

Being a pastor to a pastor

By [Diane Roth](#)

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I used to love to watch him and his wife, sitting in the front row at church every Sunday. He always took copious notes during the sermon. I learned that he called one of his daughters every Sunday night, and they compared notes about what they had heard on Sunday morning.

His first parish was in Hayti, South Dakota, not far from the small three-point parish where I had served for four years. I couldn't believe that he knew well those small towns where I had just come from. His last call had been as the senior pastor of a large suburban church. But he had now been semi-retired for many years. He served part-time as a visitation pastor at a neighboring church. But he worshiped with us.

Later on, when his wife became ill, I used to visit them both every month. We'd read scripture, pray and share communion. The first time I tried to pray the traditional version of the Lord's prayer, he gently told me, "We pray the newer version."

My colleague, the senior pastor, told me once that this retired pastor requested that I be the one to come and visit his wife. She was diagnosed with Alzheimers. Oftentimes when I visited, she would be anxious or afraid. She would say, "Don't leave me." He would answer, "I'm not going anywhere." She would say to him, "Your face is so wrinkled. How did your face get so wrinkled?" And he would just smile and hold her hand.

He was a tireless advocate for justice; he believed that care for the vulnerable was at the heart of the gospel. He often would go with me to the large rallies for our local faith-based organizing group.

He had a large garden, with tomatoes and sweet corn and beans and beets. Maybe he should have been a farmer. Maybe he was, in a way.

The other thing I noticed was that when he came to worship, I could tell he was remembering the Words of Institution. He would say them silently along with me.

Just two days ago we got a call here in the office that he had begun hospice care.

I went to his home. One of his daughters was with him.

I did not feel wise that day. He is wise. He has been praying with people, and comforting people, and reading to people for so many years. He has been sitting by hospital beds and in nursing homes for so many years.

This is what we did: We read about the trumpets in 1 Corinthians 15. I read from the gospel of John, the part when Mary mistakes Jesus for a gardener.

I did not feel wise. But I said, "It looks like soon you will be seeing Virginia (his wife) and Jesus." I said that it's hard when there are people you love here and people you love there.

And I prayed for strength for the journey.

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