

Finding Healing in the Church by Alan Medinger

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We have come to recognize certain red flags showing up in the lives of people who come to our ministry; flags that serve as indicators that this man or woman "may not make it" very far on the road out of homosexuality. Very often this red flag relates to a fundamental spiritual truth; this person simply will not forgive those whom he believes have harmed him, or there is a fierce determination to hold onto some aspect of the old man or woman.

Many times, however, the red flags have to do with one of two problems related to the person's involvement in the church; 1. They are established in a church, but they remain personally isolated. 2. They can never find "the right church."

Using composites of people who have come to Regeneration, let me describe two of these people for you.

Mike has been at Grace Church for nine years. He believes that it is a good church for him. It fits his denominational background and his theological understanding. The teaching is solid, the preaching strong, and it is a church of highly committed believers. Mike is well established in the church and well respected. He has been active on many committees and groups, especially those that reach out to the hungry and the homeless. Although Grace is a large church, most people know who Mike is.

Although this seems like the perfect church for Mike, there is a problem. Grace church has almost no relevance to Mike's struggle to overcome homosexuality. Although most people know who Mike is, no one really knows Mike. This has been Mike's choice. No one knows of his deepest area of struggle, so no one can hold him accountable; no one can challenge him where he is weak and vulnerable. If he slips, no one can hear his confession and affirm God's mercy and forgiveness. No one is praying for Mike in this critical area in his life.

In another area vital to his healing, although Mike receives a great deal of love and acceptance at Grace Church, this love and acceptance never really touches those innermost parts of Mike where his soul would be nourished. A little voice always rises up to dilute this love and acceptance declaring, "If they really knew me, they would never accept me." He has never tested this message, and so he has never recognized that it is the voice of the enemy that he is hearing.

Wanda's situation is entirely different. For the past year and a half, she has been visiting churches trying to find the right one-one where she believes her needs can be met and where she believes she can grow as a Christian. In the five preceding years she had belonged to three different churches. Wanda knows the importance of being in a good church, and she has been actively looking for one, but somehow she never finds it. Let's look at some of the reasons.

1. In two of the churches to which she belonged, after many months, she discovered that she was simply not being fed in these places.

2. In a number of churches that she visited, and in one that she joined, it became apparent that the church was organized to minister to families, not to single people.
3. At one church where she stated and was active for a while, when she was absent for three straight weeks with the flu not one person called her to find out if anything was wrong.
4. In another church, the preacher did not believe in eternal security, and this caused her to question all of his teaching.
5. Several of the churches were simply not equipped to minister to people with significant emotional wounds. There were a lot of such people in these churches, but no one knew anything about inner healing prayer or 12-step recovery groups.

In Regeneration we believe that we are to minister in the lives of people only for a season. We have a certain expertise and experience that can help them to start to take hold of their sexual identity or sexual compulsion problems. We can offer testimonies that give hope. We can provide specific tools to be used in the long run, and for a time we can provide a safe community of believers where the struggler can be open and honest about areas formerly closed off by shame and embarrassment.

But Regeneration is not life. Our lives are meant to be lived out in the midst of the larger body of Christ. This means the local church fellowship. It is in the local church that an individual can shake both the gay and ex-gay identity, and become simply a Christian man or woman.

It is in the church that we should find our models for real manhood and womanhood. It is in experiencing the love and acceptance of people who do not share our particular struggle that we can start to know that we truly have worth. It is in ministering to others in their very different struggles that we learn that we have not been singled out by God for some particularly cruel burden.

Long term healing of homosexuality requires that a person belong to a local community of believers where they are truly known and where they can experience full body life including service to others.

Mike and Wanda aren't there. For Mike, a portion of his wall of self-protection will have to come down. Someone, or a small group of trusted friends, will have to be allowed into Mike's life at his deepest level of fear and shame. This may be a terrible risk for him to take, but the alternative is continued isolation and little progress in his struggle. Although everyone who has opened up about homosexual struggles in the church has not had a good initial experience, such opening up is a declaration of our ultimate trust in God to be our protector. He will not let us down.

With Wanda, the solution is a little less obvious. Wanda lives in an area where there are hundreds of churches within driving distance. If she cannot find a church, almost certainly the problem is not with the churches. It is with Wanda. She has to ask herself some serious questions. Does she have a critical spirit? Prayerfully, she needs to ask if maybe her criteria for the right church aren't based on her desires, rather than on what God wants for her. Is there a message she keeps hearing in the church-such as the need to die to self-that she keeps running from . Maybe, she is more like Mike than she thinks; she wants social contacts but doesn't really want to get too close. Maybe she needs to surrender her concept of the church as some sort of therapy group.

Clearly, there are some churches to which none of us should belong; namely those whose teaching strays far from Christian orthodoxy and whose final authority is not Scripture. There may be churches where body life is so lacking that little growth is possible for the individual or for family members. Once beyond these criteria, however, the selection of the church will always be one of compromise. Almost every Christian joining the church must lay before the Lord certain prejudices or criteria that he or she held dear. It helps us to do this when we recognize that being jointed to the Body of Christ at the local level is more important than finding the perfect church.

Once in a church, just as in a marriage, there may be much dying to self required. Many of us as Christians are far too ready to move on when we encounter problems. It may be in the midst of those problems that God wants to do a great work in us. Separation from the local body should be viewed with the utmost seriousness. Using the analogy of a body, it should be seen almost as an amputation.

As we say over and over again in *Regeneration*, our healing comes primarily through our relationship with Jesus Christ. A major way we experience this relationship is through our submission and commitment to a local body of believers. If this is not a part of our life, our relationship with Jesus will always be lacking and our growth stunted.

Mr. Medinger is a long-time leader in the ex-gay ministry movement. He is the founder and director of Regeneration ministries in Baltimore, MD, a ministry to men and women seeking to overcome their homosexuality. Mr. Medinger has counseled hundreds of men and women leaving homosexuality and has personally experienced freedom from homosexuality