BOOK EXCERPT/CORRESPONDENCE SUPPORT

MINISTRY BY MAIL: OFFERING HOPE AND SUPPORT

By DebbieLynne Simmons

WHEN YOU THINK OF EXODUS ministry, what usually comes to mind? Praying with people for inner healing? Weekly support groups? Live-in programs? Bar evangelism (for the very brave)?

Fair enough. Relational support is indeed the heart and soul of this ministry. Homosexuality, after all, is a relational problem at its core. The Lord hasn't limited Himself to these better-known aspects of ministry, however.

Since May of 1985, I've served as a correspondence support letter writer to people writing to Love In Action. Over these ten years, I've learned that ministry to people affected by homosexuality requires more than sitting down to a typewriter and flinging around a few verses from Leviticus. And the Lord has given me the desire to teach others how to implement what He's taught me.

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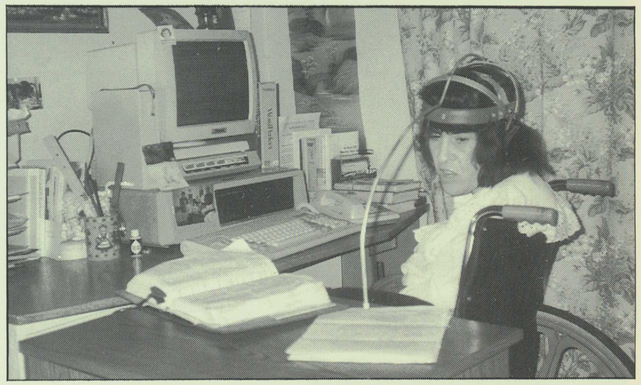

DebbieLynne Simmons: Despite the limitations of cerebral palsy, she has written hundreds of letters with her specially-designed "head stick" as full-time correspondence writer with Love In Action (San Rafael, CA) since 1985.

BUT ENOUGH ABOUT ME...

So let's talk about letter ministry in relation to you. Imagine that you've just read a six-page mini-novel, scrawled on sheets torn from a legal pad. The client confesses sordid details of his homosexual behavior, his attempts to "cure himself" with women, a dependency on one of his ex-lovers, and his discovery that he is HIV-positive. You find yourself writing a few standard Bible verses about sexual purity. Or else you stare at the blank page in your typewriter as if a letter might compose itself. Real effective, huh?

James 2:14–17 says, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can that faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well: keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

In order to write a letter that ministers effectively to your client, you must first understand this person. Why has he/she turned to correspondence? What is he/she feeling? Answers to such questions can shape your whole approach to letter support ministry.

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

Many Christians wanting to overcome homosexuality use their letters to articulate feelings they've never expressed. Some use the "H-word" (homosexuality) for the first time. They fear rejection from people in their own churches. So, letters offer a sense of safety.

People also write letters when relational support or counseling appears inaccessible (not all states, provinces, or countries have Exodus ministries). People sometimes see books or magazines list a particular organization and feel as if they've discovered a gold mine. At last, they've found someone who might—just might—understand the anguish they've endured for so many years!

Occasionally, people write in an attempt to receive ministry on their own terms. They've been in support groups that challenged rebellious attitudes, and therefore reach the conclusion that letter-writing is safer. Because the anonymity of letter support buffers them against confrontation, they hope to maintain the control that they couldn't find in relationships.

WHAT ARE THESE PEOPLE *REALLY* SAYING?

In face-to-face counseling, the client expresses feelings or reveals attitudes through eye-contact, body language, or tone of voice. The counselor can ask direct questions when there's an ambiguity in the client's story, giving the client greater opportunity to clarify thoughts. (You can't do that in letter counseling.)

In relational counseling it's easier to distinguish between legitimate hurts and protective games, precisely because the client is right there, interacting with his/her whole being. (You don't have that advantage.)

C. S. Lewis, who wrote letters regularly throughout his life, recognized that correspondence was inferior to interpersonal communication. He wrote in a letter to his friend, Arthur Greeves: "However many pages one may fill in a letter, it is only a tithe of what ten minutes conversation would cover; it is curious, too, how the thoughts that bubble up so freely when one meets a friend, seem to congeal on paper, when writing to him." (*They Stand Together*, p. 62.)

Lewis's words remind us that, although the Lord definitely uses letters as a vehicle for ministry, we operate under limitations that relational counselors don't have. Lacking the spontaneity and liberty of a two-way conversation, it's often more difficult to discern what a client really needs. As a result, letter support writers need to develop skills in discernment.

HOW DO YOU LISTEN?

Correspondence supporters must be particularly educated on the issues surrounding homosexuality. Suppose Kathy, a former lesbian, writes and explains that her girlfriend moved out two years ago. She doesn't understand her inability to get over the relationship.

To minister to women like Kathy, you'll need background knowledge regarding female homosexuality. Understanding the connection between lesbianism and emotional dependency could direct you in responding to Kathy. Her letter may demonstrate that she doesn't recognize emotional dependency as her primary problem, but you can discern it easily by "reading between the lines."

WHAT DO I LOOK FOR?

Reading between the lines doesn't mean inferring attitudes that don't exist. Suspicion and assumption almost invariably need to be zealously avoided. But don't disregard the importance of using discernment, either. Some clients may be unaware of underlying problems such as manipulation, control issues, or obsessive fantasies. You'll need to look for clues about these underlying attitudes in order to deal with hidden sin. Let me offer an example:

Dear DebbieLynne, I've been going to a support group in my home town, but I quit going. The leader told me I was disruptive. He has always had it in for me, though. I know he doesn't understand me. I'm sick of being attacked and judged. Since this group can't understand me, will you counsel me by letter? If you don't, I think I'll just give up and go back to the bars.

Sincerely, Judd

Judd was trying to manipulate me into giving him hope without challenging him in any way. He apparently had difficulty submitting to authority, and subtly warned me against confronting him. By threatening to go back to the bar scene if I failed to meet his expectations, he tried to make me responsible for his sin.

Developing an understanding of what clients are saying between the lines takes practice. Not everyone is as blatant as Judd in exposing their attitudes. But you'll learn to recognize red flags as you progress in your letter-writing ministry, so be encouraged!

WHAT DO YOU OFFER?

I admit to having a messiah complex (probably because I came of age during the civil rights movement). Praise God that, early on, Love In Action gave me guidelines regarding my relationships with clients. Those parameters helped me understand I've got limitations in what I can do for a person writing for support, and I'd like to share them with you.

First, letter support simply doesn't allow you to address the deeper issues in a client's life. Letters take time to write, send, and answer. Getting to the roots without the give-and-take of relational conversation could take ages.

Since homosexuality is still a difficult matter for people to discuss with other Christians, you probably will have clients who latch on to you for dear life. Perceiving you as someone with all the answers, a hurting client will write to you about *all* areas of his/her life. Please be a responsible steward of your ministry's time, stationery, and postage by maintaining clear boundaries.

You can realistically offer clients between one and four letters. (Sometimes, you'll exchange up to ten, but that should seldom happen.) By the third letter, you should be directing him/her to relational counseling. Always remember you are merely a stepping stone for your client. Don't become your client's pen-pal!

RELATIONSHIP

Correspondence support is only a short-term measure to a problem that requires relational attention. Your letters have tremendous value in initiating hope, but you are simply not equipped to give in-depth insight or support through the mail.

Be careful to understand your limitations as a letter writer. Within those limitations, you can be a powerful vessel of God's Spirit. ◆

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