

## Outline

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## The Home Visit

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## THE HOME VISIT

### Introduction

Each season the elders and deacons visit the members and families in the congregation. This is part of their task to care for the flock of the Lord. A good shepherd seeks out the sheep and does not wait for the sheep to come to him. Certainly the Good Shepherd did this. He came and sought His sheep. His servants must do likewise. This is not to say that these visits are always easy. At times overseers can have apprehensions about a visit or come away with a disappointed feeling. However, other times the overseer comes away from the visit strengthened by the words of the members. The same can be said about the members and families in the congregation. Some families enjoy the visits and look forward to them, while others find it difficult to open up or had a negative experience in the past. Yet, year after year the visits continue, because it is the Great Shepherd Himself who mandates His servants to watch over the flock which He bought with His blood. Since He mandates us, we must do our utmost to make sure that these visits are conducted in a manner that serves Him and benefits the congregation. In this chapter we will first deal with the visit by the elders and then the diaconal visits.

### 1. Scripture

The Scriptural basis for the home visit is connected to the teachings of the Bible concerning the congregation and the offices. God's Word teaches us that the congregation belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ. He bought her with His blood. The church is holy, that is, is set apart from this world by the Lord to serve Him.

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| 1 Peter 1:1-2 | Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance. |
| 1Peter 2:9-10 | But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.   |

Though the church is holy, it is made up of people who are sinners and who daily struggle with sin. In addition, the congregation is confronted with the temptations and attacks of the evil one. This leads to a constant struggle to live as redeemed people of the Lord.

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| 1Peter 1:13-16 | Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." |
| 1Peter 2:11-12 | Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.   |

The offices are gifts of the Lord to His congregation by which He guides and keeps the congregation in the redemption He obtained. The Lord uses the office-bearers to help His Bride live as a holy nation in this world, so that He may present her without spot and wrinkle before His Father. The offices therefore are never a purpose in themselves but are given by the Lord to the church so that God's people may live in holiness and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. The home visits have to be understood in this context.

The Bible gives very clear instructions about the task of God's servants within His congregation. Already in the Old Testament the Lord appointed elders to watch over His people. We find a beautiful description in Ezek. 33:7-9

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the Word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die in his sin, but I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked to turn from his ways, and he does not do so; he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.

In chapter 34:10-11 the LORD speaks about those who do not do this properly:

This is what the Sovereign LORD says, I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

In the N.T. we read several instructions as well.

Acts 20:28-31	Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.
Hebrews 13:17	Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.
1 Peter 5:2	Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must but because you are willing as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;
Rev 3:2	Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

The purpose of their task is to build up the congregation.

2 Cor 10:8	For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.
Eph 4:11-13	It is he (=Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ
1 Thes 5:11	Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

The apostles gave the example:

Acts 11:23	When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.
Acts 14:22	strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." they said.
1 Thes 2:11-12	For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.
1 Thes 3:2	We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,
1 Thes 4:18	Therefore comfort each other with these words.
1 Thes 5:11	Therefore encourage each other and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.
1 Thes 5:14	And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.
2 Tim 4:2	Preach the word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction.

The home visit is one of the means which the Lord uses for this purpose. It is a means by which the rule of Christ over our lives grows and deepens. In the N.T. the verb "to visit" is used to describe the great work of redemption in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel.

Luke 1:68	"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people,
Acts 15:14	Simeon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

The office-bearers have to visit the families in the congregation. Visiting and overseeing the flock are connected. The Greek word to oversee (episkopos), is used in the Greek translation of the O.T. as a translation of the verb to visit. An overseer is one who visits. In visiting he helps, shows his care or even admonished. In the following texts the words that refer to visiting are underlined.

Exodus 3:16	"Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - appeared to me and said: <u>I have watched over you</u> and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt;
Exodus 4:31	And when they heard that the LORD <u>was concerned</u> about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

Ps. 8:4	what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that <u>you care</u> for him?
Jeremiah 27:22	'They will be taken to Babylon and there they will remain until the day <u>I come for them</u> ,' declares the LORD. 'Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.'
Jeremiah 29:10	This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will <u>come to you</u> and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.

Note that the word visiting in these texts includes knowing the situation with which God's people are confronted. Visiting can also mean coming to punish, admonish

Exodus 20:5	You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, <u>punishing</u> the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,
Exodus 32:34	Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me <u>to punish, I will punish</u> them for their sin."

The visit by the office-bearers is a mean by which the risen and exalted Lord shows His care for His flock and helps His sheep to live from the treasures of His grace. In the home visit we are confronted with the electing love of our Covenant God.

## 2. Confessions/Church Order/Form for Ordination

### 2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession does not explicitly mention the home visit. In article 30 we do confess the nature and purpose of the government the church. The home visit fits in this.

Article 30 - The Government Of The Church

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church. By these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need. By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.

### 2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

In Lord's Day 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism we confess the benefit of the glory of Christ, our Head. The proof text of Eph.4:7-12 shows that the office-bearers are part of the heavenly gifts which Christ pours out in order to defend and preserve the church against all enemies. Again, the home visit can be understood within this context.

