



REFLECTIONS OF A PARISH NURSE

by Karen Hardecopf, RN

Nineteen years ago when I began as a parish nurse, I listened to one woman's story and learned the stark reality that many people in our pews are suffering in silence.

Abused as a teenager and young woman 40 years before, she came to me as a woman without hope. She still trembled as she shared her story. Through the years of abuse, she thought no one would believe her. She felt the abuse would be worse if she did speak out. For years after the abuse, her heart would race whenever she saw a closet door that was slightly ajar, as that was where her abuser would hide. She lived with a wall of deep sorrow, self-deflating life, and loneliness.

Quietly, I listened and asked God for guidance. He put this verse on my heart: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans* (Romans 8:26 GWN).

How could I help? What should I say? I did not know what to pray, but the Holy Spirit groaned in my stead. This woman's heart was heavy.

We sat without words, tears in our eyes. Finally I said, "I have no words or answers today. What I do have is my love and willingness to walk with you."

And to myself I said, "Lord, I do not have words, so I am very thankful that the Holy Spirit is groaning in our stead. Lead us as we continue this walk together."

Our conversation made me realize that so many carry this weight alone and that they might not know help is available. I wanted to help. For starters, I posted the hot-line phone number of our local abuse shelter in every bathroom stall in our church and school. As a parish nurse I can make referrals, I can walk alongside, I can drive them anywhere, and I can pray for them and with them; but I could not provide safety if they were in the midst of abuse. That's where the local shelters are invaluable.

More recently, I was saddened to see the painful long-term effects of abuse as I listened to another story. Staring at the floor, shoulders slumped in defeat, the woman shared, "I started to talk about what happened to me years ago because I think that is why I am the way I am, but my pastor changed the subject. When I first got to his office, he seemed to want to hear about what had saddened my heart, but when I started to share about the abuse, he seemed very uncomfortable with me. I thought he would help me through a difficult time in my life, but I guess not. So, I stopped talking, as it seems to me that I am not worth the trouble."

I am not worth the trouble, she had said. Even though the abuse had occurred more than 45 years ago, her pain that day was real. She might have been safe from the danger of abuse, but the abuse lived on inside.

"I don't know why I feel this inward struggle. Why can't I let it go? It was not as bad as other people's abuse. It could have been much worse." She did not want to go to a counselor, and she did not want this information made public, as people involved were still alive and it "might hurt them."

I offered my listening ear, my caring heart, prayer, and continued connection in hopes that someday she will find the courage to talk to a professional counselor.

As a parish nurse, I do not need all the answers, but I do need to know how to make referrals and where to get resources. I am thankful The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is being proactive by supplying new materials and hands-on training for church workers. **Q**

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