

TOGETHER THROUGH THE STORM

A practical guide to **Christian care**



SALLY SIMS

IN OUR FALLEN WORLD, episodes of sickness, suffering, and other trials are all too common. And the Bible's clear call for us to show Christian love and care means we *know* we shouldn't sit idly by while people around us go through these tough times.

Yet our genuine concern for others is often hindered by valid fears—the fear of not knowing what to do or what to say; the fear of putting our foot in it and making things worse; or the fear that involvement may take us beyond our own personal resources.

In *Together Through the Storm*, Sally Sims helps us overcome these fears by setting out clear biblical foundations and very practical guidance for Christian care that is based in the word of God and in Christian hope.

Sally brings a tremendously useful mix of life experiences to this important book, including training and practice as a nurse, study in pastoral care and chaplaincy, extensive reading and research, years of coordinating and providing pastoral care in her church, and, of course, personally persevering through her own times of trial.

Reading *Together Through the Storm* will help any Christian to develop in their ability to care for others, but it also provides a useful foundation for training a 'care team' in your church.



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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Together Through the Storm

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Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)

Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com

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For my dear mother, Joan, who taught me that the most important things in life are a personal relationship with God, steadfast love, forgiveness, courage and hope. The blessings of her love and care remain, even though she is no longer with us.

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Above all, I give thanks to God for the love he has shown us in Jesus.

Introduction

Life can be very good, but we all go through difficult times and we're frequently touched by the pain and suffering of others. While we know we are called to move towards others in Christian love, sometimes we feel unsure about how best to respond. In our willingness to help, we can underestimate the value of just being present and listening. Or we may hesitate because we are fearful of making matters worse. Sometimes we do nothing—not because we don't care, but because we feel out of our depth.

Even with a background in nursing and a natural sensitivity to the needs of others, I've still felt uncertain at times about how to reach out to those who are suffering. When I became a Christian, God's word convicted me that I needed to be ready to help others and share the love of Jesus in word and deed. But it wasn't until 2007, when I took a 40-hour clinical pastoral education (CPE) course run by our church, that I felt more confident and better equipped for hospital visiting and to offer Christian care to those in need.

Shortly after I completed this course, God began to draw me into a deeper relationship with himself through the refiner's fire of suffering. My father's Alzheimer's disease had progressed to the point where he had to be cared for in a nursing home for the last year of his life, and I cared for both my father and mother through

this time. Two years after my father's death, my mother died unexpectedly. The loss of both of my parents coincided with significant, and at times overwhelming, challenges within our immediate family. I found myself struggling to trust God as things spiraled out of control. God brought me to the point where I had to actively make the decision to trust him whatever happened. Head knowledge told me that God was calling me to trust him, but somehow I couldn't apply this to my heart. I prayed earnestly and often tearfully, asking God to help me trust him. I even remember asking a friend who was going through a difficult time herself, "How do you trust God when life is so hard?"

God was teaching me what it means to live by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). He continued to uphold me during this time of pain and suffering, and as I wrestled with him in prayer he enabled me to trust him with greater confidence. I continued to turn to him and read about his promises and unfailing love for us in Jesus, and experienced God's grace more deeply than I ever had. I surrendered everything to God and clung to him, knowing that he was with me in the darkness and that he wouldn't leave or forsake me. During this time I became more dependent on God for strength and comfort, and I also experienced the blessing of friends and others at church who prayed for us and offered their loving support.

As circumstances improved, my strength gradually returned and space opened up in my life for serving outside of the family. I was prayerfully considering how I might serve at church when our senior pastor asked me to consider helping to coordinate the pastoral care ministry. With God's help and the support of others, I have been doing this for the past six years. It's been a process of both giving and receiving help, prayerfully trusting God, and asking him to help me grow in the midst of life's challenges.

When I began coordinating this ministry, I read books and attended courses that would help me think biblically about

Christian care and give me the practical and theoretical guidance I needed. I've gleaned much that has been valuable, and I've endeavoured to put what I've learned into practice. A couple of years ago, I began to pray about the possibility of writing a book that included the sort of things I wish I'd known when I started out. I hesitated at first, as I don't profess to be expert in this area; but I was reminded that we care for one another not as experts but as fellow pilgrims who walk alongside each other, recognizing our common need for Jesus. And so I began to write, praying that God would use this book to equip other Christians seeking to care for one another in times of need. The book has grown over time as I've processed my experience of journeying alongside others, witnessing their faith in action and reflecting on the care-giving process in light of the gospel. As such, it is a work in progress.

Christian care: What is it?

Christian care involves reaching out to others in need, listening attentively, and bearing witness to God's grace and presence through our words and deeds. We offer this kind of care with the understanding that any difference we make is only possible because of God's love for us. By his grace, God transforms our hearts and minds so that we can look beyond our own interests to love others. As we grow in his grace, it becomes more natural for us to look for opportunities to care for others—particularly in the context of church and our everyday relationships, but also beyond.

