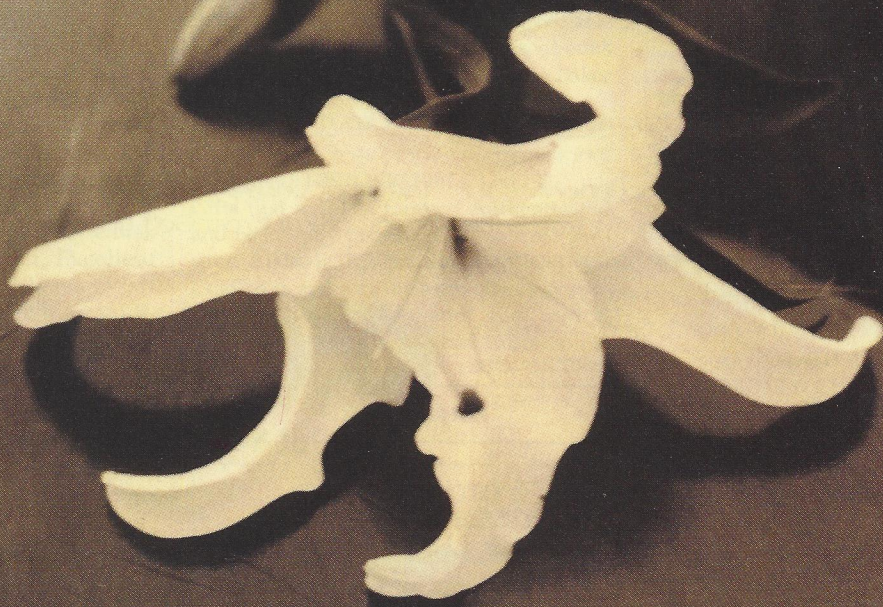


A Pastor's

Ministry to an older pastor made me feel inadequate, which may be exactly what's needed for God to use me anytime.

JAMES RODGERS



Grief Observed

With shock and disbelief, I asked, "They're all dead?" Did I really hear what I thought I heard? The caller confirmed the facts. Our senior pastor's wife and three children had been killed in a car accident that morning. The only survivor was the driver of the other car that hit them head-on.

His estimated speed was 75-90 miles per hour as he passed another car while going over a small rise on a country road. Her estimated speed was 45 miles per hour as she was taking her children to school. She and her kids never had a chance.

I hung up the phone and told my wife what had happened. We were both numb. We prayed. We sought God's wisdom. But, we didn't know what to do next.

I was 25 years old and in the seventh month of seminary. I accepted this call to be a youth pastor to gain experience and apply the lessons learned in the classroom. But we never anticipated this kind of experience.

I had not taken any pastoral ministries courses. I didn't know how to lead a funeral. I didn't know how to

comfort Pastor Jerry. He was older than me, and he was my overseer. I didn't grasp how to provide a stabilizing presence in the midst of a crisis. Nonetheless, there I was—feeling "in over my head."

My first funeral

Four closed caskets filled the front of the church. The 900 people in attendance required overflow seating in the fellowship hall. Local newspaper and television reporters attended.

I was thankful for the other pastors involved. The dean of the seminary had been the family's pastor while Jerry was in seminary, so he delivered the funeral sermon. Two other pastors, family friends, shared special music. The three of them represented years of ministry experience and training. However, I was the one they asked to step into the pulpit to offer the opening words.

I didn't fully comprehend all that I could have, or should have, been doing. I just did the best I could.

The seminary dean, Pastor Plaster (technically it's "Dr. Plaster," but he enjoyed the smiles caused by "Pastor Plaster"), had discussed the whole service with me. He never talked down to me as a ministry novice, but sought my input. He even wanted me to select the

Bible passages and asked me to deliver the opening comments since I represented a familiar face to the church. He also wanted me to lead in the prayer, eulogy, and the Scripture readings.

When I was uncertain what to do, I followed his lead. His years of pastoral experience showed in his message and his calming presence.

Instead of attempting to act like a seasoned veteran, I honestly expressed the thoughts and questions in my mind. After welcoming people I said, "Right now, the question on everybody's mind is 'why?' But as hard as we try, we can't come up with any answers. We must trust in the fact that we have an all-powerful God. And, God makes no mistakes."

I repeated that last sentence slowly and with emphasis on each word, "And God makes no mistakes." I wasn't trying to be dramatic, just to communicate what I felt God wanted me to say.

