



WHEN A NEIGHBOUR COMES KNOCKING

Helping people who seek crisis assistance through the church



LOCAL MISSION
CARE MINISTRIES





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Crisis assistance in the church

What is crisis assistance?

Crisis assistance (sometimes referred to as emergency relief) is the provision of material aid to a person/couple/family/community in immediate need. It may also include a referral to other specialist community services, such as personal counselling or financial counselling.

What does crisis assistance have to do with the church?

Over the years, an increase in unemployment, housing stress and survival on low incomes has meant that there has been an increased reliance on crisis assistance. People are turning particularly to the church (church manse or office and church workers or volunteers) and other agencies for assistance. This brochure has been created to help you to develop a compassionate and effective response to people who need assistance.

Why do people need crisis assistance?

There are many reasons why people need to ask for crisis assistance. Sometimes issues such as sudden reduction in income, gambling issues, financial management, loneliness, death of a loved one, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, drugs, illness, isolation, inherited debt, break down of an electrical appliance, wallet or purse stolen, and more can cause financial as well as emotional distress. Large increases in living costs and the requirements placed on refugees on bridging visas have continued to bring more people through our doors.

A report by the Australian Council of Social Service indicates that those at greatest risk are unemployed people, children in sole-parent families and people whose main income is social security payments. In 2020, approximately 3.24 million people lived in poverty in Australia (of which 774,000 are children and 424,800 are young people).¹

¹ <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty/#what-is-poverty>, retrieved September 2022



Why do Christians assist people in crisis situations?

Throughout the Bible, God speaks of caring for and defending the rights of those in need and has called us to 'love our neighbour as ourselves' (Galatians 5:13b,14). Providing assistance through crisis relief is one way to share Christ's love by meeting human needs.

Matthew 25:35: 'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.'

Proverbs 31:8,9: 'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.'

Hebrews 13:2: 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.'

How will the person feel when they must ask for assistance?

Building up the courage to ask for help can be difficult. Place yourself in the position of someone in need and imagine that you are hungry because you have not eaten for two days and are cold every night because you have no blankets to keep you warm. Would you admit this to someone in your congregation or someone you may not know? How would you want them to react? If you were in this situation, you would like to be treated with dignity and respect. Some general principles when dealing with people who come for crisis assistance are:

- **Avoid snap judgements and prejudice.** Do not judge someone by their mannerisms or appearance. Do not assume why the person is seeking assistance until they have had the opportunity to tell you.
- **Listen.** Take the time to listen to the person without interruption. Empathise with them (not sympathise).
- **Be sensitive to cultural differences.** Examine your beliefs about different cultures and work to ensure that these beliefs do not interfere with the assistance you provide.

Sometimes it is easy to think that the church is being ripped off – again. In deciding your response, it is helpful to ask yourself, 'What did Jesus do? What did he teach his disciples to do?' It is hard to say if Jesus would have helped everybody, but he would treat each person with respect and dignity, and they would leave His presence knowing that he listened.

Providing assistance

Material assistance

If you cannot provide material assistance from your church, you can refer someone in need to local support agencies. A good place to find local welfare services is the website of your council or local government area. You may decide to provide material assistance yourself if appropriate. It is helpful to have made-up food parcels available for you to give.

Security issues

We recommend that you avoid providing financial assistance (ie supermarket vouchers and cash) as this can create a range of personal security issues, including the high risk of theft from the church office.

It is best if people wishing to receive crisis assistance be referred to a church office, church hall or other welfare agency rather than the church manse. Even if the church office is in the manse, it is best to keep this issue away from what is also a family home, where security may not be as good and children, who are not sure of what is going on, are present or may answer the door.

Emotional assistance

Whether you can provide material assistance or not, you may be able to provide emotional support. There can be many reasons people come to ask for help, and often, emotional distress is involved. You can provide assistance by listening to them and empathising with them. The person may need to be referred to another agency in your area for counselling or other services.

Spiritual support

While people may not want you to pray with them while they are present (although you may like to offer this), you can pray for a person when they have left the venue and continue to keep them and other people going through crisis situations in your prayers. This may be the only contact that a person has with a church. How you respond may reflect how this person sees Christ's face. Have you seen Christ's face in the person in need?