Q/A 51 How does the glory of Christ, our Head, benefit us?

First, by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members.

Second, by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.

### 2.3. Church Order and Liturgical Forms

Both the Church Order and the Form for Ordination mention the task of the elders to visit the families in their homes.

Church Order:

Art. 22 The office of Elder

The specific duties of the office of elder are: together with the ministers of the Word, to have supervision over Christ's church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life according to the gospel; faithfully to visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God, reproving those who behave improperly.

Art. 27 False doctrine

To ward off false doctrine and errors which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct, the minister and elders shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning and of admonition, as well as the ministry of the Word as in Christian teaching and family visiting.

Form for Ordination:

In His unceasing care for His flock the Good Shepherd called apostles to be the foundation of His catholic church. The apostles in turn appointed elders in every Church with the cooperation of the congregation.

The office of elder is, therefore, one of authority given by Christ. Elders are to fulfil their duties by reminding God's people of His ordinances and by exercising discipline over the disobedient, by caring for the flock and defending the sheep against the dangers that threaten them.

#### Mandate of the Elders

As for their mandate, the task of the elders is, together with the ministers of the Word, to have supervision over Christ's Church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life, according to the gospel. For this purpose they shall faithfully visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God, reproving those who behave improperly.

With regard to the deacons, the Church Order and the Form for Ordination imply the need to visit. Both state that the deacons have to acquaint themselves with existing needs and exhort the members to show mercy. How can they do this unless they visit the members?

#### Church Order:

##### Art. 23

"duties of the deacon is to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy ... and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord."

#### Form for Ordination:

The task of the deacons is "to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the Church. They shall acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy."

### 3. Goal

The home visit is one of the means by which the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ, helps His people to live in their daily lives from the redemption which He has obtained by His blood. It is one of the means by which Christ gathers, defends and preserves His church by His Word and Spirit and in the unity of the true faith. Thus the goal of the home visit is that each member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life, according to the gospel. To put it differently, the goal of the home visit is that the members of the congregation may daily grow in true faith and fellowship with Christ. This in turn means that the home visit has as aim to

- increase the spiritual knowledge of the members in the congregation;
- strengthen the sanctification of life;
- help in mutual supervision;
- warn against heresies, and
- strengthen the bond between the members of the congregation.

### 4. History

The practice of visiting families in their homes is not new. In fact, its history can be traced back all the way to the Great Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. In this Reformation, the Lord brought His church back to the Word of God. This also led to a renewed understanding of the offices in the church. The Romanist distinction of the clergy versus laity was done away with and instead the spiritual character of the leadership in the church was stressed. The Church is to be ruled by God's Word and Spirit. Congregation and office-bearers must see their relationship in this light. Rome connects salvation to the priests and his actions, whereas the Reformed churches confess the Biblical teaching of salvation out of grace through faith in Christ. Christ comes to us in His Word and uses His servants for that purpose.

Two elements of this history are noteworthy. In the first place the home visit replaced the Romanist Sacrament of Penance. In this sacrament the members are expected to come to the priest who has the authority to give absolution. The Reformed churches decided that the office-bearers go to the members rather than the members having to go to the office-bearers, In the Sacrament of Penance absolution is given by the priest. The Reformed Churches realized that the home visit was not a means to give absolution. The preaching of the gospel opened and closed the Kingdom of Heaven. (see Heidelberg

Catechism, Lord's Day 31) The visit was seen as a means to encourage, comfort, instruct and admonish the members with the Word.

In the second place we learn from history that home visits were closely connected to Lord's Supper. Initially they were brought before each celebration, in order to teach the people the right doctrine concerning the sacraments and to prepare them for the celebration. It was part of the supervision connected to the table of the Lord. Over time this close connection with the Lord's Supper faded. Yet it can be very helpful to keep this connection in mind to understand the goal and purpose of home visits. Self-examination prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper deals with knowing our sin and misery, confessing our redemption and desiring to serve the Lord with our whole life. These three parts are indeed vital parts of a home visit.

The Reformed Churches have always regarded the home visit as an important part of the life of the congregation. In the Articles of Wezel of 1568, chapter IV we read of decisions and instructions agreed upon by the churches.

- 1) Now follows the order of the elders,
- 2) It is beyond all doubt that their office consists of the following:
  - They must, each over every one in his own parish (or ward) diligently be on guard and visit from home to home those (members) entrusted into their care at least once a week and further as often as it is the custom according to the rules of every church, especially when the celebration of the Lord's Supper draws near;
  - they must carefully inquire after the pureness of their walk of life and morals, after their faithful education of those who live in their homes, after the prayers which they pray for those who live in their homes in the morning and at night, and similar matters
  - \_\_\_\_\_ they must calmly, yet seriously, admonish and depending of the situation and their findings exhort them to steadfastness or strengthen them to patience or encourage them to the serious fear of God
  - everyone who needs either comfort or reproof, they shall comfort or reprove, and give the matter for discussion with those who with them are appointed over the brotherly admonitions, to determine together the admonition according to the offence.
  - they must also keep in mind to admonish all and everyone in their ward to send their children to catechism classes.

