

Stephanas: A New Testament Example of Frontier Member Care

by Jeffrey S. Ellis

Now brothers and sisters, you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them. I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence; for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours—so give recognition to such persons. (NRSV 1 Cor. 16:15-18)

It was probably the spring of AD. 55 when the apostle Paul, in the midst of what was to be his final missionary journey, penned 1 Corinthians (Gundry, 1981, p. 364). He wrote from Ephesus, a city in which he had spent over two years spreading the Gospel and ministering to the local church. In fact, Paul spent more time in Ephesus than in any of the more than 25 cities in which he planted churches. It was to that city that the household of Stephanas traveled some 300 miles to refresh the spirit of Paul. There, near the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea, a contingent of people came from Corinth to minister to Paul, and in so doing established a precedent of service to the saints.

Call it member care, pastoral care, coaching, mental health and missions, personnel management, or simply missionary development, but regardless of its name, the apostle Paul found himself on the receiving end of an innovative ministry, initiated by believers young in their faith but mature in their vision. In acting out their commitment to the Lord, they found themselves compelled to support Paul—a man on the frontiers of mission work—making him a more effective

vessel for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. A closer look at 1 Cor. 16:15-18 will help us to understand this first century example of member care on the frontiers and its implications for today's mission community.

Exegesis of the Text

They devoted themselves. Unfortunately we know little of the household of Stephanas, except that they were baptized by Paul (1 Cor. 1:16), were among the first fruits of Achaia, and that they had devoted themselves to the service of the saints (16:15-18). This last clause literally reads, "they have appointed themselves for service for the saints." It is significant that they were not appointed by Paul, nor by the church, but in a spirit of service and humility they appointed themselves. (Barrett 1968:296) Barrett goes so far as to suggest that they were appointed directly by God. He argues that it was God who made them aware of the opportunity for service and equipped them with the various gifts they needed. What can be stated for certain, is that Stephanas and his household discerned that Paul had a need which they then took upon themselves to meet.

The service of the saints. Hess (1978: 546) explains that the Greek word translated "service" in 1 Cor. 16:15, (*diakoneo*), when used in the New Testament, primarily refers to the personal help of others. In Acts 6:1, *diakoneo* is used to describe the daily distribution of food to the poor. The word is also reminiscent of service that takes place at the dinner table, where one will serve the others at the table. The closest modern example of this type of attitude would be that of the personal valet or servant;

one whose task is to take a lowly position attending to the less glamorous tasks which are nonetheless significant. Although Fee (1987:829) believes that the word is broad enough to cover a number of services, one thing seems clear to him, "Here are people who in self-dedication took it upon themselves to minister to others."

They Refreshed My Spirit. Paul visited Corinth twice during his various journeys. In his initial visit, lasting one and a half years, he experienced tremendous success, with the Gospel penetrating deeply into the heart of Corinthian society. Preaching at the house of Titus Justus, making tents with Priscilla and Aquila, witnessing in the synagogue, and converting the synagogue ruler, Crispus, were just some of the opportunities that the Lord provided. By any measure, Paul's ministry in Corinth was vastly fruitful.

Any casual reading of the Corinthian Epistles, however, makes the reader quickly aware that the congregation faced numerous trials, most of which came from within the church. Paul received word of infighting, backsliding, false teaching, and dissension among the Corinthian believers. Most scholars recognize these difficulties as the occasion for Paul's writing. Distress and worry for Paul were constant companions upon remembering the church planted in Achaia. Writing in 2 Cor. 12:20, 21 Paul states:

I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and that I may

have to mourn over many who previously sinned and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness that they have practiced. (NRSV)

Note also 2 Cor. 11:28, “I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.” Despite impressive accomplishments in Corinth, resulting in a viable witness for Christ, Paul’s heart ached as he thought about their sinful condition.

It is in this context that Paul states that Stephanas and his household “refreshed” his spirit. The Greek word, *anapauo*, translated by the NRSV as “refreshed” is translated by J. B. Philips (1972) as “relieved my anxiety”. Philip’s translation seems to be closer to the intent of the original Greek and also reflects more closely what we know about the church at Corinth. According to Hensel and Brown (1978:256), “*anapauo* means to calm someone who has become disturbed.” The verb is the same one used when the Lord gives rest to those who are “weary and carrying heavy burdens.” (Mat. 11:28)

They Made Up for Your Absence.

Helpful in understanding Paul’s situation in Ephesus is a passage from the book of Acts which introduces us to the Ephesian elders. These are people with deep feelings for Paul and for whom Paul had a mutually strong attachment. Consider the account of their last visit together:

When [Paul] had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. There was much weeping among them all, they embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. (Acts 20:36-38)

It is clear that many of the Ephesian’s loved Paul very much. Yet despite the abundance of their love, it seems that Paul was left lacking something which could only be provided for by others. It is clear therefore, that it was not a lack of people who were devoted to the apostle

or cared about him that caused him such grief. On the contrary, we know that he was loved deeply and passionately and that this was insufficient in easing his pain.

