



A BOOK REVIEW FOR GIFT OF YEARS  
SENIOR ACCESS POINT

Rev. Dr. Victor L. Hunter, August 2014

Sustaining Presence: A Model of Caring by People of Faith. By Earl E. Shelp and Ronald H. Sunderland. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 2000. Pb., 224 pages.

Sustaining Presence is a helpful book on the ministry of pastoral care centered in the congregational life of the faith community. The theological foundation from which the authors write is the affirmation that compassionate care is based in the ministry of “presence,” not just clinical technique. This “presence” of pastoral care is the vocation of the whole church, not just ordained clergy. Of the historic functions of pastoral care (guiding, healing, sustaining, reconciling), the ministry of sustaining is central to the authors’ concerns. The book is something of an apologia for a program in “Care Team Ministry” which they developed in 1985. They see “sustaining presence” as especially helpful in long-term care situations, situations that do not have possibility for short term healing or the quick fix. They especially focus on care team ministry to address three specific needs that one-to-one ministry cannot meet:

1. Aids Care Teams as a pastoral response to people touched by HIV/AIDS.
2. Alzheimer’s Care Teams as a pastoral response to families caring at home for love ones with dementia.
3. Second Family Care Teams as a pastoral response to frail seniors and younger adults burdened by disability or terminal illness.

Much of this vision is something of an outgrowth of the “small group movement” and its powerful dynamic for both those within the small groups as well as the outreach areas that small groups can touch and serve. The book is full of theological insights framed within practical applications for congregations. Sustaining presence is a profound need in our current cultural situation as well as in the life of Christian congregations.

I recommend this book for both its theological foundations and sound applicable insights for the developing group pastoral care ministry. Such practices can both enhance the faith and ministry of the laity in their own growth and involvement, contributing to the growth and authenticity of a congregation, while at the same time serving real and difficult human needs in an effective way.

### **About Gift of Years Ministry West Virginia**

Partnering with Disciples in the West Virginia region, the Gift of Year Ministry Project, focuses on ministering with, to, and for older adults in local Disciples churches and the community. For more information about the Gift of Years Ministry, a collaboration between Disciples in the West Virginia Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the National Benevolent Association (NBA), visit [www.nbacares.org/incubate!](http://www.nbacares.org/incubate!)