

The day my clergy group let one member down

The story was gut wrenching. Then came the group's response.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [January 3, 2018](#) issue



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Years ago, I ran a reflection group for newly ordained pastors in their first ministerial appointment. I employed a simple formula that never let me down. For seven uninterrupted minutes, Person A would speak about their ministry, looking back over the previous couple of months and focusing on a particular incident of joy or regret, pain or perplexity. Then for three minutes we would go around the circle and each participant would wonder: “I wonder whether you were sad or angry,” we would say, or, “I wonder what made a person whisper a thing like that to you.” Person A would

respond to the wonderings for five minutes. After that we'd pause and then begin again with Person B. With six people it took two hours. I called it *reflectio divina*.

And so it was that one morning the youngest member of the group went first. "It's amazing to be in love," said Person A. "You feel the possibilities are limitless. Life is a dreamy dance of silence, touch, and words. It's like the other person is a door into a vista of hope and home and heaven. There's nothing you or they can say that isn't an invitation to deeper trust, discovery, wisdom. Everything becomes a prism through which you see color and life and adventure.

"But I realized I had more than one love. The love of my life was the church. The love of my heart was my beloved. And the love of my life couldn't accept the love of my heart. I wanted to be ordained. But the church doesn't accept the love of my heart. And so just before I started at seminary I said to the love of my heart that we could not be. I had to be obedient to the love of my life, even if it meant breaking with the love of my heart. My heart did not understand, couldn't be reconciled, was angry, hurt, rejected, alienated.

"I went ahead with the love of my life. I had three years at seminary, and now here I am, a year into being a pastor. It's a wonderful life. But do you know what? Every single night before I go to bed, for what's now four years, I check my email one more time to see if the love of my heart has sent a message. What am I hoping for? I don't know. Maybe I have a faint hope that my heart and my life can be one."

The group sat in stunned silence. We'd covered all the usual things about stuff staying in the circle. What we weren't ready for was a full-scale gut-wrench, right there in the living room. But I trusted the process, so I invited the person to the left to begin the wondering.

"Why did you let yourself be crushed by the institution?" asked the first. "How can you possibly stay in the church?" said another. "Why don't you just call the love of your heart and get back together?" said the third.

I'm a mild man. I don't get angry about the things you're supposed to get angry about—injustice, cruelty to animals, egregiously massive executive pay deals. But at that moment, I was agitated. I struggled to find terse words that kept my feelings suppressed. "I'd like to remind the group," I began, "that a wondering is a sympathetic invitation to the speaker to explore more deeply the poignancy of what has been said. A wondering is never a question, still less a question to which you

already know the answer.”

I was overwhelmed by the irony. Here we were, gathered together to grow in faith and hope and love, specifically to cultivate the gifts of ministry. And here, for a change, was an actual ministry opportunity: not being described at a remove, recalled from an intense moment a few weeks back, but right here and now. Everything we were striving to practice was to become able to stay with that pain, appreciate its unresolved quality, stand in awe of the grief and loss and hollow agony of night after night of faint hope that somehow this person’s two loves could be reconciled.

But no one could do it. Everyone jumped in to castigate the cruelty and injustice and bigotry of what the speaker had called “the love of my life”—the church. No one could see that the other love had already gone, probably beyond restoration, and their words were threatening the only love the speaker had left. How our righteous anger makes us unable to see our own cruelty!

I didn’t say any more. I still wonder whether some members of the group got it. I think some genuinely believed that by going into battle on the speaker’s behalf, they were showing solidarity. I wonder if they’ve learned since then that ministry means staying with people as they face the hardest things in their lives, and refusing to walk away when there’s nothing to say.

What I wish I’d said is this. It’s a little hard to imagine God doing email. (I guess it would have to be Gmail.) But it’s not so hard to imagine God saying, “I’m longing to reconcile the love of my life and the love of my heart. I’ve tried everything I know to offer both mercy and truth, both tradition and reason, both justice and love. And every night, before I go to bed, ever since I called Abraham, I’ve summoned up a faint hope and looked one last time at my messages, pining for a word from you.”

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