

“The Call To Care”

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Text: Acts 6: 1 - 7

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33 years of ministry has taught me that every congregation is unique when it comes to what drives and empowers it. In my time with Varsity Acres Church I have come to appreciate that a central driver here is the priority to care. You find that priority in the opening chapters of the congregation’s history book, “Life & Joy”. You find it in our activities, such as our Side by Side program, that made the front page of our denomination’s national newspaper! For 52 years Varsity has made care a central tenet of its understanding of faith. And well it should, because love’s expression is absolutely core to Christianity. As the apostle John wrote to the churches: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). In other words, if you are not expressing love, then you really don’t get either God or the Christian faith.

The call to care was one of the first calls the church heard in its very early days. In Acts 2 we read that the first Christians shared their possessions with the less fortunate in the early church. In Acts 4 we read that some early Christians who owned land sold their land, sharing the subsequent money with the Apostles for the care of the poor. The passage we read today tells us that in those early days they also conducted a daily distribution of food for widows. So what we find here in these passages are accounts of how these early Christians expressed care informally.

Informal care has been at the heart of Varsity Acres Church. One of the most touching stories in “Life & Joy” is how the congregation rallied around the Ross family early on in the congregation’s history. While Mary Ross was being courted to become the congregation’s organist, her husband Don was in hospital. They didn’t know a single soul at our church. Over the next four years Don had several unsuccessful surgeries and family finances were very tight. As Mary Ross recounted those days, “Every family [in the congregation] helped us in some way, and they did it over time.” Gordon Hodgson arranged for Don to study courses at the Law School at the university. Creta McGuire arranged a team to read law texts to Don because his condition had made him blind. Joyce Wytmsa provided support and prayer. People cleaned house for the family, took Don for walks, brought food. Rod Tomlinson helped Mary complete her social work degree. This all went on for 4 years, when Don died. What the congregation did for the Ross family was heroic. But I think that moment in the early history of our church built care into the DNA of the congregation in a remarkable way. Recently we enjoyed the baptism of the Yawney twins. At that time Shannon and Bryan expressed their gratitude for the many ways Varsity has supported them. Again, a wonderful expression of informal care.

The Book of Acts recounts the early days, and the evolving experience, of the first church. We learn that the church expanded in Jerusalem very rapidly. Soon Christians numbered in the thousands! That remarkable growth outstripped the capacity of the church to meet needs and express care only through that informal means. We are told that the issue was raised by the Hellenists. We don't know much about them, other than they too were also Jews. This story we read this morning, at first blush, could seem relatively mundane: a need arose to ensure all widows were receiving food, and that need was met. End of story. But there are really two things of importance to notice in the formation of this official group of caregivers.

The first is that they experienced an evolving situation driven by the rapid growth of the church. The changes they were experiencing required a change in their organization. Their informal way of expressing care was no longer working adequately. So in response, they created the first ever church committee. The other thing to notice is the two-part rationale given for creating this designated group of caregivers. The first, clearly, was to meet the need for care. But the second reason was clearly to meet the need for mission. As we can see from this passage, the apostles understood themselves as evangelists and teachers. They saw themselves as helping people become introduced to Jesus, to become followers of Jesus and to grow in their discipleship. So the formation of this group of deacons was not only to ensure the proper care of those in need, but also to ensure the mission of the church would continue as a high priority.

So what is the message in this story for us? The care of people—for those who are both a part of the congregation and beyond the congregation—is a vital priority. It was then and it is now. It happens informally and it also happens in more formal, organized ways. Then as now. As the needs evolve, the structured ways to meet needs change, then as now. But at the same time, room must be maintained for for the church to have the commitment, time and energy to continue to pursue God's mission in the world. This is a pertinent message for Varsity Acres Church for 2020.

