

Just what is Our Response in the Face of Suffering?

The Ministry of Presence

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“A Ministry of Caring in Disaster Response”

The United Methodist Committee on Relief

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When nothing makes sense, somehow the church belongs there! Somehow you belong there, one wounded soul sitting with another. This is the Ministry of Presence, a gift you bring, much larger than the moment. It can last forever. Your presence “fleshes” God’s hope into what seems hopeless.

Here it is again: Our compassionate God knows it takes a human to intervene. God isn’t saying through your presence, “I’m going to fix it.” Instead God says to a suffering person, just by your presence, “I have heard your pain. I have seen your tears. I will sustain you as you travel through this ordeal.”

“Presence” doesn’t require you to know the “right” thing to say. You don’t need to have all the answers...or any. You’re not required to fix their world. In truth, too often as we struggle with our own need to be helpful, we yield to the temptation to jump in too soon with our solutions instead of allowing a survivor to find his/her own.

Often in the early days of a disaster, as people try to process what happened, they ask, “Why is this happening? Can this be real?” Now is not the time for you to provide an interpretation on the theology of suffering. The questions only show their struggle with the reality of what happened. Later there will be time for theological conversation where we try to put into language things that don’t make sense.

First comes the groaning out of the depth of our souls. Those are the times when none of us have words to wrap around our fears and sorrows—and God still understands. We don’t have to.

“Presence” counsels the importance of dealing with loss. Too often we offer the fix before the survivor has had time to deal with the loss. Grief takes time! Grief is one of God’s gifts...a gift that helps us heal.

“Presence” counsels patience. Time is also one of God’s great gifts. The “tincture of time,” the old physicians called it. In the days before antibiotic ointments, doctors used tinctures, liquids to which a little bit of antiseptic agent was added—like tincture of iodine—to promote healing by preventing bacteria from festering a wound. Healing takes time! And that requires patience from a people in a culture that is largely impatient.

“Presence” conveys to disaster survivors their worth as children of God. What they do need to know is that there is a connection between their pain and you who represent the church. Your presence conveys a mystery: “Hope. They’ve known it in the past, and you can imagine they will again.” The Hebrew book, Proverbs (20:27) contains this: “The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord.” As your spirit encounters theirs, God’s light shines on hope.

“Presence” means the survivor is able to confide pain, fear and hope to a “true” friend. A true friend will not judge or condemn and allows for differences in grieving.

“Presence” sometimes means good parenting.

People in crisis become more childlike. Sometimes a survivor will want a caregiver to fill the role of “parent” who will make the “child” feel better. Some survivors definitely need parenting. Perhaps

they've never had to buy a water heater before. But they need a good parent who will encourage them to take responsibility of their recovery. A good parent gives freedom, sometimes in the form of two or three choices, but watches to keep the "child" safe. Caregiving doesn't mean being passive.

"Presence" means encouraging the survivor to make a plan for the next day. That's part of taking responsibility. The survivor needs to say, "I'm going to take control. I'm going to decide what will be my response to this terrible thing that happened."

"Presence" means gently reminding the survivor, "You won't feel this way forever."

"Presence" means allowing survivors time to get away from their grief for a while. Perhaps a caring listener can suggest going out for a cup of coffee and a snack, just to get away from the house for a bit.

"Presence" means watching for signs of trouble. If a survivor is being taken advantage of by unscrupulous contractors, or is hiding, or can't speak of the loss, or can't speak of anything else, and/or makes "crazy" statements that aren't in keeping with his/her norm; if the caregiver finds a survivor having suicidal thoughts, being abused or abusing someone, or is a danger to him/herself or others, then a referral must be made and/or the behavior reported.

What Does a Ministry of Presence Look Like?

Take a look at two stories from the Hebrew text. The first, in II Kings 4:1-7, tells of a holy man and miracle worker named Elisha, head of a group called Sons of the Prophets.

A wife of a deceased member of the group comes to Elisha with a huge problem. Because of debt her husband left, creditors are coming to take her two sons into slavery as payment. Instead of reaching for his wallet, Elisha asks the widow how much oil she has in the house. "Only a little," she answers. Elisha suggests she send her sons to all the neighbors to gather as many jars as possible. "Then close yourselves in the house and start pouring oil. Pour until all the jars are filled." She did as she was told. When finished, she came to Elisha who said, "Good! Now sell the oil to pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest."

Elisha, the caregiver, didn't do it for her. She and the kids had to do the work. They were responsible for collecting jars; they had to decide how many were enough. They poured the oil. All Elisha did was to "enable" the miracle that God provided.

As disaster response caregivers, we don't take the place of God; we don't do all the work for survivors. Sure, we may climb up to repair a roof when the survivor isn't able. But mostly we enable miracles, we enable hope to be restored. Survivors must take responsibility for their recovery, to whatever degree they are able, and we don't want to become a barrier between them and God's healing Spirit by imposing our values and prejudices.

What Should a Ministry of Presence Not Look Like?

An illustration of what our ministry should not be is also found in II Kings (4:8-22). A wealthy woman who lived in Shunem offers Elisha and his assistant, Gehazi, a nice room in her own home where they could stay whenever passing through town. Elisha wants to do something for her in return, but she's a woman without want. What to do? Gehazi suggests that the woman needs a son. In those days, people believed immortality was achieved through male descendants—plasmic immortality, as it's called. What a gift for a woman who has everything! So Elisha expresses his thanks to the woman and declares that the something nice will come her way, a miracle—a son. "No!" she insists. "I have everything."

She conceives, gives birth and the son grows. Then one day the boy gets a headache and dies. The woman sends for Elisha who comes running with Gehazi. She yells, "Did I ask you for a son? Did I not

say, “No”? Not only did she not want a son, now she is overwhelmed by grief. Elisha’s good intentions have gone doubly wrong.

Elisha finally does something helpful. He restores the boy to life.

The point: Don’t inflict further suffering on people who didn’t want your help in the first place. A sign spray-painted on a garage door of a damaged home in some of the Oklahoma tornadoes read: “Don’t stop. We have more than enough help already.”

Just because you think they need what you have to offer, it isn’t your agenda but theirs that determines your ministry!