

A year without a church

By [Adam J. Copeland](#)

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It's been one year since I left my position as pastor of a lovely rural congregation to lead [The Project F-M](#), a ministry that delightfully defies easy categorization but could not be called a church. It's been one year since I've preached regularly, presided over the sacraments, led funeral services, visited shut-ins, taught Sunday school, been to the hospital, or responded when someone said "Pastor." One year.

Pastor friends often ask me, "Do you miss it?" It's a complicated response.

Do I miss accompanying people in their life's struggles? A little, but I do that informally now, just without a pastoral title.

Do I miss preaching regularly? Sort of. I miss preaching in a congregation whose stories I know, whose faces I envisioned as I constructed my sermons, but I do not miss the weekly struggle of it all. (And I most certainly don't miss anxious Saturday nights editing sermons before going to bed early.)

Do I miss my public role as pastor in a small community? Somewhat, but I've happily embraced my more stealth role of practical theology guru and coffee shop interloper.

I most certainly do miss the freedom and time to write. I most certainly do miss the weekly foray into the lectionary/scriptures. I most certainly do miss the challenge of leading a congregation of folks desperately trying to follow Jesus Christ.

In this first full year of a non-pastory position, I've tried to listen carefully to the new sorts of questions that have come since assuming my position of Director/Mission Developer with the Project F-M. I have to admit that being able to say to young adults that "I lead a non-profit ministry connected to the ELCA" rather than "I'm pastor of such-and-such a church" opens many more doors for conversation. For better or for worse, it's makes for a much more comfortable introduction both for me and the young adults I encounter.

And, to be completely honest, I've felt more comfortable in my own skin as a non-pastor type. I remember Carol Howard Merritt writing once (in a post I can't find) that it took her years to live into her role as pastor, that she didn't even like to be called "Pastor" until several years serving as one. When I read Carol's post many months ago, I wondered when, or if, that would happen to me. I still wonder.

What I don't wonder about, though, is my itching for the academy, thirst for teaching opportunities, hunger for more formal studies. What I don't wonder about is my ever-stronger belief that the church needs gifted pastoral leaders dedicated to lifelong ministry. What I don't wonder about is my desire to live into new ways of leadership for myself, not in spite of the church but for the love of it. I'm just not sure where that means for me, or how to get there at the moment.

I don't usually make formal New Year's resolutions, but at the start of 2012 a conversation with a mentor brought out two words that have become a sort of mantra for me this year: patience and hope. Funny thing is that they feel sort of pastor-like, which isn't such a bad thing at all.

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