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HOW TO QUICKLY BUILD A LAY PASTORAL CARE NETWORK

Part of [A Guide to Pastoral Care and Connection in a Time of Physical Distancing](#) [2]

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March 17, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has arrived, and you can barely keep up with the emotional, spiritual, and health needs of your community. Either you didn't have a strong network of lay pastoral care in place before, or the core of your network is over 60 and self-isolating... Suddenly, you find you have to bolster your network of pastoral caregiving.

This can feel a bit like building a plane while flying it, especially if your congregation is accustomed to a gradual, as-needed system of recruiting lay pastoral care associates. Our hope is that this guidance can help you create and/or maintain the kind of caring ministry you need in the midst of such an unprecedented social crisis.

Identifying People with Skills

Who in your congregation has the gift of listening well? Who has skill with being present in difficult situations, without trying to be the boss or play the hero?

Who has good interpersonal boundaries, and doesn't feel threatened by others' having a different experience or perspective than their own?

Who might have some relevant training, like in psychotherapy, counseling, post-trauma debriefing, chaplaincy, or even pastoral caregiving?

Who can make time for the discipline of meeting with the minister and the other pastoral care associates regularly, along with making time to call/video/visit with people?

Doing Due Diligence by Vetting and Screening

It's wise to not simply recruit good-seeming folks and say "you're in." Sometimes in the process of application and interviewing, you learn things about people's skills or boundaries that make you think "er, maybe not." And sometimes you find real red flags that show poor boundaries, like sex offenses. These resources can help you vet and screen your pastoral caregivers.

- [Sample questions for prospective lay pastoral caregivers and their references](#) [3]
- [Guidelines for screening adults](#) [4] who work with youth (we recommend the same vetting for lay pastoral caregivers)

Offering Some Basic Training

Figure out what are the most important things for your pastoral caregivers to *know* and the most important ways for them to *be*. Then do your best to equip them. When you're building the plane at the same time as flying it, there will likely be things you'll forget. Make sure it's clear how they can get ongoing support for their ongoing learning.

Here are some basics that every pastoral caregiver should embody:

- **Pastoral care is about being present to another person, deeply.** It is not problem-solving. We are not there to make meaning for someone, or tie up their difficult situation in a pretty bow. We are there to be present with them in their own struggle, their own emotional and spiritual journey. A mentor of mine would say, "When someone asks you a hard question, like 'Why me?', your job is not to answer them. Your job is to be present to them. Your being present to them while they ask that difficult question is a much greater gift than any answer you could offer. Your presence helps them find their way into their answer."
- **Follow the Ring Theory:** "[Comfort in, dump out](#) [5]." When someone in the congregation is facing a crisis, don't dump your own crisis experiences on them. An example: When I sought support from a fire chaplain after witnessing a fatal car accident, he started telling me about all the worse and more gruesome car accidents he'd witnessed. It felt like a verbal assault—he made me feel worse. When someone is going through a crisis, we must center their experience and their meaning-making. This is why, in Susan Silk's [Ring Theory](#) [5], the person most impacted is at the center. In concentric circles around them are other people who are impacted and hurting. Our job as pastoral caregivers is to direct the comfort of our presence toward the center of the concentric circles, and direct the "dumping" of our own fears and frustrations, away from the center of those circles.
- **Reflective listening is a powerful tool.** It's about listening so you deeply understand the speaker: what they're saying, and how they're feeling when they say it. And then it's about reflecting it back with what you say. Example: "I hear you saying 'I'm just hoping for the best,' and I can really hear the fear and frustration in your voice as you say it." Take some time to learn about reflective listening from online sources, or books, or one another. Practice it.
- **Know something about trauma.** Learn about some basic trauma-prevention tools like Critical Incident Stress Debriefing and learn the signs that you might be experiencing secondary trauma while caring for people who've been traumatized. Learn some [basics about trauma-informed care](#) [6], which Rev. Sunshine Wolf spells out in another post in the Leadership Library.

- **We are conducting a ministry of the congregation.** As such, we practice the values and policies of the congregation, modeling inclusion, sensitivity, and empowering care. And in conducting a ministry of the congregation, we work as a team with the minister(s) and other lay pastoral caregivers. We are doing important and sacred work as we nurture the meaning-making and connectedness of our people—we should treat it as such.
- **Report back to the minister(s) and pastoral care team.** Mutual support and regular communication helps everyone stay effective and well-bounded. It also helps the congregation minister to one another better. Many pastoral care teams meet monthly, or twice a month. You may find you need to meet even more frequently during a prolonged crisis like COVID-19.

What are you and your fellow pastoral caregivers learning as you minister to people amid a pandemic? Share it with the UUA, share it with me at the link below, and share it with each other so that we can support one another with love, skill, and deep interconnection.

For more information contact conglife@uua.org [7].

Source URL: <https://www.uua.org/leadership/libraryleadership/blog/how-quickly-build-lay-pastoral-care-network>

Links

[1] <https://assets.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/network-pixabay.jpeg>

[2] <https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/pastoral-distance>

[3] <https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/sample-questions-potential-lay-pastoral-caregivers-and-their-references>

[4] <https://www.uua.org/safe/youth/screening-adults>

[5] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/laugh-cry-live/201809/how-respond-people-in-crisis-comfort-in-dump-out>

[6] <https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/stay-away-and-connect>

[7] <mailto:conglife@uua.org>