To give two more examples:

**Church Order of Middelburg (1581) Art. XVI**

The office of the elder is, ... when the celebration of the Lord's Supper comes closer, to visit those who will go to the Table, to prepare them the more.

**Church Oorder of s'Gravenhage (1586) Art. XXI**

The office of the elder is to make visits according to the customs of the time and the place, for the upbuilding of the congregation, . both before and after the Lord's Supper, to comfort the members of the congregation, to instruct and to admonish them to the Christian religion.

## 5. How?

The manner in which home visits are to be conducted is determined by the teachings of the Scriptures as outlined above. A good understanding of these teachings is foundational for conducting good home visits. The opposite is true too. Misconceptions with regard to these doctrines will have consequences as well. If, e.g., the church is seen as a human association then the visit can become a social event. Or, if the church is seen in terms of election, then the visit will tend to focus on the election of the person. If, however, in line with the Reformed confessions the church is seen covenantally as the gathering of true believers, then the visit will focus on the promises and obligations in the covenant.

The same can be said about the Scriptural teaching concerning the office. This teaching too determines how home visits are conducted. If, e.g., the office-bearers are seen as elected representatives who have to do the wishes of the voters, then the members can regard the visit as a opportunity tell the office-bearers how well they are doing. Or, if the office is viewed in a dictatorial manner, then the office-bearers may be inclined to use the visit to lord it over the congregation. From the Bible we learn, however, that Christ is the Head of the church. He rules us by His Word and Spirit. In this rule He makes use of the office-bearers. They have authority from Christ, and must be received as such. This authority is given to

serve the Body of Christ. Office-bearers do well to keep this in mind as they visit. In the home visits we meet the care of our Lord for His flock.

Then how should a good home visit be conducted? When is a visit a good visit? If office-bearers would be asked to tell some of their experiences with regard to bringing home visits one will hear a variety of answers. Some visits go very well, others go very difficultly. It can even be that one year a visit to a particular family goes well, but next year's visit is much more difficult. It can happen the other way around too. There are visits office-bearers may think will be difficult, but then it turns out to go much easier than expected. There are many visits where the office-bearers come away strengthened by the discussion. There are also visits that can leave a feeling of disappointment. This disappointment can be because of the members, their unwillingness to open up, or with the office-bearer himself, because of his own shortcomings, and the feeling of inadequacy.

If the members of the congregation would be asked for their reactions to the home visits, one will hear different reactions as well. One can hear positive answers, but also negative reactions. These negative reactions can be caused e.g. by the fact that the members felt misunderstood, or had difficulty with the manner in which the elders asked questions. It can be that members have a problem with one of the elders, or with the consistory. Some will even say that home visits are a waste of time, and will not open up to the office-bearers.

Yet, year after year the members and families are visited. This section will deal with the practical aspects of the visit. The following topics will receive attention:

1. the set up of the visit;
2. the contents;
3. the difficulties we can meet;
4. the way in which the reporting takes place, and
5. the preparations for home visits.

## **5.1. The set up**

### **5.1.1. Arranging**

Home visits need to be arranged. The elders and the family have to agree on a time to meet. This is not always easy due to busy schedules. In making the arrangement both the elders and the family have to realize the character of this visit. The family should be aware that this is an official visit by the ambassadors of Christ. Time may have to be made available to meet the elders. It may even be necessary to cancel other obligations in order to meet the elders. Once a meeting has been established it should not be cancelled lightly. At the same time the elders must be sensitive to the schedule of the family. They should be aware of other activities in the congregation. Elders cannot expect members to drop everything at a short notice in order to meet the elders. Elders will have to consider whether reasons preventing or cancelling a meeting are genuine and valid, or whether they reflect lack of respect for the visit by the elders.

In planning the visit the elders do well to keep in mind the situation of the family, for example, at what time the father comes home, how many children are going to school, or whether health reasons call for an early visit. To visit a families with growing up children may mean that no other visit can be arranged for that evening. After all, one evening per year for one family is certainly no luxury.

The consistory should make clear that the children of school age and up are expected to be present at the visit. Teenage children should be offered the possibility to meet separately with the elders. In case of young children, they can leave at some point during the visit, giving the elders the opportunity to meet with the parents separately. This separate visit allows the elders to speak about the married life of the parents and the way they bring up their children. When the children become older it becomes more difficult to

send children away during the visit and yet parents or elders can feel the need to meet and speak separately. This should be indicated ahead of time if at all possible. At the same time we should not be afraid to ask personal questions within the family circle, or ask questions about the diligence of the parents and the obedience of the children while all are present. After all this is a family visit.

