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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

**WHEN CHURCH HURTS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOCIAL WORKER’S SPIRITUAL
WELL-BEING AND SELF-CARE**

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*“May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my
heart be pleasing in your
sight, O Lord, my Rock, and my Redeemer.”
(Psalm 19:14)*

Abstract

During times of church transition and turmoil, we are forced to rediscover the “Rock” that grounds our faith as Christians. This workshop will assist the Christian social worker in identifying the opportunities for spiritual and professional growth in the midst of church turbulence.

Scripture:

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV, p. 6)

The Issue

“A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith” (McNeal, 2003, p. 4). Church attendance for all age groups is down. A study conducted in the late 1990’s indicated that only 26% of Americans attend church on a given Sunday (McNeal, 2003). The *State of the Church 2002* reported that in just one decade, the unchurched population in America grew from 24 percent to 34 percent (George Barna, 2002, as cited in McNeal, p. 3).

Many churches are responding to these alarming statistics by attempting to become more culturally relevant. According to McNeal (2003), “the point is not to adopt the culture and lose the message; the point is to understand the culture so we can build bridges to it for the sake of gaining a hearing for the gospel of Jesus” (p.51). As churches respond to the needs of the 21st century, many will find themselves undergoing transition. Transition is “an act, process or instance of changing from one state, form, activity or place to another” (Webster’s II, 1996, p. 715).

As social workers well-versed in systems theory, we know that system change is not easy, immediate or always pleasant. Opposition is a part of change as a system seeks to maintain its balance or equilibrium. “Events that temporarily knock a system out of balance leave it scrambling to regain its previous equilibrium or lead it quickly toward establishing a new one” (Miley, O’Melia, & Dubois, 2001, p. 41). Christian social workers are uniquely equipped to help churches respond to change and transition by using our skills of healing relationships and conflict resolution as well as our strength-based focus.

As a member of the congregation, however, change challenges us personally in our spiritual growth and emotional maturity. During times of church transition and turmoil, we are forced to rediscover the “Rock” that grounds our faith as Christians. Recent transition in my home church provided me the opportunity to explore the foundational elements of my faith, the meaning faith has my life, and how I live that faith personally and professionally.

Common issues involving church transition can be identified as we consider how people deal with change. Southerland (1999) has made six observations regarding people and change:

- *People can only handle so much change.*
- *People feel awkward when asked to do something new.*
- *People think first about what they must give up.*
- *People feel alone when they are asked to change.*
- *People are at different levels of readiness for change.*
- *People tend to revert back to their old behavior the minute the reason to change is removed (p. 111).*

For the Christian social worker, the difficulty of church transition lies in reconciling our professional knowledge of systems theory and social work skills with our personal feelings and spiritual maturity. Change is even more challenging when the plan God has designed for a particular church body takes us by surprise or involves conflict and emotional turmoil within ourselves and those we love.

The Background

Our church began attempting slow transitioning steps in 1994 when we called a husband-wife team of new Pastors. Our Pastors tried to gently lead us to open our doors and welcome others by updating our building to make it visitor friendly. They encouraged us to consider our passions for ministry and take leadership roles. Small groups and sermons centered on developing a deeper spiritual relationship with Christ and the need for prayer to encourage substance rather than simply pew warming. Ways

to reach out to the community were explored, and our music repertoire was expanded. Grumbling reminiscent of the wandering Israelites spewed occasionally, some gradual change took place, deepening spiritual maturity occurred in a few members, but overall, the congregation as a whole did not budge. Instead, the Body put up roadblocks to the Pastors' ideas, held tight to money and even after three years work on a new constitution, clung to the old ways of doing things. Finally in 2004, the Pastors resigned. And so began the hard work of pastoral search.

As the Pastoral Search Committee members assessed our church needs, prayed for vision, and looked at the congregation, they realized that our church would be closed in a matter of just a few years if we did not experience growth. The majority of our people were elderly, and the younger couples with children were not coming back. The Interim Pastor challenged us to become a missional church with a focus on outreach to those people who do not know Jesus Christ. Prolonged gentle persuasion and encouragement were no longer an option—changes were made despite grumbling factions.

As a lay leader involved with the Worship Team and the Leadership Council, I struggled as I could see different perspectives on critical issues when conflicts arose. I found myself taking increasing ownership over issues. Thinking that God was calling me to open my time to his direction, I gave up my job as a school social worker and spent more time on church-related work. I relied on my own strength often, however, rather than his. I poured myself into trying to save the church and keep everyone happy, to no avail. As I desperately worked to salvage our membership, I finally realized that this turmoil was not about me or the preservation of a church building. It was about the

dream God desired for this church and whether we, as members, were willing to give up our personal illusion of control to his ways.

