

Pointers for Elders and Deacons, Part 2

From *Dienst*

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3. THE ELDER ON FAMILY VISIT: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

3.1 Listening and Questioning

In visiting the elders must take into account that most people in the company of one or two office-bearers won't open their hearts and minds without much further ado. They would rather keep a lot of their thoughts and activities to themselves: they certainly don't parade their worries and cares before others. For that reason the elders cannot afford to be superficial for then their visit will be rather unfruitful.

Instead they should make every effort to penetrate deeper. In that regard the elder does well to listen and to ask questions. That won't be easy. In the first place real listening is an art. You do not only listen to that which is said but more importantly to that which is not said. Therefore do not jump to conclusions too quickly.

For that reason it is important for the leader to ask questions. That, too, is not easy at first. For if the elder is to succeed he will have to ask more daring questions than those generally asked on social visits. He is after all an elder. He does not come to satisfy his curiosity, but to give Christian pastoral care a tangible form. In that realization the elder must overcome his diffidence so that he dares to seek more information than is normally the case. It goes without saying that this must be done with tact.

Therefore he will have to take care that he does not ask some of the questions mentioned in [2] literally. Then he comes on too strong and the result will be that people become close-mouthed. With probing questions the elder must let the person know that he is aware of the fact that he is becoming personal. He should also give the other person the chance to answer or not. That does not take away from the fact that only through penetrating questions the elder receives answers to questions like those mentioned. Only in that way does he gain insight into a person's outer and inner life, and only then can he truly comfort, instruct and correct him.

3.2 Corrections

As elder it won't suffice to merely get people to talk. You will have to come with the Bible in your hand, whether you give them comfort, biblical information, or correction. That is the purpose of family visits. Certainly the purpose is not to examine the activities of people visited with the help of all sorts of cold rules and regulations. The elders are not pollsters to see whether or not the consumers like their package of religious commands. Their intention should be to help the members in their service of God. That means that in and with their words they must give direction.

That is difficult especially for young elders. They are inclined to think: "Where do I get the courage from to correct someone older?" Or you are afraid that the other person will think: "What business is it of that young whippersnapper?" Yet the elder has to overcome his reticence. Otherwise he cannot be a good elder. The fact that Christ wants to make use of his work for the sake of the congregation must be a living reality to him. Of course, he should not give himself airs, for after all he is only a servant of God and only passes on His words and the wisdom learned from Him. It can, however, give him enough courage to ask questions

which he otherwise would not. In that way he can be helpful to the people in the service of God in this day and age.

3.3 Two Kinds of Visits

The elder is installed as an office-bearer of the whole congregation. For practical reasons and in most cases, only a part of the congregation is assigned to him. For that reason he cannot get away from taking complete care of that section. This the elders commonly do through two kinds of visits.

- There is the official family visit brought by two office-bearers. This happens once a year and applies to all members of the congregation.
- There are also the unscheduled visits which are mostly brought by one office bearer. There is often a particular reason for these visits and they are paid to those who need them most.

4. THE OFFICIAL FAMILY VISIT

4.1 Direction and Length

In view of its official character this is customarily done by two office-bearers. That arrangement has a great deal going for it, for two hear more than one. They can also support and complement each other in the discussions. Naturally one of them, preferably the district elder, leads. The leader opens the discussion. He should also give the discussion proper direction and it is up to him to ask probing questions. The elder who leads should bring the discussion to a conclusion. His fellow office-bearer can close the visit with prayer.

It is difficult to estimate how much time must be set aside for a visit. Often two visits can be brought in one evening. Sometimes half an evening won't do. It is probably best not to keep a set rule but to consider each visit individually.

4.2 Opening and Closing

It is abundantly clear that each visit is closed with prayer. If possible the prayer should refer to the discussion which took place. If problems come to light they should be presented to God. In any case a blessing should be asked over the visit which has been brought and help should be sought in the fulfilling of daily tasks.