The character of the visit also means that members of the family should not walk in and out of the meeting, or sit in a place where they are not part of the meeting. It is noteworthy that visits around the kitchen table (with Bibles open on the table) tend to be more open and productive than those in living rooms while sitting on couch and easy chair.

### **5.1.2. Opening**

The elders come in the name of the Lord Jesus. The elders and the family being visited must realize this. It is therefore important to start with prayer and Bible reading (and singing?). Some suggest to have Bible reading at the end. In this way the elders can read a passage that fits the visit. The disadvantage is that elders have to think constantly about a suitable passage while conducting the visit. This can hinder listening to the members of the family. Secondly, there is the danger that only some well known passages of Scripture will be read. It is impossible to have the whole Bible in one's head. The advantage of beginning with reading is that it puts the visit in the right perspective. If because of the discussion or circumstances in the family it becomes clear that the visit needs to be concluded with Scripture, then the elders can always do so.

The elders can use the passage that was read to begin a discussion. They are not expected to give an in-depth explanation. The purpose of the visit is not to show how much elders know, but to find out what lives in this family and how they live with the Lord. It will be helpful to inform the other elder ahead which passage will be used.

### **5.1.3. Leading**

The elders come in the name of the Lord. This gives the elders authority. They lead the visit. The agenda for the evening is set by them. At the same time the elders must be aware that they are guests in someone else's home. They have to respect this. The leadership of the elders comes out in directing God's people to His Word. It shows in giving direction to the discussion. They have to make sure that it doesn't become a social visit, or a visit in which much time is wasted with sipping coffee and exchanging common places. Start the visit as soon as possible. The coffee can wait.

The leadership also comes out in giving direction to the discussion. The elders have to make sure that the discussion does not go in circles, or that only a few speak whereas the rest remains silent. The elders should have a focus in mind and direct the discussion accordingly. They can at a certain moment stop the discussion about a certain topic and direct it to something else. The questions we ask must reflect this leadership and the respect for the flock of the Lord. The questions should be pastorally direct.

When a specific matter needs to be addressed, do not be afraid to address it. Waiting for an opening or opportune moment can mean one never comes to it. Cooperation and consultation between the two elders is very important in this regard.

Proper leadership shows in proper time management. If the visit is scheduled for one and a half hour then the elders should make sure to come and you leave in time. During the discussion the time must be kept in mind as well (without this becoming too obvious). Ask the questions which must be asked. It should not be that 80% of the time is spend on trivial things, whereas quickly at the end suddenly some important questions have to be answered yet. A great help in this regard is to remind oneself of the goal and purpose of the visit. To facilitate a good discussion it can be helpful to indicate at the beginning of the visit the direction of the discussion. This can be done by formulating ahead of time a few questions. Read these to the family at the beginning of the visit and then use them as a guide for the ensuing discussion.



#### **5.1.4. Concluding**

Part of giving leadership is knowing when to stop. The conclusion should not come as a surprise. If possible try to summarize in short what has been said or discussed. In case of requests, disagreements, or admonishments make sure there is a clear understanding of what will be reported or asked. It may even be helpful to put them down in writing. These matters have to be related to the visit. A home visit is a not a opportunity to dump certain issues or pet peeves on the Consistory table.

The visit is to be closed with prayer. This prayer should, among other things, express thankfulness for the blessings of the Lord, and, if possible, include some elements of the discussion, address the needs of the family, and the needs of the congregation.

#### **5.2. The contents of the visit**

In light of the purpose of the home visit, asking questions is an important part of conducting a home visit. The elders are not busybodies but need to be able to report to the Consistory about the spiritual life of this family. They have to ask the right questions, be able to listen well, and be prepared to teach, instruct or admonish. Why? Because the home visit is one of the means by which the Head of the Church helps His people to live in their daily lives from the redemption which He has obtained by His blood. It is one of the means by which Christ gathers, defends and preserves His church for Himself by His Word and Spirit and in the unity of the true faith. This means that with questions and instruction the elders may have to

- encourage the congregation to live from the promises of God in all of life,
- encourage the members to live as Christians in a world that becomes more and more unchristian,
- admonish if there is deviation, or a danger of going the wrong way, or
- teach or instruct if it appears necessary, e.g. about life style, education, devotions, financial stewardship, or otherwise.

What then should be the contents of a regular home visit? The elders want to hear how the members daily live with the Lord. This can be done in several ways. They can speak about the riches of God's promises, as revealed in His Word and signed and sealed in the sacraments. Do the members see the riches of these promises and how does this come out in the way they live? They can apply this to many areas of life, their personal faith-life, their work, their family life, or their place in the congregation. The questions can also deal with our task as prophets, priests and kings (see L.D. 12). Another avenue is to focus on the fruit of faith, and speak about the source, the need and the expression of this fruit. In Appendix I to this chapter several suggested questions are listed.

