

## Ministering to the Ministering

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When I left local church ministry almost forty years ago to return to graduate school and become a family therapist, my father the preacher was visibly wounded. "Son," he said, "I am disappointed to see you leaving the ministry." I replied, "Dad, I am leaving church work to *enter* the ministry." In the event that my father and I have offended clergy or counselors present, let me share two factors that influenced that brief dialogue: 1. My Dad had made psychologists the target of many sermons. 2. I had ended up in an administrative position in a large urban congregation and felt far removed from those I felt called to serve.

Before his death my father became convinced that I could never *NOT* be a minister: from the pulpit or the counseling room. Of course, in the broadest sense of the Christian's mission, it's *all* about ministering. Which convinces me that this topic, "Ministering to the Ministering," is a two-way street.

***The ministering counselor needs a minister***, a pastor, a shepherd, a trustworthy Christian leader in his/her congregation and the community at large. Providing therapy for the chronically depressed, the suicidal, those who live in fear and anxiety, those who seem hopelessly addicted, couples in conflict and broken families—this calling requires spiritual guidance and resources that a pastor can provide for the stressed-out counselor. Those of us living within the confines of the therapy room hour after hour, day after day, year after year, are highly vulnerable to emotional, physical and spiritual fatigue—we call it "compassion fatigue." We need a spiritual leader who encourages, supports and provides insight into our own needs as a Christian. We also need this kind of leader serving as a spiritual resource to our clients, and a congregation who will love, encourage and empower those we send their way.

It was an interesting transition from the staff minister to church member, deacon and Bible study leader. What I enjoyed most as a church member were first, those professional opportunities when I had the privilege of introducing my pastor to my colleagues, and second, those serendipitous moments in the community when in a mall or supermarket I would proudly point to the guy in the crowd as "my pastor."

***The ministering "minister" needs a "counseling" minister***, a friend, a professional, trusted colleague in the community, sometimes as therapist, sometimes a resource, spokesperson for the mental health community. Show me a pastor who wanders into psychology from the pulpit without adequate research and I'll show you a pastor who spends a lot of time apologizing and qualifying what he or she actually "meant" to say in that sermon. And, how does one preach or teach to the human condition without adequate knowledge of human behavior? The preacher doesn't need to be an expert on everything. The preacher doesn't need to know the latest findings on clinical depression. But he/she does need to know where to go for that information. The counselor can be that resource and offer support and caution where it is needed.

Pastors, staff ministers, and church leaders need to know when to refer. To do so he/she must be well aware of the strengths, specialties, and even the limitations of counselors in the community. If the church is to prevent unnecessary emotional stress and psychological disorders, those ministering to and on behalf of the church must provide education through workshops, seminars, special events, on the challenges of our time: marriage and family enrichment, living a healthy single lifestyle, building workplace relationships, leadership skills, stress management, sexual enrichment from a Christian perspective. When crises strike a community the church ought to lead out with its resources, and often the first line of response will be those licensed and trained people of faith who have spent years of academic and clinical training, equipping them to understand how the mind responds to trauma and how to find balance in their lives once again.

Yes indeed, the challenge of ministering involves each of us ministering to each other.

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