

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

P. O. Box 368 · Mt. Hood OR 97041 · 541-352-7636 · sishot@aol.com · www.liftedhands.org

Silas Shotwell, Regional Director

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“Leaders and Depression”

Dear ones,

An interesting report crossed my desk last month. I see lots of surveys but this one caused me to stop and think more than most. It was a report on depression in adults, contingent on their occupations. The study was done by a governmental agency named SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration). It reported on a three-year collection of data from full-time workers in a number of professions. It then rated the occurrence of depression by occupations.

Depression is a major problem in America. Not only in personal situations, but in terms of lost productivity, employee absenteeism, and low morale. The report estimated that U. S. companies lose up to \$44 billion dollars per year because of employee depression.

Of course I’m interested in this as it relates to those in full-time church ministry. I see so much of that in the people that come to Higher Ground. And my interest is not in saving dollars, but in saving souls.

The SAMHSA study indicated that seven percent of all the work force in America experienced a major depressive episode in the past year. The highest percentages were in those people working in personal care and service organizations. Those working in community and social services were right behind.

My unscientific analysis is that ministry falls into one or both of those categories. Most ministers may not empty bedpans or feed Alzheimer’s patients. But some of us do. And there are a lot of other ministry tasks that aren’t too far removed.

Meeting people’s personal needs can take many forms. Social services can also be broadly defined. Most of what I do in ministry and in the Safety Net work could fall into the social services category.

When church leaders are trying to serve people on many personal levels it should not be surprising to them that it sometimes gets depressing. Elijah and Jonah got depressed, and even the Lord spent that painful night in Gethsemane.

There are things that can prevent depression, and things that can help to relieve it. Time and space do not permit me to go into detail in this letter.

But I can say, that one thing that helps to get you through the difficult tasks, is to remember *why* you’re doing them. That principle has served me well through recent years.

During the late 80’s I was the primary care-giver to my father who was dying from colon cancer. Then I spent several years as the sole caregiver for my mother, who spent her last years without being able to walk or talk. And then there were nine years of good times and bad times in coping with Edna Mae’s breast cancer. And

now I am striving, alone, to raise a thirteen-year-old daughter. None of this has been easy. There have been lots of bedpans, lots of sleepless nights, and lots of tears.

But I thank God for it all!

Oh, not the pain that my loved ones have experienced, nor mine. But the opportunity to be there for those I love. Whatever temptation toward depression, there has been far more satisfaction in being able to share in the afflictions of those who are dearest to me. I am a very privileged man!

I understand the mentality of Dr. Albert Sweitzer as he worked in the leper colony, and Henri Nouwen as he worked with the mentally handicapped, and Mother Theresa as she worked with the poor. I certainly don't put myself alongside those three. But I know a bit about what kept them going.

If we take our eyes off others and think about ourselves, we can get easily depressed. When I get depressed that's often why. But it doesn't have to last. It cannot become the mind-set. Psychologists talk about depression that is "episodal," meaning it has been caused by a traumatic episode. But that is not the same as depression that is "chronic." That's when the abnormal becomes normal for us, and we live in a *state* of depression.

No one ever said loving and caring would be easy. The price of loving is experiencing pain as well as joy. The apostle Paul longed to know Christ better and believed that sharing in His sufferings was the way to do that. I can heartily agree that that is the way to really get to know someone. Going through my parent's suffering with them, and my wife's, and my kid's, has been one of the things that has endeared them to me most. I feel for those who run from pain and try to live in a world without it. They ultimately become the losers.

I've had a rough day, and a rough week. But I'm not depressed. I just have opportunities to love. ☺

Yours in Christ,
Silas