

Can we be friends? Pastor-parish relationships: Pastor-parish relationships

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

Now concerning the love of brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another . . .

1 Thessalonians 4:9

I remember the quiet summer night when things changed between my neighbor John and me. We were sitting on his front steps, having a beer, watching our children run up and down the sidewalk, which was our usual routine as we waited for our spouses to come home. We were sitting there talking about nothing, when he ventured into new territory.

“I’m thinking I want my kids to go to church,” he mumbled. “ I wondered if you knew anything about that Methodist church up the street from us.”

The words came out of my mouth before I had thought them through. “What on earth are you talking about? Here you are in Congregationalist New England living across the street from a Congregationalist minister. Suddenly you wake up one morning, finally feeling religious, and you want to go visit the *Methodists*? Why wouldn’t you come to our church?”

“I don’t know,” he said, staring out at the kids. “I guess I do want to try your church.” I wondered if he had just made a nice save. “But I didn’t know how you’d feel about that.”

But by then I was in work mode, not feeling mode. I saw a potential member for my church and zoomed in like a telemarketer on speed. Before John knew what had happened, he had agreed to come to church the next Sunday and was saved from his near brush with Methodism.

John and his kids stayed in our church. He became a leader in our community-organizing program and later a deacon. He has told me that his life is richer now. We've discussed tithing, salvation, communion rituals and politics, and now, as his minister, I know something about his nine-to-five work as well as his inner life.

But as for drinking a beer together on the front steps—that passed away. As pastor and parishioner we now had a relationship centered in a community. And we became items on one another's to-do lists.

I wouldn't trade the new relationship, but I do miss having someone to sit on the steps with. Looking back, I think I understand why John wanted to visit a church other than mine. Perhaps he saw what I did not see: that after we became pastor and parishioner, we would no longer just sit on the steps and talk about nothing.

Being in the ministry, where so much of my work is devoted to the building of relationships, I worry about losing the ability to just sit next to someone and talk about nothing. Evangelism has become a part of my personality. Even when I try not to draw people to my church, they must see an invisible sign on my back, like the ones we stuck on unsuspecting victims in grade school saying, "Kick me here."

Ask me a question about religion, tell me about the nun who rapped your knuckles or the pastor who ran off with the music director, or the fact that you're a very spiritual person but you just don't believe in organized religion, and I'll start telling you about my church. I can't help myself. So as I establish friendships outside the church, my friends join the church.

It is not happenstance that my family has had a membership at the Jewish Community Center. Proselytizing there would be rather bad form. I found that I could go to the gym there, eat at the snack bar, watch my kids run around and talk about nothing. Few people there knew that I was a minister, and I liked it that way. But I wonder if, in hiding out at the Jewish Community Center, I was ducking the hard questions.

I remember the debate in divinity school as to whether or not a minister could have real friendships within the congregation. Back then it seemed as though it would be simple. But the end of 2 Thessalonians 5:12 reads like a mass of contradictions that comes closer to the reality of Christian leadership. "But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work."

The words *respect, have charge of, esteem* and *work* seem to imply a sense of being set apart. That distance is then unraveled by the intimacy of words like *brothers and sisters, among you* and *in love*.

I know that I have friends in my church. I am also aware that there are limits to those friendships, ways in which we are set apart from one another. The major focus of my life, my ministry, is a topic that is, for the most part, off limits. I must find other friends with whom to vent about the frustrations of work, from staff conflicts to the occasional vocational vacuums.

So for that reason, I have learned the value of friendships with other ministers: collegial friendships. Two months into my first ministry, at a lobotomizingly dull denominational gathering for new clergy, I caught the rolling eyes of two other women about my age. Since that day, every month we have met for lunch for the past eight years.

Together we have been through two ordinations, three births, two job changes, one wedding and a coming-out story. We have prayed for one another in hospitals and gone shopping together for interview suits. We disagree politically and theologically. We have radically different understandings of our calls. Yet nothing could have prepared me eight years and 96 lunches ago for the way in which God has used our friendship for both holy encouragement and prophetic correction.

When I served on my denomination's subcommittee dealing with pastoral misconduct, I scrawled on one thick folder the title "Bad Boys." That was too cynical. But as we heard case after case of sexual misconduct, a common theme came through: the cases involved men who tended to be lone rangers. They generally told stories of loneliness and isolation from their peers.

