

Strangers in the Pew Do You Know Us?

By

Cynthia Rowland McClure & Robert H. Rowland

“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

“I was stranger and you took me not in.” “When saw we you a stranger and took you not in?” “When you did it not to the least of these my brethren, you did it not unto me.” (Matthew 25:24)

“Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love.” (3 John 5)

“Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” (Romans 12:13)

“... enroll a widow, ... if she has shown hospitality to strangers, ... ” (1 Timothy 5:10)

“Son of man, prophesy ... woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! ... You do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. My sheep ... were scattered over the whole earth, and no one looked or searched for them.” (Ezekiel 34)

“And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” (Hebrews 13:16)

THIS BOOK'S ORIGINS

This book is an outgrowth of the concerns of Cynthia Rowland McClure. She spent ten years as an award winning television news reporter and special assignments producer during the 1970s. She suffered from Bulimia during her college years and those years in television. She was healed from this eating addiction in 1980, only to suffer the loss of a breast to cancer in 1984. She established a foundation, Hope for the Hungry Heart, and crisscrossed the nation on speaking tours, giving hope to sufferers of addictions, eating disorders and cancer. She became a popular campus speaker and addressed students and faculties at convocations in over 300 colleges and universities. Many churches opened their pulpits to her. She addressed many high school assemblies and business conventions. She has counseled thousands of women suffering from the above illnesses. She conducted a weekly radio talk show for two years over one of southern California's most popular Christian stations. In addition to these activities, her one woman show "What I Learned as a Bald Headed Chick" was presented to thousands at churches and colleges. Her messages were faith building and a source of inspiration, comfort and spiritual encouragement to both the afflicted and their families. Her books, speeches and counseling sessions gave hope the tens-of-thousands of desperate people, especially teenage girls and grown women suffering from eating disorders. She held dozens of "Hope Weeks" where 15 to 20 women came together for intensive counseling.

During those speaking engagements, followed by group counseling sessions, she discovered thousands of women and men, young and old, who were church members suffering from neglect, isolation, disaffection and addictions. She wrote the poem that follows to express the feelings she uncovered among church members who sit on the pews every Sunday.

Her cancer returned in 1997 and she had to table this book she had outlined and ended her interviews in order to fight for her life. As her father, I, Robert H. Rowland, shared her concerns and took up the planned book and finished the work from the dream she had for it. She wanted it to be a vehicle by which leaders of churches and rank-in-file members would be made aware of the large number of unnoticed, under-served, and hurting people in their midst. They sit in our pews every Sunday. More importantly, she hoped the book would cause our churches to go beyond being made aware of these hurting people by starting programs to include those who feel excluded from the main stream of church life. These strangers go unnoticed and their needs go unmet. And, all too often, many of them give up and drop out.

It is hoped that this book will not only make Christians more aware and care, but that it will encourage them to take concrete actions to let these strangers know that they are valued and welcomed. These strangers come to our churches seeking refuge, friendship, salvation, and comfort. When the church fails to recognize their pain and special needs,

they sit in their pews or leave with their burdens intact. They need to know that they, too, have ownership in our churches and that they will receive true fellowship, comfort and strength from caring, burden-sharing members.

One of Cynthia's favorite Scriptures is 2 Cor. 1:3-6. "Praise be to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows." She usually began her chapel and convocation speeches with this Scripture.

Sadly, cancer took Cynthia's life August 14, 2003, before this book was finished. She left behind her husband, David, two sons, Caleb and Micah, ages 9 and 12. She left behind a legacy that touched millions of lives through speeches, four books, a Southern California radio talk show and her One-Woman Road Show. Her first book, *The Monster Within*, is now in its 20th printing.

Too often our churches go forth with sectarian zeal converting the lost to an imperfect church, because it is made up of fallible and imperfect members, instead of converting them to the perfect Savior. In our zeal to build bigger churches, too often an emphasis is placed converting the lost to denominational creeds and traditions. Those who do not conform to our creeds and traditions may also find themselves alone in the pew. Their membership is not considered significant. Yet, the Lord warned us, **"In as much as you did it not to the least of these my brethren, you did it not unto me."**

Do You Know Me?

I come to church. I sit by you. You look at me and say, "How are you?" And sometimes I want to ask, "Do you really care how I am?"

Our "Hello, how are you," and our handshake are not enough for me. You don't even know me. But, I think I might be very much like you.

I cry. I laugh. I bleed, suffer pain, harbor doubts and have hopes. I know about guilt and I believe in forgiveness.

Sometimes I'm so lonely, yes, so alone that I want to curl up and die.

I sin. I'm ashamed. But, I'm afraid to confess my sins to you. Would you be forgiving? Would you understand? I need acceptance. And sometimes, I don't know where, or to whom, I can turn for it. I need to know that I am loved and have value.

I am often afraid. Why am I afraid? Who am I afraid of? I don't know. Am I not like you? Do you not also have fears? I have had some wonderful times. I have had some horrible times. I wonder if you would care to know.

Would it embarrass you if I shared my pain with you? Would you share yours with me? At times, I simply don't know what to do. I reach out, but touch no one.

At times, no one touches me, or even seems to want to touch me. Do you know me? Are my experiences the exceptions, or are they the rule?

I'm a mom, a dad, a son, a daughter, a wife, a husband, a grandparent. I'm a friend. I'm married. I'm single. I just lost my job. I have children. I'm a widow. I'm divorced. I preach. I suffer. I'm addicted. I'm depressed. I work. I get tired. I grow weary. I'm rich. I'm poor. I'm broke. I'm lonely. I think I'm not too different from you. Maybe, only our circumstances differ.

But ... do you know me? Do I know you? Does it make any difference? Please ... just for a moment ... or for a day, could we get real? Could we remove our masks and share with each other for a few moments?

Could we become genuine friends in Christ, mutually supporting each other?

I really need for someone to know and understand me.

I would also like to really know and understand you and others like us. I don't want to remain a stranger, nor do I want you to be one.

*Can we break down and remove the barriers and walls that separate us?
Through Christ I believe we can, and I believe that we must.*

His blood covers each of us. In Christ we are family, brothers and sisters.

*Who'll take the first step? I'll take it. Will you open up and respond?
Will you meet me halfway? A third of the way?
I'm willing to go all the way to be understood and to understand.*

Cynthia Rowland McClure

Lonely ... Disappointed ... Guilty ... Shattered ..Betrayed ...

Forsaken ... Wounded ... Abused ... Broken ... Deserted ...

Disillusioned ... Misunderstood ... Rejected ... Lost ...

Overlooked ... Desperate ... Grieving

... Needy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Sunday Morning.....	1
2	I am Divorced: One Woman’s Story.....	7
3	I am a Divorced Man: A Divorced Man Speaks	15
4	I am a Battered and Abused Wife.....	24
5	I am an Alcoholic.....	35
6	I am a Widow	45
7	He was an Elder.....	51
8	I have an Eating Disorder	56
9	I Live Among The Homeless	63
10	I am a Minister.....	69
11	I am the Modern Leper.....	75
12	The Sniffers, Huffers and Cutters.....	82
13	The Ex-Convict	89
14	I am Obese	95
15	I Ask Questions	99
16	I am an Unwed Mother	105
17	I am a Minority Christian.....	110
18	No One Seemed to Care and I Asked, “Why?”	113
19	I am Hearing Impaired	118
20	Must Seekers Be Treated Like Strangers?	120
21	Three Suggested Activities.....	125

CHAPTER 1

SUNDAY MORNING

We have bathed, shaved, made our faces up, fixed our hair and dressed in our best. We are off to church. As soon as we leave our driveway, we start turning off certain private home and personal behavior switches. We start flipping on the church ones. We fuss less along the way. If we fuss, it is in quieter tones. Our arguments usually stop at the parking lot of the church. Too often, we turn off the switches that would reveal our sins, burdens, trials, disappointments) pain, personal problems, and our deepest worries. Our most intimate secrets are seldom shared with anyone. Our mates may not even know what private pain or guilt we bear, let alone our church family. Many of us do not even have mates to share them with. But, we feel compelled out of conscience, or law, to meet at least the minimum requirements of church membership. Due to fear and/or disaffection, we feel no compulsion to open our hearts to others. Nor, do we want others to open their hearts to us.

Too often, we cover our cares with a show of public piety. That very act brings stress and adds to our inner turmoil. Few, if any, of our private burdens ever reach the point of public disclosure in a church, assembly. We are forced to bear them alone.

We follow the liturgy. Unless we are actually overcome by guilt, backbreaking burdens or crushing needs, we reveal little or nothing of ourselves to our brethren in public, or even in private. Most churches have no "Confessional Booth" where needs can be made known. Those with such "booths" have no way in their public liturgy that allows members deepest needs to be made known. Even our sins are confessed in that catchall phrase during public prayer, "Forgive us of our sins and shortcomings" or "Forgive us our debts." We have few or no platforms where our needs can be made known. We have no forum in which we can reveal our burdens or express our fears and our doubts. Most have no twelve-step programs to help us admit our sins, failures, bad habits, and addictions. There is no avenue by which, we can seek the help of others. Some of us find it even difficult to go to God with the private demons hidden in our own closets. In public, we fear there is not one sympathetic ear in the church willing to hear of our kind loneliness and/or our alienation.

Why? We have concluded that no one has our kind of pain. No one has experienced our kind of failure. No one knows the kind of guilt we carry. No one knows the depths of our loneliness or sense of isolation. Unrevealed, our wounded and broken hearts find little or no sympathy from others in church. We often conclude that our kinds of weakness and need are not the common ones that some others "go forward" to confess. Ours cannot be revealed or shared. If we did, we would expose our weak faith and our

other frailties. By revealing them, we would then be most vulnerable to criticism by those who seem to have few, if any of our failures, burdens, and demons; certainly none as overwhelming as ours.

After all, we have been taught that we **“will reap what we sow.”** Therefore, because we have failed and stand guilty, our pain is a just reaping of what we have sown. We have made our beds and we must lie in them, alone. Some of us have concluded that God has given us these **“thorns in the flesh”** as punishment. We are doomed to suffer them alone. We have asked Him to remove them not just three times but many, yet they are still there. Since He hasn't removed them, we conclude He intends for us to bear them through life. As time passes, we tend to ask, “Who would want to hear about our complaints, sins, failures, personal burdens or sense of isolation anyway?

Does anyone really care? Why should they? Who could we trust them with anyway? Why would we want to burden others with our problems? Why would we want to help them bear theirs? Our own cross is already heavy enough. Theirs must be too.

Because we doubt that anyone would understand, really care, or be willing to help us with our needs, we sit stoically on our pew, alone in a crowd of people. We have come together to worship God. We go through the motions. We follow the order of worship. Isn't that enough? We don't need to take home anyone else's baggage. Certainly no one wants to take on ours. Since no one knows, how could anyone care? But, if others don't know, why would they care?

Even though there are blood-bought brothers and sisters sitting on the pew next to us, we are afraid to ask them to hear us or help us. They are in reality, strangers to us and we are strangers to them. They are not intimate spiritual family members. They also bathed, shaved and dressed up this morning. They made up their faces, fixed their hair, and chose to look their best at church. They also came to church with their burdens, sins, cares and disappointments, some equal to, or maybe even greater than ours. But, due to the lack of Christian intimacy, they also remain strangers on the pew. They (we) also ask, “Does anyone want to know us? Does anyone really care?” No one answers these questions. The church provides few, if any, venues where we can ask our questions and get answers. Few churches are large enough to provide Christian counselors from whom we can seek answers and get comfort.

If we followed the cars out of our parking lots to the apartment houses, the sub-divisions and housing tracts of our cities and took a serious look through the blinds, a completely different picture might well emerge from the one we see on the pew. There the hair is let down. There the real people appear. There, there is less need for show, for putting up a front, or for hypocrisy. There, people's lives are hidden from prying eyes. There, real life struggles are evident.

Behind those blinds some would be living the “good life.” Some no doubt would have

high incomes, excellent health, job security, retirement plans, well-adjusted children and shared love. The storms of life may have not yet hit them. Their big decisions would seem small and easy to many of us. The following decisions might be theirs to make. Should our children join a baseball or a soccer team? Shall we accept the higher position in the company for more pay with more time demands, or settle for less money and more time to be with our children, watching them grow and play? Other's biggest stress could come from making a decision on whether to buy a bigger house or send the children to a private school. Some might wrestle with decisions on whether to vacation in Hawaii or Europe.

These might go to church for years and be led to believe that everyone on the pew at church is in similar circumstances. They might even believe that everyone lived lives that are virtually care free, secure, healthy, and with little stress or heartache. Their being accepted and included might lead them to believe that everyone else is as well.

The truth, however, is very different. There are many Christians on the pews at every assembly, some dressed in their Sunday best, who are carrying almost unbearable burdens, living with unresolved guilt, or with other human needs that seem too great to share with others. Some, often due to circumstances beyond their control, do not even have a Sunday best. They can barely get up the courage, or muster the will, to get out of bed and dress for work or church. Due to the depth and weight of their needs, intentionally hidden, they remain strangers to most other members of the church. Their reluctance to be exposed: however, doesn't relieve the church of the responsibility to find ways to break down the walls of isolation and alienation that force these brothers and sisters to remain strangers. **“You were at that time separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were afar off are made nigh in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, ...”** (Eph. 2:12-14b ASV) If the blood of Christ brought Jew and Gentile together, should it not bring together all of the redeemed as one? Redemption should not only bring God's people closer to Him, but it should bring them closer to each other.

The church must change its rigid liturgical concept of the clergy, in most cases male dominated clergy, presiding, leading, instructing, and directing worship, to ones which include shared needs, contributions and experiences by any and all members of the body. The church must also find ways to break down the barriers that stifle, even discourage genuine sharing with others in the pew. The church cannot afford to allow barriers to stand between those who feel they are on the “outside” away from those who are on the “inside.” These “outsiders” must be strangers no longer. But, the alienation must not end with the inclusion of greater openness in our assemblies and an altered liturgy. This inclusion must extend away from our sanctuaries and reach into our homes. The practice of genuine hospitality is a lost practice in many churches. Hospitality must be greater

than sharing a cup of coffee between Sunday school and the general assembly, or “How about meeting us down at Dennys for lunch.” It must include breaking bread across the tables in our homes where the hands learn about the feet and where the eyes and the ears learn of the bunions on the feet. Such fellowship can be facilitated by including every member in smaller “off-site” fellowship groups and home study groups. The church must create ways and find avenues where we can **“confess our faults one to another and pray for one another.”** We must provide forums for sharing our cares so that we are able to truly be in positions to **“Bear each other’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”** Only then, will these strangers have opportunities, and feel free, to voice their concerns and share their burdens with those who are in a position, and have the capacity, to help them. Only then, will brotherly love be recognized and expressed in word and in deed. Only then, will every member of the body know that they really are important and needed parts of the body of Christ. **“Now the body is not made up of one part but many The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you.’ And the head cannot say to the feet ‘I don’t need you.’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”** (1 Cor. 12 NIV)

All those hurting strangers in the pew need others in their lives. Many suffer alone in quiet desperation. The “invitation song” is usually the only opportunity for the hurting to express their needs and it usually brings forward only those who are over burdened with guilt, or those who wish to begin the Christian life.

Those who attend AA meetings find an intimacy and the strength from others to overcome their addictions which most churches do not even begin to offer their members. There are no strangers in AA meetings. The “confessional” in the Catholic Churches, although clergy centered, at least offer Catholics opportunities to clear their consciences by confessing their faults with an assurance that someone hears them and who is able to understand and to assure them of forgiveness.

The strangers in most churches continue to ask, “Does anyone really know me?” “Does anyone really care?” “Does anyone even want to know me and be genuinely concerned about the loads I carry, the guilt I feel, my loneliness, or the uncertainties I face?”

Do those who seem so secure in the church really know, or want to know, the strangers in pew? The strangers certainly do not know them, nor do they even know each other. Is the church willing and ready to show the same concern and love Christ extended to the lepers, the blind, the lame, the hungry, the adulterers, and the strangers? The demon possessed? Should we not have the same concerns, the same compassion, and the same

love for others that Christ has for us? Dare we not find ways to learn of those who are hurting and those who are **“burdened and heavy laden?”** We must, and we will if we are truly His disciples. As disciples of Christ, we must not merely observe the hurting strangers in the pew and **“walk by on the other side.”**

Let us take a stroll down the aisles and among the pews at church to discover and get acquainted with some of the strangers in our midst. Saying “Hello” and “How are you” is not enough. Knowing their names is not enough. We must have some shared intimacies. Only then we will be in better positions to encourage and assist them. We will be able to show them true brotherhood, and give them comfort and counsel. We will be ready to help them **“bear their burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”** The church will then become, as Jesus wants it to become, a place of inclusion, mutual support, healing, nurturing, compassion, encouragement, forgiveness, understanding, sharing and comfort. And, it will be indeed, **“a place of refuge.”**

The church is often confused about its purpose and its identity. It easily becomes an organization that is more concerned with the dotting of a doctrinal “i” than with feeding the hungry. It may be more concerned with crossing an organizational “t” than visiting the sick and imprisoned. Yet, according to Jesus, the judgment will not be based upon right organization and right ceremonies, but upon being a true refuge for sinners, the broken hearted, the over burdened, the alienated, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the jailed, the sick, and the stranger. Those who refuse to recognize the needs of others and who refuse to respond to them, will hear the Savior say, **“Depart from me, you who are cursed into everlasting fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you fed me not; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you took me not in; I was naked and you clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and you visited me not.”** (Matthew 25:41-43) Even though the church is made up of imperfect and fallible people it can become a compassionate refuge for all people with unclean hands and broken hearts. Only when every member is acknowledged as an important part of the body will we be reaching the ideal that Christ has for his church.

When we love others as Christ loves us, we will shower love, grace and kindness upon all those in the pew. We will divest ourselves of the spirit of separation and isolation. Every part of the body will be working with every other part to bring about healing, harmony and hope. We will **“receive others just as Christ has received us,”** broken, sinful, afraid, warts and all. We will offer understanding, reconciliation and acceptance. **Most importantly, our strangers will no longer be strangers. They will be family and accepted as equal members in the family of God!**

Let us now get acquainted with some of the strangers that we might greet every Lord’s Day, but may not really know at all. Then let us begin to **“take them in,”** for the strangers we **“take in”** may be those **“angels”** that we are **“unaware”** of.

“All of you live in harmony with one another. Be sympathetic, love as brothers. Be compassionate and humble.” (1 Peter 3:8)

CHAPTER 2

I AM DIVORCED: ONE WOMAN'S STORY

I am a divorced woman. Since childhood I have sat in Bible classes where the sanctity and permanence of marriage has been taught and stressed. I have listened to dozens of sermons that emphasized the importance of God's plan, that marriage was "until death do us part." The statistics on divorce and remarriage and their incumbent problems of finances, damaged children, and other fruit that brings about other forms of pain, have been made abundantly clear in my church. The fact that "**God hates divorce**" has always been emphasized. The doctrinal discussions on who is at fault and who is free to remarry have reared their heads with regularity in the Bible classes and in sermons. I have heard them all I have studied them all. Most of the time man's understanding of law has been emphasized over grace, and traditional doctrinal interpretations have been too often emphasized over mercy. However, I'm aware that James wrote, "**Mercy triumphs over judgment.**" (James 2:13 NIV) I also understand that God said, "**I will have mercy not sacrifice.**" (Matthew 12:7 KJV)

As a teenager my dream was to find the right man, fall deeply in love, have a beautiful wedding, give birth to a number of healthy children and to live happily ever after. I found a man, fell deeply in love, had a beautiful wedding, gave birth to three beautiful children, but I haven't lived happily ever after. My marriage did not work out that way. In fact, when I finally admitted that my marriage had really failed, I sought and obtained a divorce. And for many years after I was granted that decree, I have carried an imagined scarlet D on my forehead for "Divorced." It has been reduced in size and brightness with time, but I am reminded that I am a divorced person, all too often, by teachers, preachers, and even by my friends who make well meaning, but pain giving remarks about marriage and divorce.

Admitting that my marriage was over was the most devastating experience of my life. Filing for divorce and going through with it seemed like going through hell itself. I questioned my sanity, my self-worth, and my desirability. I struggled daily on how I would manage my household, care and provide for three children, and have any free time for myself. Some of my married friends seemed to abandon me. Many of my brethren seemed to judge me. Nearly every time the subject of marriage came up at church, or in private conversation, positions were taken by some that seemed to judge, even condemn me.

I feared that God might damn me for whatever course of action I took in regard to remarriage. If I remarried, He would, at the worst, condemn me for my actions, and at the best, He would frown on any move I even made to find a new mate. I was equally fearful

that if I found someone that I would want to become serious about, he would not, or could not, be serious about loving and marrying me.

In my heart of hearts, I knew that I would be considered damaged goods and that in some churches I would find it hard to enjoy full acceptance and full fellowship. My home congregation had a rule that no divorced person could teach a class. I knew before my divorce that some of my friends in that congregation would understand why my husband of nearly ten years and I had separated, but many, however, would not understand, nor accept, my seeking a divorce. Others would not even want to understand. Some were so bold as to argue in Bible classes that it was impossible to determine who was at fault in a separation and divorce, and that both might be equally guilty. Their question was, “Who really drove who away?” Some teachers even argued that a wife was to be in total submission to her husband, just as she was to the Lord. In judgmental tones, it was made clear that a true Christian woman could make marriage work if she would just do what the Bible taught.

In spite of my doubts and guilt, and the conflicting of counsel of those I trusted, I filed for a divorce. The divorce was granted and I had to get on with my life. I sought the divorce for two reasons. First, I recognized that the marriage was completely over, so why not end it legally? There were property considerations that had to be settled. Secondly, I needed a court mandate for alimony and child support.

There was no actual red D on my forehead, but there was a big red D on the ring finger of my left hand. I removed my wedding band as soon as I left the courthouse. That D was a white ring on the skin of my ring finger that reminded me for weeks that I was divorced. When I went to the store, to the park, or to church with three small children, the absence of that ring told the world that I was either a divorced person, or maybe worse in some people’s eyes. I might be perceived to be the mother of three illegitimate children. Either way, the absence of a wedding ring was in itself a burden.

The first year of separation from my husband, I lay awake until the wee hours of the morning wondering why this was happening and if it could be fixed. I hugged a pillow during those long night hours of loneliness and often changed it for one not wet with my tears. The questions on why this happened to me flooded my mind continually. “If I had only tried harder?” “If I had been a better wife, lover, or housekeeper?” “If I had been more attentive to his needs?” “If we hadn’t had these children?” “If I were a better Christian?” “If I lost some weight?” “If I had been a better cook?” “Neater?” “Warmer?”

In the process of permanently separating, I lost all confidence in men. Worse yet, I lost all confidence in myself. There would be no rebound for me. The very idea of any kind of intimacy was quickly dismissed. I could not trust my own judgment. When my guilt was added to my doubts, I could hardly bear it. I wondered if this was to be my lot for the rest of my life. “Would the pain ever go away?” “Would my loneliness and self-doubt

ever end?” Feelings of personal failure almost overwhelmed me. Whatever his reasons for leaving, I had failed: not just that I had somehow failed my husband, but that I had also failed my family and my children. Maybe I had failed God and the church. This was the punishment for my failures.

I was nineteen years of age when I met my future husband. I was just out of junior college and was holding down a secretary’s job. I met him at church. He was twenty-two and had landed his job as an accountant with a local construction firm. Before long he asked me out to a movie and I accepted. We held hands on the date and were mutually attracted. Before we knew it, we were sitting side by side on the same pew at every service of the church. We attended revivals at other congregations and first Sunday monthly singings. We went to see a professional baseball game occasionally. His father was an elder in his hometown church and he seemed to come from “good stock,” as my dad viewed him.

After one year of courtship, he proposed and I accepted. We were married the June following my twenty-first birthday. We were not youngsters jumping into something we were not ready for. We had courted for two years and knew each other and each other’s families quite well. We were ready for marriage.

After a pleasant honeymoon, we settled down for life. Six months after our wedding I became pregnant with our first child. At the sixth month of my pregnancy, I resigned from my job and we would totally depend upon his income. His paycheck covered our bills. The birth of our first baby, a girl, brought us much happiness. Two years later, I gave birth to a boy. A year later we had our second boy. With three babies under four years of age, my hands were more than full all of the time.

My husband was happy that I accepted the responsibility of caring for the babies during the day, but was even happier that I would take care of changing diapers and feeding them during the night. Our roles, established with the birth of our daughter, became clearly defined and permanent with three babies. He was the provider and I was the caretaker of the house and the children, not to mention that I was also the home’s only “cook and bottle washer.” He mowed the lawns and watered the flower beds. He and his associates went to ball games with increased regularity while I stayed home with the children.

I was so much in love with my husband and my precious children that I never questioned our roles. In spite of the fatigue that I was experiencing, I did not complain. He, however, complained when he did not have freshly ironed shirts to wear to work every day and refused to wear the same one twice. When I finally reached the point that I could not physically or mentally keep up the duties I had accepted because I thought I was expected to, I asked for his help. “Please take care of the babies a night or two on the weekends and let me catch up on my sleep.” I asked. I pleaded. I later begged. When Friday night came and the babies were tucked in bed, so were we. When the first baby cried for attention, I was awakened. I waited. He did not move. The wailing grew

and was often joined by a second child. I nudged my husband. He did not move. The crying grew louder. I decided that I had no choice but to respond to their needs. I had the same response from my husband on Saturday night. On Sunday I decided to humiliate myself and beg for his help. My humiliation did not change the children's daddy. He would sleep and I would take care of the children. "That is the way God had intended it. Surely it was right there in the Bible somewhere." Had I not read about wives being in subjection to their husbands? And, men being the heads of women?

Our lives started to move in separate directions. He was interested in career, baseball and lawns. He was also preparing for a CPA exam. I would have to care for all other domestic chores inside the house. There would be no more discussion. We had little to no intimacy.

I offered to go with him for counseling with our minister, but he refused declaring that he needed no help. So, I went alone while the church secretary watched the children. The advice I received from the minister was almost useless. It, for the most part, simply added to the guilt I already carried. "Try to be a better and more submissive wife." "Find times and ways to be more romantic." "Get a baby sitter and go out on the town occasionally." "Pray and let God take care of it." In my final counseling session he ordered, "Get over it!" Get over it? These simplistic solutions were both impractical and unreal. I was doing my best at all these things already.

I had no answers, little energy, and three children under five. I had allowed my husband to handle the bank account, pay the bills, and take care of our business. My name was not even on the checking account. I was rationed out the cash that I needed and he would determine what the needs were. He paid some attention to the children, but I was almost their only caregiver. He paid less and less attention to me. Our communication dried up. We still went to church regularly, but it was more show than religion. We became strangers to each other at home and on the pew. At the same time we were becoming strangers to everyone else on the pews.

Two days after our daughter's fifth birthday, he came home from work one evening and went to our bedroom and started packing a suitcase. He then went to the garage and boxed up an assortment of things he occasionally used. The children were vying for his attention and to avoid them he turned on the TV and put a cartoon in the VCR. He then proceeded to put the box of garage stuff in his car along beside his suitcase, shirts and suits. I watched in dismay when he removed our second TV from our bedroom. As he proceeded to put it into the car, I asked him what was happening. He politely informed me that he was leaving me. He said that he did not love me and that he had never loved me. He did assure me that he would send a monthly check to cover our expenses. Was this traumatic for me? I was in shock. His words cut at my heart like a knife. The devastation in my heart, felt for weeks and months like that of a bombed out city. It was devoid of life.

I asked, "What about the children?" He responded, "I'll be dropping by to see them."

Without a kiss, a hug, or an explanation, he got into his car and drove away. I was crushed. I was devastated. The questions flowed. "Was there another woman?" "Was he a closet homosexual?" "Was it my fault?" "Was he weird in some other way that I had totally overlooked?" "Why? Why? Why?" I screamed. I went to my bedroom and wept. My tears would not stop flowing. I buried my sobs in thick towels. I wore sunglasses to hide the redness of my eyes.

"Who could I call?" "Who should I not call?" I couldn't call my parents. I couldn't call his. I couldn't call the minister and blurt the story out to him. I didn't feel like calling my friends whose marriages were solid and who assumed that mine was too. So I kept quiet. The fewer who knew, the better it would be. "He'll be back by tomorrow night." "This is a dream." "It really isn't happening." I waited a day, two days, three days. He did not call and he did not return.

I did have a sister whose life and marriage were as solid as a rock. She would be understanding and sympathetic. But, she lived a thousand miles away. It was going to be hard to lean on her shoulder at such a distance. But, it would be a start.

I called and she responded with shock and dismay, but she was totally supportive. I could cry on her shoulder and not be judged, rejected, or condemned. I would lean on her and her family for years to come. She was there for me then and always would be.

After that first call, other questions began to surface. "What will the neighbors think?" "What will aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and mere acquaintances think?" After all, our families don't get divorces, nor do we believe in divorce. "What about the church?" "Will the members understand and be supportive, or will they be judgmental?" "Can I face the couples in the young married class?" "If I tell the preacher or the elders, will they keep our conversations in confidence?" After a few Sundays, they'll all know. At least they'll be suspicious."

"How could he do this to me?" "To us?" "How have I failed?" "It is his fault!" "It is my fault!" "We shouldn't have had the children." "It is their fault." "It's the churches' fault!" "The whole world is at fault!" "There ought to be a law!" "It's God's fault. He's let me down."

I struggled with guilt, loneliness, fatigue, alienation, inadequacies, and judgment. I wrestled with my conscience and with rejection. Insecurity and uncertainty engulfed me. Anger mixed with rage became my constant companion.

"If my husband took such little interest in the care of my children while he lived under the same roof with them, what would he be like being separated from them?" "If he wouldn't get up at night to change their diapers and warm a bottle to feed them, how much would

he be in their lives from now on?” “Would he send a regular check?” “Would it be enough to pay the bills?” “Who would make repairs on the house, mow the lawn, tend the flower beds, water?” “Would these now become additional jobs for me?”

Other questions ran through my mind. “Would I have to go back to work?” “Could we save enough money to have a vacation?” “Would my old car hold up?” “Did it need new tires?” “If the checks did not arrive on time, would I miss the house payments and face foreclosure and become a homeless mother of three?”

I tried to pray but my tongue was speechless. God probably wouldn't listen to a failure like me anyway. When I could finally pray, I didn't pray. I screamed at God. “Where were you?” “Where are you?” “I have served you all my life and you reward me with this?”

When the news finally leaked out, the church didn't turn against me, even though there were some I had considered close friends who kept their distance. Some still spoke but could not sympathize or empathize. There was one elder and his wife who not only understood my pain but who shared it. Their visits, phone calls, and embraces of acceptance were the only things that kept my head above water. Another divorcee in the congregation, who had worked through her pain and alienation, became my closest friend. She truly understood. She was no stranger to my kind of pain and she would be there as a true friend.

Two years after the divorce I decided I needed a change. I called my sister and she arranged a visit and a number of job interviews. Our support check no longer adequately covered all our expenses. One paycheck didn't cover the expenses of two households. I traveled half way across the country and found that housing was only one half as expensive as it was where we lived. I took the trip during my former husband's vacation while he took care of the children full time for two weeks.

I landed a fine job and located an affordable house. In two weeks, my house was on the market and it sold quickly. Before I knew it, we were loading a moving van. I wanted to shout, “Tomorrow I'll be free of the pain endured here and this will be a new beginning.” “What freedom I will enjoy! Everything will be new!” “The memories here will be erased!” “Yes! Yes! Everything will be new!”

It was a new beginning. I loved my job. The house we rented was nicer than the one we had just sold. My children started their new school year and flourished. Having such a supportive sister nearby was a source of strength. Her companionship was an indescribable joy.

My former husband made the trip to our new home once a year for a visit. He stayed a week and became reacquainted with his children each year. They loved him but didn't seem to miss him because they didn't really know him. He was faithful in sending

support checks until the children were eighteen years of age. He figured at that age, they should be able to support themselves. They also spent a week with him in his home each summer. They have never been close to their father and probably never will be. My sister's husband became a surrogate dad for them.

