A minister cannot love his congregation until he gets to know them, and there is no effective way of knowing them except by pastoral calling.

The Pastoral Ministry

Of primary importance in the growing life of the Church is the pastoral ministry. Other areas of parish activity are significant factors but none contribute spiritual power as does the pastoral office. When the minister, in whom a rich and mature pastoral experience has developed a quality of mind and heart which drives him into the center of human need with an urge not to be denied, gives himself heart and soul to the people, then the Church becomes alive and the fellowship becomes warm and beautiful.

This means that the minister is ready to become a fool for Christ's sake, as Paul says. Prompt response has moved beyond the habitual to the reflex and automatic, and under the pressure of God's love and in the light of God's grace while shepherding his flock, he discovers and masters methods in human relations which assure a warm and fruitful pastorate. Philip ran to meet the Ethiopian. He ran. What else could he do? He had been with Jesus; the compassion of his Master was upon him. Years ago I knew a minister who served a rural parish. He told me he was going to stay there until he died. And he did. He was there thirty-six years. At the start he knew very little about farming; so for several years he took a university summer course in agriculture, "in order," as he said, "that I might know not only what the farmers were talking about, but also what I was talking about." He gave himself without reserve to the people of that countryside. His influence grew steadily year after year. They wanted to run him for congress, but he said, "No, I belong here."

This possession by the Holy Spirit, for that is the power which takes hold of the dedicated pastor, does not come upon him overnight. There is no spontaneity about it except as that spontaneity is the natural outgrowth of practice. It represents the accretion of the years. It means that the pastor has grown into the love of God, and confers the grace of God upon his people, as he gets to know them. And how is he going to get to know them? I know of no other effective way of knowing your people as a pastor, not as a group but as individuals, than by pastoral calling.

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I MUST be emphatic at this point.

There seems to be a growing idea that the modern minister is emancipated from routine house-to-house calling. He is an organizer and executive; pastoral calling is relegated to the limbo of the outgrown simplicities. The minister sits in the ivory tower of his office, with two telephones, a dictaphone and an ashtray on the desk, and a secretary or two in the adjoining room. When they need him, the folks will doubtless come to him and he will dispense wisdom and the fear of the Lord. "Why should I call on them? The husband is away at work. The children are in school. It is time wasted." But rationalizing negligence is bad reasoning. It is my observation that ministers, whether senior or associate or assistant or in charge of Christian education, who do not engage in systematic and sustained pastoral calling, move frequently from church to church and the voyage of their professional career is bound in shallows if not miseries. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep, and my sheep know me." The very word "pastor" means "shepherd." A shepherd must know his sheep and his sheep must know him. Remember the parable of the lost sheep. How can we know that a sheep is missing unless we know all the sheep in the flock?

The only way to get to know our people is by visiting them in their homes. The home itself tells much about its inmates, present or absent. At church we give those in attendance a hurried, impersonal handshake at the door, but at the home we sit down for a leisurely visit.

And we do not forget that visit. Sitting down with the wife and mother, inquiring about the husband and children, his work and their schooling—that is the way to know our people. We come closer to the whole family by such a visit and the family draws closer to us. When we know our people on such terms, it is hard for them to get away from us. We must look upon the congregation as individuals. Since the emphasis in this latter generation has rightly grown on the social aspects of the Gospel, there has been a concomitant neglect of the individual as the pivotal point in the life of the church. I say this as a pastor to pastors: we can only love the mass in the abstract. We cannot really love mankind in the mass, as a whole, with sacrificial passion. It is too big. Only God so loved the world. We can only love men and women, a few of them, perhaps a couple of hundred or perhaps a thousand. We can only love what we know, not ideas or abstractions. A minister cannot love his congregation until he gets to love them as individual men and women and boys and girls. We make pastoral calls in order to get to know our people as individual members of the congregation; to know not only their names, but also their ways of living, their interests, their problems.

Moreover, the act of pastoral calling gives confidence to the pastor. Let him engage in a program of fifteen or twenty calls a week, and he will move with strength and assurance as well as decorum among his people. He will learn how to meet people in every situation. We call not only for their sakes but also for our own. Every minister knows that there come times in the pastorate when we feel discouraged, we get pretty low, we can’t budge them, there is a lack of response, the situation becomes static. At the trustees’ meeting we make a suggestion which we feel is pertinent, and they look at us with a fishy eye and move on to the next order of business.