Additionally, two of Paul’s closest friends from Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila, accompanied him on his journey to Ephesus and resided with him there. So it is interesting that as Paul writes of his longing for the Corinthians, it is not due to an absence of people from there—he already had Corinthian believers living under his roof. For some reason, Paul was experiencing a void that could only be filled by others, and specifically by the household of Stephanas.

When one has been absent from a place that holds significance, one’s spirit can long for a type of filling not available through other means. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on Christmas Eve of 1943 noted from prison that nothing can make up for the absence of those from whom we are separated:

...and it would be wrong to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; He does not fill it, but on the contrary, He keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain. (1972, p. 176)

The phrase “they made up for your absence” speaks to Bonhoeffer’s idea on the reality and pain of separation and loss of others. Stephanas was doing this very thing—making up for the absence of loved ones. Coming 300 miles from Corinth, which back then must not have been an easy trip, these people provided something nobody else did: They relieved pain that inevitably came from Paul’s separation from the first fruits of his labor in Corinth.

It is likely that the household of Stephanas carried with them word as to

the condition of the Corinthian church as well as personal greetings from those whom Paul cared for. In providing this information, Paul could have his spirit calmed, while he received firsthand accounts of the state of the church in Corinth. He no longer had to rely on old information or his own fears to know the church’s condition.

Additionally, Paul would have found refreshment from Stephanas’ household because they were part of a small handful whom he personally baptized. One should not draw conclusions as to the apostle’s emotional stability solely on the basis of one word. However, the context, along with supporting texts, points to the visit of Stephanas being not just appreciated by Paul, but also timely for his own emotional and personal well-being.

Give Recognition to Such Persons.

Apparently it was not clear to the church at Corinth that the work of Stephanas’ household warranted support. Paul’s need to make this statement on their behalf further illustrates the difficulties faced with this church. The Corinthian community required admonishing so that Stephanas and his household could freely minister in the capacity to which they were called. They were to recognize and support Stephanas and others who were engaged in such a ministry of service.

Applications to Missions Today

Receiving Ministry from Others. In allowing himself to be ministered to by those whom had originally been recipients of his ministry, Paul blessed Stephanas and his household. He also defended the legitimacy of this work from voices of resistance in Corinth. Paul, the mentor and spiritual parent of these Christians, took an accepting and open stance, receiving from them, and allowing them to further define their place in God’s kingdom. Paul’s vulnerability to and affirmation of this service functions as an example to us all.

Important lessons can be learned from Paul's response to the visit from the household of Stephanas.

First, Paul demonstrated that a significant part of discipleship is encouraging new Christians to find their niche in the service of the Lord. Young believers must be challenged to obediently respond to God's calling for their lives, even if obedience means the Lord would have them minister to the ministers.

Second, interdependency needs to be strong in the life of the Body of Christ. 1 Cor. 12:12 teaches the importance of "body life" when it states, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

Third, one must know oneself well enough to recognize when one is in need and requires encouragement. Christ modeled the appropriateness of being needy when he asked Peter and James to join Him while he was in anguish in Gethsemane. (Mat. 26:39)

Finally, when God chooses to bestow his grace through another person, one must never reject that gift. This final item can be most difficult for those of us who have spent our lives making sacrifices to minister to others with the Gospel. The Lord regularly puts people in our path, not only to be ministered to by us, but also for us to receive ministry in return. God blesses us not only because we obey Him or help Him in some way, but primarily because He loves us.

Paul's statement, "they made up for your absence" also highlights the important role that special visitors can play in the lives of frontier missionaries. Be they retired missionaries, members from the sending church, teachers, or

just friends, opportunities exist for short term visits from persons whose hearts are to encourage, listen, serve, and share news from home. Short-term visits by the right person at the right time, go a long way toward bridging the chasm created when one leaves the home community and ventures into the chal-

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lenges of the frontiers. Prayer, phone calls, letters and faxes only go so far in filling the need. Nothing replaces caring human contact.

Member Care Relevance and Advocacy. Regrettably, that which we now call member care, finds itself often faced with a dilemma similar to the household of Stephanas. Individuals seeking to serve missionaries find themselves needing a modern day Paul to come to their defense and justify their ministry. Mission boards are generally doing more than ever in the arena of providing resources to their workers. Others however, still require convincing that help is required. Unfortunately the problem of naiveté can extend well beyond the board rooms of mission agencies and permeate deep into some sending

churches. It is regrettable that lengthy defense for member care services may be required before the purse strings of the sending churches and mission organizations are loosed for the sake of member care for their workers.

It seems that much of the shortsightedness described above is attributable to the idealization when believers think of missionaries. The fact is that although service to the saints was something Paul supported enough to warrant its defense, one-sided history lessons show the frontier missions endeavor making tremendous strides these two-thousand years without much member care-related assistance. This does not mean however, that a need for these types of services did not and does not still exist. One need look no further than some of the patrons of frontier missions to see what a positive function persons like those of Stephanas' household could have served.

