

Chapter 7.

VISITING THE MEMBERSHIP

A new and appreciative look must be taken at an old practice: elders' visits to parishoners' homes; house-visiting. Experience has long shown that family visits build strong churches. Such visiting should be done on schedule, covering the congregation each year, if possible.

We consider the following aspects of house-visiting:

Why?

The Lord provides for his Body in the visiting ministry of the eldership what the secular world tries to duplicate through encounter groups and the like. The confidence, security, and togetherness which can be created by carefully planned and conducted family visiting draws the Church together into the local communion of saints — a communion all seek and one which the secular therapist cannot give.

The Word specifies the dual responsibilities of both believer and elder which come to expression in such visiting: "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account" (Heb. 13:17). Both the visited and the visitor will one day have to settle their respective accounts with the Lord, who keeps close watch over any two or three gathered in His name (Matt. 18:20).

Visiting is a part of the Church's program for schooling the believer in faith and obedience. As such it may be considered a logical extension of the Word preached.

A regular program of family visitation promises the following benefits:

1. It extends the care and supportive concern of the Church into the homes of the membership. "Therefore," writes the Apostle Paul, "encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you in

the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (I Thess. 5:11-13).

2. Family visiting provides ways to determine the precise needs of the congregation, and thus give focus to preaching, diaconal assistance, teaching programs, and further attention to specific problems. Visiting takes the pulse and temperature of the Body.

3. It allows the elders to assess the people's reaction to the preaching, the teaching, and all other functions of the Church.

4. Visiting establishes a meaningful relationship between eldership and congregation apart from emergency situations, and makes handling difficulties the easier.

5. It provides a way to detect problems in the bud, and perhaps to nip them there.

Always assuming, of course, that both elder and believer take these visits as more than social occasions.

Before Visiting

It is the minister's responsibility to make family visiting most useful by preaching from time to time on its significance from a suitable Biblical text. The congregation must fully understand, and systematically be reminded of, the values for Church and member implicit in well-conducted family visiting: what they may expect from the elder, and what he may expect from them — and how the Lord is served through both. The minister may well set family visiting in the context of the key role played by the Christian family in the rearing of the young and the stability of society. Texts like the following apply: I Thess. 5:14; Heb. 12:15; I Peter 5:2.

The eldership may decide to structure family visiting around one or several themes for a given season, to be introduced by appropriate preaching. Or the visiting elders may decide to highlight a topic or topics on their visits. Some suggested themes or topics follow:

1. The Family
 - a. Biblical view of the family
 - b. Worshipping as a family, table devotions, singing, prayer
 - c. Ways in which members relate to each other
 - d. Special problems of one-parent families, and the Church's concern
 - e. Working parents, absence of mother from the home, traveling father

- f. Discipline in the home
- g. Nurture of growing children, entertainment, church attendance
- h. Christian education
- 2. The Church
 - a. Why the Church gathers to worship on Sundays, as a family
 - b. The role of preaching and of listening
 - c. The liturgy, what and why
 - d. Participation in Church activities
 - e. Financial contribution to the Church.
- 3. The following general subjects could be developed into similar topics:
 - a. The Bible
 - b. Christian growth, the Christian daily life
 - c. Prayer
 - d. Afflictions
 - e. Special problems of youth
 - f. Stewardship of goods and talents
 - g. Values
 - h. Faith and works
 - i. Providence and human responsibility
 - j. Missions and evangelism

We make these practical suggestions for the conduct of family visiting:

1. This is a team effort. Usually the minister and an elder, or two elders, constitute the visiting team. Be sure to plan matters like these: who is to take the lead in opening subjects? who will read the Word? offer prayer? close with prayer? Who makes the necessary arrangements? Who takes the initiative in leaving? Planning is the key to a good visit.

2. Make each visit a matter of prayer.

3. Ascertain in advance, if possible, what special problems or needs are likely to be encountered, and plan on response to these.

4. Know the names of all in the family, occupation, school levels, etc.

5. Be certain to be expected, with the visit pre-arranged by phone, bulletin announcements, or the like.

6. Yet, despite careful planning, avoid the "canned" rehearsed appearance. Think things through, but trust the Lord for words to speak when the visit is taking place.

During the Visit

Remember that you, as elder, go in the name of, and on errand for, the Lord of the Church. Make the visit serve Him and His Body and He will lend authority and power to your words.

Some practical suggestions for conducting the visit:

1. The Bible places high value on healthy family relationships (Eph. 6:1-4, for example). Make this, therefore, a *family* occasion, inviting both parents and children to gather 'round for this short hour.

2. Be cheerful at arrival. Wait to be invited in. Wait to be seated. People can be touchy about such things. Get off on the right foot.

3. Keep the good humor, courtesy, modesty, love all the way. Remember that children especially may dread family visiting, and must be won by sincere attention to their concerns.

4. *Work* at involving all family members in the visit. Do so with sympathy and understanding. What you do not already know about their interests and occupations, as appropriate to the purposes of your visit, try to learn — but keep the conversation aimed at spiritual realities.

5. If you intend to open with reading Scripture, select the passage before hand and bring your own Bible. Perhaps a short, crisp comment on the reading will get things going. Do not, however, start with a sermon(ette).

6. Generate discussion by avoiding questions which demand only Yes/No answers. For example, in discussing personal relationships with the Lord, tongues may be loosened by mentioning ways in which the Christian does grow in the knowledge of God: through the preaching, personal Bible study, church school, affliction, tensions, temptations, prayer, obedience.... Ask which benefits the most, and why? the least, and why? Other means of grace? Or again: rather than inquiring whether the member is enjoying the preaching (which tempts a critique of the minister — which must, of course, be dealt with in its proper setting), the elder may ask, "Why do you suppose that the Bible emphasizes preaching so much?" And, "How does one get the most out of the sermon?" And, "How might one prepare himself best to appropriate the Word preached?" This manner of approach will bring about a fruitful and often stimulating visit.

7. Let the closing prayer indicate that you have heard the needs, concerns, joys of *this* family. Pray by name for those who require this, always tactfully.

8. Don't overstay your welcome. There will be another day.

9. Decline controversy. If the family has a genuine complaint about the Church, the minister, the liturgy, hear it and promise to report to the eldership. If the matter is serious, arrange to have it aired at appropriate time and place. Avoid, also, seeming to sweep criticism under the rug, and whitewashing faults. There is no better way than that to lose credibility with the member.

10. Be aware that some member of the family might have a matter he wishes to discuss privately. Sense this. Make arrangement for it on another occasion.

After the Visit

Reflect personally on what you can learn from the visit: better ways to open, to develop discussion, to sense problems, to advise, encourage, admonish. Pray over the visit. Confess your mistakes; ask blessing on your efforts.

The eldership as a whole must turn visiting into congregational profit by:

1. Reports and discussion: strengths, weaknesses, problems real and potential among those visited since last meeting. Gifts for service in the Church discovered during the visits. Potential for wider service. The "state of mind out there" as revealed by the visiting. The spiritual level. Concerns and challenges to be met from the pulpit.

2. Reactions to the Church revealed in the visits: criticisms, just and unjust; suggestions; appreciations; pointers to new ways, higher goals.

3. Visiting techniques: an especially successful approach; one to be avoided hereafter; something to be tried again for another look.

Summary

Family visiting can be tedious and boring for visitor and visited alike. It can also be the glue that binds the congregation closer and closer together as elders and people come better and better to know and understand each other.

It all depends on you, and your solicitation of the aid of the Spirit in this important aspect of an elder's calling.