

Pressing where it hurts

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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I had a massage from an excellent massage therapist recently, and discovered my body is full of knots. What was supposed to be a relaxing experience became a confrontation with unaddressed pain, as I discovered that I am in pretty bad shape. Stress, age, and poor posture are taking their toll.

“Your body is full of toxins,” the therapist said flatly.

What, like a skunk? Or an industrial waterway?

Whenever she found a knotted up spot in my body, she came at it from the edge with her thumb and pressed gently down. I flinched. I yelled, “Ouch!” I got tears in my eyes. But I did not ask her to stop. And she didn’t stop. She never said “I’m sorry.” My knots are not her fault, after all. She just kept gently pressing in, hurting me in the kindest way.

Finally, between moans of pain, I said, “I wish I could do for my churches what you do for your clients. You press down on the pain because you know that’s the only way they will heal, and you don’t stop, even when they yell at you.”

On hearing this, she didn’t laugh or make a remark. She just kept pressing. I was awed by her strength, both physical and emotional.

In pastoral work with struggling churches, I have tried to learn the hard lessons of pressing down on the pain: listening for the rough but loving judgments of God and interpreting them for congregations who feel stuck in ruts but have no real interest in changing their behavior.

Pressing on the pain might mean asking: “What mistakes did you make with your former pastors?” Or displaying the hard truth of their situation (“You will run out of financial reserves in X years.”) Or something like the confession I had to make to a lay leader once: “I don’t trust you . . . yet.”

I really hate this part of my job, and frankly I'm not good at it, either. But speaking the truth in love is the leader's job. It's our job when the truth to be told is part of a church's healing and reconciliation, or when it's needed to correct behavior that is leading a church away from God's mission for them.

When the massage therapist was done with me, I felt relaxed and pliable for the first time in a while.

But that was two weeks ago. Now I'm back to my old, toxic self. In the dysfunctional body, things bounce back to default disease pretty fast.

The good news is, my massage therapist is coming tomorrow to press all my pain buttons again. I know it will hurt. And I know I'll feel better when she's done with me.

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