

Why We Do Visitation

Three reasons it is a vital part of ministry.

1 Peter 5:2

Every pastor has strengths, gifts, and interests. Some may emphasize preaching, others administration, others teaching.

For me, visitation has become the joy and strength of my ministry. Some days visiting is an adventure; other days it's drudgery. But my pastoral ministry cannot exist without it. Not all pastors, of course, will make visitation their top priority. Nonetheless, personal care for members remains a vital part of every pastor's ministry for three reasons.

It's central to our call. To some degree, the words we use to describe our calling determine the nature of that calling. We call ourselves *ministers*, so we serve our people. We call ourselves *preachers*, so we proclaim God's Word. If we call ourselves *pastors*, that means we will also shepherd the church flock.

As a shepherd is responsible for the sheep, being with people is the heart of the pastor's responsibilities. In his book *Pastoral Theology*, Thomas C. Oden, professor of theology at Drew University, says, "The pastoral office is by definition a shepherding task. . . . Shepherding cannot be done at a sterile distance, with automated telephone answering services, computerized messages, and impersonal form letters. By definition there cannot be an absentee shepherd. There can be no mail-order or mechanized pastoral service, because pastoring is personal. It is not just public talk but interpersonal meeting where richer self-disclosures are possible."

People need pastoral contact. Those who analyze our culture and business world underscore the value of personal contact for leaders. John Naisbitt in his book *Megatrends* says that in a high-tech society people crave high touch. Peters and Waterman in their book *In Search of Excellence* emphasize the importance of mbwa, Management by Walking Around. Effective management happens best through personal contact, the personal touch.

Likewise in the church, a recent survey summarized in the *Ministerial Competency Report* shows that lay people consistently thought pastoral calling important, even more than ministers did.

I've found that routine pastoral calls, during which we don't talk about anything urgent, are the most important ones to church members. Such contacts say clearly, "Your pastor cares for you—not just about spiritual things, but about you."

Recently, during our church's anniversary celebration, folks noted what they appreciated about our church. One man wrote, "A pastor who takes time with his flock, to lift them up out of the stony places, to encourage, to uphold in prayer on a continuing basis." People need pastoral contact.

It's a primary way to love incarnationally. As one minister put it, "Pastoral visitation is incarnational: the Word became flesh and visited among us."

I regularly call on a grandmother who lives with one of her daughters. The older woman's husband divorced her years ago, leaving her to raise the children, including one handicapped child. Her grown sons got into drugs. Her married son and his wife neglect their children. She also dislikes her job and feels detached from her community because she and her daughter have had to move several times over the years. I always feel her anguish.

The grandmother is powerless to do anything except love and pray. Many times she is heartsick and weary. Yet I stand in awe of her, as does the community and church, because she's also a model of strength and integrity.

Before I leave, we join hands for prayer, and I usually pray that God will embrace her with love and strength. Yet somehow I feel that, as her pastor, I'm one who can literally embrace her. Most members don't have the time or ability to visit her. I do. It's an awesome opportunity and responsibility, but I feel that for many people like her, I can be an extension of Christ for them, an expression, albeit imperfect, of God's love.

— DOUG SELF; adapted from *Mastering Pastoral Care*, © 1990 by Christianity Today International and published by Multnomah Press.

Discuss

1. Is visitation one of the chief joys of my ministry? If it's not, do I still appreciate my calling to it?
2. Do I consider not just urgent calls to be important, but also routine ones?
3. Does that incarnational perspective on visitation affect your attitude toward it?