Later, when I learned that it wasn't just the boys who were straying and that the girls lapsed too, I realized that I had a covenantal group of women to hold me accountable. As we had been honest with one another, this had become a place where we had shined God's light on our own shadows.

I am haunted by the end of the letter of James, where he tells Christians of their need for one another. "My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another . . ." Ministers without collegial friendships have no one to bring them back.

I'm struck by how often the epistles begin with words about friendship. The early church must have valued it greatly, with all those loving blessings and holy kisses between brothers and sisters of the faith. Sometimes it seems to be lifted up as a practice of the faith, even a discipline that Christians are obligated to enter for their own mutual formation.

Yet at the beginning of Paul's letter to Titus, a friendship is described differently: "To Titus my loyal child in the faith we share, grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our savior" (1:4). The letter goes on to encourage Titus to seek out elders in every town. And so we are reminded that not every friendship is between peers in age or cohort group. We cross boundaries in our friendships, and so we grow in the faith.

Some collegial friendships are teaching friendships. In a male-dominated field, my mentors tend to be men. There have been times when I have found myself invited into a room of men whose experience of the ministry and the world is radically different from mine. Sometimes I sit like a country cousin in the old-boys club, waiting for the subtitles to appear or the translator to arrive.

But more common are their quick responses to my urgent telephone calls, patiently nurturing me through some crisis in the ministry. It seems there is no crisis that one of them has not seen. These friendships between older men and younger women in the ministry are breaking new ground. Together we have struggled across the differences in age and gender to find a way to make disciples of one another. But the crossing of boundaries for the sake of Christian friendship is nothing new. Like Titus, I need my elders in every town.

I have examined the boundaries within lay and clergy friendships and found that perhaps my vision of friendship was too limited. I know that I should not gripe to church friends about a member of the church staff, for instance. But I have come to realize that withholding such information does not necessarily create distance. In a secular world that defines people too much in terms of their work, perhaps there is something helpfully countercultural about having friendships in which work, and workplace gossip, cannot be the center.

When my mother died, a quartet of church members flew down from New Haven to sing at her funeral in Washington, D.C. When our senior deacon spoke at her service, he explained that he represented the church. It occurs to me that that is what we do

in all Christian friendship; we transcend the needs of the individual to point to something larger than ourselves. I had my little rules about not discussing work with my members, but here they were proclaiming the gospel in song at the saddest moment of my life. What greater intimacy could there be?

After the funeral, I looked around my mother's house, full of people gathered for the reception. A table full of canapés had replaced the hospital bed in the living room, where she had died just days before. The smell of my stepfather's Greek food had mixed with the sick scent of a weeklong coma. My ability to make small talk was wearing thin.

At that point, I needed my collegial friendships—not the neighbors or even the family, but the Christian ministers who had accompanied me in the walk of loss along the way, who understood what it meant to visit the sick of your church while your mother was dying somewhere else. I thought of Paul's greeting in Philemon 1:2 to Achippus, whom he describes as a "fellow soldier."

And there, showing up at my mother's home, was the minister from another Congregational church in New Haven, a church that in the language of the world should be my church's "competition." Upon hearing the news of my mother's death, Shep had quietly booked a flight down to Washington and simply appeared at the service.

Shep had been many things to me over the past ten years, first my pastor, then my mentor and then a colleague down the street. I'm not sure what role he was playing in my life at that moment after the funeral—perhaps all of them at once. Simply seeing him standing among the mourners, amidst the small talk, gave me the witness that I had a life waiting for me at home. This death would not be the last word.

The members of my church who had come to sing at the service approached me to say goodbye. "We're heading back to the airport. We're not going to stay for the reception," they said. "If we do, you will worry about us. You'll feel like you have to introduce us to all these people."

They were right, of course, that I would fuss over them. But how greatly they underestimated the power of their presence. I didn't know how to put it into words, but perhaps they saw it in my silence. They did not leave.

“OK, we’ll stay for the reception,” they said, “but only if you promise not to act like the minister. Because right now you should just be the grieving daughter.” Their understanding of those boundaries made me realize how permeable they could be.

“Please stay,” I said. “And I promise to ignore you.” It was the first time I had laughed all day.

I thought back to when I used to sit on the steps with my neighbor John. As I watched the church members mingle into the crowd, I realized that these church members and I had finally come to the point where we could simply be near one another and talk about nothing. We were friends.