

Visit Your People in their Places of Work!

by David W. Gill dgill@gcts.edu www.mockler.org www.davidwgill.org

For twenty years I have been urging pastors to visit at least one of the workplace members of their congregation per month *in their workplace environment*, whether that is an office downtown, a factory, a farm, a restaurant, or a day care center: wherever our people work, let's go visit them.

So often we meet our people on our turf rather than theirs. So often we meet people when (a) they (or we) are in crisis or (b) it's all about a church project or challenge. Maybe we will also visit their bedside if they are confined to a hospital. It's all good but there is something missing.

Most of our peoples' Christian discipleship is carried out in a workplace. Visiting our people there is *good for us as pastors* (and seminary professors too!); we can see up close and personal what our people are up against. We can capture some of their excitement and see better their challenges. Our preaching and teaching and pastoral care will be sharpened up and more relevant. This is an incredible, essential part of pastoral continuing education. I say "once a month" but I really think "once a week" is more like it. Believe me pastor: you will really enjoy this and it will not make your life crazier to start putting these weekly visits on your calendar.

For the workplace member of our congregation, this visit from you says "my pastor cares about me." "My pastor is interested in what I do during the week." "My work itself matters to my pastor and to our Lord." And when that workplace disciple comes to worship, the brief, knowing eye contact with the pastor, the more attentive hearing of the sermon, the brief work-related comment in the sermon, the buzz generated as you mention to other workplace folk that the pastor came over for lunch to your company . . . this is a transforming, revitalizing experience for you, for that worker, and for the whole congregation.

The point is *not* for the pastor to come to offer advice or counsel but to listen and observe --- asking about the church member's work experiences, challenges, and opportunities --- and offering them only encouragement and prayer.

The Nuts and Bolts of Workplace Visit Strategy

How to proceed? Pretty simple and commonsense: "Hey Joe/Jane: I would love to visit you where you work some time. Any chance I could do that? I don't want to get in the way but I'd just love to see where you spend your work week and have you show and tell me how you spend your time. I'd love to take you to coffee or lunch also if that works out." [Note: if the person works in a no-visitor, high security environment, suggest at least meeting nearby. Don't give up! The symbolism of getting close to his or her turf is powerful].

When you get there: (1) "Tell me how you spend your time here." (2) "How did you get into this kind of work and this company?" (3) "What do you like best about your job and your career?" (4) "Are there any ways I could pray for you especially or support you in your work here?" And finally, (5), "Could I just say a short prayer here before I go?" [don't embarrass him/her; only do this if you have a quiet, private

moment; thank God for him/her and ask God to bless and strengthen them}. NO SERMONS; you are there to learn and to ask them questions.

And if you are the workplace disciple, may I just urge you to take the initiative and invite your pastor to visit you in your workplace? You don't have to wait for the pastor to take the initiative. This isn't just about you --- it's good for them and the church. Don't hesitate.

My Personal Story of Proactive, Intentional Visiting

I have spent a lot of time in workplaces of all types, both as an employee and as a pastoral or academic or personal friend visitor so I know how interesting and valuable this will be. Many pastors (and academics) live in what amount to cloisters and ivory towers and really don't have much to go on besides the deceptive images and stereotypes of the media. So that's part of what motivates me on this.

And from 1990-92 I had an experience while Interim Senior Pastor at University Covenant Church in Davis CA that plays into this also. My home and library were an hour away from the church and there was no internet in the early Nineties so my days in Davis could have been filled with a lot of reading and quiet study alone. But I asked the Pastor's Secretary to fill up my calendar from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Tuesday and Wednesday with meetings with church members. Of course we started with the weekly staff meeting and the essential visits to the hospitalized, the shut-ins, and urgent care folk. But that still left lots of hours and I asked my assistant to call up systematically the old retired men and tell them "Pastor Gill would like to meet you for coffee or lunch." Old retired couples: same thing. Swing shift and night workers: afternoon coffee or workout together at LA Fitness (for the younger guys – you can't believe how this won over these guys, otherwise marginally connected). Then, "Could you call up the families with kids at home and say 'Pastor Gill will be in town and wondered if you would like to have him over for supper.'" I know it sounds bold and a bit forward but within weeks there was a long list of families wanting to have me over. Then for 8 p.m. to the university young couples and other students: "Pastor Gill would love to meet you for coffee before he goes home to Berkeley tonight." My assistant made the appointments and gave me maps and directions where to go.

My agenda was always the same: "Tell me about you. How long have you been in the community? The church? Where do you go to school? Your favorite subject? Etc." One of my personal favorite strategies was to ask the Sunday "golf widows" to say to their husbands "Pastor Gill loves golf and wondered if you'd be interested in having him join you for a round." Many great golf experiences followed and not a few of these husbands started attending church. The church was a-buzz all the time. The kids even paid attention and felt they knew me. And I certainly felt like I was better able to preach to the whole person and the whole congregation.

So after two years of this, as I was saying farewell to the church and moving to Chicago for my next academic job, I said to many of my friends and colleagues (a) every new pastor I would urge to do this their first couple years, and (b) if I was to stay on in this church I would do the same thing but now meeting folk at their places of work.

Richard Halverson's Awakening

Larry Peabody's blog *Called Into Work* (<http://calledintowork.com/articles/article.asp?articleID=110>) recently recalled Richard C. Halverson, who pastored churches in Hollywood CA and Washington DC and who served 13 years as US Senate Chaplain. In his book *How I Changed My Thinking about the*

Church, Halverson mentions how he began what he calls a ministry of listening. "I devoted several days a week simply to moving from office to office, shop to shop, and out on the oil leases and large farms which surround the city—just being visible and available. Men became used to my presence where they were putting in their daily work and I was soon able to visit with them on their jobs."

Peabody comments that "Halverson's change of thinking about the church resulted in several insights we need perhaps even more today than when he wrote them." Here are some samples:

- "I began to realize there is a real distinction between church work and the work of the church."
- "The real work of the church is what is done between Sundays when the church is scattered all over the metropolitan area where it is located—in homes, and schools, and offices, on construction jobs, and marketplaces."
- "...many Christians have become so busy in church work they have not had time to do the work of the church."
- "In the minds of many there is absolutely no connection between what occurs in the church on Sunday and what goes on in the community the rest of the week."
- "Most of the week the church is not at the address where she worships; she is scattered all over the community, in hundreds of homes, schools, offices and markets, etc."
- "All the programs within the church are for the purpose of enabling the church to do the work of the ministry between Sundays when she is invisible as a congregation."