

## I'M NOT THE CHURCH SOCIAL WORKER!

*Mary Anne Poe*

“What should I do, Sue?” church member Carla Rushing pleaded. “Gloria just called and said, ‘We’ve solved the car problem for you.’ The church found a used Taurus for \$4,500. She told me to come to the church right away to sign the loan. They want me to work in the nursery on Sunday and Wednesday nights to help pay for it and since it’s Christmas break, they said Mark can work at the church, too, to help pay for it. They said it would be good for him to see that he needs to be responsible and help me.”

“Slow down a bit, Carla,” Sue Stanford said trying to remain calm in the face of Carla’s apparent panic.

“I don’t know what to do,” Carla continued, collapsing into sobs. “I don’t want to sign a loan. I can’t afford that. I can’t make my son work over his Christmas break to pay for my car.”

### **Broyton Community Church**

Broyton Community Church (BCC) was a conservative, evangelical congregation, not affiliated with a particular denomination. The church had about 1500 members and held traditional views on women’s roles and on marriage and divorce. The church had all the ministries found in large congregations—Sunday School, discipleship groups, youth program, preschool, musical groups for all

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ages, fellowship suppers, women's ministries, and in recent years had begun to emphasize men's programs such as men's accountability groups.

Steve Parker, the pastor of the church, was a strong and decisive leader who had been at the church for about twenty years. He was loved and respected in the congregation. Steve did very little personal counseling, usually making referrals to a few select Christian counselors. He explained to Sue that the pastor should not get too involved in the details of his parishioners' lives so that he could "be their pastor." Sue was not particularly impressed with this pastoral philosophy, but Steve usually delivered what she felt was a good sermon. Sue thought that Steve probably worked to "save the marriage at all costs" when helping people such as Carla.

Lay involvement in care ministries was encouraged and usually organized through small discipleship groups and Sunday School classes led by lay members. Marsha Baker and Gloria Gibbs, were two key leaders of women's discipleship groups. They were strong leaders, vocal believers in prayer and submission to God's will, but lacked any formal education about many of the issues facing the women in their classes. They felt called by God to help hurting women and had begun a study group on Wednesday nights called Healing Our Hurts. About twenty women attended the class.

### **Sue Stanford**

Sue Stanford had been a church social worker for ten years in two other cities before moving to Broyton. She had a BSW and MSW degree from the University of North Carolina and had completed a master's degree in theology at Duke Divinity School. Her work in the churches included providing a full range of services to members and to the community. In this capacity she counseled numerous women in abusive relationships and supported them in the various stages of staying and leaving. She always maintained good working relationships with services in the community for victims of domestic violence and worked diligently to help other pastoral staff members understand the dynamics of such relationships. Of course, as a church social worker, she helped individuals and families with all kinds of problems and knew that positive relationships with other professionals in the community were vital.

Sue and her family moved to Broyton in 1995 because of a job opportunity for her husband. No church social work jobs were available, so Sue began working in an agency providing behavioral health services. She was the director of commu-

nity educational programs. She enjoyed having a chance to be a layperson without professional responsibilities in her worship context. Through her new job she networked with service providers in most of the local social service agencies. She served on several task forces and boards, including a local faith-based program providing a full range of services for families with low-income, a drug abuse prevention coalition, the advisory council for the local university's social work department, and the state's domestic violence coalition.

### **Carla Rushing's Troubles**

Carla Rushing had already experienced one failed marriage and had two teenage sons, Mark and Andy, before she began dating Rob seven years previously. Rob had also been married and divorced. Both had been members of BCC for many years. When Carla became pregnant, Rob wanted her to get an abortion but she refused to do this. Instead, they were counseled by the pastor and others in the church to marry. This is what they did. Rob moved into the house that Carla had owned since her divorce eight years earlier. Ben was born soon after they married and Jon followed two years later. Carla now had four sons.

Troubles in the marriage were evident from the beginning. Rob had a drug and alcohol problem. Early in their relationship, Carla had "experimented" with drugs on a couple of occasions. She never became addicted or even involved beyond the two or three times they went to parties together. Carla worked full-time as a client aide at a sheltered workshop for those with developmental disabilities while Rob's work was sporadic. He helped on construction projects and Carla never knew the terms of his employment. The crisis came when Rob was arrested on a drug charge. In the process of legal proceedings, Carla's house of cards collapsed. She discovered that Rob had spent all her savings, mortgaged their home, and apparently accumulated thousands of dollars in debt. As Rob faced the consequences of his criminal charge and the reality of his drug problem, it appeared that he would finally get the treatment he needed for his addictions. But the financial picture was too bleak. They would have to file bankruptcy and move from their home.

