

Effective ministry

By [Diane Roth](#)

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I got an e-mail last week from a woman whose wedding I officiated almost ten years ago. I hear from her or her husband occasionally. We have kept in touch, even though they moved to New York (where he lived) right after their wedding.

I had known the bride for a few years before she got married. She was a regular at our Saturday night chapel service. The service was small, and filled mostly with retired people, so I couldn't help noticing her when she first started attending. One of her best friends from church was an 80-year-old woman who still volunteered regularly in the church office. She also participated in a couple of Bible studies and went to a community organizing meeting with me once.

At some point this young man started attending the Saturday night service with her. All of the widows who attended our chapel service had a front row seat for their courtship. Of course, they got married in the chapel, right before the Saturday evening service.

They invited us to come and visit us in New York sometime. My husband and I took them up on it. We went to a jazz club, Central Park, the Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and then, on Sunday, to church.

When their son was born, I sent them a piece of art with a passage from Isaiah, "I have called you by name ... you are mine."

The e-mail I got last week said they would be in Texas because they were adopting a little girl. How far away was I? Actually, as it turned out, I was pretty far away from where they were, but they wanted to get together, if possible.

So, on Thursday night, they drove all the way over to where I am to meet me at my church with their new daughter. We had a tour of our fellowship hall, sanctuary, and preschool. In the sanctuary, they walked into our chancel and asked if I would say a prayer for their daughter.

I did.

We spent some time catching up after that. They told me about their community and congregation, and asked questions about my move and the congregation I serve now. They are now attending a large congregation of another denomination but they would be Lutheran again, in a heartbeat—if they could find a place to worship nearer them.

What is it that you miss? I asked.

The liturgy, they said. They love the liturgy.

I asked about their daughter. They said she was a miracle: the agency called and asked them if they could get on a plane the next day, the flight was available, and they were here, right now. We talked some more about their lives, taking our time.

We finally said goodbye, grateful for the conversation, grateful for the prayers. They returned home with their new daughter.

They are not members of my church any more. They haven't been for many years. They have another pastor. But once in awhile, we share these small fragments of each others' lives, and we are grateful for it. I know I am. I'm grateful to see how they are a blessing in the place where they live: in their congregation, in their community. I am grateful to know that they are growing in faith, and in love.

One of my friends says that this relationship is a sign of my effective ministry. I will tell you honestly that I am not sure exactly what that means. I keep thinking that effective ministry is about big and flashy things: transformative community and social ministries, starting new organizations, things like that. But I also know that effective ministry is about relationships. It's about our relationship with God, and our relationships with one another, and how they change us. From one degree of glory into another. In ways that we often cannot see.

But for a moment this week, the veil was pulled back, and I caught a glimpse of it. It was the kingdom of heaven, while we were sitting on the steps of the chancel, surrounding a tiny girl with prayer.

A miracle.

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