

Pointers for Elders and Deacons, Part 3

From *Dienst*

Extracted from [Ordnained Servant](#) vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 3-8

3. The Deacon on Visit: Introductory Remarks

3.1. Listening and questioning

When a deacon visits someone he should remember that most people don't like to flaunt their troubles, and find it difficult to ask for help. It is also true that someone doesn't readily own up to his own shortcomings in serving others. For that reason the deacon should not try to remain superficial in his discussion, for then his visits will be rather unfruitful. Instead, he must make every effort to penetrate below the surface. In that connection the deacon should learn to listen and to ask questions. That is not the easiest thing to do. In the first place proper listening is difficult. In doing so the deacon must not only listen to what is said but also to what is not said. He must never assume too quickly that he has understood the other person's difficulty. For that reason, too, it is necessary for him to ask questions. If he really wants to know what is going on in a family, he must come with more daring questions than is normally the case on social visits. He is after all a deacon and he comes not to satisfy his own curiosity but to give a tangible form to Christ's mercy. Needless to say he must overcome his diffidence. All this, of course, should be done with tact. That is why he will have to take care that he does not ask the questions mentioned in 2 in a formal or literal way. In so doing he would come on too strong and the result will be that the people become close-mouthed. With probing questions the deacon must show, that he is aware of the fact that he is becoming very personal. He should also give the other person the chance to answer the questions or not. That, however, does not take away from the fact that only through penetrating questions will the deacon receive answers that will help him to do his work. Only when he has diagnosed the problem correctly, can he offer the appropriate help, be it money or advice.

3.2. Two kinds of visits

The deacon is installed as an office bearer. For practical reasons only part of the congregation is assigned to him. That being the case he should not shirk his responsibility for that part. It is the custom among us that elders do this by means of two kinds of visits.

- The official, yearly family visit brought by two office bearers to all members of the congregation.
- The unscheduled visits 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.

In my opinion it is sensible and practical to maintain a similar distinction for the visits of the deacons. I will go into more detail about the deacon visits in what follows.

4. THE OFFICIAL FAMILY VISIT

4.1. Direction, frequency and length

In view of its official character it is best done by two deacons. Together they hear more. They can also support and complement each other during the discussion.

Naturally, one of them, preferably the district deacon, (if there is one, see 6) leads the

discussion. The leader opens the discussion and gives it a proper direction. It is also up to him to ask the probing questions. The leader also brings the discussion to a conclusion. After that his fellow office bearer can close with prayer.

It is difficult to say how often a family visit ought to be made. Generally there are fewer deacons than elders, therefore, a yearly visit to all members is a heavy work load for the deacon. Probably a visit once every two or three years would be manageable. Even if there were more deacons than elders, it would still not be advisable, for the subjects of discussion for deacons is limited. The elders by virtue of their office must oversee all aspects of family and congregational life and, therefore, they have plenty of material for discussion. That is different with the deacons. Their duty is to pay attention to the mutual service of the congregation. On each visit they have to talk about that. If they would do so each year their visits would become rather meaningless and repetitive. Such would be far less the case if there are two or three years between visits.

To be sure, the subject of mutual service is a comprehensive one, and half an evening is probably not enough to discuss all of it. However, dividing the subject material over two visits is not recommended. It is far better to spend one whole evening on it.

4.2. Informing the Congregation

It is a generally known fact, that the deacons themselves, as well as the congregation, are confused about the task of the deacons. That is how we began this article. People would be rather startled if all of a sudden they would receive a family visit from two deacons. That is why it makes sense that the deacons publish something about the content and purpose of Deaconal family visits in the local church bulletin on a yearly basis.

For that matter it would be instructive if the deacons informed the congregation about further work done by them. It should be made clear that even in a time of affluence the deacons have plenty of work to do. Serving one another, in which the deacons set the example, is not in the first place a question of handing out money.

4.3. Opening and Closing

It is abundantly clear that each visit should be closed with prayer. If possible in the prayer reference should be made to the matters discussed. Problems which came to light during the discussion should be presented to God. In any case we should pray to God to make us faithful in serving one another.

