A MINISTER writes . . .

I have long felt a need to make the pastoral contacts of my ministry more productive of spiritual growth in the people. Evangelistic or sick calls or those made when there is obvious personal crisis present problems that have been treated many times. So do contacts in which the person brings up a need. The September, 1957, issue of PASTORAL PSYCHOLOGY was very helpful in contacts that are related to administration.

But those "routine" calls that so easily become only social calls present the problem. It seems hardly in keeping with the pastoral purpose to use them solely or even largely for promotional purposes. Yet what theory, what techniques can we find to guide us in making these calls productive in case the pastor and his people find uncongenial a pattern of prayer and Bible reaching in each case. With me, and I believe with my people, such a practice would close doors to realistic communication rather than open them.

I heard of one pastor who used a series of questions in each call: Do you have family prayers? Do you tithe?—and others of like nature. Everyone knew what the questions would be. This is one way to grapple with the situation. But without some modification it hardly seems promising in my case at least.

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JAMES B. ASHBROOK, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology, Colgate Rochester Divinity School, replies . . .

Here is a question that plagues and baffles us ministers. It is so true that when we call with a specific purpose—sickness, death, family crisis, commitment to Christ—we have at least some idea of what we are doing. So, too, the person we call on has some idea why we are there. But with the hit-or-miss call, how can we make it more productive of spiritual growth?

The minister asks, "what theory, what techniques can we find to guide us?" He goes on to mention specific "techniques," and, I think, quite properly rejects them as being inadequate. The point of focus is not on "technique," but on "theory." We have to ask ourselves: What exactly is the reason I am calling on this person?
Why am I here and not somewhere else? What would I like to have happen?

These questions help establish our point of reference. Each man must answer these questions for himself. No man can tell another man what they should be. But, let me go on to say what they are for me. I am trying to establish contact with this person. I want to reach through the smoke screen we throw out to protect us from each other and to touch him as a person. You can speak of this as establishing contact and building rapport. I like to think of it as my encountering the person I call on as a person and his encountering me as a person.

Since my purpose in the routine call is for us to encounter each other as persons, then my responsibility is to be as open and as responsive as I am capable of being. He should not have to feel under any external pressure to open up. The picture which the Book of Revelation gives us of the Christ is pertinent at this point. Christ stands at the door and knocks. If any man hears his voice and opens the door, he will go in and be with him. I feel my responsibility is only to provide an openness and receptivity. Whether or not the person responds to that is his responsibility. He may choose to lead me into the inner sanctum of his soul. On the other hand, he may feel no need to, or else no desire to. But that is his affair. If my physical "presence" is combined with my psychological and spiritual "presence," then my purpose in calling is fulfilled. We have "met" as deeply as the person feels he wants to be "met."

Actually, the routine call is simply laying the groundwork for a more meaningful encounter when need arises. In that case, even the seemingly meaningless verbiage serves our purpose. We are saying by our presence, "I am interested in you as a person. I am not trying to sell you a bill of goods or to force you to do anything you do not want to do. If you ever need me, you know that I care." Sometimes I find myself falling into the trap of feeling that every person I call on or talk to must be struggling with some deep spiritual or psychological need. Well, that is just not true! There are many times when life goes smoothly and well. We are not always burdened down nor our people burdened down. However, if we have "touched" at a more superficial level, when the crises come, the person will feel he can turn to us. We have "met" socially, now we "meet" seriously.

The purpose—theory, to use the minister's term—is to meet as persons and not simply to pass as ships in the night. Real "meeting" takes place whenever we talk about matters that are important to us. As long as I chatter about that which makes no difference, I am holding the other person at arm's length. As soon as I talk about what does make a difference, I am inviting him into my soul. In other words, it doesn't matter so much what we talk about as how we talk about it. I have engaged in a discussion of the religious life with people and for all the meaning it had for them they could have been talking about the nice day outside. On the other hand, I have had people say, "There is something I would like to show you." And with that they might show me an old snapshot, or a painting, or a flower garden, or a newly decorated room. What, in effect, they are saying is this: "I like you. I trust you. I want to share with you some of myself. I let you see me by showing you what's important to