The question of how to begin a visit is more difficult. There are those who argue: "Don't begin with prayer and Bible reading for that way the start is far too artificial." That can indeed be so. However, it can appear equally appropriate, if the visiting elder without much further ado, comes to the point. Hence, there is nothing wrong in starting with prayer and Bible reading (in that order). Of course, such a way of starting a conversation should not be considered an iron clad law. It can happen that as an elder you find yourself in the middle of a substantial discussion even before the question of prayer and reading has arisen.

In such cases the elder who leads should not interrupt the discussion in order to open the family visit officially. Such behavior would be utter foolishness. In general it seems fitting to start with prayer and reading. In the first place the visiting elders are then forced to end the small-talk, no matter how interesting, and to go on to a more meaningful discussion. Such a start is also meaningful for the church members who are visited, for it reveals the true character of the visit. By praying and reading the leader indicates: "We have not come here as acquaintances nor for the conviviality, but as elders to speak together in the presence of God about His service in our time." The two opening elements should be so directed. In the prayer God is asked for strength and wisdom, and that He, through His Spirit, will lead the discussion so that it may be open and edifying. The Bible passage should be a sort of

introduction to the subject about to be discussed. It is difficult to say what passages are suitable for the opening of a house visit, because the subject to be discussed can be almost anything. Seeing that the purpose of home visits is to listen to others and if necessary to correct them, such passages should be short (about three to four verses in length). Starting from the passage one can change over to the first subject for the evening. This should be done in a few sentences (no sermon, please). That way you are forced to talk about a certain subject, and that in itself is another advantage of starting with prayer and Bible reading.

4.3 Subject Material

Two things are necessary with regard to the subject material. First of all, the visiting elders should decide with which subject the visit should be opened. It should not depend on the introductory chat, for in that way it could be difficult to go into depth. Besides, the passage to be read is dependent on the first subject to be discussed. Of course, it goes without saying that these remarks no longer count when an important subject presents itself prior to praying and reading. For the rest it holds that you do not begin a visit without a plan. It is further necessary for the visiting elders to keep two subjects which they could or should discuss in the back of their minds. If they leave the progress of the visit to chance the conversation may shipwreck and deteriorate into superficial chatter. Then, after 10 or 20 minutes it can happen that the visiting elders frantically rack their brains for another subject, particularly if the host/hostess is tight-lipped. Those kinds of failures can be prevented if proper preparation is made beforehand. Whether or not you broach these subjects depends on their importance and the progress of the conversation.

At any rate the leader should make every effort to talk for the most part about meaningful subjects. That means that subjects which in particular concern the (un)Christian thinking and acting of the member visited are discussed and not general Christian matters. While listening and questioning it will become clear to you at what point you come with words of comfort, instruction or correction.

The question of which subjects should be discussed on a certain visit can be answered in two ways.

- First of all the visiting elder determines them with the help of the information he has about the member concerned. With one it could be about church attendance, with another about being single and alone, with yet another about the stress experienced in the work place, etc. The danger inherent in that approach is, however, that certain subjects which are important to everyone, never come up for discussion. That is why it is advisable to use a different method occasionally.
- The elders can decide to discuss at all visits a theme which has been dealt with beforehand at a consistory meeting. At the same time a number of Bible passages suitable for opening a visit, and the way these can be used to open a discussion, can be pointed out.

4.4 The “Finishing Touch”

As elder you cannot afford to stop the discussion thoughtlessly and leave it for what it is. Each house visit ought to be carefully rounded off. That means various activities:

- In the first place the leading elder should summarize matters at the end of the visit for clarity's sake. For example, the subjects discussed and the promises made by one or other party should be reviewed.
- It is to be recommended that after the visit the elders briefly review the conversation to ascertain whether or not mistakes were made and why, whether or not something was left undone and if so, whether or not to pursue the matter. If agreements have been reached or promises made, the elders should see to it that they keep their part of it.

