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## Editor's Notes

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## *Editor's Note*

**Stuart Love**

The topic for this issue of **Leaven** is the significance of consolation in contemporary Christian ministry. There can be little doubt that much of the actual ministry of Christians and the Christian church through the centuries has brought consolation to those experiencing affliction. Without being able to state carefully the details of their beliefs or to articulate the theological significance of why they are constrained to comfort others, Christians have lived their lives based on simple faith commitments to love one another, to seek to overcome evil, to offer forgiveness, and to be present with others in the midst of suffering.

Little of my ministerial education taught me about a ministry of consolation. I soon learned of its importance, however, when preaching for a small church in Mt. Hood, Oregon. One Sunday morning at the beginning of Bible class I received news that one of the members had just died. What should I do? I decided to teach the class, preach my sermon, and then go to the family. Later, Melvin Green, an unbelieving husband of one of the members, challenged my choices. "Stuart," he said, "where were you? Why did it take you so long to come?" I responded, "I needed to teach my class and preach my sermon first." "You're wrong," Melvin replied, "when one of your members dies you need to drop everything and go be with the family." "But the church needed me first," I affirmed a second time. "No, someone else can teach the class and preach the sermon, and if not, they can just pray. It'll do them more good anyway." I had no answer. I still don't know that he was right, but his chastisement has served me well for thirty years. Strengthening the suffering by being present with the sick, the lonely, the hurting, the dying, the divorced, the unemployed, and others who suffer affliction may not be popular or glamorous, but it is of first importance.

Another time, years later, when I interviewed for a large church in an urban setting an elder summarized my job description. I asked, "How much time should I spend in sermon preparation?" He replied, "In this church the preacher needs to give 90 per cent of his time to preaching." He certainly was on target in stressing the importance of prayer and study in the proclamation of the word, but failed to see the significant role a ministry of consolation plays in making sermons credible for the church. In a time of ministerial specialization, the emergence of large churches, new church activities and church structures, it is imperative we not forget to strengthen the suffering by weeping with those who weep.

Giving consolation to those afflicted because we ourselves are consoled by God is a major biblical theme. When Paul speaks of "the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation" (2 Cor. 1:3 NRSV) he not only draws upon his biblical heritage and relationship with God, he also affirms that comfort is more than

simply being sympathetic to others. Rather, it is supplying active strength to endure pain.<sup>1</sup> Consolation or its equivalent is at the heart of numerous Psalms, the message of Isaiah 40-66, the Gospels, and the message of Paul. It is at the nerve center of Jesus' ministry, and it is a major means of spiritual growth among the earliest churches.

Articles in this issue of **Leaven** are written around two objectives: (1) to renew our understanding of the meaning of a ministry of consolation by tapping once more the topic's biblical roots; and, (2) to provide contemporary Christian examples of consolation in action, concrete examples and suggestions.

Three articles explore the biblical message. Sonny Guild writes with pastoral sensitivity on a ministry of God's presence. He draws upon both Old and New Testament materials to show how a call to ministry is a call to participate in the lives of others and that God, the Father, is the model for such a ministry. John O. York ably develops the theme of Christian consolation in Luke-Acts, showing how "the true content of Christian consolation is carried in the narrative of this theological history." James Bury interprets the thought of Paul concerning the God of all comfort in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, opening up for the reader Paul's pastoral concern in a congregational setting. What does it mean to say that God comforts the suffering through the mediation of the apostles and the suffering and comfort of Christ?

The remainder of the articles exemplify ministries of consolation. Karen Sampson, a social worker at Christ's Haven Children's Home, explores what is involved in issues of loss and grief for children. Claudette Wilson, known among her peers as an encourager, shares experientially how her ministry developed. Elmer Prout leads the reader through a kind of personal odyssey describing his search for the meaning of consolation best known finally by a memory from his childhood. D'Esta Love through a personal reflection recounts a number of struggles and emotions she and her family experienced at the death of her mother-in-law. Dan Coburn tells the story of the death of a Christian medical doctor afflicted with AIDS and how the doctor and the church were spiritually strengthened.

I have learned much from the authors of this issue. I thank them and the text editors, Cindy Novak, Martha Thomas, Gary Elliott, and D'Esta Love. I hope the readers will benefit and be blessed.