This past fall the Session has been assessing our organization for pastoral care, for a few reasons. As a congregation, we are evolving! We are all happy to see the number of younger families that have made us their church home in recent years. And we also have a significant number of seniors. Too easily they are overlooked when they can no longer make it out to worship. So we asked the question, are we expressing enough care for them? Another evolving aspect of our congregation are the attitudes of our congregants. What do they expect by way of care from their church? A generation ago those expectations were pretty uniform. Today they are not. When congregants are in need, some wish the church to be involved to help while others don't expect that. Finally, one traditional organizational way for a Presbyterian church to maintain contact, to communicate and to offer care has been through the system of elder districts. But here again, recent decades have brought changes to people's lives, so much so that the large majority of Presbyterian congregations find it challenging to make the elder

district system work as designed. Because of this, a growing number of Presbyterian congregations are making adaptations to the district system, or supplementing it in various ways...with some congregations even abandoning and replacing it with other ways to provide organized care. In the faith community, care is always a priority. In our church, like most, the need is evolving. Consequently, the organization needs adjusting. As it was in the early church, with the creation of the very first church committee, and so it is still today. So how are we imagining the care organization for Varsity Acres Church? We can picture all our people in one of three clusters of care, that we call “Districts”, “Relationship Groups” and “Independent Connectors”.

Let’s look first at our own traditional care system: the district system. Historically, everyone associated with VAPC were a part of a group of 8 or 10 households—called a district—with an elder assigned to be the point of connection between those households and the congregation. The elder was also designated to provide care to those in their district. This system enables congregants to have a direct, on-going relationship with one person from the congregation. We find merit in continuing to have a district system, for those of the congregation who will find that most helpful. But we want to make two changes to the traditional practice. Moving forward, some districts will have a care giver that is not an elder. Why? Some of our best caregivers would never want to be an elder. Also, the Book of Forms (the guidebook for Presbyterian congregations) assumes that all elders are wonderfully gifted to do everything and anything, which is not realistic. For some, care is not a strength. So, moving forward with the district system, we want our district visitors to have strength in offering care. As we organize in this new way, you will be asked whether it matters to you that your visitor is an elder or not. You will have a say in who is your visitor. You will also have a say in how you will connect with your district visitor. You may prefer it be by a personal visit in your home, or by phone or email. Perhaps just talking to the person at church will be sufficient. Again, we want to tailor our system to meet your preferences.

We already know that some of our congregants find their meaningful relationships and care in the groups they participate in. Groups such as the choir, the Faith Formation Group, our Side by Side team already offer a great deal of informal connection and care one to another in the group. For some congregants, these relationships meet their need for connectedness and care, and so they do not see placement in a district as that important. If this is the case for you we will acknowledge that. And I hope we can do some training to help all our groups offer care one to another in even stronger ways. We also know that we have congregants that we are calling “independent connectors”. These are people who are a part of our congregational life but who may prefer not be really a part of these first two systems. They are content to receive communications from the church and, if they need connectedness and care, to call on the church when needed. If that is you then we want to accommodate you as well. Of course, what we are calling “Critical Care” will still be there for all. This is offered by the ministers, Stephen Ministry and the prayer chain. This is for people in illness, bereavement, life transitions, our homebound members. Nothing changes here. We also want to create a new committee that we are tentatively calling the Community Group. One of its responsibilities will be to be mindful of newcomers to the

congregation, to help them feel at home in our midst and become more incorporated with us. One aspect of their work is to help newcomers become a part of our system of care.

We are going to move in this direction because the nature of our congregation and the people who make it are changing, and our system of care must respond. This morning is just your introduction. You will be hearing more about this, and reading more about this in the coming weeks. For all elders who currently have districts we will be meeting with you to talk about this new approach. And everyone will be hearing from us and asked directly how you want connectedness and care to be provided for you. We want our system to be responsive to each and every one of you. Finally, if this morning you heard something that sounds appealing to you (like being a district visitor and not an elder) or being on our new Community Group (which will have a ministry to newcomers as part of its work), please let me know. In fact, if you want to be part of the group that is organizing all this please let me know. And I hope you do, because care one for another is core to the Christian faith, and core to the identity of this congregation. So let us all work together to do even better what we already do so well.