### **The Church Helps**

At that point, the church became very involved. Carla shared her problems with the discipleship group led by Gloria and Marsha, and they shifted into high gear to

solve her problems. In conversation with the pastor, Marsha arranged counseling for Carla and Rob with a Christian counselor contracted by the church to supplement the work of the pastor. Gloria had a son who had successfully completed an intensive residential Christian drug treatment program and she encouraged Rob and Carla to give it a chance. Rob agreed to participate in this program if the church could arrange his admission. The church also agreed to help pay for this treatment. Rob was soon out of the home and participating in the treatment program. Carla agreed to be supportive of her husband in his efforts to overcome addiction.

The pastor organized a committee of lay helpers to oversee the use of money given on Carla and Rob's behalf. The committee included Marsha, Gloria and several deacons. Marsha and Gloria were assigned to Carla, while two men were assigned to Rob for accountability purposes. Carla's expenses were mounting because Rob supplied no income to the family now.

Carla emphasized to Marsha and Gloria, "I want the marriage to work, but if Rob does not complete this treatment program, I am finished with him!"

Marsha replied, "Gloria's son did so well in this program, I am sure this will help Rob. Just trust the Lord in this."

"I can't live with this any more. He scares me with his drug use. I never know what is going to happen. I think he is influencing my older boys, too," Carla reported to her church helpers. "I am afraid that they are drinking and using now, too."

Several church groups, including Carla and Rob's Sunday school class, collected sizable offerings for the family, literally thousands of dollars over a period of three months. Gloria found a house for Carla to rent and made arrangements for Carla and her children to move. Gloria and Marsha worked up a "contract" for Carla in which they agreed for the church to pay her rent for at least the next six months while Rob was in treatment. They would monitor her finances and she would have to be accountable to them. The financial problems were big, though. Her job at a local sheltered workshop did not provide enough income to meet her monthly needs for shelter, food, automobile, and childcare. She needed ongoing financial support. In December, the class wanted her to have plenty of cash so that she could shop for Christmas presents for her children and they donated generously. A year later, the class discovered that Marsha had intercepted the donations and shopped for Carla's children, wrapped the packages, and put them under Carla's tree.

Since Rob could not leave the treatment program, Carla made the three hour trip to the treatment center almost every Sunday afternoon so the younger boys, now ages two and four, could see their daddy. Carla's older boys visited occasion-

ally because Rob had been their “daddy” for the past four years. After two months in the program, Rob was allowed to come home occasionally. On one occasion, he helped the family move from their home into the rental house that Marsha and Gloria had found for the family.

### **Sue Gets Involved**

As a church member, Sue had been a rather uninvolved observer in the Sunday School class until she helped with the move to the rental house. She made several monetary donations and had been the one to suggest that Christmas money be given directly to Carla so that she could select the gifts for her children. She knew very few details about Carla’s life, just that the class had been praying for them and that Rob was away in a treatment program. Their first real conversation occurred the day that Carla moved. The whole class helped with the move, but for about an hour during the day, Sue and Carla stayed together at her “old” home to finish some packing. The contrast between the nice house that the bank had reclaimed and the new rental house that was about to be Carla’s home with two little boys was extreme. This was when Sue began to realize the extent of Carla’s distress, her risk in relation to Rob, and the lay helpers’ lack of awareness about the dynamics of abusive relationships. Carla described to Sue an emotionally cruel and controlling relationship with Rob, “Rob likes to have things his way. He doesn’t think I do anything right. He says things I wish the boys didn’t hear.”

“Like what kind of things?” Sue asked.

“Oh, I’m sure he doesn’t mean it. He says he thinks I am stupid, calls me a bitch. I don’t like for the boys to see him when he’s like that. Frankly, it’s been easier since he’s been in the treatment program.”

“Sounds like he is a bit of a bully,” Sue replied.

“He just thinks he doesn’t have to do any of the work around here. He plays with the boys some, but it is usually too rough for me.”

Carla also described the attempts to “save the marriage” in the marriage counseling arranged by Marsha. It was obvious that Carla felt indebted to the church for all the help and repeated over and over again how much had been done and how guilty she felt for needing such help.

“I’m so embarrassed that this house is such a mess,” Carla said repeatedly as Sue helped her sort through toys and clothes in the boys’ room. “I just can’t seem to get organized.”

"Moving is always a mess," Sue assured her.

