

The following article is located at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2016/april-web-exclusives/your-most-undervalued-role.html>

Leadership Journal, April 2016

Your Most Undervalued Role

The slow, small, but immeasurably sacred work of pastoral care.

Lee Eclov | posted April 15, 2016



Pastoral care can happen in sermons and worship services, board meetings and fellowship dinners, but most often it is one-on-one: conversations, counseling, calls on the sick or bereaved, chasing down someone who is drifting from the faith, and the interruptions. Eugene Peterson taught me that often the interruptions *are* our ministry.

God so created the heart that it needs a shepherd. And when lost sheep are found and gathered into a fold of God, they need a pastor. No Christians should be without pastors who feed, lead, and guard them for the Lord's sake.

The inefficient imperative

One-on-one pastoral care is every pastor's inefficient imperative. It invariably seems we could get more done if we're left alone to study or plan, or if we could be with a group of our people at once to teach or worship or just eat together. There is this powerful instinct to always shepherd the flock in bunches, in herds, because it seems patently obvious we'd get more done. But efficiency is a poor pastoral master.

We would hardly know Jesus if it weren't for all his personal encounters in the Gospels. Peter at his nets, Matthew at his tax table, Mary at Jesus' feet, the desperate centurion, the raving demoniac, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the thief on the cross. Jesus met people one-on-one. This is what pastors do.

Akin to that, pastors learn of Jesus by being with him at all those personal encounters with Jesus' people. Pastoral care has a way of toning up our Christology. You say goodbye to your counselee or drive home from the hospital and sometimes Jesus was so *present* there, it is as if you'd just come away from private devotions. I'd visited the home of a couple just to pray with them. Barb's fear of the future hung heavy in the air. We sat quietly together while I tried to listen for the Lord's direction, for what he wanted me to say or pray. I was surprised when the words came: "All will be well. All will be well." It was as if fresh air filled the room with

relief. A few minutes later, after I'd blessed them with Aaron's ancient words, Barb said, "I know Jesus is always with us but tonight ... he was right here in this room!"

I wonder whether, in some divine miracle, a whole church has a sense of being shepherded well when only one or two actually had the shepherd's attention. The 99 in the fold are better off—healthier, more content—when the one lost sheep is carried home. Heaven is certainly the happier for it.

Good shepherds

Psalm 23 is the very definition of pastoral care. "The Lord is my shepherd." My Pastor. A church so shepherded "lacks nothing." To be good shepherds, we do what the Good Shepherd does, and we do it in league with him, or we're good for nothing.

We restore souls. Sometimes the believers we care for are like people coming off a Tilt-a-Whirl. They're unsteady in spirit, woozy. They need to sit down and clear their heads and hearts. "Here," we say, "drink some cool water. Let me help you rest your soul." Then we dispense grace—sometimes like medicine, sometime like perfume. And we help them find spiritual space. Some people will only be quiet with the Lord if we sit there with them.

We guide God's people on right paths. We catch up with them as they try to maneuver through teenage angst or aching age, through job loss or disorienting success, through anger or depression or decisions. Pastoral counselors are prone to think that our job is to help people figure out what to do, but actually it is to show them how to find the high road of holiness as they journey. So we teach them to pray well, to trust Scripture, and to lean on their brothers and sisters.

We help people rest their fears on Jesus. "I will fear no evil, for you are with me." We read the Bible to them, warding off predators and keeping them from stumbling. We show them the high, strong parapets of God's fortress. Remind them of angels keeping watch and remind them that "the waves and winds still know His voice Who ruled them while He dwelt below." When someone's pastor is with them in a dark place, they can believe more easily that Jesus is with them. And pastors know what a solemn privilege it is to walk with a saint into the valley of the shadow of death.

We give God's people a taste from the table to come. Sometimes God's people, sensitized to sin and diabolically accused, have a harder time believing in grace than a bum does, so we help them understand their high position, their place at God's table out of reach of the Enemy. We anoint them with the Spirit's blessing and celebrate, to their surprise, how honored they are by the Father.

We reinforce their faith in God's daily goodness and love till they are finally home, safe and sound. How many times does a pastor reassure his people of God's lovingkindness? And in how many ways? It is mostly what happens in counseling and pastoral calls. We reiterate the steadfast promises of God and add the Amen of Christ to them all. And when we rise to speak at their funerals, the shepherd's last word is, "And they will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

That's pastoral care.