We visited a number of churches. Sadly, some members had the same hang-ups that our home church had. Some seemed suspicious, even judgmental. One congregation's preacher let me know on his visit that they did not allow divorced people to teach classes there either. Some in the church we finally joined seemed to keep divorced people at arm's length, or it appeared so to me. I didn't want to get paranoid, but I felt like a few judgmental eyes looked down on me in spite of my attempts to fit in and be a part. The same insensitivity to divorced people's pain existed and came through in classes and sermons. It was the same attitude I had experienced from the beginning when the subject of marriage or divorce came up in sermons and Bible classes before my move.

My children grew and I was overburdened with work, home and my children's needs. There was never enough time. There was never enough energy. There were little league games, soccer matches, piano recitals, school events, youth meetings, homework, and much more. Would I ever get through all of them alone? Would I ever get any relief? Yes, I got through it, but it was difficult. I finally got some relief. My children grew up, married and moved out. By then, more than half of my life was over and I was alone.

Perhaps the saddest part of our separation and divorce was the fact that there was never a father on the sidelines, or in the audience, encouraging and cheering our children on. They had to go to their events without him while most of their teammates and classmates had dads and moms present to support them.

Now my children are on their own. I am a grandmother. I have never remarried. I'm not sure that I would, even if the right man should come into my life. I have regained my self-respect, am confident, and feel competent to handle life's challenges. I choose not to be put into a situation where these would ever be threatened again.

I am still a stranger to many at my church. However, its singles ministry has allowed me to become acquainted with many Christian men and women who have gone through or are going through separations and divorces not too dissimilar to my own experiences. I'm happy to give them advice, support and acceptance. I want them to know that they are included and valued no matter what road they have traveled or how they arrived at their "single" destination. I will ever be grateful to that elder and his wife who **"took me in"** when I was a stranger to divorce and its crippling toll on my happiness, self-confidence, faith and hope. I will ever be grateful for that handful of Christian friends who **"took me in"** and helped me keep my head above water when I was drowning in self-doubt and despair.

After twenty-five years I still do not know why my marriage broke up. I will never know

why my husband never loved me. But, I know I am worthy of love. I know that I am able to love and accept love. Nothing could be better because, **“The greatest of these is love.”** And, **“love never fails.”**

I make it my business to seek out strangers on the pews in my church. I offer them love, hospitality, and friendship. I do not want anyone to face any of life’s great struggles alone. I can’t allow one person to think that no one cares.

I pray that Christ will not hold the failure of those who refused to **“took me in”** against them in the judgment, even though He warns us that He will say to such, **“Depart from me. I never knew you.”**

“Beloved, thou doest a faithful work in whatever thou doest toward them that are brethren and strangers withal ... We ought to welcome such, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.” (3 John 5 & 8 ASV) Approximately fifty percent of first American marriages will end in divorce. The fruit of divorce is too often: alienation, loneliness, isolation, disturbed or insecure children, and poverty.

The world would be so much better off if all couples worked to save their marriages and lived by their pledge, “Until death do us part.”

The next time you meet a divorced person at church, give them a hug and let them know that their plight is not strange to you. Invite them to dinner and help them to feel whole. **“Judge them not, lest you be judged.”**

CHAPTER 3

I AM A DIVORCED MAN: A DIVORCED MAN SPEAKS

I am a graduate of a Christian college. I have a graduate degree from a state university in school administration. I started my educational career as a secondary teacher in a private Christian school. There was a kind of camaraderie on that campus that allowed teachers and students to mix freely and to develop close friendships. One of our boarding students, a senior girl, sought me out for friendship and counsel. She was already free from an emotional dependence upon her parents. She seemed mature beyond her age and by graduation time we were a bit more than teacher and student. School rules did not allow faculty members to date students. So, we did not officially date, but we started meeting each other off campus for burgers and Cokes. We carried on a very limited romance during the spring semester. She did not immediately go on to college upon graduation. Rather, she took a job at a local department store.

During that first year after graduation our courtship flourished and was out in the open. We were seen together everywhere. Members of the church we attended accepted and condoned our courtship. The following June we were married. We couldn't have been happier. We had an eight year age difference but that didn't matter anymore. We were in love.

During our first year of marriage we decided that college was must for her. She became a full time college student and a part time employee at the department store. She made excellent grades and majored in elementary education. She finished college and had her teaching credential in five years. She was hired by a school district in easy driving distance of our home. With two full incomes we quickly paid off all debts and purchased our first home. Our lives were carefree. We were happy and very much in love. We were regular in our church attendance and believed we were above the average in our involvement in the activities of the church.

I changed jobs from the low paying and uncertain salary at the Christian school to a higher paying teaching job at a public school. My experience and qualifications opened an opportunity to get an administrative job. I took the job.

We decided to start a family and she gave up her job during her fifth month of pregnancy. We rejoiced over the birth of a beautiful baby boy four months later. One year later, almost to the day our second son was born. As the boys were growing up, my wife was growing restless. She wasn't satisfied with home and children. She had gone to college to prepare to teach and she missed teaching almost as much as we missed the second

income. She needed to get out and have some adult experiences. One evening she asked, "What if I took some graduate courses during the summer?" She followed that with, "You could take care of the boys while you are off each summer and I could prepare for a better job at a higher salary with a graduate degree." How could I argue with that? During the school year, my school day would not end when theirs did, but she would always be available to deliver them to school or pick them up each day. The plan was not unreasonable and her paycheck would boost our standard of living considerably.

She entered graduate school that summer at State University 110 miles away. Her classes were in short four week sessions. She would be away Monday through Friday and be home on the weekends. She enrolled in two summer sessions with a one week break in between. I was a full time dad during this time and enjoyed that role. I kept house and played with the boys hours on end. We took trips to the zoo, to parks, mountains, to the beach, and to visit family. I read them lots of children's books and had the time to read a few books for my own pleasure.

That summer ended and we each resumed our regular roles during the next school year. I could hardly wait for the school year to end and spend full time with our boys again during the summer. I would miss my wife, but that sacrifice would ultimately mean more security for our family. She could hardly wait until the school year was over when she could go back to school again to finish her second summer of graduate school. We planned to repeat the same schedule for three summers.

During the third summer she was finishing her final class work and doing research on her Master's Thesis. She was busy completing her degree and came home only on every other weekend for the entire summer. She had lived in the dorm the first two summers, but on the final one she rented a small, furnished apartment. It would give her more room for books and research materials. And, it would also allow her to escape the noise of the dormitory.

By now the boys were playing little league baseball and soccer. My summer was filled with practices and game schedules. The boys were great company but I longed for more adult companionship and especially the companionship of my wife. We talked on the phone every other night but that did not satisfy my, or the boys, hunger and need for her companionship.

She stated that that the situation did not satisfy her either. So, I thought I'd slip down alone one weekend and pay her a surprise visit. I left the boys with my mother and headed south on Friday afternoon. As I imagined it, I would take her out for a nice dinner at a fine restaurant and we would be together for a pleasant weekend. I also planned to read whatever part of the thesis she had finished and make helpful suggestions.

I arrived at her apartment about 5:00 p.m. and she wasn't back from the campus yet. I drove to the campus and checked out a carrel assigned to her in the library, but she was

not there. She had books and papers there that were neatly ordered and arranged. I checked through four or five nearby eateries and still did not locate her. I went back to her apartment and saw that her car was in the parking lot. I sprinted to her door and knocked with great excitement and anticipation swelling in my breast. No one answered. I knocked again. Still no one answered. Was she visiting some friend or friends she met in the apartment complex? I went next door to inquire. A lady answered and informed me that my wife was at home because she had seen her and Dr. Johnson arrive less than twenty minutes ago. “Doctor Johnson?” She had mentioned Dr. Johnson before. He was her favorite professor.

Red flags waved! My heart raced! Perspiration started to flow! I panicked!

The lady asked, “And, who are you?”

“Just an acquaintance,” I replied.

I went to my car and drove to a public phone and rang her number. There was no answer. I rang again in ten minutes and still there was no answer.

Suddenly, there was thrust upon me the possibility that I was on the brink of the most devastating moment of my life. I cannot describe the horror of those moments. The rising hurt and rage could not be gauged. The uncertainties of the future dropped on my shoulders like a ton of bricks. I gagged and nothing came up. My clothes became soaked with perspiration. The anger I began feeling cannot be uttered in human language. This was the ultimate betrayal. Could the world, as I had known it and believed in, be coming to an end?

I had suspected nothing! How could I have been so blind or naive? Weren't we a loving family? Didn't we meet each other's needs? Yes, these separations were lonely, especially this summer. Yes, I missed her terribly. Yes, I had the boys and cadre of friends in the church and on the ball fields that gave me moral and social support. Yes, she was lonely this summer. She had no friends there with the exception of those she studied with or was taught by. Taught by? Would a professor seduce his student?

I nearly wrecked my car on the way back to her apartment complex. I went to the door and knocked again and still there was no answer. I checked the cars in the visitor's parking section and found one with a “University Faculty Member” sticker on it. I knew, I knew, I knew! I knew that car was owned by the popular Dr. Johnson, professor in Department of Education, without even checking with the campus police.

I returned to my car and parked it in a vacant space from which I could watch the apartment. Anger, guilt, frustration, doubts, loneliness, and a possible divorce frightened me. No, a probable divorce loomed big in my mind. Should I confront Dr. Johnson and have an altercation right there in the parking lot for everyone to see and hear? Should I just quietly leave, go home, and go into a state of shock and denial? How could I explain

these circumstances to my boys, my family, my friends and colleagues? What will be the reaction at church? Will my family blame me? Will they blame her? Will I blame myself? A hundred questions like these raced through my mind for the next hour. I wanted to shed tears, but none flowed. But, my innermost soul screamed out in dreadful silent pain.

Her apartment door eventually opened and the two of them walked out arm in arm. She escorted him to his car and they shared a parting kiss less than fifty feet from my car. She waved good-bye to him and returned to the apartment. I sat for another hour trying to sort out my feelings and trying to find the best method of approaching this, the most painful situation of my life. I decided to return home and there find a way to deal with it over the weekend. The confrontation would wait until I was in a better emotional state.

Should I call her? Will she call me? Can I act as if I know nothing if she calls? I was paralyzed with disappointment, anger and fear. I was angry over her betrayal, but the fear for the future of my family was even greater. Did she love him? Was it just a temporary infatuation? Was it just a fling? Was it a first time affair? If she asked for forgiveness, could I forgive her? Would anything ever be the same! Could we ever be reconciled? Could we resolve it and keep it to ourselves so that our families and the church would never know?

I did not call. She did not call. I went to church on Sunday, but I could not tell you the name of one person with whom I shook hands. I have no memory of the sermon or of a single announcement. I was in a stupor. My parents brought the boys to church and asked why I was home early. I gave some excuse and took the boys home after services.

Suddenly, there was thrust upon me the possibility of rearing my boys alone. But, they were her boys too. Their mother might very well pick Dr. Johnson over their dad. There would probably be a divorce, court ordered support, and a custody battle. Would I dare force the issue of custody? Would they be better off with her? What if she gained custody and moved away anyway? What if I gained custody and was offered a better job in some other city or state? Could I take our children away from their mother? Who would keep the house? Could I expose her before the world? Should I? Should I go back with a video camera and record what I would no doubt witness again? I would need evidence to win the battle in court. Should I just pack her clothes and notify her that I was kicking her out of the house for just cause?

As the boys went to sleep that Sunday night, I suffered shortness of breath. My chest ached. I wondered if I was having a stroke or a mild heart attack.

I don't remember much that happened on that Sunday. She called late that evening. I was watching television but I have no idea what was on. I took the steps to the kitchen to use the phone there but I could hardly make my feet move. She greeted me with her usual greeting and followed it with banter about the weather, asking who was at church and

about my parents. Her progress on the thesis was not mentioned, nor was anything said about the end of her research work. After five minutes of mostly nothing in real communication she paused and asked if anything was wrong. “Was anything wrong?” I muttered under my breath.

Of course there was something wrong! The pause on my part in answering seemed like an eternity. She repeated her question and I answered, “I went down to be with you this weekend, but I returned late Friday night, rather Sunday night. I found that you were occupied with what appeared to be extra-curricular school work.”

There followed a long period of silence. The first words out of her mouth made me the bad guy. “So you were spying on me?” she charged. “No, I was not spying on you. I came down to be with you. I went down to surprise you with a weekend visit so that we could be alone. I believed that you would enjoy and appreciate it too.” I responded. “Why? Why? Why?” I asked. There was no response. She hung up after a long period of silence.

Most of us can justify our actions through rationalization. She would later justify hers to her own satisfaction, but not to mine. She came home the next weekend and moved to the spare bedroom. We barely communicated. In six weeks we realized that the gulf created between us by her guilt and my hurt wasn’t going to be bridged. She would not seek nor ask for forgiveness. I could not forgive without her repenting of the pain she had heaped, and was heaping, upon our family. Oh, I wanted to forgive and start over, but found that my forgiveness alone would not mend our marriage. Our boys knew that our home life had changed, but didn’t know why. We continued going to church once a week, but were no longer involved in its programs. I had no idea whether she was keeping in touch with Dr. Johnson. I feared that she was still seeing him, or at the least talking to him on the phone. We went to her graduation at the end of the fall semester. She told me afterwards that she wanted out of the marriage. Seeing that a full reconciliation was hopeless, I wanted out too. I sued for divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. She counter sued and asked for the house and custody of the boys. I did not have the heart to drag her behavior through the court system. We were given joint custody, but her residence was to be their residence. They were to live with me during the summers and spend every other weekend with me during the winters. I granted her my interest in our home. I wanted out. Gradually, the boys were with me almost every other weekend but were with her most of the time during the school week.

The boys informed me that a Mr. Johnson who now taught at a local university was a regular weekend visitor to their home when they were with me. The following summer he and my first love were married. He had divorced his wife and changed jobs. He now had much more to do with my sons than I did. That brought on a high level of resentment on my part. They went to church only on the weekends that I had them. She gave up going to church altogether.

I had become depressed, discouraged, and lonely. I needed to escape the constant feeling of being rejected by the bride I had loved and adored. I had to face the man who had succeeded me as her new husband nearly every time I picked up my boys. The conditions were heart wrenching and destructive. I hung onto my faith and did not give up on the church. I still had a few intimate and understanding friends there.

But, things at church had changed, too. I was still a member and the congregation seemed to be happy to have a school principal in its membership. The elders of the church decided that I could not be a teacher of a Bible class or a substitute teacher of one. It was a church policy. The elders feared that by permitting me to do so, a message would be sent to the youth of the congregation that the church approved of divorce. Moreover, the same message would go out to every married couple as well, especially the young ones. I could attend, bring my neighbors, and contribute ten percent or more of my salary, but I couldn't have any public part in the worship or teaching program of the church. I became a stranger among the people that I had worshipped and worked with for over a decade. There were few invitations into any of the member's homes. There was no recognition or acknowledgment that I even existed on the part of some church members. Their rejection was heart rending.

I was not just alone; I was so lonely. I became isolated. Outside my own family, I found few welcome mats out by fellow Christians. Other administrators, teachers and staff at school were much more comforting and supportive than many church members were. They included me in a variety of activities associated with the school and parties in their homes. It seemed that even my non-believing neighbors showed greater sympathy and understanding than some of my brethren at church did. "Maybe I should just give up on the church altogether," I pondered. But I couldn't do that. I was still a believer and went to my Bible daily for comfort, strength, and direction. I prayed to the God I believed in. Most of the time, He didn't seem to hear or answer my prayers. Was He also ashamed of me because of my failed marriage and divorce? I shed many tears, but they did not wash my sadness away.

I needed an escape. I could no longer live my life with any degree of happiness in the situation I found myself. I would seek employment in another city or another state. There were openings for persons with my qualifications and I put word out that I was available. Within six weeks, a school board two hundred miles away, in need of a superintendent, called and I agreed to an interview. In three months I was offered the job. It would increase my paycheck by more than twenty-five percent. I accepted the job and moved to a new town and a new position in July. It was difficult to say goodbye to my boys and associates. But, it seemed to be the best solution. The boys could come down for long weekends and for summer vacations. We could keep in touch by phone. It wouldn't be so bad. In fact, I would be starting over, but at a much higher level of responsibility. Everything would be fresh. Would I ever find happiness again? I had not

given up hope.

I started in my new job with enthusiasm and vigor. I was learning my new job and was committed to it. The last weeks of summer passed and the boys went home to their mother. I was so involved in the school and community that my phone calls to my sons became somewhat infrequent. Their calls to me also became more and more infrequent. Even when I did call, Dr. Johnson often answered the phone. I resented going through him to speak to my sons. I tried to be civil but found it hard to do. He was sleeping with my bride, eating meals with my sons and watching them grow. He attended their ball games. The only thing I had on my mind was keeping a school system working, while eating alone and sleeping alone.

My divorce and subsequent decisions made it impossible for me to be there to cheer my boys on at their ball games. I would miss their home runs and stolen bases. I would miss them making the final shot that might win a basketball game. I could not help them with their homework. I could not guide them in making moral and ethical decisions. I would not see them off on their first date. I would miss most of their recitals and their acting in school plays. We would seldom shoot baskets or go fishing together. I could not monitor their conduct in relation to the use of alcohol and drugs. I would miss out on eighty per cent of their lives, all because of my stinking divorce! I hurt and the hurt would not go away. Maybe I should have stuck it out. If I had, surely she would have eventually come to her senses. I was the one who was wrong. I was the guilty party. I began to carry the entire hurt and shame of our divorce.

I placed membership with the local church and attended regularly on Sunday mornings. I worried that I would not be accepted. To escape that possibility, I used my job as an excuse for missing other church services. However, I was accepted and allowed to participate in the public services of the church. The church was smaller than my home church had been. The minister pretty well set its spiritual tone and doctrinal standards. I usually attended the men's monthly business meetings to show my interest and loyalty.

During my first year on the new job I joined the Rotary Club and became acquainted with a member who owned a local Realty firm. She was also divorced and had two teenaged sons. She attended another denomination, but accepted my invitation, to attend church with me on most Sundays. On some occasions we attended her church. I took her out to dinner and to a few movies. By the middle of the next summer we were a "couple" around town. My boys met her and her sons on one of their visits. They accepted one another with reservations. My boys seemed to worry that her boys would take their place in my affections.

The following summer she was baptized and joined my church. I proposed at spring break and she accepted. We immediately slipped away and were married. When we made the announcement at church, upon our return the minister took me aside and informed me that

we must have an immediate meeting. It was arranged for the next evening.

I met him at the church office and he informed me that we would be excluded from the fellowship of the church since our marriage was “unscriptural.” He informed me that the Bible taught that we were living in a state of adultery. Therefore, our marriage could not be blessed by God or the church. We would have to split. He even went farther and informed me that the only way for either of us to be married again, would be that we would have to breakup and return to our first mates. He informed me that he had checked the county records on both of our divorces and neither was based upon “unfaithfulness.” He claimed that this was the only Bible cause for divorce and remarriage and neither of us qualified. I protested, but he insisted that we have our marriage annulled and remain single. Going back to our original mates to have the fellowship of the church was a ridiculous as well as impossible.

I knew that was not going to happen. Both of our mates were remarried and had new families. We did not go back to church the next week. We did get a letter signed by about ten men in the congregation) stating that the church would withdraw its fellowship from us if WE refused to separate as they claimed the Bible taught.

Just when I was putting my life back together with the expectation of having a family again, my brethren in my church “yanked the rug out from under me.” There loomed a mountain ahead of me almost as difficult to climb, as my divorce was. Was I willing to be rejected by my brethren and the church I had been in for a lifetime for my new wife? Would I break the vow I had just made to her, “until death de us part” in order to please a few dictatorial men? Did all the men who signed that letter really feel that way? How could I be wrong when my new marriage was so right?

I called the only man on the list that I had developed a close brotherly relationship with and asked him if he really felt that way. He admitted that he was pressured into signing the letter, but had gone along with the others in order to keep the “unity” of the church. Others believed their actions were taken to keep the church “pure.” Even in the concourse of normal school and community business relationships, my former brethren treated me with coolness, and some, even with a degree of scorn. What about the Scripture that said, “**He that is without sin cast the first stone.**” (John 8:7 KJV)

I could have driven ten miles away to another congregation of the denomination of which I was a member, but the story of my divorce and remarriage would have followed me. As a compromise, we chose a new church of which neither of us had been members. We attend services. But, we do not quietly and quickly leave after the benediction. We are known by most of the members, yet we are still strangers to some. We sit on our pew, worship God and do not go on our way. We now seek out other lonely people and invite them to our home for meals. We make an effort to make every stranger, divorced or otherwise, feel that someone cares about them. We have revealed to no one the pain of rejection and condemnation we suffered at the

hands of those in our previous fellowship. We attend and we mix. Many have asked us into their homes for meals. We are determined that our church relationships will always be different. We are determined to be open and accepting.

Yes, I'm a divorced man. I am also a remarried man. Somehow it may have been my fault that my first marriage broke up, but I did my best. Surely, whatever my faults and failures, God's grace is big enough to cover them. I believe that He is willing to **"take me in"** even when some of my fellow Christians treat me like a stranger. Worse yet, some have been so cocksure about their doctrine as to treat me as an enemy.

I wish I could tell the church of my youth and early manhood the pain and alienation I feel because it failed to **"take me in"** and offer me comfort and understanding during the hours of the greatest disappointment of, and pain in my life. If it knew me, really knew me, I want to believe it would have acted differently. But, it didn't. I pray that Christ will not hold that against it in the judgment, in spite of His warning that He will say **"Depart from me. I never knew you"** for failing to take strangers in.

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another. No man has beheld God at any time: if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us, ..." (1 John 4:11-12 NAS)

"Neither do I condemn you: go your way; and from now on sin no more."

CHAPTER 4

I AM A BATTERED AND ABUSED WIFE

You have seen me, but you really don't know me. At least you know little of my past. In the past I was accustomed to wearing high collared blouses, turtleneck sweaters or full pant suits. Few skirts are even now found in my closet. For a long time my wardrobe has consisted of such. I have missed many appointments because of "illnesses" and I have missed church meetings for the same reason. I have often refused to socialize and my children tend to be reclusive. You see the illness that has kept me away from others, started with an illness that my husband has. My illness fed on his illness. He is an abuser. I was an abused and battered woman. I have hidden the dark bruises under my long clothing. If the bruises appear on my face, I simply stayed indoors and away from the public until I can hide the evidence under make-up. I didn't like hiding my illness or his. They tore the very heart out of my self-confidence and self-respect. But, I could not have personally told you about my past experiences. Even if I had, you probably wouldn't have understood, or believed me, or maybe you wouldn't have even cared. Somehow, I felt shunned almost everywhere, even at church. My alienation was not as much about being shunned by others as it is about my need to shun others. In fact, I feared that you would shun me more if you knew how I lived. Since you don't really know me, I found it easy to pass by you with a forced smile. Even when you asked me how the girls and I were doing, I got the impression that maybe you really didn't want to know.

My subdued smile attempts to cover a bridge in my mouth, made necessary when my husband knocked out two of my teeth. It took six stitches to repair the damage done by that blow to my face. You only saw me at my best, because I put on my best on Sundays.

I did not grow up in any church. I did grow up in very poor neighborhoods and attended Sunday school off and on at various local churches. I did not have nice clothes and those I did have were shared with my year older sister. We moved often because dad could not always keep the rent paid. We lived in our car off and on for days between rentals. My self-esteem was non-existent. At church, however, I was at least recognized, acknowledged, and even seemed appreciated.

In spite of moving often and being poor, I made fair grades. Everyone said I was pretty. Every time I heard that compliment, I enjoyed a boost in my ego. I just didn't hear it enough to believe it, or that I deserved better than I had. It was my lot to be both poor and neglected. I accepted my lot and dreamed of better things and days. I longed for the day when I would find a way to escape my situation.

During my junior year in high school I had my first boy friend and my first date. He was

good looking, at least he was by my standards. Any boy who paid me any real attention met my standards for both looks and character. He asked me out to a movie and didn't even try to kiss me on that first date. We did hold hands while going to the theater and back to his parked car. He was a senior and had a part time job at a fast food restaurant. His parents were divorced and he seemed a bit angry most of the time. I learned that he could be very belligerent when things did not go his way. I learned early that I should do my best to always please him. Since I had had little experience with any boy, I assumed that was the way all boys were. Even if other boys weren't, he was my best chance to get out of my own circumstances.

By my senior year we were a couple. I dated him exclusively. He would not have it any other way. He was then working full time and had no interest in going on to college. I dreamed of college, but every time I mentioned it, he objected. I had no idea how I would pay for college anyway. He convinced me that college was for nerds and rich kids. He subtly let me know that he felt that I was too dumb to go to college. He suggested that we get married as soon as I graduated and that I also get a full time job. We could live well off both of our wages.

When we first began talking about a date for marriage, he had a full time job and I had one part time. He was getting very possessive and had begun dictating how I was to spend my time and my own money. I attributed that to his love for me. In fact, I considered his possessiveness a compliment. The more attention he gave me, under whatever disguise, the more I was convinced he loved me. He called me twice each night from work. He wanted to know about every person I had anything to do with at school or on my job. On weekends, I had to give him a report of the things I did when we were not together. Soon my reports were not just those on whom I was with and where I went, but detailed reports of time and even the contents of conversations.

Since I had no experience with any other boy to compare this relationship with, I continued to assume that it was normal. Normal meant that he could put me down and make me feel worthless. I was a "dumbbell" because I didn't know what he knew and he didn't mind calling me that along with other demeaning names. But, at least I had a regular boy friend. I could count on him to always be around and interested in every little thing I did.

After one date, we were sitting in his car and I did not give him the details of the day as he had expected. He demanded more. I had no more to give. When it became obvious that nothing else was forthcoming about my day, he grabbed my hair with his left hand and pinched my jaws between the fingers and thumb of his right hand. He brought his face right against mine, and in a rage, demanded that I tell him more. I broke down in tears from the pain of the hair pulling and the pinching of my cheeks. He let go. When I got over my crying, he apologized and begged for my forgiveness. I accepted his apology; forgave him and everything was back to normal.

We ran off and got married in June following my graduation. We both had fast food restaurant jobs but our shifts did not match. While he worked, I was expected to be in our apartment and alone. While I worked, he could do just about anything he wanted to since he was the man of the house. What he did was none of my business. He reported to no one. He resented the time I spent with my sister. He resented the time I spent visiting my parents. He phoned often enough to know that I wasn't very far away at any time without his knowledge. By the end of our first year of marriage I was not to even call my parents or my sister without his permission. I could have no personal friends either. He was beginning to totally possess me. I had little control over my life. I was not allowed to make decisions.

He got a better job with a construction company. I got pregnant during our second year of marriage and again during our third year. He didn't have to check up on me much any more. He knew where I was all the time, but he did. I was caring for two babies and nursing one. One afternoon my mother offered to baby sit while my sister and I went to a movie. I almost refused the offer, but my need to get out for a break had become almost overwhelming. We went to the movie and mom took care of the babies.

As destiny would have it, my sister had a flat on her old car and had no spare. By the time we got it fixed and at home, my husband was home from work. He had talked pretty ugly to my mom and let her know that she was no longer welcome in our house due to her "sneaking" ways. He proceeded to cuss my sister out and demanded that she quit calling or visiting. If they wanted to visit me, they were to contact him first. When they left I knew I was in for a long evening.

It was a long evening. He was angry. He was disappointed in me and it was that evening that he started calling me a "dumb bitch!" This became his favorite name for me. I concluded that I must be a dumb bitch or he wouldn't call me one. Some of the time he left the dumb off my title. I never heard terms of endearment that I hungered for like dear, sweetheart, or darling. But, I remembered that my mom had never heard such terms of endearment either. Such terms were non-existent; the blame for trouble in our home was always mine to bear. Fusses usually ended with my being shoved and slapped around for which I was always the cause. Early on, after a particularly hard slap, he would apologize and ask for forgiveness. Later his apologies were fewer and farther between. I began to blame myself for all the problems in our home and marriage. I could not get the courage up to disagree with my husband.

The only place that I was free to go without his permission was to church. It was just a couple of blocks away from our apartment. Somehow, he had it figured out in his own mind that the church was not a threat to his control over the children and me. Good folks went there, and because they were good, none of them would seduce us away from him. There were times when we missed church for two weeks at a time. One doesn't go to church with a black eye. In fact, one doesn't go anywhere with a black eye. When told

that we were missed, I gave some lame excuses, but they seemed to satisfy the few who did inquire.

I was in a quandary. On one hand, I desperately needed to tell someone my plight. On the other hand, I felt that it was imperative that I keep my secrets to myself. One morning after I was slapped around and abused verbally, I called the minister and told him I needed to talk to someone about a problem I had. I made an appointment with him and told my story. I glossed over the worst parts of my marriage experiences but felt relieved that someone would listen to me and sympathize. He listened and seemed to want to sympathize. But, instead of giving me a bit of sympathy and sound counsel on how to solve my problem of abuse, he pushed me right back into my bed of torment.

He assured me that every marriage had its ups and downs. He informed me that conflict was part of every marriage and suggested that mine was probably no different. Not only did he fail to give me any encouragement, his counsel made my situation worse. His solution was a simple one. He told me the Bible taught that a wife was to be in submission to her husband. He said that in every wedding ceremony he instructed the bride “to love, cherish, and obey her husband.” So, if I would just be a lot more submissive and obedient, the tension and abuse I was experiencing would go away. God would see to it.

He didn't have a clue on how low I really felt, how much I hurt or how much I needed a different answer. But, I went home determined to be a more submissive and obedient wife and allow God to solve my problems.

By the time our babies were four and five, I was virtually a prisoner in our little apartment. One evening a couple from church stopped by for a pastoral visit. The girls and I had missed church for three Sundays in a row. I had been suffering from blue marks on my face and neck, brought on by a severe slapping and choking, so I didn't want to be seen in public. I was so lonely that I invited them in. They gave my girls some kind attention and the girls ate it up. He came home while the couple was still there and barely acknowledged these visitors. He did demand to know what I had for his dinner. The couple quickly got the picture and left. Before leaving however, they invited him to attend church with us. Immediately after they left, there was some shouting that all the neighbors could hear. “Why did you invite them in?” He demanded. “You are a dumb bitch if you think I'm interested in going to some church.” The verbal abuse went on for most of the evening.

I had taken his verbal abuse all evening and finally decided to defend my actions. Finally, I shouted back, “I have a right to invite people in. They didn't hurt anything. They are my friends from church and I'll invite them in if I want to.” His control had been challenged. He had shoved me around, choked, and slapped me many times before. This time he hit me in the mouth with a doubled up fist. I lost two teeth and received the

severely cut in my lip. The bleeding was frightening and he decided that I should go to the emergency room and have it checked out.

On the way to the hospital he concocted a story for us to tell on how it happened. I had been rushing up the stairs to our apartment when I slipped and fell. My face landed on the edge of a step causing two teeth to be knocked out and had done the damage to my lip. The emergency room nurse seemed suspicious of our story, but had no choice except to accept it. We had left the girls with a neighbor, so they weren't there to refute our story. My husband repeated the same story when the doctor inquired and I nodded in agreement. When we got back to the apartment he became contrite. He begged me to forgive him. He promised that he would never lay a hand on me again. He even called me, "Darling."

Fortunately, by this time my husband had a job in a big warehouse and we were covered with medical and dental insurance, so our bills were covered. Though he acted contrite, my pain and the damage to my face were, however, still my fault. If I hadn't invited that couple in and had had his dinner on the table, this wouldn't have happened. If I hadn't spoken up and argued with him, I'd still have my teeth. If I would now apologize, he would forgive me and everything would be patched up. I did take the blame and apologized, but in no time he was furious again. I feared he would have punched me again but for the bandage on my mouth. I apologized and he forgave me for making him mad. My lip healed and a dentist later made a bridge to cover the crime committed against me. But, I didn't know it was a crime.

During the week following that destructive blow I received, a lady knocked on our door. She was from Social Services and asked if she might come in. I reluctantly invited her in and before she left I had "spilled the beans" about my husband's verbal and physical abuse. I admitted the truth about the injuries to my mouth. She assured me that my husband had committed a crime against me and that he could go to prison for that abuse. She encouraged me to file a complaint against him. She laid out a typical story of spousal abuse and ill matched my experience to a T. She explained that most men who were abusive did so in order to gain and maintain control over their spouses. She said it could reach a point of his killing me. She warned me that many wives had suffered such fate.

