

The hospice pastor with a church on life support

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May 20, 2013

"I feel like a hospice nurse," I sighed as I arrived home and set down my bags. I had so many funerals in my small congregation, that I had little time for anything other than caring for the dying. Please don't misunderstand me. I appreciated every holy moment at the bedside of the members. But I also realized there was something missing in our church's ministry, and the answer was so clear when I looked at Jesus' ministry.

We've read the gospels so many times that we can forget how amazing it was for Jesus to be walking from town to town, village to village, ministering to people. While people went to the synagogue to read Scriptures and pray, Jesus took the message out into the dusty roads. In the streets there were few barriers to the Gentiles, women, "unclean," or poor, so Jesus was able to touch the skin of the leper or heal the woman with the issue of blood, because he was outside of the walls for so much of his ministry. Going out was a liberating act.

In this time of ministry, pastors have so much to do. For many pastors, staffs have been cut but expectations haven't. Over half of our congregations are above the age of sixty, and many members are retired. Let's be honest. They are often the people who have been faithfully paying our salaries and keeping the church running for decades. So it's really easy to become absorbed in the lives, demands and health of those who are gathered. Often congregations resist having the pastor focus attention outside of the doors and complain that we're not taking care of the members when we spend too much time in the community.

But it's important that we keep walking in the footsteps of Jesus, focusing our attention on people who won't, can't, or never imagined themselves in church. How do we do this? It's difficult for pastors, who are often introverted. Yet, there are literally thousands of ways to go out. Here are just a few.

- Walk once a day. Imagine the lives of those around your church. Pray for them. Think about what they might need. What are their concerns? Talk to people and

become a regular character in the neighborhood.

- Work outside the church one day a week. I had a personnel committee that was chaired by a University professor. The school that he worked at demanded that the professors give one day a week back to the community. He thought that I should do the same, and the attention to that practice changed our ministry.

- Use outward-focused technology. Figure out an Internet strategy that not only takes care of members (i.e., private Facebook Bible study groups), but also helps your church to imagine how you can be digital missionaries. Things like sermon podcasts can become powerful tools for reaching out. And remember, your website is now your front door for visitors, so make sure that it's outward focused as well.

- Assess the needs of your community. Talk with non-profit organization directors, small business owners, school-age parents, and coffee-serving baristas within your neighborhood. Find out what they need. Take a careful look at the demographics of your neighborhood and keep thinking about what ministry might be best.

- Start a community garden. I have watched churches come alive and make new connections through the fruits and vegetables that they grow.

As I travel around the country, I often hear the words "life support" and "hospice care" when pastors describe their jobs. If you feel weary in the midst of in-grown ministry, you are not alone. Yet, in this important time, we will need to keep encouraging one another to get out.