

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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## For the **LIFE** of the **WORLD**

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## FEATURES

### 4 What Is a Chaplain?

**By the Rev. John A. Fale, Associate Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, Saint Louis, Missouri**

Nearly every day of the 14 years that I served as a chaplain and pastoral counselor I was energized by the fact that I would get to meet people who were looking for a word of comfort . . . a word of hope . . . something to hold on to . . . something to hold them . . . something . . . anything . . . as illness, disease, death, or broken marital and family relationships knocked the stuffing out of them. I was grateful that I had something to offer them.

### 7 You Care! You Understand!

**By the Rev. Dr. Richard C. Eyer, Director Emeritus of Concordia Bioethics Institute at Concordia University—Wisconsin, Mequon, Wisconsin**

When the sufferer experiences your willingness to enter into his suffering the response is usually something such as, “You care! You understand!” The pastor can then help the sufferer recognize his pastoral caring as God’s caring for the sufferer as simply as saying, “God cares for you.” Then conversation that follows can build upon the suffering of Christ on the cross as the evidence of God’s caring and desire to embrace the sufferer with forgiveness and hope.

### 10 The Cure of Souls: Good for What Ails You

**By the Rev. Dr. Harold L. Senkbeil, Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary**

Mention “healing” and most people think of physicians, the medical arts, and pharmacology. Yet increasingly, medical personnel are broadening their horizons to think holistically about human health. They have come to see that the physical health of a human being is connected to mental and emotional health. Some health professionals have even begun to see that these two components of human well-being are incomplete without a third—spiritual health.

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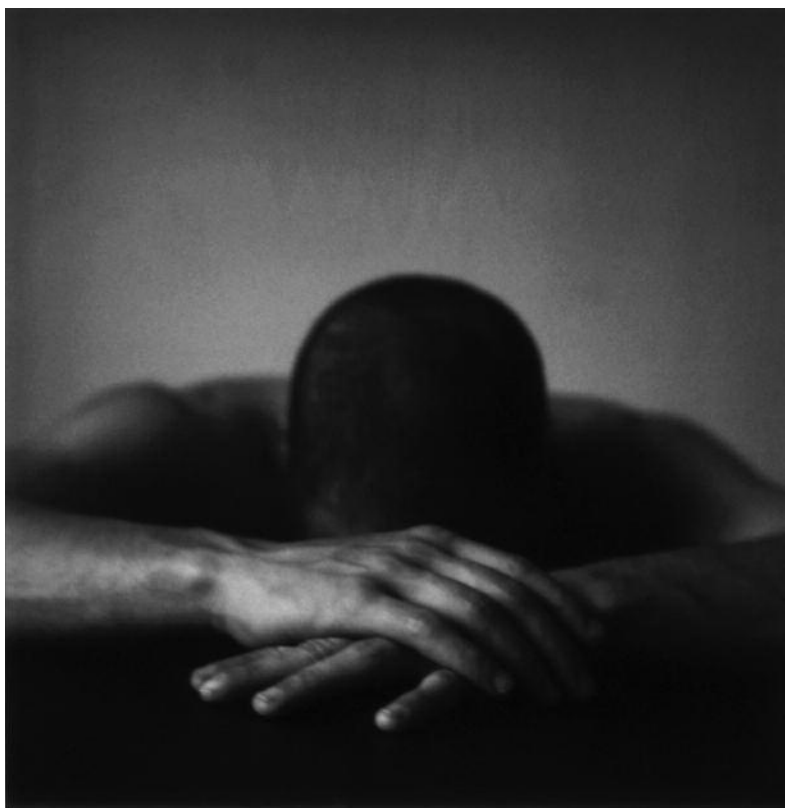


# You Care! You Understand!

By the Rev. Dr. Richard C. Eyer

Recently I sat with a friend in his living room listening to him talk about the sudden and unexpected death of his wife the night before. She had left the room to get ready for bed when he heard her collapse on the floor upstairs. He climbed the stairs quickly and knelt at her side as she cried out, "Al, I'm dying!" In panic he blurted out, "You're not dying," and ran to call 911. Within minutes of the paramedics arrival she was pronounced dead. As I listened he spoke and wept intermittently, and I tried to empty myself of my own thoughts in order to focus on his grief. He had been a good friend for 15 years and I felt deeply for his sorrow. How could any man bear the death of his wife whom he loved so dearly? How could I if I were in his place?





