

Outline

Chapter 2 - 5

Visits

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VISITS BY OFFICE-BEARERS

Introduction

In this chapter we deal with the special visits office-bearers may have to bring. In chapter 1-1 we already discussed the home visits and the diaconal visits. These visits are not the only visits an office-bearer brings. They also visit those who are ill, who receive a baby, who want to profess their faith, who want to be married, who are in special and/or difficult circumstances. There are also welcome and disciplinary visits. Some of these visits are discussed in other chapters of this Handbook:

For visits to parents in connection with the birth of a baby: see 1-3

For visits with those who want to profess their faith: see 2-6

For disciplinary visits: see 2-1

For visits with couples who want to be married: see 2-7

This leaves the following visits: to the sick, to those in special circumstances and the welcome visit.

1. Visits to the sick

1.1. Who are involved?

The sick visit involves the member who is ill and the office-bearer. Of course, also members in the congregation bring sick visits, but our attention now is for the visit by minister, elder or deacon. Who receives such a visit? Not every member who is ill is visited. These visits are for members who are ill for a longer time, are seriously ill or, are bound to home and cannot come to church for several weeks in a row. Also those are in hospital need to be visited. In the Form for Ordination of Ministers of the Word we read: "It is also his duty to visit the members who are sick and sorrowing. Thus comforting and admonishing he shall call the whole congregation to the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." In the Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons the elders receive the mandate to visit the members in their homes to comfort them with the Word of God. The Deacons are instructed to show the mercy of the Lord. Usually the minister visits those who are seriously ill, not able to go to church or in hospital. If he is unable to visit them, he will notify the elders who then will make the visit. Some elders do already visit in their ward those who are seriously ill. The deacons visit those who are sick for a longer time as well.

Each illness is different and each person deals with illness differently. Some illnesses are temporary, others are terminal. Some can accept sickness, others have a hard time with it. It can even change during the time of the illness, in that initially the brother or sister can accept the sickness, but as the sickness wears on it becomes more difficult, or the other way around. It is not always easy for a healthy person to put himself in the position of one who is ill. The sick member is bound to bed or home, whereas the visitor will leave the room or home and be again in the hustle and bustle of life. It is important that as visitors we try to understand what those who are ill go through. For although each sickness is different and each member deals with it in a different way yet we have to keep in mind some of the common effects of being sick. Sickness takes a person out of regular life. The member who is ill is suddenly in a totally different situation. Life goes on without the one who is sick. This can lead to feeling disorientated. Your regular routine is gone and this can give an unsettled feeling. Then there are the concerns that can make life difficult for the patient, concerns about the family members, who have to take care of the patient, or have to do without the input of the patient, concerns related to health, concerns whether the medication does its work, concern because it seems that doctors have no time for the patient. All these things can effect the sick member and even change the way a person may react if he were healthy. As office-bearers we have to try to have an understanding of this, and at the same time help the patient to accept also this hardship from the hand of the Lord.

1.2. The purpose of the visit

The purpose of the visit is to be with the person, show care and help the patient to deal with the illness in faith. This means that a sick visit is usually a personal and focussed visit. This purpose brings with it other elements as well, such as showing interest in the life and situation of the one who is ill, maintaining the contact between the patient and the congregation, filling the gap brought about by not being able to attend the regular worship services.

1.3. What is the reason for the visit?

The Lord Jesus, who is the Chief Shepherd, came to this world to heal and restore a broken world. He preached the gospel of the Kingdom and healed many of their illnesses. These healings pointed to the power and the reality of the redemption from sin by His death. Because sickness is a result of sin, the Lord showed His power in healing those who were sick.

Mat 8:16-17

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."

Mat 9:1-6

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home."

Mat 9:35

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

The Lord Himself was filled with compassion for those who were suffering. He gives His servants the task to care for the sheep. In the visit by the office bearer the sick member is confronted with the care of the Chief Shepherd for the sheep that is in trouble.

