

the focus of SHEPHERDING WOMEN



I sat ACROSS the lunch table from a former key staff member of a well-known Christian ministry. We briefly exchanged stories and then Carol (not her real name) said, “Bev, tell me the truth. Do you see any hope in the church?”

“Hope?” I asked.

Carol continued.

After my husband, a committed church leader, walked out on our twenty-year marriage for a younger woman, I was devastated. I wish I could tell you someone from the church expressed care, understanding, or support. But instead, everyone avoided me—no one called or even came to pray with me.

After meeting with our pastor, I realized that even he did not understand how much pain I was in. All he said was to make sure I studied the Bible and prayed every day.

Frankly, I wish I could have studied the Bible every day, but the pain and shock of it all hurt so deeply there were days I thought I wouldn't be able to catch my next breath, let alone concentrate enough to read or study. I could only pray three words, "Help me, Jesus!"

The most humiliating day of my life was the day I finally walked into my doctor's office to ask for an AIDS test. Even though I had remained pure before and during my marriage, when I found my husband was a sex addict, I knew I was at risk. It took me weeks to gather the courage to go. As I approached the receptionist, I looked around, felt my face grow hot, then whispered, "I came for an AIDS test." I felt so alone and so ashamed.

Bev, do you ever see the church becoming a place where people understand pain like this and express care to people in my situation?

Frankly, I rarely go to church any more. The pain is too great.

Is this a unique story? I wish it were.

Usually I am a defender of the church. I believe it is Christ's bride, His body on earth. Having been a pastor's wife for many years, I know it is more difficult to bring about change on the inside than it appears to be from the outside. It is also easier to criticize what the church is not doing than it is to jump in and contribute to the solution.

But on that winter day in February, I heard Carol's pain. I had heard it too many times before. And I had no words of defense to offer.

Each school term I hear students of all ages express similar pain. Women often tell me that my seminary classroom is the first place they have found where they could admit their source of pain and feel accepted and understood.

I have discovered that once students hear the story of a woman who has experienced the pain of abortion, divorce, or domestic violence they begin to feel a new level of compassion. Once students feel compassion, they open their hearts for an increased awareness

of the issue causing the pain. This deeper understanding of the pain motivates students to acquire shepherding skills. This progression has become predictable.

Often in our desire to resist sin, we can miss seeing a real person behind a past sin. Even when we know domestic violence is wrong, we can transfer our doubts about the "real story" behind the scenes onto the victim. Then we find it hard to feel compassion or express care. We are still in the judging stage, wondering if she "deserves" our intervention. The very ones she had hoped would understand and offer care only multiply the enormous pain and self-doubt she already feels. She is again marginalized and further immobilized.

We look at our full slate of Bible studies and women's ministry programs and wonder why women like Carol do not feel accepted or why they are not involved. Our beautifully decorated Christmas Luncheons and Spring Teas are not pulling her in. Our busy pastors may meet with her. She may even attend Sunday services. But we sense that we are not really connecting with her. We are not really meeting her where she is. What do we do for her? Where does she fit?

Just as a paramedic first looks at the source of the bleeding, we should focus first on the injury. A patient who is bleeding profusely cannot receive instruction on how the accident might have been prevented. What the patient needs at that point is emergency care from someone who understands what is needed to stop the bleeding and what are the "normal" symptoms of his specific injury. Once the initial source of bleeding is discovered and addressed, then more long-term and even preventive instruction can be received from the patient's established health care provider.

Too often the body of Christ starts with preventive instruction, then long-term directives. The woman is told to memorize Scripture or pray more. This is valuable and needful instruction, but it is not timely when the patient is bleeding emotionally, panic-stricken, or confused. In essence, women are often told, "Just get over it! Stop the tears and just move on. This isn't that bad."

effective pastoral care to women REVERSES THE USUAL ORDER OF PROCEDURE

My friend Carol needed someone to be present with her in her pain. She needed someone who could encourage her to cry even when she was afraid she might not stop crying. She needed someone who understood that feelings of shock, disbelief, anger, and bargaining are all part of the grief process. She needed someone safe encouraging her to express her feelings of betrayal and injustice.

It is healthy to feel the pain. Crying is cathartic. It is an essential step toward healing.

Once the patient is given emotional CPR, she is watched carefully for stabilizing responses and treated accordingly. Our first concern in giving directive instructions should be her emotional state. Once she is in a safe place and stabilized emotionally, she can think more clearly.

Effective pastoral care to women focuses first on the emotional pain and how women process emotional pain. Then it gives attention to the issues that cause women pain. A shepherd would know that Carol needed to feel the pain before she was ready to think about the next step of her life. A shepherd responds with compassion. She skillfully dispenses pastoral care that is timely and appropriate. Finally, effective pastoral care continues to move toward the goal of bringing this woman to a place of health. The caregiver understands that this will take time and multiple resources. She coaches the woman toward making decisions that lead to health and maturity. A shepherd knows when to refer to professionals while offering the pastoral care needed on the journey to recovery.

a SHEPHERD of WOMEN WILL STOP THE BLEEDING BEFORE SHE GIVES THE VITAMINS

"Bev, do you ever see the church becoming a place where people understand pain like this and express care to people in my situation?"

Yes, yes, yes, Carol. I *do* see hope in the church! I too dream of the church's becoming a place where people understand pain like yours and express care to people in your situation. Certainly a new focus, a new model of ministering to women is needed.

One such model identifies women who are available to come alongside women in pain. These potential Shepherds of Women have

- experienced emotional pain,
- received healing,
- gained understanding of the issue(s) causing them pain,
- received training,
- modeled the four Titus 2 characteristics, and
- been approved by the pastoral staff.

A resource list is compiled of women willing to be identified as Shepherds of Women to come alongside women in pain. Pastoral staff and other church leaders then use this list as the need arises.

A new model of women's ministry focuses on Shepherds of Women as central to providing truly *effective* ministry to the broad scope of the needs of women. The focus is on the women themselves, more than on popular programs or events. Bible studies and events certainly are part of the model but only as their purpose clearly ministers to a defined people group. The purpose in ministering to each people group is unequivocally to lead women to the Living Water, Jesus Christ. But some women can only receive sips of water from a teaspoon. In our eagerness to quench thirsts, we sometimes use a fire hose.

This book is written in the hope that we can contribute to the solution rather than to criticize what the church is not doing. *We* are the church, Christ's body.

Carol, as a member of Christ's body, I apologize to you and the many women like you who have experienced incredible

pain, marginalization, and loss from the church because we have not reached out to you in your pain with understanding and compassion. I am so sorry! May you find it in your heart to forgive us. I know the Good Shepherd would wish more for His body. Oh, forgive us, Lord! Show us a new way. Show us the way of a shepherd.

Men and women, I invite you to explore with me the elements needed to shift our focus so that we can begin to change this tide, one woman at a time. Perhaps the next Carol who comes through our church door will feel the awareness, understanding, compassion, and skillful shepherding that Jesus would have given. Then this book will have served its purpose.