



# Forgiving Churches: Avenues of Hope for Rural Communities

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**W**E LIVE IN COMMUNITIES THAT ARE DEVASTATED OR OPPRESSED BY THE CRISIS of rural America, by situations of humans inflicting hurt and pain on one another, and by institutional grievances that contribute to the pain persons carry in their lives. How do we embody the grace of Christ as we minister to one another, to families struggling to survive, and to communities caught in the chaos of change? What is the role of forgiveness or the role of the church in responding to breaches of trust or experiences of hurt and pain?

Reflect on these scenarios:

- A community experiences fear and depression over the lack of financial support for education in their public schools. With a rippling effect, members of the community begin to accuse one another of not caring about children and youth. One member of the school board publicly accuses another of lacking integrity. Both are members of the same church, and the

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*The rural crisis engenders individual pain and institutional grievances that disrupt families and communities. By teaching and practicing forgiveness, rural churches can help restore communal harmony and justice.*

families participate in many activities together. In the process the church feels caught in responding to the crisis and, not knowing what to do, the members remain silent.

- A member of a rural church expresses disappointment because the church has not taken a strong stand on some of the legal initiatives sent to the state legislature that would assist farmers. She begins to withhold her financial support, encouraging others to do the same. This member feels betrayed by the church community when, at a council meeting, someone suggests to her that if she doesn't like the way this church is moving, then she ought to find another one. Many people leave the meeting feeling hurt, confused, and angry.
- A small congregation's pastor embezzles money from church funds. Members are deeply disappointed and there is disagreement among them about what steps should be taken to move toward a just resolution of the situation. The congregation feels abandoned by denominational leaders whom they view as not responding to their financial crisis, particularly in light of the fact that the church is now faced with the very real probability of discontinuing its services. As they contemplate issues of justice and forgiveness, they also wonder how to survive.
- A family struggles to pick up the pieces of their lives after their teenager experiences sexual abuse by a leader in the community. They turn to friends and the pastor of their church, voicing righteous anger and struggling with those in the church who suggest that they ought to "forgive" the perpetrator and "get on with their lives." The church pastor responds carefully by encouraging them to discern what is genuine forgiveness and its relationship to repentance, noting as well the need for time to work through a process of forgiveness.

To be the community of faith means to consider how we embody forgiveness in our churches and how we model that forgiveness in our communities. In what follows I will explore the meaning of forgiveness and its process and then look at two contexts for forgiveness. The first context examines how we forgive the church when we feel it has betrayed us. The second context focuses on how churches can embody the grace of forgiveness as a community.

## I. DEFINING FORGIVENESS

For purposes of this article I will define forgiveness as a process that assists individuals, families, and communities to move away from the overwhelming power of an experience of a hurt or an injustice. In addition, forgiveness holds persons accountable for their participation in actions that wound others. As a process, forgiveness moves us individually and communally toward deeper experiences and understandings of liberation and justice. A closer look at this definition illuminates some of the significant dimensions of the forgiveness process.

First, forgiveness is a process that is not linear but dynamic. At times the process flows naturally between persons. For example, a parent forgives a child for a momentary emotional hurt felt after a child's negative comment. Out of compassion and love the parent recognizes that the hurt is not intentional and that love still exists between them. The parent is liberated from the fears that the child no longer feels loved by the parent or that the parent is no longer loved by the child. The relationship is deepened, and not permanently damaged.

But, the process of forgiveness can also be quite complicated. Such factors as the number of persons involved in a particular situation (as in the context of a congregation or a community), the emotions that are triggered as a result of the pain, the depth of the wound or trauma, or the involvement of legal issues can confound the process. The dynamics of the forgiveness process are as multiple and as deep as the experience of the hurt.

Second, the process of forgiveness involves many movements that occur in the context of relationships. Among the possible dynamics are: recognizing that a wrong has been committed, naming the hurt and pain experienced by the participants in a situation, allowing anger to be expressed by various parties, confessing one's own participation in hurting another, changing behavior so as to lower the chances of the same pain being inflicted again, and moving toward a reconciling stance with one another. From this list alone it is possible to understand that forgiveness can sometimes take a matter of months while at other times it may take years. The deeper the hurt the longer the process becomes. In addition, if one or more participants in the wounding experience do not or cannot participate in the movements toward forgiveness, the process will take more time. If, for example, the pastor who embezzles the money never admits to the wrongdoing and does not confess her part in the wounding of the congregation, it will take longer for the community to find its way through the forgiveness process.