Ezekiel 34:15-16

I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice

Acts 20:28

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.

Matt 25:39-40

When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

1.4. How does the Bible speak about illness?

We cannot bypass the question how the Bible speaks about sickness. In general it can be said that sickness is the result of our fall into sin. To be more specific we note that God uses sickness also - to show us our sinfulness

Ps. 32:3-4

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped

1 Cor 11:30

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

-to test us

Ps. 119:71

It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

Isa 38:17

Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back.

Heb 12:11

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

- to glorify God

John 9:3

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

John 11:4

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

- to be a blessing for others

2 Cor 1:3-4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God

1.5. The "Why?" question

The member who is sick can struggle at times with questions. Why am I sick? Is the Lord punishing me? Why does He continue to do this? Why does it take so long? We should not ignore these questions, because they are not wrong in themselves.

Ps. 10: 1

Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Ps. 13:1

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Ps. 44:23-25

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.

The LORD allows us to ask the question Why? as long as we ask Him and not seek the idols.

2 King 1:2

Now Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself. So he sent messengers, saying to them, "Go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to see if I will recover from this injury."

2 Kings 1:16

"And he said to us, 'Go back to the king who sent you and tell him, "This is what the LORD says: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending men to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!" ' "

Because sickness is a result of sin, we may never take sickness for granted. In sickness we come in confrontation with the destructive powers of the devil.

Acts 10:38

how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

2 Cor 12:7

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

We learn from the Word of God that illness is a result of sin. We also know of instances in the Bible where it is revealed to us that a particular sickness is a punishment for a particular sin. We do not receive such revelations anymore. Although it could be true that the Lord is warning the person involved, yet we have to be careful not to accuse the sick person of a sin. At the same time we may use the opportunity to deal with the guilt we all have because of sin, and that we all have to repent before the LORD. The Lord can use sickness to teach us that we rely on Him. He can use it to bring us closer to Him, provided we accept in faith what He gives. To quote from one of the prayers for the sick and spiritually distressed:

"Gracious Father, we beseech Thee to grant us that grace of Thy Holy Spirit, that He may teach us truly to know our misery and to bear patiently with Thy chastisements. If based on our merits these chastisements should have been ten thousand times more severe. We believe that they are not evidence of Thy wrath but of Thy fatherly love towards us, that we may not be condemned with the world."

1.6. The contents of the visit

The contents of the visit is determined by its purpose. We have to show interest in the life of the other. The visit is also means by which the Lord helps His children to deal with their illness in faith. The office-bearer may help, comfort and encourage the member who is ill. This must be done with the Word of God and prayer.

1.6.1. The Word of God

In order to help the member who is sick the Word of God has to be opened. The Word speaks about the brokenness of life because of our fall into sin, but it also speaks about the restoration of life through Christ. The Word of God speaks about the Comforter who makes us cry "Abba, Father." The Word of God lifts up the broken hearted and binds up the wounds that smart. To be patient in adversity we must live from the Word of God. The Word of God reveals the promises of the Lord. In our speaking this richness of God's Word has to come out. In the visit we can refer as well to the sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper. Also in adversity we have to use the treasures of the sacraments.

Rom.5:3-4

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The use of the Bible is not a quick text here or there, but the use of a text or passage within the context of God's Word. The Confessions can be of great help in this regard. (See e.g. B.C. Art.13, 17, 20, 26; H.C. Lord's Days 1, 7, 9, 10, 16, 17, 18, 22, 45; C.o.D. V,8, 10) In the confessions the church has summarized the true and complete doctrine of salvation, the only comfort in life and death. The Confession also speaks about God's work in our lives in His electing love. He who began this work in us has promised to complete it as well. In the struggles with the Why? question we may point to the promises of the Lord to preserve His children.

Ps. 138:7-8

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever— do not abandon the works of your hands.

