



PRESENCE:

A GUIDE FOR CHRISTIAN CARE

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Ask about how this booklet can be used in an interactive training in your local Christian community.

אָנָה אֵלֶיךָ מְרוּחֶיךָ וְאָנָה מִפְּנֵיךָ אֶבְרָחָ:]
אִם־אֶסְקֶה שָׁמַיִם שָׁם אַתָּה וְאֶצִּיעָה שְׂאוֹל הַגֶּהֱ:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee
from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven,
you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol,
you are there.

Psalm 139:7-8

Thank you to Rev. Linda Jaberg who
taught me to Hang, Hug, and Hush.

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PROLOGUE

Martin Luther affirmed the radical notion that we, as the Christian community, all participate in the “Priesthood of All Believers.”

This means that there is no such thing as pastoral care—only Christian Care.

This booklet is used as part of a training called “Presence” which gives teams of people the skills they need to provide Christian Care. At the end of the booklet are scriptures and other resources for pairs of Christians to use, if needed, when providing care for those in a time of need.

Jesus always sent people in pairs of two. Go with a sibling in Christ.

INTRODUCTION

When a family member, friend, colleague or loved one is facing a difficult time or enduring a crisis, what is our responsibility? Beyond ensuring that everyone is safe, how are we to function? What are we to say and do?

The goal of this booklet is to help you answer these questions and at the same time provide appropriate scripture and prayer tools to guide you as you find yourself in a position to provide care for others.

Equally, this booklet is designed for all Christians not just Christian leaders. Sometimes we believe that only pastors are called to provide care in times of need. But this is not the case at all.

God uses deacons and elders to provide soul care and God uses non-ordained individuals everyday to care for those who are toiling in the challenges of life!

All Christians will have opportunities to provide care at just the right time:

- A coworker may go through a divorce.
- Your neighbor may be diagnosed with cancer.
- A local coach may be in a horrific car accident.
- Your boss may lose a child.

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

- Is a congregation stronger when the pastor provides all of the care or when there is a community of support ready to bear one another's burdens? Why is this so? Who provides care in your church?

- When have you experienced the difficult circumstances of someone else and did not feel that you were able to care for them? How did this make you feel? What did you do? What could you have done better?

*"Rejoice with those who rejoice
and weep with those who weep."*

Romans 12

CHAPTER 1

THE REALITY OF MAKING MISTAKES

It is true that all Christian can be ready to care for others. Yet, you should be aware that even individuals who are highly trained make disastrous mistakes when caring for those in crisis.

The unfortunate reality is that our own discomfort with situations and our lack of attention to the people around us has promoted actions and words that actually have caused more harm despite our desire to be helpful.

- We have spoken when we should have remained silent.
- We have been absent when we could have called.
- We have laughed when we would have done better being still.
- We have sat stone-faced when levity was needed.
- We have provided painful answers to questions that were not being asked.

- Like Job's friends we have provided insights that increase burdens instead of truly bearing witness to God's faithfulness.

As Peter Levine writes, *"trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside us in the absence of an empathetic witness."*¹

And so we (including pastors) confess that we have added to the trauma of others because we did not personally witness their pain or because we were not filled with empathy when we did.

You may think that if pastors make mistakes that you will not be able provide care in a healthy way. The truth is that we all make mistakes but it is equally true that we all can provide care in a healing and faithful way.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Jesus

¹ See Peter Levine's "The Unspoken Voice," pg. xii

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

- When have you gone through a difficult time and someone's well meaning words or actions actually caused more trauma? What are the most common mistakes people make when trying to show care and love during the trials of life?

- When have you felt as if you provided healing and nurturing care to another? What made this experience so healthy?

CHAPTER 2

WHAT WE CAN'T DO

Before we start building a framework for providing care to others it is important to note a few things that are beyond our ability and responsibility.

Make People Feel Better

First, Christians have regularly told themselves that we need to make people feel better.

For example, I recall being in high school and listening to a friend who did not feel safe around a loved one. In down time they were regularly in tears.

As a teenager I did not have the influence to change the situation and all I could do was try to bring a smile to their face, rationalize happiness, and sporadically quote scriptures that meant little to them.

Looking back at these moments, I acted like a parent shaking a rattling before a crying infant. But this was my infancy, not their's. At this time the rattles of laughter, rationalization and scripture reference were only a distraction for this individual.