Some churches have the practice of formulating a theme for the home visits in a certain year. The congregation is made aware of it and in the preaching this theme will receive attention as well. The advantage of a theme is that repetition of what was discussed in a previous visit can be avoided. It is also a good tool to educate and instruct the congregation in a more systematic way. To help the congregation in preparing for the visit a hand-out with pertinent information or question can be given to the family involved prior to the home visit. The draw back of working with a theme is that it does not leave enough opening to dealing with matters that can cause difficulty in a family or the life of a member. It could hamper the spontaneity of the visit. Another draw back is that in the beginning of the season the theme is alive for elders and members, but by the end of the season it can be more difficult to generate a good discussion. With regard to both approaches much depends on how the elders lead the visit. For examples of themes and how to work with them, see P.G.Feenstra, The Glorious Work of Home Visits.

This brings us back to the components listed earlier: asking questions, listening, and instructing. Asking the right questions is an skill office bearers have to and can learn. A requirement for asking the right questions is knowing the family or member involved. It does make a difference whether it is a visit with a recently married couple, with a family with growing up children, or with a retired couple. Other elements that can have influence on the discussion can be the work situation ( e.g. in case of

unemployment), the health of members of the family (e.g. in situations of sickness or handicaps), or concerns about loved ones. In spite of all these specific situations the goal must be kept in mind with each visit. There are elements that vary from family to family, there are also elements that are the same in each visit.

Overseers have to learn to ask the right questions. Questions should be clear and direct. Do not be afraid to ask for explanation. "What do you mean with this?" or, "How does this show in your life?" In asking these questions it is possible to go beyond the regular answers. There is always the danger that the regular and expected questions are asked. The elders will then receive the standard answers. The report will be positive, but the visit has stayed on the surface. Without becoming busybodies or overly suspicious, yet elders do not have to take yes or no for an answer. The Lord is interested in, and shows care for the life of His children.

What applies to asking questions applies to listening as well, we have to learn to listen. To give a response is not necessarily a proof that one listens. It can be good to summarize the words of the other as a way of indicating that you are listening. Before elders give their answers they must make sure they understand the members well.

Helpful and very informative in this regard are the chapters 14 and 15 from Service With A Vision: A Handbook For Deacons, by M.Assink, translated in Diaconia. Sept. 1996, Vol. X. No.2. It shows that asking questions and listening are skills that can be honed. The concentric method of questioning mentioned in chapter 15 is helpful as well. The questions begin with the general things, then move on to the immediate surroundings and lead to the personal sphere.

When children are present they must be recognized as well. The elders must speak with them. The home visit is the place where the pastoral care for the younger members becomes very close and concrete. At the same time we should not forget the family as a whole. The visit may not end up in an examination of each child and that is it. We have to try to involve them in the discussion, and use the question we ask them within the whole discussion. In order to speak with the young children it will be helpful to know what is happening in school. Elders can acquaint themselves by means of newsletters published by the schools. To involve the teen-agers in the discussion will be more difficult. Some find it difficult to open up, especially when their parents are present. Others look very critically at the office-bearers. Others struggle with their own characters, with their place in this world, and struggle with doubts. They will not say all this at the visit. The elders have to try to convey to them that they also belong to the congregation. Children can easily feel that they are under attack of the elders. Yet, the questions of the elders have to go beyond the common and expected and address the issues that young people in their situations meet.

Article 27 of the Church Order states that the elders shall use in family visiting the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning, and of admonition, to ward off false doctrines and errors which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct. This is no small task. It implies that the elders themselves are aware of these dangers. In view comes here e.g. the literature used in the home and read by the members of the family, as well as the use of VCR and TV or Internet. We have to warn against literature that propagates an unchristian philosophy, but also literature that presents itself as Christian but is not Reformed.

The older version of Art. 27 dealt with the printing of books. No one, it said, belonging to the Reformed religion shall have any book, whether original or translated by him, printed without prior ecclesiastical approval. This rule has been dropped, but it shows the concern of the churches for the purity of doctrine and the sanctity of life. (See W.W.J.Van Oene, With Common Consent, pages 124-126) It is no luxury to talk about the literature that enters the home, the programs that are watched. As elders we should not be afraid to instruct, refute, warn and admonish in this regard.

All this describes the content in a rather general way. It is incorrect to suggest that there is only one way of doing this. Situations differ. Not every family is the same. Elders have their own talents and weaknesses as well. In Appendix I to this chapter several examples of more specific outlines can be found. These are suggestions, no more. The format (Yes or No questions) makes it difficult to use them. They are not to be used as a check list, but as a means to help in preparing for the visit.

### **5.3. Difficulties**

There can be several obstacles on the road to a good home visit. These obstacles can come from the side of the office bearer and/or from the side of the members. Some will be listed as well as a suggestion how to deal with them. This list is not exhaustive but given with the purpose for reflection.

On the side of the office bearer:

- not being clear in his own mind - Take the time to prepare.
- not being clear in what he says - Make sure the others can follow and understand.
- not asking the right questions - Help each other.
- not listening properly - Tell yourself to listen; Don't come with your opinion right away.
- not giving proper leadership - Reflect on the task.

