

## THE GRACE HOUSE MINISTRY (A)

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Randy Samuels, a licensed clinical social worker, moved to Gastonia, North Carolina in March of 2000, after accepting a position at the Mecklenburg County Mental Health Center. Randy and his family were at a park in their new neighborhood when they met a couple who invited them to visit Grace Presbyterian Church. They accepted the invitation and started attending regularly. A few months later, an elder from the church called Randy to ask if he would be willing to meet with a family that came to the church for help. When he agreed, he never imagined he would become so involved in the church's outreach ministry. What began as a one-time event, though, turned into a weekly commitment.

As he invested more time helping the church leaders, he came to believe that the church could be more effective in helping families if they changed how they utilized their resources. After talking to the pastor, Randy was invited to discuss his concerns with other church leaders. During the meeting, Eric Young, one of the church elders asked, "What do you suggest we do?" As the church elders looked on expectantly, Randy pondered how to respond. He had a few suggestions but wasn't sure which ones to share.

### **Grace Presbyterian Church**

Grace Presbyterian Church was a member of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a conservative denomination that historically new congregation's first pastor. As the membership grew, the church started meeting on Sundays in the fellowship hall of a Seventh Day Adventist church. On Christmas Eve of 2001, the church moved into its own building located in an upper middle-class neighborhood. There were currently 200-250 members at Grace. The majority of the church was young, and no one at the church was over the age of 62.

As in any other PCA congregation, the leadership of Grace Presbyterian Church consisted of a core group of elders. The elders were in charge of ensuring that the church maintained its focus on the

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gospel of Jesus Christ. The elders were also responsible for the daily operations and finances of the church. Only elders had an official vote on the direction of the church. The pastor, associate pastor, and youth minister were all elders. There were deacons who were in charge of carrying out all social outreach ministry including managing the deacon fund, meeting with church members and other people in the community who needed assistance, and leading the small prayer groups. Once a month, every elder and deacon would meet to discuss church business. The meetings were an official gathering called the Session. Only men could serve as elders or deacons in the PCA denomination.

### **Randy Samuels**

At age 27, Randy Samuels graduated from the MSW program at East Carolina University. He did his advanced year field placement at Pitt County Mental Health Center and was hired full-time in the same position after graduation. As a psychiatric social worker in a partial hospitalization program, Randy developed and facilitated five hours of mental health groups each day. He also performed psychosocial and substance abuse evaluations with new clients, and crisis intervention work with the emergency services unit every third weekend. He stayed at Pitt County Mental Health Center for two years until he completed all of his requirements to be licensed in North Carolina as a clinical social worker (LCSW). He then accepted a position as the lead therapist on an intensive family and child unit at Mecklenburg County Mental Health. He and his family bought a house in Gastonia, where he was living with his wife and two children.

In April 2000, Randy Samuels and his family started attending Grace Presbyterian Church. They found the congregation very welcoming and were invited to participate in several different worship activities. Within a few weeks, his family was participating in weekly small prayer groups, Randy was going to the men's early-morning prayer time, and his wife and children joined the mother's morning out program. In June 2000, after completing the new membership class and being examined by the elders, Randy and his family became members of Grace Presbyterian Church.

### **Getting Involved**

For several months everything was going smoothly. He and his family were getting adjusted to their new home, Randy was enjoying his work, and they were fully connected to the church. In the process of getting to know other church members, members asked Randy about his occupation. He explained that he was a licensed clinical social worker employed at the Mecklenburg County Mental Health Center.

Up to this point, Randy's involvement at the church was limited to participating in the usual church activities. No one asked him to

help out with any of the church functions, nor did he volunteer to serve in any capacity. He was comfortable with how church fit into his life. He used to think to himself, "I'm a social worker; I participate in social ministry each and every day, I don't need to do more on my own time."

Then one evening around 9:00 o'clock, Kenneth Baum, a church elder, called the Samuel's house to speak with Randy.

Randy's wife, Lynn, answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi, Lynn, this is Kenneth Baum from Grace."

"Oh, hi, Kenneth."

"Lynn, I was wondering if I could speak with Randy for a minute."

"Sure, I'll go get him."

After a few moments Randy picked up the phone. "Hey, Kenneth, how are you brother?"

"I'm fine, Randy. I am sorry to bother you so late in the evening."

"That's okay, what can I do for you?"

"Randy, the pastor thought you might be able to help us with something."

"Sure, what is it?"

"Well, you see, a woman came to the church this morning asking for help. Apparently she and her two children have been living out of their car for the past few weeks. We put them up at a local motel for the weekend, but we're not sure what to do next. Randy, the pastor and I were wondering if you would be willing to meet with the woman after church on Sunday. We told her that you were a social worker and she was willing to talk with you."

"Sure, I don't know how much help I will be, but I can at least help you figure out what to do next."

"Great, I'll tell Pastor Edwards and we'll schedule a meeting right after service on Sunday."

"Okay, I'll see you then."

When Randy hung up the phone Lynn asked, "What did Kenneth want?"

"They want me to meet with a woman they're trying to help."

"Oh, I think that's great."

"Yeah, I don't mind helping out, I just don't want to get too involved."

"Well, it's only one meeting; besides I think it will be good for you to help out."

