

# The Caring Church

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The pastor of the church I attend cares about people. I've seen him rejoice when church members are celebrating their individual and collective successes, and I've seen him weep when tragedy strikes the church. He genuinely feels for the people. He is emotionally available to the congregation. That's a wonderful thing to behold!

I suspect that our pastor, Terry, learned this from his family, especially from his little brother, Ronnie, who died several years ago due to complications associated with Down syndrome. Terry took custody of Ronnie after their parents passed away and he care for him for many years.

Terry is an educator. He spent most of his career as a teacher and school administrator. He understands the value and the role of reason as it relates to faith. He endorses developing faith formation programs that present a systematic and comprehensive overview of doctrine, but I don't recall anyone ever pegging Terry as an apologist. Defending the faith isn't his *modus operandi*. He's more about expressing faith care-fully. The doctrines of the church are only relevant in the context of loving and caring relationships. My many conversations with him have revealed to me that Ronnie was the one who taught him this most profoundly.

If salvation requires us to know our doctrines and defend our faith against those who are different from us (a common trap that apologetics enthusiasts fall into even though legitimate apologists wouldn't buy that idea), people like Ronnie have no hope of salvation. If our salvation depends upon what I'll call relational intelligence, then Ronnie is among the first in the Kingdom of Heaven.

## Relational Intelligence

Relational intelligence is a developing area of interest in both church and business settings. It refers to relationship skills that help people interact more effectively with peers, bosses, employees, family members, friends, enemies, etc. Relational intelligence gurus propose that one's R.Q. (relational quotient) is a more accurate measure of success in today's world than one's I.Q. (intelligence quotient).

When I say that Ronnie was relationally intelligent, I'm not exactly matching him up with what is being proclaimed in the field of relational intelligence. I'm simply saying that relationships mattered to Ronnie more than anything else. Ronnie's "smarts" couldn't be measured in a classroom; rather, his brilliance was his smile, his sense of humor, his frequent hugs, and his uncontrollable enthusiasm when someone he knew entered the room. I remember him yelling my name and announcing my arrival when I showed up late to a church council meeting that he was attending. He was thrilled to see me, and I was honored to be greeted so grandly. As the so-called weighty matters were being discussed during the meeting, the conversation had to work its way around Ronnie's loud snoring as he slept through the business portion of the meeting.

Ronnie was a constant and palpable reminder that our communion with each other is always more important than our plans, programs and agendas. This relational priority made a difference in Terry's life, and I think that makes our church more caring. Becoming a caring church is pretty simple. Churches are caring when church members regularly and intentionally show their care for each other and for the community in which they find themselves. This essay will explore what that looks like and how it is rooted in some key Bible passages. We'll also explore some questions for reflection that will help generate discussions to plan for a more caring disposition.

## Caring

Caring is a foundational component of church life. One could say that you can't call your organization a Christian church without the component of caring. A very stripped-down definition of caring for the purposes of this essay could be as follows: Caring is giving priority to the needs of others and expressing that priority in actions and conversations.

Imagine what your congregation would look like if it modeled itself after these biblical endorsement for and expressions of caring:

- ◇ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."  
(Matthew 11:28-30, NRSV)
- ◇ "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-36, NRSV)
- ◇ "...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:30-31, NRSV)
- ◇ "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."  
(Philippians 2:3-4, NRSV)
- ◇ "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." (Matthew 5:42, NRSV)
- ◇ "...whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." (Matthew 10:40;42, NRSV)
- ◇ "...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:44-45, NRSV)

Christianity developed as a religion marked by caring relationships. Let's pause to examine these passages briefly.

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*heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)*

In this passage, Jesus sets the tone of caring by showing how much he cares. He tends to the needs of his followers. Although there are challenges in life and in discipleship, Jesus promises to provide relief and comfort for those who enter into a relationship with him. The context of this passage is instructional. Jesus utters these caring words after gives thanks to God for revealing to simple children what is hidden from the wise and learned. His care is set in the context of putting a high value on the simple ones who capture the relational core of discipleship. Living from a caring heart is the primary disposition from which a Christian engages the world.

Caring churches are organizations that have room for everyone, not just the skilled, the talented, the intelligent, or the notable persons in our midst. Not only do we have room for the less notable people, but we honor them as paradigms for what we are all about. When a person’s life is not wrapped up in hyper-functionality (I am what I can do) he/she is more likely to define success in terms of family relationships and friendships (I am a husband/wife/daughter son/friend/team member).

### **Questions for Church Reflection**

- Who are the shining stars in our church? Are they the ones who wield the most power and influence? Are they the most intelligent members? Are they the most talented members? Or, are the shining stars in our church the caring ones who are marked by the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?
- How can we ease the burdens of others in imitation of Christ who cares enough to ease our burdens?

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The very greatest commandment, found clearly in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, sets love as our highest priority. Love for God is first, love for others is second, and love for self is third. Every book of the Bible and the whole history of Christianity reinforces this counter-intuitive and counter-cultural teaching. While the world is obsessed with self-help programs and products, Christians continue to promote an “other-help” way of life. Indeed, the way to truly help yourself is to engage in caring actions for others and to speak caring words to and about others.

