

The Practical Side of Caring for Each Other

Here's how it sometimes works. The church member who has served faithfully for years and always given faithfully to the church in every way is slowing down. In the mornings, it's hard to get up and get moving. She comes to church when she can, but she can't every Sunday. People notice that she isn't there - because she's always there - but then she's back the next week, and over time people get used to her only being there occasionally. "Occasionally" becomes "rarely" then "not at all." But it happened gradually, so no one really notices, and this faithful member just disappears. Nobody meant it to happen; it just did.

Other times, it works this way. A new family joins the church, filled with the desire to become a part, to get involved, to provide a place for their children to encounter and grow in faith, and for a while everything goes pretty well. But then the couple has problems - financial worries leading to marital strife, maybe - and for a couple of weeks it just feels like too much work to get everyone out of bed and to church. And so they don't go, and a month passes. Meanwhile, at church, people notice they aren't in their usual pew, but guess they're on vacation, and then they wonder what's up but feel as if it would be intrusive to call. The couple, seeing that apparently no one has even noticed that they're gone, decide not to go back. Nobody meant it to happen; it just did.

Or it might work like this. A church member going through a difficult time reaches out for help to the person who always sits beside her in the pew. After church, that person faithfully reports the problem to the pastor, who scribbles a quick note on his bulletin and tucks it into his Bible along with the other notes that people had given him, from the dripping john in the ladies' room to the new email address to . . . and in that black hole of good intentions, it is never seen or thought of again. The church member waits for someone to call, anyone, and finally decides no one cares. So she disappears. Nobody meant it to happen; it just did.

Perhaps the most basic, most fundamental element of the community of faith is - or should be - its mutual care, support, encouragement. We should be a place where we experience Belonging. Here is my place. Here I know I am loved. Yes, we should have inspiring worship, challenging faith formation, creative outreach to others - but most of us don't start there. First we must know that we are loved, and if we don't know that, none of the rest of that matters. But as these examples show, sometimes we care but still fail. Maybe we think someone else will do it. Or don't know what to do. The problem isn't that we don't care; the problem is that we don't know how and when to show it. What we need is structure. When we know that someone is in need of care, we need to know what to do and who to talk to, and that person or group needs to be structured in such a way that concerns will not be allowed to fall through the cracks.

We are working to build that structure, one step at a time, beginning with a team of people who are already dedicated to the caring ministry of the church. But even after we have this team up and running, that will not be enough. Mutual care is not the task of one chosen group, but the joyous privilege of all who are part of Christ's church.

Everyone can write a card, send a note, make a call – just enough to remind people that they have been thought of and still belong.