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 in that way you imitate the elders in their visiting.” In my opinion, such an argument does not hold any water. A more sensible argument would be that such an opening at the beginning of a discussion is some what artificial.

Still, it is equally forced, if the visiting deacon con without much further ado comes to the point. That is why it seems fitting to begin with prayer and reading (in that order). In the first place, this benefits the visiting deacons, for thereby they are forced to end the small talk, no matter how interesting it may be, and to go on to a more meaningful discussion. Such a start is also instructive for the church members who are visited, for it reveals to them the true character of the visit. By praying and reading the leader indicates: “We have not come as acquaintances, nor for the conviviality, but as deacons to speak together from a Scriptural perspective and in the presence of God about the serving task of the congregation.”

The two opening elements should thus be prayer and Scripture reading. 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, as a matter of fact, deal with the

task of serving one another in Christ. Starting from the passage one can change over to the first subject of discussion for the evening: the form for ordination (see below).

4.4. Subjects for discussion

After the opening with prayer and reading four subjects should be discussed on a Deaconal family visit.

4.4.1. The form for ordination

In the first place it is good to talk briefly about the content of the form. If at all possible the deacons should try not to dominate the discussion, but should attempt to have a mutual discussion about what the Bible says about service in general.

Seeing what has been stated in 1, it should be clear that both the task of the congregation and that of the deacons are to be discussed. To help the discussion along the deacons begin with pointing out that because of our unity in Christ, the congregation should be a community of people who serve and support each other in particular when there are difficulties. After that attention is paid to the fact that deacons are to stimulate such service, as well as serving others.

By way of conclusion, the deacons should point out that because of their task and that of the congregation they have come to talk about whether or not they can help and about how the members can/should be of service.

4.4.2. Possible needs

By listening and asking questions (see 3.1) the deacons should try to find out if the family visited has one or more problems (summary 2.2-2.10). If that is the case the discussion can center on the nature of the problem and about the kind of help that is needed (odd jobs, transportation, money etc.). In doing so the deacons should watch out for two things. In their enthusiasm they could, on the one hand, be too quick and too generous in their assistance, particularly when it concerns odd jobs and money. The result of this can be that the recipient becomes needlessly dependent. It is, therefore, necessary to give the recipient the opportunity to solve his problems independently. If that does not happen, the deacons can come to their aid. After that, however, the deacons should withdraw as soon as possible.

In their diffidence, on the other hand, they could be too quickly put off by a refusal to accept help. They ought to realize full well that such a refusal is often the result of false pride and a wrong perspective on the congregation. Therefore, it is often necessary for the deacons to instruct the member(s) about the nature of ecclesiastical aid, particularly where it concerns money. It has to be learned that it is incorrect to experience such assistance as humiliating, as a shame, for in fact the recipient receives Christ's gifts of love. In the proffered help one experiences how Christ's mercy becomes visible in the work of the deacons. In other words, in the gifts given the community established by Christ through His Spirit, becomes tangible. In light of that there are no reasons whatsoever for church members to refuse the offered help.

4.4.3. Serving each other

Next, the deacons through listening and asking questions inquire whether or not the person(s) visited are making enough effort to serve others in the congregation. (See first part of 2.1) If there is a lack of some kind, the deacons should urge them not to neglect their serving function. At certain visits they could also point out how someone through definite activities or by his presence alone can be of help to others.

4.4.4. Money Management

Finally, the deacons should put the question to the person(s) visited whether or not they act as faithful stewards of God's possessions (see under 2.1). As always the deacons should pursue this matter with tact. They would be going too far if they inquired about amounts and percentages. What they can do is to point out the scriptural norms for such giving. In this connection it can be meaningful to talk about the different causes for which collections are held during the worship services. It probably will show that such knowledge is often minimal. A discussion of the purposes of various collections would certainly increase awareness. In addition it would be useful if the deacons pointed out a number of organizations within the Reformed community which are in need of our prayer and money. In my opinion other organizations not necessarily Christian, could also be pointed out. To keep the discussion orderly it is recommended that the deacons prepare a fact sheet before hand.