At lunch, when all those helping with the move were gathered, Gloria declared, "I am so thankful for all the help this class has been to Carla. It is fortunate that we were able to find this place for her to live."

Sue cringed inside, seeing the embarrassment on Carla's face and newly aware of how Gloria and Marsha exerted control in Carla's life through helping.

### **Rob Quits Treatment**

Marsha and Gloria kept constant vigilance on Carla's condition and needs. One of them called daily to ask how she was and to learn what she was doing. When Rob was dismissed from the program for failure to comply with the rules, they told her that he could not move back into her house. Carla followed their instructions and told him he could not move back with her. Someone at the treatment center told Carla that Rob had a "problem with authority." Rob moved back to Broyton, initially staying with his mother. He eventually got his own apartment and became more involved at church. He grew particularly close to one other man, Chuck Sawyer, his accountability partner.

Carla was still reluctant to file for divorce, though she had managed the household while Rob was away and had grown to enjoy the relative peace of his absence. She had grown more independent and had begun to realize how terrible their relationship had been. Carla began to wonder if it could possibly be okay with God if she divorced. Now that Rob was back in town, she dreaded contact with him because he continually harassed her about moving back into the house and about visiting with the little boys. Rob's mother also hassled and irritated her.

### **Carla Files for Divorce**

One Sunday morning, after Rob had been back in Broyton for about three weeks, Sue asked Carla how things were going. Carla confided that Rob had failed a drug screen—one of the regular screens mandated by the court due to his criminal record.

"I think it may be time to get a divorce," Carla said to Sue. "I'm afraid for my boys." She then collapsed into tears. After Sue found a quiet place in the church building where they could talk, Carla went on, "I've not said this to anyone else. Rob is getting the papers for divorce this Friday. I don't want everyone to know my business."

As Sue and Carla talked, the depth of the problem with the church helpers grew more and more clear to Sue.

"Marsha and Gloria talk with my counselor, others in my discipleship group, Brother Steve, and Rob's friends. Everyone knows all my business."

Carla also explained that she was afraid of Rob and what he would do when served the divorce papers.

"Have you had any contact with The Women's Place?" Sue asked. The Women's Place was the local agency serving the needs of those experiencing domestic violence, and Sue knew the staff at the agency well.

"Another friend suggested that to me but Marsha warned me not to work with them. They are not a Christian agency," Carla responded.

"Please call The Women's Place, Carla. They can help you," Sue encouraged. She told Carla what she knew about the agency and that, while the agency was not "Christian," several of the staff members were, in fact, believers.

Sue was also concerned for Carla's safety and explained the importance of having a "safety plan." As they talked, Sue felt she had to be more involved at this point. *I know I don't have a professional role in this situation, she thought, But if I don't get involved, that seems both professionally and spiritually irresponsible; Carla is really at risk here.*

The next day, Monday, Carla phoned Sue, "I called The Women's Place this morning."

"What happened?" Sue asked.

"I told them about Rob getting the divorce papers on Friday. They wanted to know if I felt safe and then they started helping me think about how to handle things."

"I'm glad you called them, Carla. You sound relieved. I think they can help you."

"They suggested I get an order of protection. They said they could help me do that. I have to work on Friday. I'm afraid I'm about to lose my job because of all this, Sue."

"Why would you lose your job, Carla?" Sue asked.

"Just all the calls. Rob calls, Gloria calls, I have to call my lawyers. The day care calls. And I'm afraid that Rob will go get the boys after he gets the papers," Carla began to cry.

"Is there a way I can help next Friday, Carla?" Sue asked as she realized the depth of Carla's despair.

"I don't know, Sue. I don't want to bother you."

"Carla, this is a good time for you to have plenty of help. I want you and the boys to be safe."

Carla, with Sue's help and the help of The Women's Place, arranged to get her younger boys from day care early, so that Rob would not be able to get them. Carla planned to stay at the shelter until she felt safe to return home.

"What about your older boys, Carla? What will they do?" Sue knew that they would not be allowed at the shelter with Carla and the little boys.

"Mark is mad at me. He's all tied up in this, too. When I told him about my plan for the shelter, he got all tough. I told him to go to his dad's house."

"What did he say?" Sue asked.

"He said he wouldn't leave the house—that it was his home. He could take care of Rob. Sue, he can't take care of Rob. They will get into it. I've seen them get into it before. I wanted him to go stay with his dad. He's never been very close to Rob. Rob always favored Andy and picked on Mark."

"What about Andy?" asked Sue.