More to the point, we neither have the ability to manage another person's feelings nor to expedite the grieving or shock processes. Honoring a person's suffering is better than superficially taking it away.

Make "It" All Better

Second, as humans we do not have the ability to fix tragedy. When a husband buries his wife of 30 years, we can not change the reality. When a loved one witnesses a horrific event, we can not undo the past. When a child battles sickle-cell anemia, we can not alter their body's chemistry. Someday doctors maybe able to do so, but as friends we can not do this.

When we work to fix unfixable problems we can actually make emotional, spiritual and physical healing all the more difficult for our friends. Sitting with a loved one in silence is better than ignoring the severity of the circumstances by trying to make the situations disappear.

*"Even fools who keep silent are
considered wise;
When they close their lips,
They are deemed intelligent."*

Proverbs 17

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

When has someone not honored your emotions?
What did this do to you?

When have you tried to fix someone else's
problems? What was healthy and unhealthy about
this?

CHAPTER 3

HOPE BEYOND OUR LIMITATIONS

A family asked me to be with them as doctors and nurses removed life support from their elderly father. A year early their mother had died and it had been a grueling and tiring time physically and spiritually for the family as they grieved and regularly traveled to be with their dad.

What guided my actions as we witnessed the monitors go silent and as life slipped away from an earthly tent? What framework provided me with a healthy structure from which I could function?

As a general rule when we reflect on our actions, and in this case our future actions of care, it is beneficial to begin by focusing on what we know of God. After all, how we understand God influences how we act.

If God is a tyrant we have permission to act accordingly. But if God creates and recreates as the Biblical story goes, then we too look for ways to make all things new.

In acts of ministry and in life I find great comfort that our present and future hope is rooted in God, who vastly exceeds our limitations.

Starting with God as the basis of our actions is a much stronger model than beginning our inquiry from humanity. This is not because humans are evil and incapable of good. Rather, sometimes we do not know how to look beyond what we can immediately see. Focusing on God before we examine our actions forces us to consider possibilities that have thus far evaded our thoughts.

"In the beginning, God..."

Genesis 1

CHAPTER 4

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

*“Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast...”*

Psalm 139

In a rhythm of celebration the psalmist ponders where to go to escape the presence of God. But no location or state of being will do. For God is always present.

According to this psalm God is in heaven and God is at the farthest limits of the sea. Still more, God’s presence can be found in Sheol.

Let’s take a moment to outline a few biblical descriptions of Sheol:

- Sheol is the location of the dead who are described as trembling shades—bodiless and fearful spirits²
- No living being can avoid Sheol³ as it is the residence of dead humans and animals alike⁴
- Sheol houses both the righteous and wicked who have perished⁵ and neither group can escape its gates⁶
- Sheol is utterly devoid of love, hate, wisdom, thought, work, memory, sound, praise, and light⁷
- Sheol sounds terrifying. Yet, we learn about God’s nature when we read of Sheol. If God is in Sheol, God can hold us fast, guide and comfort us in every situation we experience in life.

God is always present. In joy and sorrow, in failure and success, in holy acts and sin, in death and life God is with us.

² Job 25:5; Psalm 88:10-12; Isaiah 14:9ff

³ Psalm 89:48

⁴ Psalm 49

⁵ Ecclesiastes 9:2-3

⁶ Job 10:21

⁷ Ecclesiastes 9:5-6,10; Job 10:21-22; Psalm 6:5; Psalm 94:17

In this pattern of thought, Moses promised the Hebrew children that God would never leave or forsake them.⁸ Later, in the author of the book of Hebrews holds firm to the same idea, speaking in the voice of God, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”⁹

God.

God is.

God is present.

*“...See, the home of God is among
mortals...”*

Revelation 21

⁸ Deuteronomy 31:6

⁹ Hebrews 13:5

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

When have you experienced God's presence in such a way that you could not deny it?

When have you felt that God was absent?

CHAPTER 5

SERVING WITHOUT BURDEN

The beauty of celebrating the reality of God's enduring presence comes with the very real recognition that no matter what situation we walk into, God is already there.

There is a freedom in knowing that we do not need to bring God with us and we do not need to pray or muscle God into hearts that are reeling.

This same assertion is woven into the fabric of Gospels. Jesus is the one who heals, Christ is the Good Shepherd who guards, protects, feeds and guides, the Messiah is the one who redeems Israel, and the Emmanuel is imaged as the Greek Logos which holds all things together.

