

CHURCH THAT CARES

A Biblical Guide to Loving One Another Well

Helen Thorne-Allenson

"Developing Christ-like care in our churches serves so many ambitions. It blesses those inside the church who receive that care, and it commends Christ to those outside the church who see the quality of the care being given. Helen Thorne-Allenson's book is a faithful, biblical and comprehensive guide to the principles and practicalities of being a caring church. Broad in scope yet detailed in application, this book will help all our churches grow the kind of caring culture that is both glorifying and obedient to Christ."

Steve Midgley, Executive Director, BCUK; Author, *Understanding Trauma*

"Wanting a church that cares and having a church that cares are two different things. Helen both identifies the barriers to the practice of authentic care and offers realistic strategies to growing both the desire and the capability within yourself and others. Reading and discussing this book together would be an ideal way for your church to grow in care through inviting and encouraging every member to play their part."

Andrew King, Association Secretary, Grace Baptist Churches South East, UK

"In this accessible and practical book, Helen gives us a hope-filled and Bible-saturated yet realistic vision for churches that care well. I am confident it will be a stimulating and encouraging resource for anyone who wants to help their church grow in this vital area, whether a church leader or a member of the congregation. It is a great place to start!"

Kerstin Bowsher, Church Pastoral Worker, Grace Church, Porthcawl, Wales

"Helen skilfully and gently shows us, in a practical and accessible way, how we can build and nurture a culture of biblical care in our churches. I felt genuinely cared for as I read. It is a must-read for anyone passionate about helping people grow and pointing them to Jesus."

Fernanda Curtis, Women's Worker, Christ Church Cambourne, near Cambridge, UK

"Love is patient, love is kind... and church is messy. This book gets that. Gospel-centred and pastorally sensitive, it speaks to churches of all shapes and sizes, and paints a picture of what it looks like when we learn how to love one another. It will challenge and encourage you in equal measure with lots of practical ideas for growing a culture of care. Well worth reading!"

Matt Beeby, Rector, St James' Church, Gerrards Cross, Bucks, UK

"I am so grateful for this book and will be reading it regularly for years to come. It has challenged me to be more imaginative in prayer for my church, more diligent in my love for others, and more proactively collaborative in creating a culture of care. Helen's writing is thoroughly biblical and wonderfully realistic; she consistently sets a vision for growth which is exciting, challenging and Christ-honouring, yet does so with humility and gentleness, using relatable examples."

Eleanor Godwin, Pastoral Worker, St Giles' Church, Derby, UK

"Once again, Helen has written clearly and biblically with wisdom and compassion born of faithful gospel application in the nuances of everyday life and of the wealth of experience which that brings. Whether you read this by yourself, with a friend, in a small group or as a whole church, this book will help you live out Jesus' command to love one another just as he loves us and, in doing so, to show the world that we are his disciples."

Helen Morrow, Assistant Pastor, Holy Trinity Church, West Bromwich, UK; Tutor, BCUK Foundations Course

"I loved this book! Helen's understanding of people and experience of being part of a local church for many years are so evident throughout, and I frequently found myself thinking, 'You know my heart, and you know my church'. She is wonderfully realistic about the challenges we face when it comes to loving one another well but left me feeling excited that we really can make progress, and that our culture can change, as we acknowledge our need and look to Christ."

Andrea Trevenna, Women's Minister, St Nicholas' Church, Sevenoaks, Kent, UK

"Wise, practical, challenging and motivating, Helen's book has fuelled my love for my local church and spurred me on to love others well. Anyone who serves in any way in their church should read this book. The wonderfully rich application of Scripture, alongside 'how-tos', FAQs, training outlines and lived examples, invites discussion, reflection, personal change and action. I can't wait to read it with others in the ministry contexts I serve in and see how God uses it to change our hearts, our prayers and our church care."

Esther Lynch, Irish Church Missions churches, Dublin; Team Lead, Equipped to Care, Ireland

"Helen draws on a wealth of experience in helping both individuals and churches grow in their ability to care well for one another. Each chapter is accessible yet packed full of biblical encouragement, practical application, inspiring stories and challenging questions. Aimed at equipping both leaders and congregation members, this book is an invaluable resource, whether read individually or within a small group, ministry team or whole church."

Dr Joanna Jackson, Counselling Psychologist; former Director of Counselling, All Souls Church Langham Place, London

"How different are our Christian communities? Surely an acid test is how well we love and care for our brothers and sisters, and particularly for those who are in pain or vulnerable. Helen has given us such a helpful book to encourage us to do this like Jesus—thoughtfully and humbly. I wish I'd had this book years ago. There is much wisdom to help me, and the church family, to care like Jesus more and more."

