

Don't Just Shake My Hand – Hold it!  
by Mike Ruhl

*This article is from the September 2004 New Harvest newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions. Permission is given to copy this article for distribution within your own congregation. Please credit the author and the Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, California, [www.centerforusmissions.org](http://www.centerforusmissions.org). For more information, contact the Center at 949-854-8002 x1780.*

I was touched deeply by an article in the Winter 2004 issue of *Leadership Journal*. Pastor Craig Barnes wrote about his “ascendancy” from serving as a parish pastor to his new role of professor of leadership and ministry at a seminary in Pittsburgh. As guest pastor, Craig had just finished preaching a stirring sermon in one of the many constituent congregations which pray for and support the seminary.

After the worship service, Craig was greeting the saints of the congregation as they exited the sanctuary. The host pastor was present for the entire service and now stood inconspicuously in one corner of the church entry. And it was just then that Craig thought to himself: “All these polite people are coming up to me to say something nice about the sermon. But all the people who love and need their pastor are lined up in front of ‘the other guy.’ Some just want to hold his hand for a few seconds.” And it was at that moment that the reality thundered home to Craig: “I am *not* their pastor.”

When the previous week had been spent visiting the sick child in the hospital, wrestling with a distractible confirmation class, burying the dead husband, praying with the single mother who had just lost her job, unpacking the doctrine of the Real Presence in Holy Communion to an adult inquirers class, begging the Lord for a clearer vision of mission and writing a sermon from his heart that was already filled to the brim with all of this pathos ... well, it was no wonder at all that people line up after worship *just to hold his hand!* Because it wasn't really his hand that they were holding. **It's grace that they are reaching for.** And only a parish pastor knows that.

Some who read these words are former parish pastors, now serving parish pastors as Mission Executives, Evangelism Executives, Education and Stewardship Executives, Mission and Ministry Facilitators, District Presidents and various synodical officials. And surely these are significant and strategic ministries in the Church of Jesus Christ!

And what crucial importance is embedded in that blessed ministry of encouraging, bolstering, affirming and resourcing the pastors of the congregations being served.

So do be encouraged, then, to care for those pastors. Encourage those pastors. Pray with those pastors. Bolster those pastors and congregations. Because, in case you have not noticed, *that is precisely where the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ unfolds--in the local congregation.* And healthy churches are led by healthy pastors, surrounded by healthy people and staff, all living out healthy spiritual and missional relationships.

And so after the guest preaching, the special training and facilitated planning, remember that while many people in the congregation may shake your hand ... it is *the pastor's hand that people want to hold.* And be assured that it is *grace* that those people are reaching for. ■