“What are you depending on God to do? The answer is rather easy to discover. Those things you are praying for are the things you are depending on God to do. Those things you are not praying for, you are doing on your own” (Southerland, 1999, p. 37). As I started to let go, I saw things happening that were beyond any human being’s doing—pieces were put into place, money was supplied for renovations that could only be God’s orchestrating, people left and others moved in. Convicted of God’s movement and my resistance, I finally was broken beyond my own repair. The Interim who by now was being called as the permanent Pastor insisted that we be reading in our Bibles daily and suggested using the *Life Journal* (New Hope Resources) to record God’s desires for us to apply his Word. In doing so, the answers started to come. The message to love and to reach out rather than work at self-preservation started to sink in. I made the decision to focus on worship and trust God’s leading in this journey of faith.

The Journey

The following excerpts from my journal writing in response to daily Bible reading may be helpful in understanding the transformation process that God can take us through when we are in his Word. The application of his Word to our current church circumstances helped me grow spiritually and also pointed to ways I could use my professional skills.

Journal Date: 1/27/06

Scripture: *“Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it...” Exodus 17:14 (NIV)*

“...the work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.” Exodus 18:18b (NIV)

“Repent, then and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.” Acts 3: 19 (NIV)

Application: I seem to have a pattern of getting so busy doing (especially at church) that I begin to think (mistakenly!) it is me and not God running things. I feel incredibly frustrated and totally wiped out. I become the ultimate martyr.

Prayer: Lord, I just pray that this time I remember this tendency—my sin is pride. I confess it, Lord. I ask that you help me remember the past, hear it so I can finally break free of the pattern. Forgive me, Lord. I do know in my heart it is all about you. You will guide, you will enable.”

Journal Date: 1/28/06

Scripture: *“He is ‘the stone your builders rejected, which has become the capstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by whom we must be saved.” Acts 4: 11, 12 (NIV)*

Application: Jesus alone is the foundation. God will work things to his glory no matter how trying circumstances become if I focus on Jesus.

Prayer: Lord, I seek you with all of my heart. You are my strength, my shield and my salvation. Help me to keep my focus on the Rock and build everything in his Name filled with your Spirit. Amen

Journal Date: 1/30/06 (Morning)

Scripture: *“For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”* Acts 5:38b, 39 (NIV)

Application: Our church is in upheaval. I am grieved. I am unsure if the direction the church is headed is man’s plan or God’s. I am scared, disillusioned, baffled, and frustrated. I feel that things I have attempted to do to bring people together and coordinate efforts have been fruitless. So does that mean they were my plans, not God’s? Where is God leading this church? Are we following him or going our own way? What does he want me to do in this situation?

Prayer: Lord, I have more questions than answers from your Word today. Help me not to struggle with you or stand in your way. But also enable me to speak and do as your desire. Amen

Journal Date: 1/30/06 (Evening)

Scripture: *“So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”* Acts 6:7 (NIV)

Observation: The Word of God is convicting. It brings changed lives and followers who are obedient to the faith.

Application: Learn God’s Word. Speak God’s Word. Spread God’s Word.

Prayer: Lord, help me not to be so grieved and distracted by things going on that I neglect to speak and spread your Word. Enable me, Lord, to be an instrument for you. Amen

Journal Date: 2/4/06

Scripture: *“So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”* Acts 11:17

(NIV)

Prayer: Lord, help me not to oppose or hinder your plans because they don't quite fit as I see them. Amen

(8 months later)

Journal Date: 10/28/06

Scripture: *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”* Job 19: 25-27 (NIV)

Application: Despite Job's pain, tragedy and questions of God as to “why”, Job knows without a doubt that his Redeemer lives and he will see him one day. As Christians, we do have struggles, but we know that *God is*. We have hope that Jesus Christ *is* our Rock and Redeemer.

So What? The Implications

God has amazed me with personal and professional transformation through the process of church transition. I realized that much of my spirituality had become dependent on a church building and friendships within the church. Although a place of worship and Christian fellowship are important, they cannot be the basis of your faith. Only a personal relationship with Christ can be your rock.

As Christians, we are called to be open to God's leading. As social workers, we have been given skills to assist our church bodies in making transitions and conflict less painful. However, if we are not grounded spiritually and emotionally, church turmoil will test our own faith. As difficult as change can be, it provides us with opportunities to grow both spiritually and professionally. What might these opportunities be?

