

The Ministry of Presence: The Importance of Building Capacity among the Laity



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Introduction

African sayings, stories, recalling to memory conversation of the elders in my family, are among my sources for self-education to aid in understanding what is important, as well as the expectations of my fellow African Christians as I use them as a source for the communication of the Gospel. Coupled with this are the informative thoughts that come from my participation in young people's meetings as well as visits I have received from them.

One important aspect for the community that I have learned from these informal sources is the value of a leader's physical presence in African context. Actually, my professor of pastoral care and counseling stressed this fact on several occasions. Again, I remember, as a youngster, several times overhearing my elders in their conversations criticizing some of my uncles for not visiting them, though they often sent gifts and material support. For them it would have been better for my uncles to visit with nothing in their hands. Of course, this does not mean that they did not want the gifts; they did, but what they were saying is that their nephews were more important for them. This thought carries over into the communities where Africans live.

There seems to be an unwritten norm in African communities that says members should physically attend community events, both happy and unhappy ones, and failure to comply with this unwritten law finds unwritten sanctions. This reminds me of a story often told in our circles of a family in a community that, due to the demand of their businesses, could not participate in the events of the community, but they always sent gifts to support the bereaved families or to support marriages, as is expected of community members. The time came when the only son of the family got married to a girl from another village. As it was a norm in that community, all members contributed generously for the wedding in food, etc., in such a way that there was more than enough for the occasion. But on the wedding day nobody from the community came; therefore, the live singing and dancing that is common in the village weddings did not happen, and this family learned in a hard way to participate physically in community events.

It has been clear to me since I was young that our communities value more the physical warmth than material gifts, though these are needed.

In the few years I have been in ministry in my country, I have concluded that this is true with the church too. Our members value the physical presence of other Christians; they participate in numbers especially when the event is a sad one. And more so when the pastor is present in the

church on Sundays, but also his/her presence in their homes makes a difference.

A Successful Ministry of Presence

I lived in a certain UMC congregation of three hundred-plus members that began growing from the moment the new pastor started home visits. This was a process whereby he visited each home of those members both active and inactive, and prayed and chatted with them. In one of the homes, where only the wife and children were members of the church, but not the father, he joined the church after the pastor's visit. The congregants saw the pastor as someone who was concerned not only with their spiritual well-being, but also with other aspects of their lives as a whole; because the pastor would meet the extended family of the visited member, the pastor would know their concerns and visit with them and pray for them. The response was positive; those that were weary stood and began participating again; some came with their neighbors who felt that this was a caring church.

As an African saying goes, "You don't know someone until you have stepped in her or his home."¹ The "know" referred to here is deeper than a simple knowing of somebody; it carries with it the sense of being a family, of caring for the person you are visiting. From the pastor's visits the members felt cared for; they saw Christ's representative in their homes; they felt like members of the Church family. The number of the congregation's membership grew.

I was sure this was one of the best strategies a pastor could use for the congregations to grow.

"Shepherding the Shepherds":² A Strategy for Fast-Growing Churches

Soon I realized a new strategy needed to be put in place to give life to these and other classes. I decided to move from being a shepherd by myself to training laypeople as shepherds.

In 2004 I was appointed pastor of Matola UMC, a nine-hundred-plus-member congregation, and with the previous experience that seemed to give good results, home visits were a top priority within my plan, first because I needed to know the members, and second because it proved good for the numerical growth of the church.

In my first year I led a small group of three to four church elders in visiting homes of two classes from two different local churches (Changalane had five homes with more or less twenty-five people; and Jonasse, seven homes). The visits were done mostly on Sundays after church service. One of the homes we visited was that of a widow; she had called her neighbors to receive her pastor, and she said in the words of welcome, "Thank you, Pastor, for entering my house. I see God in my house. I have been in this church for years, and no pastor has ever visited me."

These were classes that were more than thirty kilometers (almost nineteen miles) from the main sanctuary, and members were expected to come to Sunday service mostly using public transportation, which was not always available. The classes were there for years but did not

grow, though there were many homes in the areas where these were located.

After my first visits they began growing at a very slow pace; the number I had targeted for that year was not attained. We got less than a half.

Soon I realized a new strategy needed to be put in place to give life to these and other classes. I decided to move from being a shepherd by myself to training laypeople as shepherds. I could shepherd them as they learned to take God's love to the members. It became clear that the ministry of presence can only be effective when it involves more than the pastor. Tom Rath, in his book *Strengths Based Leadership*, quotes Warren Buffet as saying, "A leader is someone who can get things done through others." The effectiveness of the ministry of presence was made possible first by letting the church be where the people are and by sending shepherds to give spiritual nourishment, as Christ did in "going around teaching and healing." I chose one person from the elders of the church with some experience to be directly responsible for conducting services in each of the classes, visiting homes, organizing Bible studies, etc. I went mostly for Holy Communion and baptismal services. There were a number of lay preachers whom we scheduled to support the one assigned permanently there.

The plan worked well, In Changalane the number rose to fifty members in less than a year.

I used the same strategy for Jonasse, and it also worked: the church grew in numbers. In mid-2008 Changalane had more than one hundred members and had a sanctuary built of local materials, and were making bricks for the building of a permanent sanctuary. The other class, Jonasse, also had grown, and under the leadership of the new pastor, this class rose to the status of local church. The Spirit of the Lord transformed these congregations from stagnant congregations to evangelism-oriented congregations led by these men and women of God.

This experience requires from the pastor the building of capacity of new shepherds; it requires from him/her constant planning together with them for understanding and following the steps taken toward the development of these congregations. It also requires continuous encouragement and support in dealing with some of the challenges that these leaders face, so they do not feel abandoned. Again, people should see the Spirit of Christ in their leaders so as to respond to Christ's ministry accordingly.

Advantages of Shepherding Shepherds

Empowering the laity is key for the church in Africa looking to the number of people in our churches and those that are now coming to the Lord. The few pastors we have cannot feed well the number of sheep; hence the need for reproducing other shepherds to be partners in ministry. Especially for us who believe in the "priesthood of all believers." The lay preachers feel useful in their ministry as they minister to these congregations. They have good initiatives that motivated the church members, lifting their spirits high.

Shepherding shepherds allows a permanent contact with the members, though not always physically.

Taking the Gospel Where the People Are

Taking the gospel where people are brings growth to the congregations. It is one way of having the leadership present near the church members.

The congregation becomes a fulcrum from where it grows; the presence of Christ is felt in the community. The Great Commission is fulfilled.

Scripture says that Christ went round doing good to the villages and synagogues; He went to the people, and these gathered around Him. They saw in Him hope, as they were hopeless in their sins, diseases, and hunger, among other things. This is still true, even today. When we visited Mr. Ngale, who was eighty years old, in his house, he was very sick, such that he couldn't walk. We prayed with him, read the Scriptures; we stayed for few minutes just conversing with him. When we were leaving, he asked to be helped to stand. He said he had been healed, and he accompanied us to the car, something he couldn't do for weeks.

As those sent by Christ, it is our duty to take Him where people are, and they will gather around Him as they did when He was walking on earth. The communities in Africa need the presence of Christ more than ever; they need hope that only Christ can provide. They need Him and Him alone, who can transform them using the shepherds as his hands and feet.

The pastor's presence makes things new in the hearts of congregations, and communities in general. Christ makes a difference to all. Whether they are in joy or sad, they need words of hope from their shepherd.

¹ Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, *Strengths Based Leadership* (New York: Gallup Inc., 2008), 79.

² Teresa Flint-Borden, *Women Married to Men in Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

www.gbhem.org (then go to networking, clergywomen, wellsprings 2011)