Caring churches help their members lose themselves so that they can find themselves in the loving care that they receive from others as they offer the same. If members can stop focusing on their own concerns long enough to make the concerns of others a higher priority, then they can experience the wonder of receiving in the midst of focused giving. The trick is to get enough members of your congregation into the habit of thinking for others first without neglecting love for themselves.

Church staffs can coach members to understand that their own needs are important, but they can't fulfill them outside of caring relationships with others. Our own deepest needs can only be fulfilled by another person or group. It is an illusion, a spiritual trap, to believe that we can meet our own needs. For example, my need for conversation is a need that requires another. My need for affection is a need that requires another. My need for admiration is a need that requires another. My need for belonging is a need that requires another. I can't fulfill my own deepest needs. Someone else has to do that. My role in the community is to meet the needs of others and allow others to meet my needs. We really do need each other.

### Questions for Church Reflection

- How does the church mission clearly identify the greatest commandment as our highest priority?
- How does our church help people believe in the power of the community over the power of the individual?
- In what ways do we promote other-centered perspectives and behaviors?

*“Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (Matthew 5:42, NRSV)*

If the needs of the other are a higher priority for me than my own needs, how do I know the need of the other? There is a one-word answer to that question: begging. Begging often has a negative connotation, but in Christian tradition it has been raised to the level of a charism. “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” (Mt. 7:7, NRSV) Many Christian groups have made begging a core part of their identity. Religious communities, churches, and other non-profit organizations would not survive without the spiritual practice of begging. Individuals also need to be humble enough to beg for what they need. It is important to overcome the stigma that suggests begging is demeaning. Asking for what we need is a blessing for others because it allows them to more easily fulfill their mission of meeting our needs. Likewise, hearing others ask for what they need is the only way we can effectively fulfill their needs.

A lively and ongoing discussion of needs is an essential part of a caring church. Helping people assess their own deepest needs while they develop the skills for effectively meeting the needs of others in a way that expresses real care is a ministry priority of Christian churches. Christian power is experienced when deepest need meets loving care in a mutual exchange.

## Questions for Church Reflection

- How are needs assessments incorporated into all church ministries?
- How do our ministries and programs meet real and expressed needs of church members rather than the needs of those offering the programs and ministries?
- What are the families in your community begging for?

*“...whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” (Matthew 10:40;42, NRSV)*

This passage reminds us that there is greatness in simple service. It is a great thing to meet the need of another even in the simplest ways. The small acts of caring that we offer to each other reveal the abundant presence of God in our midst. It is mind boggling to consider the number of small acts of kindness that happen in one’s life on a daily basis. So fewer are the intentional evil acts we experience, but it is easier to focus our attention on the one blemish on our body rather than the general good health we enjoy day to day.

Churches that care are places where people are kind and kindness is a planned part of the church’s mission. Yes, kindness happens all the time, but caring Churches shine the spotlight on the myriad simple acts of kindness that knit together a community that is a shining light for the nations. The members look for ways to express their care multiple times a day. Leaders acknowledge, name and esteem the simple caring acts that they observe every week.

Christians are people who prefer to serve rather than be served, but, at the same time, we need to make room for those who offer service to us. Caring is always a two-way street, a mutual exchange of love. We are all called to serve; therefore, we are also all called to receive with gratitude and humility.

## Questions for Church Reflection

- List the ways you have seen members of your church express care for each other in simple and spontaneous ways.
- List the ways you can communicate these examples of caring to the community on a regular basis.
- How does your church balance its attention between the spectacular works of Christians and the simple works of Christians?

*“...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:44-45, NRSV)*

Even when Christians have problems within the church or with others who are outside of the church, we deal with our problems in a spirit of caring. Christian care reaches heroic levels in the teaching of Jesus which calls us to love and pray for our enemies. The joy of experiencing God’s loving care is blocked by the desire for revenge. Christian care reaches out to those who don’t care. There are many wonderful stories of Christians who have been deeply wounded in the worst imaginable ways, and they respond by offering forgiveness, prayer, and kindness to their offenders.

Caring churches are places of forgiveness. When a Christian offends another, forgiveness is sought. When a Christian is offended, forgiveness is offered. Forgiveness is not accomplished with human effort; rather, it is a grace of God that must be welcomed into one's heart. Prayer is the part we play that releases the power of God's forgiveness.

### **Questions for Church Reflection**

- How are church members coached to offer genuine, detailed apologies when they offend another? For example, "I'm sorry, this is what I did that was wrong (describe the offense). I understand that I hurt you in this way (describe how the offended person was hurt). In the future I will \_\_\_\_\_ (describe what will be different and how the change will happen so that the offense does not occur again)."
- How are members taught to pray for the grace of forgiveness?
- When tragedy strikes individuals and/or the community, what approach does the pastoral staff take to lead people to expressions of care and forgiveness?

### **Conclusion**

John's gospel reminds us that Christians are known by the ways in which they love each other. At this moment in history, Christians are often criticized as being too much like the general culture. It's hard to see that their faith is making any difference in their daily lives. If churches can bring caring to the center of their missions as is mandated in the Scriptures and in the traditions of Christianity, then others will look upon our communities and wonder where this joy comes from. Maybe they'll become curious enough to ask us about it, and we'll have a story to share that will touch their deepest needs. We can discover that our distinction in any culture is not captured by what we know; rather it is captured by the intensity with which we care.