



Companioning with a Stranger

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As a new pastor in a church in Amish country, I did not expect to be welcomed by all. I was female, single and, as we say in my home state of Maine, “from away.” When I walked down the street in my town or other nearby locations wearing my pastoral collar, men in black wide-brimmed hats with beards looked away and the women with them simply looked confused. I did not think I would be invited to converse with either group any time in my ministry there. That is why I was surprised when I heard a tap on my office window, which looked out over the sidewalk beside the church, and saw a woman’s face with a pure white bonnet standing there. This began a piece of my ministry in that place, a ministry I did not expect.

Like many, I believed in the stories of the Amish as members of idyllic tight-knit communities. While this is certainly true for many, no one experience can be true to all. The woman who came to my window was living in a community and family as a survivor of domestic abuse that included physical, mental and verbal abuse. Due to the way Amish communities were constructed, she felt they had no place to go. Yet when she found out I was at this church, she came to ask for help. She was only the first. Over the two years I was there, eight different women tapped on that window. They might not come into the church building (they never did) but somehow they knew I could be an ally. And, at first, I was at a loss as to how to help them.

I learned many things from these women. One of the most important was living with the limitations of my knowledge and understanding, while at the same time wanting to advocate and protect another human being who was hurting. The reality was that I could not protect them and did not have the skills or

tools to help them in their communities. What I could do was sit with these women as a supporter and companion as they navigated what was best for them in each situation. I learned where there were resources in the communities that they could access and gave them that information. But that was the least important thing that I did. The most important was listening, not judging, and setting aside everything I thought I knew about them and their lives.

Galatians 6:2 (CEB) asks us to “Carry each other’s burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ.” We are not always asked as allies to solve the problems of the world. Sometimes we are called to simply help another bear the load that they may carry. I have no idea where any of these eight women ended up. Maybe they are still in their homes. Maybe they have left. What I do know is that their tapping on a window was the bravest thing some of these women have ever done. I pray and have hope that my presence in that time helped them to see that, no matter what, they are never alone in carrying whatever burdens they bear. I have to believe that in my encounters with them, Christ was at the center, leading, guiding, listening and loving all of us into new ways of being.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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