

Pastor, not friend

Jack served the church in countless ways. There's only one thing he wanted in return.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [January 9, 2013](#) issue



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Jack Anderson is every pastor's dream elder. He's a physician who is known for being ethical and compassionate. He reads theology and practices the spiritual disciplines, and I can always hear echoes of the Holy Spirit in his wise counsel. No one in the church, including Jack, can remember all that he has done for the congregation over the years—he's exactly what the Reformers had in mind when writing about the priesthood of all believers.

Jack stood beside me in more than one foxhole when the leadership of the church was introducing a change that caused conflict within the congregation. There was only one thing he expected in return for all of this service—he wanted to be my friend.

When the time came for me to leave the church, Jack was devastated. He was hurt that I hadn't included him in my discernment process—and livid that I would "so easily" abandon the relationship we had developed over the last ten years because "friends don't treat each other like that." He is right about friends, but I was not his friend. I was his pastor.

For over 30 years I've struggled with the question of befriending parishioners. I realize that I'm supposed to maintain healthy friendships outside of the church, and I've taught this for years in seminary classes. The professional literature supports this call to maintain a distinction between relationships of mutuality and those of service as a pastor. I get that. But there's a math problem—there isn't enough time left over after serving the church to have healthy friendships. Or at least that's what pastors tell themselves.

I suppose I could have pulled back from the church and tried to meet more people through the PTA, the Little League, a political party or the volunteer fire department. I could even have convinced myself that this is part of my local mission as a Christian. But I love being a pastor, and I love the churches I've served. And they are demanding lovers.

Since hard-working pastors devote most of their energy to the church, they inevitably become close to the lay leaders who work beside them. After a long committee meeting or Bible study an elder always hangs out around the table with me to talk. We start with the elder's concerns, but he or she will then ask, "And how are you doing, Craig?" Over the years we become deeply invested in our anxieties about our children or worrisome medical reports. We laugh as we clumsily rebuild a roof on a mission trip. And we have many lunches together. It sure sounds like friendship. But it can't be.

When I knelt to receive the laying on of hands before I was ordained, the elders of the congregation were being led by the Holy Spirit to push me away from them. They were essentially saying, "We are setting you apart to serve us. So you can't be just one of the gang anymore. Now you have to love us enough to no longer expect mutuality." It wasn't long after I stood up from the ordination prayer that I discovered this. But the elders have a hard time understanding the holy distance they created by their decision to make me their pastor.

The pastor offers the congregation's laments and doxology to God and proclaims God's holy word to the congregation. Friendships have little to do with this. Should God call the pastor to go to another place, it's asking too much of the congregation to expect them to discern this with the pastor.

Ordination costs pastors, and one of the greatest costs is maintaining the lonely status of being surrounded by everyone in the church while always being the odd

person in the room. Jack Anderson will never understand this, but it is critical for his sake that I did.

As a physician, Jack had a similar challenge when he diagnosed me with a condition that required minor surgery. He didn't ask me to help him discern the best course of action, and he knew that the truly loving act was to say necessary things that I didn't want to hear. That's because his ethical responsibility was to treat me not as a friend but as a patient. That makes perfect sense to him and to me. But he's confused when I treat him as a parishioner.

I do have friendships that are not encumbered by a pastoral call. Mostly they are with other pastors who are spread all over the country. Communication these days is easy and travel is not that hard. Long ago I learned to set times for retreats with friends to whom I'm accountable for the condition of my soul. I talk with them weekly. That helps me remain clear about the nature of relationships of mutuality and relationships of service to the church.

Now I am leaving congregational ministry to become a seminary president, which has the potential for even more crowded loneliness. I plan on being as friendly as I can, but I know I won't last long without friends who have nothing to do with the seminary.