1. We are forced to take a faith stand. In times of change, we must evaluate whether our Christian faith is based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ or a particular church, way of doing things, tradition, ritual, or friendship. A faith based on anything other than Jesus Christ will not stand.

2. We confront the need for our own personal balance and emotional health. In *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives*, Scazzero (2003) asserted that "It is not possible for a Christian to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature" (p. 50). Spiritual maturity and emotional health go hand in hand. Church conflicts often occur because "many are supposedly 'spiritually mature' but remain infants, children, or teenagers emotionally. They demonstrate little ability to process anger, sadness, or hurt. They whine, complain, distance themselves, blame, and use sarcasm—like little children when they don't get their way." (Scazzero, 2003, p. 18).

Social workers are trained to help people grow in emotional health and maturity. Sadly, however, many of us do not use our skills when it comes to our own emotional health and relationships. Honestly assessing your own emotional health is critical. Modeling emotionally and spiritually healthy ways to interact is essential. "We forget

that change comes through brutal honesty and vulnerability before God.” (Scazzero, 2003, p. 53)

I discovered that church was one of my primary sources of support and vital to my self-care as a professional. Thus, when our church was in crisis, my emotional health faltered. I relearned the necessity of balancing my activities and support system.

Questions to consider as one evaluates a balanced support system include: Do I have adequate supports in place that if one is taken away, I will not crumble? Has church become my only source of support, friendships and service outside of my professional work?

3. We realize skills that we have as professional social workers can help the church heal and deal positively with change. We are in a position to model reflective listening and conflict resolution. We can refuse to let triangled communication take place and instead, use healthy, open communication skills.

Be aware that conflict resolution most often takes more than one meeting and give God time to work. I went to our Pastor time and again to talk directly about issues of concern—even those issues which she and I disagreed upon. Through our discussions, I was able to experience firsthand the perseverance and love needed to heal a relationship. I was on the receiving end of words spoken “in truth and love” and learned through experience the acceptance that our clients must feel when we treat them with dignity and respect.

As social workers, we can advocate for and provide opportunities for healthy grieving. Losses, such as friendships, comforting traditions, and familiar roles, abound

when churches splinter in transition. It is important to take time to grieve, but also not become stuck in the grieving and lose the momentum of change.

“Many of us have taken on our culture’s pain-denying view of grieving...we deny and avoid the difficulties and losses of life, the rejections and frustrations. People in our churches minimize their failures and disappointments. The result is that for many today, at least in prosperous North America, there is a widespread inability to face pain. This has led to an overall feeling of superficiality and lack of profound compassion. ...Our national capacity to grieve is almost lost. We are too busy with trying to keep everything as it is and getting our own way” (Scazzero, 2003, p. 161). “In Scripture, the God-like response is for us to deal honestly and prayerfully with our losses and disappointments” (Scazzero, 2003, p.162).

4. We come to recognize our own limitations. Instead, we are convicted of our source of empowerment: prayer, reading God’s Word daily, and the work of the Holy Spirit. I recognized that I cannot “fix” everything that is broken, nor should I try. Southerland’s words echo healing self-talk as he describes the verity of criticism:

- *You cannot please everyone. (Jesus didn’t—and you and I won’t either.)*
- *You cannot please anyone all the time.*
- *You can please God (He is much easier to please than people.)* (Southerland, 2003, p. 118).

“The reality is that criticism and opposition will drive you somewhere. Let it drive you closer to God and you will become better; let it drive you away from God and you will become bitter. The choice is up to you! And the choice often begins with prayer” (Southerland, 2003, p. 120).

5. We can apply our new understanding of conflict and change to better help client systems develop healthy supports. When we personally experience crisis and systems change, it enhances our awareness of client needs, strengths and gives direction for positive resolution.

The Conclusion

The process of transition may be likened to Brueggemann's division of the three types of Psalms: songs of orientation in which we delight in God's presence, songs of disorientation which detail the seasons of hurt, suffering, confusion, doubts and despair, and finally, songs of reorientation when "God breaks in and does something new. This is when joy breaks through our despair" (Scazzero, 2003, p.164-165). Many of us give up during the songs of disorientation. We feel abandoned, disillusioned, and angry. We vow not to have anything to do with those "hypocritical Christians", the broken church, and sometimes, even God. In walking away, however, we run the risk of missing his new song of reorientation.

Leighton Ford reminds us that, "The most important time is between the dreams, not the dreams themselves" (Scazzero, 2003, p. 164). In the process of change, *God is working*. And he *is* gently calling us to stand firm on the Rock of his salvation.

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