- Not only in connection with the above, but also for other reasons the district elder should make notes of the visit for himself. He should in the first place write down the date of the visit, further what was read and what in particular came to the fore during the visit. In that way the elder can easily refer back to it on subsequent visits and some continuity in visits is established. It goes without saying that when the elder retires he will destroy such notes.
- Finally the home visits must be reported to the consistory. Because the visits are confidential the elders should be reticent in the giving out of information. They only have to relate what the consistory ought to know (for instance that the person visited left a good impression or why they gave rise to doubt) and information with which the consistory has to deal (complaints which could not be settled, suggestions made concerning local church life, etc.).

5. UNSCHEDULED VISITS

5.1 Significance

It is the task of the elder to involve himself with every member in his district. Not only with the people in a certain category (e.g., those in danger of falling away), but with all the members entrusted to him. If he is to do justice to that concept he will have to visit more than just once a year.

Because of his limited time he will have to make a choice. In particular he will have to visit those who experience difficulties, however, that does not mean that he should forget the others. Through personal association with his people he forges the bond of trust with them. It should not be his fault (through noninvolvement), when church members come to nought. As a matter of fact the official family visit would be far more open and run more smoothly, if the relationship between the member visited and the elders is one of trust.

5.2 Method

During unscheduled visits certain points dealt with on the official visit could be followed up. A certain incident or something else could be an occasion for the elder to drop in. Possibly his only motive is the time elapsed since the last official visit. (See under 4.4 for the importance of notes.) Because of the limited purpose of unscheduled visits they don't have to last long. Often 30 to 45 minutes will suffice. In certain cases dropping in for a few minutes can be enough.

Sometimes, however, it may be wise to stay for the whole evening or half of it. It also may be wise for the elder to take his wife along. There are no set rules for this kind of visiting.

The purpose of the visit should be clear to the elder. That is why he should determine for himself whether he intends to follow up on a certain matter. If that is the case he should take the time to think about how he is going to do that. Furthermore, it is beneficial if the elder makes the purpose quite clear early in the visit. Otherwise people keep asking themselves for some time why the elder has really come. To prevent that he should explain quite soon why he has come (e.g., because he wants to follow up on something said at a house visit, because he has not seen the member(s) in church for some time, or because he only wants to see how things are).

In view of the character of unscheduled visits they are best brought by one elder. If a serious matter has to be discussed he can bring a fellow elder along. Also, because of the character of these visits, they are never to be opened with prayer and Bible reading. Whether or not they are to be closed that way depends totally on the situation. If, for instance, a serious matter has been discussed it is almost self evident that at the end a prayer is said. Sometimes an appropriate Bible passage will suit the occasion. In short, for the closing of unscheduled visits

there is only one general rule: one prays if the situation demands it. Often we Reformed people, office bearers as well, are somewhat shy about praying and reading with others. We will have to overcome that. When it naturally follows from the discussion, we should not forget to listen together to God's Word and to present the matter discussed to Him. It is always wise to end visits to the sick and elderly with prayer and reading.

5.3 The “Finishing Touch”

Much of what is said in 4.4 about summaries, review and note taking, and reporting applies to unscheduled visits as well. As far as the reporting of such visits is concerned, I don't think I am far wrong when I assume that little of that is done. To judge by what Art 73 of the C.O. says about the mutual exhortation and admonishing of elders “with regard to the execution of their office”, I think it is incorrect not to report such visits. For how can one do that if one doesn't know that visits, besides the official house visits, are made. To stimulate one self and one's colleagues it is useful for an elder to relate something about his unscheduled visits. Often just mentioning the fact that a visit has been made will be sufficient. It will have a beneficial effect on the activity of the other office bearers.

6. CLOSING REMARKS

6.1 District Division

In a very small congregation there may not be any district divisions. Each elder is involved with the whole congregation. That seems to me to be an undesirable situation, for it remains unclear both to the congregation and the elders which office bearer is responsible for what member. As a result the contact with various members can easily be lost.

The same objection, to be sure much less so, can be made when two elders have one district together. In that case the one so easily assumes that the other is handling the case and does nothing. All kinds of difficulties and misunderstandings may arise.

