

The Missional Value of Christian Care

by David A. Paap

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Mission-minded, outward-focused congregations are sometimes tempted to see pastoral care as an obstacle, an impediment to carrying out the Great Commission. Caring for those with deep emotional and spiritual needs (e.g., those who are grieving, divorced, terminally or chronically ill, in a job crisis, lonely) requires prolonged, focused, individual attention; it is time- and labor-intensive. Slowing down to meet these needs can seem at odds with the goal of helping more people meet Jesus for the first time.

But what if, instead of being considered a problem, providing Christian care was seen as an opportunity? What if, instead of being a nuisance, bringing Christ's care to those in need became an investment in mission with the potential to provide huge returns? What if, instead of seeing it as a drag on your progress, you saw it as a wind at your back?

The Four Needs™

The organization I work with, Stephen Ministries in St. Louis, has done a good bit of research to learn why people are drawn (or not drawn) to Christian congregations. In a number of ways we asked people, "What motivates you to connect (or not connect) with a particular Christian community? What deep needs or longings do you have that a congregation could fulfill?" Based on surveys and conversations with thousands of individuals, both inside and outside the church, we've identified four primary longings people look to the church to fulfill. We call them "The Four Needs" . . .

- **Spirituality:** helping people experience Jesus and his saving power in their lives;
- **Community:** helping people experience Jesus in one other, giving them the sense that they are connected to a "body"—a loving community—as well as to the Creator and Sustainer of all things;
- **Care:** helping people experience Jesus in their pain and suffering—when many people are most clearly in need of the gospel and most open to God's presence and the healing, saving power of Jesus; and
- **Service:** helping people experience meaning, purpose, and significance by participating in Jesus' mission in the world and being involved in something that is not only bigger than themselves, but also life-transforming and enduring.

How well a congregation meets those four needs is a significant indicator of its overall health and ability to be in mission with Jesus. The Four Needs can provide a blueprint for how a mission-minded congregation can plan and structure its entire ministry.

Leaders of missional churches readily recognize that spirituality, community, and service are significant factors for pursuing their mission. But many fail to see how providing Christian care fits into the overall mission and purpose of the externally focused congregation.

In fact, the missional value of Christian care is evident in a number of ways.

Rehabilitating Wounded Soldiers

You don't send wounded soldiers back into battle without providing appropriate care and sufficient time to recuperate.

Life is tough. The members of your congregation experience emotional and spiritual bumps and bruises from time to time—and sometimes more drastic injuries—as they serve their King and engage in his mission. Sometimes the wounds are inflicted by an enemy; other times they are self-inflicted. Either way, wounded soldiers need time and proper care to recuperate and heal before again being pressed into service. Christian care is essential for helping God's people return to wholeness so they can once again engage in God's mission.

What happens if people don't receive the care they need when they're suffering? What if their needs are ignored or unnoticed or—worse yet—trivialized by others wielding hollow platitudes? Hurting Christians who don't receive appropriate, compassionate care from your congregation quickly lose sight of any potential value they may have had for your congregation's mission. Some will become disillusioned and seek healing elsewhere; others will lose faith in the church as a whole and disassociate from your congregation. Another major research finding is that a person is much more likely to become inactive or drop out of church if his or her needs for care during a crisis go unmet. Even if hurting people stay in your congregation, their loyalty and devotion are likely to wane.

On the other hand, hurting Christians who receive appropriate and compassionate care from their congregation are much more likely to return to health and re-engage in the mission of the church. Quite often, after receiving care during a time of crisis, they rebound with a newfound passion for serving God and the church.

One of the most gratifying transformations I see in Stephen Series congregations takes place when a Christian who has received care from a Stephen Minister during a time of crisis later recovers and feels a strong calling to be in ministry caring for others. Such wounded healers are a powerful force for bringing the love of Jesus to others in need.