**The task of pastoral care is not to bring an end to people's suffering but to help them find Christ in the midst of it. Unfortunately, every other spirituality around us today aims at escape from suffering. Meditative techniques, whether spiritual or secular, aim at finding peace in one's inner being by blocking out the suffering. But it is in the midst of suffering that God chooses to reveal Himself to us.**

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I have worked hard as a pastor, learning how to allow myself to feel the pain and helplessness of others in their moment of need for support. I am convinced it is the starting place for pastoral care before any offer of prayer or sacrament ought to be made. Compassion is a skill to be learned if we have the willingness to learn it. Some people are naturally compassionate and show it unemotionally through generosity of spirit and doing things to be helpful. Pastors, however, need to learn to feel the sufferer's helplessness in suffering and allow it to become their own feeling for the moment. They need to understand that this identification with the sufferer's helplessness is the way to communicate God's compassion for the suffering. Jesus demonstrated this when He sat on the hillside overlooking Jerusalem and wept for the city. In His own helplessness to save them, even in their rejection of Him, He had compassion for them.

When the sufferer experiences your willingness to enter into his suffering the response is usually something such as, "You care! You understand!" The pastor can then help the sufferer recognize his pastoral caring as God's caring for the sufferer as simply as saying, "God cares for you." Then conversation that follows can build upon the suffering of Christ on the

cross as the evidence of God's caring and desire to embrace the sufferer with forgiveness and hope.

During my 20 years as a hospital chaplain, I had to face up to my own sometimes unwillingness of the moment to bear the burden of another patient as I listened endlessly to patients as they poured out their hearts to me every day. Periodically, during the years of chaplaincy someone would ask me, "How are you able to do that all day, day after day?" What sustained me more than anything was being cared for by God through worship and my early morning devotions in which I could keep putting the suffering of others back on Christ's hands and move on with open hands to receive the next sufferer. Admittedly, I had to hand some of the same people back to God over and over again until I could let go of them, but letting people go into the arms of Christ is what pastoral care is all about.

This was especially painful when a patient died. I often thought of myself as walking up to the door of heaven with them as they leaned on my arm, holding the door for them as they stepped inside, then being denied entrance myself into the joy of God's presence and having to turn away alone. Of course, I am glad to be alive, but there is a part of me that is eager to be with the Lord most fully.

The worst thing a pastor can do is to substitute his lack of empathy with verbalized theological truths that ring clear and true, but come across cold and lacking in compassion. The two are not mutually exclusive and neither theology nor personal caring ought to be divorced from pastoral care. All pastors have days when they have all they can do to deal with burdens they bear without looking for more sufferers. It sometimes takes an effort to allow oneself to feel what others feel and by doing so enter into the suffering of others. Most of us feel some empathy for others at times,

but we learn early in life to bury our capacity for empathy in some deep, secret place within us when the suffering of others becomes too much for us. There is nothing wrong with either allowing empathy to surface or with burying it, depending upon circumstances. But it is important for a pastor to be willing to feel the suffering of others as Jesus did when He wept at Lazarus' death. This bearing of our grief and suffering is why God became man in Jesus Christ. Christ's suffering and death are taken on to end them for all eternity and to enable us to live with hope and peace in the midst of our sufferings in this life.

The task of pastoral care is not to bring an end to people's suffering but to help them find Christ in the midst of it. Unfortunately, every other spirituality around us today aims at escape from suffering. Meditative techniques, whether spiritual or secular, aim at finding peace in one's inner being by blocking out the suffering. But it is in the midst of suffering that God chooses to reveal Himself to us. As Walter Brueggemann says, ". . . the cross places suffering at the heart of God's character and at the heart of meaningful, faithful human life."<sup>1</sup> The pastor helps parishioners find Christ in their suffering as an extension of God's self-revelation through Christ's suffering on the cross. This *theology of the cross*, as Luther identified it in the Scriptures, is the heart of pastoral care whether administering the Lord's Supper or listening to an old man in his living room talking about the sudden death of his wife.

There is a triumphalism in the American spirit that has carried over into the churches that causes us to turn our eyes away from suffering. In turning away from suffering we fail to see Christ at work in the midst of it. Luther went so far as to say, "God can be found only in suffering and the cross." Triumphalism seeks to rid the Christian of his suffering in this life by the strength of his own faith. Luther called this a *theology of glory*. Blind to Christ's self-revelation in suffering they do not see the victory of the cross on Good Friday. Good Friday and Easter cannot be separated from each other. Good Friday is the victory and Easter is its celebration. Looking for God elsewhere than the cross is a *theology of glory* built on the strengths of men (even the strength of their faith) and not on the strength of God found in Christ's weakness on the cross. The humiliation and willing weakness of Christ is heard from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Patients can identify with this forsakenness, but because of it they can find hope and peace in the midst of suffering because of the victory of Christ on the cross. Our peace in this life is found not in the absence of suffering but in the midst of it. That is where Christ finds us. There, in the midst of suffering we can say to God, "You care. You understand! Thanks be to God!"

*The Rev. Dr. Richard C. Eyer is the Director Emeritus of Concordia Bioethics Institute at Concordia University–Wisconsin, Mequon, Wisconsin.*

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann. Editor p. ix, *A Theology of the Cross* by Charles B. Cousar, Fortress Press 1990.

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