In Revelation Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. As such, Jesus is the Sigma and the Iota. Jesus is all the way through history.

In the epistles Jesus is the Great High Priest, the one who ministers and who offers humanity perfectly to God.

Before we pick up the phone, get in our car, or walk through a threshold we put on a stance that God is already holding, tending, healing, redeeming and saving.

Because God is the active one in ministry we serve without burden.

*“Not by might, nor by power,
But by my spirit, says the Lord of
hosts.”*

Zechariah 4

CHAPTER 6

THE MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

If God is always present and if we do not need to bring God with us as we care for others we have a working model for providing care.

Our responsibility is to be fully present in such a way that bears witness to God's ministry and mission within the moment.

From this stance we can be calm, still, gentle, and strong—a bulwark in the wind and an anchor in the storm.

I certainly have made my share of mistakes but I have also participated in this ministry well. Early in my seminary training, as I was assisting a congregation and learning from an amazing pastor, Linda, I recall one day where I fell short and hit the mark with different members of the same family.

As I entered the house Linda was already there. A police officer stood taking information and an ambulance sat across the street with its lights whirling.

On the couch sat a dear and sweet woman who had just learned that her middle aged son, who lived a stones through away, had taken his own life a few days before.

That day, I did well with the grieving mother. She was a faithful woman of the gospel. My learning curve was figuring out how to care for people who were not rooted in faith.

My strongest actions of the day were sitting on the yard swing with this elderly woman, holding her hand, expressing my condolences and singing hymns with her.

Brokenhearted, she wanted to be reminded of God's goodness and so we quietly sang her favorite hymns together. This worked well as she began the challenging work of acknowledging and then processing the emotional and physical shock.

In those hours, this is what it meant for me to be present. I

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

John 11

provided no answers and gave no Bible lessons. I simply was there—an

Ebenezer who communicated God's presence with very few words.

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

- During times of crisis, how can we be fully present for people who are not rooted in faith? What have you done in these situations that works and doesn't work?

- As people who provide care, when and how is it appropriate to demonstrate our grief and pain?

CHAPTER 7

BEING PRESENT: CURSING & LAMENTATION

When we are lost, hurt and confused God can handle our tears and visceral shouts of pain. We need not be afraid of offending God or being sacrilegious as we experience the struggles of life.

The early biblical stories demonstrate individuals who stood up to, challenged God, and even wrestled with the Lord. Later, the psalms were filled with passages of lament. Dealing with this reality, Job proclaims, “[God] *does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands.*”¹⁰ In the same way, Jesus himself recited the old prayer “*My God, My God why have you forsaken me.*”¹¹

The God of the Bible would lack power and mercy if the King of Kings could not manage our human fumbling as we pass through times of suffering. But this is not the case at all. The scriptures do not tell stories of a God who lashes out at people who are struggling and mourning. Quite the

¹⁰ Job 10:3a

¹¹ Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46

opposite is true. The Bible paints a picture of a God who will wipe away the tears of every eye and who will bless all who mourn with comfort.¹²

This is important as we visit with individuals and families. Sometimes all we have to do is be there as the tears flow and permit or even encourage the shouts to abound.

We can be there without flinching.

We can be there with empathy as witnesses to their pain.

We can be there as a sign of God's tender grace and mercy.

*"There is a time for every matter under
heaven...a time to keep silent, and a time
to speak."*

Ecclesiastes 3

¹² Revelation 21:4; Matthew 5:4

CHAPTER 8

BEING PRESENT: INCOHERENT THOUGHTS

At times we are at a loss for words. This is especially true when we, as humans, face new and devastating realities.

How can we even formulate a prayer or recite a well known liturgy when we are broken?

As before, the solution lies within God's power and not ours. I find great comfort that the scriptures teach us that God accommodates us when we are unable to speak:

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too
deep for words.*

*And God, who searches the heart,
knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints
according to the will of God.*

Romans 8

God does not need coherent words. The Spirit does not flee from our inability to express needs, thoughts, pleas and desires.

Instead, God prays for us when we can not find the strength, and prayer, therefore, becomes defined as God's self-communication—sharing our deepest groans and holding them together in communion.