On the side of the members there can be:

- unwillingness or inability to express oneself
- aversion to questions that deal with their lives
- lack of communal vision or Scriptural insight

If this happens on a regular basis it will be good to address this with the family.

Other difficulties can be that the members bring up matters that do not belong at the visits. This can be because of genuine interest or concern, it can be because of nosiness, it can also be done maliciously. The elders have to try to stay focussed. If questions come up which are outside the scope of the visit, it will be helpful to acknowledge them, but then to indicate that they can be discussed at another occasion. This is also the case when members are at odds with the consistory and in this way want to show their opposition. It will be important then to state that the difference with the consistory will be addressed at a separate meeting.

At times you elder may ask the question: "Is there anything you want to bring to the attention of the council?" This can be a legitimate question, it can also be a dangerous question. The members have indeed the right to bring matters to the attention of council, but the overseers must watch out that they do not become messengers through whom the members can place all kinds of issues before the council. If members want to bring matters to the attention of council they can do so in writing with proper grounds. The same applies with regard to the question about the preaching. It is good to ask questions about the preaching, but the focus is how the preaching functions in the life of this family. What do they do with the Word? The home visit is not the place to vent grievances with regard to the preaching or the preacher. There are other ways of addressing these matters.

### **5.4. Reporting**

The elders report the visit to the consistory. To report both elders must be present. If one is not able to attend a written report can be submitted if signed by both elders. Reporting must be done carefully. The ninth commandment also applies to the elders. Confidentiality is important in visiting, in the consistory meeting, but also at home. Elders will lose their trust when things said at visits or in consistory meetings is told by family members to others.

After the visit the elders should first discuss and agree what shall be reported. This is even more important when difficulties came up or requests have to be conveyed. Not everything that was discussed has to be reported. The Consistory's first task is to make sure the visit is made. The elders give the main conclusion. It should not be too simple, nor too detailed. The other members of the consistory receive the opportunity to ask questions if necessary. The clerk records the conclusion of the report in the Minutes.

He can also include elements of the report that are important for future visits. In the end the meeting will decide what goes into the Minutes.

An important question is, what is a good visit? Does it mean there were no problems? That the visit ran smoothly? A visit can run smooth without problem and yet not be a good visit. It is important that the elders understand what they mean with good. This will be a part of the evaluation.

## **5.5. Preparations for the home visit**

Because home visits are so important elders ought to prepare ourselves properly. Sloppiness in this regard will have negative results for the elders, for the consistory and for the congregation.

### **5.5.1. Personal**

Preparations start with the elder himself. He should not leave it to the last minute as to what should be talked about and which passage to use. In addition he has to acquaint himself with the situation of the family that is to be visited. Are there special needs? What age are the children? Are there special circumstances that must be kept in mind? In general, the elder must prepare himself with prayer and the study of God's Word. He has to keep up with what is happening in the church and in the world.

### **5.5.2. Team**

Each Ward has two elders. They work together in the home visits. They should know from each other what the focus of the visit will be, and if there are special matters that need to be mentioned. Also the evaluation of the visit is done together. In general, the two elders help each other in giving suggestions and/or constructive criticism. No one should ever think that he is "pro" at this work and can "wing" it without help from the other. Of course a beginning elder can learn a lot from constructive comments of a more experienced elder. But the other way around, a more experienced elder can be helped by the questions and suggestion of a beginning elder.

### **5.5.3. Consistory**

It will be very helpful for elders to discuss the manner of visiting the families and the problems they encounter on a regular basis. At the beginning of each season it will be good to determine together whether there are things that need to be addressed. If need be a certain topic can be addressed within the consistory first in order to prepare for the visits. Elders can also help each other in asking advice as to how to deal with difficult situations, in being honest if there is disagreement with a fellow office-bearer or a certain approach and if this is expressed in a constructive manner. Elders should also be prepared to receive and evaluate criticism from the congregation.

### **5.5.4. Congregation**

The congregation is involved in the preparations as well. The congregation must understand that the love of Lord comes to our homes through the work of the office bearers. If it is well they look forward to such a visit. It will be good to let them be aware of the difficulties that elders can meet so that we can help each other. In informing the congregation we prepare future office bearers for the task of elder as well. The visits must be remembered by the congregation in their prayers. The sermons have to direct the congregation in this regard as well. This can mean a sermon on the care of the Lord for His sheep, but also sermons an specific topics that will be addressed at the home visits.

## **6. Diaconal visits**

### **6.1. What?**

Deacons visit members and families too. They visit those who are in need, those who are suffering, those shut in, handicapped and elderly. Besides these visits the deacons should visit the families and members of the congregation on a regular basis as well. It must be admitted that this is a more recent development.

