

CONGREGATIONS

Thomas Rusert: Why I offer “free prayer” in a coffee shop



Photo courtesy of Thomas Rusert

A pastor’s first job is to “take care of our people,” writes a Lutheran pastor. Sometimes, he has learned, “our people” are those we have never met.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2016

I drink coffee only on Thursdays. This is partly because I am a weirdly patterned person. It’s also because I feel insecure ordering my preferred tea at a coffee shop; it’s like ordering a salad at a steakhouse. But the main reason I drink coffee on Thursdays is because that’s the day I take a little sign that says “Free Prayer” and sit at a local coffee shop for a few hours.

I like to think I have great ideas, but good advice gets all the credit for my work as a first-call parish pastor. One mentor and professor, for example, shared this: "As pastors, the first thing we have to do is take care of our people." With that in mind, I focused my first year of ministry on spending time at people's homes, setting up several visits a week to meet their dogs, applaud their children's artwork and pray with them around their dinner tables.

A second bit of advice came from a clergyman who offered this: "A pastor is doing the job well when at least half of his or her time is spent outside the office."

Pastors regularly go out on hospital visits or stop by the homes of newcomers, but the administrative demands of parish ministry otherwise keep many of us shackled to our swivel chairs. For me, come Thursday mornings, after too much time within my office walls, I become cantankerous. So for everyone's sake, I heed that good advice and break out of my sacred confines, fleeing to a local coffee shop for reading and sermon writing.

When I first started doing this last summer, I felt insecure and self-indulgent -- an incognito clergyman in shirt and tie munching an "everything" bagel with cream cheese and calling it work. I had to legitimize pastoring in Panera.

That's when I began wearing my clergy collar each Thursday and setting up at any one of my church's dozen or so "satellite campuses" (i.e., the coffee shops where I typically run into several parishioners I've missed the previous Sunday morning). I bring with me a sign that says "Free Prayer," with a quote at the bottom from Martin Luther: "Pray, and let God worry."

And people stop to pray with me every time.

One brisk October morning, a man I had not met walked through the ever-swinging door of the local Starbucks. Amari, from West Philadelphia, had business at the courthouse in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, the town where I serve.

He looked at me and asked, "Free prayer"? What's that?" I explained that I'm a pastor in town who goes out to where people are during the week to offer prayer. Tears welled up in his eyes. He placed his coffee and courthouse papers on my table and walked outside.

Sometimes, *our people* are the ones we have never met.

I packed my things and Amari's and went outside to invite him to go for a walk. As we strolled together over the next hour, I heard all the unuttered prayers and pains he had held inside for two years. His wife had experienced an identity crisis and left him. A dear friend had died from a blood clot. An aunt had died from medical malpractice. Another friend had died from an overdose. Finally, death had taken his sister. Death had hollowed out Amari's spirit, and he had spoken about it to no one. "Then I read those words, 'Free Prayer,'" he said, "and I couldn't keep it in anymore." It seemed that God had enacted a little apocalypse, an awakening, in Amari's soul. And all I'd had to do at first was sit there.

Though I offer prayers for others, the blessings have also come to me. I recall when a man sat down and requested prayer for a friend undergoing heart surgery. I asked whether he'd like to start the prayer. He began, "Dear God, I thank you for Thomas. Thank you for giving him the courage to offer prayer in this place. And Lord, may Thomas know that you are well-pleased with what he is doing."

Heaven embraced me with that prayer. I was second-guessing my ability to reverse trends, to draw more people to worship, to inspire more generosity. Then a stranger prayed for me, and I felt, at least in that moment, that I was doing something right.

The bulk of my ministry is still among people within my congregation, but I am grateful for those free prayers at coffee shops each week. I think of the schizophrenic woman who stopped and asked for prayer because she sees witches.

We prayed for courage and strength and protection. An owner of a Dunkin' Donuts asked me to pray for her shop. Upon seeing my "Free Prayer" Facebook post, an old acquaintance asked for prayer for his nephew born three months early. A manager of a Starbucks sat down at my table to share what God had been up to in her life.

God has been up to a lot in my life through this Free Prayer ministry. While it has done admittedly little to expand the ranks of my congregation, it has done much to expand my vocation to include the ranks upon ranks of God's people I have never met who are searching for answers, waiting for comfort and willing to pray.

An Amari walks into a coffee shop every day in your town. I guarantee it. It may be a man or a woman, young or old, but an Amari is there. And he or she could really use some prayer. I set up my little sign to invite people to "pray, and let God worry" right where they are -- because the Amaris need prayer and aren't about to walk into my office down the hill at church.

Sometimes, we have to move beyond the shadows of a steeple to take care of our people. And in so doing, we may just find that God takes care of us, too.