Rachel Meynell, Minister for Pastoral Care, St Mary's Church Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK

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If there is one thing I have learned from my recent renewed foray into gardening, it is that nothing grows well unless it is tended. Things do grow without help—that is for sure—but what grows, and how it grows, is very much dependent on the care the plants are given. Left to its own devices, a vegetable patch quickly becomes full of weeds. Without the proper care, the runner beans intertwine with the tomatoes and quickly form a cat's cradle of greenery that distorts both plants. If not picked in time, the fresh vegetables become rotten vegetables. And don't get me started on caterpillars and the havoc they can wreak... Gardens need tending if they are to flourish and be fruitful.

Churches are a lot like gardens. A culture will always grow—an approach to caring for others will always emerge. But what that culture is and how it functions will depend on the kind of nurturing the church has been given: the sort of teaching they have received, the kind of role-modelling that has been displayed, and the quality of relationships that have been grown. A flourishing culture will not just appear by accident or simply come to pass because gospel truth is proclaimed with gentleness. If we want our churches to overflow with the love of Christ in ways that encourage people to come to Christ and grow in Christ, in all seasons of life, there needs to be an intentionality in tending that growth. Without it, love and care can get muddled or muted or pushed to one side.

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What follows in this book does not set out everything that we might need to know in order to grow a culture of love and care for one another well. It is far from comprehensive. But what it does aim to do is to set out what a culture of Christ-like care might look like in a local church and suggest a range of areas to attend to in order to grow and maintain that culture and care. Some of those areas may seem obvious and some may take you by surprise, but hopefully all will feel achievable over time. And all require each of us—leaders and congregation members alike—to be involved.

Thankfully this work does not rely on us alone. We can be confident that the Lord is always at work in his church, growing what is good—we simply need to follow his lead and avoid pulling in a different direction. And as we seek to be faithful to God's call to love one another well, we can enjoy reaping the wonderful fruits—comfort, hope, encouragement, sanctification and witness—that flow from a church that loves and cares like Christ.

It is my hope and prayer that, as you read, you will become ever more excited about God's call to love others well and will know the blessing of the Lord as you engage in his work of caring for others, in his church, for his eternal glory.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)



SECTION 1

PRINCIPLES OF CARING WELL







CALL: WHY CARING MATTERS

ove one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22). So wrote the apostle Peter to the early church. The apostle Paul instructed the believers with whom he was in contact in a similar vein: "Be devoted to one another" (Romans 12:10), and, "Serve one another humbly in love" (Galatians 5:13), he said. The apostle John agreed with them both: "I ask that we love one another" (2 John 5), he penned. The point is obvious: love is meant to be central to all Christians say and do.

Such teaching is rooted in the person and work of Christ. Jesus expressed extraordinary love when he left the glories of heaven to be incarnated as a man. Jesus modelled countercultural care and kindness during his earthly ministry: touching the "unclean" (Mark 1:41); speaking with the outcasts (John 4); calling those who had made serious mistakes to follow him (Mark 2:13-17). And then Jesus displayed the pinnacle of love as he hung on the cross, taking the sins of the world on his shoulders so people like us can go free, clothed with his robes of righteousness. Jesus, as God, embodies love. It is not just what he shows; it is who he is. God is love (1 John 4:8).

No wonder, then, that he taught his followers to love. "As I have loved you, so you must love one another," he said (John 13:34). The greatest commandments given are to love God wholeheartedly and love one another deeply (Matthew

22:36-40). One of the hallmarks of the Christian church should be love—so much so that in his *Apology* (chapter 39), the early Christian theologian Tertullian wrote of the Christian church, "See how they love one another". In a believing community, love should be startling and obvious.

Love that makes a difference

It is a beautiful thing when an ethos of love is at the core of a local congregation. Beautiful because it is an expression of obedience to Christ. Beautiful because it is a powerful witness to an unbelieving world. Beautiful because it is a sign that Christians are being who they are designed to be, living in ways that encourage one another to flourish in the faith. Beautiful because it is an act of worship—a hallmark of being a set-apart people who seek to live lives worthy of our calling (Ephesians 4:1).

Love is an intensely practical characteristic, and it is one that works itself out in the care of others. Love means that people will feel able to and be wanting to share their lives, not just the gospel, as Paul did with the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Loves means that people will experience freedom to be honest about the ups and downs of life, knowing that those around them will respond by rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep (Romans 12:15). Love gives people the courage to bring dark things into the light, confident that as they speak of their battle with sin, they will be met with humility and grace and pointed back to the Father, who loves to welcome them home (Luke 15:11-32). Love propels believers to set aside selfish ambition and genuinely want what is best for those around them (Philippians 2:3-8). Love spurs people on to growth in Christ-likeness (Ephesians 3:17-19).