If I did file a complaint and he went to jail, how would I pay the bills? Where could we go when we were kicked out of the apartment? My parents were barely getting by and my sister had no room for my two girls and me. Even if I could move in with my parents, I would have to reveal the secret about my marriage and the abuse I had suffered. I couldn't do that. Worse yet, what would my husband do to me when he found out that I had revealed our secrets of our family, especially to the police? I figured my mouth now looked fine in comparison to what my whole face might look like when he found out that I had filed a complaint on him.

The lady convinced me that if the abuse continued my whole face would some day look like my mouth now looked. "Abuse unchecked, escalates!" She warned. She enlightened me to the fact that the abuse would also likely spread to my daughters. "If he isn't stopped or doesn't get help, you and the girls are in for a very long painful journey." She then answered my questions about what I could do, or where I could go, if the abuse continued. She gave me a phone number and assured me that someone would pick me up and put me in a safe place that my husband could not find if the violence continued, or if I were even threatened. It was a woman's shelter that welcomed, concealed, supported, and counseled women in my predicament. She encouraged me to report my abuse to the local police. But I refused. I could make changes. Everything was my fault. I would please him and would never cross him. He would change. He was our only breadwinner. Things would get better. Time would take care of my pain and my misery. I did, however, keep the phone number.

Things did get better for a few weeks. Then one night he went into a rage over nothing, shoved me down on the bed and slapped me twice. He then grabbed my throat and started choking me. I nearly passed out. When he let up on his grip to my throat and I had recovered, he warned me that the next time I crossed him, he might just finish the job. I was terrified, but my sense of self-preservation enabled me to tell him that I was going to call the police if he ever hurt me again. Just the threat turned him into a greater rage. He then slammed me down on the couch, shoved his knee into my stomach and grabbed my throat again. This time he held on long enough for me to pass out. He released his grip and I came to. My children were cowering in the corner of the room crying and begging him to leave me alone. He yanked his belt off and gave each of them a sound whipping for interfering.

He replaced his belt, walked to the door and said he was going to the tavern and have a beer or two. He ordered me to get the apartment straightened up before he returned.

I drew up enough courage from some source to call the number of the women's shelter. I was told to gather up a few clothes for the girls and me, and that someone would pick us up in a few minutes at a designated spot near our apartment house. I gathered changes of clothes for us, put them in big garbage bag and went to a nearby corner to wait. We were greeted by a friendly middle aged woman. She drove us to a shelter in a nearby town. We met other women at the shelter who were going through the same kind of crisis we were in. We were given a bedroom and a hot meal.

The next morning I agreed to make a report to the police. They arrived and interviewed me. My neck was black and blue. My turtle neck sweater did not go high enough to cover the blue marks. There were blue marks on my daughters' legs from the whipping they received. Pictures were taken for evidence and my husband was arrested, charged, convicted, and subsequently, sent to prison for five years.

I had no idea how I was going to survive. But one of the counselors in the shelter arranged for us to get subsidized housing in another city, food stamps and other aid for my dependent children. The Salvation Army arranged to move our few possessions to another city and a local lawyer volunteered to represent me in divorce proceedings. I was granted a divorce six months later.

I have now started over. I fear the day that my ex-husband will be released. Now I'm getting by and developing a sense of personal worth. The girls and I go to a non-profit agency for counseling each week. When I participate in the group sessions, I get support and insight. When I hear the stories of some of the other women, I feel lucky. Some of them have not just been abused verbally and physically, some have had guns put their heads and knives to their throats. Others have had bones broken and subjected to the vilest of sexual degradation. I learned that many women in our country are killed every year by their controlling husbands, or their boy friends. I also learned that most women go back to the men who have abused them, even when the separations are caused by a prison sentence. I determined not to ever be caught in that trap again.

I am getting stronger. My girls are in school and are also gaining a sense of self-worth. They no longer live in a home filled with anger, fear, and danger. Our location is secret. We hope that we won't have to keep it that way forever. We also hope that when their dad gets out of prison, he'll go on his way and never be involved in our lives again.

We have started to church again. We get there in time for Sunday school. I sit quietly in an adult Bible class and speak to only a few members. Very few members speak to me. Oh, how I need the church to understand my plight and my loneliness! My how I need someone sitting by me on my pew who knows me and understands my needs! How I wish I could go to the minister for counseling. But, I fear that he would tell me that I must not only forgive my husband but that I should honor my vows to "live together in the holy state of matrimony ... until death do us part ... to forgive, honor, and obey him." I fear that he will tell me that I can never remarry someone else and go to heaven. Or, that I must be reconciled to my ex. That very threat keeps me from calling him for counsel. My experience tells me that I would get preached to more than I would be understood or sympathized with. Why even try?

I know that the last place that I should feel like a stranger is at church. But I do. The only thing the church members seem to know about me, or seem to care to know, is that I am that divorced woman who is on welfare and who has two pretty little girls. I've told two ladies, when questioned, that my ex is in prison. Now, I suppose everyone in the church knows. What good Christian would want to associate with a divorced woman whose husband is in prison? Beyond casual greetings, there is little or no contact away from the church building and very little recognition in it.

Will it change? I doubt it. Should it change? It certainly should! But, I keep going

because I do get consolation and encouragement from the songs, prayers, and some of the sermons. I also know that my girls need the church and the friends they have made there. My little girls and I would like to be drawn into a circle of intimate Christian friends who would be warm, loving, concerned and friendly on Sunday and equally warm, loving, concerned and friendly the rest of the week. I pray that God will change some hearts at the church and that I'll get the support I need to keep my head up. My girls and I would enjoy having dinner occasionally in the homes of young families, who have a couple of children their ages. But, we haven't been invited. At times, even at church, I feel like I'm merely treading water. What else can I do but hope for better things, better days, and more sensitive Christians? I have developed enough self-confidence during the past two years not to depend on the church for help, even though I need its support as much now as ever.

There are a number of older widows in church; any of them would make a fine surrogate mother for me and a great surrogate grandmother for my girls. They don't know how much their friendship would mean to us. There are dads, with children my girl's ages, who could help fill in the void left by my husband if they just knew how much my girls need a father figure in their lives.

I've put everything in God's hands. I have no other choice. I pray that he will send us people to help fill the void that exists in our little abode and in our hearts that are hungry for acceptance and love.

I have enrolled in two classes at a local community college and I hope to soon have skills that will enable me to become totally self-supporting. This is now my major goal.

The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project of Riverside County in California published the following cycle of violence its victims go through.

1. USING COERSION AND THREATS: Making or carrying out threats to do something to hurt her; threatening to leave her, commit suicide or report her to welfare; making her drop charges. Making her do illegal things.
2. USING INTIMIDATION: Making her afraid using looks, actions, gestures; smashing things; destroying her property; abusing pets; displaying weapons.
3. USING EMOTIONAL ABUSE: Putting her down; making her feel bad about herself; calling her names; making her think she is stupid or crazy; playing mind games; humiliating her; making her feel guilty.
4. USING ISOLATION: Controlling what she does, who she sees and who she talks to; what she reads and where she goes; limiting her outside involvement; using jealousy to justify actions.
5. MINIMIZING, DENYING AND BLAMING: Making light of abuse and not taking her concerns about it seriously; saying the abuse didn't happen; shifting responsibility for abusive

behavior; saying she caused it.

6. **USING CHILDREN:** Making her feel guilty about the children; using the children to relay messages; using visitation to harass her; threatening to take the children away.
7. **USING MALE PRIVILEGE:** Treating her like a servant; making all the big decisions; acting like the “master of the castle”; ,being the one to define the men’s and women’s roles.
8. **USING ECONOMIC ABUSE:** Preventing her from getting or keeping a job; making her ask for money; giving her an allowance; taking her money; not letting her know about or having access to family Income.

Facts about Abuse

- Twenty-five percent of the women in America suffer from domestic violence. In Latin American countries the number jumps to over thirty percent.
- The FBI estimates that one-third of the women murdered in America are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends.
- The National Abuse Hotline number is (800) 799-7233 and online it is www.ndvh.org
- Alternatives to Domestic Violence 24 hour crisis line: (800) 683-0829.
- The Attorney General of California reported that there were 196,406 domestic abuse calls in California in the year 2,000 and 52,200 domestic violence arrests. There were 197,360 restraining orders issued in the state that year.

Signs of an Abuser

1. Did he grow up in a **violent family** where one parent beat the other?
2. Does he tend to **use force** to solve his problems? Does he over react to little problems and frustrations? Is he cruel to animals?
3. Does he have **strong ideas** on men/ women relations that puts the man in control and makes the woman submissive?
4. Is he **jealous** of your relationships with others? Does he keep tabs on you and wants to know where you are at all times?
5. Does he abuse **drugs or alcohol**?
6. Does he have **access to guns, knives, and other lethal instruments** and talk of using them to threaten or to get even?
7. Does he become **angry** if you do not fulfill his wishes, or if you cannot anticipate what he wants?
8. Is he **extremely kind** at one time and **extremely cruel** another?
9. When he gets angry, **do you fear him**? Is not making him angry a big part of your life?
10. Do you do what he wants instead of what you want to avoid making him angry?
11. Does he **treat you roughly** or physically force you to do what you do not want to do?

Source: The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Patterns of Escalating Abuse

1. In courtship he criticizes her lipstick and demands that she not wear a particular color, especially the color she likes.
2. He criticizes her clothes and hair.
3. He escalates his verbal abuse with phrases like the following:
 - A. "Who do you think you are?"
 - B. "What do you think you are doing?"
 - C. "Why don't you ever ... ?"
 - D. "Never mind!"
 - E. "The discussion is over!"
 - F. "What's going on here?"
 - G. "Don't you think you are smart?"
 - H. "Nobody asked you!"
 - I. "Haven't you got anything better to do?"
4. He starts using the "stare" as a means of intimidation.
5. He tells her he likes younger women, brunets or blondes.
6. He belittles her about her weight, cooking or dress.
7. He disconnects the thermostat to make her freeze in the winter or bake in the summer. He rewires it only when he wants something extra from her.
8. He drags his feet in making decisions to show he is in control.
9. He makes sure that you are tardy to concerts, dinner engagements, and the theater to add to his control and your embarrassment.
10. He begins to call you derogatory names such as, "Stupid, Dumb, Slut and Bitch."
11. He belittles your achievements. These are acts of jealousy.
12. He excludes you in making plans and you are forced to follow his.
13. He starts pinching, slapping, choking and punching.
14. He grabs you by the hair and yanks you around.
15. He grabs you by the hair and drags you around the room.
16. He exhibits weapons such as knives or guns to cause fear.
17. He starts throwing small things to intimidate.
18. He throws ice water on you while you are in the shower to terrorize you.
19. He turns off the headlights while driving full speed to terrorize you.
20. He begins throwing harder objects with the intent to hit and hurt you.
21. He throws the remote control, baseballs or ashtrays.
22. He targets your head for these objects to both humiliate and hurt.
23. If the police are called he lies about the causes of your injuries and claims your medication caused you to fall and hurt yourself. You give into his cover-up and support his lies out of fear.
24. He places the knives at your throat or guns to your head.

25. He uses these weapons on you.
26. When you threaten to leave him or attempt to do so, his apologies and pleadings for forgiveness flow. He promises not to ever hurt you again, but he never keeps them.

CHAPTER 5

I AM AN ALCOHOLIC

I was brought up in a Christian home along with two older sisters. Our family went to church three times a week. When we had a revival, we were there at every service. We attended first Sunday singings and all youth meetings held within a reasonable driving distance at other churches. My dad was an elder and my mother did her share of visiting the sick, helping widows, and teaching Bible classes. We knocked on doors and invited our neighbors and strangers to visit our assemblies. We held cottage meetings where we brought unbelievers together to study the Bible. We gave a tenth of our income directly to the church treasury. We also contributed to orphan homes and to a couple of Christian Colleges. By all recognized standards, we were an upstanding Christian family. We didn't cuss, drink smoke, or approve of them by those who did.

We did attend an occasional movie. Our music was Country Western or Gospel. Growing up, we were forbidden to go to Rock and Roll concerts, but my sisters and I listened to Elvis or the Beatles or the sly.

The church preached total abstinence and I'm sure most members practiced it. We would not have taken a drink of wine, even **“for our stomach's sake, or our often infirmities,”** as Paul instructed Timothy to do. We preached and taught against John Barleycorn in every one of its forms. Beer was as bad as whiskey and one drink of either would probably put you in danger of hell fire. There was no such thing as moderation. True Christians were teetotalers.

That was my background. It established my convictions and my childhood behavior. However, that background and those convictions did not stop me from wondering what was so mysterious about a bottle of beer or a shot of whiskey. When I got to high school it was pretty well known which students slipped around and drank illegally. Since our town wasn't very big, just about everybody knew everybody else. In fact, it seemed that nearly everybody's business was known by almost everybody else in the community. We knew which parents drank because most of them drank openly. The only thing that most adults did not know was how many, or which kids were slipping around drinking or smoking pot. On Monday mornings the stories of weekend drinking parties spread around the campus fast among the students. We learned who did stupid things while drunk and laughed at the stories about them. Even church going students, like me, wondered what it would be like to get drunk and do some of the same stupid things. Of course, some church going kids also drank some and even smoked pot on occasion.

Although I hung out mostly with the good kids, I still played ball with many of the drinkers. They were some of the school's best athletes. Unless one of them got arrested and their drinking was reported in the local paper, or were caught drinking at a school

function, they remained eligible to play on the town's ball teams.

During my senior year we had an excellent basketball team. We won the district championship and were also winners at state. After winning the state championship, the team members were not only the biggest jocks on campus, but we were also the big shots around town. After going to state and enjoying the town's adulation for a week, a big party was planned by the team's leaders on the following Friday night. It was going to be held at the park down by the river, which was located a mile outside the city limits. Every player knew that alcohol in various forms would be available. Anyone who chose not to come to the party wasn't a loyal team member. Moreover, if they didn't come to it for religious reasons, they were sanctimonious, and considered chickens as well.

I went to the party and was determined not to take a drink of anything stronger than a Pepsi. I would let my **"light shine"** in the midst of their darkness. After all, with my family and church background, how could I be tempted?

As the party got underway, we built a bonfire and had a wiener roast. There were soft drinks in the coolers, but no beer or liquor in sight. A couple of guitars were brought for a songfest and we would retell and relive our experiences along the road to the state championship. As the party wore on, some of the guys brought out six packs of beer. The beer had been stored in the trunks of their cars. I was then taunted with "Come on, John, loosen up for a little bit. A swig of beer never hurt anyone." By now, some of my teammates, who were known not to drink or believe in drinking, had accepted a bottle of beer and were sipping away in celebration. Some weren't just sipping, they were drinking. I was about the only one abstaining. The pressure to take a bottle mounted up. The team members started toasting various members for special plays that enabled us to win particular games. At every toast, everyone touched bottles, shouted hooray and then took a swig.

The team captain related the story of my three point shot in our first district playoff game that gave us a victory in the waning seconds. Without that shot and victory, we would have gone home and not to state. I was complimented, given three cheers, and pressured to join in the drinking celebration. Someone handed me a bottle of beer and I took it. Everybody shouted, "Here's to John, our three point hero!" Then everyone tipped his bottle and drank up. I yielded and when I took my first sip, I was applauded. After taking that first sip, I just stood around with a full bottle of beer my hands. The others continued drinking. After a lot of back slapping, I felt fully accepted by the whole group for the first time. It was a good feeling. I was no longer an outsider, a holy Joe. I nursed that bottle of beer for the whole evening. I would not dare go home drunk, not for the whole world.

I went home at the end of the party and crawled into bed. I was elated that I had been recognized and honored by all my teammates for that key shot and a few other game

changing plays. Yet, I was struggling with my conscience for drinking. It was easy to rationalize my behavior. I had merely drunk a bottle of beer. I did not get drunk. I didn't even get a buzz. It certainly didn't cause me to do anything stupid that could be talked about the next week at school. I kept asking myself, "What is the big fuss about drinking all about?" This was hardly the dangerous liquid that I had heard preached against all my life. I had proved that I could handle my liquor. I did not make it a habit to run around with the drinking crowd at school, but did have a few more brews with some of the guys before graduation. None of the beer affected my behavior, except to enable me to get into the middle of parties, instead of being on the outside fringes as I had always been before. Summer came and I drank a few more beers on hot summer Friday and Saturday nights when the old gang got together and had little else to do. My parents never suspected anything and I was pleased to keep them in the dark about my experimentation with alcohol.

Summer passed and I enrolled at State University in the fall. I was away from home and had no one to report to for my behavior. I lived in a dorm, but the supervisor did not object to our drinking unless our parties got out of hand. I no longer had to worry about getting caught drinking by my mother or dad. With no one to answer to, it was much easier to join the guys and girls on weekend parties. Parties were held on and off campus. When we went off campus we were at least responsible enough to have a designated driver. On campus, we could drink as much as we could hold or as much as we wanted to. When someone got drunk, it was a simple matter to walk him to his room and put him to bed. A few always had to be.

On Halloween we had a big bash. There were kegs of beer and fifths of hard liquor. It was there to be consumed. And in the relative safety of the dorm, we began to consume. I learned that I enjoyed the taste of whiskey more than the taste of beer. I did not realize that the consumption of a little whiskey was equal to a lot of beer. So I passed up the beer and went straight for Scotch on the rocks. It was on that Halloween of my freshman year that I first got drunk. I was miserable and woke up the following day with a giant hangover. I also awoke with a very stricken conscience. A buzz from a couple of bottles of beer was one thing, but being totally drunk from drinking liquor was very much another. I had never imagined that I could be so out of control as to get drunk.

In the meantime, I attended a church close to campus with considerable regularity. My dad made sure of that. He was acquainted with the minister and he checked up on me occasionally. As far as my family and the church knew, I was a fine practicing Christian young man. As far as my dorm buddies knew, I had become a fellow drinker that didn't mind partying on weekends. I was now accepted as one of the guys. And, nothing was more important than being accepted as a regular guy by them. Grades were not even that important.

In four years I graduated with a degree in business. For the last two years in school, I had

become a binge drinker about every other weekend. I landed a fine job and dreamed of advancement. I liked my boss and fellow workers. I married a classmate and we were happy. Every thing changed from my college days except the fact that I had developed a real need to drink and still needed to “tie one on” about every other weekend. Whether I drank at home or went out to do it, the drinking began to put serious pressure on my marriage. The stress on my marriage seemed to make my need for liquor greater.

When I went to a local lounge to drink, it was my wife’s job to get me home and into bed. When I did my drinking at home, I slept on the couch. Often my drunkenness was accompanied with vomiting. There had been vomit on the upholstery in the car, on our house carpets, on our couch, on our bed, and the kitchen floor. At times, my drinking wound up making me “commode hugging” drunk.

Before I had made any of the dreamed about advancements on the job, my marriage was unraveling away from it. It got so bad after five years, that my wife gave me an ultimatum, “Choose the bottle or me!” She said that she could not, and would not, take my drinking any longer. She said that I needed counseling and that she was willing to go with me if it would help.

We went for counseling and I quickly learned that I was an alcoholic. “But,” I protested, “I only get drunk every other weekend.” But, the counselor was right. I was addicted. If I didn’t tie on a drunken spree every other weekend I was miserable. That habit alone labeled me an alcoholic. My drinking had also reached the point that if I didn’t have a drink or two during or after dinner each evening, I almost had a physical fit.

In counseling, I learned that an alcoholic had a real disease. It was not just a matter of choosing to drink and becoming a drunk or not. The abuse of alcohol became a physical and psychological disease. Once the abuse of alcohol reached the stage of alcoholism, a person is hooked for life. Even one drink could turn the alcoholic’s abstinent life into one that again demanded more alcohol. Total abstinence was the only hope an alcoholic had of the control of this disease.

At the end of our counseling sessions, I agreed to go on the wagon. There would be no more highballs before, during or after dinner. I was to stay home on weekends or take my wife along if I went out. There would be no gradual cutting down on my drinking. I would stop cold turkey and become a teetotaler. It was only under those conditions that my wife would stay with me. As an alcoholic, I was warned, that one drink could send me spiraling right back into my destructive behavior.

My, it was hard. By the end of the first week every fiber in my body demanded a drink. I was obsessed with the need to meet these demands, but giving in would mean the end to my marriage. My wife made it clear that she would not live with a drunk. I didn’t like that term. Being an alcoholic sounded a little softer. But, by my own standards I was a drunk and I knew it; call it what you will.

At the end of the first month of sobriety, the need for a drink had hardly lessened at all. I still craved a drink, a lot of drinks. I prayed for help. I was determined to save my marriage.

After six weeks, without a drink, I went to lunch with a group from the office to celebrate one of their birthdays. Only one of them was aware of my alcoholism. Nearly everyone around the table ordered a drink. One drink wouldn't hurt and my wife would never know about it. I yielded to the temptation and ordered my favorite, Scotch on the rocks. I planned to sip on it throughout the lunch. When the drinks were served, we sang Happy Birthday and shouted, "Cheers," as we touched glasses. I downed my drink quickly and ordered a second.

My life went into a tailspin that afternoon. On the way home I stopped by my favorite liquor store and took home a fifth of Scotch. I hid it in the garage and took a drink from it after dinner. One drink was still not enough. After the ten o'clock news, and my wife safely in bed, I sneaked out the garage for more. I went to sleep in my easy chair and did not awaken until early the next morning. I had slept on the couch occasionally so my wife did not suspect anything.

The next morning, I took the bottle from its hiding place and took it to work with me. I hid it in the back of a bottom drawer on my desk. By noon, I had to have a drink. That started my noon drinking. Before I knew it, I needed two drinks at noon to meet the demands of my addiction. I used mouthwash and mints of all kinds to cover up the whiskey odor on my breath. I was confident that I was keeping my little secret from both my wife and my fellow employees. I did so until the day I took my first drink the first hour of the workday and four more before the end of the day.

During my sobriety period I had revealed my problem to my boss and assured him that I had it under control. He was sympathetic, but warned me that if I got back on the bottle to the point of hindering my work, I would be discharged. Moreover, drinking even one drink, while on the job, would not be tolerated. It would be cause for termination. But, here I was with a bottle of Scotch in my desk. When it was empty, I vowed that I would not replace it. I wouldn't take the risk in order to satisfy my body's demands. But, I broke the vow.

One day after about five drinks, I was summoned to the boss' office. He asked me point blank, "Have you been drinking on the job?" "No!" I lied. He asked for the permission to go through my desk. I refused him the permission on the grounds of privacy. He informed me, that my desk belonged to the company. Moreover, that I had no privacy while on the job, except in the restroom. I caved in and admitted that I was under a lot of pressure and lied that I had given in just this one time. He stood by his Zero Tolerance Policy and asked me to clean out my desk. When my personal things were packed in a box, he appeared at my office door with my final paycheck. In that box of personal things,

was a half full bottle of Scotch. He offered his hand and I refused to shake it. I sheepishly waved goodbye to my fellow workers and headed for an exit.

I went home, consumed the rest of the bottle and passed out on the couch.

When my wife came home and found me in that condition, she lost all hope, and any confidence she had left, that I might overcome my addiction to alcohol. She found herself an apartment and moved out. With my last paycheck I bought liquor and virtually lived off of liquor for a month. When my cash ran out, I began living on three credit cards. I did not seek employment. I would do that when I sobered up. I lived to drink and drank to live. My life had spiraled completely out of control. My wife called occasionally, was sympathetic, but would no longer help me unless and until I decided to help myself.

She then informed my parents about my condition. They were shocked and dismayed. How could they help? I needed money. The credit cards were “maxed” out. I had a house payment to make and a court appearance to meet. I had been arrested on a DUI after I was engaged in a fender bender and had to depend on a couple of old friends for transportation.

I couldn't go to the church for help. I believed they would just consider me another drunk. I hadn't gone to church regularly during the past three years, except during the short time I was on the wagon.

My parents did come to help rescue me from my situation. They found me a bleary eyed drunk in a house that was in total disarray. That was the first time I had ever broken their hearts. It was most difficult to face them and take in the pain that was showing on their faces. They had no idea how I had gotten in this condition. I was twenty-six years old, broke, with no job and helpless. My house was in foreclosure. My wife had left me and was threatening to get a divorce. I was not the bright young man my parents had sent off to college who never drank or smoked, or ran with those who did. I was a church member. I was trusted, loved, and admired. I was smart, having graduated from the business school at the university with honors. I had had a great job with a very promising future. Now I was a nobody, without a future. I wondered if there was a way out of the dark hole I was in and had dug for myself.

That was a long evening with my parents. I tried hard to find someone to blame. My parents were as good a target as anyone else. They didn't understand me and never had. My wife was equally guilty. My sisters never really cared for me and were jealous of my successes. If someone, anyone, had really cared for me, I would be sober, have a great job, be happily married, and have no need to drink.

The next evening I agreed to meet with my parents, sisters, and my wife for a confrontation. We would sit down with an arbitrator and lay out our positions. We would face my alcoholism together and determine how to get on with our lives.

It was a long evening. I protested the charge that I was an alcoholic, "People my age cannot become alcoholics." But the evidence was stacked against me. I learned that there were many alcoholics running around as young as fifteen. I was forced to admit that the drinking was my fault, my choice. I had to admit that I was powerless to do anything by myself. My wife agreed to assist me in my recovery, but refused to agree to resume our marriage. My parents and wife agreed to underwrite the cost of a volunteer commitment in a rehabilitation center. I had to agree to spend a minimum of four weeks there and longer if necessary. That show of support by my wife and parents assured me that I was still loved in spite of my behavior.

Their love enabled me to enter the treatment program where I associated with a group of men and women in the same condition that I was in. There were fifteen-year-old alcoholics in residence there. There were also some seventy-year-old ones there, too. Total abstinence was the rule, along with an admission that I was an alcoholic and helpless to cure myself. I was released in six weeks, clean and sober. I went to stay with my parents for a month and became fully reconciled to them. However, I would never be reconciled with my wife. I had broken too many promises, caused too much pain, and was the cause of the alienation.

I started a job search and landed one with less pay, and less promise than the one I had landed out of college. It did, however, pay the bills. I lost our house and moved into my own apartment and lived alone. The desire for a drink did not leave me. I was usually strong enough to say, "NO.". But, when I got the compulsion to drink, I would call friends that I had made at AA meetings. I entered a twelve-step program and faithfully followed it. I had never met a more compassionate and understanding group than those I associate with at AA meetings. If my craving for a drink began to overwhelm me, even at two in the morning, one of those members would get out of bed and come to sit with me until I had my need for drink under control. I give God thanks daily for such faithful and concerned companions.

I have now returned to church and attend every service. From my earliest years I was taught that being a part of the family of God was the most important association in the world. So, I go to church as a single man, who is divorced. There are a few single members in the congregation. Their ages range from nineteen to sixty. Some have never been married. Some are divorced. Some have lost their mates through death. Our age differences make our faith and singleness the only things we have in common.

I have two strikes against me in matters of church. I get the full impact of sermons on various forms of the use and abuse of mind-altering drugs or drink. I also feel the pain of my divorce that was the fruit of that abuse. Even if I found a desirable Christian woman, I fear that I have no right to remarry. I also wonder if I might put another woman through the same pain imposed on my first wife, if I should fall off the wagon again.

I go to church out of conscience, primarily to worship God. But, I also go hoping to have my social needs met there as well. I have not tried to hide the fact that I am an alcoholic and that I have been divorced. I usually sit on my pew, most of the time, alone. Few seem to want to have a close association with a former drunk and one divorced. I have been attending this church for five years since my recovery and have been invited into only four homes in those five years. I'm welcome to the potluck dinners, to work days on the building and the grounds, or for outreach campaigns in the neighborhood. But, I have not felt a warm welcome there. And, I have had only a couple of relationships that went beyond the assemblies of church.

I'm a stranger in the pew at my church. But I need understanding, acceptance, associations, fellowship and hospitality just like everyone else. I've gone through a lot of self-imposed suffering, but that doesn't mean I am unworthy to be a Christian friend or to be fully accepted as a brother in Christ. I am lonely. The last thing I ever want to do is to go back to a bottle for friendship. Being accepted and supported by Christian associations will help me to continue to win my battle over the bottle. My heart aches for more of it.

Even though I haven't found more warmth and greater acceptance at church, I'll keep trying. I don't want to seek acceptance in another fellowship. But, I might very well do so if my own brethren continue to refuse to **"take strangers in"** who are alcoholics.

The Twelve Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol-that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. We made searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of our character. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to all of them.
9. We made direct amends to persons wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry

that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice all these principles in all our affairs.

How Much Is Too Much?

If you answer yes to any of the following questions you may have a drinking problem.

1. Do you drink alone when you are angry or sad?
2. Does drinking ever make you late to work?
3. Does your drinking worry your family?
4. Do you ever drink after telling yourself you won't?
5. Do you ever forget what you did while you were drinking?
6. Do you get headaches or a hangover after drinking.

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism guidelines.

Did you know that thirty-one percent of fifteen year-olds in America are drinking and that sixty-three percent of all high school seniors drink on a regular basis? It has been estimated that 11.4 percent of all alcohol consumed in America is consumed by young people between ages twelve and twenty?

Did you know that 81 percent of high school students have consumed alcohol while only 70 percent have smoked cigarettes and 47 percent have used marijuana?

Did you know that of the high school students who try alcohol once, 91.3 percent are still using it as seniors?

Did you know that 31 percent of high school students who drink are binge drinkers? Binge drinkers are described as four consecutive drinks for girls and five for boys.

Did you know that the major cause of death of young people ages 15 to 19 is from auto accidents involving alcohol.

Source: A 1998 survey taken by the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse.

Did you know that an average of one thousand, four hundred college students die of alcohol related auto accidents each year?

Did you know that 75% of fraternity and sorority house residents binge drink?

Did you know that 57% of male athletes and 48% of women athletes binge drink?

Source: Harvard University School of Health Study

For those who are interested, there is a test that can be given that is a sure indicator that one is an alcoholic. The number for the test is (800) 697-6700.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse, alcohol is consumed by 2 million

students while driving. Over 400,000 students admitted to having unprotected sex while under the influence of alcohol. Alcohol consumption by college students contributes to 600,000 assaults, 500,000 injuries, and 70,000 sexual assaults each year.

An Encouraging Sign

In the 2002 school year, the University of California at Santa Barbara initiated a plan to inform parents of the misuse or abuse of alcohol by students on its campus. It adopted a policy of informing parents when any student was found guilty of any alcohol related offense. The offenses include driving under the influence, public intoxication, and a minor in possession. The University stated that this plan was the only one that has reduced high-risk behavior.

Such a policy on the campuses of all institutions of high learning would be a giant step forward in reducing the statistics quoted above.

CHAPTER 6

I AM A WIDOW

I am sixty-nine years old and have been widowed for six years. I had been a member of the congregation where I worshipped for forty years. I knew every member of this church and could tell you a bit about most every one of those members' lives. I was on a first name basis with nearly all three hundred. I had been known as the "flower lady" for thirty-one of those years.

Twenty-five years before my husband died, he and I built a nice greenhouse on the back of our lot. I was determined to raise flowers for the church the year round. Except for the times when we were on vacation, our fresh cut flowers were in the vases on the stands up front every Sunday. Beautifying the sanctuary was an important part of my ministry. There were few funerals that my flowers did not grace the pulpit. At some weddings, only my flowers were seen) never charged a dime for them.

At the time of my husband's death, the church members could not have been more attentive. There were phone calls and visits that brought me a great deal of comfort during those first few weeks after the funeral. The elders and their wives all dropped by. The minister and his wife were there for me. Some of the younger couples, who had enjoyed my flowers at their weddings, made calls and visits to console me. I was so blessed. The calls and the visits dropped off rather dramatically after four weeks. Except inquiries at church, there seemed to be little interest in my continuing sorrow or any of my other needs. It seemed that everyone thought I could make it on my own by that time. I was barely making it and I was crying alone an awful lot.

I continued my ministry. But, oh how I missed my sweetheart. I got up in the morning and cooked and ate breakfast alone. After a few months, I seldom cooked a breakfast. Gone were the breakfasts of ham and eggs, biscuits and country gravy. My lunches and dinners were mostly right out of a can. When I cooked, there were always so many leftovers that my refrigerator was packed with little covered Tupperware bowls. Much of it eventually went into the garbage disposal.

