

Reaching out or caving in?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

November 19, 2014

I sat during my first year of evaluations at the church. The personnel committee said, “We love your work in the church. You’re doing a great job. But what are you doing *outside* of the church?”

I was confused. I had been a pastor long enough to know that outside work was done with stealth. I could serve at the soup kitchen, teach art at the women’s shelter, protest against violence, or hone my writing craft, but when I did it, I acted like a lover with a jealous husband. I snuck around at odd hours and guiltily confessed to members when they asked me where I had been. Now I was in a church that wanted to know what I was doing outside of the church? Like it was a requirement?

“At the college I where I teach,” the wise committee convener explained, “professors are not just there for the institution and the students, but we are there for the community. We are required to serve the larger community one day a week.”

It seemed like a wonderful idea, and so I took up the challenge. It transformed my ministry in significant ways. I felt less drained, and more useful. I think it was an important key to the congregational identity as well. They saw themselves as reaching out instead of caving in. They were serving the community along with their pastors.

Too often, members see the pastor as caretakers of the congregation. Particularly when the church gets older, a pastor’s life can be consumed with trips to the hospital, grieving with widows, and sitting by bedsides. These are holy and precious moments. There is no doubt about it. But it can be all-consuming. And the size of the congregation does not matter. Often, the smaller the church, the larger the demand on the pastor’s time.

If we funnel all of our creative energy inward, then we will lose all contact with the outside world. We will begin to see any external endeavor as competing with our true love, the church. The church will be known as a tight-nit family that doesn’t accept adoptions. And then, in time, the congregation will not be known at all.

But what if we saw the church in service to the world, and our work outside of the church as a necessity? What if every pastor spent one day a week in service to the larger community? It could change our ministries, and our churches.