We see the faithful nature of that love in the story of a woman with a chronic illness, often unable to leave the family home, who was regularly visited, cared for and prayed for by her church family over many years. The fact she could not get out and could not serve on Sundays did not diminish the ways in which she was valued and included in the body of Christ. Meals were prepared, time was spent with her, biblical encouragement was shared, and songs were listened to together until she went home to be with the Lord.

We see the transformational nature of that love in the story of an older man who had been addicted to alcohol for many years, who was welcomed into the local church. He had pushed so many people away over the years. His family had long given up on him—they could not take his lies and outbursts any longer—but the care of Christ and his community gradually broke through. As this man was loved, he saw the power of the cross, and he began to believe that change was actually possible. He learned to be honest, he learned to find other ways of dealing with the pain, and he learned to live a truly loving life, even able to reach out to his children once more and genuinely ask for their forgiveness.

We see the compassionate nature of love in the story of a woman who was bereaved in her early 30s, her husband taken in a tragic car accident. Left to bring up her three young children by herself, she must have felt as if her life had come crashing down—but her church family rallied round. Life was done together: school runs, shopping, play dates and parenting decisions all became things she could do with others when she wanted the support. She had friends to cry with, to talk with, to pray with and to grow with. The church cared, and she and her kids thrived.

We see the gracious nature of love in the story of the young man who was battling sporadic pornography use. He never had to labour under the impression that he was the only one struggling that way, because the church was open

about the reality that lots of men (and women) experience pornography's lure. There was a grace-based structure for him to seek help within the congregation. No additional guilt or shame was piled on him—just a consistent, caring encouragement to look to Christ for freedom and hope.

We see the quiet nature of love in the story of a young couple trying to work out how to do life together. No one imposed rules upon them, but there were multiple couples within the church who were willing to listen and share wisdom with them. When it came to finances, decision-making, diary planning and sex, there were people who would simply listen, pray and encourage them to live for Christ day by day. Love propelled the community to love the couple well.

We see the strength of love in the young man who was starting out in the workplace and constantly feeling the pressure to compromise his faith (or, at the very least, hide it). Among his peers, there was always some coarse joking and some pressure to lie to get ahead. He could so easily have joined in had it not been for the regular encouragement of his small group. They didn't come up with trite platitudes. They didn't merely tell him to stand firm. They heard the complexity; they saw the depth of temptation—and they prayed. They gently talked through how he might respond in the hard situations he faced. They loved him on the days he got it wrong. They showed him what it is to live life humbly yet faithfully before an unbelieving world.

We see the wise nature of love in the nurturing of a woman who was doubting her faith. She was given space to articulate her concerns: she knew she would not be condemned for asking questions and that it was safe to bring her queries to her church and the Lord. The leaders committed to regular meetings with her. They listened, they discussed, and they spotted the underlying fears as well as hearing the surface questions about the sovereignty of God. She was

given space to explore Scripture alongside friends over a significant period of time. And they cared, so they did not give up praying, even when she temporarily walked away.

We see the unexpected humility of love when a man who had begun controlling his wife—expecting her to do his bidding and to live life in obedience to his desires—began to see the damage he had done to his family. Instead of making excuses or covering it up, he was won over by the culture of repentance in the church. Little by little he saw that his reluctance to admit his faults went against the grain of Christian living. He began to see that the marriages around him, in which the husbands were humble and gentle and quick to put their family above their reputations, were the ones that were flourishing. And when he finally admitted the horrors of his idol of control and sought help, he came to taste a personal freedom and a depth of connection with those around him that he had never known before. His family were able to thrive once more.

Love really does change everything.

Love that struggles

Caring is not easy though. Love is much harder to grow and maintain in a congregation than we might like to admit. And, if we take an honest look at our church communities, we will see there is some growing to be done. Often, the trouble is that caring for those around us has fallen off the priority list. No church would say it is unimportant, but an intentionality about nurturing it has been swamped by other things.

Sometimes love has been pushed aside as doctrinal battles have been fought. Churches have been embroiled in denominational disputes, the authority of Scripture has been undermined, and the priority has been to fight for what is right. People have been encouraged to prioritise truth—to

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make sure every theological i is dotted and t is crossed—and the deep relational culture of the church has, at times, been sacrificed. Care never stands in opposition to truth. Indeed, love rejoices in truth (1 Corinthians 13:6). But love is essential. Without it, anything else we may do, even the defence of Scriptural authority, is nothing more than a "clanging cymbal"—a blunt sound that brings no pleasure to the Lord.

