

## No Visitors Allowed

A late phone call last night alerted me to the fact that a longtime friend and colleague had gone to the hospital ER with heart concerns. In a normal time in a normal world I would have instantly climbed into my RAV4 and buzzed over to that hospital both to check on his condition and to offer what pastoral support I could to his family. But not last night. I knew that current virus restrictions don't allow even one visitor in the ER treatment areas. So I sat at home and felt anxious and uninformed and useless.

All that day my pastoral instincts had felt quashed by similar visitation limits in our hospice units. From the very first days of hospice care in our town, I have hurried to the bedside of dying parishioners. Being with them and their loved ones in those final hours has always seemed to be one of the most important roles I can fill as their pastor. But yesterday a longtime member of my flock lay dying in a hospice bed, and I knew that if I showed up there, I would simply displace the one family member allowed to stay beside her. So I sat at home, frustrated.

My comments thus far are not criticisms of the hospitals or hospices involved. Their rules for visitors right now are valid. They make sense in a world where our sickest people need to be isolated and shielded from all possible virus exposures. But the same guidelines that protect our most vulnerable patients from contamination also cut them off from most of our traditional sources of encouragement and support.

If you're a mother, for instance, and your son or daughter lies critically ill in a hospital, how do you feel, for instance, if you can't even hold your child's hand because the single visitor allowed in their ICU room must be their spouse? OR what if you are a spouse, and when your husband or wife gets gravely injured in a car wreck, virus-visitor rules prevent you from even seeing your wounded loved ones, much less kissing or hugging them and letting them know you are "there" for them?

Our hospital staffs are even more troubled by these new rules than the rest of us. Why? Because all of us are suddenly being reminded of just how precious and powerful the presence of family and friends can be when we're hurting the most.

While we can't visit our ailing family members and friends right now, this may be a good time for us to remember the biblical instruction for us to pray for our fellow-believers who are caught in health crisis. We can't be there beside them in person, but the scriptures assure us in James 5 that "the earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results."