

Pastoral care: How much is too much?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

August 23, 2015

I served two small congregations who wanted a lot of pastoral care. Which was good, because I love people, and I love visiting with them.

But it did get to be too much. Smaller churches often expect visits more than larger ones.

I remember hearing complaints that I didn't visit a particular woman enough. She was a relatively young, able-bodied woman, who never came to church. But people in the congregation really wanted me to reach out to her, so I had visited with her six times in the first year. But it still wasn't enough. She kept complaining to the church leadership.

You see, my predecessor had set up particular expectations. I followed an interim, who wasn't interested in revitalizing the church. He was interested in sitting back and sipping coffee with the widows in the congregation on weekdays, pulling sermons from his ample files on the weekends, and collecting a painless paycheck to supplement his retirement income. The people he visited were his friends, in a way that I could not be, because I was forty years younger than they were.

My pastoral care classes from seminary weren't a great deal of help either. The instructor said that the pastor needed to visit with every member in his or her home within the first year. I suppose it was like the other things we learn in seminary—how we were supposed to translate every text from the original language, go through every step of the hermeneutical process, and spend at least twenty hours on our sermon every single week. There wasn't a lot of awareness of what a pastor's day actually looked like.

I became frustrated from fighting inertia. I loved the visits, but hated the complaints that I wasn't doing enough. My time was consumed with those complaints, and I wasn't able to dedicate any time to the things that gave me joy and made the

church more vital—creative worship, new members, or community work. I wondered if it could be a chicken or egg thing. Was the church smaller because of the pastoral expectation to spend so much time visiting? I had to start setting up some sort of boundaries.

This is what I came up with:

- If an able-bodied person, who was not currently going through a crisis and could make it to church every Sunday, wanted a visit, then he or she needed issue an invitation, for a specific date and time. As an introvert, inviting myself to people's homes exhausted me. It was also unfair for me to be getting complaints for not being able to read people's minds.
- When someone was in the hospital, they needed to be visited every day. On my days off, an elder needed to visit. People in hospice needed visits at least once a week. At the end, I needed to go every day.
- When someone was in the nursing home, they needed to be visited during holiday seasons (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Eastertide, and Summer).
- There needed to be something in place so that people could receive communion.
- Younger generations do not necessarily want or need to be visited at home. They usually think they're in trouble if you ask if you can visit with them. But they deserve to be heard as much as older members. I set up dinner parties with them. I invited six to eight people over, starting with the leadership.
- I set up office hours and preached about people coming into the office for counseling, so they would know that they could visit me.
- I had to do internal work. I had to address my own need to please people and bend to every demand. I realized that I had become an enabler as a pastor, and I was visiting too much because I needed them to need me. So, I went to a therapist, worked through some family of origin issues, and realized I needed to be less codependent in order to be a better pastor.

Your list will look different, according to your setting. There is no magic formula. But it's good to have some guidelines.