

A Personal Account of Living with Grief:  
Enlisting the Faith Community for Support  
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Presented at the AFCNA 2006 Annual Conference - 26 August 2006

**Introduction**

Nearly 3 yrs ago my husband Peter sustained a spinal injury that resulted in him being unable to move from neck down and needing a ventilator to help him breathe. He spent the next 13 months in hospital totally dependent and with many serious health issues. We had 3 young children and in an instant our world changed permanently. Our situation was extreme, but quite often it is in these extreme situations that important concepts are more clearly understood. Peter died last year but what we experienced as a faith community will live on.

From the time Peter first sustained his injury many people from our Church wanted to help, which was great because we now had MANY needs! But how can people's offers of help be fully utilized in effective ways?

Luckily for me, I was just finishing of my grad dip in FCN (in fact I did my last assignment by Peter's bedside in the Intensive Care Unit of the RAH) so God had prepared me for what lay ahead. I rolled up my sleeves and started implementing what I had learned in my last 2 years of study.

**I knew I had to do 3 things:**

1. look after Peter
2. look after the children
3. look after myself so that I could continue to look after Peter and the children in the long term and avoid "burn out"

**I knew I had 2 things to help me achieve the above:**

1. a strong faith in God's ability to provide our needs
2. a faith community who wanted to help

**I knew I had 3 obstacles in my way:**

1. the faith community were unclear as to how they could best help
2. the faith community were afraid 'to say or do the wrong thing'

3. I was unclear as to my exact needs so I needed to invite others to help me identify needs

Effective help was NOT going to 'just' happen without the implementation of some FCN concepts!

**Some of the FCN concepts that were implemented were:**

1. Identifying, clarifying and then communicating our families specific needs to the faith community
2. Matching the need with the right person i.e. the right skill wasn't always necessary – it could be easily taught – however, the right heart (desire/motive) **was** necessary
3. Communicating the positive impact that people's support was having

Giving positive feedback both encouraged and empowered those helping and motivated them to continue their support. Knowing that their support **was** making a positive difference to our situation became a very powerful motivator. I didn't waste an opportunity to let people know what a positive difference their help was making. I discovered that where there was a genuine need, many genuine people wanted to help in genuine ways. There is no shortage of resources within our faith communities. The problem is that these resources are difficult to utilize without the help of FCN.

Sharing how people's support was enabling our family to cope encouraged others to find their own appropriate way of ministering. Sharing helped people realize the power of a supportive faith community and gave people ideas and opportunities to also help out. It created a domino effect.

**Communicating needs and encouragement to the faith community:**

This will be different in each case - I found the most effective way was:

- Via group emails. This was by far the most effective. Instead of updating several people, I could send one email explaining the latest challenge, request specific prayer points and identify current needs. This reduced dramatically the number of phone calls I had to receive and make. I could email at times that suited me and have time to clarify my thoughts rather than have to respond immediately.

**TRUST:** One of the first things I did was give my house key to a lady from church. This was necessary to enable others to help at a deeper level. I spent many hours at the hospital, away from home, so allowing access into my home made it easier for everyone involved.

### **Some of the different ways the faith community provided support:**

- Provided home cooked meals ready to eat (placed in fridge while I was at the hospital)
- Gardening...roster
- Shopping...unpacked into fridge etc
- Cleaning...this team of ladies became known as my "Angels"
- Help with transporting children (esp. on Sat mornings...I had 3 kids needing to be at 3 different places all at the same time and one dependant husband)
- Mending clothes
- Helping me care for Peter, that included learning new and unique skills e.g. tracheal suctioning
- Teaching kids...Hannah was falling behind with her learning
- Gifts
- Encouraging letters, emails and cards
- Praying for specific needs
- Many more unique ways that people made a positive difference in a way that was also meaningful to them...(e.g. massage once week)

I found that when grief struck, it was often the so called simple things that I found the hardest. There were so many BIG things that only I could do. Having such great support from the faith community meant that I could focus on these things rather than becoming drained and exhausted and possibly then unable to function altogether.

We were embraced by a group of genuine people who were committed to us in the long term in ways too numerous to list...you only need a few of these people within a faith community to make all the difference when encouraged and assisted in effective ways.

The result was a win-win, or mutually blessing situation. Our family had its needs met, the faith community were being God's hands and feet and God in the midst of it all was being glorified.

This was the greatest witness of God's love and character that many of our non-Christian friends had ever seen. A group of Christians loving one another as God has loved us.

(John 13:35) "...by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"

(Matthew 25:40) "...whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me"

### **Examples of DON'TS**

- There is only one thing worse than coming home and having to cook a meal during a crisis and that is thinking you have an edible meal waiting for you when you don't! Don't offer to do something unless you **will** carry it through. It is better to know that you are not going to get support than think you are and then don't.
- Don't offer to do something just because it will make you feel better (i.e. will what you are offering actually meet the person's need...if not then you have the wrong motive). An example is a couple who repeatedly insisted that the children and I go to their home (a 2 hour drive for us) for dinner whilst Peter was in ICU...I was already driving 2 hours every day!
- Don't tell me about your problems...I will be very polite...but I actually have enough of my own at this crisis point, with no room to spare.
- Don't tell me what you think I should do unless you have been through exactly what I am going through...and then think twice!

### **Examples of DO'S**

- Do be gentle with me. I am so fragile. My world hasn't just unraveled; it has exploded into a million different pieces. I am often confused and may say all the 'wrong' things.
- Do encourage me in any way you know how...I feel so insecure...the world I once knew has disappeared.
- Do let me know that you care if you really do.
- Do tell me if you want to help and do tell me if you don't know how

Without guidance, offers and attempts to help can have undesired effects. People then become discouraged and are less likely to offer their support next time. That is why implementing FCN concepts is vital in enlisting the Faith Community for support that will be effective.

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