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# Ministering to the Hurting: An Elder's Perspective

by Bill Goforth

Ministering to hurting people is one of the greatest single challenges to Christian faith. Too often we wish, or even naively believe, that people in the church should not have problems or have to endure hardship and suffering anymore. When we are constantly confronted with hurting people—some whose hurt often may be self-inflicted to some degree—it is easy to get frustrated and even easier to feel inadequate to the task. Someone has said, “The church would be a great place if it weren’t for the people.” Unfortunately, that sometimes is the attitude one develops in dealing with the trials and tribulations of church members. It is easy to forget that God’s church is not a “sanctuary for saints” but a hospital for sinners who have accepted the Savior. While I certainly am no expert in the field of counseling, my own dealings with hurting people and my own personal struggles through the years have taught me certain lessons which I find helpful to remember in crisis situations.

Paul recognized that Christ had comforted him so that he could comfort others (II Cor. 1:3-7). Out of my own receipt of comfort in the midst of trial and suffering I am empowered to comfort others. The

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character of the comforter needs to be one of integrity, a life that reflects Christ himself and is recognized as Christ-likeness by others. Having the mind of Christ means having a readiness to freely share in the lives of others; to bear their burdens; to identify with their problems; to make their concern’s our own (Gal. 6:1-2). Our imitation of Christ will lead others to trust and listen when comfort and advice are offered. Such imitation demands a humility of heart and a spirit that never allows us to see ourselves as better than others. If we are “better” we will also be judgmental. Hurting people don’t need a judge, they need a listener who will accept them and genuinely hear them. Such listening never needs to condone sins, but it can offer love and forgiveness to the sinner.

Hurting people, no matter who they are and what the circumstances may be, need to know God as the Creator and the Sovereign one. All humans are created in his likeness and his steadfast love endures forever, for everyone. Communicating that message in the midst of crisis is seldom an easy task. Hurting people are not interested in verbal sermons. They are much more likely to receive living sermons—a hug, the loving touch of a hand, or even the simple act of being there. They are far more likely to remember our physical presence and touch than whatever we say. That is important for us—the shepherds—to remember because so often our own hesitation to offer assistance is caused by our per-

sonal struggle of “knowing what to say.” We need to realize that we do not have all the answers, and we do not need all of the answers in order to minister. What we need to communicate, particularly in initial stages of involvement, is that we care and that we have come not to judge but to feel with them and for them. And we must be patient! We must give people time to heal. Remember that it is God who has the power to heal if we will but trust and use it.

Perhaps what is most difficult for the care giver are those times when one sees hurting people whose hearts are not yet receptive to receiving help. People

often need to desire help before help can be given. Certainly there are times where confrontation may be appropriate, but there are also many times when forcing ourselves on hurting people is harmful rather than good. At all times our first avenue of help ought to be prayer—for the hurting person, that his/her heart may be open to the loving care of God and open to the concern we as care givers may have to offer. We also need to continually be in prayer for ourselves, that God will use us to his glory, not our own, and that we can be his instruments of mercy whenever, wherever, and with whomever He may choose.