

The Ministry of Presence: Someone Who Stays



by DARBY STRICKLAND

A stunning photograph of two penguins captured the hearts of the judges at *Oceanographic Magazine's* 2020 Ocean Photography Awards and took home the top prize. It's a picture of tender companionship, a universal bond that instantly resonates. But there's a deeper story that makes this image even more powerful. The photo shows an older female penguin and a younger male, both of whom have lost their partners. Every night, these two lonely penguins come together, clearly finding comfort in each other's presence.¹

Biologists describe how the two stand side by side for hours, gazing at the lights around them. Photographer Tobias Baumgaertner captured the young male resting his flipper around the older female in a gesture of tenderness. It's a simple act. But it speaks volumes about the deep comfort that comes from being together. And it resonates with those of us who feel powerless to alleviate the suffering of others but who wish to offer genuine care. The image inspires us as it depicts the rich comfort

1. See "Widowed penguins hug in award-winning photo," BBC, December 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/in-pictures-55416365>.

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that our presence can bring. What these penguins offer each other in their silent, faithful companionship is precisely what many sufferers long for: someone who stays.

But we must acknowledge that it is difficult to offer our presence to others in times of suffering. We feel powerless when tragedy strikes those we are called to care for. Watching people in profound pain is agonizing, and we want to *do* something, anything, to make the anguish go away. In these moments, our instincts to relieve pain often cause us to offer unhelpful or hurtful words.

I have been on the receiving end of such words. When my son was a toddler, he was diagnosed with a neuromuscular disease. I was filled with fear for his future, but what felt even more devastating than the diagnosis was sharing the news with fellow believers. In their attempt to offer words of comfort, they instead caused distress; some even laid the blame for his disease on me. What was even worse, however, was when people in my community tried to push me *past* my pain. I longed for someone to welcome my tears and share my sorrows. Nothing could be said to make it better. My son was facing an uncertain future. Thankfully, I knew that God was faithful, and he welcomed my grief. So I could speak to him. But in the months that followed, I felt increasingly isolated from the community of Christ at precisely the moment I needed them most. I did not know how to be around them because they did not know how to be around me. Many sufferers face the same sorrow and isolation.

This experience continues to shape me. It fuels my desire to offer something different to people in pain: to create spaces where grief is not rushed, wounds are honored, and presence becomes the gift that draws us both to each other and to God. If we can become people who sit in the dark with others—not with answers, but with nearness—then we become a witness to the One who draws near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

When you see someone who is isolated and in anguish, the best thing to do might be to simply offer them your presence. This is one way we showcase God's love for his people and are assured that we are not alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* emphasizes the value of Christian community and companionship, especially in difficult times.

He writes,

The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Longingly, [Paul] the imprisoned apostle calls his “dearly beloved son in the faith” [Timothy] to come to him in prison in the last days of his life (2 Tim 4:9). He wants to see him again and have him near.²

Bonhoeffer challenges us to recognize the sacredness of simply being with others, an idea that I am referring to as a *ministry of presence*. He believes that by doing so, Christians embody Christ’s love and create a space where God’s grace and comfort can be felt deeply.

This article will explore the biblical foundations of a ministry of presence, including Jesus’s incarnational ministry. It will address how to practice this ministry in the local church and in counseling contexts. It will also offer responses to questions that might arise about this ministry, including how to view it in relation to the crucial ministry of God’s Word.

Descriptions and Biblical Foundations

We will start with the basics: What is a ministry of presence? What are the biblical foundations for it? And why is it uniquely suited to suffering people?

Ministry of presence. A ministry of presence is a deeply relational approach that affirms a sufferer’s experience and meets them with Christ’s compassion and gentleness. It enters their world with care, listens well, and provides a steady nearness that honors them as image bearers and acknowledges their distress. People in pain often feel invisible and misunderstood, but by being present and attentive to their heartache, we reflect the character and love of Jesus. This connects them to the One who sees, understands, and heals the brokenhearted. This ministry focuses not on words or solutions, but on creating a space that acknowledges a person’s pain and reminds them that they are not alone.

Many times, I have seen a ministry of presence bring comfort to victims of domestic violence. When community members understand

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (Harper & Row, 1954), 19.

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