With good communication between the respective elders this objection can indeed be overcome. But how often does it not happen that you only decide the day before or at the last moment to visit someone? If that is the case you may be unable to consult with your colleague. Inefficient use of man power may be the result. In addition, a pair of elders can vary greatly in their attack and method. That in turn can make the work at one and the same address still more difficult.

Therefore, it is best if each elder has his own district. Then the office bearer knows precisely for which part of the congregation he is personally responsible. When a limited number of people are entrusted to him alone, it would be difficult for him to shirk his duties over against them. He can forge closer ties with them than when together with another elder he has to take care of double the number of people. Conversely, the church members know to which elder they can go with their questions and worries. Of course regular visits (house visits and certain unscheduled visits) should be made by the two of them. It seems more practical to me that there are set pairs of elders each season.

That can be done in two ways:

- The consistory can decide at the beginning of the season which elders should work together this time around.
- It can also be decided that elders of certain districts always work together. (If the system of two elders to one district still exists, the district could simply be divided between the two of them, while the two elders continue to work together.)

The advantage of both systems is that for a year at least you work together with a regular

partner. It is far easier to consult him, because he is also acquainted with your district. It seems advisable that a more experienced elder is paired with one who has less experience. Such an approach works better under the first than the second system.

Unless both elders retire at the same time, the second system has more advantages when the time has come for the “changing of the guard”, for then the remaining elder, because of his knowledge of the district, can assist the newly elected elder in his orientation.

6.2 Transfer of the District

When an elder retires it is not enough for him to give his successor only a list of names, addresses and birth dates. He has to transfer his district in more detail. I don't mean that he should extensively inform his successor about the personality and Christian character of all the members in his district. A newly elected elder should have the opportunity to meet the members entrusted to him without any prejudices. Conversely, the church members receive a chance to begin with a clean slate.

What the new elder has to be told are the external circumstances such as family relationship, the children living outside the congregation (their church ties included), the dates of death of the marriage partner or children, church attendance; membership of study societies, occupation (or former occupation); school education, etc.

That kind of information can greatly help an elder in his orientation. Much of that he will get to know when he informally visits the members in his district. It should be a matter of fact that he does so. In doing so he gives himself, in my opinion, a head start.

6.3 Praying

Up to now we have concerned ourselves for the most part with the work of the elder in the congregation. That pastoral activity, however, can only be fruitful if it is supported by his personal prayer at home. On a regular basis the elder should pray for the congregation, in particular for his own district.

He cannot only do this in general terms. He must concretely place the names and the concerns of the people in his care before God

The office-bearer should also pray for himself. He must fully realize that he is responsible for the members entrusted to him (see Heb. 13:17). I do not mention this to scare anyone but to show that it is necessary for the elder to ask God for wisdom and strength in order to execute his task well. It is also essential for him to ask God for forgiveness for wrongdoings and to ask Him to curtail the damages resulting from them.

If the elder makes his work in the congregation part of his prayer life he can do it in the correct frame of mind. If he only pays attention to the work load and its troubles and pains particularly in relation to the limited scope of his activities both in quantity and quality, it would only discourage him and bring about despair. But since he has entrusted the congregation and himself to God, he can be at peace. In the final analysis he does not have to keep the people on the right track; Christ does that. As the Head of the Church He does the actual work by His Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-7). Even if an office-bearer fails, Christ completes His plans. Such knowledge should give an office-bearer courage, in spite of the disappointments he experiences.

Of course, others with their problems can get to him. However, with the help of prayer an office-bearer should not let himself be swept along by feelings of either uselessness or superiority. He realizes that he, as much as the others, depends on Christ's atoning blood.

III. SOMETHING ABOUT THE WORK OF THE DEACONS

Many consistories have difficulty with the question, what do deacons really have to do? Many deacons are confused as well. Let's face it, such confusion causes the deacon to be the odd man out. It is self-evident that this has dire consequences for one's estimation of the office of deacon. To say nothing about how miserable a deacon must feel under such circumstances.

From all sides you hear suggestions about how to make the office of deacon more functional. Written material to remedy this is plentiful. We only have to think about the many articles on the subject in *Dienst*.

