

THE GRACE HOUSE MINISTRY (B)

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After thinking a moment, Randy responded, "I don't know exactly what to do but I do know some things have to change. For instance, I think Grace needs to utilize the deacon fund more deliberately. Perhaps the church can develop an assessment procedure that would help the deacon on call gather appropriate information so he can make an informed decision on how the church can help. More importantly, Grace should focus its resources on one or two populations in need. The church can do an assessment of the services provided in Gastonia, and focus on meeting a need that is not available in the community.

The Committee

The Session agreed with some of Randy's suggestions and decided to form a committee to explore ways to improve the use of the deacon fund. The committee was to meet each Thursday and report back to the Session in February.

Pastor Edwards asked Randy to be on the committee. Randy, encouraged by the Session's willingness to take his concerns seriously, readily agreed to participate. Jeff Hatling and Tom Chewing volunteered for the committee because they were currently helping two families that had been coming to Grace. In his late thirties, Jeff was married with two children. He worked for the City of Charlotte as a zoning coordinator. Tom was in his early forties, in his second marriage, and had three daughters. Tom used to manage a grocery store, but recently started his own lawn and handyman business. They were both deacons. Several people suggested that Kenneth Baum join the group because he was the elder responsible for overseeing the deacons, and he agreed. Kenneth and his wife were two of the original members of Grace Presbyterian Church. He was in his mid fifties, and owned a successful computer repair business.

Getting Focused

During the committee's first meeting, Randy suggested, "It seems to me that Grace needs to focus on a specific population that we want to help. From my experience, most of the existing services available in the community do a

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good job at providing help in emergencies and for brief periods of time. They are also concerned about helping as many people as possible. Therefore, Grace doesn't need to provide more of this type of support."

Tom confirmed, "That is exactly the problem I am having with Tammie."

"What do you mean, Tom?" said Kenneth.

"I have been trying to get Tammie and her kids situated, but I spend so much time running her to different agencies, helping her fill out paperwork, for one bit of resources after another. She's just making it from month to month, so there's no time to get her to the point where she can really turn things around."

Kenneth asked, "Maybe the church could help her go back to school?"

Tom replied, "She would love to go back to school, but there is no way she can do that without a lot of support."

Jeff added, "And what about Gayle? She told me Sunday that she's about to lose her benefits. How is she supposed to keep a job while raising four kids on her own?"

Tom replied, "What about Debbie. She's been struggling to survive ever since her husband died last year."

The group recalled other examples until Randy made an observation. "All of the cases we've been talking about have one thing in common. They are all single women, who for one reason or another are having a tough time making ends meet."

Jeff replied, "That's true."

Randy added, "Perhaps Grace Presbyterian Church needs to make a conscious decision that we will use our resources to make a real difference in the lives of single women with children."

Kenneth asked, "Isn't there a shelter in Charlotte, run by the Salvation Army, that helps women and children?"

Randy answered, "Yes, there is, but the Salvation Army gives women only sixty days. The types of changes we are talking about will take longer than two months. For example, if the church decides to help Tammie go back to school, that will take at least two years, maybe longer."

Jeff commented, "So we're talking about making a long-term commitment to help single women with children."

"That's what it sounds like to me. The question I have is how can we do that for everyone that comes to Grace for help?" asked Kenneth.

Randy commented, "Recognizing there are infinite needs with limited resources, perhaps we can determine how much it would cost to help one family, and I mean really help them turn their lives around. Then we can decide how many families we can afford to make that kind of commitment to at the same time. If we can only help 3 or 4, then we only help 3 or 4."

Jeff asked, "Would we turn the rest away?"

Randy answered, "Well, we could still interview them, find out what they need, and then refer them elsewhere. I believe making a long-term commitment to a few families would be different from other programs . . . we could really help some people climb out of poverty."

Looking down at his watch, Tom broke in, "Hey, guys, it's almost 8:00...I've got to go and pickup Rebecca from gymnastics."

Kenneth replied, "Let's pick this up next Thursday. So far it sounds as if we all agree to focus on single women that have children and to consider making a long-term commitment to as many as we can. I'll type up the minutes from the meeting and send them to everyone. Tom, would you close us in prayer?"

Randy interrupted quickly, "Can I make one suggestion?"

"Certainly," said Kenneth.

"Well, if we want to seriously attempt to help single women with children, there is something missing on our committee."

"What's that?" asked Kenneth.

Randy answered, "There're no single women with children on the committee. It is very important that we have people who are potential consumers of our program being part of the planning. We may think we know what these women need, but as middle-class white men, we have no idea. If we develop a program, we want to make sure that our intended population will use it."

Jeff answered, "You're right, perhaps we can ask Tammie or maybe even Charlene."

Tom added, "Charlene would be perfect. She's been there, but is also remarried, has a job and is doing great."

Kenneth commented, "I think we should ask both of them to come next week. Let me just talk to Steve and tell him that we want the women to be on the committee."

Randy asked, "Is there a problem, Kenneth?"

"Not really, it's just that Grace has never had women on committees before. It shouldn't be a problem, but out of courtesy I want to let Steve know what we're doing.

"All right," Tom responded, "let us know tomorrow and if it's okay we'll talk to the girls over the weekend."

Tom got the group's attention and said, "Great, let's bow our heads and pray."