I caught myself talking to my husband, only to realize that I was talking to myself. His easy chair was still where he last sat in it. It was never moved except when I vacuumed. His clothes were still in his closet and his tools remained idle in the garage. His presence still lingered with me after six years. He didn't answer me when I asked him a question. At night when I reached over to touch him, he didn't touch me back. I missed hearing him clear his throat at night. I even missed his snoring. The warmth of his body next to mine for those forty years was missing. I would awaken and listen for him to flush the toilet, but there was only silence. I can't say that I was afraid of being alone during that time, but

I was never really comfortable.

Thankfully the house was paid for. I got by on social security and a small retirement check. I owned a pretty good used car and went anywhere I wished. But, even among the church members I had known and worshipped with for thirty years, I still felt more and more alone. I was greeted with warmth and lots of hugs at church, but they seemed to stop at the church house door.

I read a lot. I watched television more than I should have. On Sundays I usually went to the cafeteria with a half dozen other widows for lunch. However, that circle of sisters began to shrink each year. Occasionally, I went to a movie with a couple of these sisters. Most of my time, however, was spent alone with my loss and my loneliness. But, I still had my greenhouse and I faithfully continued my ministry.

My children all lived in other states and had their own families. I could have sold out and moved closer to one of them, but that would have meant making a choice between them which I was yet unwilling to make. How could I have chosen one child over another? I also worried that I might be more of a bother than a help if I moved closer to any of them.

I sat at home hoping and waiting for the phone to ring. When it did ring, too often it was someone wanting to sell me a security system or offer me a mortgage at a rate that I shouldn't refuse. These offers came in spite of the fact that my home had been paid off for ten years. Solicitors of all kinds called and I heard them out, even though I knew I was going to say, "No." At least it was someone to talk to. I had to watch out for con artists and scams. I don't know how they got my phone number. I guess with all this new Internet stuff, people can find anything about anyone they want to. But, being so lonely, I was glad to hear the phone ring even if it was just some pest calling.

You see, I wanted most to hear from my four children, my twelve grandchildren or my three great grandchildren. Any call was welcomed. One short call made my day. One long call made my week. I would go over those conversations with family members a half dozen times after hanging up. If they only knew how much I loved to hear from them, they would have rung more often. But, I tried to understand. They had their priorities. They all had their own lives to live. I called them as often as is reasonable, but I didn't want to seem to be intrusive.

There was one call that I could expect nearly every morning. It came from Marie, my closest widow friend at church. The phone usually rang by the time I was drinking my second cup of coffee. We knew everything about each other and we checked up on each other almost every day. This woman became a more important part of my life than my children were. I couldn't have done without her. When I was overcome with loneliness or grief, I could call her or drive over to see her. We were rocks that each could lean on at anytime.

There was a dimension in my life that I missed more than anything else. That was the social contact my husband and I enjoyed with other couples and other families from church. Sure, I still spoke to people at church and on occasion visited with them a few moments in the lobby of the church. I had short visits with them when we bumped into each other at the mall. But, those meetings meant little in fulfilling my deepest social needs. When my husband was alive, we went to bridge and “42” parties. We went to ball games, movies, out to dinner and on trips with other couples. We enjoyed a close broad-based friendship and fellowship with other couples and families throughout the church. There was hardly a weekend that we were not in some other home, often with two to five other couples as guests. Or, we had a variety of guests from church in our home. We had felt wanted, needed, and appreciated.

Suddenly, as a widow I no longer seemed to fit in. I was almost always the odd one in almost every gathering. Couples fit, but singles didn’t. Families with children fit with other families with children, but a widow didn’t fit. The only times it felt like I fit in were at those Sunday lunches with other widows and at lady’s Bible class.

In that sixth year of my widowhood, and two weeks after the anniversary of my husband’s death my world changed again, drastically. If I thought things had changed because I had been widowed, it was really going to change now.

Marie had ridden to church with me that morning. We went to the widow’s lunch at the cafeteria. On our way home a teenager ran a red light and broad-sided my car on the driver’s side. I was knocked unconscious and had a concussion. My left hip and three ribs were broken. Marie was free of any major injuries but did have a few abrasions and contusions. I was in the hospital for two weeks and bedfast for another six. Two of my children came for a couple of days each week and Marie was there every day to help after my hospitalization. The minister called on me nearly every day at the hospital and a couple of times the first two weeks while I was recuperating at home. Two of the elders and their wives dropped by the hospital a couple of times to encourage me. Each of the other widows from the luncheon group dropped by the hospital at least once. As soon as I returned home I realized things might never be the same.

Few things came back to normal. My hip refused to heal properly. My memory was affected. The ribs did heal but when I coughed I still suffered pain. I went through physical therapy but my hip just didn’t return to normal use. It was terribly painful just trying to move my leg. Walking was impossible without a walker. I lost my appetite and with its loss, I began losing weight. Fortunately, my insurance enabled me to have a home care nurse drop in every day. Marie did most of my housework and made sure I had meals. A few church members dropped by with pies or cakes. But, as time went by, fewer and fewer dropped by. One of my daughters insisted that I come and live with her. I refused the offer because she had a daughter and two of my great grandchildren living with her and only had a three-bedroom house.

With much pain, I was finally put in a wheelchair and started attending Sunday morning church services again. In the meantime, my greenhouse went unattended and my flowers began to wither and die. No longer were they seen beautifying the pulpit area. I was still greeted warmly at church and given best wishes by many of the old time church members. But, during the week everybody seemed to assume that I was adequately taken care of. I got by on pain pills. But sadly, I also became addicted to them. I was in sort of a daze a lot of the time. When I was fully conscious, the house seemed emptier and quieter than ever. The visits by the nurse and Marie no longer filled my need for company. My longing for company increased in intensity while my sources of company decreased during the long lonely days and evenings.

Marie was called out of town to take care of her 90-year-old mother who had become an invalid during those months after the auto collision. I was now alone most of the time, but was able to get to the bathroom and the kitchen to take care of my personal needs. On Sunday mornings, one of the deacons picked me up for church services. On rare occasions I was invited into some home for lunch after services. I did enjoy visiting with some old timers at our monthly potluck supper.

However, I was no longer the “flower woman.” I was that old lady who struggled to get out of her wheelchair into her pew and who had that special pad to rest her feet on. Those who sat on the same pew were kind, but none had any comprehension about how lonely and left out I felt.

Often, I was tempted to beg the church to recognize my need for some companionship to help fill my lonely days and long evenings. My family members, however, became more attentive and visited as often as possible. But, their visits were too short and too far apart. The television became my constant companion. I watched reruns of “I Love Lucy” and “Bonanza.” I watched the court room shows and the news. I watched Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune, trying to beat the contestants. Such shows still keep my attention, yet I was starved for human relationships.

Only those who have gone through the loss of a mate can empathize with folks like me. I believe every church should provide programs for the bereaved so that no person ever feels totally alone with their grief after the loss of a mate. No one should sit on a pew in a church building, dreading to go home to a silent and empty house. Every widow and every widower should be a part of an intimate group where struggles are shared and where needs made known and met. They should be treated as family and the church should help meet their need for company and companionship. These needs should be met with regularity and love.

No person on the pew should look with dread to the last hymn and the last prayer on Sundays. Each shut-in should know that calls and visits will be made by fellow Christians during the week. They should be assured that they would not have to eat alone

twenty times a week. They should be assured that their brethren would be there for them with visits and loving care. I was determined to make it alone in my own house, but my children determined that I needed twenty-four-hour care. Yet, none were in a position to furnish me the kind of care I needed.

My children insisted that I go to a rest home where I could get the needed and adequate care. I finally relented and was admitted to a Christian nursing home, an hour's drive from my hometown. But I will never see my home again. I gave power of attorney to my oldest son. My personal things were divided among my children and grandchildren. The house was sold and the proceeds placed in a trust account to be used for my needs.

I have started over. I am disappointed, but I try not to be bitter. Nearly every month, one or more of my children and my grand children come by for a visit. They drop me cards and make regular phone calls to check on my welfare. I'm getting acquainted with the nursing home staff. They are friendly, but most are all business. There is one bright spot in my week, I attend an interdenominational worship service here in the home each Sunday in my wheelchair. I can still feed myself and take care of my personal needs. I get regular calls from Marie and receive an occasional card at various seasons from some of the widows back home. However, the church there seems to have forgotten me. I have a roommate here in the rest home, but she has lost most of her memory and gives me no real companionship. I am wheeled down to the recreation room daily where some of us play cards or dominos. Many of the residents come to the meeting room to stare at the television or to sleep. Others are strapped in their wheel chairs and secured to a banister along the walls of the hall. Some never get out of their beds. I have begun to look forward to death. In fact, there are times in my boredom and loneliness that I welcome it. Sometimes, in my more desperate and loneliest hours I pray for it.

As a younger person I was under the impression that as I grew older, the church would be a sanctuary for me. I believed that it would be committed to "visiting ... the widows in their affliction." But, as I view it now, it seems that the church was and is more interested in adding to its numbers and keeping secure its doctrines, than meeting the needs of its aged members who supported it all during their lifetimes. So I plead, "Please! Please! Don't let widows and widowers become strangers in your pews! Please don't let them languish alone in rest homes! Don't let them die there alone!"

In America, in the year 2002, there are over 1,600,000 men and women confined to rest homes. A large majority of them are women.

"And he looked up and saw the rich men that were casting their gifts into the temple treasury. And he saw a poor widow casting in two copper coins. And he said, 'Of a truth I say unto you, this poor widow cast in more than you all: for these all did of their superfluity cast in unto the gifts; but she of her want cast in all

the living she had to live on.’” (Luke 21:1-5)

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after the orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27)

The church can keep in touch with its widows and widowers and make them feel they are still an important part of its fellowship.

The following suggestions are a start in making it happen.

1. Every month send around a greeting card or a greeting folder to one or more adult Bible classes and ask members to write a greeting and bring the shut-ins up to date on important happenings in your families.
2. Ask members of the congregation to adopt certain shut-ins and mail them a greeting card with some regularity.
3. Arrange for a group to go and celebrate their anniversaries, birthdays, etc. with them. It might be a class, the deacons and wives, the elders and wives, teenagers, or a circle of former close friends.
4. Arrange for a children’s choral group from the church to visit the shut-ins occasionally to give a sacred concert to them.
5. Have the children paint greeting cards and goodwill posters and deliver them to the lonely and the shut-ins.
6. Encourage the minister, an elder, a deacon, or any man or woman to stop by and have a Bible reading and prayer with the shut-ins.
7. Establish a particular Sunday to bring the shut-ins to a special service where they are recognized, acknowledged, and thanked.

CHAPTER 7

HE WAS AN ELDER

In addition to the widows and widowers who may become strangers in our pews there are others who ought to be recognized for their valuable past service to the church and be given a continued sense of belonging. Every member of a church needs to be assured that they have ownership in the church to which they belong.

It is not difficult to find some person, family or group within any congregation that needs and deserves to be stroked publicly for their contributions to the church. Those in leadership roles, who lead successful churches, will find ways to give them recognition. Sadly, some who have public roles in assemblies sometimes seem so concerned about their place and their need to be recognized for their contributions, that they fail to honor others **“to whom honor is due.”** Wise and honorable are those who give recognition instead of seeking it. There can be more value in taking time to give recognition than spending the same time preaching a sermon or singing a few more songs. Those in the “spotlight” roles in many assemblies could share their roles with others who deserve it.

This is one former elder’s story. He once served a great church at an elder. He preached some, taught classes, entertained new members and visitors, helped that church dream, and contributed sacrificially to its local budget and mission fund. He is no longer a member of that church. But when he visits it, he is made to feel almost like a total stranger.

He and his wife started attending this church, which they will always call their home church, when he was forty years old. In fact, that church employed him to as a part time minister to help heal wounds after a difficult church split. It had been a congregation of almost 300 members, but after the split had difficulty attracting 150 people on Sundays. The membership was having a hard time forgetting the wounds and scars from the split. It needed to get beyond the incriminations of the battle it had just fought.

It was his job to help the congregation **“forget that which was behind and to look forward”** to doing greater things for the Kingdom of God. The church initiated a number of programs that helped members get involved in constructive efforts to rebuild the church. In his second year the full-time minister resigned and the church employed a young minister who was positive about every aspect of the church’s life. It was his first job out of seminary.

He tells his story.

I resigned from my part time job after the church healed and had begun to move forward. I was asked to serve as one of the congregation’s elders. My experience in broad aspects

of the church life as a former missionary, preacher, and a Christian College administrator had taught me that for a church to grow, it must have a vision, but not only vision. It had to have people capable of seeing the vision realized and the courage to even "do church" differently. There were small and large churches all over our city whose work consisted primarily of maintaining the *status quo* and repeating a rather stale liturgy every Lord's day.

My first job as an elder was to head a worship committee. Instead of rote exercises based on a traditional form of worship, we experimented with a variety of forms and inclusions that changed our whole approach to worship. These changes terrified some traditionalists but they attracted many others. Before we knew it, we had an attendance of college students and young couples equal to the numbers from the families who stayed on after the split. Our auditorium could seat no more than 320 people. We filled it. We then initiated a second service and within two years we filled our sanctuary at both services. All the while parking and classroom space became our greatest problems. It was determined by the elders and the deacons that we should consider buying a new site and building a new church building.

A building committee was appointed and before long acreage was found and bought that would accommodate our needs for many years. The architects were brought in and a building was designed that would accommodate up to 750 parishioners. I was on a mission trip when the final decision was made on the size of the building and I returned just after a contractor had poured a partial footing on one corner of the new building.

Based on the attendance and the continued possibility for growth, we were convinced that we had finalized plans that were way too small. After much discussion and prayer we stopped the work and brought back the architect. We then had the building redesigned to seat up to four times as many as the original plans called for.

Such a step up in size required three times the financial resources as the first building had. We added enough money to our bond sale to complete the new building. My wife and I stepped up the plate and bought our share of bonds, as did other church members. We all shared the dream of a larger facility, including a gym, or all-purpose room.

When we held our first service, over 800 attended. Within two years, additional classrooms were required and our attendance reached 1,400. A full-time staff of eight people was required to take care of the ministries of the church. A harmonious spirit prevailed and in every aspect of church life there had been growth.

My wife and I spent 18 years in shepherding roles in that church. The guest book in our home indicated that we had entertained hundreds of visitors and new members as our way of helping bond them to the body of that church. Hospitality was the watchword of our pastoring. I sat through more scheduled and unscheduled meetings than I can count. I worked as a mediator in conflicts, comforter to those in grief and counselor to those in

trouble. I wept with those who were weeping and rejoiced with those who rejoiced.

After those 18 years, I retired and we moved across the country, in order to assist members of our family get through some difficult times. We worked with two different churches over the next 10 years but our hearts were with that congregation we called, "Home." We missed the joyous fellowship, the inspirational worship services, and the programs of outreach and missions. We tended to compare dozens of churches we visited when we traveled with that home church. Barely a half-dozen came close to matching its spirit and programs. The hours spent in shepherding, visiting, teaching, entertaining and the dollars sacrificed to help that church become a great church, were worth every effort. We had not one regret over the time or contributions we had made to it! The membership of that church changed somewhat during the ten years after we left. The staff changed. But, well over half of the church members still knew my wife and me by our first names. Other elders, who had served with me, had resigned and with time their contributions were overlooked

During these last ten years we have visited that congregation five times. Only once has a presiding elder, the ministers, or any other person involved in those assemblies even recognized our being there, let alone offering us an opportunity to publicly greet those we love and had served. It was as if nothing was owed those who have gone before. No one saw a need to even recognize the sacrifices and efforts of those who helped bring this church into being.

We were forced to ask, "Is this the way we treat those who have served so long and so faithfully?" "Is another five minutes on the sermon more important than **'honoring those to whom honor is due'?**"

The preachers and others presiding over the assemblies were enjoying the facilities built by other hands. They enjoyed working for a congregation that others formed and led to its greatness. Yet, they were incapable or are unwilling to recognize those who had borne the burdens in the "heat of the day" through those years of building and growth. Two of the new ministers had their jobs partially due to my recommendations and encouragement that they be hired. More importantly there is such a thing as Christian courtesy, but those in charge seemed to have missed its significance as they went about their tasks.

On my last visit to that city on business, I attended the congregation three consecutive Lord's days. On the first Sunday a 94 year-old widow invited me to lunch. I had preached her husband's funeral years before. Only two families in that congregation asked me to have **"a cup of cold water."** They invited me into their homes as a guest. Was I hurt for not being given the opportunity to greet the church I had shepherded and had helped lead for 18 years? Yes, a bit. Was I disappointed? Yes! A new generation had risen up **"that cared not about Joseph."** They knew about Joseph, but they seemed to care "not" about him. They were warming by fires they had not built and enjoying the

fruit of other's labors but felt no need to acknowledge them. They were eating at tables they had not prepared and were drinking at wells they had not dug.

On the first Monday of that last visit, I attended a meeting of my old Kiwanis Club. It was the second time I had visited it in those ten years. It is the largest club in that state. I had served as its president and as Lt. Governor of its division. I was greeted warmly at the door, a fellow member demanded that he buy my lunch. The president, whom I did not even know, introduced me and asked me to greet the assembled club and let them know about my life and anything else I might consider of interest. But, my home church did not even recognize my presence. **“The children of the world in their generation are wiser than the children of light.”**

On the walls of my office are many plaques and trophies of victories and awards of my past. One gift is a cherished plaque to my wife and me from that home congregation when we retired and it reads:

“In loving appreciation for your servant hearts, unlimited gifts of time, and genuine love for lost souls, and for the many years as one of our shepherds. Your vision and boldness has helped stir us and has inspired us. You will be deeply missed! Your family at the blank blank church.”

In order to give everyone a sense of ownership and of being appreciated not just for elders, congregations should plan days and ways of recognizing individuals, families and groups. On one Lord's Day each month, time could be set aside to recognize and honor certain members.

1. Our children could be honored in mass or individually for honors received at school, in scouting, or on athletic teams. They could be honored for volunteer work. Some churches bring the children to the pulpit for a story and children's songs in order for them to feel that they are an important part of the church.
2. Every five-year wedding anniversary, beginning with the twenty-fifth, could be recognized.
3. Every member's birthday after seventy or seventy-five could be recognized.
4. Election to leadership in community organizations should be acknowledged.
5. Appointments to commissions and boards deserve recognition.
6. Jobs volunteered and completed by church members should be recognized.
7. Teachers should be honored annually.
8. Elders and deacons should be honored for every five years of service. Retired elders and deacons can be recognized for their faithful service at the same time.
9. Ministers and other staff members should be given honors every five years and a significant gift would endear them and their families to the church they serve.

10. Seniors should be recognized and appreciation shown for their faithful years of service.

Hard to find is a man or a woman who will resent being recognized for some good thing they have done or for an honor they have received.

Showing gratitude is the cornerstone of good manners.

“Do not hold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.” (Proverbs 3:27)

CHAPTER 8

I HAVE AN EATING DISORDER

I attended church faithfully. I participated in most of the programs designed for my age group. Publicly, it would have appeared that I had it all together. You see, I was a television news reporter, morning anchor and special assignments producer. I dressed nicely and maintained a somewhat normal body weight. People recognized me in my city nearly every where I went. My job gave me a certain celebrity status. I was asked to be judge in local contests and to serve as master of ceremonies at other local events. I enjoyed my popularity and its attention.

At church, adults were glad to greet me and the young people gathered around me, and gave me a degree of adulation. My job paid well. If you asked those at church or on the job who knew me, they would have told you that I had it all together, that I was supremely successful in what I did.

What people didn't know, was that I had a secret. It was a secret that was almost unbearable, worse yet, unmentionable. I put on a great facade and it appeared to others that my life couldn't have been much better. I was a bulimic. I had an eating disorder that was killing me. In fact, there were times I was so desperate, I wanted to die. Many times I was so discouraged, that I contemplated suicide. My life was a living hell. Behind those smiles on the television screen was a woman whose life was out of control and who had no idea how to fix it. This eating disorder became a monster that controlled my life and never left my shoulders. It was there when I awoke. It was with me all during my waking hours. It was with me when I went to bed.

Due to the nature of my disorder, I found it hard to get close to anyone. Getting close might allow my secret malady to be discovered. And, discovery was the last thing that I wanted.

"Why?" You ask. Because if I revealed to you how I once lived, you would have concluded that I was crazy. I really did crazy stuff. I learned through research that one out of seven young women, aged fifteen to twenty-five, is either bulimic or anorexic. At times, some may be both.

Women suffering from bulimia go on eating binges and then purge their food by induced vomiting or the use of laxatives. To better maintain what they perceive as an acceptable body weight after bingeing and purging, they turn to diuretics to get rid of any excess body fluids.

Young girls and women suffering from anorexia simply refuse to eat. They starve themselves, sometimes to death. They pretend to eat, but don't. They hide their food in

napkins or pockets, then dispose of it in secret. These sufferers always perceive themselves as being too fat. Their bodies can be just skin and bone, yet they still feel fat. They have never seen a fat model in Seventeen Magazine. They are certain that no one will love them unless they are thin. To them, thin is often deadly thin. Many die of starvation trying to look good, even while their starvation makes them look bad. Most anorexics feel a dire need to get in control of their lives, and starving is one way to do it. Moms and dads can control their children and make them do lots of things, but they can't make them eat.

Both eating disorders can bring about alienation and may become life threatening. Heart attacks are not unusual in severe cases. The excessive vomiting by bulimics causes their teeth to be regularly coated with stomach acids. Severe tooth decay is one consequence.

You may wonder why I felt like a stranger on the pew. I felt like a stranger because I believed that no one would love me or even want to be around me if they knew what I did every day of the week. I feared that my past behavior would be so shocking, that most people would shun me. Therefore, I continue to attend church but I allowed no one to get close to me.

My days usually went like this. I would get up in the morning and eat a bowl of cereal and drink a couple of cups of coffee. Some mornings I drank a glass of orange juice and ate a half to a dozen donuts. Once or twice a week I stopped at a favorite restaurant and had bacon and eggs. By the time I got to the office, I panicked. "I'll look fat on the camera." I told myself. Therefore, I would rush to the restroom, lock the door and stick my finger down my throat. I would vomit my breakfast up wash my mouth, straighten my hair and go to the news desk. After the news went off, I would panic again. I would rush to the candy machine and buy a dozen candy bars. I always keep five to ten dollars worth of quarters in my desk just for those purchases. I would step out of our building, go under a staircase, or anywhere else that I could have a moment of privacy and gobble down the candy bars, up to a dozen at a time. Within an hour, I would panic again to dispose what I had eaten. But, being out on an assignment, I couldn't let my cameraman know that I was in a panic situation. I had to hold the candy bars down. On the way back from the assignment, we would stop for lunch at a local diner. I would order a full meal and gulp it down.

Back at the station, I edited and prepared my news stories for the evening broadcast and then headed home. On the way home, often less than two hours after I have eaten lunch, I pulled into a McDonald's and ordered two Big Macs, two large French fries and a large Coke. By the time I arrived at home the candy bars, the lunch, Big Macs and fries consumed caused me to look six months pregnant. I would then rush to the bathroom, stuck my finger down my throat and vomit.

Cooking was one of my hobbies. I would open a cake mix and bake a cake. While it is

cooling, I would put on my jogging suit and running shoes. I would go out and jog for three miles. I had to get the weight off. I would return, shower and observe myself in the mirror and conclude that I was too heavy. I would ice the cake, eat half of it, and go to the gym where I had a membership. There I went through aerobics and used all the exercise machines.

When I got home from the gym, I would sit down and eat one normal slice of my fresh cake. Then, I ate a larger slice. My compulsion forced me to finish the cake. I would watch television for a couple of hours and prepare for bed. Before retiring, I took not one laxative pill, but a dozen. The next morning, if I had not had a bowel movement before I left for work, I would take another dozen. I couldn't get fat!

I had a monster on my back and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake it. My eating habits, my purging through vomiting, an exercise regimen, and my laxative use become more excessive with time. I was powerless to do anything about it.

I went to my medical doctor and he told me to stop doing it. He prescribed tranquilizers. I went to six different psychologists and psychiatrists and none could help me. They could take my money, but none could discover the root of, or solve my problem. I was put on different tranquilizers by different psychiatrists. Some also put me on diets. One suggested that what I needed was a man. I went to my minister and he recommended that I just pray about it and God would heal me. Nothing worked. The more I prayed and the harder I tried, the worse I became. The monster got heavier and more threatening. My future became very bleak. The thoughts of suicide came more often. I could not tell my parents, for that would be a major disappointment to them. They believed I was successful and would someday be up there with Barbara Walters. I did win a United Press Trophy for the best documentary of the year in my third year of broadcasting. But, I was in a battle to keep my sanity. I felt so hopeless.

The church I was a member of never invited members to share their needs. Women could not even speak in its assemblies. There was little or no confessing faults one to another. Even if that church changed its policy, I was so conditioned with the idea of "women remaining silent," that I probably would not have shared my burden with that church anyway.

There was one woman with whom I became close friends and shared confidences. She knew about my eating disorder. She attended another church that had a Sharing Time during worship and it was open to both men and women. There, members publicly shared their sorrows, sins, burdens, and addictions. They also shared their victories, healings, and other blessings. There they prayed for each other's needs. They anointed the sick with oil as they prayed for their healing. My churches' liturgy did not include testimonies by men or women. Had this church been like mine, one that kept their women silent and which allowed no one to give testimonials, I would have never found

help. I would have probably been dead either from a heart attack or suicide. I thank God for the church my friend attended and that did not silence its members, male or female.

One Sunday, just after lunch, my friend called me with some important news. She informed me that at her church that very morning, during testimony time, a lady had testified that she had suffered from bulimia for over ten years. She then told the congregation that she had admitted herself into a Christian psychiatric clinic in another state and came out healed of her addiction to food. She said that although the staff of this clinic dealt with a variety of addictions; treating bulimia and anorexia were their specialties. She encouraged me to meet this woman, hear her story and consider hospitalization too.

She arranged a meeting for the three of us. After hearing her story, I called the clinic about being admitted. They informed me that they had a waiting list, but would be glad to place me on it. They told me that I would have to report within twenty-four hours after a notification of an opening at their clinic or be canceled. I then informed my boss about my condition and asked for confidentiality until I was admitted. He agreed to a leave of absence and assured me that my job would be open when I had my eating disorder under control. He had no idea that I was living two lives, nor the gravity of my condition.

In less than a month the call from the clinic came. I informed my boss, cleared my desk and went home to pack my bag. I was terrified, but even more desperate. I had decided that I would get healing at this clinic or I would die. I had exhausted all other avenues for help.

I drove five hours through most of the night, slept in my car the rest of the night on the hospital's parking lot, and walked into the front office at eight in the morning. My admission papers were filled out and I was guided into a wing of the hospital where I would spend the next three months. The doors were locked behind me and I was now going to face my monster.

I was locked up with anorexics, so thin that I wondered how they got up the energy or strength to even walk. Other bulimics, alcoholics and drug abusers were there to find ways of getting rid of their monsters. Patient's ages ranged from fifteen years to thirty-five.

It took nearly six weeks of individual and group counseling for me to get my first break through. I had no idea what my underlying problem was. I had no idea why I resorted to food for comfort.

My mother and father came for family counseling and informed my counselor that I had been burned in the pubic area and inner thighs as a little girl, and that it had left serious scars. This was the first time he had heard of it. He concluded that I had considered

myself “damaged goods” since childhood. He would now have to get me to acknowledge my blemishes before real healing could begin. There were other factors in the equation as well, one being my weight as a high school teenager. I was never really overweight, but I was on the borderline at times.

The summer following high school graduation, my father wanted me to look my best upon entry to his alma mater in the fall. He offered me twenty-five dollars a pound for every pound I lost during the summer. It was to be used for new school clothes that fall. I accepted his offer and sought ways to lose about twenty pounds, five hundred dollars worth. I also wanted to please him and to enter college looking my very best.

What my father did not realize about that offer, was the fact that I received a message that I was unacceptable to him at my high school weight. I was already permanently damaged due to the scalding accident and now I felt that I was too fat to be fully accepted by my own father. Moreover, I believed that unless I lost weight, it was unlikely that I would ever be accepted by the college crowd. Weight became my most important consideration.

I spent the summer as a counselor at a youth camp. I told a fellow counselor about my dad’s offer and asked her how she kept trim and neat. She let me in on a little secret that worked for her, no matter how much she ate. She recommended that I buy laxatives and diuretic pills. “Flush it before it has a chance to stick to your ribs,” was her recommendation.

Before the end of the summer I was taking laxatives twice daily. I was losing weight fast and the dollars, at twenty-five dollars a pound, were adding up. I went off to college in the fall as thin as a model and some new garments in my wardrobe. I continued my use of laxatives throughout my college years. But, my weight and scars continued to trouble me. The purge from laxatives did not work fast enough. I discovered another way to purge my food that wouldn’t allow any calories to stick to my ribs. I started vomiting.

Between the laxatives and the vomiting, I kept my weight under control. But, what was not under control was my abuse of these purging methods. The need to purge became overbearing. My first thought after a meal was how to get rid of it without creating suspicion. A restroom off the lounge in my dorm was the best place. I could lock the door there, purge and return to whatever I was doing without arousing anyone’s suspicion. If I used the bathroom in my dorm suite, my roommate or my suite mates might hear and get suspicious. By the end of the year, that restroom became the refuge, not only for me, but a dozen other girls with eating disorders in my dorm. One could tell by the odors that this rest room was a haven for other girls who were using vomiting as a method of weight control.

My abuse of my body continued throughout my college years and into my professional life. The abuse got worse with time and so did the burden of guilt and isolation I felt along with it. Who could I tell? I couldn’t go before the church with my needs, such

wasn't allowed under its system of male dominance and governance. A half dozen professional counselors hadn't helped. Prayer didn't curb my destructive behavior.

I came home one weekend and confessed my problem with my mother. I also told her that I had become suicidal. She reported it to my father and he scoffed at such an idea. "Get over it," was his naive solution. He was a professional educator and had no idea that anyone could have an eating disorder with behavior implications as serious as I claimed to have. If my parents could not, or would not, understand my condition, then who would? Until my friend made that phone call on that Sunday, I was without hope.

At the clinic, my primary counselor kept asking me, "When did you become damaged goods?" When I finally opened that logic tight compartment where I kept my burns a secret, I began to heal. There were other family issues that had to be worked out, but with time I worked them out, too. I returned home, resigned my television news job, and wrote a book about my monster. It is now in its twentieth printing. I have now written two other published books. I went on a speaking tour and have appeared on over three hundred campuses and before numerous high school assemblies. In counseling sessions after convocation speeches, dozens and sometimes hundreds of students with a variety of disorders come for encouragement and understanding. Some churches have welcomed me as a speaker. I have conducted dozens of New Hope Weeks for girls and women with eating disorders. For a number of years I represented two of the best eating disorder clinics in the nation. The demand for answers on why women and girls are suffering from these disorders is tremendous and those who have solutions are still few indeed.

I have changed church fellowships. The communion I was brought up in still will not allow women on the pulpit in their congregations for any reason. Had all communions been like that, I would have never heard of the clinic where I was saved from an early death. I feel like a stranger in my former fellowship. When I visit one of its congregations, the controlling doctrines on women's roles in the church means that I am frozen out of any public roll along with all other women. I sit as a stranger among the people I worshipped with most of my life. Sadly, there are girls and women, sitting in the pews of that fellowship and many others, who are going through my disorder or others like it, whose cries for help are never heard. I cannot speak to them publicly and let them know there is hope because of that church's antiquated doctrine and practices.

Until my healing, one of David's prayers became my prayer: **"O Jehovah, the God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee. Let my prayer enter thy presence: Incline your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles, and my soul draws nigh unto Sheol."** (Psalms 88:1-3)

This is also the cry of millions of girls and women suffering with eating disorders. Who else will God use to answer their questions, give them hope and comfort them when they cry?

It has been estimated that one in seven of the coeds in our colleges and universities suffers from some form of an eating disorder.

The Center for Disease Control estimates that there are 7,000,000 Americans suffering from an eating disorder.

Most doctors and counselors still view eating disorders as a diet problem instead of stemming from a deeper psychological problem.