Serving in a crisis

In the months that followed, people often inquired how Pastor Jerry was dealing with his loss. Then, sometimes, they asked me how I was doing. My basic response became, "I know there are other pastors with more, and better, training to minister in this situation. But,

We regularly sent him cards, gifts, and affirmations, but we signed them “your secret interceders.”

for some reason—beyond my understanding—God chose me to be here at this time.”

Now, viewing this event through the lens of 18 years of pastoral experience, I realize God was teaching me some very important lessons about ministry. Perhaps the most important is that God can use our inadequacy or inexperience as a launching pad to discover His sufficiency.

Pastor Jerry needed some time away, and it was about six weeks before he returned to the pulpit. The church board hesitated to hand me the regular preaching responsibilities. I was stretched trying to minister to kids experiencing their own grief, since the oldest child who died was a member of the youth group. A retired pastor provided the Sunday morning messages for a few weeks. The board offered me some of the speaking times if I was up to it.

Three weeks after the accident, I delivered my first full sermon in the evening service. I spoke on Nehemiah and his ability to press on during difficulties.

Just before the service started, two of the board members met me in the office. With serious looks, they shared that a couple had entered the church and they were part of a cultic group. This couple had attended other churches to interrupt the speaker and challenge his teaching. They assured me that if this couple tried anything, they would quickly escort them out.

With my inexperience, I didn't know how troubled I should be. I valued the

board members' support, and they suffered more concern than me. Everything went well. The potential hecklers never interrupted. I experienced another example of God's sufficiency in the midst of my earthly inadequacies.

Ministry to a more senior pastor

Prior to the accident, Pastor Jerry and I met weekly to discuss ministry. We also enjoyed theological banter on “deep issues” as he continued work on his Th.M.

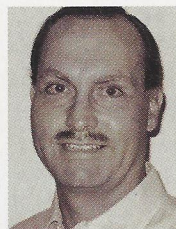
After the accident it took a while to resume our meeting times. And the content and tone changed. I know Jerry wanted to mentor me, but understandably, his emotional reservoir ran low. Sometimes he just needed someone to share his hurting.

I wanted to offer encouragement and support, but how? What did I really have to offer? I found myself just listen-

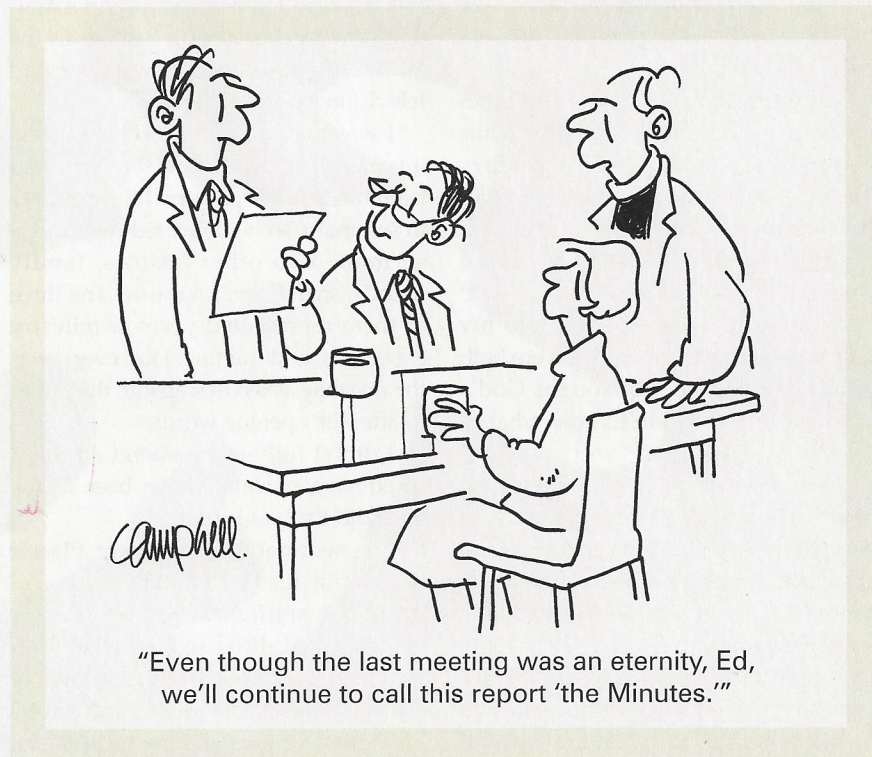
ing. As he went through the grieving process, I tried to learn from his experience. He shared that one of the results of a dramatic separation like his is to feel uneasy about other existing relationships. Since he had lost those closest to him, he needed affirmation that others close to him would not be leaving as well.