Yet in spite of the practical remarks made in them, the step from theory to practice appears to be very difficult to make.

The following is intended to narrow the gap somewhat. I have collected practical pointers from the various volumes of *Dienst* and arranged them schematically. You will not find much new material in it, but perhaps by presenting the available material in this way, the deacons may be helped.

1. THE TASK OF THE DEACONS IN GENERAL.

We begin by following the form for ordination. There we find a description of the deacon's task in broad outlines. That the form speaks about the task of the congregation first and then about the task of the deacon is remarkable.

1.1 The task of the congregation

All our serving finds its origin in the love of Christ. He came into the world to serve, and even went so far as to offer himself up for God's enemies. He also took pity on many who were in need. In their serving the congregation must follow her Lord. That, among other things, means that the congregation should joyfully provide the deacons with sufficient means to do their work. In addition the members of the church must be good stewards over what has been entrusted to them. Briefly, everyone in the congregation should consider themselves called to serve, for in Christ's congregation no one may live uncomforted under the stress of sickness, loneliness and poverty. It is precisely the suffering who ought to share in the joy of God's people.

1.2 The task of the deacon

The deacon, the elder, is a gift from the ascended Christ to his congregation. It is a gift he gives in his continuing care for His flock. The task of the deacons, then, is to see to it that the service mentioned under 1.1 is continually rendered to the congregation. If he is to do that work properly he must do three things:

- Call on the families in order to ascertain the possible needs in the congregation and urge the congregation to serve;
- Collect and manage the donations and dispense them joyfully in the name of Christ to those in need;
- Comfort and encourage the church members who receive help with God's Word.

In short, the deacon ought to make visible through word and deed the communion of saints, which the Holy Spirit cultivates in the congregation and which is enjoyed at the Lord's Supper table. Therefore, he must be a help to those who are troubled and lonely. In his work he must be a good example of the service which Christ requires of all his members.

1.3 Additional remarks about the deacon and the congregation

1.3.1 The congregation

It is certainly not the task of the deacons to serve on behalf of the congregation. It is in the first place the congregation which must serve. Its members ought to insure that assistance is rendered when someone finds himself in distress. That is a mandate which the members may not fob off on the deacons, for then they themselves would fall short in their following of Christ. That's why a deacon should never allow the congregation to push all sorts of odd jobs on him. He must resist the temptation to do everything himself. Instead he should put the congregation to work. You could say that he should make himself redundant.

1.3.2 The deacon

In actuality the deacon will really never become redundant, for the service of the congregation, because of sin, will never be what it ought to be. Hence there is always enough work to do for the deacon.

- In the first place, he will have to find out where and what kind of help is needed. The fact that someone in the congregation is in need can quite easily remain hidden. That it remains hidden is often because of a lack of trust in the community on the part of the person concerned. This may be understandable in light of previous experiences. That is why a trusted person (a deacon) is needed to whom one can tell his trouble, and of whom one knows that he will do everything he can to help.
- Furthermore, the deacon should use every effort to make the congregation understand their calling and urge them to greater service. He will have to point out to them where and how they can help. In the first place he will have to point out what they can do in the local congregation as well as in the church federation. In the second place the deacon should make the members aware of (charitable) organizations which are not only beneficial to church members but to non-Christians as well.
- The deacon himself should really serve. That means that he is busy on behalf of the congregation, particularly when an emergency situation has arisen. He can also do something for someone, for an extended period, either because the congregation has failed in their calling to do so themselves, or to provide the congregation with an example to follow. The deacon will have to act on behalf of the congregation where it concerns financial support. The nature of such support is very sensitive and common knowledge is undesirable.
- In view of what has been said in 1.3.2 it should be clear that if a deacon is to execute his task properly, it is necessary for him to visit the members of the congregation. Only in that way will he find out if help is needed. As a matter of fact his visiting can be service in itself, for by his example he encourages the rest of the congregation to follow suit.