Contact Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders at ANAD, P.O. Box 7, Highland Park, IL 60035. (www.anad.org)

Order Cynthia Rowland McClure's insightful book on bulimia:

The Monster Within

from

Robert H. Rowland

3619 Larchwood Drive

Corona, CA 92881-8784

Phone (915) 898-1947

\$12.50 including P & H

E-mail: RHRowld@Juno.com

CHAPTER 9

I LIVE AMONG THE HOMELESS

I am known as a homeless person. All my possessions are in a “borrowed” shopping cart. In it, I have a well worn sleeping bag, an extra blanket, a change of clothes, and a few cooking and eating utensils. I have no steady job and usually I have no money. I have no address and no phone number. I have a family, but I have no idea where they are. I have no medical insurance. When I get really sick, I go to a free public clinic and stand in line for hours for medical care. Mostly, I just suffer through my illnesses. I do not have one close friend. I do have a few acquaintances. One of them watches my possessions when I occasionally get a temporary job at the Casual Labor Office. I watch his possessions when he has temporary work and I am free.

I am a pretty good carpenter but I have no tools. I sold them long ago to get by for a few days. I cannot afford to rejoin the union and wouldn't have transportation to a job if I had one and was a union member.

I am alone, but I am not alone. I have lived here in the inner city for the past five years. There are hundreds of people like me, or worse off than me, who sleep on the sidewalks, in doorways, on empty lots, in cardboard boxes, under bridges and in empty buildings. We form lines two times a day to get soup at the Salvation Army kitchen or a Rescue Mission nearby. The rescue missions and the Salvation Army also have a limited number of cots where some of us can sleep in the worst of weather. The only problem in that arrangement is that there are never enough cots to accommodate those of us who need shelter. Large cardboard boxes constitute homes for many.

Lots of people drive down the streets where we, the homeless, are concentrated. They drive shiny cars and appear to be prosperous. I'm talking about people who probably consider themselves Christians, who go to church regularly. They go to worship God and sit on padded pews, while resting their feet on carpeted floors. Monday through Friday they see us and say, “How pitiful!” Most of the people in this city, however, never see us. We are a population that never engages in protest marches, or voting campaigns. We have no voice. Many of us do not even have a driver's license for identification.

We each arrived here through a variety of circumstances. Some of us are alcoholics. Some are dope addicts. Others are physically handicapped. Some have serious mental illnesses. Others are simply not equipped to hold down a regular job due to the lack of training or skills. We have become the dregs of society. No residential community wants us around so we congregate here on skid row downtown.

The downtown missions usually require us to sit through a sermon and some singing

before we go through their soup lines for food. We hear about sin, God's love and redemption. Some of us get saved pretty regularly, because for many, salvation doesn't last too long. Some of us resort to thievery in order to get by. Others hustle dope. Most of us just try to get by a day at a time. We have nowhere to go, little to do and nothing but time on our hands.

At various times I have tried to improve my lot. From temporary employment I would save enough money to get a cheap hotel room, where I could shower regularly and sleep in a real bed. I buy used clothes at the Goodwill Store. Occasionally, I have even mustered up the nerve to catch a bus out of downtown to attend nice churches. There the choirs were always dressed in fine robes and the members sat in the padded pews in their Sunday best. The preachers were well dressed and often displayed gold rings and other fine jewelry. I've even heard sermons from Christ's words when he described the judgment. "When did we see you hungry and did not feed you, or thirsty and gave you no drink? When saw we you naked and did not cloth you, or sick and in prison and did not visit you? Or, a stranger and took you not in? When you did it not unto the least of these my brethren, you did it not to me."

Most churches and their members are good at saying, "**Be you warmed and filled,**" but never give the homeless the time of day, let alone the things needful for the body.

When I visit such churches and they learn that I had no address, no family, no job and no hope, they did not know what to do with me. They had no plan to feed strangers like me and they didn't support the missions down town that did. Those nice padded pews were used three or four hours a week while hundreds slept on concrete sidewalks and in doorways downtown. These choirs dressed in velvet robes, while hundreds downtown had only the clothes on their backs. The Church buildings were heated in the winter and air conditioned in the summer, while hundreds downtown shivered in the cold of winter or sweated through the heat of summer. The parking lots at the churches were filled with fine automobiles, while hundreds were putting cardboard over the holes in the soles of their shoes in order to walk about.

I know no one in these churches and no one in them seems to want to know me. I was a poor homeless stranger and it always appears that the churches would be happier if I would just go back to where ever I came from. The churches I have visited do not take strangers like me in.

You may wonder how I wound up homeless, living and wandering the streets of this city. They had their beginnings with an accident. I was married and had three children. We were buying a home. As I was repairing the roof one Saturday, I slipped and fell. Both of my knees were injured and my back was seriously injured. I couldn't return to my job on Monday. Like many families, we were living from paycheck to paycheck. We had no savings and no health insurance. Our financial difficulty quickly escalated into other

even more serious difficulties. I was flat on my back and my wife was forced to care for the children and me without any income. We both appealed to our families for help, but there wasn't much available there. They were also living like we had been living, paycheck to paycheck. We appealed to the church we were members of and the budget was already running short, so, there would be little help from it. The church did take up one special contribution for us, but the amount barely covered our expenses for one month.

Before we knew it, our mortgage company was threatening foreclosure on our house and the bank was threatening to repossess our only car. Then things really got worse. We did lose our home to the mortgage company and the bank did repossess our car.

When we were forced to vacate the house we could not even afford a security deposit or the first and last month's rent on a house or apartment. My wife and daughter moved in with her parents and our son and I moved in with my parents. The plan was to reunite as soon as I had recovered enough to return to the job.

I did recover in about six months and returned to work. The construction project my company was working on was fifty miles from my parent's home. I borrowed my mother's car to make the trip until I was able to afford my own. In the meantime, my wife had gone to work at a fast food joint at minimum wage. I gradually saved enough money to make a down payment on another car. Due to the time consumed in transit, I chose to move near the job site and rent a room in a cheap motel. My son stayed on with my parents.

Time, poverty, distance and separation brought on, serious tensions in my marriage. In my loneliness, I turned to the "bottle" for consolation. My drinking only increased the tension. Before I realized it, my family had broken completely apart. My wife and daughter were going their own way and my son was going another. I seemed helpless to change the directions they were going or to even redirect myself. Eventually, we broke completely up and a divorce followed. My wife and children stayed together and I lived alone.

My back never fully healed and I missed work often. It was hard to find the time and the resources to visit my children. Since, I could not support them as I wanted to, they gradually moved out of my orbit. I quit drinking, but it was too late to make any difference. I became depressed and was later diagnosed as "clinically" depressed. I was pronounced disabled by my doctor. That enabled me to receive a small Social Security check every month. It was sent to me in care of the offices of the Salvation Army, my only address. It was spent long before the month ended, on food and a room in a flophouse. When my money ran out, I would load my grocery cart and take my place back on the street or in some back alley. I had become one of the full time "homeless" folks, or as some called us, "street people." Others looked upon us as bums.

Due to my health problems, I could not hold down a carpentry job had there been one close by for me. I wasn't qualified for any other job. Gradually I moved further down town. I continued to rent rooms in cheap hotels or sleep in doorways. For two weeks out of each month, I was largely dependent upon the soup lines at the missions for my food.

My family was gone. My health was going. My hope was gone. My faith was gone. I began to long for an early death, in order to escape my misery. One Sunday night a youth group from a large city church conducted worship services at one of the missions on skid row. I attended, motivated by the food that was to be served afterwards. A young man delivered a short but meaningful sermon. It reminded me of better years. I was touched, convicted and asked for prayers when they sang the invitation song. The group prayed for me and even encouraged me to attend their church. I pondered that invitation all the next week. I was hopeful that maybe, just maybe, it could help me escape the life I was living and the location where I was forced to live it.

Determined to change my life I dressed in my cleanest clothes and walked twenty blocks to attend worship services at that church on the following Sunday. I don't know what I expected exactly, but I did expect the same kind of warmth the youth group had extended that Saturday night.

There were readings from the Bible, great singing by the congregation and the robed choir. The sermon was right out of the Bible on the hope God offered mankind. Communion was offered to the congregation. I hadn't partaken of the communion in years. The missions did not offer it in their services. The sermon gave me hope of maybe reclaiming my life. I even imagined being reunited with my family, at least with my children. When the invitation was offered, I responded again and asked for prayers. When the song was finished, I was alone on the front pew. The minister sat down beside me and asked what the church could do for me. I gave him a short version my conviction, my sins and my hopes.

He listened patiently as the congregation waited to hear my confession. The music director led the congregation in a verse or two of a song before I was finished. The minister then went to his pulpit and gave the congregation a shorter version of my conviction, my confession of sin and my need for restoration. He then led the church in prayer for this sinner and asked God's forgiveness for my wasted life. With a little business and a couple more songs the benediction was offered and the congregation started filing out. The minister was strategically located in the lobby of the church so that he could shake hands with all his parishioners. I felt out of place. An older and rather distinguished looking man, maybe an elder of that church, came over to welcome me and wish God's blessings on my life. As I moved toward the back of the sanctuary, a nice lady, coming my way, was forced to acknowledge me. She did it with a nod, but did not offer me a handshake. I received two more handshakes before I reached the lobby. The

minister then shook my hand and told me he looked forward to seeing me again the next Lord's Day. He then turned to others.

I left that church and walked back to my room in the flophouse. On the way, I observed members whom I had seen at that church, lined up at a cafeteria as I passed by. None spoke or acknowledged me. I was hungry. I was weak. I was broke. I had to wait until six o'clock to get into a soup line for my only meal that day.

I didn't think I'd be going back to that church again and I didn't expect a visit from its minister or any of its members the following week. And, I don't think the members there will miss me. I did not expect any family to invite me into their home for a meal, let alone for a night. I knew that some strangers represented danger. I knew that wisdom and space limitations dictate that families not share their homes with the homeless. But, I did expect that by some chance, some Christian would inquire about my circumstances, or even invite me to a meal at a local restaurant. None did.

I know there are undue dangers and risks in inviting homeless strangers into private homes. Yet, it seems that the least churches in our cities can do, is to provide financial support for the missions and the Salvation Army that are in a position to help feed and house those homeless folks who live on the streets. There are hundreds of thousands of homeless people like me wandering the streets of our cities without hope, or with very little hope.

According to sheriff of Clark County Nevada, Jerry Keller, in March of 2002 there were over 12,000 homeless people roaming the streets of Las Vegas. In the midst of all that glitter, the plight of the homeless is appalling.

The State of California has a budget of \$20 billion for social services designed to reduce homelessness. California has about 300,000 homeless people. In 2002 it had a law before the legislature that, if passed, would allocate \$900 million for apartments and \$400 million for emergency shelters and housing for people in danger of becoming homeless.

In April, 2002, a homeless shelter was opened in downtown Los Angeles by a non-profit organization with 100 beds, a barber and beauty shop, job counseling office, a training school, and large wardrobe room. It was outfitted with enough nice clothing to dress any homeless man or woman who wanted to seek employment. It also had a job placement office. Such shelters could be established in any city.

In addition to the homeless walking and living on the streets are those who need housing and who can't find it due to shortages in low cost rentals. The Associated Press put out a report by the California Budget Project that estimated that there was a need for 651,000 houses and apartments in 2002 for families earning \$18,000 or less.

An indication of how desperate most street people are, the owners of a popular internet site, “BUMFIGHTS,” has paid desperate “bums” (homeless men and women) as little as \$20 to engage in vicious fist fights, kicking brawls and other forms of mayhem which were video taped. Such “entertainment(?)” indicates just how low some people will go to get an audience and make a buck. They also show the depravity of the producers and that of viewers who make up consumers of such human suffering. Numerous criminal charges have been filed against the video producers as well as a number of civil lawsuits.

St. Paul’s Catholic Church, is located near ground zero, in New York City. It became a haven for the displaced by the events of 9/11. Its deeds have been described as “Radical Hospitality.” It provided food for those working in recovery, beds for the homeless, and offered counseling and hope to the troubled. One is forced to ask, “What would happen to the roll of all churches if they began to practice Radical Hospitality?” What would happen if “Radical Hospitality” became more important than the way our rituals are performed?

“I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you took me in.” “When did we do these things?” “When you did it to the least of these my disciples, you did it unto me.”(Matthew 25:35, 37 & 40)

“Defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and the oppressed.” (Psalms 82:3)

“They ask for decisions and seem eager for God to come near them ... Is it not to share food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-when you see the naked and clothe him?” (Isaiah 58)

“Listen my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love him?” (James 2:5)

CHAPTER 10

I AM A MINISTER

Years ago, I decided to become a minister of the Gospel of Christ. I enrolled at a Christian college and majored in Bible and speech. I was aware that the pay might not be too great. Based on the history of the tenures of ministers at my home church, I was aware that I might have to move quite often. My church had never kept a minister for over five years and the average tenure was closer to three. One had lasted only one year. But the idea of preaching the “unsearchable riches of Christ” appealed to me. After all, I had given my life to Him, therefore to me, preaching was a natural choice of occupations. I felt called of God in my decision.

I prepared for my work and have been engaged in it for more than forty years. At times it has been all, or more than I had expected. I have preached the “good news” to thousands. I have nurtured growing Christians in the grace and knowledge of Christ. I have been held in high esteem in the churches and communities where I have served. I have made many converts and baptized them. I have buried the dead, performed weddings, and counseled the troubled.

I have gone camping with youngsters and traveled with the seniors. I have raised money for Christian schools and colleges, Christian camps, retirement centers, mission fields and orphan homes. I have written and published over two thousand church bulletins. I have served as general custodian, janitor and grounds keeper at some of the churches where I have preached.

I feel that I have enjoyed loyalty from the churches for the most part of my ministry. I have not regretted choosing the ministry for my life’s work. However, there have been some disappointments and I have shed some tears along the way. There is a flip side to the ministry that does not show when I’m preaching, teaching, visiting, counseling and filling my other roles in the ministry. Many people in the pew are totally unaware that there is another side. Or, it is conveniently overlooked or ignored by those who are aware of the other side. Allow me to explain the other side of the ministry that makes the work less than ideal, a side that many church members are strangers to.

Ministers may, and many do, opt out of Social Security. By doing so, they do not have to come up with their half of the monthly payment and the church is relieved of its duty to come up with the other half. It means there is more take home pay for the ministers who choose not pay into the plan while the church enjoys not being burdened with its share too. Many churches fail to provide any kind of a retirement plan for their ministers to substitute for Social Security. Most ministers, not being business majors, never realize that for retirement, they are going down a dead end road. At the end of one’s ministry,

there will be an elderly couple with few or no savings, no Social Security, no 401K plan and probably no Individual Retirement Account. They will have lived in homes furnished by the church and will have no equities in any real estate. They will be looked over for job openings at churches that prefer younger men: Unless they have exceptional abilities the only openings for employment will be in smaller churches that have fewer resources with which to pay their ministers. Church leaders, knowing that its ministers will have rather short tenures, usually fail to provide any assistance to them for retirement.

I have lived in those church parsonages. Some have been modern, but most have been older and often run down. Many were bought when the churches were young. When the churches build new buildings for themselves, they usually keep the old minister's home. It is seldom upgraded. But, it's "good enough" for the preacher's family. At the same time that the average family in the church is growing up and old, it usually moves into larger and better homes. It is also building increased equity all along the way. In contrast, most ministers neither move up, nor build any equity in a home.

There have seldom been any spare dollars in my family's bank account. We have always tried to set an example to the church in sacrificial giving. Any spare dollars went to payoff the orthodontist, church trips, additional education, books, children's tuition, or some benevolent cause related to the church.

There have been times when the pressures, brought on by the shortage of dollars, have been so great that my family had to eat out of the benevolent pantry at the church. We became part of the "community poor." But, dollar shortages have not been the only pressures my family and I have suffered by my choice of occupations. At times, due to church problems, such heavy burdens have been placed on my family, that we needed professional counseling to handle it. At \$65 an hour, we couldn't afford much of that. We just had to be thick skinned at times and maintain stiff upper lips, even though our work called for great tenderness. Church problems and uncertainties about the future have a way of contributing to a minister's personal concerns about security.

Some might ask, "What's the big deal? Everybody has financial problems, job uncertainties, and has to work in difficult situations." One of the differences is in the fact that I can be doing a fine job in ministry, but I can be fired on the whim of a few disgruntled members of the church. Their influence may far exceed that of members who are less judgmental and much more Christian in spirit.

I've mentioned the financial problems, but those are not the only problems facing the minister and his or her family.

Every time I have been hired, the church leaders made it clear that my wife was expected to be a housewife and mother. With one exception, no church wanted her working outside the home. Volunteering to work outside the home on church endeavors, however, was a

gladly granted exception to the rule and expected. They overlooked, maybe willfully, the fact that my mate was as important to my ministry as I was. She made encouraging visits and phone calls. She wrote notes and cards addressing the needs of church members. She baked and delivered cakes, pies, and whole meals for those in need. She assisted in weddings and funerals. She taught classes. She chaperoned the youth groups on trips. She accompanied me on calls to the hospital, the bereaved, and the shut-ins. She hosted bridal and baby showers. The church always enjoyed the services of two people in ministry even though it only paid for one. My wife never complained. But, she was as much a part of the success of my ministry as I was, and maybe, more so at times.

If my wife bought a very nice dress or suit, some church members thought she was extravagant. If she wore her worn out clothing, some thought she dressed too shoddily for a minister's wife.

Some of the churches that we have ministered to were not at all sensitive to our need for recognition and signs of appreciation. Our birthdays and anniversaries were largely overlooked. We have never received a year end bonus or an appreciation check at Christmas.

When we asked for a raise, made reasonable by inflation, some accused us of being money hungry. Or, that we were unwilling to suffer for the cause of Christ. Other families could enjoy two incomes, live lavishly in big new homes, drive big fancy automobiles and never be criticized. For most of the time in our ministry, we have been a one car family and forced to live modestly and humbly.

On the other hand, we were expected to dress well and entertain often. When I accepted an invitation to play golf, I always paid my own green fees lest I become obligated or compromised by accepting gifts. Even though I have considered all church members friends, I cannot be too friendly with any. In tight situations, a very close friendship might cause me to water down the message I preach or compromise in making certain decisions. I cannot be true to God and allow that to happen. Even though I have had a pretty close relationship with the elders of the churches I served, I still had to respect the employer-employee relationship that existed. A line always exists that cannot be crossed safely. There have been very few intimate friendships between me and any of the elders I have worked for.

One of our heaviest loads in ministry was borne by our children. They were always placed in an unjust spotlight. They were more severely criticized for just doing what all kids do. They were expected to behave above the congregation's norms, just because they were the preacher's kids. They did not wear Air Jordan shoes or Izod shirts. We did not buy any name brands when we went shopping for school clothes and shoes. We traded at discount houses. Our children all took part time jobs as soon as they were old enough, in order to supplement family income.

If one of our children missed prayer meeting because they had a soccer match or a little league game, we were accused of not setting a proper example for the rest of the church. Other member's children could miss church services to play, and their parents could miss to watch them without criticism, but it was not so with our family. We have taken our children out of ball games at half time or in the fifth inning in order to avoid criticism for missing church. I am now embarrassed to acknowledge that I took my oldest son out of a baseball game at the eighth inning when his team was ahead in a championship game. He was the relief pitcher and had fanned three batters in a row in the seventh. My sensitivity to criticism was humiliating for my son. It was also a cause for resentment toward the church and me by the coach, the other players and other parents. I was often pressured into such behavior by the legalists in the congregations I served.

I have been criticized for explaining Scripture contrary to traditional interpretations. I have been criticized for not preaching enough on certain subjects and preaching too much on other subjects. When I exposed some "sacred cow" of the church, I could expect immediate repercussions. If the "sacred cow" was a tradition held by a powerful or rich church member it could have meant the loss of my job. In the "belly" of each congregation there always lurk a number of reasons for firing the preacher that have nothing to do with competence, performance, truth or righteousness.

In theory, we who minister are subject to the leaders of the church. In reality, we are subject to the whims of nearly every member of the congregation. After all, they all contribute to the payment of my salary. Do they not? We are hired to serve them all, are we not? It seems to most that the right to criticize and make demands is in the province of every member, regardless of the motives, since the minister works for the whole church not just the elders.

My family has had to adjust to new congregations, new schools and a new community every time we moved to another church. Friends and neighbors were left behind.

When I compare my dilemmas and frustrations to those of Paul and Peter, they seem insignificant. Even though I have never suffered a moment of real persecution, I have suffered when my congregation was in turmoil. I suffered when my wife or our children were unjustly criticized or undue burdens were placed on their shoulders. We suffered when the paycheck didn't pay our bills and no one seemed to be concerned. My family has often suffered neglect because I felt that it was necessary to be on call "24 and 7." Even though I officially had one day off each week in most churches, I had to leave town to really be off.

As I look forward to retirement, I do so with uncertainty and some fear. I trust that God will take care of us. He'll have to, because we and the churches we have served haven't done very good job in making plans for our future needs.

In my more sober moments, I weigh the good against the bad in my choice of professions

and ask, “Was it worth it?” The answer is always, “Yes! Yes!” Upon reflection, my work affirms my faith in God and the importance of my work in His kingdom. I do have faith that He will take care of my wife and me in our old age, even though the churches have made no plans to get us through the last years of our lives.

If my family or I seem to get uptight at times, please understand that we have unique problems and stresses. We also have all the normal problems that other families experience. But, with God’s help, we have not yielded to pressures of our chosen profession and quit. We do not plan to give up our ministry and start selling real estate or insurance. Many ministers have already given up and are doing just that. We have resisted joining multi-level marketing groups like Amway, even though we could have always used the extra dollars they may have produced. I did not want to divert my energies from my ministry to some profit venture on the side.

My wife and I have done our best to **“keep our hands on the plow and to not look back.”** We look forward to many more years of spreading the Kingdom of God.

Our struggles may seem strange to many. There are times that we feel like strangers on the pew, the front pew. All that we ask is that you understand us, encourage us, and support our efforts to serve Christ and spread his message of hope to the hopeless. When you criticize us, make sure that it is motivated by love and is justified. For such criticism, we will be in your debt. But we, like you, need a little slack as we try to do our best.

“How beautiful are the feet of them that bring glad tidings of good things.” (Romans 10:15)

“Endure hardships with us as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer.” (2 Timothy 2:4)

“You yourselves know, from the first day I set foot in Asia, after what manner I was with you all the time, serving the Lord with all lowliness of mind, and with tears, and with trials, which befell me by the plots of the Jews; how I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, testifying to both Jews and Greeks repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 20:18-21)

“I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God.” (Acts 20:20)

“Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke and exhort with all long suffering and teaching.” (2 Timothy 4:2)

Eleven Suggestions that Will Bless Ministers and Their Families.

1. Always show goodwill toward your minister.
2. Praise his better sermons and tell him why you liked them.

3. On the anniversary of being hired have a celebration party. Invite the whole church.
4. Recognize his family's anniversaries and birthdays. Make a giant card and have everybody sign it.
5. For Christmas, take up a special collection and buy them a needed gift, or give his family a surprise paid vacation at some nice resort.
6. After five years, take up a contribution and give them a trip to some distant location that they have always wanted to visit.
7. Encourage members to drop them notes of encouragement and appreciation.
8. If and when criticism is necessary, do it in privacy. But first shelve your criticism for one week. A month is sometimes even better.
9. Let their mates and children know that they are appreciated for their contribution to the ministry.
10. Your minister will never know of your love and appreciation unless you express it. Don't hesitate to do so!
11. While you are remembering to honor your ministers do not overlook honoring your church secretary, janitor and other staff. Without them your minister is pretty helpless.

CHAPTER 11

I AM THE MODERN LEPER

The latest report in 2002 from the Center for Disease Control, states that there are now over 1,000,000 people infected with HIV in the United States alone. It is estimated that there are over 30,000,000 in southern Africa. In the US over 40,000 persons became infected in 2002. That is a jump from about 26,000 in 2000. Newfound drugs give the infected some hope. But, they also give the risk takers the false notion that there is or will be a cure if they become infected. The infection crosses all social lines. It makes no distinction between the young and the old, female and male, black and white, homosexual and heterosexual, or the rich and the poor.

A Christian woman tells the story of her friendship with three homosexuals who were infected with HIV. Two have died from the infection.

My friend was dying of AIDS. I had known him since the eighth grade. When he was forty, he contracted aids. Whenever I traveled to his city, I visited him. If he was up to it, I brought him dinner. I'd sit by his bed and we would talk. He knew he'd die soon and shared his excitement about seeing the angels in heaven.

We would share things that had gone on in our lives. We debated whether a person was born gay or whether it was a result of one's environment? He told me that he knew he was different from his earliest memories, around age three. He said that he never made a conscious choice to become a homosexual. Rather, that was the way he always was.

Since childhood he said he had looked at girls and boys differently than the other children looked at them. His buddies all called attention to the prettiest girls in school and wanted to be around them and later to date them. In grade school, if you kissed a girl, no matter how pretty, it was an achievement. If she was the prettiest girl, you were a hero. In high school, greater conquests were causes for greater brags. Heterosexual attraction and behavior were the norms. Some of the guys who played around carried condoms in their wallets for protection, or to make an impression on the other guys. Others were promiscuous but never practiced safe sex at all. Many of the girls were as indifferent to "safe sex" as their partners were. They worried little about sexually transmitted diseases. The "pill" enabled most of them to worry little about pregnancy.

My friend said his needs were very different. He did get a few girl kisses to brag about. But, those kisses didn't bring him a great deal of pleasure, even though they did give him some bragging rights. Instead of worrying about kissing girls, he wondered how it would feel to kiss the quarterback on the football team. He was the person my friend thought he would prefer to kiss while others were dreaming of kissing the beauty queen. But, he also knew that even if he did, there would be no bragging about it.

He was a straight-A student in high school, attended a Christian college and was admitted to medical school upon graduation. During college he studied hard and dated little. During his freshman year he met another male student, who, upon first eye contact, passed along a subtle message that he too, was different. They began going through the cafeteria line together and eating at the same table. They became close buddies. They played tennis together. They went to ball games and movies together. He went home with his new friend at spring break to meet his family. To them, he was just a buddy from college. To each other, it had become much more.

During their sophomore year they signed up as roommates. Before Thanksgiving vacation they were no longer just roommates, they had become intimate partners. Their guilt was overwhelming. But, the pleasures they enjoyed with each other were enough and to spare to compensate for their guilt. Their relationship continued through college. At their first sexual encounter they prayed for forgiveness for their sinful acts. By their senior year there was little guilt, no prayer, and lots of pleasure. No one seemed to suspect that their friendship was any more than what other roommates in the dorms enjoyed. Occasionally, they had dates with girls and took them to formal club and college functions.

Upon graduation they were forced to part ways. My friend went to medical school and his roommate took a job in another state. Separation did not eliminate the hormones raging in their young bodies. With time, each would be attracted to new secret partners. The rigors of medical school forced him to sublimate his sexual needs to his studies. His social needs were largely met in a singles group at the church that he attended with regularity. He developed pretty close friendships with some members of the group. To the women in the group, he was considered a prize catch. But, no matter how much they saw him, none could get beyond a warm platonic Christian relationship with him. Some were hoping, "He'll have more time and be available for dating once he gets out of medical school."

But, once out of medical school, he chose to practice medicine in the big city and a three-hour drive from his hometown. Once his practice was established, he was free to investigate the opportunities for relationships with others. He had admitted to himself that he was gay and that nothing outside an act of God was going to change that fact. He had prayed for a change since grade school and God hadn't relieved him of his homosexuality, yet. He hated his life style. Sometimes he hated himself. But, as far as he knew no one in his circle of friends, family or church knew that he was gay.

He started going to a local gay bar for a few beers on Friday nights to relieve his tensions and for the possibility of meeting a potential partner. The bar was filled with men looking for dates. He went home alone for a few weeks. He would just have a beer or two, dance with four or five men and go home. By this time, the news of a new disease called, "AIDS" was rocking the homosexual communities of America. But, it surely wouldn't

affect him. The odds for infection were minute when compared with the numbers who were homosexual. Moreover, he was a physician, he could and would find medical help if he ever needed it.

He finally picked up a date at the gay bar and one date led to another. Alone in a big city, he headed for the bar two or three times a week after his office was closed and he had made his hospital rounds. On every other weekend he was on hospital call and on the off weekends he spent his time with new friends. When approached by the church regarding his lagging attendance, he easily justified his absences due to the pressures of establishing a new medical practice.

He became a successful physician, but about the time it was well established, he was diagnosed with HIV. He was in his mid-thirties. He loved life, his family, and even though he had almost quit the church, he still loved it. And, the family and the church all loved him. They didn't exactly shower him with love and support when he made his condition known. He confessed the sin of his life style that had brought him to this destructive end, seeking forgiveness from both the church and God. On the Saturday before he confessed his sin and condition to the church, he had driven home to reveal his life style and medical condition to his family.

His father turned his back on him and his mother went into hysterics. A wall went up so high and thick between him and his dad, that they almost lost all communication. His father later admitted that he had suspected nothing, while his mother confessed that she had worried about his sexual orientation since the fourth grade. Still, she was crushed by the news. The revelation of his homosexuality was more devastating to them than was his infection with a deadly disease. He asked them to pass along the sad news to his siblings because he couldn't face them.

One evening on one of my visits, I asked him, "What should the church do about the homosexual?" He answered with great conviction, "The church must start loving the homosexual and help them abstain from their immoral behavior. As one who is going to die, I am convinced that celibacy is the only answer to sexual sin among the unmarried, homosexual or heterosexual. If heterosexuals can live alone, remain celibate, and enjoy life, so can homosexuals. He was fully convinced that sex outside of marriage was sinful. Yes, his sins were grievous, but all sin is sin, regardless of who commits it.

He stated, "Each of us has sinned and does sin. Are some sins acceptable to the Christian community, while other sins are not? One of the sins that can never be accepted by the church is sexual immorality, gay or straight. The church must be supportive and encourage all sinners and that includes homosexuals. We need love and understanding, not rejection."

He handed me a letter from a mutual Christian friend. He had written, "I guess you're really sorry now for the life you have lived." "He was saying, 'Your sins are worse than

my sins.’” What he didn’t know, or maybe didn’t even believe or care, was that it is possible for a homosexual to be forgiven and restored to fellowship with God and the church like any other sinner. His friend could not accept the possibility that this brother in Christ had repented and stood justified by the blood of Christ.

He then asked me, “Do you want to know what real love is? Real love is when someone carries me to the tub and bathes me because I can’t do it by myself. Real love is bathing me and cleaning out the sores on my body. It is cleaning up my vomit or my diarrhea, and changing my diapers, because I don’t have the strength to do it for myself. That’s what real love is at this time in my life.”

He died of AIDS at the age of forty-one.

Dying of AIDS is horrific. Another friend, Roberto, just disappeared one day. I found out that he had contracted AIDS. My husband and I began a search for him. We finally found him in a cheap hotel, without a single friend or family member to give him aid or comfort. His shame had engulfed and overwhelmed him. He informed us that he just wanted to be left alone to die. Yet, he was desperate for help from someone.

After much frustration and a lot of closed doors, another friend and I working together, found a bed for him in a hospital for AIDS’ patients. My vivacious and funny friend, Roberto, had given up. I continued to visit him. He continued to exhibit anger. When I tried to comfort him with words and prayer, he would pull the sheet over his face and refuse to respond. Within a month after hospitalization, he had lost over thirty pounds. He was withering away before my eyes. His bones hurt. He had continuing diarrhea. He couldn’t eat and when he tried, he could not keep his food down. Open sores appeared on his skin.

I was there the day he died. But he did not recognize me. Unable to talk, he labored even to breathe. He gasped for one final breath and his spirit returned to God who had given it to him.

This friend, at age four, was raped by a relative. His mother abandoned him when he was nine. He went to work as a dishwasher in a restaurant in order to survive. He never finished high school. He spent his young years trying to find love. But, he couldn’t accept natural or normal love when it was offered. The ghosts of his childhood haunted him. He sought acceptance and found fleeting relationships in the gay community and there he contracted AIDS. He died at age forty. He died in a local hospital without a single member of his family or a single friend, except me, at his side. A half dozen men from the gay community attended his funeral. He had no family, no church fellowship, no club membership, and no support group. He died a miserable death, virtually alone.