Yet again, I wonder if my inexperience actually allowed God to use me more effectively. If I'd had more training, I might have “known just enough to be dangerous.” I might have tried to be a more active counselor and said something really dumb.

Jerry shared of some of the hurtful things that well-meaning people said. Some suggested, “God must have needed them more than you.” Jerry said he wanted to scream, “God has the angels, the apostles, and all the saints of history, so why would God really need my wife and children?” Others offered,



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“Even though the last meeting was an eternity, Ed, we'll continue to call this report ‘the Minutes.’”

"It's just like what Job went through, so you can make it too." But, Jerry observed, that was cold comfort.

Two different people actually approached Jerry to probe what sin his wife and children had committed. Now, that does sound like Job's experience with his "friends."

Jerry didn't mind silence with people. He just valued their presence and confirmation that the friendship still existed. Since that time, I've studied more about Job's experience and noticed that the three friends spent their first seven days in silent support of their friend (Job 2:13). Maybe that's what grieving people need most.

Caring connections

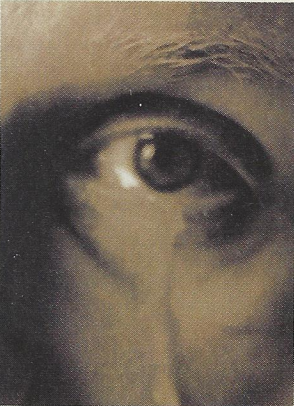
Mary Ann and I had been married less than a year when the accident occurred. Since we were still establishing dynamics of our relationship, the accident impressed on us the fragility of life.

Mary Ann worked as an RN at the only hospital in the county. So for six weeks after the accident, she would often serve alongside me in ministry situations and then go to the hospital where the only survivor of the tragedy recovered. We knew this was not coincidental, and it forced us to deal with issues of forgiveness and grace.

Even though we both felt "in over our heads," it also served to confirm God's directing of events. And if God deemed it okay, then it needed to be okay with us.

We also wanted to deal with the situation as a team. Many people sent Jerry cards, gifts, and affirmations of their concern. But we came up with the idea of becoming "secret interceders." We regularly sent him the cards, gifts, and affirmations, but we signed them "your secret interceders."

It was fun to come up with new ways to surprise him. Just before we left the church to move on to a senior pastor position, we revealed our identity. Jerry shared that it had driven him crazy trying to figure out who it was. That was part of our intent, as it caused him to reflect on the many people who cared



Grace During Grief

What I've learned about grief ministry since the accident

Power of presence. Because of our vocation, we pastors cause people to think about God. Without saying a word, our presence reminds people that God is still there—loving and caring.

Less is more. When people grieve, they can misinterpret well-intended comments. Simple phrases of personal care and affirmation connect better than theological discourses on God's sovereignty. Job's friends performed their best ministry during that first week of their silence.

Listen patiently. When people grieve they say things they don't really mean. Allow them to vent their pain without correction. Psalmists often express disappointment, even anger, with God. But, God does not abandon us when we're discouraged or depressed.

Walk the walk. Supporters may offer, "If you need something, let me know." But grieving people often don't know their true needs. Go ahead and take a meal (in disposable dishes). Or wash some of the dishes stacking up in the sink. Offer to do a load of laundry—don't wait for them to ask, because they won't.

Acknowledge anniversaries. Grieving people remember anniversaries, whether others do or not. Don't make a big deal about it, but express your concern with a simple comment or card—"Thinking and praying for you today."

—JDR

deeply and hurt with him.

It also met a need in our lives, to take a painful event and look for creative ways to minister.

The accident caused us to make sure our daily decisions reflected an eternal perspective. We never part without saying, "I love you" so that if something should happen to one of us, those three words are the last that the surviving spouse would have heard. We certainly don't think of the accident every time we say it, as it has become a regular part of our lives. But it's a simple act that helps us keep our love and our ministry in perspective.

Because I witnessed this grief from a front row seat, I realized I can never

fully comprehend what Pastor Jerry experienced. Many men would have completely crumbled and turned their backs on ministry, and even God himself. To Jerry's credit and evidence of God's continual work, he didn't do that. Jerry now serves God at a Christian counseling ministry, specializing in grief counseling.

God continues to impact our lives as well. Perhaps the greatest impact is the vivid realization that God can use me even when I don't feel properly trained or experienced. I've gotten much additional training and experience since then, but that first funeral taught me not to depend on my inadequacies, but rather on God's.