"He's in Colorado, thank goodness. I haven't even talked to him yet. No telling what he will do. Mark's home for the summer, but he doesn't have his driver's license. I'm afraid for Mark."

"Did the Women's Place have any suggestions for you about Mark?" asked Sue.

"They just said he couldn't stay in the shelter and that he would have to make up his own mind. They said they would talk with him if he wanted," said Carla.

"Will he talk with them?" Sue responded.

"I don't think so. He's trying to be tough and thinks I am crazy," Carla said.

"Well, he's an adult, Carla. You can't make him do anything. He has to make his own choices at this point," Sue replied, feeling somewhat desperate herself for Carla's situation and all the complexity and danger of it. She hoped that at least Carla would follow through on the plan that she had developed with the shelter and for her little boys.

### **Trying to Get Untangled**

Carla did go to the shelter on Friday and returned home after about a week. In the parenting plan, court ordered in the divorce proceedings, Carla had requested that Rob's visitation with the boys be supervised because of his drug problem. He



had tested positive on several occasions since leaving treatment. Rob had taken the boys from her home when Carla thought he was high but she had been unable to stop him. The court ordered visitation for every other weekend. His mother was to supervise. He was subject to drug tests whenever requested by Carla or her attorney.

Rob continued to come to church. He boasted to others in the church of his love for Carla and the boys and his desire to be reunited. He maintained a close relationship with his "accountability partner," a man he had known all his life and had even lived next door to for many years. Rob always came to church and made a point of seeing his boys. He would take them from Sunday school to play on the church's playground while Carla was in Sunday school. When she would arrive to pick up the boys, he would use the opportunity to harass and belittle her, often accusing her in front of the boys of trying to keep them away from him. Though there was a "no contact" order of protection, he was ignoring it while on the church grounds.

One Sunday, Rob was particularly threatening. On this occasion, Carla asked the boys' teacher and the Minister to Children to help her get to her car safely. Because Rob was generally careful to say things to Carla when others could not actually witness it, Carla's attorney subsequently filed a contempt of court motion and subpoenaed the Children's Minister and teacher.

Carla was grasping for some emotional support from her church helpers and the staff. She continued to feel so guilty about all her needs and embarrassed that so many people were getting dragged into her dirty business. Carla and Sue talked several times a week. Carla often seemed confused about what to do. Sue wanted to stay connected with her because of the extreme emotional distress that Carla exhibited.

"Marsha called," Carla reported one day. "She makes me feel so bad when she calls, like she's in charge of everything I do."

"What does she say?" Sue asked.

"She wants all my receipts so she knows what I have spent. She nags me about paying bills. I don't know. It's just the way she says things more than anything. I feel so judged. She wants to run Mark's life, too. She tells me what to make him do as though he's five years old. I can't make my grown son do anything."

"Sounds like you are not feeling much support from Marsha," Sue reflected back to Carla.

"I don't. They are supposed to be helping me, but I can hardly think, they are so demanding," Carla blubbered. "Sometimes I think I'm going crazy, but they got this house for me and pay the rent."

Sue became concerned about Carla's apparent depression. "Are you still seeing the counselor at The Women's Place?" Sue asked.

"Yes, she wants me to see my doctor about getting some medicine for depression, but Marsha tells me I don't need medicine. I just need to trust the Lord. I've made my bed, now I have to lie in it, is what Marsha thinks."

"Maybe you should just quit talking to Marsha so much," said Sue.

"That's what the counselor says to me," Carla replied.

As time went on, Carla seemed to depend more and more on Sue's encouragement and the help of the therapist at The Women's Place that Carla now saw once a week. Sue thought that Carla's spiritual and emotional pain was growing because of the very controlling approach that Marsha and Gloria had assumed in their relationship with her. Carla now felt as much pressure from them as she had once felt from Rob, came to feel that she was inadequate and unworthy, and thought that she should follow their directives. Now, she had to handle their onslaught of well-meaning, but harmful, "help" as well as try to wrest herself free from Rob's manipulation and control.

### **In Court**

Though she had known him for years, Carla had had no direct contact with Steve, her pastor, during this whole process until they saw each other in court. She was accompanied by her attorney while Rob appeared with his attorney, his accountability partner, and Sue and Rob's son, Andy. Carla's attorney asked the Sunday school teacher and Children's Minister to testify on her behalf. The pastor came to court with these two staff members, but Carla felt the clear message was that the church was not taking any sides in their battle. He hardly spoke to her and seemed to be there for Rob as much as for her. The very fact of their involvement in it embarrassed Carla, but their unwillingness to support her hurt deeply. She did not think she had done anything that made her responsible for the trouble now. Rob's attorney got Andy, their son, to testify on Rob's behalf. Carla was devastated that her own son had testified against her and that he had even lied on the witness stand about what Rob had done at church. She hated the way that Rob was using her own son against her and devastated that Andy would comply.

