

Caring for people in Spiritual Alienation

By Rev. Charles K. Stanley, SCC, Indianapolis

A routine spiritual assessment became anything but routine as the patient told his story of spiritual alienation. He recounted that as a child enrolled in a church-related school, a teacher regularly beat him on his left hand because he persisted in writing with it. This treatment eventually led him to reject the church. Now, as a new hospice patient, he found that he lacked the support of both a personal faith and a spiritual community. His psychosocial assessment was not surprisingly characterized by depression, anxiety, and unfocused anger. He also complained of physical symptoms such as loss of energy, headaches, and low appetite. It is likely that the alienation within this patient's spirit contributed to, if not outright caused, his emotional and physical distress.

Spiritual caregivers sadly know this as a common story. When we find ourselves caring for someone who feels alienated from their faith group, our approach to care requires the greatest compassion and respect. All members of the care team should be alerted to the patient's experience, and be prepared listen without judging, fixing, minimizing, or expressing outrage.

With this kind of acceptance and a great deal of time, the interdisciplinary group (IDG) may find the alienated patient shifting their focus from the hurt to the healing. Wounds inflicted by religious people are serious indeed, but no amount of focus on the hurt in the past will empower the patient in their present situation. Author Larry Burchett stresses this point in his book, *Bring 'Em Back Alive: A Healing Plan for those Wounded by the Church*:

Imagine that you have been shot and rushed to the emergency room. Would you spend all of your time worrying about who shot you? Or do you think your first concern might be to survive? With physical hurts, we immediately seek help. But emotional and spiritual hurts seem to engender a response unlike any other wound. When we are "shot" by people in the church, we tend to focus on the shooter, not the Healer.

Finally, in caring for patients with spiritual alienation, it is vital for the IDG team to understand the role of forgiveness in the patient's own religious tradition. The major religions teach forgiveness as a spiritual discipline — not as a matter of law or justice. Forgiveness does not excuse an abusive person's behavior; it simply frees the patient to live with peace about the past.

For the patient mentioned above, unforgiveness resulted in a belief that God was irrational and unfair like his teacher. The love and gracious listening of the interdisciplinary team created the spiritual climate for the patient to forgive. A few months into his time as a patient, he began to accept that his teacher's behavior might have been related to common superstitions about left-handed people. At a subsequent meeting, he asked me to arrange for a meeting with a spiritual leader from his own faith community. His choice to confront his spiritual alienation lightened his emotional burden, and enabled him to complete his journey with a deeper level of peace.



Rev. Charles K. Stanley, SCC: Charles currently serves as a VistaCare Spiritual Care Coordinator after 24 years of ministering to congregations in both Michigan and Indiana. He also holds standing with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.