

Strategies for Effective Pastoral Leadership" series.

Touch Points

I grew up as a PK. Every day Pop would walk home to the parsonage for lunch and then go out "calling" for much of the afternoon. Pastoral care was a major expectation of congregational life in the 1970's. It still is, though our "visits" take many different shapes and forms, and social media has vastly changed the way God's people collectively care for each other. Some congregations still request pastoral "visitation reports" at Council meetings which, for many of us, reinforces a mindset of quotas and a spirit of suspicion rather than a mutual commitment to build community trust and care.

In many settings pastors assume it is the prerogative of the congregation to establish the desired level of pastoral care. Fair enough. Parishioners are accustomed to past practices and their own expectations, so we need to sensitively respond to that. But we should also cultivate our own sense of the "right" balance. Depending on the church size and demographics, expectations around pastoral care vary widely. In some settings, obligatory weekly pastoral visits may feel like a worthwhile task but in fact may take precious time away from our calling to advance the overall mission of the church.

Pastoral visits are often most valuable at milestone moments and critical junctures of parishioners' lives. Too often we fall into routine visits for a few rather than episodic visits for the entire congregation. In my years of pastoral ministry this meant I wasn't going to schedule weekly or even monthly "perfunctory" visits simply due to expectation. Rather I began to think of pastoral care in terms of do-not-miss "touch points." Over time I committed to a reactive and proactive ministry of connecting with congregants at the sacred points of their lives: illness, unemployment, transitions, birth, death, marriage, parenting woes, relational brokenness, bankruptcy, retirement, etc.

Another way of framing "touch point" pastoral needs (beyond the events of life) is to reflect on who is experiencing loss, fear, anger, shame, joy, hardship, searching. These are the times people need a listening ear, a hopeful word and the resources and prayers we have to share. Such opportunities might take shape through a text or email, phone call, impromptu conversation in the store, formal visit, a Facebook posting, etc. The timing of such talks is so crucial. A single conversation at the right moment can be transformational, whereas routine visits can sometimes leave us feeling as though we've simply rehashed the same conversation over and over again.

As far as the scriptures inform us, Rabbi Jesus concentrated on critical opportunities through which he invited people to receive God's grace, goodness and guidance - Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, blind Bartimaeus, and the lame man by the pool of Bethesda. Surely Jesus had many relationships sustained by frequent nurture and care, so we naturally affirm the gift of continuity in our ministry with parishioners. Indeed, the deepening of relationships over the long haul makes possible those intervening "touch points" when crucial conversations can take place.

An image that has been helpful for me is that of a pastoral hat - perhaps like that of Dr. Seuss or Abraham Lincoln! Under this imaginary hat we tuck all sorts of brewing thoughts and potential conversations. Most often these are ideas for which the time is not quite right to explore. These

are talks that seem premature, or thoughts only partially developed. While we don't want to miss the opportunity to ask poignant questions that invite opportunities for pastoral care, we also don't want to force conversations that feel intrusive. So often the art of ministry is all about the timing.

When we practice "touch points" we widen and deepen our pastoral reach, and our people are tuned into the energy and intuition we put into pastoral care.

I'm wondering what thoughts you might share about pastoral care? What insight can you offer? Many of you have congregational care teams, which is a wonderful way to complement pastoral care. Do you find this allows for a wider reach or more consistency in visits where that is needed?

Please go to my [**blog site**](#) to share your thoughts, experiences, challenges.

Shalom,

Franz