Adding Romans 8 to the teaching that Jesus is the Great High Priest, both the Spirit and the Son offer prayers to God on our behalf. In other words, God is not only the active agent in ministry, God is also the active agent in our best and worst prayers.

Modeling our actions after God being present in this way

“Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and brushing himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and shouted at the top of his lungs...”

Mark 5

means that we hold space for individuals, families and loved ones to express inexpressible thoughts.

This is a particular challenge for some because as humans we enjoy clarity and organization. But healing is a messy business and Jesus is in the middle of that messiness. So, as

care providers, we forego our need for coherence and we invite individuals for a time to speak and listen, whether we completely understand the words or not.

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

- How can you better provide safe space for people to groan in their agony before God and one another?

- When has someone tried to stop you from expressing the incoherent struggles of your heart? How did you respond to this?

CHAPTER 9

BEING PRESENT: THANKSGIVING

As care givers, while we clearly acknowledge the very real difficulties that are being experienced, we are also harbingers of thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is important because it is a reminder of God's presence and it helps us to calm our fears. We can welcome thanksgiving through communion, simple prayers, reading a psalm, or through reenacting good memories of days past: sharing photos, telling stories and visiting favorite locations.

I have
come
a

*"Our soul waits for the Lord;
God is our help and shield.
Our heart is glad in God,
Because we trust in God's holy name."*

Psalm 33

yet to
across

situation where
we have been unable to give thanks for something. We
might not thank God for current difficulties but we can
thank God for blessings in the middle of strife.

For example, when visiting someone who is in the ICU we can give thanks for doctors, nurses, and the sanctuaries of space and time. When sitting with a family facing divorce we can be thankful for good memories and the support of loved ones. When a child is found to be abused we can thank God for those who work to protect and heal their wounds, and for those who were brave enough to come forward.

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

- How can enacting thanksgiving be a motivation for healing, grieving and sharing?

- What are some great ways to enact thanksgiving during a time of difficulty?

CHAPTER 10

BEING PRESENT: ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS

Without a doubt one of the most common experiences of spending time with people who are facing a life changing event is hearing the question: Why?

There is certainly some built-in psychological need to understand why horrible things happen. The problem is that there is no good, healthy, and faithful answer to the question why.

God may use all things for good but this is quite different than telling someone that their child over-dosed for God's glory. May God have mercy on us for the pain that we have inflicted on those who are grieving.

When the time is right I have, however, found it beneficial to help people ask better questions. People do not so much need to be told what to do but they do grow when they learn to live into better questions.

Here are a few examples:

- How can we grieve better?
- How can we honor the past?
- How can we celebrate what you once had?
- Who needs to join us?
- Where can we go to find new ways of life as we move forward?
- How can we adjust our future rhythms to build better relationships?
- What resources do we need? Where can we get them?

Healthy questions abound and are waiting to be discovered. We only need to find the right time to ask them in

the most *“Let your requests be made known to God,
And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts
And your minds in Jesus Christ.”*

Philippians 4

appropriate way.

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

- How can we invite people to develop their own questions that can lead to healing and faithfulness?

- When have you seen a family walk through a difficult time well? What questions do their actions inspire?

CHAPTER 11

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF CARE

One of the measures that demonstrates how healthy we are as churches is our ability to build communities of healing, encouragement and support. This is an on-going process which requires churches to be thoughtful while being filled with hope and compassion.

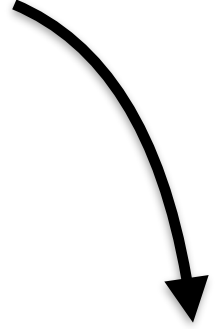
As we build our skills together please remember that we never master Christian care. We are always growing. We are always re-forming our actions and thought patterns.

Churches who are serious about building community will invest time in a continuous cycle of growth. For more help on this, please ask.

This process is life-giving and easy to establish.

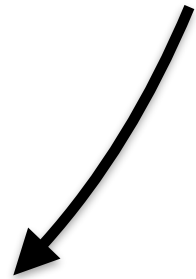
In it, communities vow to:

Intentionally
Care for Others



Tend to our own
Physical, Spiritual
and Emotional
Health

Debrief Caring
for Others
Together



Create and
Follow a Mutual
Plan for Learning

May God bless your efforts,
honor your heart,
celebrate your service,
move through your actions,
bring comfort with your words,
and heal the nations through Jesus Christ
and in the power of the Spirit.
Amen and Amen.