Sacred intruders

I remember a mom calling me in a panic over her teenage son. She was at work and he was at home alone, depressed and unsteady, and he wasn't answering the phone. "I'm on my way," she said, "but could you go over and check on him. The back door is open." I was frightened all the way but I found him safe, huddled in a blue funk, and so far from Jesus. But that's what we do. "The back door is open."

Pastors are often sacred intruders. We're spiritually nosy. A sign outside the hospital room might say "Family Only," but that restriction doesn't apply to me. We arrive at some closed-door crisis and hear the whisper, "The pastor is here." I've talked to strangers in distress and said, "I'm a pastor. Would you like me to pray for you?" and, of course, they said yes. I keep waiting for someone to check my I.D.

It's like that with people's hearts, too. I let myself into their souls: "You don't mind if I come in here, do you?" And the next thing you know, you're talking about long-guarded fears or sins or memories covered in dusty sheets. Grace opens a lot of doors. When people sense I'm not going to hurt them, that I won't slash them with the sword of the Spirit, they are relieved to have someone look in to the lonely, dark rooms of their hearts with them. When we don't rush them and don't try to squeeze God's Word in edgewise, Jesus has room to work wonders. Again, what we bring that is most Christlike is grace. Grace is the credential that lets us park close to people's hearts.

I like to have pastored

One-on-one shepherding is not usually my favorite part of being a pastor. That would be preaching. Frankly, I enjoy creating and organizing things more than I enjoy pastoral care. But pastoral care is like the writing I do. When people ask me if I like writing, I always say I like to *have written*. I like it once I've done it. Pastoral care is often like that. I like to *have pastored*. Sometimes I dread the grim story I know I'm going to hear, the weeping that I know is coming, the anger that is sure to erupt before me. I wish I didn't have to talk to the new widow or call the guy who has skipped church for three months. But when it is done, even when things aren't resolved, I know that in this I was a good shepherd.

Nothing in all the pastoral work I do gives me such a sharp, clear sense of being a good shepherd as *having done* pastoral care. I'm most truly aware of being the pastor in those one-on-one moments of care and prayer, of wisdom and grace. It is the vulnerability, I think, the face-to-face love of a shepherd for his sheep. There is a certain comfortable distance in preaching or leading larger ministries. But when I sat last weekend with Soni, wan and weary from cancer, and heard her love for Jesus, when I read Psalm 86, when we sang "Blessed Assurance" together, when I prayed into the promises of heaven—well, that was the very heart of shepherding.

Small work

"Marv" would just drop by my office. No appointment. Just stick his nose in my door and strike up a conversation. (Not all pastors have gatekeepers.) He was needy. He really was. And it helped him to talk. It

frustrated me to pieces, and sometimes I told him I was busy. I never felt those visits were very useful because he never seemed to get better, but I eventually decided that what Jesus had me doing was washing Marv's feet.

Pastoral work is humbling. It's humbling, of course, because we so often feel inadequate, but also because it is often such *small* work. A pastoral friend writes a birthday card to every person in his church. Small work. Another quietly prays through the church directory. Small work. We call on people and no one ever hears about it. We sit and make small talk with someone while trying not to worry about our unfinished sermon. Small work. We pray for a 10th grader's audition or a 45-year-old's job interview. We take a newcomer to lunch, or help arrange some funds for a sister with a need. Small work.

Last Sunday "Molly" was in church. She's not a believer. She doesn't really grasp the gospel yet. But she likes to be there. I hadn't seen her for several weeks so I sidled up to her and quietly asked how she was. "Things are really tough," she said. "Let me pray for you right now," I said to her surprise. Short, simple, small. Later she told her friend, "I felt something.... I think it was the presence of God."

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will ... put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left." And there we will be, both as sheep and shepherds, gawking at the glory and amazed at the grace that got us there.

Jesus said that then the King will give us each the inheritance prepared for us before creation, and he will tell us the incredible reason why he has made us so rich: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

I can think of few Christians who have more opportunities to get rich slowly than pastors. When we were trudging down hospital corridors or going back to the church for evening counseling, when we were squeezing in a visit to a shut-in or meeting with a 17-year-old just to talk about school, we were bringing food to hungry hearts. We were inviting in strangers. We were clothing people—maybe in garments of white. We went into prisons, some with unseen bars, and jingled the keys of grace. It was so ordinary, so small, but look where it got us: "in his glory, and all the angels with him."

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"