

MUTUAL SUPPORT

BY BILL VAMOS

One Sunday, after everyone else had left the sanctuary, Sam and Lois were still trying to find some way to agree. The sermon, which focused on Christian love, had inspired both of them to talk about the future of their Fellowship Group, and the over-all attitude of the church. Let's listen to their conversation.

L: I'm telling you, Sam, the only answer is to blitz the church with this silence and prayer thing. That way we kill two birds with one stone. Our group reaches out, and the congregation becomes a praying force.

S: Lois, in the first place they're not ready. Can't you see that? Lots of people still feel left out. How can you get into your own prayer life when you don't feel included? And some people just come for the sermon on Sunday. If we shower them with promotions of prayer, most of them would be polite. They might even pay attention. But nobody is going to be blitzed.

L: Well, let's take a different approach. Start a whole series of courses on spiritual growth at the same time. Do half a dozen all at once, so as to reach everybody. Saturate the people with spirituality in our Adult Education program. Just for 3 or 4 weeks. Maybe even double the class time. That'll get'em ready, don't you agree?

S: Lois, we haven't stopped to ask about our own group. What are we willing to do? What if we started by asking the group to spend some time in quiet and prayer each week, praying for each other and for the church, asking God to guide us as to what we are to do?

L: That's pretty mild. Not much courage there. I suppose it might work though. I've got to get home. Let me think about it this week and we'll talk next Sunday.

Do you think there's any real hope that mutual support in a church will grow out of prayer? Consider the following examples. A large inner city church was torn in a fierce dispute. The members were scraping against each other like sandpaper. They tried to hide their tension under a blanket of smiles, firm handshakes and carefully measured conversation. But the congregation was nervous, worried, divided.

The members were invited to a retreat for prayer, Bible study, sharing, and outreach. Forty-two of them attended as they communed with God in quiet solitude, they drew closer to each other. The retreat had a relaxed pace. Each one was encouraged to affirm their own experience during the retreat. The leader said: "If all you do is slow down your busyness, that's a good way to begin spiritual growth. Nobody pressed anybody else. Yet there were plenty of opportunities for each one to grow in a personal relationship with Christ.

In this devotional atmosphere, the stereotypes and positioning, that had eroded their faith community, began to disappear. They experienced God healing their relationships. At the end of the retreat, they decided to devote themselves to prayer for the rest of the congregation, and they practiced the art of hearing other people. The healing spread.

A small rural church had a series of evening classes on spiritual growth. The classes included both teaching and practical experience. When the series ended, the church officers decided to use the first thirty minutes of their Board meeting for Bible study and prayer.

Another church Board schedules a period of intercessory prayer, right in the middle of their church business agenda. At 8:30 pm, on Board meeting night, the pastor stops the discussion of the moment. He walks over to a blackboard and asks the officers to name persons and concerns for prayer. After all the requests have been made, the pastor asks for volunteers to pray for specific names and causes. Then the entire Board enters into a time of quietness and prayer. This time of spiritual caring sets the tone for the entire meeting and inspires a spirit of openness among the church' officers.

Prayer flows into mutual support. In I John 4:19, the writer says: "We love, because God first loved us." He wants us to be aware that Savior Jesus lived and died and rose – from the dead for us. His love for us is undeserved and unending. When we commune with Him in prayer, we can love in the same way.

Will you continue to pray in your own life and in the life of this group? Will you set aside five minutes or more per day in your personal schedule and a significant portion of time in this group every week for quietness and prayer for yourself, for each other, and for your Church? Would it be a good idea to continue to use the 7:00 to 7:15 pm time spot on Wednesday nights, when the sanctuary has been available to you for silence?

Make a list of each person in this group and add new person's names when appropriate. Pray for each name every day. As you pray for the members of your congregation, choose four persons at the beginning of the month, put their names on a card, and pray for them day by day until the beginning of the next month. Then choose four new names. Pray for the congregation in this manner, as well as the persons in your group, during your quietness and prayer time each Wednesday evening, and as part of your personal prayer discipline each day.

How will you ever cover the whole congregation if each of you prays for only four persons per month? As you engage in this process, you will be inspired by it and you will sense changes in the church over a period of time. You will also recommend the 4-a-month prayer process to others.

There is a contagious affect in such intercessory prayer. People who are prayed for, in a consistent, intentional way, have a spiritual affect on other people, sometimes even without knowing it.

If you, the members of this group, would dedicate yourselves, corporately and individually, to praying for one another and for your congregation, your church would be transformed. Prayer is never wasted and is always effective. The more you

pray, and the more you support each other in prayer, the more God will use your prayers in a powerful way.

If you haven't been doing so, seek a spiritual partner, so God can guide you to a helper, someone who will hold you accountable and enable you to discern the will of God.

Prayer flows into mutual support. We even become better listeners when we pray. I remember a person who gave some lively input to a class that I was teaching. Each day we used thirty minutes of class time for praying in solitude. At the end of the course, some people shared what that 30 minute daily devotional time meant to them. That especially enthusiastic class member, whose name was Walt, told the rest of us that listening to God, in Scripture and prayer, enabled him to listen more deeply to people.

Walt said, "Before I retired, I was a truck driver. Whenever I went into a truck stop to eat a meal, something very sad struck me. If there were 20 tables, and 20 truck drivers, there will be one driver at each table. We were some of the most lonely people on earth, but nobody was willing to admit it."

"I always wanted to put a sign on my table which read: 'I am a Christian. I will listen to anything you want to talk about except the latest statistics on how fast your truck will run, but I never did it. Now that I've prayed my way into being a better listener, I'm going to do something with it. I've decided to visit my friends who are in a nursing home and listen to them. I'm going to be with them two days each week.'"

When we pray, we grow in our ability to listen to others from within their skin. We listen with an inner attitude that has been sensitized by new questions: i.e.: What is it like to be totally new to your church? Or, to be a 35 year veteran in the congregation? How does it feel to be one of the 600 black persons in the city of Lafayette? What would it be like to wait on the steps of Lafayette Urban Ministry for an hour, one or two mornings each week, seeking food and fuel money for my family? What would it be like to live in one of our community's Nursing Homes and not have any visitor for a whole week?

Listening to God in prayer raises those kinds of questions, and empower us to listen to the hearts of other people in a way that moves us to link our prayers with action.

I challenge you as prayerful listeners to focus on one segment of the world's need. Ask God to guide you as a group to stand alongside your hurting sisters and brothers, with which you share the distinctions of being loved by Christ, and minister with them. For instance, your special place of shared love may be Habitat for Humanity, where God is calling you to help make it possible for people to own a home. Or, the Lord may be asking this Young Adult Group to commit itself in a long term way to the ministry of Lafayette Urban Ministry, or the work of the Shelter. Or perhaps God is moving you to make common cause with a black church in this community, with some of your members joining that church while still remaining a member of Central – discerning ways in which the two churches can help each other. Or your calling may be to a mission within Central Church.

You may ask, how can such action be mutual support? It sounds like the giving is all one way – from us to them? Recently, I had a conversation with a member of the Habitat for Humanity Board. He said: “Do you know who this ministry serves? The people who get a house to live in true. But those of us who are involved in making that possible are blest beyond anything you can imagine. With the new homeowners, we together, grow together, and walk together. What marvelous teamwork.”

That is what God has in mind for this group – praying, consistently, for yourselves and your church; listening from deep within; and taking action to stand alongside one group of people as you receive God’s love together.

Be a praying people – and out of your prayer, mutual support will grow.