Carla decided to ask for a meeting with the pastor soon after they had been in court. Carla knew that Pastor Steve was aware of many of the details of her life from Marsha's and Gloria's perspective because they often reported to her what he had

said she should do. When Carla asked for her support, Sue agreed to accompany her. This meeting was prompted partly by Carla's experience in court in which she felt no support from the church. The meeting with Pastor Steve did not go well. He listened to Carla's side of the story, but offered no real compassion or empathy to her. Instead, he asserted again his need not to get in the middle of their domestic quarrels and that the church could not abandon either Rob or her. Carla longed for Pastor Steve's approval to divorce Rob and move on, but it was not forthcoming.

### **The Final Straw**

In spite of all the turmoil, Carla was slowly gaining a sense of self and feeling stronger. She still had major financial worries because her full-time job left her still \$200 short each month. Rob was not providing child support as ordered by the court. Every week was filled with various forms of harassment from him. Marsha and Gloria continued to call. Each call left her feeling judged and inadequate. Carla was participating in a support group for survivors of domestic violence and seeing a therapist once a week. Legal proceedings seemed to drag on and attorney fees were mounting, but Carla was beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. She battled depression constantly, having some good days and some very low ones. She had developed a workable schedule for her little boys. Usually the only tough days with them were after they returned from visits with their dad. Carla continued to attend church regularly and even seemed to be gaining spiritual strength as she felt God caring for her and providing for her needs. Through their conversations, Sue knew that Carla was still on a bit of a roller coaster ride, but managing.

Then, one day, Carla called. "My car has broken down," she began anxiously. "I've got to get it towed. What am I going to do about work? I can't pay for car repair bills?" Carla grew more and more agitated as she talked about this new financial crisis.

Sue tried to slow her down. "Okay, let's think through the possibilities, Carla."

"I've already had a friend look at it," moaned Carla. "He said it's a major job. The car's hardly worth the cost to repair it."

"Can anyone help for the next few days while you work out a solution?" Sue asked.

"My son is here and can help for a few days, but he has school and a job, too. Can you just pray for me that something will work out?"

"Sure, you know I will do that." Sue responded.

"I've got to go. I'm at work and someone's paging me." Carla said.

The next day Sue discussed with her husband the possibility of loaning Carla a third car they had but did not really need at this time. They were holding onto it for their fifteen-year-old child who would be driving soon. She called Carla to tell her that she could use this car for several months. Carla had just talked with Gloria. She had just called to tell Carla that the pastor had bought a car through the church for her, a 2000 Taurus, for \$4500. He had called a church member who owned a car dealership to explain the need. Gloria told Carla that she needed to come to the church to sign the loan. The church expected her to pay \$75 a month and to begin to work at the church providing child care on Sunday and Wednesday nights to help pay for it. Since Carla's son was home for the Christmas holidays, Gloria said that the church would put him to work in order to help pay for it as well. Gloria said this would help him understand Carla's need for help and make him responsible. Carla was overwhelmed. She could not afford \$75 a month. She did not want another job. And she did not appreciate that they had an expectation for her college-age son to work for her car. He already had a job and school.

Carla had not asked for this "help." Gloria had called the day before and Carla had mentioned the car problems, but only with the request for her prayers, just like she had asked Sue. How could they think this had solved her problem? For Carla, this effort by the church felt like an impossible burden—more indebtedness for her financially as well as emotionally, theft of her responsibility to solve her own problems, and more judgment from her church family.

### **Sue's Dilemma**

Sue could hear the desperation in Carla's voice. Fearing that Carla's growing independence was about to collapse, she also wondered, *Is Carla about to have an emotional break? Is this spiritual abuse?* Sue felt increasingly troubled and angry. *These people in my church are so insensitive toward Sue's condition. Even the pastor does not seem to understand, she thought. Is my own anger interfering with helping Carla? Can I continue to be a sort of bystander—talking with Carla when she calls and offering support to her but not intervening in any way with my church? Have I become a part of that abuse by not being willing to get involved with the church helpers or staff to advocate for Carla? I am not sure I could do any good anyway. I don't have much influence here. Maybe I should not interfere because no one at church has actually asked me to help? I can continue to talk with Carla when she calls. Is that enough? What should I do?*