4.5. The "Finishing Touch"

As deacon you cannot afford to stop the discussion abruptly and leave it for what it is. Each visit ought to be carefully rounded off. That means a number of activities.

- In the first place, the leading deacon should summarize matters at the end of the visit for the sake of clarity. For example the subjects discussed and the promises made by one or other party.
- It is to be recommended that after the visit the deacons briefly review the discussion to ascertain whether or not mistakes were made and why, whether or not something was left undone and if so whether one or both of them should pursue the matter further. If agreements were reached or promises made, the deacons should make sure that their part is kept.
- Not only in connection with the above, but also for other reasons a deacon should make notes of the visits. 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 in the discussion. In that way the deacons can easily refer back to it on subsequent visits and some continuity is established. It goes without saying that when a deacon retires, he will destroy such notes.
- Finally the visits must be reported to the consistory. Because of the confidentiality of the visits the deacons should be reticent in the giving of information. They only have to relate what should be already known to their fellow office bearers (for instance that the person visited left a good impression or why he gave reason for concern) and information with which both elders and deacons have to deal (complaints which could not be settled, suggestions made concerning local church life etc.).

If at all possible these reports should be made at a council meeting. It makes sense, that the elders are informed about what the deacons have experienced. If it is not possible to make a full report because of the size of the consistory, only information about worrisome developments in a certain household, complaints and suggestions with which the deacons have to deal ought to be given. The complete report, including confidential, financial information, should be brought on a deacons' meeting.

5. UNSCHEDULED VISITS

5.1. Significance

It is the task of the deacon to involve himself with every member of the congregation. Not only with people in a certain category (e.g. the elderly or those who have financial difficulties), but with all the members entrusted to him. If he is to do justice to that concept, he will have to visit more often.

Because of the limited time available to him he will, of course, have to make a choice. In particular he will have to visit those members who are experiencing social, material, or physical difficulties. The others in his care, however, should not be neglected. That is why he should take the trouble to visit them once in awhile. Through personal association with his people he forges a bond of trust. It should not be his fault, when needy members of the congregation pass him over in favor of secular authorities. It should also not be his fault when the needs in the congregation are unknown and he is unable to translate his desire to help into deeds.

5.2. Method

The deacon for the most part visits those people whom he knows to be, or assumes to be, in difficulty. In addition he visits those people who are prepared to help. Each visit, therefore, has its own character. I will mention a few examples.

- The deacon visits in order to do something himself (e.g. doing odd jobs, to hand over money, or just to show his interest).
- The deacon visits to ascertain whether or not the information he has received concerning needs in the congregation, is indeed correct.
- The deacon visits people in order to convince them to lend their help in certain cases.
- The deacon visits simply because too much time has passed since the last visit (see 4.5 about notes).

From the above, it becomes clear that certain aspects of the official family visit occur at unscheduled visits as well. You could say that on official visits the whole spectrum of Christian service is discussed, while on unscheduled visits certain elements are high^{lighted}.

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 just dropping in for a few minutes is enough. Sometimes, however, it may be wiser to stay a whole evening or half of it. It may also be wise for the deacon to take his wife along and that she, on his behalf, pays a visit. There are no set rules for this kind of visiting.

The purpose of the visit should be clear to the deacon. 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 time to think about how he is going to do that. It is also useful if the deacon makes the purpose of his visit known as soon as possible, otherwise people keep asking themselves why has the deacon really come. To prevent that from happening, he should explain almost right away why he has come (e.g. because he has heard about sickness in the family, because a member is unemployed, because the person has difficulty getting about, because the deacon seeks the member's help, or because he only wants to see how things are going).

In the view of the character of unscheduled visits they are best brought by one deacon. If a serious matter has to be discussed he can bring a fellow deacon 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 well. 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 omit 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, note taking, and reporting applies to unscheduled visits as well. As far as the reporting of such visits is concerned, little of that is done. To judge by what Art. 73 of the C.O. says about the mutual exhortation and admonishing of deacons “with regard to the execution of their office,” I think it is incorrect not to report such visits. To stimulate himself and his colleagues it is useful for a deacon to relate something about his unscheduled visits. Often the mere mention of the fact that a visit has been made will be sufficient. To make the giving of that simple information a requirement can have a beneficial effect on the activity of office-bearers.

