

The invisible wall

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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Not long ago I was talking with friend who has become the pastor of a church in his small home town. He's been there for a few years, having been away for 20, and has found himself among people he has known all his life. The parish council president, for instance, is an old classmate from nursery school through high school. Some of his elderly parishioners are his old teachers. He knows almost everyone on Main Street, regardless of their denomination or lack thereof.

What's got to him, he said, is the invisible wall that has been constructed between him and all these old friends. He goes to morning coffee and the old gang chirps up with, "Watch what you say, the preacher is here." That sort of thing. Friendships that once shared confidences with ease are now guarded. Relaxing "out of uniform" in public as become difficult, if not impossible.

The invisible wall is a price paid by almost every clergy person no matter where he or she serves, but I imagine it has to be especially tough when one serves in one's home town. Not everyone, however, experiences it as a negative. Another acquaintance, who also serves in his home town as a locally ordained person, has found the invisible wall to be quite permeable, and the cautionary, "Watch what you say, the preacher is here," is also an invitation for him to be comfortable as the presence of the church over coffee or a beer. Nevertheless, he is mindful that he is never not the pastor, even when working at his secular job.

It brings up an interesting question. Locally ordained nonstipendiary and part-time clergy are becoming the norm in many small towns, and in many denominations. The greater church has done what it can to see that they are as theologically well-educated as possible, sans three or four years away at seminary. Is the greater church also helping them understand what it means to be separated from the flock to become a shepherd? It's the separation part that I wonder about. Being separated for ordination is an old subject of conversation among church leaders, but it's been mostly about seminary graduates who do not go back to their home towns, and who, for the most part, have ventured forth as professional clergy. Locally ordained

persons serving their home congregations while maintaining a secular job are in a different place.

Separation for ordination also brings social separation that has dramatic emotional consequences, and I suspect that we don't pay enough attention to it when preparing locally ordained persons for ministry in their hometowns. The invisible wall is reality. It does not have to be an emotionally damaging one, but I suspect it will be if we don't help them prepare for it.

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