In our care of others we can be tempted to focus on people's problems (which may be overwhelming at times), and overlook their spiritual needs or give scant attention to ministry of the word and prayer. But caring for others is more than the practical expression of Christian love; we are ultimately concerned with helping people to connect with Christ and move forward in their relation-

ship with him. We are to come alongside other people and interact with them in ways that help to strengthen their relationship with Jesus. We must always do this sensitively and with humility, acknowledging that we are all needy and broken. We want to keep the brokenness of humankind in view while we point people to God and to the gospel. If we don't do this, we run the risk of either becoming insensitive to a person's anguish or losing sight of God's promises.

Therefore, as we care for one another, we need to keep prayer and God's word central. Col Marshall reminds us:

At the core of all Christian ministry is Bible reading and prayer. We are united with Christ by hearing his word and responding in faith, and that is how we remain in Christ. We can never progress beyond these basics—teaching each other the word of God; calling upon each other to believe and repent; bringing our lives, our churches and the world before God in prayer.¹

We cannot afford to lose sight of this truth. As we care for and about each other, the goal is making disciples and building up the body so that we all reach maturity in Christ (Eph 4:11-15).

The scope of Christian care ranges from simple acts of kindness to planned care strategies. These may take place informally between individuals, or more formally as part of a team effort. This kind of care is often called 'pastoral care', but for many that term brings to mind something less than what it is (e.g. casseroles and hugs) or something more specialized (e.g. counselling). At its heart, Christian care is an expression of 'one-anothering',

1 C Marshall, 'Factotum #3: One-to-one prayer and Bible reading', *The Briefing*, 20 September 1994 (viewed 2 January 2016): www.matthiasmedia.com/briefing/1994/09/factotum-3-one-to-one-prayer-and-bible-reading/

of every-member ministry in a Christian community. There are more than 50 ‘one another’ references in the New Testament, and dozens of commands about how we are to relate to one another. ‘One another’ care is Christ-centred, which means being intentional about reaching out to others, putting them before ourselves and putting Jesus first of all. As we care for one another, we are to sensitively encourage each other to look to Jesus first and foremost and to depend on him in all circumstances. Caring for one another in this way helps us to grow in our faith and also has a direct impact on our witness to the world.

The term ‘pastoral care’ can also be too easily confused with pastoral ministry and pastoral counselling. Pastoral ministry takes place every Sunday and throughout the week and includes preaching, teaching, worship, prayer, care, one-to-one Bible reading, and so on—all of those disciplines that bring people into contact with God, nurture their growth, and encourage whole-hearted discipleship. Christian (or pastoral) care grows out of pastoral ministry. It is intentional care that Christians offer to one another in times of suffering and need. Pastoral counselling, on the other hand, is a distinct and formal type of counselling in which the counsellor uses integrated knowledge from the behavioural sciences and theology in the process of helping others.

Today ‘pastoral care’ is a term that’s used broadly in a number of settings, including schools, hospitals and nursing homes, where it’s often used interchangeably with the term ‘spiritual care’. One of the consequences of the development of general pastoral care services alongside church pastoral care ministries is that they may use the same terminology to mean different things. We want to hold on to the distinctiveness of *Christian* pastoral care and avoid any confusion. For this reason I have decided to use the term ‘Christian care’ throughout this book, and suggest that when we do use the term ‘pastoral care’ we refer to it as Christian pastoral care.

Who is this book for?

I've written this book for Christians who are looking for practical, biblical guidance on how to care for those who are facing life's challenges—for those who have a general interest as well as for those who are more formally involved in offering this kind of care. Because we often care about others and are willing to help but feel hesitant or ill-equipped to do so, the chapters that follow outline specific actions we can take to help someone going through a difficult time.

While there is much wisdom to be gained from books and courses, they are not essential prerequisites for caring for others. By his Spirit and through his word, God equips and teaches us as we prayerfully reach out to others with his love. However, if you are planning to care for others in a more formal capacity as part of a church caring ministry, appropriate training is essential if you are to care for others well and look after yourself in the process.

Whether you are caring for others informally or formally, I hope this book will be an encouragement and help as you seek to offer the most effective care you can.

The first part of the book explores suffering and the need for compassionate, biblical thinking as we care for others. The second part considers the biblical foundations of Christian care, and the third provides practical guidelines for visiting and responding to people in need, including those who are in the hospital.

My prayer

God made us to depend upon him and to be mutually dependent upon each other. Christian caring isn't a one-way process; it's a process of both giving and being able to receive. We all have stormy seasons, and a book of this nature can sometimes prompt us to

think about our own needs and suffering. If you are currently going through a difficult time, it's my prayer that the God of all comfort will reassure you that you're not alone. May you know God's peace, the comfort of his promises, and the assurance that you are in the grip of his grace. May you also know the loving kindness of other believers who are prepared to reach out to you with God's love. And when the time is right, may you in turn be a comfort to others.