

## **THE STUCK SYNDROME**

### **ARTICLE 12: RELEVANT MINISTRY**

The chaplain was intense on his cell phone, as I came through the gate at Santa Barbara airport. Carefully he staved off the suicide attempt. The man on the other side of the line was devastated. His wife had just left him for another man. Later, the chaplain told me that at Vandenberg Air Force Base, he deals with four to five suicide attempts a month. The usual cause— marital problems. On that trip, I learned that suicide problems are rampant in the armed forces. Military families are under a major siege. Over the years, I have done marriage conferences at Yokota, Atsugi, and Yokosuka, but this experience opened my eyes even greater. That weekend, I attended a meeting of chaplains and base leaders to deal with the suicide predicament. That same week, on other bases, two airmen had succeeded in killing themselves.

My heart was moved as I looked out on all the couples that attended the weekend marriage conference. Many were hurting big time, so much so, that there were even Mormons, Muslims, and Wiccans\_(witchcraft) attending. They needed help so bad they were even willing to seek it in a Christian event.

The need is so big, one chaplain told me, that he spends about 40 hours a week just in counseling, mostly marriage counseling. Then he has to spend about 30 hours a week to get his other jobs done. He himself has a wife, and two small children. He got choked up telling me that when he called another chaplain to handle the suicide attempt the night I arrived, that chaplain was playing games with his five kids. The chaplains themselves are overwhelmed and even end up neglecting their own families. It was like I heard an echo of Japan. An air force chaplain there had told me, “We are just doing damage control.”

Great things happened that weekend. Six people got saved. Many came back to the Lord. Tons of couples recommitted their marriages. I caught myself saying audibly on the return flight home, “Lord, I will serve our families in the armed forces, any time, any place.”€35

When my wife and I attended an international symposium on family ministry in Switzerland last Fall, the story was the same for every country—families are struggling greatly. But that is only one of the big needs. There are many more. I believe that a church that is connecting with people’s needs is a healthy church. If a church is not meeting needs it has become a moot entity, an irrelevant oddity.

The Church in the United States has struggled with this problem of relevance. There are about 15 million believers who are un-churched today. The majority are likely baby-boomers who left the church because it failed to connect with their needs. If somehow these people returned there would be an enormous influx into the Church. Each of America's 350,000 churches would get 40 new members. The result would be a 44% increase in every church in the country!

I believe people in Japan are amazingly open. But the key question is, "Is the church relevant to needs?" Most every survey that comes out in Japan rates people's top concerns to be, number one, health, and number two, family. Do we address these concerns? Do we get even close? How much of church revolves around human need? Jesus fought the same battle with the Pharisees. Jesus was all about meeting people's needs, feeding them, delivering them, healing them, accepting them, and often on the Sabbath, to show that the Sabbath was made for man, no vice versa. But often we try to mold man for the church, not church for the man.

I was grieved to find that about a third of Christians I surveyed in Japan were struggling with anger and self-hate. I was also sobered to hear from one counselor of pastors who practices in North Carolina, that 95% of church problems are a result of family-of-origin issues. Perhaps the majority of pastors today feel lost as where to begin in addressing issues like depression, post-abortion grief, divorce recovery, problem children, addictions, abuse, eating disorders, or special-needs families. But these are the worlds where people live. Fortunately, however, it is not the pastor's job to meet all these needs, but rather to help establish healing communities.

In consideration of the great need around us, we cannot waste our time with irrelevant ministry. Either we are practicing relevant ministry or we have succumbed to inane/absurd ministry. Ray Anderson says that, "For every person who is clinically depressed and in need of professional therapy, there are hundreds who sit passively in the pews waiting for 'pastors to see things' that are circumspectly hidden from view on Sunday morning."

Anderson thus advises young ministers, "Preach one sermon every month to the Jesus who walks in off the street and sits alone in the back row, weary and worn, to see whether there is any good news for him today!"<sup>35</sup>

I learned about relevant ministry from my parents. When Japan was devastated by the war, people were hurting. At that time my parents lived a comfortable life, faraway in San Francisco. Amazingly they sold everything and moved to Japan. Many hospitals

there had no medicine. But in a time when some missionaries were actually making money in Japan, my parents used the money from selling their home to buy \$5,000 worth of medicine in the US and give it away in Japan. By the time my parents left Japan in 1959 they were deep in debt. It took them twelve years to get out of that debt. They had greatly connected with people needs.

Sonia is just an unobtrusive woman who lives in Moscow. One day, leaving the market with her hard-won groceries, she noticed a woman in the crowd. And God spoke to Sonia “Give her your groceries.” But Sonia resisted, “What about my family? We need these groceries.” God assured her that he would take care of her family, so Sonia gave the woman the groceries. The woman overflowed with gratitude and left. Then God told Sonia to follow the woman from a distance. Through the back streets she tracked her to a dreary apartment. Then she went home.

A couple weeks later, as Sonia prayed God spoke, “Remember that woman Sonia? I want you to buy her three sweaters.” She bought and delivered them to the woman. Then, some time later God spoke again, “Remember that woman? Buy her some shoes.” “But Lord, I don’t know what size!” Sonia protested. Then God said, “Size 8.” And so she bought and delivered the shoes. After awhile, God spoke once more, “Remember that woman? Buy her some underwear.” Sonia did not resist anymore. She bought the underwear and when she knocked at the woman’s door the woman was completely amazed and grateful.

“My home is not very nice, but please come in.” She said. After they got settled inside, the woman explained to Sonia, “My husband drinks vodka and so we have little money. The other day, even though I had no money, I went to the market, hoping...and you gave me your groceries. Some days later I felt it was starting to get cold, and my daughters and I needed sweaters, but my husband just shouted that he would not give me money for the sweaters. Then you brought three sweaters. A couple of weeks passed, and as I was getting on the bus, my shoe got stuck in the mud and I lost it. Then you arrived with shoes, just my size. Finally, I was offered a job, a good job, but I found out that this afternoon I would have to have a physical exam for the job. The problem was, I have no underwear, and I was so embarrassed that I decided I could not go for that physical. And today you bring me underwear.”

The woman paused, and then asked Sonia, “Why is it that you always know what I need?”

Sonia replied, “Because God told me.”

“I thought so.” The woman said.

And that is where Sonia helped this hurting woman to invite a very relevant God into her heart and life.