

What's a pastor for?

By [Rufus Burton](#)

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By far the most uncomfortable pastoral work I do is with people who want help for relatives in churches that are far away. I once got a call from one such relative who had been elected secretary of a church committee and wondered how she should minute the meeting. Worse are the complaints about pastors who do things I have done. (“My brother says they don’t sing hymns everyone knows. What can we do?”)

Harder still is the task of dealing with relatives of folks who really have been on the receiving end of pastoral incompetence. Better incompetence, though, than malicious intent.

I never know quite what to say.

Once upon a time, I am told, people were agreed as to what the pastor did, and they appreciated “him” for it. Having read Charles Spurgeon in the guise of “John Ploughman,” I am not sure this was really the case. In any event, now I am told of ministers who no longer count their pastoral calls—instead, they count Facebook likes and blog pingbacks.

At least it is a metric. In the back of my own mind is the fleeting glory of seeing a pithy quote of my own re-tweeted. If the internet is anything like the church narthex, I will be remembered best for things I didn’t actually say.

All of this comes to mind because of one of the truly odd moments in my ministry. Someone with relatives far away discovered that for less than \$250 a year, not only a sermon but a complete service—with hymns everyone knows—could be e-mailed to a church office. This would obviate the need for a minister. They are expensive,

and nobody really likes their children anyway.

The proposal to the congregational meeting was that such a service would save the church a great deal of money. Everyone could take turns reading the sermon. Everyone would be happy. Well, everyone except the manse family. But no use being confused by facts.

This is where the readings for this Sunday are encouraging. [One actually has to know what one is seeing to see what is actually there](#). A high-powered Egyptian civil servant is a brother. A man on a prayer retreat is the Savior of the world. The person ordained, called, and sent actually loves you enough to tell you about both.