Capitalizing on Common, Untapped Gifts

Perhaps the greatest stumbling block to providing quality Christian care is thinking the pastor needs to be the only one who provides it. The good news is that, if your congregation is like most, there are a great number of people who have gifts such as mercy, encouragement, and helping. With the right kind of training and organization, lay people can provide very high-quality Christian care for people who are hurting or suffering. That's what the Stephen Series has been doing in thousands of congregations for more than 25 years—equipping laypeople who are called Stephen Ministers to use their God-given gifts to make a significant difference in the lives of hurting people in their congregation and community.

Involving gifted laypeople in caring ministry meets two of the four needs in a powerful way. People who are hurting receive the focused, one-to-one, Christ-centered care they need during a time of crisis. The lay caregivers also experience personal satisfaction and spiritual growth because they're using their gifts in meaningful ministry—they're serving God and others while doing something they deeply enjoy.

Pastors benefit, too, because they don't have to bear the burden of caring ministry on their own. Pastors can continue to be involved in providing care in certain instances, but now they have a team of gifted, trained, passionate laypeople providing the largest slice of congregation care.

First, these lay caregivers are very well trained. Pastors who lead Stephen Ministry often say that their Stephen Ministers receive much better training in caregiving than the seminary ever provided. Training Stephen Ministers also is a very leveraged activity—for the Stephen Ministers and for the trainers. Stephen Ministers regularly describe their training as life-changing. The pastors and other leaders who conduct the training are preparing a class of 10, 15, or more lay caregivers in much less time than it would take to personally mentor one person to the same level by bringing him or her along on pastoral visits. Lay leaders can conduct most or all of the training. Knowing that he or she can count on such effective lay caregivers frees the pastor to focus on other vital leadership functions.

Reaching Hurting People

One reason mission-minded congregations are often reluctant even to talk about congregation care is because it can be seen as a trap, turning inward to focus on internal maintenance, meeting only the needs of members. This is indeed true when caregivers are limited to pastors and church staff—the sheer volume of needs within a congregation can quickly consume all their available time. But when a congregation has a well-organized team of 10, 20, 30, 40 or even 50 or more lay caregivers, Christian caregiving can become a powerful outreach to hurting people in the community.

People are never more likely to be open to the gospel or to connect with a Christian congregation than when they are suffering. Caring laypeople bear a powerful witness to the love and compassion of Christ through their compassionate interaction with those who are hurting. St. Francis said, “Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words.” Stephen Ministers, through their quiet ministry, preach the gospel—sometimes even using words.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark asserts that compassionate Christian care was one of the major forces behind the explosive growth of Christianity, especially as two devastating epidemics swept through the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries.

While pagans—even pagan physicians—tended to flee the sick in order to avoid being afflicted, Christians provided care for the suffering people around them whether they were Christian or pagan. The survival rates among those who received even elementary nursing care were significantly higher than among those who received no care. And of course the pagans who received care from Christians were much more likely to take an interest in knowing Jesus.¹

What epidemics plague our world? Loneliness? Meaninglessness? Poverty, homelessness, and despair? The care ministries of your congregation can bring Christ’s care where others are unable or unwilling to make a difference; it can be a significant part of your overall mission strategy. Congregations that have effective care ministries are well positioned to bring people who are hurting to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The Genius of the AND

In his book *Built to Last*, Jim Collins says:

The “Tyranny of the OR” pushes people to believe that things must be either A OR B, but *not both*. . . . Instead of being oppressed by the “Tyranny of the OR,” highly visionary companies liberate themselves with the “Genius of the AND”—the ability to embrace both extremes of a number of dimensions at the same time. Instead of choosing between A OR B, they figure out a way to have both A AND B.²

Missional congregations should not fool themselves into thinking that they can do *either* mission *or* caregiving; that they can be *either* outward focused *or* inward focused. Missional congregations must do **BOTH**. In fact, they must focus on service *AND* care *AND* spirituality *AND* community.

Incarnating the Love of Jesus

Whatever else the church is called to be, it is most certainly called to be Jesus' expression of love and compassion to the world. Providing care for hurting people is not an option, but an opportunity, because sometimes we are the only glimpse of Jesus some people will ever see.

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- 1 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 73–94.
 - 2 James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: Harper Business, 1994), pp. 43–44.

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