## 6.2. Why?

Because we are dealing with something new it is good to look why this is done? However, really it is not that new. Already in the report of the gathering of Reformed Churches in Wezel of 1568 we read about deacons visiting in a more organized way, and not just in connection with financial need. To quote from the Articles of Wezel:

### Chapter V - Of the Deacons

[1.] It is completely certain from the testimony of Scripture that the office of deacon is that they serve the tables, that is, they come to the help of the poor in their needs and provide them with what is necessary by gathering the alms.

[5.] It would be beneficial when especially in the larger congregations, two kinds of deacons are appointed. The first will apply themselves to the gathering and distribution of the alms and take care at the same time, that if any goods are bequeathed to the poor, these will be requisitioned in a legal manner and faithfully will be distributed to the beneficiaries.

[6.] The other part will mainly take care of the sick, wounded and those in prison. Besides the gift of faithfulness and zeal, these [deacons] should be endowed also with the gift of comforting and with more than a general knowledge of Scripture. They will diligently ask the elders whether there are sick and weak in their wards who need comfort and uplifting.

Yet it is a new element in the churches. This new element was recognized by the churches in the most recent Form for Ordination. Comparing the old to the new we note an addition. The Old maintained there are two tasks for the deacons:

"that they in the first place collect and preserve with the greatest fidelity and diligence, the alms and goods which are given to the poor: yea, to do their utmost endeavour, that many good means be procured for the relief of the poor."

"The second part of their office consists in distribution, whereto are not only required the gift of discretion and prudence to bestow the alms only where there is need, but also cheerfully and simplicity to assist the needy with compassion and hearty affection..."

Our current Form has these two as well but adds that the Deacons must see

"to the good progress of the service of charity in the Church. They shall acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy."

This change is also reflected in the Church Order. In Art. 23 we maintain that the

"duties of the deacon is to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy ... and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord."

The new element is that deacons are charged to acquaint themselves with existing needs and to exhort the members to show mercy. How can you do this? By visiting in a systematic manner. Acquainting and exhorting is not waiting till the members come to the deacons, but implies visiting of all the families by the deacons. Thus we may conclude that visits by the deacons is not a luxury, but part and parcel of their task.

We can go a step further yet. For why would the Church Order and The Form come to state this? To answer this we can refer to the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is very important for the work of the deacons. After all the term deacon in the Greek refers to a table servant. The work of the deacon finds its beginning, focal point and goal in the celebration and its joy. We see this in the Church Order, Art. 23:

the "duties of the deacon is to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties and exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy ... and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord."

If we look at this closer, we see the following elements:

- The congregation enjoys at the table unity and fellowship
- This is a gift of the Holy Spirit.
- This joy must be protected.
- This joy and unity must be promoted

It is the task of the deacons to promote that unity and joy by word and deed. Again here not just the needy, the whole congregation is in view. Thus to promote this is much more than help those in need, it is also to stimulate all others to help. How else can we do this, but by visiting?

Is there a Biblical reason for these visits? We will pay attention to two elements, first the caring for each other, then the visiting by the deacons. See also the chapter about The Ministry of Mercy (2-2)

### The Biblical mandate is to show mercy to one another

Deut.15:11

For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.

Lev.19:9-10

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

Lev.23:22

"And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God."

Leviticus 25:35-37

"And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit.

Deut.24:10-13

"When you make your neighbour a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to fetch his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge; when the sun goes down, you shall restore to him the pledge that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the LORD your God.

Deut.24:15

you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); lest he cry against you to the LORD, and it be sin in you.

### The Lord Jesus reminded God's people of this call.

Mat. 9:13

Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Mat. 23:23

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

Mark 10:43-44

But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

John 13:15

For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

### He showed the importance of this service of mercy with the parable about the sheep and the goats.

Matthew 25:40

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'

### The apostles continued this instruction of the Lord Jesus, calling the church to show mercy. They also gave the example, e.g. in the collection for the needy in Judea.

Rom.12:8

he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

2 Cor.8:14-15

but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack."

Gal.5:13

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.

Gal. 6 : 10

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Heb. 13:16

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

1 Tim.6:18

They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous,

James 2:13

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.

1 John 3:16-18

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in Him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.

### **6.3. How?**

#### **6.3.1. Character of the Visit**

The Form makes very clear that the work of mercy finds its origin in the mercy which Christ Himself has shown to us.

"The Lord Jesus Christ, who has shown us the Father, came into the world to serve. In His mercy He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and showed compassion to the afflicted. Thus He gave an example, that His church should do likewise. The ministry of mercy, as assigned to the deacons, proceeds, therefore, from this love of our Saviour."

Deacons must give an example, promote this unity and fellowship by word and deed. Their visit has to reflect the care and mercy of our Lord. The visit is characterized by the confession that the congregation is special in the Lord. Not lording it over, but exhorting.