Saying 'no'

You should not feel bad about referring a person or caller to another agency. Government and welfare agencies have the services and resources enabling them to provide this type of assistance to people that your church may not. A firm but kind 'no' with an explanation of the facts is important. For example, 'I'm sorry. We simply do not have the resources to assist you, but another agency does', or 'It is a church policy that we are unable to give money, but I can give you a food parcel'.



Starting a crisis assistance service in your church

Your congregation may decide to assist people in crisis situations in a more-involved way. This section will tell you more about working with people in crisis situations and setting up your church's own crisis assistance service.

Establish guidelines

Guidelines for crisis assistance need to be established before the program is initiated in the church. Following are some items that you may want to consider:

- Boundaries for assistance: Will assistance be given to a person or family on a once-only basis? How often will you assist within a particular time frame (for example, within 12 months)? Will it just be when the need arises? You may work out another arrangement or refer the person to an agency. Whatever decision you make, it is necessary to let people know when you are assisting them if this is a once-off arrangement or the last time you will be able to help them. Give them a copy of the list of agencies that provide crisis assistance in their area, so they know where to go next time.
- What type of assistance will you provide?
- What time of day will you make this assistance available, for example, only during day times or the evening, whenever someone arrives in need or another time?
- Where will the assistance be available? Church office only? Church hall only? Both?
- Will there be a value limit on the assistance you provide?
- Consider work health and safety. There should always be more than one person in or near a crisis assistance interview.
- How can the person's dignity and confidentiality be assured? What will be the procedure for confidentiality breaches by those giving assistance?
- Who will distribute crisis assistance? People in a welfare committee? Other volunteers? The pastor?
- How will records be kept, maintained and accessed?

You could form a welfare committee if there is not one already or allocate planning tasks to an existing committee. This committee would discuss the best possible action to address this issue. You may ask the congregation members to donate non-perishable items to place in a food parcel to give to people when they are in need. You may set aside a cupboard or container near the church door or in the church hall where people can place these donated items on a weekly basis. These items can then be sorted into shopping bags for food parcels.

You may consider working together with other local churches. Sometimes, people go from one place to another, which can make it more difficult for those distributing assistance. If the churches can work together, the load is shared, resources are pooled, and there should be better outcomes for those in need.

Preparing a typical food parcel

A basic food pack may contain the following items:

- pasta or rice
- pasta sauce
- 1-litre milk (fresh or UHT)
- cereal (Weetbix)
- tinned fruit
- biscuits
- 2-minute noodles
- spreads
- tuna/tinned ham
- cup-a-soup
- tinned vegetables
- tinned soup
- baked beans or spaghetti
- toilet paper
- tea, coffee or Milo
- 2-in-1 shampoo and conditioner
- toothpaste
- toothbrushes
- soap bars
- deodorant
- tampons/pads.

The contents and the size of food parcels can vary according to the number of people in the household that require assistance. Unless you use all ring-pull cans, you should have some can openers available in instances where the person does not have one. You may also like to add one or two Christian tracts for people to read if they would like to know more about the church.



Networking/referrals

It is good to keep in touch with welfare agencies in your local area – to keep up to date with the services they provide so you can refer people to these agencies with ease. This can be achieved through attending local community welfare forums. To find out about forum dates and times, contact the local government welfare agency in your area.

The local council or one of the local welfare agencies may have put together a directory of services in the area that can also help you with referrals. This information may change, so it is important for you to attend forums/meetings of local services to keep up to date with any changes that may take place.

The referral process

When referring a person to another agency, it is important to take the following things into consideration:

- Does the person want to be referred to another agency? They may choose to decline.
- Referral criteria – is the person eligible for that service? For example, are they in the correct age group and income level, and do they live in a suburb/district covered by that agency? Does the agency require a referral letter from you or another agency for the person to use their service?
- Can you make an appointment time for the person that is suitable for both the person and the agency? Does the person prefer to make the appointment themselves?
- Do you have accurate information to provide to the person about the service, for example, a brief description of the service the agency provides, its location and contact number?
- Does the person have access to transport to attend an appointment at another agency? Can you get a bus ticket or cab charge that will help them get to the appointment?

Confidentiality and privacy

It is important as a church to have confidentiality and privacy policies in place before providing crisis assistance. It is a person's right that the information they disclose to you remains confidential except in special circumstances as listed below. In smaller towns or communities, information can spread quickly. Confidentiality is not only the person's right but also builds trust.