1 Cor. 10:13

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

2 Tim.4:18

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:10

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

It is advisable that the one who visits has a passage in mind when he comes. At the same time he should be flexible enough to use another passage if the discussion with the patient gives occasion for this. In situations of prolonged illness it can be helpful to read with the sick member a particular Bible book or passages from it. Not only does this give direction to the visits, but it is also wonderful to see how both patient and visitor benefit from this. New treasures of God's Word come to the surface. A third possibility is to connect the reading to the sermons. If the minister makes visits to the sick he may want to discuss the text for the following sermon he is to preach. This binds the sick member to the congregation and the worship service and it helps the minister as well, as it gives him valuable input.

1.6.2. Prayer

Besides the reading of God's Word, prayer is an important part of the visit. The intercession in the worship service is important as well, but the prayer on the visit is of a more personal nature. Following what we confess in Lord's Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism we can say that this prayer must reflect our gratitude to the Father for all His benefits and a petition for His grace and Holy Spirit. This prayer in order

to be pleasing must also reflect the proper respect, humility, trust and thankfulness which is required of all our prayers. In order to lead in prayer the office bearer must listen carefully to the Word of God, - the reading must be used in the prayer - and the needs of the person. The prayer does not have to be restricted to the situation of the member who is sick but can also include the needs of others. In the Book of Praise we have two beautiful examples of a prayer for those who are ill.

It can also be necessary to speak with the patient about the importance and function of prayer. The Lord wants us to pray so that we may recognize Him as our God and Father. We must pray for a blessing over the means that are used for healing or treatment. We may also ask for healing. We know that the prayer of God's people is powerful in its effect. Healing is given upon the prayer of God's children.

Ps. 27:8

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.

Ps. 50:15

and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."

Ps. 62:8

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

Mat 7:7

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Luke 18:1

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

Rom. 12:12

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

James 5:13-18

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

1.7. Difficulties in the visit

Not every sick visit is a success. It can be a disappointment for patient and/or office bearer. This can have a variety of reasons, some beyond our control, and other avoidable.

One of the most important requirements for a good visit is that the visitor listens well. A visit will go wrong when the patient receives the impression that the office-bearer is not listening, let alone understands the difficulties that the patient is going through. The visitor has to show interest in the situation of the patient. Some of the detail may seem boring to the visitor but can be of great importance for the patient. The visit can go wrong when the visitor does not ask the proper questions or asks questions that lack sensitivity. A visit can go wrong when the visitor speaks more about his own problems or people he knows who had similar problems, rather than letting the patient speak. A visit can go wrong when we use superficial statements, which do not address the needs of the patient. A visit can go wrong because the visitor is afraid to address the difficult questions or is afraid that the patient will break down. A visit can go wrong because the visitor has an aversion to sickness and is very uncomfortable in a hospital room. As office bearers we have to examine ourselves, and if we notice these things we have to work on correcting them.

Also from the side of the patient there can be things that can derail a visit. When the patient is so wrapped up in this/her own situation that there is no listening ear for what the visitor has to say. A patient who is very critical of the visit or the visitor can make a visit difficult as well. If the visitor first receives a reprimand for not coming sooner, the visit already starts on a sour note. Another difficulty that can occur is the fact that the patient does not listen and keeps on talking, to the point that there is hardly any time for Bible reading and prayer.

It is fair to say that when both visitor and patient are willing to listen to each other and to the Word of God the visit can be fruitful for both. Yes indeed both. In fact, it is not unusual that the office bearer receives strength from the patient.

1.8. The set-up of the visit

There is no prescribed set-up for a sick visit. Each situation can vary so much. Sometimes you have the time for a good talk, other times you only have a few minutes. At times you can speak in the privacy of a home, in other cases you are in the busy traffic of a hospital. The health of the patient is also a factor that plays a role.

Yet, there are some elements that are important for a sick visit. The visit must reflect interest for the life, concerns, and situation of the other. This means you ask about the well-being of the patient. At times you have to do this in a careful way, lest you by asking the question, 'How are you doing?' open a flood gate of information which does not really help the visit.

