

MTMFoundation

From: MTM Foundation [charleschandler@mtmfoundation.ccsend.com] on behalf of MTM Foundation [mtmfoundation@verizon.net]
Sent: Tuesday, May 31, 2011 11:51 AM
To: mtmfoundation@verizon.net
Subject: Source and Significance of Human Comfort



Ministering to Ministers Foundation, Inc. Newsletter May 31, 2011

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Comfort: The Ministry of Standing By

My teaching on the topic of biblical images of pastoral care and counseling always begins with Paul's words of greetings to the Christians in Corinth, II Cor. 1:3-4, 7. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may comfort others who are in any affliction with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. . . . And our hope for you is steadfast, knowing that as*

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The Ministering to Ministers

you experience suffering, so shall you also experience comfort. This is a remarkable statement that generally gets overlooked in a rapid read of the introduction to Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church. It underscores the significance of human comfort and identifies the source of true comfort as being found in God's comfort experienced by us in "all our afflictions." The operative words are "so that." God has a purpose in comfort that transcends just the feeling of being comforted. We are comforted *so that* we may pass it on to others by comforting them *with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.* The point seems to be that the experience of being comforted does not end with our own awareness of comfort from God, but it is to be passed on to others in the same manner by which we have received it. So, comfort in a spiritual sense begins with our self-awareness of the power of feeling comforted in *all our afflictions* and continues by being empowered and directed to extend God's comfort to others *in any affliction.* Comfort in this sense is more than just a good feeling, it is a transformational experience.

Some years ago, while I was serving as Executive Director of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, I attended the International Congress on Pastoral Care and Counseling held at a conference center in the seaside village of Nordwickerhout, near Amsterdam. We were assigned to a small group composed of persons from around the world who were involved in some ministry of pastoral care and counseling. Our groups met twice a day during the week long conference and provided an experience of depth in relating to new friends and colleagues. In one session toward the end of the week, after group trust and deep rapport had developed among us, a German pastoral caregiver named Klaus, seated just opposite from me in the group circle, shared that just before arriving at the conference he had visited the World War II memorial to the German soldiers who were killed in the fierce battles with the Russians on the Western Front, where horrendous losses occurred. His father was fighting in the German army and was one of those killed. Klaus was a 5 year old boy at the time and had never fully grieved that loss and the hardships borne by his mother and himself during and after the war. As he described his powerful experience of grief at the memorial, tears flowed down his bearded cheeks. I listened intently and was drawn into his experience by the memory of being a 5 year old boy myself when my father was in the American Army in Europe. I had recovered the dormant pain and raw fears of those years in personal therapy and knew first hand of how young children are affected much more than adults realize by the trauma of war when a parent is in that war. As I listened to Klaus, tears began to roll down my cheeks as well, and when he finished speaking I shared that I too was 5 when my daddy went to war and my mother had was then called a nervous breakdown in her exhaustion from military moves and worry. We discovered that we were exactly the same age so had both been five at the same time. In the powerful emotion of that moment we both got up and embraced each other, with tears falling on each other's shoulders, not as two grown late middle aged men, but as two 5 year olds comforting each other in our fears and sense of loss. It didn't matter at all that each of our fathers were part of armies who were desperately fighting each other. It was the experience of fully understanding the other, as well as being fully understood. Then, the rest of the group spontaneously got up and surrounded us in a group embrace, with tears replacing words as they

(MTM) Foundation seeks to be advocates for clergy and their families in all faith groups who are experiencing personal or professional crisis due to deteriorating employment or congregation-clergy relationships.

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identified with us and grounded God's comfort in their caring. It was a transformational experience that taught me how God's comfort is embodied in human caring and is passed on from person to person, even when those persons do not share the same culture or speak the same language. Even though my daddy came home and Klaus' daddy didn't, it was the most powerful experience of comfort I have ever had and is deeply imprinted in my consciousness.

Some time ago it occurred to me that something like this happens at our MTM retreats. Fresh from fighting church wars, forcibly terminated clergy, often with their spouses, find comfort in listening to each other tell a story that is identical in meaning to their own. As one person listens to the experience of another he/she begins to hear their own experience and identify at a deep level, reaching out to comfort and find comfort for themselves, comforting another with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. After each person tells his/her story, the rest of the group surrounds him/her with affirmation, love, and prayer. We can't change the circumstances, only the meanings. These are transformational moments that are incarnated and strengthen the person for the transitions to come.

Prayer becomes especially real and powerful in these experiences of shared comfort, which I call the ministry of standing by. For me, the most helpful prayer of comfort is the full version of Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer, written around 1937 for a chapel service at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The first sentence, of course, was adopted by AA for use in each and every one of their meetings throughout the world, and the remaining lines are equally expressive and comforting. I read it at least several times a week and never fail to find comfort.

Lord, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can change, and the Wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting this sinful world, as Jesus did, for what it is and not what I would have it be. Trusting you to make all things right for those who seek your will, so that I will be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with you in the next.

As Paul wrote, *Our hope for you is steadfast, knowing that as you experience suffering, so shall you also experience comfort.* May all of the MTM retreats, as well as other caring functions, fulfill this hope and provide this comfort.

C. Roy Woodruff, Ph.D.

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