbent if possible. The church leader does not need to know everything but should keep in touch and provide accountability and PCC support.

The diocesan Mission and Ministry team is willing to offer expertise in setting up such a team and resources for training and development. This guide to thinking through the steps of creating a pastoral team or group can ensure that the necessary issues are worked through.

- **Safeguarding policy**

A clear **safeguarding policy** ensures the safety of both carers and those cared for. Your parish will have a safeguarding policy in place but it is helpful to look at [Promoting a Safer Church](#) for more details, in particular for handling safeguarding situations which could arise. All pastoral carers must be DBS checked and have the appropriate training.

- **Training**

All pastoral care groups should share in relevant training either using materials for local training or participating in diocesan sponsored training. It may be a general Pastoral Assistants course, active listening, signs of mental ill health, the care of specific groups e.g., the elderly etc, dealing with difficult situations, where to go if help is needed, and ongoing support/supervision from someone with relevant professional facilitators.

- **Openness to looking at power dynamics** both within the team and between the carers and those cared for. All groups of people are affected by subtle (or sometimes not so subtle) power dynamics e.g., how leaders behave or are seen, how people use status to undermine, feelings around inclusion/exclusion, etc. It can be difficult to spot without pastoral supervision. The important thing is to be open to looking at it and to changing as a result. The interactions of Jesus with almost anyone is illuminating here.

- **Signposting**

We act as part of a community of carers. It is important to have an awareness of our limits; what pastoral care is and what it is not, when to signpost those, we care for on to others. Having easy access to resources with which to **signpost** people on as needed.

- **Ethical values for pastoral care**

Religious communities and Christians in particular can hold firm values about, say, sexuality, culture, status, etc. A pastoral carer needs to respect the rights and dignity of each person. This is not always easy, and openness is needed to discuss such issues on occasion. An eye needs to be kept on this within a group or team in regard to things like unconscious bias and to distinguish between biblical and cultural perspectives.

Getting good foundations laid at the beginning will pay off in the future.