

## **THE DAY OF PASTORAL VISITING IS NOT OVER**

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The other day I was talking with a member of another church. 'In the past eleven years', he said, 'my minister has never visited me once – not even when first my father, and then my mother died. Ministers it seems have given up on visiting'.

Sadly, this is not the first time that I have heard this criticism. The impression that I gain is that many of my colleagues see their task in managerial rather than pastoral terms. I was once present at a conference for ministers of larger churches where my admission that I love to visit people in their homes was greeted with disbelief – and I was made to feel as if I belonged to the ark.

Yes, there are limits to the amount of visiting pastors in larger churches can do. It certainly isn't possible to visit every member every year. In many cases it is a more efficient use ministers' time to have people make appointments to see them in their church office. Yet, there is something special about a home visit. The dying and the bereaved, for instance, warrant home visits. And if for any reason I have failed to make it in time to the maternity ward, then I will certainly want to see the couple with their first child at home. Newcomers too I will always visit in their homes – for home is where people are most real, home is where one can above all get to know people for who they are.

Routine pastoral visiting I happily delegate. And yet there are times when I will visit older members of the church who are housebound. The other day, for instance, I spent a full hour with one of our older members who had just moved into a home. Yes, I could have popped in just for 10 minutes, and yet it seemed to be to be important that on that occasion I gave her a significant period of my time, when I could listen to her and her concerns. Similarly, for me it is important that every housebound member and friend of the church is brought communion by a minister in the week running up to Christmas and Easter – some of those visits prove to be very special.

Most of my visits are not 'sacramental', in the sense that I only take communion to the housebound. And yet, hopefully every visit I make is 'sacramental' in the sense that it becomes 'a means of grace' to those I see. Every visit ends with prayer – and in many a home I will read the Scriptures. This is surely all part and parcel of being a 'minister'.

How much visiting should a pastor do? The only yardstick I have come across is a principle enunciated by Kennon Callahan, an American Methodist who has written a number of ministerial textbooks: 'Spend one hour in pastoral visitation each week for every minute you preach on a Sunday morning'. Goodness, if we pastors were to adopt that principle, most of our sermons would probably be considerably shorter!

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