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Pattern of caring, bearing and sharing a gift from religious congregations

Bill Tammeus | Nov. 28, 2012 A small c catholic

The morning's autumn air was pure of heart, snappish and sweet. The sun played with a few thin, uncommitted clouds in the eastern sky and the dead at our feet did not stir.

A group of men I've been part of for almost 30 years -- all members of my congregation [1] -- was there to witness all this. These seven men gather once a week for breakfast, Bible reading and prayer, usually at the home of one of our members.

But just over a year ago, the wife of our host died. And Marty's death rocked all of us pretty hard.

So on this extravagant fall morning, we agreed to meet not at our friend's home, but at Marty's grave in Mount Washington Cemetery [2] at the edge of Kansas City, Mo.

We gathered at the cemetery gates, which opened at 8 a.m., then drove up a hill to find the burial site. It's where not only Marty is buried, but also her husband's parents, grandparents and other relatives. And it's where his body also will find its final rest.

One of our number -- clearly more in touch with his feminine side than the rest of us were with ours -- had brought flowers, which we placed by Marty's grave. And Marty's husband had printed off the words to the Irish hymn "Be Thou My Vision [3]," so in our untrained voices we lumbered through two verses before a member of our group offered a prayer of thanksgiving for Marty's life.

And as I stood next to Marty's headstone with these close friends, I thought, "This is what a community of faith does for its members. It shows up. It cares. It takes death seriously. And it lets its members know they are loved."

In a world of one-night stands, Facebook friends we've never met and neighbors whose names we don't even know, that's a lot. And we people of faith should not dismiss it as something of slight weight, easily attainable.

All of us standing there that morning knew Marty's story. We knew she had been born in Northern Ireland and that she met her husband when she was a missionary nurse in India and he, a Kansas City native and recent Princeton graduate, was studying there in the 1960s.

We knew their three daughters (I taught two of them in seventh-grade Sunday school years ago). We knew their former home, where our group met for years, and their current home, where we've been meeting since their move.

In short, we were part of their lives and they have been part of ours ? a reality we will celebrate on an upcoming Sunday when, after worship, we gather with our wives at the home of another of our members and his wife for an annual Christmas season luncheon.

I am not imagining there is anything especially Protestant or even Christian about the pattern we have established over the years -- a pattern of caring, bearing and sharing. I know it happens in congregations that are Catholic, Jewish, Islamic and none-of-the-above.

But it's good to remind ourselves from time to time that one of the gifts such congregations can -- and often do -- give to their members is the opportunity to gather in small groups and share life with one another in intimate ways that allow people to know and to be known.

The danger, of course, is that when new people join our congregation they may hear about such long-established small groups and feel left out. So it's important to have a system for drawing in new people to such groups so they, too, can experience the love offered there.

After we sang and prayed that morning, a few guys had to get to work, while four of us had time to stop at a corner café for breakfast. And some day, I know, they will do this all for me or my wife. Thank God.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [4] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust* *[5]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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