Third, forgiveness does not mean that the consequences of one's actions disappear. There are times when the meaning of forgiveness has been distorted in an attempt to erase the consequences of a particular hurt or pain. Yet, the power of the forgiveness itself lies, in part, in an honest accounting for the results of particular actions or behaviors. Forgiveness does not erase the memory of the hurt; rather it offers a way to move through the pain and to address the consequences of the wound or injustice. Forgiveness allows us to attend to issues of accountability in relationship in honest and meaningful ways.

Fourth, forgiveness changes the relationships between the participants in some significant ways. Working the process of forgiveness invites persons to reassess and to renegotiate the relationships in which they live. Forgiveness never allows relationships to return to the way they were prior to the incident of hurt. What does happen, however, is that forgiveness encourages the deepening of honest relationships, making them richer and stronger.

## II. WHEN WE NEED TO FORGIVE THE CHURCH

Forgiving a church is a difficult process, yet it is one in which many people find themselves at some point in their faith journeys. Whether over the embezzlement of funds, the sexual misconduct of a leader, the inappropriate use of power, the failure of church leaders to attend to churches, or the loss of a way of life in communities of faith, churches and their leaders sometimes stand in need of being forgiven. Loving someone, or in this case, loving an institution carries with it the inevitable potential for experiencing disappointment, hurt, rejection, and failure. The process of forgiveness encourages us to remain hopeful about the possibilities of the church while, at the same time, being realistic about its failures. Working the process of forgiveness ensures that the pain does not become the final word about our relationships with the church.

When churches, or the leadership that represent them, disappoint us, we find ourselves having to move through the steps outlined above. However, the process is made more complex by several factors. First, there are more people involved in this process than in the fracturing of a relationship that occurs between two or three individuals. Greater dimensions of hurt and pain will be experienced with responses varying among those involved. For some, the response to the hurt is an attempt to move quickly beyond it; while for others the response may involve holding onto vengeance, anger, and pain, hoping for some kind of perfect resolution. No two people respond to situations in exactly the same way. Hence, whenever a community is the center of the pain, a longer process of moving toward forgiveness ensues.

Second, the process is complicated by the expectations and hopes that persons bring to church with them. Some expect that, since the church represents the body of Christ, it can be a place free from stress, strife, and hurt. Others expect the church to address issues of injustice easily and quickly, providing models for how persons can live in community. Still others find themselves unable to move away from the deep disappointment over the realization that in the institution of the church, human beings can act with thoughtlessness and carelessness. High expectations of church leadership make the process more difficult when clergy or lay leaders of the church are perceived to be at the center of the inflicted pain or hurt.

Third, the varying pace with which persons move toward forgiveness complicates the process. In churches it is important to have capable and competent leaders who can allow persons to be at different places in the process while, at the same time, shaping and guiding a communal process of forgiveness.

## III. COMMUNAL ELEMENTS FOR FORGIVENESS

I would like to suggest that there are at least four elements important for communities of faith to embody as they move through situations that address forgiveness.

First, communities need to be comfortable with naming the pain that lives among them. Part of this naming process involves reckoning with pain and hurt while, at the same time, seeking accountability from one another. Hence, honesty is one of the essential elements necessary for the process of forgiveness, whether one is dealing with individuals, families, or communities. Without honest reflection and communication the possibility exists for false repentance or simplistic forgiveness.

Second, the courage to discern carefully how best to call forth God's liberation and justice needs to remain central to our communal life. Forgiveness is, in many ways, the invitation to move toward operating as communities of justice rather than communities of vengeance. Forgiveness provides communities with the opportunity to seek ways that call forth the kind of justice apparent in the gospel rather than the kind of vengeance most likely to arise from feelings of hurt and pain.

Third, communities that remain steadfastly present with one another, abandoning neither the process nor one another, are communities that embody God's love in the everyday world. This requires an inordinate belief in God's embodied presence and grace as we experience it in one another. Only in faith that we are a community of people called forth by God to be present with another in God's name are we able to experience the sustaining presence of one another in our movements toward forgiveness.

Fourth, communities must know how to draw upon the resources of their faith and their tradition when opportunities for forgiveness arise. The use of liturgy, worship, prayer, fellowship, and education should not be underestimated. Pastoral leaders can continue to unlock the treasures we find in the resources of our communities, while incorporating and inviting new forms of justice-making faith to come forth. Churches that connect one's individual faith with the reality of being called together into community are congregations that engender forgiveness.

Churches can be communities of forgiveness, embodying the process in ways that make forgiveness part of our faithful response to living as God's representatives in the world. ⊕