

# When a Minister Walks Into the Room

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**By Charles E. Groce**

TYLER, Texas—There are expectations that come with every occupation, including the ministry. A few examples:

- If you're at a social gathering and someone becomes ill, everyone will ask if there is a doctor in the house.
- If a group of people is traveling on a bus and the bus breaks down, people will look for a mechanic.
- If, in a neighborhood meeting, a few people ask how difficult it would be to repair a dilapidated building, they will ask a carpenter or someone else with construction experience.

When there is a minister in the room, what's expected of him? People will turn to him for—what? Is he expected to preach or to perform and draw attention to himself? Is he expected to be a social gadfly, a drink in one hand and cigarette in the other? Is he expected to be an authority on politics, health food or investing? What service is expected of a minister?

A recent article in *Leadership Journal* raised a question about the values and relevance of ministering. It was written by a Navy chaplain assigned to the II Marine Expeditionary Force. He was specifically assigned to a battalion special task force in the western desert of the Al Anbar province, an area bordering Syria and Jordan. He was wondering what kind of difference he made to people he served, whether he was with them in church, their homes or a hospital room.

The writer of the article, Lt. Cmdr. Bruce Crouterfield, commented on how he came to understand his relevance to those he was there to serve. He was searching for a clearer picture of the values associated with his ministry.

He asked the marines and sailors what they thought about chaplains. In other words, when a chaplain was in the room what values came with him?

- One marine said, "When the chaplain is on our convoy with us we feel safer."
- Another said, "When the chaplain is around the gunnery sergeant is nicer."

■ A corporal told him, "Sir, when the commanding officer comes in the room he gets respect, but when the chaplain comes in the room he gets reverence."

Lt. Cmdr. Crouterfield talked to 100 marines and sailors serving in a combat zone, collecting their thoughts about chaplains. No two answers were exactly alike, but he detected a trend.

For some the chaplain offered a sense of comfort. For others, a sense of safety. For still others the chaplain's presence caused a change in the behavior of people.

The feelings and sense the marines and sailors had of him were a reflection of the values they placed in a person they perceived to be a man of God. He reminded them of the presence of God.

A minister's presence, whether at a graduation, scout activity, court hearing or delivery of a sermon, carried the expectation of the importance of doing and saying what God would do.

Most likely you don't see yourself that way—as a person who does what God does. When you look in the mirror you see a human being with faults, someone who struggles with life's decisions and someone who is occasionally conflicted. You see someone who wants to be loved, accepted and valued. You see someone who has fears and worries. Where in all that is the presence of God?

Perhaps the best example of what happens when a minister walks into the room is that left to us by Jesus. John 14:19-21 tells us what happened when Jesus came into the upper room when there were so many needs to be met among his disciples.

Here's what He did and did not do.

- He didn't lash out at them; He reached out to them.
- He didn't discourage them; He encouraged them.
- He didn't condemn them; He forgave them.
- He didn't give them up; He lifted them up.

In this remarkable example Jesus reminds us of the most important values associated with ministering. These are revealed in us when we preach, teach, anoint, counsel, visit and serve the flock.

We also see where the emphasis should be in serving. Is it just in preaching and teaching? What did Jesus give His disciples? He gave them what they needed most: *comfort* and a *sense of safety* (reassurance), and He brought about a *change in their behavior*. That's serving; that's ministering.

When a minister walks into a room what comes with him is the expectation of the presence of God, no matter the circumstance.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 Paul reminds us that comfort comes from God through the agency of human beings. God uses people like you and me to deliver comfort to others. (In this text, the English word *comfort* is used to translate the Greek word *paraklesis*, which is related to the familiar word *paraclete*, "one who comes along to help," a description of the Holy Spirit.)

When you come alongside someone else and share the comfort you have received from God, doesn't God come with you? In a sense, you are a bearer of the presence of God.

Bringing comfort to someone is the most basic form of ministering. When you comfort those who are troubled, stressed or in a crisis, you bring to them what you are not: God. Your presence brings the God-with-us factor. You become what is known as the Emmanuel factor.

When you come alongside another after God has come alongside you, God is there. That makes the Christian who has received the comfort of God a bearer of the presence of God.

A person's life is truly relevant when he becomes a bearer of God's presence. Living the presence well might not allow us to be an expert in anything, but it does allow us to fulfill the calling of God in our lives and to share His presence with others. God is with you; let Him work in you.

The disciples were sent out as servants. People changed their behavior because of the comfort and reassurance that came with them. The disciples were bearers of God's presence. They lived the gospel—and people followed.

The same happens today. That's what happens when a minister walks into a room.