The Committee Expands

When Kenneth talked with the pastor, he gave the committee his blessing to include Tammie and Charlene. Tom spoke with both women and they were excited about joining the committee. Charlene is currently a successful accountant. While raising a daughter on her own, she put herself through school. A few years ago she remarried. She and her husband live in a large suburban home with Charlene's teenage daughter, three teenage children from her husband's previous marriage, and two young children of their own. In contrast, Tammy continues to struggle following a heated divorce. She has two children and receives no financial support from her ex-husband. She was working part-time as a layout artist, but was forced to quit because she could not afford to pay for two children in day care. She is currently receiving TANF. If given the opportunity she would like to finish her degree in marketing. Charlene and Tammy attend church almost every week. Over the next four weeks the group came to a consensus on several key recommendations. First, Grace should continue to use the deacon fund

to help meet emergency needs, and develop a separate ministry focused on making a long-term commitment to single women with children. Second, the committee should do an in-house assessment of the interests and spiritual gifts all of the members to rally support from the entire congregation. Third, although the ministry will take time and start off slowly, the Session should establish the ministry as a 501(c)3. This way the church could consider entering into partnerships with agencies and applying for grants. Finally, the group began to share a vision for the ministry that involved owning a house that would provide long-term housing, without governmental regulations, where women can be treated with respect, loved unconditionally, and work with the church to get back on their feet. This vision inspired the group to begin calling themselves “The Grace House Ministry.”

Developing the Mission Statement

With just two weeks left before the committee reported back to the session, the group decided to use the current meeting to develop a mission statement. They had been meeting in the church office, but held this meeting in one of the Sunday school classrooms so they could use a dry board. Randy, Jeff, Tammie, Charlene and Tom sat in a semi circle facing the board. Kenneth remained standing so he could write down ideas from the discussion.

After opening up in prayer, Kenneth commented, “I’ve been keeping Steve informed about our meetings and he is looking forward to the Session meeting. I will try and type up something for next week so we can look at it before we give it to the Session. Randy, you’ve mentioned the last few weeks that we need to develop a mission statement and I completely agree. I think the rest of the elders will appreciate that we’ve taken the initiative to synthesize what we are trying to do here.”

Addressing everyone, Randy added, “Remember the mission statement is a broad statement that describes what The Grace House is for or why The Grace House exists.”

Jeff broke in saying, “Why don’t we start by going around the room and sharing what each of us envisions the Grace House to be.”

With everyone in agreement, Kenneth asked Tom to start.

“I think,” Tom paused, “I think the Grace House Ministry must maintain a Christ-centered focus where families are supported and provided with an opportunity to become productive members in the community.”

Kenneth turned to Charlene, “What do you envision?”

Charlene stated, “I know back before I married Hugh, I would have benefited from a place where I could have time to save money to buy a car or even a home. I was in so much debt after my first husband left that it was impossible for me to save any money. If the Grace House existed I would have lived there and saved money.”

Randy added, “So, Charlene, you see the Grace House as providing an alternative place to live for women who are in debt?”

“Exactly.”

Randy continued, “Okay, so the Grace House is not necessarily just for people that are homeless. Instead, we want it to be a place where women

would feel comfortable choosing to live.”

Kenneth asked, “What do you think, Tammie?”

“I agree with Charlene.”

“Jeff?” Kenneth probed.

“All I know is that The Grace House has got to do more than just provide shelter. I would like to see us help people find housing, finish school, get a job, get counseling, and medical attention if needed.”

Kenneth stepped in, “What about this for a mission statement?” He proceeded to write on the board, “The Grace House Ministry is a comprehensive program, rooted in the redeeming work of Christ, supporting single women with children to live independent lives.”

The group sat silently as they processed the statement. Jeff was the first to speak, “It sounds good to me.”

Tammie quickly responded, “Yeah, most of it looks okay, but I’m not sure about the ending.”

“I agree with Tammie,” Randy added. “In social work we don’t like to use the word ‘independent,’ instead we think of healthy functioning as interdependent. ‘Interdependent’ recognizes the need for relationships, and I believe it is more in line with the Gospel.”

Tammie continued, “Randy makes sense, but that is not exactly what I was thinking. I was thinking about the message we want to be sending to women that come to us for help.”

Kenneth asked, “What do you mean, Tammie?”

She answered, “We don’t want to promote the idea that the Grace House Ministry supports women remaining single. We want them to turn their lives around, but we don’t want to encourage them not to remarry.”

Randy responded, “I know what you’re saying, Tammie, but in my experience often times these women are coming out of bad relationships. I think there is nothing wrong with them taking their time to put their lives back together before jumping back into a relationship.”

“That’s fine but we still don’t want to contribute to them thinking they can and should do it on their own for the rest of their lives.”

Kenneth jumped in, saying, “I agree with Tammie, when God created the covenant of marriage between men and women He was giving us His way for living as a family. So we need to express clearly in the mission statement that we love these women unconditionally, we support and want to help them put their lives back together, but we encourage them not to discount the possibility of entering into marriage later on in their lives.”

The committee members continued discussing this issue for the next hour. It was 9:30 and they still did not agree on a mission statement. Randy felt torn inside. On one hand, as a Christian he agreed with Tammie and the rest of the group. On the other hand, as a social worker thinking about a client’s right to self-determination he was unsure of how effective a program would be where women were getting the message that the church viewed their living arrangements as less than ideal. He also knew as a clinician that helping relationships are not very effective when the helper thinks he or she knows what’s best for the client and tries to persuade the client to agree. How could he help the group develop a mission statement that

acknowledges the church's position, not to mention his personal position as well, about marriage, communicates a welcoming environment where women will want to come to the Grace House, and effectively supports them putting their lives back together? ❖