

Living With People in Pain

By Dr. Gregory Wiens

This past week my wife Mary Kay and my mother-in-law both had the flu. I learned a couple of things. One was that I am not a very good nurse and the other was that a lot of my ability to meet their needs depended on my expectations. I found that if I adjusted my expectations, it was so much easier to serve them.

In other words; if I know they are sick and therefore not capable of caring for themselves, I will expect to provide for their adequate care, and won't expect to have my own needs (physical, emotional, mental, etc.) met. I will not get upset when they barely notice my presence due to their own pain. I will expect to give and not receive.

This is a problem in ministry as well. Many pastors expect things from people within the congregation that they simply cannot provide. Many people are hurting and in so much emotional pain that they can't step out and help others. Or, maybe they criticize the pastor out of their own dysfunctions. Most often, we as pastors expect our congregation to act normal, but when people are in such pain, our expectations are not met and a volatile situation develops.

Whereas if the pastor expects sick behavior (usually very inappropriate) from chronically hurt people in the congregation, then more than likely, the pastor would act or respond differently. There are two problems in this scenario. The first is that often, the hurting people won't admit they are acting out of their own pain (totally unrelated to the church). It is sometimes the case that these people are in positions of influence, so the whole church is tossed to and from by their dysfunctional behavior or attitudes. The second problem can be that the pastor is simply not getting his/her own needs for significance met elsewhere so the pastor gets defensive, depressed, worn down or burnt out.

Every church has at least a few of these people. My observation is however, that smaller churches have a much higher percentage of these people. Probably because in a smaller church, chronic pain people have a higher probability of garnering attention to their needs. Also, they stand a better chance of getting close to the pastor when the church is small. This phenomenon keeps smaller churches small because healthy people are driven away by this continual sick behavior or are burnt out trying to deal with it. Pastors in these situations usually get caught in the trap of trying to meet these unending needs and therefore have little precious energy to give toward missional outward activity.

Some pastors are uniquely gifted to respond to these co-dependent relationships. In these cases everyone is happy in these churches: the people in pain have someone who will focus on their need to be catered to and the pastor surely feels needed. So everyone is happy; including those who live around the church that are going to hell, because the church remains small and inwardly focused.

I recently had a conversation with a person from one of our congregations who has the potential of causing a great deal of pain in the congregation instead of dealing with their own pain. I reminded this person that ultimately we all will stand before God and be accountable for how we handled His bride. I am convinced that God is serious when He calls the church His bride and I better not defame her through me trying to get my way and thereby soothe some unmet need in my life. It is HIS bride and it is for His honor that she be spotless and blameless. I will be held accountable for how I act (*1 Cor. 3*).

The way to deal with this is for everyone to first be aware of his or her own pain. And then, to be aware of how this pain is at work in the way we act in the church. We must be held accountable that the church IS NOT the place where we can have our way to meet our needs in dealing with our pain. Rather it is the place where Christ gets His way to meet our needs often through our pain. We as fellow members of this body cannot let individuals take the mission of the church hostage to meeting their own needs from the mission of building healthy maturing followers of Christ out of hurting and dying lost people.

As I am reading the *Psalms* in my personal devotions, I have been struck by how often love and justice or grace and judgment are mentioned in the same verses (e.g. *101.1*). Now I think I understand, that true love involves justice. If we love people, we will hold them accountable for their actions in and outside the body. You can't have one without the other.

This morning my wife and my mother-in-law are feeling much better, which is good. Now I think I need some of *my* needs met! I really do think that is what the body is all about: each of us sacrificing for others so they can in turn sacrifice for us. That is love. This is the church.