

How to Serve Families in Crisis Situations

by Rebecca Ingram Powell

Death. Prolonged illness. Broken marriages. Financial problems. Addictions.

"Most of the time we just need to listen, but when a reply is needed, words can harm or help."

These are just a sample of the many crisis situations that you will face in the course of your ministry.

How can you encourage your church family to assist those in crisis?

The way they respond to members of your church family who are "going through the fire" can make an eternal difference. It's not only important to relationships within the congregation, but it is also a critical outreach to non-Christians who are within the circle of extended family, neighbors, co-workers, and friends.

The urgency of turmoil will often cause people to seek Christ for comfort and help, and I believe there are five things anyone in your congregation can do to encourage those in crisis.

Be there. When my husband Rich was injured in a severe car accident, I was so thankful for the people who came to sit with me while he was in the emergency room and later in the critical care unit. My pastor, Jimmy Moore, of Parkway Church in Goodlettsville, Tenn., believes being there is one of the first ways to minister in an emergency situation. "Your presence speaks volumes," says Moore.

Be sensitive. A lack of sensitivity on our part most often leads to crisis situations being overlooked. Unfortunately, our busy lives can hinder us from reaching out to one another.

"We miss the crisis," admits Moore. "We don't hear, see, or sense that there is a crisis." Perhaps we need to devote more time to building relationships within the church. Intimate friendships are not easily brewed along with the coffee before Bible study on Sunday morning. They are slow-cooked in the warmth of a welcoming home and during other times of deeper fellowship.

Weekly phone calls, men's accountability groups, ladies' nights out - these help establish relationships before a crisis such as divorce or addiction come along. Tight relationships can be essential in avoiding some of life's derailments.

Be committed. It's all too easy to muddle the essential after-care during difficult times. *When the immediate crisis is over, casseroles and pot roasts are no longer necessary - but the church family must still be available.*

"We fail to follow through by extending love and care on a long-term basis," Moore says. This after-care can come in the thoughtfulness of a phone call, card, or visit. Again,

remember the value of hospitality. After the death or divorce of a spouse, home isn't the same anymore. Most people would gladly receive an evening shared with another family.

In the aftermath of tragedy, Pastor Bryan Powell says there is no "quick fix." Powell was on the front lines, caring for the emotional needs of students who survived the tragic 1997 Heath High School shooting in Paducah, Kentucky.

"We just tried over time to provide an environment where the teenagers could come and feel however they felt," he explains. "Our youth seemed to re-live the day of the shooting as the trial approached many months later, and one-on-one counseling was again a part of our ministry. Forgiveness - and the emotional healing that follows it - did not come overnight."

Be practical. In times of crisis, the spiritual must link with the practical. Jesus demonstrated this. His ministry was one of hands-on action while still speaking to the needs of the soul.

On the balmy summer night of my husband's accident, I'm thankful for the person who offered me a blanket in the cold emergency room. I'm indebted to the couple who slipped a roll of quarters into my hand so I could grab something from the vending machine. I'm grateful for the friend who offered to make the necessary phone calls and send the emails so that I wouldn't have to tell people what happened over and over again.

Rich spent five days in the hospital, but the real help was needed when he came home. There was no RN on duty on the home front - just a wife meeting the demands of caring for a husband with a broken back while keeping up with three young children. Words cannot express my appreciation for a "hands-on" church family that helped me extensively with meals, yard maintenance, errands, and even made sure that the kids had rides to their regular church activities.

Be quiet. What could be worse in the aftermath of a suicide, divorce, or financial ruin than idle chatter from a trusted church family? Randall James, president of First Orlando Foundation, Orlando, Fla., says, "What damage is done when we take another's pain and share it with others."

Many times, gossip is thinly veiled in the form of "prayer requests." We need to be vigilant as we guard our tongues during the tough times, keeping confidences and details to ourselves, even when inquiring minds want to know.

Restrain yourself when it comes to giving advice, as well. "When ministering to families in crisis situations, we need to speak truth but in love. Most of the time we just need to listen, but when a reply is needed, words can harm or help. Our job as believers is to be sensitive and speak what is appropriate - edifying words, corrective words, instructional words, supportive words - for the specific situation," cautions James.

Finally, you don't have to be quiet when it comes to praying for families in difficult situations. Be there, on your knees, to intercede for them. Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading, and He will guide your prayers. Be committed to praying for the families long-term. Practically speaking, your prayers will make the eternal difference in your ministry to families in crisis.