

She had just heard the news – the doctors could do nothing more for her. Chemotherapy had not worked, the cancer had spread, and the most the doctors could offer her was the promise to keep her free from pain. It was an all too familiar story! It is one shared by so many everywhere! It is one that raised its ugly head for what seemed like the thousandth time the other day when a woman I have come to love and befriend shared her news with me. As always it came with a host of questions – many of which have no adequate answers. After nearly 45 years as a pastor, it is still a question that begs for an answer! It is one asked by every caring person who has ever been called upon to minister to the person who has received such news.

What do family members and other loved ones say and do in response to such heart-breaking news? What do clergy and other persons in ministry say and do? Do we enter the privacy of that person's thoughts and soul and presume to answer the unanswerable questions for them? Do we presume to know a person is ready to hear what we believe or even – at such a moment – cares? Is it time to witness to our faith? Is that best done through words or through actions? Do we lead the conversation or allow the person to lead whatever conversation there is?

I submit there are no hard and fast answers! So much depends on the nature and depth of the relationship, the prior conversations, that person's comfort level with the one offering the ministry! There is, however, one rule I follow.

The person sharing the story will offer the clues as to whether the conversation may proceed!

Most often the person knows there are no adequate answers, already knows what you believe, and is simply wanting someone to listen to the questions and the pain. When and if they want more than that they will let you know either verbally or by some other signal.

I was reminded of this when my friend, just days after receiving the news, called and asked if I would stop and visit her. Of course I would! Of course I did! Out of the blue she said: "My son told me he called you. I suppose he has told you everything about my situation!" Rather than respond directly to her question, sensing that she wanted to talk further, I said, "I do not tell others what you tell me! I don't feel comfortable talking about your son's conversation with me. I want people who share their concerns with me to know they are sharing only with me. I would be more than flattered if you ever want to share your concerns with me." Without a moment's hesitation she began talking about her death, her funeral wishes, her fears and her faith. It was a beautiful time, a time of honesty, a time of being a witness to God's amazing power to transform a devastating event into an event of faithful wrestling.

I am convinced it would not have happened had I not waited for permission to be more than a listener.

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