

14 June 2020 – Reflection on carers – Rosie Hunt

The term 'carer' is not an easy one. As you will hear from Helen in a moment, it is an uneasy term to use about oneself and many people prefer the terms 'husband, daughter, brother, friend'. Over 70,000 people in Sheffield provide support to an adult or child with an illness, disability, frailty, mental health problems or experience of substance misuse. The work of those supporting them is to look at how different parts of their lives are impacted by caring for someone else – their work, social life, emotional health, spiritual health. And to explore ways to reduce the impact on these areas.

Supporting a family member is often an unseen role – hours of care and dedication that do not fit into any work pattern but are a response to, and finely attuned to, need. Many people in this position are unable to take much time for themselves, and often carers find they are consistently unable to attend social occasions and start to find it difficult to maintain friendships – the very thing that can be a lifeline to them is denied them. An even greater concern is that it can become very difficult to maintain their own physical and emotional health, because they've become used to prioritising someone else's needs.

I have been so struck, through my professional work for Sheffield Carer's Centre, by how people have managed in very different ways during the lockdown.

- ❖ Some have said they feel much more resilient than normal, and have less pressure on them (perhaps because they're not trying to help their husband get ready for a 9am hospital appointment when it takes a few hours to give him a shower and get dressed);
- ❖ Some have said they feel much less 'left out' than normal, because other people's lives have slowed down to their pace (it's amazing how inclusive online contact and phone calls are for people who can't easily leave the house and normally miss out on a trip to the pub).
- ❖ Others, though, have found a difficult situation to be made much harder by the lockdown. Those who rely on respite or even a few hours out a week where they're not on high alert, have not had this because of the risk of the virus if careworkers come into their homes or they go to a care home facility. Others might have watched a family member struggle even more with their mental health or addiction.

When forming this service, Sue and I spoke to a few members of the congregation who support a close family member who is unwell. I am struck that, when asked if they'd like to talk about their experience, both Helen and Jo chose to reflect on the things which they draw strength from and which enable them to maintain resilience through a challenging situation.

Other voices spoke of some of the sacrifices they have made – in giving up work, relationships, social life and at times compromising their own physical health. Some spoke of how difficult it is to go out now as it is not safe for their husband or wife to be on their own. This has impacted on their church friendships as they cannot stay after the service to chat.

What Helen's, Jo's and other's reflections say to me is that they have not shied away from the challenges but found ways to draw strength. Perhaps we all have a role to play in supporting each other to nurture the strength, especially during the hard times.

In giving so much to others, it can be hard for those in caring roles to also remember they are important too. Yet, I am reminded of the verse "Love thy neighbour as thyself". The love of a carer is absolutely this – Love thy husband as thyself, love thy daughter as thyself, love thy friend as thyself. In order to do this, this must also incorporate love and care for self. And an acceptance of the love which the person they care for gives to them.

So, if you are a carer please hear this phrase "You are important too". In order to continue to care and in order to also be the unique individual that you are, it is vital, life-giving to *live* that you are important too. And if you know someone who you realise might be in this situation, perhaps you can remind them of it too.