

I Was Sick and You Cared for Me

Our Call to Visit
Those in Need

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I must have stood outside that hospital room a full five minutes before finding the courage to push open the door. I was midway through my seminary education, in my mid-forties, and had never in my life seen anyone who was near death. I had been to some funerals here and there, cared for sick children and family, even had a scary incident with one of my kids just a few years before. But I had never seen, talked to, or prayed with a dying person. I'll admit, I was terrified.

I was in the midst of trying to discern a call to pastoral ministry, and my understanding of that role included what is often referred to as "visitation"—calling on people who are sick, troubled, housebound, dying. So I came to the hospital to see a woman from my home church, a woman suffering from a vicious recurrence of cancer and just days

from death. I truly did not know what to expect—what I would see, feel, say, or do—and those nervous butterflies were fluttering frantically as I waited in the hallway. Taking a deep breath and uttering a cry for help to the God who had prodded me this far on my journey, I walked through the doorway and stood next to her bed.

She was nearly bald from chemotherapy, and very heavily medicated, though still restless. Initially, it was hard to look at her, but as I stood quietly next to her, I found myself taking her hand, gently stroking her forehead, and whispering in wonder, "My goodness, dear friend. You're getting ready to be born, aren't you?" And with those words came the realization that just as my own children had struggled in darkness to push their way into this life, my friend was struggling in darkness to push into the next. Every ounce of my

fear dissipated as my mind and body recognized that I had just stepped onto holy ground.

I didn't stay long, but I prayed aloud that God's grace and peace would fill this dear, dying one as her time on this earth came to an end. I kissed her hand and left the hospital, humbled, grateful, and immensely blessed. That was nearly twenty years ago. I went on to complete seminary and ordination requirements, and have served in a staff position at two churches. There have been many visits in the intervening years, each one a privilege, each one a reminder that the call of our Savior to care for the sick is as much for our good as it is for theirs.

Moving from layperson to clergy-person has been a marvelous journey, filled with good stuff and hard stuff, challenging moments and fulfilling ones. I have learned that there are indeed some areas of ministry more specifically given to pastors than to members of the congregation. But this one—this good work of visiting those who are in need—this one is a shared ministry. It is also a vitally important ministry and, potentially, a life-changing ministry.

Every person who chooses to follow in the Jesus way is included in the mandate illustrated by the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:34-36: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For... I was sick, and you cared for me'" (NLT).

Coming alongside those who are struggling with life or with death is a high and holy calling, a calling extended to all of us. Yet I continue to bump up against an almost subterranean belief system that infects many of us in the church—a belief system that says a visit from a pastor is somehow of greater intrinsic value

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than a visit from any other member of the body of Christ. I can find no scriptural warrant for this hierarchical view, except, perhaps, for a word in James 5:14 to “the elders” to offer anointing prayer, which is a more specialized version of a home or hospital visit.

But there are multiple references to encouraging one another, loving one another, caring for one another.

For example, “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24, NLT). Providing encouragement, loving care, and gentle and compassionate presence to those who are seriously ill, hospitalized, homebound, deeply discouraged, grieving the loss of a loved one—all of this is part of what it means to come alongside one another in the name and for the sake

of Jesus. This ministry is for each and every one of us, not just for clergy.

The ministry of visitation is a vitally important one in the life of a healthy congregation. Not only does it bring hope and encouragement to those who are struggling and not only does it provide deep personal

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satisfaction to those who are ministering, but it also serves as one of the most powerful evangelism tools in the church's repertoire. Jesus told his friends, on the night before he was crucified: "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:35, NLT). How will the world come to know about Jesus? By the way we care for one another as fellow travelers on the way. You may not be called to be an evangelist, but you are most definitely called to be a disciple who loves and cares for those who are a part of your community of faith.

