

Editorial

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Should we still visit people in their homes?

Although minister of one of the larger Baptist churches in England, I still believe in visiting people in their homes. I know that, for some of my peers, this is viewed as 'small church' mentality, with the result that they delegate the visiting to other people in the church. However, I cling on to the idea that the shepherd needs to know the flock, and that, without visiting people in their homes, you will never really know people as they are. I find it a rewarding exercise. It is amazing the things people share over a cup of tea. Yes, there is the inevitable 'chit-chat'. But it doesn't take long to steer the conversation on to deeper spiritual issues. Pastoral visiting does not need to be superficial - rather it provides an opportunity for genuine pastoral care and spiritual direction.

Alas, I gain the impression that it is not just pastors of many larger churches which have given up on pastoral visiting, but pastors of smaller churches too. Office-bound, they sit at their computers all day long, keeping in touch with their people through e-mail.

Now don't get me wrong: I believe that e-mail is a Godsend when it comes to keeping in contact with people. Every month I send out an e-mail message to all members and friends of the church (or at least, all members and friends who have an e-mail address). E-mail is great for communicating news, but it rarely is the medium for a heart to heart exchange. Meaningful pastoral care is surely only conducted face to face.

I cannot pretend that I visit all my people regularly - that is beyond me. Ongoing day-to-day pastoral care has to be delegated in a larger church. However, I have visited every member or friend of the church at least once. When I first came to my present church, I set myself the task of visiting the whole membership within two years. It was a massive task, but nonetheless it was achieved. Needless to say, the task is never over, because there are always new people joining the church. Once people have been coming to our church for two or three Sundays, then I aim to be in their home within the next week. Only in that way can I get to know them. Casual conversations at the door or over coffee after a service are inevitably superficial. People can only be known in their home. And, of course, where there is a crisis or a need, I am there in their homes too. Yes, it is time-demanding; yes, for the most part it involves giving up precious evenings. But this is surely the work of a pastor.

Needless to say, there are times when I ask people to come and see me in my church office, but they are normally people with whom I have established a relationship - a relationship which has often come into being through a home visit. I am not arguing for all pastoral work to take place in the home, but simply that there is a place for the home visit.

What do you think? Do I belong to the ark? Or does the work of the pastor today still entail visiting people in their homes? Your comments would be much appreciated!