Safe Church

If a person in the church becomes aware of any allegation, disclosure or reasonable suspicion (or they form their own reasonable suspicion) that a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm (whether inside or outside the church's environment), the person must make reports to the local police, the applicable government child protection authority and Professional Standards.

The Lutheran Church of Australia provides Safe Church Training for people in the church to assist them in understanding how to best fulfil their obligation to take all reasonable steps to protect children and vulnerable adults from all forms of harm.

Aggressive behaviour

It is important to know how to respond to aggression. Consider some of the reasons why a person may become aggressive:

- Be aware of the person's personality – are they arrogant/abusive?
- Consider their recent past – have they told you of an argument, stress or problems?
- Is it physiological, ie are they under the influence of alcohol or drugs?
- Is it confusion with assertiveness or fear? Are they angry in order to gain something, be heard, cover up feeling anxious, or do not know any other way of receiving what they are looking for?
- Is it the result of injustice – bias, prejudice, unfairness or disrespect by the crisis assistance worker?



Dealing with anger – situation assessment

Angry people are highly charged, emotionally and physically. They are energised for action.

- Assess the situation. If there is a high risk of physical harm, seek help from the police or other workers.
- Ensure your physical safety first. Position yourself for protection or escape in case the anger is not controlled.
- Seek assistance if you feel too uncomfortable or unable to respond (a supervisor, other worker or friend).
- An angry response to an angry person will escalate the issue. A humorous response may defuse the person's feelings but could also be interpreted as demeaning. Your fear in isolation may encourage the person to abuse power and threaten when they want something or feel aggrieved. It's okay to be afraid. If intimidated, seek help.

Dealing with anger – your response

- Remain as calm as possible even though you may feel nervous or anxious.
- You do not have to deal with anyone under the influence of drugs or alcohol, as they may not be receptive. If you are having difficulty getting people – under the influence of drugs or alcohol – to leave, call the police.
- Acknowledge the anger briefly as recognition of how the person is feeling and to identify what is happening.
- Speak slowly, firmly and clearly, without a raised voice.
- Quickly move away from the emotion to the facts of the issue.
- Focus on what the person says and what they would like to happen.
- Do not give in to intimidation unless there is a physical threat. Focus on your personal safety first and then the issue at hand.
- Having acknowledged the person's concerns, state clearly what you have decided to do. Offer the opportunity for appeal, for the decision to be offered in writing with reasons or any alternatives. Make the outcomes clear so the person can decide to leave or appeal and not just continue to 'negotiate' with their anger.
- Debrief with all involved as soon as possible. Check with those who may have witnessed the event to ensure their wellbeing or refer them to a professional counsellor.

Emotional blackmail

People may sometimes use emotional blackmail as they seek an amount of care in a particular timeframe. They may suggest that their children will have to go hungry for another night if you don't immediately help them. Or they may threaten self-harm or even suicide if you cannot help. If the latter occurs, contact the police and an ambulance immediately by dialling 000.

What is 'debriefing'?

Speaking with someone going through a rough time and in need of crisis assistance can stir up personal issues and difficult memories for staff. It can also lead to compassion fatigue.

Debriefing is the opportunity to share your experience with someone else. This helps to unload stress, guilt, concerns, confusion and any uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. This might prevent you from churning things over at night and help you move on. Find someone you can trust who will take the time to listen and not judge when you debrief. The sooner you debrief, the better. Rather than letting issues stir in your mind for extended periods, it is best to talk about them to help release any built-up emotion that may have been caused. Talking about an issue once may not be enough; you may need to talk about the situation several times before you feel at ease.

It does not have to be a serious situation that calls for a debrief but may just be a way to unwind. Failure to debrief may mean that stress begins to accumulate and may re-present itself much later. Debriefing may occur at home with a partner, but this may become onerous to them. Where possible, issues are best left at work. If you can, find a 'debriefing partner' at your church where you call each other or meet to debrief once a week or whenever a stressful situation occurs.

A final note

God has given us all many talents and gifts to use to his glory. One of the gifts we possess is the gift of giving itself without expecting anything in return. Continue to give thanks that the people you support have had the opportunity to have contact with the love of Jesus through your care.

God bless you and your work with those in need.



Support agencies

Queensland: Lutheran Services' support includes assistance in the areas of disability, mental health, youth and family and domestic violence. Find out more at www.lutheranservices.org.au

South Australia: Lutheran Care's support includes emergency relief, financial counselling, counselling and a community visitors scheme. Find out more at www.lutherancare.org.au

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