

BROOKSIDE METHODIST CHURCH

Gunthorpe Road, Peterborough PE4 7TG

Registered Charity Number: 1142796



Brookside Methodist Church Peterborough

GOVERNANCE

Supplement

Pastoral Carers

Guidelines on Role and Confidentiality

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1 THE ROLE OF PASTORAL CARERS

The governance document covers our role as pastoral carers:

- Visit or make contact with any person on your list whenever the need arises
- Visit each person at least once a year with their membership ticket;
- Keep in touch, be perceptive, supportive and available;
- Nurture friendship, reliability and trust;
- Ensure your member or adherent has a contact number for you in times of need;
- When necessary, advise the Minister of a concern or situation (with member's permission);
- Respect confidentiality at all times;
- Use the Pastoral Assistants for advice or support whenever necessary.

Listening to some of the recent feedback that has surfaced in relation to how people receive our ministry, and how we handle confidentiality, I thought it might be helpful to offer some advice about how we go about our task.

2 OFFERING OURSELVES FOR THIS MINISTRY

As a pastoral carer we offer ourselves to people. Some will take up our ministry readily. Others will be pleased to know that we are there, thinking of them and praying for them. Others (and this may surprise you) do not feel a particular need for a pastoral visitor but because they are a member of the Church, they accept it. Frequently, they develop other support networks outside of those that we formally lay out. We let people know we are there if they need us.

Thinking about my own experiences across different churches, sometimes I am surprised just how different people are in the level of the support they are comfortable with. Some families will deal with a bereavement quietly on their own, whilst others will welcome more close support. In times past this has sometimes left me feeling like a 'spare part'; I find myself thinking, 'Surely, because I am the minister, I should be doing more!' But it is important to note that what I think is not the point. The focus is on the needs of the individual.

Often I find that a phone call that I have made has done wonders – and that is all that they needed. At other times, people do not want the minister to know immediately but reveal information later on. This is fine. You may have similar experiences.

It might seem odd that people respond in this way but it is in fact quite understandable. One difficulty in the life of the Church is that when we are going through some kind of trauma, people ask us how we are, and we end up repeating (and often reliving) the same story.

However, instead of helping some people, this actually hinders the healing process; returning back to the story is like scratching an insect bite – it can make things worse. In my view, this one reason why some people yearn for privacy. It is not a weakness. In most cases it shows a high degree of self-awareness. This moves me on to my next point: confidentiality.

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3 CONFIDENTIALITY

As a church, our default position is one of openness. Our worship is open to the public, as are our meetings. Whilst we can go into 'closed session', this can be done only under specific conditions, and even then guaranteeing confidentiality is difficult. However, all pastoral information is confidential. Recently, questions about confidentiality have come to my attention from multiple angles. Unfortunately, my experience of most Methodist Churches has been one where confidentiality 'leaks like a sieve' (to quote my former Chair of District).

There may be times when we even hear people share information about someone else, but tell us it is supposed to be confidential! As a minister, I have even been approached with – 'they did not want you to know this, but I feel you should know!' At other times, we hear something disclosed in one context and do not know whether to repeat it in another. Or we don't know whether we should pray. As a result, we feel compromised.

As Pastoral Visitors we are all bound by confidentiality. The Methodist Church states:

'The Methodist Conference has adopted a clear policy regarding confidentiality In some ways, this advice is common sense, but in some situations it's easy to upset people when information isn't shared appropriately.'

Anyone, lay or ordained, who is involved in pastoral work needs to be aware of the following guidelines:

- Things people share should be treated in confidence.
- Don't assume that a person's friends or family know any details.
- Confidentiality is just as important with children as with adults.
- Don't share information without express permission, even in open prayer or intercessions.
- If you know someone in more than one context, remember to keep the boundaries.
- If you believe someone to be at risk disclose the information only to the relevant authorities.
- The limits of confidentiality should be set by open and agreed policy rather than assumption.'

Confidentiality is not so much about keeping secrets. It is about preserving privacy. I think that the most helpful advice that I can give is to establish the bounds of confidentiality with the person concerned, as soon as possible.

- Is the person happy for people to know generally?
- If not generally, then ask specifically about whether it is OK to let the minister/the pastoral assistants/the pastoral team know.
- Always ask permission to add someone to prayer lists or to pray for them in church.
- Remember (and I have been caught out on this one) that when we do pray for people, not everyone may know and some may be left quite shocked. Hearing pastoral news through a prayer is not ideal. It is not always easy to prevent, but anything sensitive should usually be covered as part of our notices.
- In general, you should try to avoid being the only person who knows about a situation as you may need someone to share with – even if they are from another church.