

12 things I learned when I returned to pastoral ministry

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I recently did a stint as an interim pastor. Here are a dozen things I learned—or relearned—about pastoral ministry:

1. It is through pastoral care that pastors earn credibility, acceptance, and therefore authority—or not.
2. Listening is perhaps a pastor's most important tool. People are not likely to remember anything you said to them when they were in crisis; they will remember that you spent time listening to them.
3. The 80/20 rule works in congregations: 20 percent of the people will take 80 percent of your time. Likewise, 20 percent of the laypeople in the congregation will do 80 percent of the work.
4. Tend to the well-being of the worker bees in the congregation. Their health and welfare is as important as yours.
5. Sermons still matter to laypeople, if sermons connect biblical-theological insights to the world in which they live.
6. Pastoring isn't about the pastor. It is about the Spirit of God working in and through the people.
7. The job of a pastor is to help the people become what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "detectives of divinity"— that is, to help them develop the capacity to see where God is at work in the world and then participate in that work.

8. Be open to the surprises of God. As [Peter Marty](#) said to me once, God can do amazing things with people...if they let him.

9. There is an inevitable political dimension to pastoring. (I learned this years ago from [John Esau](#), a wise person about things pastoral.) Know who the “players” are, especially the people who may not want to be in charge but do want to be in control. Figure out who in the congregation has the respect of most people and will be listened to during times of discernment.

10. Affirmation does a whole lot more to build up the body of Christ than criticism and correction do.

11. One must guard against the tendency to need to be needed and to like being liked. People-pleasing can be the death knell of pastoral ministry.

12. Another job of the pastor: to occasionally remind the people in a congregation that they too will die one day.