My husband befriended Jason, another guy who was gay. Jason, weary of his struggle with his lifestyle, sought help. He wanted to find Christ and have the joy of salvation.

His struggle didn't go away. As he faced his behavior, he struggled with his faith in God. At times, he wanted to give up on himself and God.

Jason was very needy, as desperate people are. He needed friendships. He needed to be understood. He wanted to be straight, and worked to get out of the life of homosexuality. He had high expectations of anyone whom he called a friend. My husband was determined to help Jason save himself, along with help from God and other Christian friends.

After years of wrestling with his sexuality, he found help at a wonderful ministry in Southern California called, "Desert Springs." The professionals there understood homosexuality. He learned that his own mother had molested him as a child. This molestation destroyed his ability to trust women. His father was emotionally and physically detached from Jason all his life. This detachment and his fear of women led him down a path to both need and find male companionship in the homosexual communities.

Through counseling, Jason broke his dependence on homosexuals for friendships and relationships. He is now a full-time minister of the gospel of Christ. When I am around him, I see a man of great compassion for others who are struggling. He believes that the church must find ways to embrace homosexuals and lead them away from their lifestyles. He says, "It's time we professed Christians stop being afraid and start doing something for the homosexuals that will enable them not only to want to change their lives, but which will assist them in changing their lives."

In almost every church there are gay men and women who battle daily their sexual orientation. Most keep their homosexuality a secret. They fear the rejection that would come with disclosure, even though they totally abstain from every form of sexual contact.

One mother and a close Christian friend of mine, grieving over her son who died of AIDS, told me that in the end he was blind and was unable to move his arms and legs. She said that she felt so alone in his final days. She was so afraid of what people would think, that she could not ask others for help. Finally, in desperation, she asked for help from a few Christian friends. But, instead of helping and supporting her, most of them began to shun her.

She understood why people were afraid. But, she thought that everyone knew that families and health care professionals care for AIDS victims all the time without being infected. A couple of Christian ladies did help her out, but her son needed some male support as he faced eternity. She called on the elders of the church to give him some comfort and hope, but not one came to support him or her in those final hours. I've wondered if these men, who claimed to be the shepherds of the church, just weren't strong enough to handle an AIDS situation, or whether they simply did not care.

“All my son needed, was some compassion and to be treated with dignity in those closing days of his life,” she stated. I wanted someone to say, “Brother, I’m here for you and I’ll be here when or as long as I’m needed.” With tears in her eyes, she asked me, “Do you think Christians have a right to treat people dying with AIDS with any less dignity than they offer others?”

Her son died at thirty-six years of age. This grieving perplexed Christian mother now attends a grief support group for families who are losing loved ones with AIDS, or who have lost loved ones to AIDS. The last time I talked to her, she had just returned from a group session. There a young infected husband reported that he had just lost his wife. She had contracted the virus from him. He said he wrestled with suicide daily. A mother and father reported that they had just lost their only son. Another father in the group said his son was also suicidal over the burden of guilt he was carrying for bringing that disease into his home. He was bisexual and his sinful behavior not only gave him AIDS, it brought the AIDS infection home to his wife.

The parents of another young man were not only grief stricken over the death of their son, but guilt stricken over the fact they did not even know their son, nor were they able to do anything about it. They wondered if there wasn’t something they could have done to alter his behavior and his life style at an earlier age.

There is a wake up call, church! There are desperate people there on the pew beside you. Some are battling to control their behavior every day. Some find that their homosexuality never quite leaves their consciousness. Others are suffering from a disease that ultimately kills. They all sense an alienation from the heterosexual community. Their suffering is often only shared with some partner, mother, father, brother, sister, or a wife and children. Some do not even have any family for support. Many of these modern day ‘lepers’ are forced to fight their battles alone. We must stop thinking, and by our response to this modern plague, stop shouting, “Unclean! Unclean!”

A married friend calls his homosexuality a monster. He is fully aware that this monster is always there. The only thing that keeps him going is a loving wife, a support group and the Holy Spirit. He has never given up his faith, but it has caused him to do battle with his monster for a lifetime. His Christian conviction on sexual behavior is the only thing that has enabled him to be faithful to his marriage vows.

“Wake up, church!” Homosexuals and bisexuals cry out for strength, understanding and help. Being one or the other is not a sin in itself. Giving in to their gay passions is the sin. If a heterosexual can live a single and celibate life, gay people can too. Many out of conviction do. There is big difference in being homosexual and practicing it. Loving and supporting a homosexual is not a violation of God’s laws. For some, it easy to say, “They deserve to be dying as punishment for their sins.” But, don’t we all?

Jesus died for sinners. His church should be a safe haven for all sinners who confess their

sins, repent and look to the Lord Jesus Christ alone for direction, strength and salvation. All sinners are baptized into the same body, the church,

As American Christians, we cannot overlook the million HIV sufferers in our country alone and the families that suffer their pain and loss with them. We must find a way to aid and comfort them. They all need to know that "Help is on the way." And, if church members cannot personally handle ministering to them, we need to support those who can and do.

It is estimated that in the year 2000 there were over 40 million people worldwide infected with AIDS and the number continues to climb.

The AIDS infection can strike any teenager, any young family or any retired person at any time. It just takes yielding to one temptation and engage in one sexual act outside of marriage to become infected. Then there will be a lifetime filled with regrets for that one sexual act. It can result from a single IV injection. It has also spread in one transfusion of contaminated blood.

"Let us walk becomingly, as in the day; not in reveling and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy. But put you on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." (Romans 13:13-14)

"But you, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, who are in doubt; and some save, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh." (Jude 20-23)

"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!" (James 2:12-13)

"If you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your father in heaven forgive you ours." (Matthew 6:14)

CHAPTER 12

THE SNIFFERS, HUFFERS AND CUTTERS

Most Christians are aware of the illegal use of Marijuana by citizens young and old. The fact that Pot smoking often leads to other heavier drugs is an established fact. Pot is often the entry drug. What many parents do not know, often Christian parents, is that there are other forms of getting high that does not come from the use of illegal drugs.

It has been estimated that about two millions youngsters, ages twelve to eighteen get their kicks from under the sinks or from the shelves in our bath rooms and in the garages. Some get their kicks from the can of gas used in the lawn mower.

Let us tell you about Henry. He was a maintenance man on a Christian College campus. He kept his building clean and polished. His wife had left him with a five-year old son whose name was Charles. Henry was not the most attractive man around, but he was a dependable man. He had difficulties combining work and being a single parent. But, with the help of a nearby day care center he made it. Life was not easy, but the two of them got along pretty well without a woman in the house. They were regular in their church attendance. Henry took a part time job as janitor at church to help make ends meet. This second job took up many of his evening and weekend hours. Little Charles tagged along with dad on the part time job.

The contacts Charles had with women were with his first and second grade teachers. He enjoyed some close contact at the day care center where he went after school each day. At school he watched other children arriving in their cars with their mothers. He watched as these mothers gave their children hugs and kisses as they dropped them off. He would have given anything for a hug from a loving mother. The only woman's kisses he could ever remember were those he received from his grandmother as a little boy on occasional visits to his paternal grandparent's house.

When he visited the homes of his few friends, he wished that their moms were his. He imagined that some of these homes would have reason to adopt him and make him a part of their family where he could get those hugs he saw others get. Even though his dad was a loving and considerate man, nothing or nobody could take the place of his mother. His did not visit him, call or write.

Henry built his son tree a house in a large cottonwood tree in their back yard when Charles was in the fourth grade. It was really a fortress of sorts, where Charles and some of the neighborhood boys could play war games. They were soldiers one day and cowboys the next. The tree house was a place of escape for this growing boy. Here his imagination could work and here he could hide his loneliness. He ran an extension cord

from the back porch up to the fort, enabling him to have lights at night and watch television on a small set he had received on his tenth birthday.

By his twelfth birthday he had secreted away all sorts of things in the tree house. Some had been given, some had been found and some he had stolen during his idle hours. He no longer went to day care. Henry thought he was big enough and responsible enough to take care of himself after school until he came home from work. Henry never visited the tree house, nor did he feel that he had any reason to.

As boys will do, they passed on to each other what they were learning about girls, sports, tobacco, dope and alcohol. They had used the fortress as a hide-away to smoke their first cigarettes. However, as Charles' boy friends grew older, they came to the tree house less. But Charles had become so attached to it, that he spent most of his lonely hours there. It became his escape from the empty house he and his dad lived in.

There was a story circulating around school which revealed that one could pour gasoline on a rag, sniff the rag and get on a high equal to that of any other drug. Curiosity and daring led Charles to pour a cup of gas into a fruit jar from a gas can and take it up to fortress to experiment. He soaked a wash cloth with gas and took a whiff. The effects of breathing the gasoline fumes were immediate. He got all light-headed and a bit dizzy. He satisfied himself that Gasoline fumes were a cheap and easy way to get high. He told three boys at school what he had done and they showed some interest in getting on that kind of a high with him.

Charles, in his loneliness, was interested in getting on regular highs. The very next day he climbed the ladder to fort and poured some more gasoline on the wash rag and sniffed again. He got immediate results again and a little more light-headed and a bit more dizzy. His buddies didn't drop by that day and by the time his dad came home from work Charles had a pretty big headache.

All the next day Charles couldn't get the memory of the effects of the gas fumes out of his head. He told, in fact he bragged, about his second experiment with the gasoline fumes to the other guys and invited them to drop by the tree house again that afternoon. Three of them did and the gasoline soaked rag was passed around. Charles was the host and the one with all the experience at sniffing gasoline fumes. So he showed off. He sniffed and sniffed.

One of the friends had heard that mixing paint fumes and gasoline really did produce a kick. The boys then mixed gasoline and paint and starting sniffing. Charles wanted to show off some more, so he sniffed longer and more often than his friends on these stronger fumes.

Within a few minutes he did not know where he was or whom he was with. He then passed out on the floor of the tree house and his buddies deserted him pronto. None

returned to see if he was OK, nor did they report it to their parents.

Henry returned from work at his usual time and Charles was not at home. He assumed that he would drift in shortly and proceeded to fix dinner for the two of them. Time passed and Charles hadn't returned. The light in the tree house was not burning. One of his buddies lived less than a block away, so Henry walked over to inquire about the whereabouts of his son. His buddy claimed he hadn't seen him since school was out. He claimed that none of the guys had stopped by from school to play in the fort. Henry then called the homes of the two other buddies and neither claimed to have seen Charles after school.

Henry went out and climbed the ladder to the fort. He pulled the chain on the light switch and saw his son's body lying on the floor of the tree house. He grabbed him and found his body to be stiff and cold.

He rushed down the ladder and rang 911. In a matter of moments an ambulance and the police had arrived with flashing red and blue lights and their sirens blasting. The neighbors rushed out into their yards to see what was happening. Eventually, the body of Charles was lowered to the ground, placed on a gurney and taken away.

An investigation followed and the friends of Charles were interviewed by the police. One of the three confessed to having sniffed the fumes with Charles and implicated the other two for experimenting with it. All three now have to live with the knowledge that they deserted their friend when he needed them most. The saddest part of that knowledge was in learning that they might have saved Charles' life had they called 911 as soon as he passed out. Instead of saving him, they fled in fear.

There was a big funeral at the church. The sixth grade classes were dismissed to attend the funeral. Many church members attended. Henry and his parents sat alone on a pew down front. There were numerous flower arrangements gracing the pulpit area. Songs were sung. Scriptures were read. Prayers were offered. A short obituary was read. But missing in the whole service was what the church could and should have done for Henry and Charles.

Henry knew most of the college's personnel and he knew every professor in his building at the college by first name. Every professor knew Henry by at least his first name. They knew there was no mother in his home and that he was rearing Charles alone. Henry could not remember when he or his son was invited into one of their homes for a meal, or even a visit. Not one of the deans or vice presidents had ever invited this employee or his son over to their home for a dessert and coffee after church. Although the chancellor and the president of the college knew who Henry was, they knew nothing about his life, nor could they have told you which boy in Sunday school belonged to him.

Most of the church members were aware that Henry and Charles lived alone, but no one

wondered if they were lonely nor did they seem to care. Henry had held down his job at the college and had attended a nearby church for five years, but he and his son had never been invited into a single home for a Sunday dinner. They were strangers sitting on the pew needing acceptance and inclusion, but no one seemed to care, notice or to make any attempt to make them a part of the social structure at the core of the church.

More tragic than the failure of the college and the church communities to take Henry and Charles in, is the fact that they had never been invited into the home of a single elder of the church; men charged with the command to “be hospitable.”

Maybe, just maybe, if one family had taken them in and showered some affection on Charles and others like him, they might not have needed to experiment with inhalants.

Maybe, just maybe, if the church had a program in the empty church house for latch key kids after school, where volunteers could have showered some love and affection on such children, children like Charles would still feel safe, healthy, loved, accepted and wanted.

Maybe, just maybe, Charles would be alive, a productive citizen and participant in the life of the church.

Charles was not the only child in that school who died experimenting with mind altering substances. Within four years of Charles’ death two other elementary students died. Mike died sniffing the fumes from a spray can of paint. Mary Alice died the first time she used a spray can from under the kitchen sink for sniffing and huffing.

Parents must be aware of the dangerous substances not related to illegal drugs. All Christians must be aware of the lonely, disaffected and alienated people among its members and in its community. People, young or old, with healthy relationships seldom resort to mind altering substances in order to survive. Awareness is, however, not enough. Churches can develop hospitality programs so that every member is included and made welcome in each other’s homes as well as at church services. Larger churches should be able to develop after school programs in their communities for latch key children. Such programs can become not only a service to moms and dads needing supervision for their children, but they can become important evangelistic outreaches for the church.

It has been estimated that over 2,000,000 children in the United States have tried whiffing, huffing and sniffing the fumes of various substances. Many die from it. Others do permanent damage to their brains and lungs. Children must be warned and taught about the dangers that lurk under our kitchen sinks and on the shelves in our garages. Moreover, they must find such love and support from parents and other adults, so that they will feel less need to experiment.

The Cutters

We know about the abuse of drugs and inhalants among our population. We are aware of

the abuse of alcohol. Most of us have at least heard about eating disorders. But there is a significant number of young people, estimated by some high school counselors, to be one in fifty teenagers, who are cutters. Let us tell you about just one case.

Helen is an only child and a senior in high school. Her dad is an attorney and her mother sells real estate. Both are highly successful in their chosen professions. They live in a lovely home in the suburbs and enjoy the finer things of life. They are faithful attendants at their church and participate in all manner of community activities. They support their political party and its politicians. They are members of two service clubs and the local health spa where they work out three times a week. Helen's dad is on the school board and talks of running for a judgeship in the county elections some day. Her mom works night and day seeking listings and showing real estate to prospective buyers. In fact, Helen is usually alone after school, but is expected to fulfill the dreams her parents have for her. She drives a cute little sports car and has had adequate spending money for buying about anything her heart desires.

That sounds like a very good life, doesn't it? Who could complain about such success and such opportunities? No one does, openly. What no one knows, but her parents, is that Helen goes to a psychiatrist one day each week for counseling.

Her parents, though emotionally remote, expect the best out their daughter. To please them, she needed to make A's in her schoolwork. She was once on the swimming team. In order to do that, she had to get up at five o'clock, five days a week, for a two-hour workout before school. She had to attend Bible school and church every Sunday and prayer meetings on Wednesday evenings. Her parents wanted her to run for secretary of the student body. She did and she won. She is also a co-editor of her school paper. But, her life has hardly been her own. The pressure to succeed in every activity has been enormous. She could not afford to drop one activity and still fulfill her parent's ambition. But, she found a way.

Why does she see a psychiatrist every week? It is because she is a cutter. When the pressures from her activities become unbearable, she feels compelled to find a way to lash out, or let the steam off. She is not suicidal, but she has used razor blades and other sharp instruments to slash or punch holes in her flesh. A little blood letting relieves a lot of the tension and pressure. She has scars on both arms and legs from the cuts. She had a self-inflicted tattoo on each leg where she used a ball-point pen to puncture the skin and let a little blood out. The tattoos had no particular design, but they were embarrassing to her parents. She doesn't swim any more because the scars and tattoos became too embarrassing. Her parents took her to a dermatologist and had the tattoos removed. She no longer has to go to swimming workouts because she dropped out. That has relieved some of the pressure from her life. But she still cannot control the urge to puncture or cut her skin and watch it bleed.

Children like Helen, attend church, participate in its youth programs and no one has the slightest idea that they are suffering from the excessive parental expectations. The stress and tension they endure daily are beyond the experience of most church members or their children. How wonderful it would be if our churches could provide individual and group counseling sessions that would enable our troubled children to vent their anger, frustration and stress. How nice it would be if these young “strangers” on our pews could view the church as a haven, where they receive not only instruction and worship experiences, but understanding and comfort. And where the church itself helped parents learn not to expect or demand too much of their children.

According to Marion Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund, an American child is ...

abused or neglected every thirteen minutes.

born to an unwed mother every twenty-six seconds.

born into poverty every thirty seconds.

arrested for a violent crime every five minutes.

killed by a gun every five hours.

Every day 1,234 children run away from home.

Every day 2,860 children experience the divorce of their parents.

Every day over 1,200,000 latchkey children go home where a gun is available.

The Cry of a Lost Fifteen-Year-Old

Here we are, face to face, living the life with nothing to say. Hoping someone will love me someday.

I need a hug and big old kiss, this is something of an every day wish. For someone to hold me and say our love is true.

But this is something I cannot do.

I need someone to fill me with all the things going on with them. But hold on, wait a minute, I need to grab a paper and pen.

I’m sitting here mad, with nothing to say, wishing I could just leave. Or just run away.

I wish and hope that I was next to you and do all the things I want to do, But, you are not here, SO now we are through.

Why am I here in this world of fear, hoping my death will soon be near? Every night and every day, I hear voices that tell me to leave,

but I have no where to go, SO I stay.

I sit here and sigh, hoping not to cry, those lonely and hurtful tears from my eyes.

So once again I ask myself, “Why?” Is it because I lack dignity or intelligence?

In my mind I try to focus on reality. “Why,” I ask again, “am I here.”

Is it because God loves me and He wants me to walk into the light with the best of things?

Or, is it because I’m too blind to see, or stuck on the fact that death awaits me? Again, I ask, “Why?”

This poem was written in a juvenile hall by a lost, lonely and hopeless student.

“At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?’ He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whosoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.’” (Matthew 18:1-5 NIV)

What kind of stewards will we be? There are thousands of church buildings that sit mostly vacant and idle Monday through Saturday while hundreds of thousands of latchkey children go home from school without supervision. At the same time, there are hundreds of thousands of able and willing church members, many retired with little to do, who would volunteer to assist in supervising and instructing those children after school if churches would set up programs for them.

Will our churches continue to “bury their talents,” be blind to opportunities and keep their doors closed, or will we use them to serve and save these children to the glory of God?

CHAPTER 13

THE EX-CONVICT

I am an ex-convict. I understand why you do not wish to get close to me once you learn of my past. I have done some pretty bad things in my life. I do not, and will not, try to justify them. I chose to break the law and commit crimes. I have only myself to blame for spending one-third of my life behind bars. It has been an embarrassment to and a burden on my family and many former friends.

But, I need to tell you my story. Maybe then you will understand and I will no longer be a stranger to you and other members of the church. Then it might be possible for you to no longer feel that you prefer to be a stranger to me. I don't wish to make you feel uncomfortable, nor do I want to intrude upon your world without your informed consent. However, I want you to accept me as a child of God and redeemed by the same blood that redeemed you, regardless of how close we get as brothers.

As a lad of eight, I was caught stealing from the lunch bucket of other children at school. My family was poor and my lunch almost always consisted of just a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The jelly was always spread very thin. Seldom was there ever an apple or an orange. On occasion there was a cookie for desert. When my dad was out of work, a note from mom enabled me to get in the line with the poorer kids whose lunches were furnished by the government. I never had the money to buy my lunch and always envied the kid who did.

We had a closet off the hallway next to our room where those who brought lunches could store them until noon. One boy always brought his lunch in a Roy Rogers lunch box. In addition to sandwiches of meats and lettuce, an apple or and orange, he nearly always had a candy bar, a cookie or a piece of cake for dessert. My how I envied him.

One day I was excused to go to the rest room during class. In route to the boys' toilet I passed the lunch closet and that Roy Rogers lunch box could be seen on one of its shelves. I decided that it would take less than a minute to open the screen door on that closet, open the lunch box and grab the boy's candy bar. I knew I couldn't eat the candy at school because I would get caught. But, I could keep it in my pocket and eat it on the way home.

Every time I held up two fingers, the sign to the teacher that I needed to go to the restroom, my mind was actually fixed on the lunch box rather than my need to go to the restroom. I knew it was wrong to steal, but the pleasure of a candy bar exceeded any fear of punishment in the case I got caught. I finally yielded to the temptation. I stopped at the lunch closet and stole the candy bar. It was so easy. I watched the boy from whose lunch box I had stolen the candy bar, and he did not seem to be too disturbed that there

was no kind of sweets in his lunch that day. He assumed that his mother had forgotten to put one in. I had gotten away with the theft and oh how I enjoyed that candy bar on the way home from school.

I didn't dare repeat the theft the next day, though I thought it would have been so very nice to have another candy bar. I waited with some guilt for about a week before I dared repeating the vile deed. I was successful again. No one seemed to know or care. What I did not know was that the boy reported the theft that very first day to our teacher. I also did not realize that the teachers could and did keep up with all the children who were excused to leave the classroom during class time.

The very next week I gave in to my temptation again, assuming that a week between thefts would throw anyone off my tracks. I was wrong. The teacher called me in at the afternoon recess that very day and asked me to empty my pockets on her desk. I did so slowly and with great reluctance. Among my few possessions was a Baby Ruth candy bar that I could not account for and that my mother, if asked, would swear wasn't a part of my lunch.

I was exposed, humiliated and punished. The worst punishment was the taunts that came from the other kids after my theft became public knowledge. The teacher forced me to confess my theft and apologize before the entire class.

That was the way my criminal life started. It was with a twenty-five cent Baby Ruth candy bar.

Since I was branded as a thief anyway, I somehow decided that I should live up to my reputation. If I saw something I really wanted, and felt I had a pretty good chance of getting away with stealing it, I would steal it. The pleasure high I received in stealing things was often more rewarding than the value of the things I stole. My biggest problem was hiding the things I stole when I brought them home.

By the time I was seventeen I was a pretty accomplished thief and a better liar at covering up the way I acquired the things stolen. A buddy of mine and I both owned cars. We were working on one of our cars in the garage at my house, or at his, nearly all the time. We stored parts and tools on shelves in our garages and attics. We stored things in the unfinished crawl space under my folks' house. No one questioned what we were storing or who owned it. Our parents assumed that everything there was legitimate.

We bought an altered trunk key from a friend for a certain make of car that would open about one out of ten makes of that car. We went to the parking lots of large shopping centers to test the key out. Sure enough, our key opened the trunk of the fifth car we tested it on. To our surprise, the trunk had a lot of goodies. There was a tool box and fishing tackle box. I grabbed one and my now partner in crime grabbed the other. We had made a great haul on our first break-in of an automobile. The pickings were so good

that we made regular trips to that center and others on busy shopping days. We peddled our “take” at second hand stores, pawnshops and to friends. We knew that most of the newer cars had brand-new tires and rims that had never been out of the trunks of those cars. A new rim and tire were worth much more than used tools and fishing tackle. Unless we found power tools, we left every thing alone except the new tires. Late at night we would cruise through residential neighborhoods looking for this special make of car. We found them parked on the streets and in driveways. We could usually be in and out in less than a minute with a rim and tire worth about forty dollars.

By graduation time in our senior year, the crawl space under my folks’ house was a storehouse of new tires. My partner and I had new tires on our vehicles and we sold tires at a discount to our friends for theirs. I had a pickup and my friend had a sports car. We also had all the pocket change we needed for dating and any other expenditure.

Late one night, we were cruising a neighborhood looking for cars to hit. We found what we were looking for. We already had three new tires and rims in the back of my pickup. We had become so successful that we felt immune to the possibility of detection and arrest. My folks never asked questions nor did my partner’s parents. On this night we decided to drive until we had a complete new set of tires to take home. On our last find, we had to remove a large number of items from the trunk of the car in order to get to the spare tire. The owner was awakened and rushed out his front door to challenge us. We both dove into my pickup with the engine already running. I slammed it into gear and sped away. In my rear view mirror I could see the owner waving his arms at us in anger and disgust.

Having gotten away we stopped at an all night diner for hamburgers and Cokes. When we prepared to leave, we were confronted by two policemen and arrested. The next day a search warrant was issued by a local judge and premises of both our homes were searched. We were charged with grand theft for vehicle and home burglaries. We admitted our guilt and were given three-year sentences in the state prison. We both served two years of our sentences and were then released on probation. I choose not to describe the things that happened to me as a prisoner. At best it was degrading, at worst I was forced to live in ways that I choose not to describe. The way I was treated by the guards was bad enough. The way I was treated by older and bigger prisoners is unmentionable. Yet, I knew my suffering and humiliation were the consequences of my bad choices. I was the only one to blame. I kept wondering why someone hadn’t discovered my criminal bent and straightened me out before I was caught and sent to prison. I wondered why I was not smart enough to recognize and acknowledge the consequences of my illegal behavior.

I had been reared in a home that was divided in regard to religion. My mother was a three times a week church attendee. My dad refused to even go to church, let alone

practice Christianity. In fact, he was an alcoholic. He had spent a year in the state penitentiary for vehicular homicide while under the influence. So prison was familiar to our family.

When I was released from prison I held down a number of jobs, none with a future except one. I became a skilled tire man. I met and married an older woman. She was used to playing the field and using drugs. With time, while on probation, I was partying, using liquor and grass. I moved up to cocaine and before I knew it, I was addicted. I denied it, but every waking minute I was looking forward to my next fix. My wages were not enough to cover my living and my drug costs. My wife held down a few low paying jobs from time to time. Yet, her habit made it impossible to be depended on by any employer. We needed an escape and convinced ourselves that a move would solve our problem.

We moved to California to start over and quickly graduated from users to sellers. I was caught with enough cocaine to be charged with, possession with the intent to sell. Tried and convicted, I was sentenced to three years and sent to a state penitentiary. Upon release, I returned to my parents' home to live. My wife deserted me while I was in prison and I had no one else to turn to.

A Christian man, who owned a large retail tire store, gave me a job.

He had been in a little trouble early in his life and sought out ex-cons as employees in the belief that he could convert them to Christ and assist them in changing the direction of their lives. I was happy to be out of prison and to have a fine paying job. I might have converted to any religion for the privilege of honestly providing for myself. I started going to church seriously for the first time in my life. The more I listened and read, the more I understood how sin not only messes up lives, but actually destroys lives. I attended a Friday night Bible class at my boss's house every week. I accepted Christ and was baptized.

My journey of faith and church membership wasn't anything spectacular. I felt duty bound to be faithful in my attendance to all the public services. I willingly contributed to the churches' treasury. I was greeted, and seemed accepted, by most of the church members. Everyone there knew my boss and my mother. When there was a party or a luncheon on a weekend that included those of my age group, I went and participated. My boss and his wife were always accepting and encouraging. I moved out of my parents' house. I lived alone in a small apartment, had little company and was checked on with regularity by my probation officer. Outside the social life connected with the church, my life was very lonely.

My family and I never really became fully reconciled after my second conviction. Their neighbors were aware of my criminal past and subsequent incarcerations much to my mother's embarrassment. I saw and visited them whenever possible. Yet, I always felt like an outsider at family gatherings. I gradually found excuses that kept me away from

most of those gatherings.

The church had accepted my conversion and membership with warmth at first. When I became acquainted well enough, I asked an eligible woman about my age for a date. She accepted and we attended a movie. Over fast food following the movie, we revealed quite a bit about ourselves to each other. I confirmed that I was an ex-convict, but assured her that I had truly converted to Jesus Christ. She accepted that and seemed to accept me. The date was a pleasant one. However, there were no “sparks” between us. The experience was so encouraging that I asked another young woman out where there seemed to be sparks, but was turned down. I then went back to the first one and started seeing her occasionally on dates to dinner and movies. It seemed that from that first date on, the church members distanced themselves from me. The more I needed their company, the further it seemed I was pushed from the church.

The elders called me in for a meeting that turned out to be a disaster and threatened my faith. They informed me that because of my previous marriage and my lack of knowledge about why my wife left me, I should not date other single women in the church. They claimed that there was only one cause for which a man could put away his wife and remarry. That cause was her unfaithfulness. And, since I couldn't assure them that she had been unfaithful to her marriage vows, I could not be remarried. That seemed to contradict my whole understanding of forgiveness and restoration. But they were the elders and they assured me that they were “looking out for my soul.”

I revealed these circumstances to my parole officer and he told me that it was probably my imagination getting the best of me. Surely the elders were not trying to get me to separate myself from the other singles in the church. He encouraged me not to get paranoid and to keep going to church.

But, he was wrong. I was greeted by many of the church members, but there was an obvious barrier standing between them and me. We spoke, we shook hands, we made idle conversation, but I knew I was not fully accepted. I sat alone in the assemblies. I went home and ate alone. If I were going to date, fall in love and marry, it would be with someone outside the church. I was not invited into any of the members' homes. It seemed that they had all concluded, “Once a thief, always a thief. Once a drug dealer, always a drug dealer.”

I understood why families had to be careful about who they invite into their homes. I understood the concern folks had in inviting an ex-convict to their dinner tables and to be around their wives and children. But, these Christians would not give me a chance to prove myself. I could not prove my honorable intentions toward their daughters or that I would not lead their sons into crime. I wondered how long it would take for them to change, or if they would ever change. Would I have to find friends outside the church, date and marry a woman outside the church in order to marry and have a home? If I

remarried outside the church would that mean automatic ex-communication? Would I have to wait until I was thirty, forty or fifty?

I did date some and even took a couple of the ladies I liked to church. Though they were greeted and welcomed with words, they felt like there stood a barrier between the church and them that couldn't be crossed. If I became serious with one, marriage would have been out of the question according to church doctrine. In that church, I would have been relegated to a single life of celibacy.

I considered giving up, not on a crime free life, but on the church of my childhood. I had read Matthew 25 often and had wondered if I would be a stranger in other churches as well as this one. I kept thinking of trying one of them, but my boss and his wife would have been disappointed had I changed. I owed him so much. But, I did not know how long I could go on feeling that most of the church members were giving me the cold shoulder and keeping me at arm's length.

I was invited to attend the services of a church made up mainly of former hippies, street people, recovering addicts and a few ex-cons. From the get-go I was shown warmth and given hospitality. I was not an outsider in this Christian fellowship. I left the church of my youth and found a church home where every sinner is accepted, whether their sins were criminal or other kinds.

In 2002, there were 6.6 million people in the nation's correctional system. There are over 1,400,000 prisoners occupying prison cells in the United States. California has 236,300 behind bars and 468,700 on probation. Texas leads the nation with 755,100 behind bars and 443,684 on probation. The rate of recidivism is about 50%. Out of every 117 men in America over 16, one is in prison. Among adults the figures of those in jails, prisons on parole or probation jump to one in every 32. (Source: U.S. Justice Department)

There are two compelling reasons why many ex-convicts do not return to a life of crime.

The first is a true religious conversion experience and the second is the marriage to a loving and supportive mate. The church is the only organization that can provide the first experience. It can also provide a loving and supportive fellowship, the next best thing to a loving and supportive mate.

It is understood that most Christian families do not have the housing capacity to take in ex-convicts, and most shouldn't even if they did. This does not mean that our churches should not help shoulder the responsibilities of providing halfway houses and counseling for those in transition from prison to freedom, self-respect and self-support.

“I was ... in prison and you visited me.”

CHAPTER 14

I AM OBESE

It isn't easy to talk about my condition. I say, "Condition," because my state of health is deteriorating and I haven't found the will or strength to change its course. It is a physical and mental condition that I have wrestled with since elementary school I have fought and lost more weight battles than I can remember. There have been times that I wanted to completely give up. In my desperation, I have even hoped for a heart attack that would take me quickly without much pain.