That Sunday, Randy met with Kenneth, Pastor Steve Edwards, and the woman. Within an hour Randy helped the woman identify and prioritize her needs, and facilitated a discussion between Kenneth, the pastor, and the woman to determine specific steps the church could take to help. After the meeting the pastor shared with Randy how impressed he was with how Randy handled the whole situation.

### **Is There a Better Way?**

Over the next few weeks the pastor and other church leaders began asking Randy to help more frequently. As he continued to volunteer his time to meet with families, he was beginning to observe some problems in the church's helping process. One evening after meeting with another family, Randy and the pastor were walking out to their cars when Randy asked,

"Steve, can I talk with you for a minute?"

"Sure, Randy."

"Steve, I have some concerns about how the church uses the deacon fund. I think its great that Grace wants to be a place that people in need feel welcome. And I am honored that you and the elders want me to help. But, it seems to me the church gives out money from the deacon fund too sporadically. It also seems that Grace is trying to do everything for everyone."

"Well, Randy, the deacon fund is the church's main source of outreach ministry. We use it to help families in a way that may lead them to being receptive to hearing the Gospel. It's meant to be used for such purposes and we don't want to be stingy."

"I understand what you're saying, Steve. But lately, every time the church tries to help, the church discovers that the needs of these families are more complex than they initially appear. In my opinion the type of help the church provides is basically a temporary band-aid to deal with a symptom of a greater problem."

"What's that?"

"Poverty. And it takes more than paying someone's utility bill or buying a week's worth of groceries to help these families get on their feet."

"Brother, tell me about it. Sometimes we get frustrated and feel helpless. But I'll tell you, Randy, Grace is a church for the nonbeliever and especially those in need. Besides, as I often say at the leadership meetings, I like doing something better than doing nothing."

"Steve, a fundamental principle that I learned at school, and one I experience as a social worker, is that there are always unlimited needs and limited resources. And that is why, until Christ returns, I will always have a job. As a congregation, I think it is important for Grace to think about how they can provide the most effective help, given our limited resources. Otherwise, Grace will continue to provide superficial help, without really making a difference."

"You have a point, Randy. Listen, the Session is meeting Monday, January 8th. Why don't you plan to attend so we can talk about this with the entire leadership team?"

"Okay, I'll be there."

"Great. The Session meets at 7:00 o'clock in the fellowship hall next to the staff offices."

### **Addressing the Session**

When Randy arrived, the elders and deacons were already sitting around four tables arranged to form a large rectangle. The only open seats were at the end of the tables closest to the doorway. Randy sat down at the edge of the table next to one of the deacons. Although everyone was friendly and the atmosphere appeared informal, he felt a little insecure sitting among all of these church leaders.

Steve started the meeting by welcoming everyone to the meeting. He added, "Randy, we wanted to thank you for coming tonight."

Randy replied, "Well, I am both honored and humbled to be here. To be honest, I am a little bit nervous."

"Well, Randy, I approach each Session meeting with a reverent fear, recognizing the magnitude of our responsibility as leaders of this congregation. We spend a lot of time praying for God's will for this congregation. We also get updates from each of the small prayer group leaders and talk about many of the church's ministries and activities. Sometimes we're here past 11:00 o'clock. You'll be first on the agenda so you can get home to your family."

Looking over to the left side of the room, the pastor looked at one of the deacons and asked, "Matt, would you open us up in prayer?"

Matt replied, "Of course," and everyone in the room bowed their heads and closed their eyes as Matt prayed. When he finished, Jeff Hatling, the deacon who managed the deacon fund, quickly turned to Randy.

"Randy, the pastor called me the other evening and filled me in on your conversation with him. Can you briefly tell the rest of the Session some of your concerns?"

Randy paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. "Well, when I started helping some of you with different families, I thought that it was great that the church even attempted to help such families. I thought to myself that Grace was a special place that really wanted to share the Gospel with everyone, no matter what his or her circumstances. But the more I became involved, the more I began to notice how the church begins a helping relationship with families, only to later find out that their issues are more complex than they initially appeared. As a result, the church sort of runs out of steam and gets frustrated helping these families. I am also concerned that Grace ends up unintentionally reinforcing a mistrust that many of these families may have for the church."

"What do you mean, Randy?" asked the pastor.

"In social work, when families have bad experiences dealing with other social workers, it makes it more difficult to establish a helping relationship with them. I can't even begin to tell you how many families I work with that are so mistrusting because of an experience they had with a therapist or social worker that ended poorly. I always have to be careful that in the process of developing a relationship with a family, I don't perpetuate the same pattern by promising too much, and not being able to deliver. In my opinion, the same holds true for the church. We don't want to offer help and refuge to

families, tell them about Christ's unconditional love, only to turn them away when we realize that a family's issues may require more time and money than we originally expected."

After what seemed to Randy like a long silence, Eric Young, one of the elders turned to Randy. "You know, we would love to be able to provide the kind of help these families need, but we just don't have the resources. We also don't want to turn anyone away. What do you suggest we do?"

Randy wondered what to say. He knew that PCA churches normally don't get involved in social service programs. However, he sensed that Grace was really committed to helping people. He also remembered Steve's sermons about the church being a place of refuge for the lost and downtrodden. Randy had a few suggestions but he wasn't sure which ones to share or where to begin. ❖