1.4 The deacon and the elder

According to the form for ordination, the elder's task is to lead the congregation. He is to see to it that each member holds Christian convictions and conducts himself properly. In order to do that work he has to visit the congregation to comfort, instruct or correct them with God's Word. From that description it appears that the work of the elders and deacons partially overlaps. The deacon, as well as the elder, concerns himself with those who because they are single, old, sick, or, for some other reason, have difficulties. However, for the elder that is only part of his work, for the deacon it is his work exclusively. That is why it is the task of the deacon, not the elder, to busy himself completely with those members who through external circumstances are in difficulty. It is he and not the elder who comes with financial aid and words of comfort.

2. POSSIBLE NEEDS IN THE CONGREGATION OF WHICH THE DEACON OUGHT TO BE AWARE

The deacon should be continually on the lookout for the needs of the members of the congregation; for situations where possible help or extra attention is needed. Even though the list is really endless, I will mention a few practical examples. Let's suppose that:

2.1 Someone is a member of the congregation

That gives rise to questions such as:

- Does he make any efforts to mean something to his fellow church members; in other words, does he visit them, does he do something for them (shopping, odd jobs, babysitting), does he pray for them?
- Does he realize in his money management that he is a steward of God's possessions; does he give a proper percentage to the church, the mission and all kinds of other (charitable) organizations, in and outside the church community?

2.2 Someone is elderly.

That gives rise to questions such as:

- Can he do his housekeeping, or does he need some assistance (e.g., with the laundry, shopping, window cleaning, taking out the garbage, odd jobs such as wallpapering)?
- Can he get by financially?
- Does he get many visitors; if not would he appreciate more? Can he come to church, are rides to and from church (when needed) well regulated? If he cannot come to church does he receive a cassette or video recording of the service?
- Can he still read or does he need someone to read to him on a regular basis? Is he interested in large print books or tape recordings from other sources?
- Would he like to go someplace for a visit?

2.3 Someone is house-bound because of sickness or handicap

- Are sufficient technical means available for him to get around at home, or is help from a variety organizations necessary?
- Are there financial problems?
- Is he visited enough or would he like more (at least on a weekly basis)?
- Can he enter into the spirit of church life sufficiently, does he appreciate the cassette recordings of the church services or other events held in the church?
- Does he occasionally need transportation? Would he like to go on holidays or go out for a day or part of it?

2.4 Someone is hospitalized or institutionalized

- Does the person receive visits (in a hospital if possible daily), is any thought given to family members at home?
- Is it possible for family members to visit regularly or is help needed for transportation, babysitting, money?

2.5 A mother is ill or suffering from a (near) mental breakdown

- Is regular assistance with the housekeeping a necessity; if yes, how much temporary replacement or other help is needed with certain things (laundry, housecleaning, mending, or babysitting during the day)?
- Does the wife need the opportunity to go out with her husband alone, for a day (or part there of), for a set period?

2.6 Someone has a sensory handicap

- Can someone whose hearing is impaired still follow the church service, are earphones a requirement in church; does the sermon have to be printed or can it be followed reasonably well on cassette recordings?
- Can someone whose vision is impaired still read, or is someone needed to read to him, is he interested in large print (Bible) books and/or tape-recordings?

2.7 Someone is a widow with children

- Can she manage financially; are her insurances kept up, does she need help with the filling in her tax papers?
- Do certain jobs remain undone?
- Is she able to go out for a day or can she not get a baby-sitter?
- Does she get enough visits from couples, or do the women visit her without their husbands?
- Are there special problems with the children?

2.8 A family is threatened with bankruptcy

- Is it necessary to give (temporary) help?
- Do the persons concerned need to be taught sound financial management?

2.9 Someone is out of work

- Are the burdens becoming too heavy because of lack of income?
- Can he and his family cope with the situation and is he in that respect supported by the congregation?
- Is he totally bored and would like to have a certain task within the congregation?
- Does he look for work or is there only certain work he wants to do? Is he too choosy?

2.10 Someone becomes a church member

- Is he welcomed by non-office-bearers? Is he informed about the way things are done in the congregation and is he made to feel part of the community?.

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