



We are called to be genuine

Jon Singletary
Assistant Professor;
Editor, Director,
Center for Family and
Community Ministries



*"The place God calls
you to is the place where
your deep gladness and the
world's deep hunger meet."*

*Frederick Buechner,
Wishful Thinking*

Each year, I am invited to the meetings of the family ministry and children's justice committees of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. This year, for the first time, I decided to go and meet the family ministry leaders of several mainline denominations.

We met in New Orleans and toured Habitat for Humanity's "Musicians' Village" in the Ninth Ward. We discussed ways our churches are advocating for children, building healthy relationships and strengthening families in Louisiana and around the country. And, of course, we ate some of the finest food in the world (I grew up eating Cajun food so I do have some bias).

Leaders representing the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, American Baptists and others offered stories of exemplary congregational ministries. It was inspiring to hear church leaders relate the struggles of their own congregants to the experiences of our brothers and sisters in New Orleans. It was encouraging to hear stories of strength rising from the significant grief and loss of this community. At the same time, there was the recognition of many more needs.

We were convicted not to become the Priests and Levites of Jesus's parable as we observed the men, women and children who have been robbed, stripped and beaten down. As we drove through the tattered Ninth Ward communities, we didn't want to pass by on the other side but rather to stop and develop a sustained calming presence in the aftermath of a devastating storm. The good news, of grace for us and of hope for the people of the Gulf Coast, is that there are many Good Samaritans in their midst doing this work.

Congregations, religiously affiliated nonprofits and many other organizations have been moved with compassion and are offering genuine care. The redevelopment of housing and jobs begin to give testimony to that fact.

Nevertheless, there were other stories told of people sharing their pain and not being heard. We heard about pastoral and governmental leaders, and other professional caregivers, who sounded even more like the Priests and Levites, people called by God, yet ill-equipped and uncertain of how to respond to deep pain. Some of our hosts were skeptical as they asked us why we were there, but still there was hope in their eyes that our presence would be genuine.

As I hear about ministers who have visited New Orleans in recent months and as I reflect upon our responses when there, the words of Frederick Buechner in *Telling the Truth* come to mind. Although he uses masculine language in reference to the minister, I invite you to read it more inclusively; the call to respond in the midst of a storm is poignant:

“But let him take heart.... If he does not make real the human experience of what it is to cry into the storm and receive no answer, to be sick at heart and find no healing, then he becomes the only one there who seems not to have had that experience because more surely under their bonnets and shawls and jackets, under their Afros and ponytails, all the others there have had it whether they talk of it or not.”

And so we respond to the pain of our world, knowing we cannot do everything – that we are not called to everything. But knowing also that when and where God calls us, we are called to be genuine.

Buechner continues in such a way that demands a compassionate response from us:

“If the preacher does not speak of that and to that, then he becomes like the captain of a ship who is the only one aboard who either does not know that the waves are twenty feet high and the decks awash or will not face up to it so that anything else he tries to say by way of hope and comfort and empowering becomes suspect on the basis of that one crucial ignorance or disingenuousness or cowardice or reluctance to speak in love any truths but the ones that people love to hear.”

It is in this spirit that we present our Winter issue of *Family and Community Ministries*. With Buechner, these pages are a part of our adventure in “telling the truth.” **Andy Taylor** and **Michael Sherr** examine ways church leaders can offer positive pastoral support for returning veterans, particularly those experiencing combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. **David and Diana Garland** offer an excerpt from their book, *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God’s Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships*. They ask us to re-examine the story of Bathsheba and David as one of abuse of power but also as evidence that God hears the lament of people treated unjustly.

Michael Kelly provides two Faith in Action pieces, both the result of a vision resulting in community transformation. **Marge Nykaza** presents Hope, Harmony & Healing as a ministry that addresses social issues through the arts. In Kelly’s interview with **Sheila Mack**, we hear of Godly Women Reaching after Grace and Elegance, a ministry that challenges cultural stereotypes about young women who seek what God desires for their lives.

We also highlight the work of Fredericksburg Baptist Church in Virginia and its ministry among refugees from Burundi. This is yet another church that we are proud to celebrate as we learn about its sustained ministries with families in their community.

In all of these writings, as well as the poetry and prayers gathered by **Michael Sciretti** and the book reviews edited by **Amy Castello**, we hope you will hear our acknowledgement of genuine suffering that makes your ministries so relevant.

The transformational community ministries that we see in these pages begin with the recognition of deep pain. We cannot know the full extent of the pain of each person with whom we minister, we cannot experience every storm that blows through the lives of our congregation’s families and their communities, but we can respond from our own pain in such a way that allows God’s presence to be expressed.

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