

DO YOU LOVE PEOPLE

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I was encouraged to read of a prospective associate minister anticipating moving to a new church family. His letter finished with: 'I and my family look forward to sharing our lives with you'. I was encouraged, because I took it to allude to Paul's example in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8: 'Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.'

This is a prominent but often under-noticed theme of the apostle Paul when describing leadership. He might be defending his own ministry (as in 2 Corinthians 10), or using his own ministry as an example or incentive to others (as in Acts 20 or 1 Thessalonians 2), or simply exhorting others in their ministry (as in 1 Timothy 3 and 4, and Titus 1), but this call for a minister to love the people of God is ever present. This love is often spoken of using words like gentleness, patience, affection, care and compassion. It is not only Paul, but also Peter, who uses such language, and both clearly look back to the shepherd ministry taught and uniquely modelled by Jesus himself (John 10 and 21; Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 2:25, 5:2).

As one of the CPAS patronage trustees, I often assess applications or interview candidates for appointments. I have also been a training incumbent for over 24 years. In these contexts, I have observed that congregations want a minister who is a pastor, a leader who will love them. Some will say it explicitly, others will implicitly convey it. My observation is that the same is true at any level of Christian leadership. People appreciate being cared for and loved.

I realise that it may appear to be an inadequate understanding of the pastoral ministry and possibly too comfortable an expectation if a fellowship is to change or grow, but I sense that it is nonetheless essential.

Believers are the flock of God and each individual needs to know, trust and love those who, under the great shepherd, shepherd them. Trust and affection are given to those who demonstrate trust and affection. I recall an interview where the candidate asked whether the congregation was welcoming and friendly. The warden shrewdly replied that fellowship was a two-way street – 'the more you go down the street to them, the more you find they come the other way towards you.'

So, leader, love your people. Let them know beyond any doubt that they are loved by you. It will be sensed in how you preach and lead services, the home group, the youth fellowship. It will show in how you conduct yourself before and after meetings and services, and in how you talk of your leadership role, your diary(!), the congregation and the wider community. But for those in overall leadership of churches, I want to draw particular attention to visiting.

Visiting people in their homes seems to be a dying practice and no longer a serious pastoral priority. Ministers do still call in for 'business' reasons, for example specific needs like a funeral or serious illness, or to make requests, for example to consider some job or service. There is also growth in the strategic and



intentional commitment to one-to-one mentoring and in the generous gift of hospitality.

However, the simple and routine ministry of pastoral visiting for ongoing encouragement, support and partnership seems to be dying out. The pattern of tea at 5.30pm and out at 6.45pm for a couple of visits before the evening meeting has given way to the priority of family-time guarded by the answerphone. The use of afternoons for being out in the parish or even that critical after-school window of 4.30-6pm for home visiting of individuals or families is frankly rare. Occasionally ministers have tried to undertake the Baxter Model*, but it often remains unfinished and somehow of more benefit to the visitor than the visited.

Prioritising family life is important, and no doubt there are cultural and societal reasons for these changes, but more concerning seems to be the changing patterns and priorities of ministry. Ministers talk of the 'ministry to do', as much as of 'the people to love'. I believe it was Starbucks that grew when it changed its ethos from serving coffee to people to serving people with coffee.

The minister and, therefore, leader of the local church family is well described as a pastor-teacher (Ephesians 4). The rediscovery of the importance, demands and value of the ministry of the word in the last generation has indeed re-galvanised the ministry of many ministers as teachers and preachers. I for one am indebted to the Proclamation Trust for this discipline and encouragement. This emphasis chimes in well with the classic portrayals of the work of elders and overseers. However, many of today's ministers seem to use this priority to squeeze out the other – preparation time is sacred, the computer at the desk to access resources on the internet is a lure and magnet. It can take over as the chief means of ministry with emails and texts the preferred and expected means of communication.

However, leaders of the local church are pastor-teachers. They are to lead in feeding, teaching and guiding, but also in love and affection. Leadership is relational if it is to be effective. We must work hard to learn and remember names. It is not good enough to claim 'I'm not good at names'. Write them down, pore over lists before Sundays or meetings, and use the names all the time. We must work hard to notice and welcome newcomers. We must visit people in their homes - in my experience, this is the best way to really get to know another person. If the teacher in any of us wants a word, read Acts 20:20: '[I] have taught you publicly and from house to house.' We should not be content to do 'most of our pastoring from the pulpit', as I heard from one interviewee (he did not get the job!). We should take the word and its comfort from

home to home.

Pastoral visits to individuals or families will no doubt include some 'sharing of oneself', but will include some sharing of the word and in prayer at the end. I find the Psalms invaluable words in season. Such visits need not be long. They trump the answerphone, the computer or the mobile every time. Those may be wonderful aids and supports, but they are lousy masters and models. Nothing beats the face-to-face touch.

On a recent away day, my own staff team came to recognise our 'visiting deficit' in our congregation, and decided to do something about it. We now use part of our weekly staff meeting to report specifically on any pastoral visits or significant conversations that we have had. It has revealed how little we do, but it is a start. We have not yet set ourselves any targets (e.g. three home visits a week), and certainly not handed out names in advance at the start of the week – that might seem far too old-fashioned ... but it might yet come!

My advertisements for posts at St Peter's no longer start with the question, 'Do you love the gospel ... or teaching the Bible ... or God?' (I want to take those for granted), but rather 'Do you love people?' And if you say you do, how do you demonstrate it? Most people's ministry will be remembered not for how well they preached or taught, or how important their vision or leadership was, but how much they loved the people of God in their charge under God. 'Over all these virtues put on love' (Colossians 3:14). Leader, love your people.

*The Baxter Model. Orthos 13, Fellowship of Word and Spirit, Wallace Benn (1993)

Inspired by Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), itself an extended commentary on Acts 20:28, this short booklet discusses and applies Baxter's methods and relevance for today.