Take, for instance, the life of Dorothy Carey. Struggling with the impact of life abroad on her children, she suffered a mental breakdown in India and was described later in her life as "wholly deranged". Seldom do we hear her side of this missiological experience. Tucker and Andrews (1992:24-35) describe other stories from the history of Protestant missions, including those who have suffered mental disorders, emotional distress, and breakdowns. There is a list of successful, anointed workers who have suffered great emotional pain for the sake of the missiological call. But their list is far from complete!

Reflect on your own mission experience. Remember the team member who single-handedly brought to an end several years worth of work. What

about the couple whose fighting was negating efforts to spread the Gospel. The husband, who in adapting to a culture where the men socialize over drinks, finds himself addicted to alcohol. The wife who decides that she can't take it anymore so she packs up the kids and flies home. Add to this list your own story. The mission community abounds with stories of well-intentioned, good people, who loved the Lord, but find themselves in such significant personal pain they can no longer serve. Add to this the pain and the shame that comes with being considered a missionary casualty.

Much can be done to keep crises on the field from becoming ongoing nightmares. When others, like Stephanas, are encouraged to come along side and bring refreshment, the flare-ups on the field become more manageable. Failure to provide or seek out this type of member care hurts more than the parties directly involved. The fallout reaches across oceans and continents and impacts people in the organization, nationals, families, and churches. Member care workers and others committed to the support of missionary personnel must be released to freely fulfill their varied callings, bringing refreshment and relief to those in need.

The Legacy of Stephanas.

It is significant that Paul left the door wide open for others who may also feel compelled to perform this work: "put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them." Currently we are seeing a resurgence in the numbers of people who desire to help maintain missionaries. There are many young people in graduate school, for example, desiring to serve the Lord by preparing to care for frontline workers. Pastors are taking time away from the pulpit to bring refreshment to the saints. Career missionaries are refocusing their ministry efforts in order to pastor those in need. This call

seems to be happening globally, to persons of all races, denominations, and ages. It is my firm conviction that the open-ended and inclusive nature of this passage is intended as affirmation for those who feel a vocational calling to serve the saints. With the further implementation and maturation of member care, we can expect to see frontier missionaries more resilient, making them able to spend more time reaching the unreached and less time healing the wounds of broken relationships, team fragmentation, and personal crises.

Member Care Teams.

Beyond Fortunatus and Achaicus, we will never know if there were other members of Stephanas' household. The text is silent as to the roles which the various members played as it is regarding their relationships to one another. What we can say for certain is that Stephanas and his associates ministered together as a team. Particularly relevant for today's frontier missions context is the importance and efficacy of ministering together. Lareau Lindquist, president of Barnabas International, once said: "I try to never go on an extended trip without Evie [his wife]. I have found over the years that I am more than twice as productive having the support and encouragement of my wife near by".

Member care resources are usually best delivered through teams rather than persons acting on their own. The Bible clearly teaches that collectively Christians represent Christ's Body (cf. 1 Cor. 14) and that as individuals we represent only a small portion of this Body. The wisdom and discernment needed to fully expedite member care resources is best accomplished as a group of individuals bring their own experiences and spiritual gifts to the specific task.

Concern for good stewardship could lead individuals and organizations to think that reaching the largest num-

ber of missionaries with the fewest member care workers is an expedient and prudent strategy. This however is not only not true but unwise. It is a far more expedient use of resources to group member care workers into teams. Experience shows that the care of the care-giver is vital to the care-giver's ability to minister to others. The best way to prevent damage to those who are ministering is to surround the "minister" with people who share the same mission. (cf. Ecc. 4:9-12).

Conclusion

What we now call member care is not new or original to twentieth century Christian missions nor to local congregations. Scripture is replete with illustrations of people actively caring for Christ's flock. At the end of 1 Corinthians, we come face to face with a specific example of what caring for frontier missionaries can look like: A team of Christians who have found their niche in the Great Commission by traveling to the field and serving the saints. The household of Stephanas did not wait for Paul to return to Corinth so they could serve him. Rather, they took the initiative to go and serve. During his final missionary journey, Paul became the benefactor of what we now call member care. It is heartening to read Paul's response, "I rejoiced at their arrival for they refreshed my spirit."

Such "spirit refreshing" ought not to become a lost art. It is as needed today on the frontiers, as much as it was nearly two thousand years ago. Considering the demands and complexities of modern mission to the frontiers, it is needed more so today!

Questions for Discussion

1. The author states that Paul was in need of and freely received ministry from others. Where else did this happen apart from his experience with the household of Stephanas?
2. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of forming and

using member care teams?

3. What types of skills and gifts are needed on a member care team?

4. In what ways is your organization or agency fulfilling the legacy of the household of Stephanas as it cares for its mission members?

5. When was the last time your "spirit was refreshed" as the result of a timely visit from Christian friends?

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