

Crossing-the-Street Covenants

W. R. (Buzz) Stevens

After serving six years as a campus minister I realized assignments beyond-the-local-church can cause one to feel like a second-class colleague at times. It may have something to do with not generating apportionments that subsidize one's own salary. Maybe it was just me, but after my special appointment stint I needed to check out how I would fair with local church pastor types. So, within a month into my new appointment as a church pastor, I contacted two nearby senior ministers and asked them if they would like to join me for lunch. We met one-on-one on separate occasions.

Naturally I figured they would be inviting me to a luncheon meeting in due time. During my six-year stay no invitations came from my colleagues, and I took it personally, "Know what I mean, preachers?" Twenty years later I received some third-class mail pertaining to continuing education events from one of those pastors. A handwritten note on the bottom of one of the pages caught my attention. It stated simply "Buzz, you'll never know what our lunch meeting meant to me when you first came to town a couple of decades ago. It was a true gift!" He was right; I never knew, but I was certain it was a gift to me at the time.

With one pastor we confessed with a little fear and trembling toward the end of our meeting that we were still not sure our doctrine on Christology was all that solid, and we felt fortunate we had gotten by the Board of Ordained Ministry. The other preacher confessed he was having struggles with personal relationships. We may have decided beforehand it was a hit-and-run encounter and we had stuff with which to deal that only another clergy person could comprehend. And maybe our loved ones might welcome others to listen to our woes for a change. We may want to go for one-time luncheons and learn to cherish the memories.

I've gotten rather pushy with preachers, whether they are active or pensioned, by asking point blank if they ever ask colleagues to lunch or coffee times. One preacher confessed "There is no clergy person in our conference with whom I would particularly care to have lunch." I thought he was kidding! He claimed he was serious, but admitted later, "If a colleague were to turn me down, I would not handle that too well, so why bother?"

It seems we ministers are fragile characters when it comes to making friends within our ranks. I was fortunate to have two of

*The covenant
mostly has to
do with
making the
first move.*



my clergy mentors as luncheon partners during the first decade of my ministry. I met with them individually every two or three months. It dawned on me one day that neither of them initiated invitations to meet; I always asked them to lunch. So, I decided to wait until one of those pastors contacted me first. Okay, it was silly, but that's the way I felt, real childish. We touched base rather briefly at conference events over the next seven or so years, but an invite never came. One afternoon I received a call from the wife of one of them. She informed me that he had died suddenly that day. She said, "You know, you were his best minister friend. He would want me to give you his robes and books, and, of course, he would have wanted you to preside over his memorial service." I decided to never play the "who calls first?" invitation game again with my colleagues.

I've always wondered about what the clergy covenant really entails. Webster's dictionary defines "covenant" as a "binding or solemn agreement made by two or more individuals to do or keep from doing a specified thing; a compact." Which can translate, "Let's get close" or "Stay out of my hair." I think it just may mean, in part anyway, initiating and receiving invitations, but the covenant mostly has to do with making the first move.

Take the risk, parsons, and heed the warning by Virginia Woolf who confessed, "I have lost friends, some by death—others through sheer inability to cross the street." □



Buzz Stevens is a retired elder in the Desert Southwest Conference.