Sometimes love has been pushed aside by pain and suffering. For some, the church has been a place of deep and profound hurt. A few leaders have crushed their congregation members. A few congregation members have crushed their leaders. Cultures that have previously been accepted as normal have come to be seen to be broken in the extreme. Some have got scared. Self-protection has become the order of the day. Keeping others at arm's length has felt like the more sensible course to keep further suffering at bay.

Sometimes love has been pushed aside because it is just hard. As Christians, we may be united by Christ, but we are a diverse community. Our temperaments, preferences on secondary issues and passions for different areas of ministry vary. It is easier to follow your own path than come together in an attitude of Christ-like compassion and care. We have sometimes allowed churches to become places of individual expression rather than corporate care.

And in the process, we have seen some of the rotten fruits of those tendencies. We see it in the stories of the individuals with chronic illness who were effectively abandoned by the church save for the occasional email check-in, because it was too hard to keep visiting someone who is not improving health-wise and is never going to be able to "contribute" to the work. We see it in the stories of alcoholics left on the periphery because it felt awkward and uncomfortable and a bit messy to get involved, and so no one stepped forward. We see it in the stories of the bereaved, whose non-Christian

friends provide so much more support than the busy friends at church. We see it in those young people struggling with pornography who keep their battles silent because they have no evidence that their stories will be treated with care. We see it in the young couples who labour under the burdensome impression that they really ought to be able to work out this marriage thing alone, and who spend years quietly drifting apart before a crisis appears that leaves everyone around them stunned. We see it in the individuals living double lives, smiling sweetly on a Sunday but acting abominably on a Monday. We see it in the lives of those who have walked away from the church because they didn't feel able to bring their doubts to their brothers and sisters in Christor because, when they did, they were met with a simplistic download of truth that completely missed their confusion and fears. We see it in the lives of those people who know they are treating their family awfully but are so terrified of having to admit they are wrong, with the reputational risk which that brings, that the whole family stays trapped until someone walks away.

When we fail to care for one another in the way that Jesus commands, people in our churches are left broken, reeling and alone.

Love that is observed

It is not just within the church that the presence or absence of a culture of care leaves its mark. Those outside the church are impacted too. Acts 2 reminds us that it is as the church meets, devotes itself to Scripture (v 42) and shares with and cares for one another well (v 44) that it grows. The world watches Christians. When it sees superficiality, partiality, pride, arrogance, lack of integrity and other unloving attitudes, the church is seen to be falling very far short of what they are designed to be. On the other hand,

when the watching world sees love and care, and the Spirit's work in enabling people to love like that, that is attractive indeed.

The only reason why I went to church as a young adult was because I saw extraordinary love in a couple of people there. They were not perfect, but they were kind, sacrificial, generous, hospitable, willing to apologise when they got things wrong, patient and persevering—they chose to love me when I was deeply unlovely. Of course, the Holy Spirit was the one who ultimately opened my eyes to the gospel, but it was the deep care of Christians who commended that gospel to me.

Since becoming a Christian, I have known the ups and downs of church life. I have been loved. I have been treated unlovingly. I have loved. I have acted unlovingly. And, in each of those circumstances, I have seen the consequences, both delightful and desperate, of the presence or absence of a culture of love and care.

I imagine it is the same for you. As you have read this chapter, I hope there have been stories of love flooding your mind: moments when you have seen the difference care has made to your story of coming to Christ and growing in him. I am conscious that there may also be stories of lack of love gripping your heart: stories where you or someone you care about has been sidelined or hurt in ways that are really painful to recall. Stories where your faith journey has been marred by a culture that is very far from loving and kind.

This book is designed to enable you, whoever you are, to play your part in helping your church grow so that the stories of flourishing far outnumber the stories of pain. As we go through the chapters ahead, we will begin to see more of what this culture of love and care looks like. We will wrestle more deeply with the obstacles that get in the way. And we will look at how to help our church flourish—whether we

are young or old, male or female, in leadership or just new to faith.

One day, the church will be perfect. We will be perfect people, in a perfect place, gathered around the perfect throne of Christ (1 John 3:1-3; Revelation 21 - 22). But in this life, our churches will never be perfect. Yet, as we pursue love together, we will become ever more the worshipping community we are designed to be.

Questions for reflection

- 1. What excites you about God's call to love and care for others well?
- 2. To what extent is love on view in your local church? Note and thank God for some specific examples of where love has shone out.
- 3. In what ways is (or can) pastoral care be something that helps your church reach out to those who do not yet know Christ?