Because this visit is meant to help and encourage the question must be addressed whether the patient is able to receive this sickness from the Hand of the Lord. Again, the question must be asked in accordance with the situation and in a pastoral manner. At times it may be good to ask the question directly, at other times you can come to the question in a round about way. In cases of prolonged illness this question should not be asked each visit. At the same time do not forget that the way the sick members deals with sickness is not always the same. It can change from day to day, even from hour to hour. For this reason the question about being able to accept this trial from the Lord's Hand should not be forgotten in cases of long term illness.

Then, the visitor has to bring the comfort of God's Word. A fourth element is prayer. We have addressed this already in the previous section.

There are other elements that can be addressed during the visit, though not as essential as the previous ones: family involvement, and information about church life. The visits by the office bearers can be one of the few links the patient has with the outside world.

The length of a sick visit depends a lot on the condition of the patient and the circumstances of the visit. On the whole a sick visit should not be too long. Especially in situations of severe illness the visit must be short and to the point. At the same time, it should not be done in a hurry. The member should get the impression that the office bearer takes time for this. It is good to have a time limit in your mind as visitor, but do not be enslaved to this.

A sick visit can be brought by one office-bearer, he can even do it with his wife. It is not a visit that has to be reported on as e.g. a home visit. When a member is in the hospital the visit can take place outside the regular visiting hours. Most hospitals allow this for office-bearers.

2. Visits to those in special and difficult circumstances

The title of this paragraph covers a large and varied area. What are we dealing with in special and difficult circumstances? That can be birthdays and anniversaries, but also handicaps or death in the family. With regard to happy occasions, the minister visits the older members on or in connection with their birthdays. Ward elders usually visit such occasions as well. With regard to handicapped members, it is helpful for Council to have a schedule for visiting. Each handicapped member should be visited at least once per month by an office bearer. With respect to those who are grieving a visit is in place as well. If some one loses a member of the immediate family, the minister or ward elders bring a visit to comfort the family.

3. Welcome visit

New members are welcomed in the congregation by means of a visit by the ward elders. Although this visit is not the same as a home visit, yet it also has an official character. It is the official welcome in the congregation.

Such a visit is preceded by the handing in of an attestation. This is of importance for the visit. A good attestation is a beautiful document, something to be thankful for. The fact that members who move in are willing to submit to the oversight of the church is something wonderful as well. These believers do not want to live by themselves but see their task to be joined to the body of Christ. It can be helpful to deal with these two elements at the visit. It will give the ward elders insight in the spiritual life of these new members. If the attestation indicates a concern or gives information about discipline then the elders have to ask for further clarification. This will be reported to the Consistory.

Secondly, the welcome visit allows the ward elders to gather information about the member, or family and their work situation. Without becoming busy bodies, we like to know something about new members. The elders can find out as well whether there are special concerns, e.g. with health or family.

A third element of the welcome visit is to introduce the new member or family to this congregation. It will be helpful to take a current Directory along. It contains the names of the other members. This can lead to a discussion about the communion of saints. The Directory also mentions the various organizations, Bible study, school etc. The discussion can deal with the value of being involved in these. In this way the elders can show the many privileges that come with belonging to a congregation, as well as the obligations.

Because this is an official visit, it would be proper to conclude with prayer. The elders need not report on this visit except that it was brought. Unless they feel that certain matters should come to the attention of the Consistory.

4. Evaluation

- Have we overlooked any visits in this chapter?
- Do we agree with the purpose and reason?
- Do we agree with the contents and set-up?
- Are the sick visited faithfully?
- How are the sick visits received by the congregation?
- Are those in special situations visited?
- Do the welcome visits function well?
- Are there difficulties or problems in connection with any of these visits?
- If so, what can we do to improve on this?
- Are there matters which you want to bring to attention of the meeting? Why? How should we deal with them?

5. Literature