6. CLOSING REMARKS

6.1. District Division

In a very small congregation there may not be any district division. Each deacon is involved with the whole congregation. On the whole that is an undesirable situation, for then it remains unclear both to the congregation and to the deacons themselves which office bearer is responsible for what member. As a result the contact with various members can easily be lost.

Therefore, I advocate that each deacon has his own district. Then the office bearer knows precisely for which part of the congregation he is personally responsible. When only a limited number of people are entrusted to him, 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 deacon he has to take care of double the number of people. Conversely, the church members know to which deacon they can turn for help.

Of course, regular visits (family visits and certain unscheduled visits) should be made by the two deacons. It seems more practical to me that there are set pairs of deacons each season. The consistory or a deacons' meeting can decide at the beginning of the season which deacons should work together this time around. The advantage of that system is that for a year at least you work together with a regular partner. It is far easier to consult with someone who is also acquainted with your district. It is advisable that a more experienced deacon is paired with one who has less experience.

It is further important that the district of a deacon is not larger than the district(s) of two elders. That means at the same time, that the number of deacons is at least half of that of the elders. For those who see it there is plenty of work. Justice can only be done to the work if the number of families under one deacon's care remains as small as possible.

6.2. Transfer of the District

When a deacon 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 deacon should have the opportunity to meet the members entrusted to him without any prejudices. Conversely church members should receive the chance to begin with a clean slate.

What the new deacon 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 a deacon in his orientation. Much of that he will also get to know, when he informally visits the members in his district. It should be a matter of course that he does so. In doing so he gives himself a head start.

6.3. Organization

In serving one another one sometimes comes across recurrent activities or activities that go on for some time. I think here of visiting the elderly and the sick, help with the housekeeping, the doing of odd jobs, babysitting, the welcoming of new church members, etc.. Such instances of mutual service require some organization. The arrangement of these activities is preeminently the work of the deacons. They can, for example, enlist the help of the women societies or form separate committees to do certain tasks.

They will, however, have to take care that such arrangements soon begin to function independently and that their work becomes supervisory in nature only.

6.4. Deaconal Meetings

Even in places where the deacons are part of the consistory, it is recommended that they still meet together as deacons. At such meetings all sorts of matters can be dealt with (e.g. reports of visits made, discussion of financial aid given, discussion of certain difficulties, and the making of certain arrangements See 6.3).

In all this the deacons should be aware that according to the Church Order they are responsible to the consistory. Deaconal policy and management needs the approval of the consistory. Worrisome developments within the congregation are to be discussed with the consistory or, at least, with the district elder. Conversely, the elders should not take drastic measures in cases which also involves the deacons without their knowing about it.

Steps should be taken to prevent elders and deacons from working independently on a case or even working against each other. Together they should work on the edification of the congregation.

6.5. Praying

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

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

The deacon 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 any one but to show the necessity of his asking God for wisdom and strength in order that he may execute his task well. It is also essential to ask God for forgiveness for wrong doings and to ask Him to curtail the damages resulting from them.

If the deacon makes his work in the congregation part of his prayer 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, if not lead him to 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. I Cor. 3:5-7). Even if the office bearer fails, Christ completes his plans. That knowledge can give an office bearer courage, in spite of the disappointments caused by himself or others.

Certain members can indeed bother him greatly. However, ruled by the prayer for the congregation and himself, an office bearer should not let himself be swept along by feelings of either superiority or antipathy. He realizes that he, as much as other believers, must depend

on Christ's atoning blood.

The task of the Deacons is:

1. to diligently collect alms (gifts for the poor) and other contributions of charity;
2. to faithfully and diligently distribute the same to the poor as their needs may require, after mutual counsel;
3. to visit and comfort the distressed;
4. to encourage the congregation to show Christian mercy to those in need at home and abroad;
5. to render an account to the Session.

—from the *Church Order of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand*