

The second visit

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The first congregation I served had just under 90 members, and among them were a dozen shut-ins, most of them over 90.

Margery was not on that list.

I first saw her name when I studied an outdated photo directory. She lived in senior housing just down the street, a 10-story high-rise of independent apartments with an assisted-living wing; the residents represented a range of health and capability.

Margery did not come down the street for worship. What was her situation?

I asked a deacon, who responded with a scornful shake of the head. "She's not a shut-in. She gets to the beauty parlor every week!"

Do we know why she doesn't come to worship?

"I think she stopped coming when she didn't like the organist. She could get to church if she wanted. You don't need to visit her."

I was busy figuring out how to be a pastor, and I confess I did not regret hearing that Margery could come off my list of concerns. I forgot about her until someone I visited in the assisted-living wing asked, "How is Margery? She hasn't been to see me lately."

I asked around a little more and learned that Margery's son still lived in her house nearby; that she had sung in the choir for many years; that she had been a gym teacher and, after retirement, a crossing guard. I heard she had lost a beloved dog.

When I telephoned, she invited me to visit the following afternoon. A tiny lady with perfectly coiffed hair opened the door. Dressed neatly in slacks, a striped blouse, and a pullover sweater, she engaged in conversation with intelligence and purpose, describing the neighborhood of her youth. I noted her careful movements, the controlled way she sat in her chair as we talked.

I asked to come back again.

On the second visit, I asked about her dog. Margery told me how her beloved Katie had been mortally wounded by coyotes in the woods behind her house, a place they walked together daily. After Katie's death, she moved to this apartment with a view of the city and the bay beyond, a view away from the woods and home.

On the third visit, she showed me dozens of pill bottles in a kitchen cabinet—treatments for arthritis, depression, vertigo, high blood pressure, and for the symptoms caused by their side effects.

On the fourth visit, she apologized for never coming to worship. She had to wait for the stiffness in her hands to loosen in the morning before she could dress and do her hair. She let me see the walker previously hidden in her bedroom.

Margery had a lot to grieve. When she stopped attending church, other members focused on their own feelings of rejection. They did not consider that she went to the beauty parlor in the afternoon, when her arthritic joints allowed it.

Most churches are ill equipped to minister to people living with chronic illness. We love a crisis, an acute situation. Whether an illness or injury ends in recovery or in death, we can offer ministry in the form of rides, babysitting, casseroles, visits, prayer, and laying on of hands. All of this seems manageable in the short term. We hope for healing, but we stand ready to shift our understanding from a cure of the body to a restoration of the soul.

What can we offer in the case of chronic illness? We would rather celebrate with the newly cured. Pastors feel comfortable reading the 23rd Psalm at a deathbed. I know too well how often the pastoral visit gets pushed a week out and another week when needs arise that seem more urgent. It feels more heroic to rush to the emergency room than to sit ruminating on Psalm 6 with the person who waits for her fingers to unbend each morning, or who times his life by the finger prick, or who lies awake wondering if the world will seem as unbearable in the morning as it did the day before.

I could not fix anything for Margery, but I could sit and listen long enough to build a relationship that I hope brought a sense of God's presence. I look back and see that luxurious circumstances enabled our visits; how many pastors of 90-member congregations still work full time? All people in the church community must learn to

minister to one another.

One Sunday, Margery did make it to church. Imagine the heroic effort it took to arrive before 10 a.m., her light blue cashmere cardigan buttoned, her strand of pearls clasped, her hair patted into place by fingers too stiff to bear the weight of a hymnal.

Imagine. Then make the second visit.