

Too Little, Too Late?

Martin Nicholas

During the Christmas holidays, a cold front pushed frigid air and freezing temperatures upon Houston while my wife and I were away traveling. On our return to town, I was desperately attempting to protect our outdoor plants only to have my wife comment several days later while surveying the damage, “Too little, too late.” When the marriage of church members is precariously close to disintegration, the church’s effort, and mine as pastor, to assist the couple in reconciliation often seems to be “too little, too late.”

At some moment, one or both spouses in a marriage sense a general feeling of discomfort or dissatisfaction, which is frequently not expressed but held within. Withdrawal, resignation, depression and other signs of anxiety are felt until the discrepancy between the expectations, assumptions or feelings about the marriage and its perceived reality can no longer be ignored but must be addressed. Tentative attempts at reconciliation, adjustment, or simply peace are made, usually in private, with only a small group of intimate friends or colleagues aware of the situation. Before long, the issues broaden until others become acquainted with the situation because aggression, hostility, conflict and grief have come to characterize the relationship. Finally the church is informed as one partner or both eventually seek counsel and comfort from the pastor as a matter of last resort.

Whenever I encounter such a situa-

tion, among other feelings, I experience frustration. The church’s role at the outset of a marriage is usually significant, preparing the couple for marriage, celebrating the union in worship, and assisting them to find a place in the church family. However, during the crisis the church’s assistance and guidance are ignored until it is “too little, too late.”

Rather than wait for the crisis to reach the state of last resort, as a pastor who is called to shepherd the body of Christ, I have found that caring for souls can involve some proactive measures or actions. The steps that follow have enabled me to involve the church and the pastoral office early in relational conflict and stress. Not only have they helped me care for couples in a marriage crisis but they have also allowed me to visit, relate to, and guide men in a variety of issues, needs and concerns, including marital disharmony.

Signs of Trouble

So much can be learned by careful, deliberate observation of parishioners. What can be learned by attendance and giving patterns? Changes in faithful attendance in worship, Bible study, and other programs, as well as faithful financial support that drastically or suddenly shifts, can be indicators of underlying issues or concerns. For instance, a husband may attend services without his wife, which is an alteration of previous habits. A couple’s children may start to miss church school and other activities, or their pattern suddenly becomes erratic and unpredictable.

If a pastor will become engaged with sensitivity and discernment, other clues can be detected. What does a person’s body language communicate? Does a person make a hasty entrance or exit to worship or a gathering, attempting to avoid eye contact and conversation? Are tears

ever evident? After someone casually comments that he or she would like to visit and will call in the near future, do you ignore the remark if the phone call never comes? What information comes from others in the church? Do buying patterns reveal anything at all?

As pastor, an unaffected, natural and personal openness can assist one to be a careful observer of the flock. Trust the Holy Spirit to enable your eyes to see, ears to hear, and mind to discern what is unfolding before you.

Invitation

Whenever a disturbing issue is observed in a parishioner or even when the Holy Spirit nudges one with an urge to contact a parishioner, it is important to reach out and invite oneself into a conversation. The pastoral office carries the unique and extraordinary privilege of calling upon people at almost any time. Over and over, I have found that my invitation to visit and converse, especially with men, has been fruitful and even extremely illuminating concerning a crisis or need about which I was unaware. Courage, however, is a prerequisite.

If disturbing signs of crisis have been detected, a certain boldness or confidence in the pastoral office is required to initiate a contact and arrange a visit. Pastors are especially challenged to take this step whenever men are involved.

Several ways in which I have invited myself into a conversation, personal crisis or spiritual restlessness with a parishioner is to arrange a breakfast or lunch meeting. Seemingly this is not as threatening to men. Also, a visit to a parishioner's place of employment for a quick cup of coffee can lead to deeper pastoral issues. In the same way, inviting someone in a casual, informal manner to come by my office for a cup of coffee has been productive.

It is critical as well to see that other invitations and occasions to connect and relate a parishioner to timely ministry and fellowship activities occur with intention. These include Bible studies, men and women's ministry groups, celebration and worship events, as well as many others.

To take a risk and invite oneself into a

conversation must be done in a way that does not offend or appear judgmental. The goal is to be open to the needs and concerns of a person, to hear a cry however muted it might be, to see a tear even if it is disguised, and to respond in love.

Intervention

This may be the most challenging step of all. If courage is required to initiate a contact or relationship with someone, it is even more necessary if a pastor is willing to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15.) Throughout the scriptures, the body of Christ is called upon to admonish, counsel, warn or instruct one another (see Romans 15:14, Colossians 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, 4:2, Luke 17:3-4, Matthew 18:15-19). This responsibility cannot be ignored by one called into the pastoral office. Surely, it should not be coercive or manipulative

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but may involve correction, confrontation and guidance.

The goal of a sensitive, corrective dialog between a pastor and a person, couple or family is healing and wholeness. Self-examination and self-reflection, which can lead to different patterns of behavior, can emerge from admonition. Intervention should never be in public but reserved for private, scheduled occasions.

Through the years, I have found myself in the uncomfortable place of confronting male members of my church with correction. For instance, homes and marriages have been destroyed by infidelity that began over the Internet, leading to acknowledged adultery. Drug use and alcohol abuse in someone, like infidelity and adultery, have caused me to invite myself into a conversation where it was required to speak the truth in love.

Such corrective action must be rooted in love, compassion, tenderness and trust. A pastor should never use harsh, judgmental

language. The purpose of intervention is not to cast blame or exercise authority but to seek repentance, forgiveness and healing. While it is true that such admonition has potential danger, the loving prayers, discerning presence and supportive correction of a pastor can make a critical difference.

Referrals

No pastor should ever believe that she or he can meet all the needs of every parishioner. Quite often, the role of a pastor is to assist someone in securing the special guidance and care that is required. Many times a pastor is asked for a referral, for a name of a trusted counselor. While it is important to know professional counselors and to have confidence in their practice, referrals should be seen not as a removal or transfer of responsibility but as a broadening or sharing of it.

What this means for me whenever a person or couple are utilizing other means of assistance is that I can function as I should. That is, as a pastor, not a counselor. In the end, my hope and trust has to be in the incomprehensible power of God to change hearts and lives.

I have discovered that with God, it is never too little or too late. Even in situations that challenge my willingness to initiate an interaction and to intervene with admonition—situations of cruelty, abuse or flagrant infidelity—God's grace and mercy always result in the opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation. Many times someone has finally trusted God to cleanse and forgive because I first trusted God and followed the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Thank God that the Holy Spirit can work through the pastoral office to correct, re-

direct, and redeem people. □



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