

REPORT TO THE PRESBYTERY OF GRAND CANYON

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In ancient days when I served as an Associate Pastor in a large congregation, I encountered a troubling phenomenon with some regularity. As I would stand at the hospital bedside of a parishioner, having come to the end of a heartfelt prayer, the member of the church would look up and say that it was nice of me to stop by, but the pastor had never visited him or her. Often disappointment or even anger would accompany this implied accusation of pastoral dereliction of duty.

Prior to this I had served as a solo pastor and so had never encountered this kind of reaction when doing hospital visitation. The first few times this occurred, I took it personally. It felt as if my ordination vows counted for nothing to these parishioners. I felt diminished and unappreciated. A visit from the Associate Pastor didn't really count in the eyes of some church members. But in time I was able to see that this wasn't about me personally but had to do with their expectations about ministry.

Pastors and parishioners bring a wide variety of expectations to the practice of ministry, and with some frequency these expectations clash. Some church members have expressed the view that they pay the pastor to take care of them and expect the service they paid for. Others have complained that the minister preaches about Christian servanthood but doesn't practice it. Yet others self-deprecatingly explain away the absence of their pastors by saying the pastor is really busy and doesn't have time for unimportant people like her or him. Some pastors, on the other hand, have pointed out that they are called by God and are not employees of the congregation, and therefore the particular tasks they perform at any given time should be between them and God. Nevertheless, sessions and personnel committees continue to struggle with writing job descriptions for their pastors. Inevitably they discover this is a complex and frustrating endeavor. Yet whether realistic or not and whether covered in a job description or not, expectations continue, from parishioners and pastors alike, about what constitutes appropriate pastoral performance.

But expectations change. Over the decades, I've seen a shift with regard to certain pastoral tasks. There was a time when the pastor was expected to call on members in their homes. Not for grief situations but for formal visits over tea or over Sunday dinner. And the pastor would wear a suit when doing so. Then a generation of parishioners arose who did not feel the need to receive pastors in their homes for social visits. When a crisis occurred, they wanted their pastor on the spot, but otherwise, Sunday morning in church was enough.

The home visitation expectation has diminished significantly over the last three decades. So has the expectation that the pastor's spouse will sing in the choir and serve as an unpaid pastoral assistant. Meanwhile, expectations have grown for therapeutic pastoral counseling. Most pastors are not trained in psychotherapy and have no credentials in counseling, but the expectation that they will provide counseling to parishioners -free of charge- has increased. Smart pastors refer people to professional counselors rather than risk undermining ministry, such as being drawn into taking sides in a marital dispute.

Clearly, however, certain other expectations about ministry in congregations have continued for generations. In the past two months I've heard the following accounts, which collectively have led me to today's reflections about the practice of ministry.

An old friend from Pennsylvania called, and in the course of the conversation, my friend said his father-in-law, a former clerk of session of their church, had been in the hospital for major cancer surgery and had asked to see his pastor before going under the scalpel. The pastor did not come. My friend called the pastor and pleaded with him to make the visit prior to the surgery. Though making it clear it was inconvenient, the pastor reluctantly agreed to go.

Three hospital chaplains from different denominations commented to me about receiving multiple requests from local pastors to visit their parishioners on their behalf so the pastors wouldn't have to do it. One chaplain told of making a call to a pastor to advise that a young couple from the church were at the nursery ICU where their child was dying. The pastor's response was that he was in a staff meeting but to convey to the parents that they were praying for them. The chaplain emphasized that the baby was near death and the parents were in severe emotional and spiritual distress. The pastor said the staff meeting was too important to miss.

An elder told me that his pastor had never taken communion to homebound members. Another member reported that a relative in the East belonged to a PC(USA) church where elders escorted the pastor into the sanctuary on Sunday morning to make sure that no parishioners could talk to him.

What's going on here? None of these stories in isolation would be surprising. I could go on at length about pastoral lapses over the years. But all of these reports came to me within a short span of time since the last presbytery meeting. Are expectations about pastoral care, and particularly hospital visitation changing? Do members and pastors have divergent expectations? Are there generational or gender components to these situations?

This isn't the whole story, of course. I know many pastors who have gotten up in the middle of the night to rush to the hospital or member's home in response to an emergency or tragedy. But which now is the norm?

Another way to approach the situation is to ask what are the core tasks of parish ministry today? What are the bare essentials that pastors serving congregations need to tend to? Whether it be by pastors or associate pastors in large churches or solo pastors in smaller churches, what are the duties that define parish ministry? I like to think of these essentials as what a pastor needs to do to pay her or his dues to the congregation before taking time to pursue ministerial avocations or take up non-parish causes.

I suspect lists produced by elders and members may be different from those produced by pastors. Surely there would be overlapping agreement, but there may be distinct generational differences in these lists of necessary pastoral duties.

Let me offer a preliminary list. It seems to me that competent and faithful worship leadership is a must. And proper administration of the sacraments is integral to worship. And extending the Lord's Supper to the homebound is organic to the sacramental life of the congregation. I would put hospital and crisis visitation on the list, also, along with officiating at memorial services and weddings.

Presbyterian pastors used to be called teaching elders. I would add a teaching role to the list of core tasks for parish ministry. This could be teaching through the sermon in worship or in separate classes or both. In recent years there have been reports about

biblical illiteracy among Christians. Based on my observations of PC(USA) churches I'm tempted to say it's not so much biblical illiteracy as exegetical and theological illiteracy. That is, many pastors have not invested energy in introducing parishioners to the intellectual tools for interpreting scripture and thinking theologically. Some would say such arcane skills are the province of pastors and lay people don't need such knowledge. I disagree.

Pastors do lots of other important things, such as moderate sessions, attend committee meetings, administer programs, supervise staff, attend fellowship events, participate in the life of the presbytery, etc. Pastors also spend a good deal of time at their computers. I do too. When I began work here as EP, I spent far more time with telephone calls than email. Now the reverse is true. Much more of my daily communication is by email. Phone and email are convenient and efficient ways to communicate, but in the context of ministry, neither is as effective or important as face-to-face meetings. From my perspective, then, all the core tasks of parish ministry involve face-to-face relationships with people. Being available to parishioners is crucial.

To recap, my list includes faithful worship leadership, officiating at the sacraments, including communion for homebound members, hospital and crisis visitation, tending to the rites of the church, such as memorial services and weddings, teaching parishioners methods for interpreting the scriptures and how to think theologically, and being approachable and generally available to people. What would your list include?