Finally, this ministry of encouragement has the potential to change lives—the life of the person receiving the gift of caring presence (and by extension, the lives of those closest to that person, most especially family members) and perhaps even more profoundly, the life of the person offering the gift. I have been on both sides of this equation at different times in my life and can offer personal testimony to this truth with two brief stories.

He was a strapping man, filled with life and energy when his family joined our church. Within three weeks, however, our new friend was diagnosed with a terminal illness. An existing small group came around them and provided hands-on care—meals, visits, celebrations of milestones. I was there regularly to listen, to plan his memorial service, to cry with him and for him, and to pray—oh, how he loved to be prayed

for! I was also there the day he died. Every single one of us who went on that fourteen-month journey will never be the same again. Such riches of grace and hope and love! What if we had missed these gifts because this family was new or because our community was frightened of the unknown or because we thought we were too busy?

Three weeks ago, we lost our son-in-law after a long, difficult three-year decline from the after-effects of cancer treatment received more than twenty-five years ago. A fine man, a good dad, a loving husband to our oldest daughter, he was absolutely decimated physically but spiritually vibrant until the day he died. Their family has been actively involved in a church near their home, and I watched—this time as a concerned mom and grandmother—as that community of faith lived out the gospel in my daughter's life.

For nearly *two years* regular meals were provided. For every hospitalization—some of them forty or fifty miles from home—there was a member of the pastoral staff present for pre-surgery or post-recovery prayer. On the night he died, we traveled one hour south of our home to join our kids, only to discover at least two dozen friends from the church and Christian school literally surrounding our daughter and her three sons with love, care, and presence. And they stayed around until one in the morning. Their "love for one another" proved to us that

they are disciples of Jesus.

We are all changed, deeply and profoundly changed, by this experience of truly pastoral care—given by both the pastors and the laity of our daughter's church family. My prayer is that churches everywhere will foster this kind of committed, gospel-centered sharing of life and death, offering caring companionship to one another as pilgrims on the way, in the name and for the sake of Jesus. ■

The Do's and Don'ts of Visitation

Visiting others is not a ministry reserved for the clergy. Everyone is invited, indeed instructed, to do this.

Here are a few important do's:

- Do** ask God to guide you before and during your visit.
- Do** go with a friend if visitation is new to you.
- Do** listen more than you talk.
- Do** offer a gentle touch—to hand, forehead, shoulder.
- Do** remember always that you are in sacred space.
- Do** be unhurried, but sensitive to time, fatigue level, and other company.
- Do** ask first before reading Scripture or offering prayer.
- Do** write down a helpful Scripture or personal word of encouragement, and either leave it with the person or send it to him or her later.
- Do** offer practical help—food for the family, shopping, or other errands.

And some don'ts:

- Don't** be afraid of silence; sometimes just sitting with someone is all that is required.
- Don't** be afraid of tears, either theirs or your own. Tears are one of God's great healing gifts to us, and sharing tears with another person is a powerful reminder of our shared humanity.
- Don't** offer platitudes that diminish either God's deep desire for their good or the person's suffering, loss, or grief. Don't say, for example: "God never gives us more than we can handle," or "This is all a part of God's plan for you," or "God must love you a lot to let you suffer like this," or "God needed your loved one in heaven." (And yes, I've heard each of these.) ■

Suggested Resources for Visitation

Begin or participate in an ongoing prayer shawl ministry. Check out the website www.shawlministry.com. These make wonderful gifts to offer when visiting someone who is suffering, providing a tactile reminder of the love and care of God and the community.

Read through some prayer books (e.g., *The Book of Common Prayer*, or *Celtic Daily Prayer* from the Northumbria Community) or collections of written prayers (e.g., *Getting Ready for the New Life: Facing Illness or Death with the Word and Prayers*, by Richard F. Bansemer), and copy out a few that you like. Take them with you when you visit, and ask if you can use them when you offer prayer.

Read through Jerry Sittser's fine book *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss* to gain a deeper understanding of the role of suffering in the life of the disciple. ■