



Compassionate Ottawa – January/February 2021 update

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During the fall of 2020, the HELP Ottawa Team has been busy identifying findings from our more than 160 site interviews. These are things that people have said that have recurred in several or many interviews. Because we are in the initial stage of our data analysis, these findings are broad. What is interesting; however, is that, when the facilitators of the Faith Community sites compared notes, we discovered that about half of our findings were held in common while the rest were site-specific. We thought that the Compassionate Ottawa community might like to hear about a couple of shared themes.



Faith & Sense of Community - Congregants in both [Orleans United Church](#) (OUC) (photo of Community Care Tree below) and [Christ Church Bell Corners](#) (CCBC) Anglican Church (photo of Advent worship service above) commented on a strong sense of community within their parish. Many acknowledged feeling well supported by clergy and parishioners/friends alike, which led some to refer to their church as “home” or “family.”



The work of clergy in both churches is valued and appreciated and the ministers are identified by interviewees as particularly supportive of the chronically ill, dying, and bereaved. How significant it is that during the pandemic many commented on their faith as a source of support in times of loss.

Impact of the aging congregation – Most volunteers and informal church leaders are 55 and older. Active members scaling back on activities due to frailty or illness are now needing the support they used to deliver. In response, parishes are examining the need to both attract a broader base of volunteers and to rethink the ways individuals and families can offer their time and talents.

Caregiver fatigue - There appears to be one population that needs more support than they are receiving; caregivers express being overwhelmed, stressed, and in need of support to avoid burn-out. During the pandemic, we know that most community programs (e.g. day away and respite care) have been curtailed. While some activities have been reconfigured for online delivery, this has increased accessibility for some while decreasing it for others.

Both churches have teams offering support; the CCBC Pastoral Care team and the OUC Care and Support Team work with clergy, for instance, to keep in touch with the sick, dying, bereaved, and caregivers. However, caregivers are not receiving the support they need, especially during COVID-19. Let's further explore this theme.



More and more people in their 50s to 80s are becoming untrained caregivers of frail or chronically ill relatives. According to Caregiver Solutions magazine, “more than 8 million Canadians are informal (unpaid) caregivers for a family member or friend with a long-term health condition, disability or aging needs. That's one in four people”.¹ These number are also reflected in Statistics



Canada, 2018, Caregiving in Canada data.ⁱⁱ Yet, even with those high numbers, our research shows a disconnect between the lived experience of caregivers and the understanding by non-caregivers of the stresses involved.

The incredible stress that caregiving causes is well documented in HELP Ottawa research, and elsewhere. However, being physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted often means that the caregiver does not have the emotional or physical energy to reach out for, or to plan, help. Furthermore, many in our society regard asking for help as a condemnation of their caregiver skills. *"I think," said one respondent, "we have a natural cultural reluctance to ask for help. I think*



we are brought up to be independent and to stand on our own feet, and not being able to do that is a sign of weakness and you don't want to feel beholden to people."

Members of our faith communities often know each other better than they know their neighbours and they recognize that members of healthy communities, especially faith communities, look after each other. Non caregivers in our faith communities want to help; however, they express concern about intruding, about not knowing what to do to help, about limitations of their own time commitments, and about their skills in offering help. Others see helping as a long-term commitment and are reluctant to offer.

The question, "What can I do to help?", puts the onus on the already stressed caregiver to think creatively and come up with an answer. Yet, the question is posed from a sincere concern and desire to help. Caregivers and the bereaved suggest that offering something very specific is most supportive.

They express heartfelt appreciation for little acts of kindness: an un-requested meal arriving at the door, a driveway shovelled, mail picked up, phone calls made and, said one interviewee, *"sometimes that's all you need. It doesn't necessarily need to be somewhat in your face, but you know, knowing someone cared, was really, really helpful."*

Faith communities, in partnership with service providers in the community, can offer education and support both to those who are caregiving and to those who want so desperately to help. One caregiver said it well: *"there's something huge about people feeling less alone ... to have a safe place where they ... can share what's happening with people who will understand.... I think that one of the best ways to find support is to be with people who are experiencing the same thing that you are."*



Faith communities offer a non-judgmental environment for peer support. *"Knowing that you see it as a place where you can come and have conversations with other members who have been in that role – who come to either vent or step away from it for a couple of hours or just have a safe place to sit in (a worship) service and cry. It offers that safe place to step away, which you need sometimes when you're taking care of someone who's unwell."* Both parishes have begun to discuss caregiver needs in our faith communities.



We will continue to study the exciting data and work with our sites to bring the Compassionate Ottawa community interesting stories.

ⁱ *Family Caregiving in Canada*. (2018, May 31st). Caregiver Solutions. Retrieved January 15th, 2020, from <https://www.caregiversolutions.ca/caregiving/family-caregiving-in-canada/>;

ⁱⁱ Government of Canada. (2018). Caregivers in Canada. The Daily. Statistics Canada, Ottawa, ON. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200108/dq200108a-eng.htm>)