



Written by
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Undertaking a pastoral visit for a person in their own home

- Prepare for your visit
- Know your boundaries
- Remember you are a guest
- Build relationship
- Bring a 'ministry of presence'
- Keep a record of your visit

Background

Many older people have reduced mobility or healthcare needs that result in them becoming housebound, making home visits essential. Some individuals may be known to you or your church family, but you may also have referrals from other agencies, or hear about someone who has moved to the area. Pastoral needs vary but everyone has spiritual needs – to be valued, loved and have their story heard. Many wish to continue to practice their Christian faith through prayer, Bible reading and sharing Holy Communion.

1 Prepare for your visit

Consider if you need training in pastoral care, dementia, confidentiality or safeguarding. For one-to-one visiting you will need a DBS check. You might find a prayer partner who can pray for you and those you visit.

Contact the person for a general chat before fixing to visit at a mutually convenient time. Agree how long it is appropriate to stay so you both know what to expect. If possible, arrange for a relative or carer to be present on the first visit; identify anything that might be challenging, such as unusual behaviour arising from dementia. Arrive on time and don't overstay your welcome. Wear a badge with your name on and the name of your church or organisation, in large, clear lettering.

2 Know your boundaries

Before your first visit, talk with your supervisor or line manager and be clear where the boundaries lie. Your primary role is to listen and be present, something for which others in caring roles lack time. You may be the only person offering spiritual care. You may spot unmet needs; be aware of local organisations supporting housebound older people in your area and signpost what they offer, enabling links to be made. Agree how often you will visit, and the period over which you will be visiting; ending visits can be hard when the person enjoys your company, especially if they are unprepared.

3 Remember you are a guest

Remember your status as a guest, there by invitation; this makes the relationship more equal, rather than you 'doing' something for the person. Leave prejudices at the door; we all have them so be aware of yours. Ask the person where they would like you to sit. If they offer you a drink or a cake, do accept this hospitality. You can assist but try not to 'disable' the person, instead letting them serve you with their kindness.

4 Build relationship

Your visit is about building a relationship and you need to focus on the person. Show you are listening by nodding and making appropriate comments. Try to pick up on what's being said and sometimes on what is not being said. It can be good to share something of yourself, but you are there mostly to listen. You don't have to fill gaps in conversation; find ways of making the silence comfortable.

When you focus on the person, you communicate that you value their company and that their story is precious. As trust develops, they may discuss difficult feelings about the meaning of life, death and what happens after death, and who will remember their life. These deeply spiritual questions require thoughtful responses; if you haven't considered your own mortality, you may not easily convey the basis of your Christian hope. Feeling part of the church family and community may be important, so take news of people that are known and leave a copy of the church pew sheet or local magazine.

5 Bring a 'ministry of presence'

Pray beforehand for God's blessing. Remember, being present and giving attention is key, whether praying silently or holding the person's hand; being together in God's presence is what matters. Be open to God's prompting and when appropriate offer prayer or share scripture. If you know the person well, suggest reading something spiritual or singing a hymn. They might enjoy looking at a newspaper or working on a jigsaw with you.

6 Keep a record of your visit

A note in your diary of key points of your visit and anything to follow up next time is sufficient as a record. You could also leave a written note with the person after visits if they have dementia and may forget details. If needed, you can report general things that occur to you about your visit to your supervisor but be mindful of confidentiality and storing personal details safely; remember you are duty bound to report safeguarding concerns.

Further resources:

Growing a Caring Church: Practical guidelines for pastoral care by Wendy Billington (BRF, 2010).

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