I was born into a Christian family. My parents have not been "slim" as long as I can remember. Both tended to always be a bit overweight. But I have never been slim. My earliest memories are those of being pinched on my rosy cherub-like cheeks and called by my mother, "Mama's little darling." As I grew older, I never felt like a darling, nor did I feel little. Many of my classmates through the years openly nicknamed me "Chubby" or "Chubby Charlie." The really cruel ones called me "Fatso," some even to my face. I have also been called "Blubber Bottom" and "The Whale." My strongest defense against these slights has been the use of humor, often backed up with sarcasm. If I couldn't make my tormentors laugh, then I would attempt to cut them down. A successfully worded cutting remark sometimes humbled my tormentors, and the pack usually turned on them instead of me. I became a master of the one liner.

When I started to school I was chubbier than most other children.

But, by the fourth grade my size could not go unnoticed and the number of taunts increased and with more ugliness. I was the slowest child in foot races in my school. I was the last one chosen on the ball teams. I made above average grades and my only claim to fame was my ability to spell. I won the championship in my school and came in second place in the district. These honors offset some of the put-downs that struck me to the core.

It was obvious to my parents that I was not going to be a normal sized child. They made me more conscious of my size by trying to limit the amounts and kinds of food I ate. It seemed that no control, in whatever guise, kept my weight off, or kept me from gaining. I was forced to go on diets and later in life I went on a dozen voluntarily. In every case, circumstances enabled me to break my diet before I realized any long term results. My folks finally gave up and I didn't care to try any more. "It's in his genes," my mom would say. Since it was in my genes, I believed that I was not responsible for my size. I reasoned that I was predestined to be fat. Such reasoning enabled me to live with myself as I grew older.

Our family went to church regularly. It seemed that during my childhood the church was

the only place that I was accepted by most of the people. By the time I was an adult, I had begun to realize that even at church I was not fully accepted. People worried about the folding chairs breaking when I sat on them. They tried to guide me to sturdier chairs. It is true that I have caused a few chairs to collapse under my weight. Every where I go outside my home, there seems to be a sigh of relief from those around me when I sat down and the seat supports me.

By the fifth grade I had realized just how mean children could be.

I chose not to enter any foot races. I preferred to sit on the sidelines during ball games rather than participate. Being chosen last, or not at all when there was an uneven number of students wishing to participate, did not lift my sense of self worth. No one expected me to catch a fly, hit the ball and reach first base when I tried to play baseball. I could never catch anyone when playing tag. Loneliness on the sidelines was to be my destiny in life. I tried humor to ward off the cutting remarks of my peers, but it only gave me temporary relief.

By Junior High School I had decided to go out for the band. I made the band by learning to play the trombone. I practiced and practiced. It drove my folks and the neighbors almost crazy, but it was the one thing besides spelling that I mastered.

In Senior High School I made the band in my freshman year. When being measured for my uniform, fellow band members were happy to kid me about the size of a uniform I would need. I was just over five feet tall and weighed 220 pounds. One remark made still lingers in my memory. The Drum Major, standing by as I was being fitted said, "There won't be any material left for the rest of us by the time Charlie's uniform is made." Another band member chimed in with, "Naw, it'll only take 2 bolts of material to make him a uniform."

By my senior year I had dropped out of band. Sitting in class or on the gym bleachers and pumping my trombone was a vast difference than marching for two miles or more in a parade. By this time I weighed in at 305 pounds and simply did not have the stamina to march for even one mile in a parade. Our band had been chosen to march in an important New Years bowl parade. I was afraid I couldn't make the distance and that I might have to drop out en route, so I feigned sickness on the big day and was excused from the march.

When I graduated from High School I had not had one date. By that time I was nicknamed "Tiny." I had developed a pretty thick skin, so names no longer hurt as they once did. However, my size seldom left my consciousness for any length of time. In many social situations, spontaneous and cutting remarks were made about fat people without the speaker even realizing that the obese in the group were hurt. Even when said in innocence, statements like, "He or she was a big fat person," in describing someone hurt. The remarks about others in my presence like, "He (or she) had the biggest gut you

ever saw,” did not, and does not, lift my self-esteem.

I enrolled in a technical school and prepared my self to do repairs and maintenance on electronic equipment. It took me three months to get my first job. I applied for job after job only to be turned down or worse, my applications seemed to be totally ignored. Not one employer called to even tell me that I was not qualified for a job opening or to give any other reason why I was not hired. I became so insecure and felt so worthless that I nearly quit trying. One computer company needed a repairman so badly that they asked me to come after I called them, asking about what had happened on my application.

The job fortunately paid more than a minimum wage, enough for me to eventually pay my school loans off and buy my own automobile. But it did nothing for my social life. I worked in the back room of the company and most of the salespersons on the floor up front made it pretty clear that I was not to spend time in the showroom. So, I sat as a trouble shooter and repairman at a back room table all day long and out of sight. My appetite never diminished and my weight continued to edge up. I did not exercise on the job or during my spare time. I never get on the scales at home. I do weigh in when I go to see my doctor, but I never ask how much I weigh. I cannot see the scales myself. I am sure that I weigh over 400 pounds now. I have given up on everything outside my home except my job and the church.

At church I participate in worship and in Bible classes. I am never asked to go the pulpit to read a Scripture or word a prayer. I believe that the church leaders think that I would be an embarrassment to the church. And, I would embarrass myself as well, if I were to be “displayed” up front.

I know I am accepted in my church fellowship, yet I never feel like I’m fully welcomed. I know that some of it is in my head. When there is a choice of greeting me or a normal sized person in the lobby of the church, it seems that people greet them first and me last, or they totally ignore me.

I pray for acceptance, not pity. I pray for understanding, not judgment. I pray for encouragement, not neglect. If I could lose 200 pounds, I would feel delivered from the curse that has been with me since the third grade. If I had the courage and the will to change my eating and exercise patterns I would. If there were some program in the church that overeaters could turn to for help, I would be a part of it in a minute. But the church seems to believe that it is its job to preach and teach, not to set up programs that address needs like mine. There are hundreds of “fat” people in every community who are like me. Many have given up on church because they feel different, even unwelcome. Yet, if they were offered a program that enabled them to help get their weight under control by the church, many would be participating and productive members.

Can the church continue to neglect our needs? Can it continue to make obese people feel like they are not fully accepted, even unwelcome? **“In Christ Jesus, there can be neither**

Jew nor Greek, bond or free, male of female,” obese or slim!

In April, 2002 the Bureau of Internal Revenue ruled that obesity is a disease and that deductions for related expenses were made valid.

The National Institutes of Health estimates that 97 million American adults are overweight. There are 500,000 who are morbidly obese.

The Obesity Association estimates that there are 300,000 unnecessary deaths each year in America due directly to obesity.

The annual medical cost in the United States related to obesity exceeds \$117 billion.

One of the world's leading models, Natasha, committed suicide in April, 2002. She had appeared on the covers of most women's magazines. She died of multiple self-inflicted stab wounds. At age 13 she ballooned to over 200 pounds. She lost her first boyfriend because fellow students teased him about the size of his first girlfriend. She lost 100 pounds but never regained her sense of self-worth in spite of being one of the most popular models in the world.

It is never too late to change eating and exercise habits. Richard Simmons has helped numerous obese persons lose over 500 pounds, one woman lost 640 pounds.

There is hope for change in everyone, including the obese! The church should be first in line to help them succeed!

CHAPTER 15

I ASK QUESTIONS

From my earliest childhood, I was taught to accept the doctrines of the church without questioning any of them. If the church taught that the Bible was the inspired word of God and without error, I was expected to accept that as final truth. If the church taught that baptism was only by immersion, then sprinkling and effusion were just not biblical, they were wrong. I was not to question the conclusions reached by Bible scholars and leaders of my denomination. I learned that just about every other denomination also taught its members that its creed and practices were according to God's true and complete will. If two persons reached different conclusions about what a Bible passage meant, one or both had to be wrong because the Bible is true, consistent and does not contradict itself. The church of which any of us are members preaches and teaches only Bible truth and the full truth, regardless of what other denominations believe and teach.

But I learned that it was necessary to question every doctrine the church taught and every practice it engaged in, in order to have a faith that was truly my own. As I grew older, I became more critical of that which had already been proven, settled and made final by my church. I sought consistency in what the Bible taught and what the church practiced.

I was taught to be honest on the one hand and on the other hand accept, without question, conclusions about truth and practices. My questions did not always set well with the hierarchy of the church. It became unsettling to those who led the church when I questioned that which had already been settled by the church.

As a lad I remember studying the story of Joseph in Sunday school. I could sympathize with the boy who had the coat of many colors. I accepted the fact that "God was with him" in all his troubles and that through God, everything "worked together for good" in his life, and in his family's life in the end. But, while studying the story, I found what seemed to be a contradiction in the Bible. In Exodus 1:5 the Bible said, "**The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt.**" The Bible also taught that Joseph had a wife and two sons. So I reasoned that there were seventy that came to Egypt and since Joseph was already there with a wife and two sons, the number of descendants was seventy-four. But in Acts 7:14, Stephen said there were "Seventy-five in all." I picked up on the discrepancy immediately. Was the number seventy, seventy-four or was it seventy-five? My Sunday school teacher could not explain the discrepancy. She would take the problem to the minister and report back next week.

The next week, she came back with a weak explanation of the contradiction. It was at an early age of eleven that I began to be skeptical of what I was taught at church. I learned

that it was much easier to go along and get along, than to ask obvious and hard questions at my church and be ostracized.

As a teen ager I continued to question my teachers and our youth minister about things that seemed to not fit with Scripture or my sense of logic. When I challenged some of the accepted doctrines or practices at church, I tended to be shunned by other youths. I was even charged for being a doubter, even an unbeliever because I dared to question that which was already settled in the minds of others.

I remember well the day I challenged the youth minister on the subject of evolution. He had started a thirteen week series on creationism. He totally discounted the evolutionary hypothesis. He claimed that the Bible taught that the first man, Adam, was created by God full grown, and that his wife, Eve, was formed by God from a rib taken from Adam's side. I asked whether Adam and Eve were Caucasian, Black, Oriental, Indian or Eskimo. Everyone in the class, including the youth minister, seemed to think they were Caucasian because those in the class were.

I argued that God must have created more people in the beginning than just Adam and Eve, otherwise we would all still be of the same race. I further argued that if Adam and Eve were the first and only couple, then their offspring had evolved into black Africans, black Australian aborigines, white Europeans, dark Indians and Eskimos, brown Latinos and Middle-Easterners, and yellow slant eyed Orientals in an awful short period of time. All of these races had to evolve, not from the time the first couple God created, but since Noah and the flood. I asked the youth minister, "Does not this alone prove that there is an evolutionary process going on in this world of ours?" I then asked, "If God did not at some point in time arbitrarily change the race of Adam and Eve, how many centuries would it have taken for each race to evolve, based upon known racial data?" He was stumped? I was stumped? I needed logical and evidential answers.

In spite of what the church taught and believed, I had no doubt that either there was an evolutionary process going on, or that God had created more than one family in each species in the beginning. Moreover, I reasoned that if one of the pairs that went into the ark died, then that would have to have had been the end of that species.

As I studied the theory of the spontaneous generation of life theory, I could not accept it because of the simplest application of logic. I had owned two white rats as a youngster, one was male and one was female. They bred and the female gave birth to a litter of little white rats. They were born blind, hairless and helpless. But it didn't take long for them to find the nipples on their mother's breasts and they were sustained for a number of weeks with only the milk from these mammary glands of their mother.

If I accepted the theory of the spontaneous generation of life from a single cell then I realized that it would take millions of years for that cell to grow into the first female rat. And, that a simultaneous generation of life would have had to occur forming a male rat.

Both would have to occur at the same time period. Moreover, each cell that would eventually become a rat would have to survive, multiply and reproduce in a hostile world for millions of years while the male and female characteristics evolved separately. The female rat would have had to develop, not only her female organs to a mature level for reproduction, but at the same time would have to develop mammary glands in anticipation of giving birth and feeding her offspring. No college math professor had to tell me what the mathematical odds were for this to happen. I knew from that experience and observation, that you could hardly print that many zeros. I have never doubted that there was an intelligent living being with the power to create and sustain all the life forms found on earth. I just had to maintain a healthy skepticism about the Bible record of that creation being complete. I have, since that age, wanted some scholar or theologian to explain how, in only six thousand years, all the races of man could have evolved from one couple, or how every living plant and animal, of whatever species, could have evolved in that short life span? I knew the church claimed that the written Bible record began with Moses. The Israelite race started with Abraham barely 4,200 years ago. When did the other races start? If all living animals and men died except those in Noah's ark, then all races of man had to issue from Noah and his wife and all animal life had to issue from the few animals Noah took into the ark. The story of the Tower of Babel could only account for new languages, not the racial differences around the globe. I believed that something in the Bible record did not fit, nor did the Bible give a full record of Creation.

As an adult I have continued to question the leadership of the church on any number of issues, doctrines and practices. Every church I have personally attended, and have been a member of, has claimed that the Bible is its sole source of authority. My Catholic neighbors, claim that the Bible is authoritative, but that the Pope is their final authority. I learned that authority in most Protestant churches was created in the vote of their conventions, councils and synods.

I now touch on just a few of the questions I have asked that shed light on the difference in what the Bible taught and what the churches have taught and practiced.

Every Protestant church that I have attended or have been a member of participated in a communion service, either weekly or monthly. They often read the record of the last supper from the Gospels or First Corinthians before making comments on its meaning and purpose. They passed the bread first and followed it with the wine, or fruit of the vine. One church that I attended claimed that it was absolutely necessary that it be taken in the exact same order in which Christ instituted it. A prayer was necessary before passing the bread because that is what Christ did. A second prayer was necessary before the wine was passed because that was the way Christ did it. They taught that this order could not be altered and still please God. I thought that thinking in the church was too legalistic for me.

I was scolded for challenging this legal concept. I had, early in my adulthood, realized that all churches establish legal meets and bounds on many doctrines and practices. These meets and bounds differed somewhat from church to church.

Baptist churches and Churches of Christ practice immersion for baptism, but for a different purpose. Immersion is necessary to get into the Baptist church and its necessary for salvation in the Churches of Christ. Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians and Lutherans sprinkle as their mode of baptism. Each church has its own idea of the mode, meaning and efficacy of this rite and other rites in their denomination. But each one has a definite legal concept of how to apply scriptures that relate to all practices they engage in.

During one Sunday morning Bible class study of the Gospel of Luke, taught by an elder of the church, I discovered a passage of scripture that would reverse the manner by which we partook of the Lord's Supper. In chapter twenty-two, Luke recorded that the fruit of the vine was taken before the bread. It was blessed and passed. Then the Lord gave thanks for the loaf and it was passed among his disciples. Matthew and Mark recorded that the bread was blessed and passed first then came the fruit of the vine.

I asked the elder if it made any difference whether the bread was passed first or the wine. The tradition of this church, which had become law, was that the two records of Matthew and Mark were clear and directed the church on the order of serving. I then read the account by Luke. The elder and the class were flabbergasted, but they were not about to change the traditional order.

I had concluded that it didn't make any difference and questioned the conclusions of the church. I took a position that one prayer could cover the observation of both elements, regardless of which was passed first. I asked why we couldn't pass them together. My suggestions were not welcome and I was told that my position on the subject was wrong. Scripture and logic did not matter, nor did either faze those in power. Communion would be served as it had always been served. My skepticism or the Bible record would not change their opinion. You couldn't follow Luke. And, it was mandated that the church would follow Matthew and Mark. I then had the audacity to ask, "If a congregation did not have the complete Bible but just had the book of Luke, could they serve the fruit of the vine first?" That made me a troublemaker instead of a truth seeker.

I even went a bit farther in my observations. I asked the elder why the Holy Spirit, if he inspired the writing of the Bible, inspired opposing accounts of the Last Supper. I suggested that it was obvious that the Bible contradicted itself. With that observation, many class members, who were already suspicious of me due to previous confrontations on similar subjects, had new cause to separate themselves a bit farther from my wife and me. Was the church really that afraid of controversy and open study? I wondered why we couldn't use logic as we studied the Scriptures.

A study of First Corinthians at mid-week prayer meeting resulted in additional concerns about my soundness in the faith. It seemed that every time I asked hard questions about why we did, or did not do, certain things I was pushed farther from the main body of the church.

We were studying the eleventh chapter about God being the head of Christ and Christ being the head of man and man being the head of woman. In this denomination men ruled the church and did all the public functions such as preaching, wording prayers, leading the singing, reading scripture and even making formal announcements. As I reviewed this passage it seemed clear to me that Paul taught that women were to wear head coverings as a sign that men were the heads of women. Yet, there wasn't one woman at this service or any other who wore a head covering. To me this was a blatant act of disobedience by the women for not wearing a head covering and a dereliction of duty by the men who claimed to be their heads who did not demand it. I challenged the class to practice what Paul commanded. I reasoned that if you could refuse to obey one of his commands, then you could refuse to obey any other.

As I studied the chapter, another strange contradiction surfaced that neither I nor anyone else in the class seemed to have never recognized or addressed. These women, that the church claimed had to be under the men of the church, were commanded to wear a sign of authority on their heads while they prayed and prophesied. I stated that it was obvious that the women in the assemblies at Corinth both prayed and prophesied. And, that the only differences between them and the men in doing so were their head coverings and long hair, while the men did so uncovered with short hair. I then asked why the church refused to allow the women to pray and declare the will of God just like the men did, since it was obvious the Corinthians instructed them too. No one could adequately answer that question or explain the inconsistency between this passage and what the church actually practiced.

Some class members, including women, argued that Paul instructed women in chapter 14 to remain silent in the church and that they were not even permitted to speak there. They also claimed that Paul told Timothy that women were not to even teach men. Yet, here were women speaking up in church and trying to teach me, a man that it was wrong for a woman to teach a man or exercise authority over a man. I then argued that the women in our congregation should be given every opportunity to participate in our assemblies, just like they did in Corinth. I was further branded a troublemaker, and pushed even farther from the main body of the church. I was warned on two occasions that I would face church discipline if I did not quit bringing up controversial subjects.

This church not only believed that it was superior in doctrine to its neighboring churches, it believed that if you failed to believe and follow the doctrines it delineated as "essential" you would be lost. I refused to accept that conclusion. I asked an elder in a Bible class to give us a list of the "essential" doctrines that everyone had to believe and follow in order

to enjoy God's grace. I also asked him to give me a list of the "non-essential" doctrines that we did not have to believe and practice. He could not, or would not, come up with such lists. It seemed clear to me that all men are in error on some things and that all would therefore be lost if being error free was the basis of salvation.

I concluded long before that occasion, that none could be saved by believing and doing exactly what the Bible taught, because no one can know exactly all that the Bible teaches, let alone doing exactly what it teaches. Therefore, those in every church, if saved, would be saved by God's grace and not through perfect knowledge and perfect obedience. Nor, would they be saved by being members of the church that claimed perfection in doctrines and practices.

I continue to ask hard questions. I try to seek honest answers. Neither of these goals sets well with the leaders of the church and with many of its members. But, I dare not sit by and allow important questions about Bible truth to go unanswered or neglected.

This position leaves my wife and me on the pew almost alone. In fact, we are strangers to many members because they are afraid of being contaminated by me in my search for greater truth and understanding.

I have chosen to value honesty over political correctness, truth over tradition, and an open mind over a closed heart. Consequently, I have found freedom! I will not sacrifice my freedom just to please or appease man!

Maurice Maeterlink, in 1907 observed and wrote an important truth and observation.

It reads like this:

"At every crossing that leads to the future, tradition has placed against us ten thousand men to guard the past."

Another sage observed, "The search for truth is a journey that never ends."

CHAPTER 16

I AM AN UNWED MOTHER

My life until age 18 was not too different than the lives of other teens in my class. My grade point average was 3.5. I was fairly popular and dated a number of boys during my junior and senior years in high school. The only one I had dated regularly was a member of my youth group at church. I was not the least bit promiscuous. I had kissed a couple of my dates goodnight, but that was as far as intimacy went.

The summer I graduated from high school, I took a job at a summer resort in the Colorado Rockies. An older cousin had worked there and she opened the door for me to get the job. The resort provided housing for its teenage employees. There were four girls to the room sleeping in bunk beds. We had little to no privacy. The resort employed an equal number of boys who lived in similar but separate quarters.

By the end of June two of us had paired off with a couple of the boys. They were college students and a couple of years older than we girls. There were long evenings when we had little to do but watch TV or take hikes up mountain trails. The first few hikes were made in groups. Later, we began to go out on hikes as couples.

The boy that I had paired up with was handsome, likable, and “experienced.” I considered myself pretty, likable, and “inexperienced.” I was distanced from my family by many miles and the natural restraints of home and church were not there. I had strong convictions about premarital sex. I had chosen to remain a virgin until marriage.

As the summer wore on, my boyfriend and I became very close. The opportunities to have almost total privacy on the nighttime hikes opened the door to greater intimacy between the two of us. Under the pressure of my boyfriend and the awakening of my own body to sexual excitement, we eventually went all the way. After my first sexual encounter it became easier to engage in intercourse in spite of my conscience and upbringing. I convinced myself that I was in love and that my boyfriend was in love, too.

In mid August, two weeks before my job ended, I missed my period. I believed that we had used protection, but either I had been deceived or the protection failed. I secured a pregnancy test at a local drug store and it came up positive. I went to a clinic for a second opinion and test. My pregnancy was confirmed. This wasn’t good news for my boyfriend. He was returning to college, in another state, in one week. His solution to “my” problem was an abortion. He went from being my boyfriend and lover to one who charged me with not being smart enough “to be on the pill.”

The last week on the job was a living hell for me. Two of my roommates advocated the abortion route out of my dilemma. My other roommate went for a full term pregnancy

and adoption. In the meantime, my parents were expecting their Christian daughter home by September 1 and then to see her off to college after Labor Day. I was in such turmoil over guilt, the future, and the simple solution my boyfriend had for “my” problem that I could not eat or sleep. If I used his solution to “my” problem, no one else would have to know and we could get on with our lives. He carried no burden of guilt, no fear of exposure and felt no obligation except to help me pay for the solution to “my” problem.

The dreaded thought of revealing my condition to my parents and siblings was the biggest mountain ahead of me. It seemed insurmountable. I entertained thoughts of running away, but I had really no place to go. I thought of my maternal grandparents. They would be sympathetic and understanding. But, I knew that would be only a temporary fix. The worst thought that entered my mind was the ultimate escape, suicide. I quickly realized that I didn’t have the courage to hurt myself and it was totally against everything I had been taught as a Christian. I couldn’t hurt myself, nor could I hurt a baby conceived in a voluntary act by two people.

I packed my bags at the end of the week and caught a bus home. Every mile was torture. Every mile raised the level of the dread of meeting and revealing my condition to my family. Every mile brought greater guilt for my weakness in yielding to temptation.

When I stepped off that bus and fell into the arms of my mother, a greeting that should have been filled with joy and laughter turned into a torrent of tears. I could not stop the flow, or the heaves of my crying. My parents knew immediately that something was amiss, but had no idea of the gravity of what was amiss. I tried to cheer up on the way to our house but my attempts failed to relieve the anxiety I saw reflected in my parent’s faces. I sat in the rear seat between my brother and sister. We kept giving love hugs and I was forcing a conversation about the happenings of the summer.

Once we were home, I realized I was in a haven of safety. Here I was loved and respected. My family’s love was unconditional. Together, we could face any difficulty or ride out any storm. No questions were asked and I volunteered nothing that evening. When everyone retired except my mom and me, I knew that my secret couldn’t be kept any longer.

Mom and I were sitting across the dining room table drinking cups of chocolate as we had done a hundred times before. There was lull in the conversation and looking into my eyes, she asked, “What’s the matter, dear?”

My answer flowed freely as I described my summer and the things that led me to my pregnancy. She came around the table and took me in her arms. Though in tears, she assured me that we would get through this and that God would see something beautiful come out of this mistake. In spite of her assurances, I could not see anything beautiful or good coming out of my mistake. She said we would wait for the right time to inform dad and my brother and sister. She gave not one second of thought of an abortion. That was

totally out of the question. She said, "We'll think and pray this problem through and God will give us the answer. She took my story to bed that night and informed my dad. Thankfully, he was much more interested in my welfare and the welfare of my baby, than he was about my behavior during the summer. He and I were up before breakfast and his strong arms reached out to embrace me. They gave me strength and hope. He had already forgiven me of my transgression and assured me that he was ready to support me all the way. That meant, not just through my pregnancy, but for my entire future.

Our family, as was our custom, arose early on Sunday morning and went to church. I had attended church barely five times all summer. Now I was beginning to see the church was going to be involved in my problem whether I liked it or not. If I decided to keep my baby, it would be obvious to everyone at church and in town that it was conceived out of wedlock. If I went away to some home for pregnant girls, my parents were not going to lie about me being away for college. Therefore, everyone would know where I was and why. There would be no secrets in my small hometown. I was going to have to find the courage and inner strength to face the future.

On Monday evening it was deemed necessary to inform my siblings. My brother wanted to get some buddies together and go beat the father of my child up. My sister was excited about having a niece or nephew. Neither judged me. Both embraced me and assured me that they would stand by me.

My next revelation would have to be to the church. Sex outside of marriage was not acceptable behavior in its eyes or its doctrine. Premarital sex was a sin: not just any sin. But one that often spread sexually transmitted diseases and produced illegitimate babies. I understood all of this and appreciated more than ever why the church must teach against this sin. Had it done a better job of bringing conviction about sexual behavior to camp last summer, I might not be in this predicament.

Mother and I made an appointment with the minister about a month after I returned home. It brought on a lot of personal stress for me, so I let mom do most of the talking. The minister was compassionate and understanding. This brought a great deal of comfort and reassured me that there was forgiveness.

Mom informed him that I was going to stay at home and see the pregnancy through. Whether to adopt or not would be decided later. He tried to assure us that the church would be forgiving and understanding. On the following Sunday I responded to the invitation song and confessed that I had sinned and wanted forgiveness and full restoration. I did not reveal the nature of my sin, nor was it necessary. At the conclusion of the service many members and long time friends surrounded me with hugs and words of support. None knew the nature of my sin. I wondered if that support would continue when it became apparent what my sin was.

My boyfriend (?) did not call and he did not write. I neither called nor wrote him. I did

write him off as someone worthy to be the father of my child. To him, I had been just an innocent girl to seduce and use for the summer, and to be cast off at its end. Love, commitment and marriage were strange words to his vocabulary. They meant something to me even though I behaved for a while as though they didn't exist. I wondered how many girls he had impregnated and left high and dry like he did me.

By Christmas that year everyone in town knew I was pregnant. I had completely dropped out of the young peoples group at church. I was regular in my attendance and somehow God gave me the strength to keep my head up and the courage to keep on going. I had to convince myself over and over again of the words Jesus spoke to the woman taken in adultery, **“Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.”** I was determined that I would never again yield to the temptation to engage in sex outside of marriage, no matter the circumstances. I vowed before God that I would not. I can say truthfully, that I kept that vow.

There were the expected side looks by members of the church as my condition became obvious and known. Some of my girl friends from high school days always found excuses to be busy when I suggested that we get together. Some church members even made remarks in Bible classes about sexually active youngsters and their illegitimate children. I believed that most of such remarks were made in innocence. However, some seemed to be made to intentionally hurt. I became pretty tough minded and accepted these unkind remarks as **“reaping what I had sown.”**

In spite of my ability to dismiss such remarks, judgmental stares and the distancing of some from me, I knew that I could be and was forgiven. I wanted to be accepted by all members of the church who are admonished to “forgive lest they be not forgiven.”

When my little girl was born, I was as happy as any new mother could be. My family fell totally in love with her. There was a battle every time she needed a bottle, on who was going to feed her. Even diaper duty became a contest. My family couldn't have been happier or more pleased if my baby had been the fruit of a marriage. Their help enabled me to get a degree from a local college and I now fully support my child and myself.

I will consider marriage if and when the right man enters my life. I regret the mistake I made, but I have a treasure that means more to me than my own life. My daughter's smiles, hugs and laughter cannot be measured in terms of the joy they bring to my life. She is a fine student and loving daughter.

My experience made me a stranger to some at my church for a while. For sometime a few just couldn't help seeing the scarlet “A” on my forehead and judging me a sinful woman. However, I must admit that every member of the church, and I think without exception, has fallen in love with my daughter. They also now extend love to me. I wish that they had been that understanding and forgiving from the beginning. Had my condition of pregnancy been accepted from the beginning as a sin among other sins that

we all commit, my relationship with the church would have been so much happier and better. That is not to mention the pain I suffered during my great need for acceptance and forgiveness.

The church cannot afford to brand some sinner's sins as unacceptable and some as acceptable. Sin is sin and the church is a haven for all who confess their sins. If the church is not refuge there for the penitent, there is little hope for the church in the judgment. In the United States during the year of 1999 there were 1.3 million babies born out of wedlock. The teen birthrate among unmarried girls, ages 15-17, in the United States is 27.5. In high-risk communities the rate is 52.5.

Since teen pregnancies and STDs are common, the Center for Disease Control allocated \$42 million nationwide in 2002 to combat teen pregnancy. It is used to fund the Community Coalition Partnership Program for the Prevention of Teen Pregnancy.

CHAPTER 17

I AM A MINORITY CHRISTIAN

I had just completed my doctoral studies and accepted a job at a university 2,000 miles from my Alma Mater. I leased an apartment and began to survey the offerings of the community around it in regard to recreation, shopping, churches, and transportation. I found a church within three blocks of my apartment and it looked inviting. It would be an easy walk from my residence. If I found it to be a warm loving body of people, I would join. Near the university I had attended, there was a church that welcomed college students of every stripe and color. It had programs going on nearly every night for students and it became my haven and the haven for many others away from home. I had enjoyed a warm accepting fellowship from the local members of that church and was invited into many homes in its membership. I had also experienced full acceptance by the domestic and foreign students who made up about half of that church's membership.

As I surveyed the community I was going to live in, I noticed that there were very few Blacks, Asians or Latinos in the malls, restaurants and recreation centers. The neighborhood was basically Caucasian. But this was America and the color of your skin, the slant of your eyes, or way you pronounced the English language made no difference. I had been a Christian since high school and I was certain there would be no discrimination of any kind in the churches.

At a glance you can tell that I am different. My skin color, my eyes, and the way I pronounce the English language are all different. In this community I stood out. My race made me different. I wondered if there would be discrimination here. In the malls, my dollars were just as welcome as that of Caucasians. The theaters accepted my money for tickets just as quickly as it did from others. When I bought the furniture for my apartment, the clerk was eager to accept my check. How would it be at the church down the street? I wondered.

Experience had taught me that in most social settings, the majority of almost any group clung together whether in small clusters or as a whole group. I knew that minorities tend to band together as well. I did not want to believe that this was true in churches.

On my first visit to the church, I stood out in the crowd. Many people glanced my way for a peek, for I was a racial oddity there. Some gave me what seemed to be a patronizing smile, but they did not speak or offer a handshake. In their little clusters, they gave each other friendly greetings, handshakes, hugs and even a few kisses as they met. They were so absorbed with each other that they had no time to greet me, a stranger in their midst. Over the double doors into their sanctuary there was a sign, "We

Welcome You To God's House." I moved across the lobby and was almost into the sanctuary before I was greeted and welcomed. An elderly lady spoke to me and offered her hand. She then introduced herself and asked me my name. She welcomed me but did not inquire further about me. I walked down the aisle and found a seat on a pew half way down to the front. I moved to the middle of the pew to make it easier for those coming in to be seated.

They came and moved on forward to other pews. They filled those pews. But, they left two big gaps on each side of me. I glanced back and noted that the pews behind were filling rapidly while mine remained empty. Finally an usher directed a couple with two children to the pew I was on. The children were about eight and ten years old. The children wanted to sit between their parents but the mother wanted them separated. So, she pushed the youngest, a little girl in front of her, toward me. I gave them a smile and they barely nodded in return. Though the mother had nodded, she showed me no recognition beyond that nod. Another couple entered my pew from the aisle on my left. They also looked me over, but neither of them greeted me. At this point, I felt that I had been treated with indifference at best.

