

Hospital Etiquette for Pastors

By Steve Durkac

If you are a church pastor or a church lay person who has taken up the assignment of visiting church members during their hospital stay, this post is for you. I want to address seven points of etiquette and guiding principles when it comes to visiting a parishioner in the hospital.

Unless you work in a hospital, the dynamics and the vibe can seem intimidating, confusing, and easier to avoid than to press on to minister to a parishioner that is a patient there. So here are some points that I wish to share to help you successfully minister to your parishioner.

1. Understand the hospital environment. Please know that there are several differing caregivers operating in a hospital. There are physicians, nurses, and different types of medical techs who help patients with respiratory, x-rays, pharmacy, social services, transportation, and nursing assistants. Know that these caregivers are under a great deal of stress and you will likely wonder why they seem to be buzzing around you as you make your way to the patient's room.
2. Identify yourself at the nearest nurse station. You'll recognize a desk with a few nurses working at computers and it is a good proactive step to let them know who you are and what room you are hoping to get to. The nurses will let you know if there is anything you may need to be aware of, like disease precautions. When you identify yourself as the patient's pastor or church pastoral care representative, the nurses will be more than happy to support your visit, even if it is outside of official visiting hours. If you have some type of identification or credential from the church, please show it or have it ready to show.
3. Some don't do's. I wish I didn't have to mention this but if you are a minister or an assigned visitation church member, please don't be intrusive, rude, or demanding. Your role may garner a great deal of respect among your church fellowship, but don't expect the same from stressed hospital caregivers. Also, do not ask the nurse for a report on the patient's medical condition. You may ask if they are awake and aware enough for you to visit and have a conversation. However, due to HIPAA privacy laws the medical staff cannot provide any information to you unless the patient has specifically designated you to receive that through their expressed permission in the hospital paperwork.
4. Practice good hygiene and follow rules. I don't want to scare you or encourage you to become a germophobe, but wash your hands or use a germicide foam pump before entering and after exiting the patient's room. For your own safety, follow the rules if a mask or other protective apparel is required before entering a patient's room. If the patient is in isolation and you would prefer not to enter, you can always ask the nurse if family is present and if they can be asked to meet you in the hall. You can always ask the nurse if there is a phone in the room and if the patient would be able to speak by phone.

5. Brief visits are generally best. Typically, a patient needs rest and it is often hard for them to rest when they are regularly awakened for tests and procedures. 20-minutes is a good stretch of time when a patient is medicated and self-conscious about their hospital stay appearance while in front of their pastor or fellow church member. Having prayer with the patient and/or family is always a good way to wrap-up and conclude a hospital visit. If there is no family present and the patient is out of the room or in a deep sleep, just leave your business card and a Sorry I missed you message on the back.
6. Regarding prayer in the visit. Offering to pray with the patient and/or family is always good and appropriate for an active church member. If you are not sure about the patient's reception of prayer (maybe it's an unfamiliar church member's family) you can always say, "Well, I will keep you in prayer" than pause and add, "Or I am happy to pray with you now if you'd like. Whatever you prefer." If the patient says, "You can just keep me in prayer" than you know that they are uncomfortable with that and you can say goodbye and leave. If they say, "You can pray" then you pray with them.
7. Regarding Scripture in the visit. Reading a Scripture verse or passage is good and acceptable for an active church member if you'd like. As I have pointed out in a post at my website titled **Scripture for Hospital Visitation**, you can also include a verse of Scripture in your final prayer. The guiding principle for sharing Scripture is to choose an appropriate passage or verse and avoid turning it into a Bible study. You want the verse to speak for itself. You want your choice of Scripture to be God's Bread of Life and Living Water to the patient and family. Think of your task in terms of a restaurant operation, you are not the manager, you are not the cook, but you are the server, so put the Bread and the Water on the table and be on your way.