Although the character of this visit is somewhat different from the home visit by the elders, yet there is also a common element. Also the deacons come in the name of the Lord. It is not without reason that we have one Form for Ordination which applies to both elders and deacons. Our fathers did this on purpose. Under Rome the deacon had become the servant of the bishop, but with the Reformation the work of the deacons once again received its proper place. To indicate that the office of deacon is no less than the office of elder, our fathers used one Form. This means that the beginning of the Form when it speaks about the authority and the character of the office applies to both elders and deacons. Also the deacons come in the name of the Lord. Also they come with authority. The members must receive you as such. Refusing deacons is just as wrong as refusing elders. The difference lies in the focus. Deacons are concerned with the progress of the service of charity.

#### **6.3.2. Manner**

For deacons is it also important to ask proper questions, to listen well, and to be prepared to instruct. We can refer to what has been written about this earlier in this chapter. Also these visits are conducted by two office bearers and have to be opened and closed with Bible reading and prayer. Since this visit is more limited in scope, one hour should be sufficient. Each family does not need to be visited every year. Most churches seem to do it once in three years.

#### **6.3.3. Contents**

What ever approach one takes, the purpose of the visit is twofold. In the first place the deacons have to ascertain whether and how this family uses its gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit of the other members? In the second place, the deacons can find out whether there is a particular need in this family.

To work this out, with regard to the first:

Does this family use the gifts the Lord has given for the upbuilding of the congregation? Are they aware of the needs of others? What are they doing to become aware of them? Are sick visited? Are those who have difficulties remembered in word and deed? The argument of not having time should be discussed. Is the education of the youth of the church seen as a responsibility of the whole congregation and how does this show? If a members are part of a larger family, do they make an effort to go outside their own family circle as well? Do they make an effort to speak to others and visit others. Keep in mind that help is more than giving to the deacons, it can be bringing a visit, offering a ride, bringing a meal etc. If this is found lacking these members must be exhorted with the Word of God to promote the unity and the fellowship of the Lord's Table.

The second aspect of this visit is whether there are needs in this family. Sometimes the deacons already know ahead that there is need, in other situations they do not. "No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty." Some families may have an easier time to speak about their needs than others. Take the concerns of the members seriously. Do not right away come with your answers and solutions, but listen. At the same time do not be fooled. Ask questions of clarification that show that you understand and are interested, but also that gives you the opportunity to assess the situation. Do those bound to home receive visits? Do meals have to be brought in? Do they need transportation? Is professional help required?

Because of this more limited focus similar matters will come up each time a family is visited. This does not matter if a family is visited once in the three years. The deacons change and the situation of a family can change. We all need to be reminded constantly to show mercy. To prevent unnecessary repetition it might be helpful to approach the visit from different aspects. To give some suggestions:

- Explaining the work of the deacons.
- Showing the connection with the Lord's Supper.
- Discussing the ministry of mercy in the congregation
- The implications of our confession concerning the communion of saints.
- The use of money in the kingdom of God.
- Doing good to all men, especially the household of faith.

#### **6.3.4. Reporting**

The visits are official, must be reported on at the meeting. Minutes should record that a visit had been made and the character of the visit. A report can be submitted only when both deacons are present. The reports have to be specific but not too detailed. If there are needs or other points to be followed up, these should be recorded. If elders have to be made aware of something, the deacons can bring it to the attention of the ward elders or mention it at the council meeting.

#### **7. Literature**

The following books and articles are mentioned to further study. Much of the material of this chapter was also taken from these sources.

- P.Y. DeJong, Taking Heed to the Flock, Baker 1948. Reprinted in Diakonia vol. IV,# 4, vol.V # 1-4
- Pointers for Elders and Deacons, in Diakonia, vol.1, #1
- A.N.Hendriks, "The Elder and Family Visitation," in Diakonia, vol.II # 1
- W.Meijer, "Family visit Tonight," in Diakonia, vol.III # 1, 2
- W.W.J.VanOene, "Family Visiting", in Diakonia, vol.III #1
- W.Huizinga, Diaconal Visits, in Diakonia, vol.III, # 3.
- C.Trimp, Zorgen voor de Gemeente, Vanden Berg, Kampen, 1982.
- C.Van der Leest, Dienstvaardig I & II, De Vuurbaak, 1987 & 1989.
- P.G.Feenstra, The Glorious Work of Home Visits, Premier, 2000



## 8. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and Confessional basis for this work, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. The evaluation can deal with the practical aspects of the visits. This applies to both visits by elders and deacons. Are we in agreement on the set up of the visit? Is it easy to arrange visits? If not, why not? What could we do to improve this? Similar questions can be asked about the content of the visits, how we lead it, how they are reported and how we prepare for our visits.
3. Often the report is given, it was a good visit. But what is a good visit?
4. How do the members receive the elders and deacons?
5. How is the attendance and participation of the youth of the congregation? Do they receive sufficient attention?
6. How can we help each other as office-bearers?
7. Do the deacons visit all the families on a regular basis?  
If yes, how is this going? How often are the families visited? What are the themes used?  
If no, should we consider the possibility?
8. Are there concerns with regard to the home visits and the diaconal visits?  
What are these concerns?  
Why are they a concern?  
What plan of action could be followed?