After an invocation and one song, the minister asked the congregation to stand and greet one another. I stood and the couple in front of me also stood and spent the greeting period greeting those in front of them and at their sides. I turned to the folks behind but they had turned their backs to me greeting those behind them. I spoke to the little girl on my right and she shied away while her mother was busy greeting those she apparently knew in front and back of her. I turned to my left and the lady said, "Good morning." But she did not offer her hand, ask me my name, or offer to make hers known to me. When the members had all spoken to each other, and had neglected me, the music director started the song service. The liturgy was very little different than that which I was used to.

At the close of the service, I made my way to the aisle and began walking slowly toward the lobby and the exit door. Two elderly ladies spoke to me and offered a hand, but that was all. I walked away as much a stranger to those in that church as I had been before attending its Sunday service. I tried it two more times and received about the same reception.

I now drive over five miles to a church that opened its arms to me on my first visit. I was not only welcomed by this church on my first visit but was invited into two homes for lunch.

No one seems to worry that I am of a different race and born in a foreign country. They understand and have accepted one of the most fundamental truths of Christianity, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free, male or female, all are one in Christ Jesus." People of every race and national origin bleed when they are cut, weep when they are

sad, suffer from loneliness and they smile when happy. They also need to be accepted by other human beings. Oh, that this was understood in all churches! If it were, I would be walking to church every Sunday instead of driving ten miles.

“Do not deny justice to your poor people in their law suits.” (Exodus 23:8)

“There will always be poor people in your land. Therefore I command you to be open handed toward your brothers and the poor and needy in your land.” (Duet.15:11)

“Defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and the oppressed.” (Psalms 82:3)

“A generous man himself will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.” (Proverbs 22:9)

“Listen my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and inherit the kingdom to those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the one who are dragging you into court? Are they not the one who slander the noble name to whom you belong?” (James 2:5-7)

“For your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the mighty God and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are strangers, for you were strangers in Egypt.” (Duet. 10:17-18)

CHAPTER 18

NO ONE SEEMED TO CARE AND I ASKED, “WHY?”

I am a thirty-five-year old man. I am married and have two children. I was converted to my new faith eleven years ago by my wife and her preacher. I can tell you the hour, the day, the month and the year that I was re-baptized.

I gave up the church of my youth for a church that convinced me that its organization, doctrines and practices were the true biblical ones. I was convinced and convicted with a message from the new fellowship that taught, “If you continue in your erring church affiliation, you will be lost because they preach and practice false doctrines.” I approached the study that brought on my change with what I consider logical reasoning and an open mind. My new denomination was absolutely sure that they had everything right and all others had many things wrong.

My parents and siblings were convinced that I had joined a cult.

They saw my new church as the one that preached and practiced the false doctrines. The fact that my wife and her family were members of this new church no doubt influenced my decision to make the change. But, it was my decision. And that decision was based upon a great deal of thought, Bible study and personal prayer.

My first few years in my new fellowship were delightful and enriching as I grew in my spiritual quest. My new fellowship claimed everything it did was backed up with a “Thus saith the Lord.” I even tried to convert my own parents and siblings to my new faith. I mailed them tracts on various doctrines on which we differed. My former church believed in sprinkling for baptism. It also believed in infant baptism. My new fellowship believed in baptism by immersion and administered only to those who were old enough to be accountable for their decisions and actions. There were at least a dozen doctrines on which the two churches differed. They ranged from acts and forms of worship to the proper name over the door. I was fully convinced and convicted I had made the right change in denominations. I set out to immerse myself in its activities.

The members and leaders of this new church had welcomed me warmly and soon I was taking on a number of responsibilities to assist the church in its mission. I worked with the youth. I organized golf tournaments, trips for father and sons to see Major League ball teams play. I helped in fundraising efforts for special needs of the church. I wanted to be a contributor to the church, not a drag on it.

I’m sorry to say, but in nearly every effort I made to add to the fellowship and spiritual life of the church, there was criticism from some long time member, or members of the church. It was especially so, if the activity was a new one. Some even had the audacity

to criticize the prayers I did my best to lead in the assemblies.

“We haven’t done it that way before and we aren’t going to change it now,” was the response I usually received when I made what I believed to be constructive suggestions to assist the church in its growth and fellowship.

Five years after my conversion, I was still convinced that my new fellowship was the place God wanted me to be in spite of the negative responses I had received to many of my good-faith efforts. During that fifth year, everything seemed to be turned upside down in my experience with this church that “did everything by the Bible.” The elders announced that they were firing the preacher. The preacher announced that he was not leaving. Members of the church chose sides and there was a big church fight. I was amazed that some of those, whom I had come to believe were the true disciples of Christ, could turn and be so ugly. Yet, they were telling the world that they and they alone were the true disciples of Christ. Some acted more like the Devil than they acted like Christ. My faith was almost shattered as I observed professed Christians, members of this “true” church, bite and devour one another. The preacher finally left and with him a third of the members. My family also left. We did not leave this denomination, nor did we follow the preacher. We transferred our membership to another congregation, in a neighboring town, of the same denomination that was at peace.

My wife’s family stayed on with the original congregation. On special occasions we visited the former congregation with them. We were welcomed back with open arms by many of those we had once worshipped with. They encouraged us to return. Their pleading, combined with driving distances and family ties, finally convinced us to return. We soon found that the critical judgmental spirit had not left with the former minister. But, we were determined to stick it out this time.

Shortly after our return, I suffered a debilitating illness. I had major surgery. Being the only breadwinner in the family, it did not take long for us to get into severe financial straits. I was off work for over two years. We reached the edge of bankruptcy. We paid our food and shelter expenses by “maxing” out our five credit cards and my wife’s part time job. We went deeply into debt and I was still unable to work. Our future was bleak indeed. During my illness and those dark days the church did rally around us at times. They were willing to assist us with some of our food needs from the benevolent pantry of the church. I knew that the early New Testament church members sold their possessions to assist one-another, and this church claimed to be the New Testament Church. Many of those New Testament Christians sold everything to be of assistance to other members in need. But, this congregation didn’t, nor did they seem to care about even helping with our medicine or housing needs.

Finally, I made it back to work and for three years we struggled to get out of the dark hole of debt we were in. I worked sixty and seventy hour weeks in order to catch up. Some

members seemed to continue to be unduly critical, while others seemed to distance themselves from my family. We continued to attend, participate and tried to encourage others to be more involved.

This church claimed to be the perfectly restored church of the New Testament. They claimed to have had all the right rituals, all the essential doctrines and all the necessary practices down perfectly. Yet, they found few ways to help me **“bear my burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”** They hadn’t even learned to **“weep with those who weep, nor rejoice with those who rejoice.”** I was not alone with feelings of neglect. Others in similar circumstances dropped out and disappeared. What was wrong? I needed answers.

I concluded that this church had a misplaced emphasis. Their faith is centered in what they called sound doctrine involving the right rituals. They believe in the correct rituals on Sunday and “leave undone the weightier matters of the law; justice, mercy and faith” during the week. The church’s general indifference to my family’s needs, and the needs of some others in the fellowship, resulted in “lambs” straying, but some of the full-grown “sheep” strayed as well.

A couple of months ago, I learned that I was going to have major surgery again and that I would be out of work for as long as two years. I became depressed and discouraged. I missed church services. I needed encouragement. I needed hope. I needed friendship. I received very little at church. So, I have virtually dropped out to face my problems with only my family for support. Only one person has called to see how I was doing. He offered me friendship and moral support. Not one elder, not one deacon, or one minister has even called to check on me, inquire about my needs or my condition. I have attended church a few times since I learned the news about my new health condition. Only a couple of the members asked me about my absences. When I go I feel like a stranger in the pew. I am a stranger in the pew! I keep asking, “Doesn’t anyone care?”

In my deep need, the following poem came to me. It expresses my needs and the questions about my continued association with the church that claims to be the true body of Christ here on earth. It expresses my pain and feelings of alienation. It is my cry for help.

And I Ask, “Why?”

*As the years have passed, life hasn’t gotten any easier. Life has been one big challenge, yet I continue on.
“Why?” I ask.*

I continue to be in pain daily, yet I carry on. “Why?” I ask.

*I have been in financial trouble since my first surgery. I now work 60 to 70 hours a week to help catch up.
I continue to carry on. “Why?” I ask.*

*Becoming a Christian and trying to serve God, I get knocked down, negative things are said, yet I carry on.
“Why?” I ask.*

Physically, financially and spiritually I struggle and continue on. “Why?” I ask.

When I share my hurts with others, they think I'm just complaining. So, I just hold it inside and pretend all is well.

"Why?" I ask.

As I fall away from the church, senior saints encourage me to continue on. "Why?" I ask.

Circumstances and situations have made life very difficult.

It is hard on my family, yet I carry on.

"Why?" I ask.

I come to church to worship God and a brother or a sister uses this as an opportunity to speak words which discourage me.

Yet, I continue to attend.

"Why?" I ask.

I have been encouraged by many, but discouraged by others who make it difficult to be around them, yet I stay.

I continue to attend. "Why?" I ask.

I pray specifically every day for people, relationships and relief from these bad situations, yet life seems to get worse. But, I accept it.

I ask, "Why?"

- Written by this Christian husband and father 12/1/02

Our Response Be a more mature Christian?

I am a Christian and have pretty good idea of all that life entails.

It requires patience, forgiveness, faithfulness and endurance.

In spite of life's difficulties, including finances and health,

I carry on and ask, "Why not?"

It is not easy to face my critics and give them a smile.

It is not easy to barely get by.

It is not easy to go the second mile or turn the other cheek.

But I ask, "Why not?" And, I do.

It's hard to care when no one else seems to.

It is difficult to trust God when you can hardly trust yourself.

Or, to smile when bill collectors are knocking on the door.

I ask, "Why not care, trust and hope for the best?" And, I do.

If God is so willing to give me a second chance, and a third,

A fourth, ten or more.

I ask, "Why can't I give some slack?" And I do.

When I am discouraged, stressed out and depressed And few others try to lift me up,

Should I not respond with gratitude and a positive attitude?

I say, "Of course!" And I do.

*When I am ready to complain about my old shoes, or
I see someone who has no feet, or who is blind.*

I am compelled to look on the bright side.

And I ask, "Why not?" And, I do.

When I count my many blessings and name them one by one, I'm truly surprised at what the Lord has done.

Would He not want my thanks, instead of my complaints? I answer, "Yes!" And I give thanks.

God never promised me riches, perfect health or pleasant days. But, I've had a measure of each.

He encourages me to "Overcome evil with good." I ask, "Why not?" And, I'll do my best to.

CHAPTER 19

I AM HEARING IMPAIRED

One day I was sitting on a bench waiting for a bus, when a stranger sat down on the other end. She asked me when the next bus was scheduled to pass. I did not hear her question. You see, I am hearing impaired. I work for a large computer firm and my job does not require that I be able to hear. I let the stranger know that I could not hear by a number of signs with my hands while pointing to my ears and mouth.

This stranger was a woman. She immediately “signed in” and we started a conversation. She told me that she was the daughter of a hearing impaired couple, but that her hearing was normal.

During that ten-minute wait we became acquainted while exchanging addresses and other information. She asked me if my family and I went to church. My answer was, “No.”

She then invited me to visit the church that she attended. She said that there was a small group of hearing impaired members and that she signed for them. I was impressed and promised to accept her invitation on some Sunday when my wife and I were free to attend.

I filed her information in my billfold and forgot about it. Ten days later there was a knock on our door. It was this lady and her husband. We invited her in and we carried on friendly discussion covering the news, weather, and politics. Then we got to the subject of religion. I learned that she was one of the best translators in the city. She translated sermons, prayers, and songs into sign language at her home congregation. She translated for the local courts. She was also called by various congregations in the city to translate sign language sermons into the spoken word preached by visiting deaf preachers. She was called on to sign for meetings of church leaders that included both deaf and hearing attendees. She told us that there were six ladies who were qualified to sign at her congregation and that they rotated at different times during the assemblies. She offered to conduct a Bible study in our home.

We agreed to have a ten-week Bible study. It was held every Tuesday evening and by the tenth week my wife and I agreed to attend her church. We were accepted by the deaf group at the church and we quickly developed ties with them. We were invited into their homes and we invited them into ours. Our teacher was the glue that brought and kept us together. With consistent and loving teaching we were convicted and converted. We enjoyed the new fellowship with other believers. However, the fellowship was mostly with other deaf members of the congregation. We attended church-wide potlucks but

still were forced to spend most of the time with the members who were also impaired. We were never invited into one elder's home or one deacon's. Though welcomed at church, we met and became acquainted with very few of the hearing members. We were total strangers to most. The hearing members clung to each other and the deaf members did the same.

I was transferred to a California plant and upon arrival we sought out a congregation with a ministry to the deaf. We settled on one and placed our membership with it. They had two women able to translate for the deaf. There was not one man who could sign in that church, either. In Austin, Texas the sister who converted us also taught our Bible class. In California, the congregation had no classes for the deaf. There, it was considered unscriptural for a woman to teach a man in a mixed Bible class. Therefore, if we were to be taught, it would be by sermon from the pulpit through these two translators.

The deaf group there was much smaller than we had in Austin.

The doctrine of this church bothered us a great deal. These women were willing to teach us, but the church had a ban on such. They claimed that a woman could not teach a man, even though we had been converted to Christ by the teaching of a woman. And, we had attended her classes for years. They claimed that it was scriptural for a woman to teach the deaf what the preacher preached, but that it would be unscriptural for the same woman to teach what Christ taught. This made no sense to us, or to anyone else willing to think it through. But, that was the traditional stance of that congregation and we would just have to live with it.

We are hanging on, but barely. We would love to invite the hearing brethren into our home and would enjoy being in theirs. But, without a translator there would be little or no communication or sharing, except for the food.

Therefore, I suggest that churches arrange to teach numerous members to sign, both men and women. Then all members could practice Christian hospitality and those who sign could open the doors of fellowship to an entire congregation.

The deaf in a congregation need not be strangers in our pews. They can be integrated into any hearing congregation with planning and effort. The hearing impaired may need acceptance and support more than the hearing.

Let's find ways to make them feel that they are an integral part of our congregations.

“Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind: but thou shalt fear thy God, for I {am} Jehovah.” (Leviticus 19:14 KJV)

CHAPTER 20

MUST SEEKERS BE TREATED LIKE STRANGERS?

One businessman's perspective.

I am acquainted with churches. I have degrees from two prominent church related universities. I have traveled broadly in my business and have visited hundreds of congregations in my travels. I have visited churches of various denominations in my own city. I have visited them on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings and at mid-week prayer meetings. I have attended their revivals and lectureships. I have attended youth rallies and conventions. I have rated user-friendly churches on a scale of 1 to 10, the highest being 10.

To my surprise of my associates, there is not a church of my observation that has rated a 10. I used the following criteria to measure how user-friendly a congregation was:

1. The outside appearance of the building and grounds.
2. The warmth of the lobby or foyer of the building.
3. The greetings by members at the entrance.
4. The warmth of the membership once I was in the sanctuary.
5. The recognition of visitors from the pulpit.
6. The use of visitors' registration cards.
7. The availability of printed matter on the church and its mission.
8. The recognition and follow-up at the conclusion of the service.
9. The immediate (within one week) follow-up by the church by mail and personal contact.
10. The continued follow-up contact of the church within the next month.
11. Enthusiasm in the assemblies.
12. Quality of its preaching.
13. Involvement of membership, male and female, in the assemblies.
14. Quality of its music.

I have visited various services of a number of these congregations more than once and some as many as four times. Without exception, these churches attitude toward visitors was reflected the same way regardless of the service attended. I shall describe what I observed in the churches visited. I have rated them on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest.

Church # 1

My most recent visit was to a church I had worshipped with at two intervals over the last thirty years. In the interim since I was last a member, there had been a complete change

in the membership of that church, so my wife and I recognized not one person and no one recognized us. The church had about 200 in attendance at the last time our membership was there. They had a building lot large enough to have accommodated a future building that would seat 700, with sufficient room left over for parking. Its first auditorium was plain and simple. In the intervening years, the congregation chose to build a new sanctuary with a seating capacity of 300. It was a beautiful, structure and well furnished. The old sanctuary had been turned over to a Spanish speaking congregation.

My wife and I arrived a couple of minutes after the service began.

As we entered the lobby, we could hear a Scripture being read over speakers in the lobby. There was a lady in the lobby who handed us an attendance card but did not introduce herself or verbally welcome us. To our amazement there were only 26 people in attendance that morning. At the conclusion of the service, before the final hymn, the song leader acknowledged my wife and me as visitors, along with two others. Then there was the closing hymn and a closing prayer.

We were seated behind everyone else and started walking slowly toward the exit, expecting someone to catch up with us and greet us. The only ones who spoke to us were the other two visitors who had sat on the pew directly in front of us. Just before we exited the lobby, the song leader caught up with us and introduced himself. We visited with him for a couple of minutes and then the minister walked up and spoke to us but did not give his name. None of the other 22 people in attendance so much as nodded in our direction. Here we were in the midst of brethren of our own denomination and only two of its members felt it important enough to speak to us, and one, the minister, did not even give us his name. Is it any wonder that this congregation had shrunk and was on the verge of closure? It barely rated a 1 on my user-friendly list.

Church # 2

I visited this congregation's Sunday morning Bible class and assembly. I was greeted by an elderly lady in the church lobby. She was handing out bulletins. She suggested that I might enjoy the auditorium class. I took a seat about halfway down the rows of pews in the sanctuary. When the class started, there were about 25 adults in this auditorium class. The teacher walked past my pew without speaking or even acknowledging my presence. He started the class with a prayer and proceeded to teach. The teaching was adequate and rated a 5 on my scale. The teacher was prepared but allowed a debate to be carried on by two class members for half of the class time. I did not know if there were other visitors present, but none were acknowledged, introduced or welcomed. In such a small group it would have been obvious to anyone that I was a visitor. When the class ended, an elderly woman came over and introduced herself while welcoming me.

I stood around in my pew next to the aisle during the intermission between the class period and the general assembly. At least 50 people walked by on their way to the

forward pews and a few nodded to me. Only one man offered me a handshake and an introduction. The song leader did welcome visitors and members before he started the first song. The prayers were quite rote and on the singing, I rated it a 6. Beside the men up front leading prayers and songs, reading Scripture and preaching, there was no participation by the audience, except during the singing.

A rather large man and his wife sat directly in front of me. He did not speak to me when he came in but did sing “Send the Light” with great volume. The preacher preached a sermon on a subject that was controversial in that church. However, he encouraged the members to consider all sides of the subject and to allow him to test past doctrinal positions held by this denomination. That approach appeared reasonable to me.

The man in front of me began to twist and turn as the sermon progressed. He got a bit red around the collar and kept nudging his wife at each point made by the preacher. The sermon ended and was followed by an invitation song. Final announcements were made and the man in front of me was asked to lead a closing prayer. He responded that he would not lead a prayer for God to bless the service and especially the sermon. He then walked, rather he stomped out of the building leaving the whole church stunned and embarrassed. Needless to say, that church rated a 0 n being user-friendly. What visitor would have returned to that church under any circumstance?

Church # 3

This church was one of the oldest churches in the, city. It had an attendance of around 500 every Sunday morning. It had a broad spectrum of ages, but leaned toward older aged people. It was quite formal and proper. As my wife and I entered the lobby, there were two couples spotting the visitors attempting to greet them between shaking hands and greeting the regulars. Before entering the sanctuary, one of the couples caught us and introduced themselves and asked our names. At the beginning of the worship service, the person in charge asked the audience to stand and greet one another and their visitors. About a half dozen folks came to introduce themselves and welcome us. At another point in the service, everyone was asked to fill out an attendance card, white ones for the regular members, and pink ones for visitors. We filled one out and dropped in the collection basket as requested.

After the benediction, we worked our way toward the back exits.

We were greeted by only two people before we left the lobby. On Wednesday of that week we received a form letter from the congregation acknowledging our visit and asking us to “return at any time.” We did not return but we rated that church about a 5 on our user-friendly scale.

Church #4

My wife and I had just moved from out of state to the city where this church was located.

I will describe it as one of the most user-friendly churches we had ever visited. It was a metropolitan church that had grown from a congregation of 250 members to a congregation of over 2,500 in less than ten years. It held two worship services every Sunday morning to accommodate the crowds. When my wife and I arrived one Sunday morning there were men directing traffic in the parking lot. We were stopped by one of these men and were asked if we were visitors. When informed that we were, he welcomed us and directed us to a section of the large parking lot closest to the building reserved for visitors. As we approached the front entrance of the church building, there was a gazebo with a large sign on top reading, "VISITORS PLEASE REGISTER HERE." We were greeted warmly by a vivacious group of hosts in their twenties. They handed us a visitors' registration card along with a packet of material that introduced us to the church, its ministers, its local programs of ministry and benevolence, its outreach and its foreign missions efforts. They gave a small ribbon to pin on our lapels so that we would be recognized as visitors. In the package there was an additional interview sheet, that allowed us to give a more detailed account of who we were, our situation and any of our needs, if we wished make them known. On it we could submit more details on the reasons that prompted our visit. Once in the lobby, there was another cadre of warm folks of all ages who greeted and welcomed us again. Their welcomes were extra friendly and genuine. By the time we were seated we had shaken hands with about a dozen members in the lobby of that church.

We observed some informality in the liturgy, but seemingly directed informality. There were old folks, middle-aged, young marrieds, college and high school aged youth, and lots of children. They came in suits and ties, sports wear, blue-jeans, slacks and some even wore shorts. They wore Nike and Reeboks, sandals and Florsheims. There were beards and ponytails. They were black, white, yellow and brown. Everyone seemed to feel at home.

When the service began, the leader extended a warm welcome to members and visitors. He asked everyone, who hadn't, to fill out an attendance card. He encouraged everyone to enter the worship with enthusiasm and vigor. They did! There was a well read Scripture followed by three contemporary songs. After the third song the entire audience was asked to stand and greet those around them. Again it was done with great warmth and in a spirit that said, "We are glad that you are here and want this service to bless your life."

Their welcome was followed by another Scripture reading and a prayer. The prayer was followed by three traditional songs, communion and a 25-minute sermon that got to its main points quickly and clearly. An invitation song was sung at the conclusion of the sermon and about 2 dozen folks came forward. Some came to confess sins, others to be baptized and still others who sought the prayers of the church for burdens they were carrying. One could tell that this was truly a caring church. After the benediction, we

observed the spirit of inclusion radiating throughout the sanctuary. We were made to feel welcome all over again by those around us. We did not to feel like strangers, even though we were.

We left that church inspired, encouraged and determined to return. But, the church was not through with us. They had a philosophy that if a person was willing to take out an hour of their weekend and come to their assembly, the least they could do was to follow-up on that visit.

This they did. On Monday evening we received a phone call from one of the members of that church acknowledging our visit and wanted to know if we had questions or needs they could help us with. I felt certain that, had I told this man I had lost my job and that we were short on groceries, he would have had a box of groceries on my doorstep that very evening. Had I told him we had just moved to town, was without a job and our refrigerator was damaged beyond repair in the move, I believe that he would have helped us replace it. I thanked him for the call and the hospitality shown by the church.

On Wednesday of that week we received a letter from the senior minister thanking us for visiting the church. He welcomed us to the community and invited us back. He also offered the services of the church if we had any needs. The letter was personalized and we could tell that there was some thought put into it.

On Thursday evening a couple from the church dropped by our home and left us with a welcome pie from the church. They did not try to be intrusive, but we could not let them leave without inviting them in for a short visit.

I gave that church a 9 on my user friendly rating. I shaved a point off because the instrumental music was so loud I could hardly hear the lyrics. It probably would have received a 10 by most visitors. It was no secret why the church had grown 1,000 percent in ten years. It truly wanted strangers to visit them and had a plan to make them feel welcome! It understood the concept of warmth, welcome and inclusion.

If you were a seeker, which church would you return to if you were seeking a church home, #1, #2, #3 or #4?

Churches like number four would grow even if they did not have an effective evangelistic outreach program. Their warmth, concern, and attention offered strangers would have been enough to cause most visitors to return and join their ranks. Even though there were more than a thousand at each Sunday service, no one could leave their worship services feeling like a stranger.

CHAPTER 21

THREE SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

In addition to the activities mentioned in earlier chapters of this book, there are three additional activities, which may be adopted in overcoming the loneliness and isolation felt by many of those in the pew. Any church can adopt them. They may require making a change in the public life of the church. Most churches continue to have morning and evening assemblies. They are basically the same and usually not done as well as the morning service. The evening service may be shorter but it is still pulpit centered and the audience acts as spectators sitting in rows looking toward the pulpit and at the backs of other parishioner's heads. There is little hope of any real congregational intimacy in this arrangement, let alone dialog. The following activities will help meld the members of the church together.

Home Groups

Many wise and progressive churches have canceled Sunday evening services at their buildings and have started "home groups" that meet in much more intimate situations. The groups average 10 to 30 members in size. They are divided into varied groupings, which may reflect age, family, or simply geography. These "home groups" start with a devotional consisting of songs, prayers, a Bible study and a sharing of personal and family needs. The devotional is followed by a shared meal. The host homes are rotated so that the burden of hosting is shared by all those who have enough house space to accommodate the group.

It is in these settings that strangers become friends. There, hearts are opened and burdens are shared. Sins are confessed and support given. No one is threatened and all are accepted. There, personal needs are acknowledged. There, personal needs can be met and the group becomes an extended spiritual family. Dialog is not only possible in these groups and it becomes a reality.

Each group has a facilitator to make meeting plans and to see that the plans are carried out. The talents of all members are used to the benefit of all, thus enabling personal growth. Each member can make contributions that are impossible to make in most of the regular congregational settings.

Churches that have adopted the "home group" arrangement have consistently had greater combined attendance on Sunday evenings than at the traditional evening service.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

The second activity that has been used successfully is the "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" program. In it, members of the congregation are encouraged to volunteer to

invite four singles, couples or families into their homes for a meal each quarter. That averages one each month. The invitees are to be people that the hosts do not know well, newcomers or those who visit and are basically strangers. In this activity, the newcomers and strangers meet and get acquainted over a meal in the home of the hosts.

It has been said, “You do not really know a person until you have broken bread with him or her.” This program breaks down barriers and builds relationships like no other in this author’s experience. During the breaking bread with strangers, there develops a tie that cannot be fostered in any way during normal church assemblies and activities. The walls are quickly broken down and ties are made that may last for a lifetime.

At such dinners, church members learn of the other family’s history, faith, problems, concerns, and hopes. After one dinner, those who have broken bread together will never again greet the each other at the church building with a formal “Hello” or with a simple handshake. They will be asking questions like the following and will be genuinely concerned about the answers. “How is the arthritis doing?” “How are your Children?” Or, “Grandchildren?” “Did you get the job?” “Do you still plan surgery?” “Can we take care of your yard while you are away?” “May we baby sit while you care for your mother?” Or, the conversation may include the following. “If that car breaks down again, you are welcome to use our second one until you get it repaired.” “I’ve conscripted a couple of deacons and four other men to be there Saturday. We’ll be able to replace that old roof of yours in one day.” “I’m serious. Call me when you need some help.”

Without knowing others in the pew, few or none of these conversations will ever take place. It is so easy to say, “**Be you warmed and filled**” and then do nothing. But, if we know our brethren and get acquainted with the strangers in the pews, the compassionate Christian will respond to the needs and cries for help, readily and responsibly.

Shared Time

Since most churches follow a liturgy that is pulpit centered and use professional ministers to conduct it, the worship is wrapped around singing, readings, prayers, sermons and the Lord’s Supper. With the exception of a few lay-persons who may read, pray or sing, there is little opportunity to learn about the strangers in the pew, even if they are identified.

Some churches allow time for individual testimonies, but these are often limited to members in good standing and who have a gift of speech.

Some churches have adopted what is called “Shared Time.” The authors of this book remember “I shared times” to be among the most rewarding and richest experiences in public worship assemblies. They are bridge building experiences like few others in the church.

It involves effort and planning but the experience can do much to open the fellowship to every member of the church.

Among the examples of shared times that have lasted us for a life-time, just four are as mentioned here.

On one occasion, at a Sunday morning service, the minister invited a converted alcoholic to the pulpit. His wife was a faithful member of the church and had suffered long with this man. She and a few intimate friends had prayed often that God would bring about a change in his heart and life. Although he had attended church with his wife once or twice a month, he had made no effort to change his life. Her friends, male and female, attempted to bring him to Christ. On a visit with the minister he acknowledged that he needed help and wished that those who were trying to convert him knew how difficult it was to give up the “bottle.”

The minister invited him to come to church the next Sunday and tell the church about his struggles. He reluctantly agreed to do so.

His “shared time” with the church was done in an interview form.

It lasted about ten minutes. As he finished his story, he asked the church to help him become the Christian husband and father he knew he should be. The church gave him a standing ovation. He returned to active membership and started a AA chapter at that church. He knew the whole church supporting him and praying for him. He became the successful Christian husband and father he wanted to be.

Most members have no idea what the subject of the sermon was that morning, but you can be assured that every member of that church who was present, remembers the man and the outcome of that ten minutes of “shared time.”

On another occasion, a young woman who had suffered throughout her teens and early twenties from bulimia “shared” her battle and her healing from this eating disorder. In four weeks after her testimony, no one could tell you the name of one song used that morning or the subject of the sermon, but most can tell you about her testimony twenty years later. The church announced that she would be speaking on her healing the following evening and nearly two hundred people showed up to hear her full story. Many of them suffered from an eating disorder or had a family member who did. The audience that evening did not consist of only church members but was heavily sprinkled with neighbors, physicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists who yearned to hear in detail the story of her eating addiction and the methods used in her healing.

On another occasion, the minister called one of the elders on Sunday afternoon and reported that he was ill. He asked the elder to prepare the evening service. The elder called six people who were for the most part strangers to the larger body of the congregation, or who carried burdens that most members were unaware of. He brought

them to the pulpit one by one and interviewed them. They included a foreign college student, a widow, a widower, the father of teen-age children, a businessman who had just gone bankrupt and a young mother whose husband had deserted her. These six developed a tie to the hearts of the other members of the church that ten years of traditional assemblies could not or would not have accomplished.

There can be scores of “shared times” in any church that would build bridges, develop understanding, create sympathy, and open the doors of fellowship that no other, or all other, assembly activities cannot achieve.

The fourth example of the power of “shared time” was the news that a young mother of two adopted boys, ages 2 and 5, had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Her husband, children and parents were distraught. The doctors gave her six to eight months to live. This church had never used women in any kind of public leadership roles in their assemblies.

This heartbroken mother asked the elders for permission to open her heart to the congregation. They reluctantly permitted it. At the end of her “shared time” there was not a dry eye in the house. The church rallied behind her and her family with prayer, food, baby sitting, and words of encouragement and hope. God gave her six years of life and blessed the whole church because she shared her story and needs.

Such “sharing times” need to be monitored and conducted with care. There is hardly a church, large or small that doesn’t have a basket full of blessings sitting quietly and alone on their pews. Searching them out and arranging for them to share should be among the top five priorities of any church. They will bless any body of people like few other activities will or can.

It is only through an intimate knowledge of each other that we are enabled to fully appreciate the sentiments and words of that great song of the church, Blest Be the Tie That Binds:

Blest be the tie that binds, our hearts in Christian love:
The fellowship of kindred minds, is like to that above. Before our Father’s
throne, we pour our ardent prayers:
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, Our comforts and our cares.
We share each other’s woes, each other’s burdens bear, And often for each
other flows, a sympathizing tear.
When we are called to part, it gives us inward pain:
But we shall still be joined in heart, and hope meet again.

It is when we live the words we sing, that the genuineness of our faith is truly reflected. May we resolve before God, and one-another, to **be genuinely interested in others as we**

greet, seek out and reach the strangers in our pews!

“And the word of Jehovah came to me saying, Son of man prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord Jehovah, Woe unto you shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves. Should you not feed the sheep? You eat fat and clothe you with wool, you kill the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. The diseased have not been strengthened, neither have you healed that which is sick, neither have you bound up that which is broken, neither have you brought back that which was driven away, neither have you sought that which was lost, but with force and vigor have you ruled over them. And, they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field, and were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my sheep were scattered upon all the face of the earth, and there was none that did search and seek after them.” (Ezekiel 34:1-6) “I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand, and will cause them to cease from feeding them my sheep.” (vs.10)

May we put forth the effort to make sure that our church and its shepherds not have such judgment passed on them!