

Guide for Conducting Church Visiting

I. Brief history of the practice of church visiting

Church visiting has its roots in apostolic tradition. Peter “traveled about the country” and, among others, visited the “saints in Lydda” (Acts 9:32). Paul “went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (Acts 15:41), ascertaining how they were doing (Acts 15:36), and delivering “the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey” (Acts 16:4). His epistles to the Corinthians, Thessalonians, and others are filled with references to previous and future visits designed to upbuild the saints of God (e.g., I Cor. 16:5-9; I Thess. 2:1; 2:17-3:10).

There are very few references to the practice of church visiting in descriptions of life in the early Christian church. It is clear, however, that by the fourth century there was a regular pattern of diocesan visits made by bishops or their representatives in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In the centuries that followed, especially in the Western church, these visits increasingly assumed the character of hierarchical supervision. Indeed, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, if done at all, the visits had degenerated into judicial inquiries or occasions for the clergy to heap abuse on the local parish. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Reformers initially saw them as part of a corrupt system desperately in need of renewal.

Despite early misgivings, Martin Luther eventually urged the Elector of Saxony to require church and school visits in every place. As Williston Walker observes in *A History of the Christian Church*, “‘visitors’ were appointed by the Elector to inquire into clerical doctrine and conduct on the basis of articles drawn up by Melancthon in 1527, and enlarged the following year.” The focus in these articles was indeed on “clerical doctrine and conduct,” but the document included areas like confession, discipline, and liturgy. Indeed, this “constitution” also provided for the appointment of “superintendents,” who visited churches on an annual basis not only in Germany but throughout the Lutheran world. An element of hierarchy remained, but the practice was largely restored to its original purpose of strengthening the congregations.

Similar developments took place in other areas where the Reformation flourished. John Calvin introduced annual church visits in Geneva and surrounding areas in 1546. They were made by two city-council members and two elected ministers of the Word. Eventually, the practice found an enduring place in the Genevan Church Order (the *Ordonnances ecclesiastiques*), adopted in 1561. In Scotland, John Knox instituted a temporary office of “superintendents,” who were to visit all the congregations to ensure a healthy development of church life. His idea was that the office should cease as soon as there were a sufficient number of preachers. Largely due to Episcopal influences, the practice took on a more permanent character, and, once again, there were traces of illegitimate hierarchical intrusion into affairs of the local parish.

The attempt to avoid all hierarchy in such a practice was most successful in the Reformed churches of France and the lowlands. The Synod of Emden (1571) adopted the principle still found in Article 85 of the current Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church: “No church shall in any way lord it over another church, and no officebearer shall lord it over another office-

bearer.” When the Synod of Middelburg was asked a decade later whether it would be beneficial to appoint superintendents to conduct annual church visits, the assembly expressed its fears about such arrangements and decided that they were unnecessary.

But the need remained, apparently, and just five years later the Synod of the Hague (1586) eventually permitted “*visitatores*” appointed by regional bodies (classes), though at the same time the institution of “superintendents” was forbidden. This decision became the model for the practice of church visiting in the Netherlands and, ultimately, what is now Article 42 of the Church Order. It also provided the basic structure for what we know as the Guide for Conducting Church Visiting that has been developed throughout the history of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

In this way the churches of the Reformation sought to return to apostolic example by arranging for annual visits of congregations, designed to strengthen the local church and its officebearers. The practice acknowledges that the local church is not an island unto itself. It provides an avenue of accountability—not as if the officebearers must answer to superiors but by acknowledging the accumulated authority of the broader assembly called the “*classis*,” which designates those who conduct church visiting. In addition, those who visit provide a reasonably objective “ear” for members who have grown disillusioned with their leadership and need the assistance and advice of others. In this way congregations have a constructive way to deal with tensions that may arise.

II. Clear statement of purpose

A. *Church Order Article 42-b specifies the practice and purpose of church visiting:*

- a. The classis shall appoint at least one committee composed of two of the more experienced and competent officebearers, two ministers, or one minister and one elder, to visit all its churches once a year.
- b. The church visitors shall ascertain whether the officebearers faithfully perform their duties, adhere to sound doctrine, observe the provisions of the Church Order, and properly promote the edification of the congregation and the extension of God’s kingdom. They shall fraternally admonish those who have been negligent, and help all with advice and assistance.
- c. The churches are free to call on the church visitors whenever serious problems arise.
- d. The church visitors shall render to classis a written report of their work.

B. *Four aspects of church visiting*

1. Ascertain—this involves data gathering, conversation, and listening.
2. Admonish—a limited aspect, but occasionally required.
3. Advise—councils have questions that can be dealt with at the official visit or between visits.
4. Accountability—church visitors report their work to classis.

The four aspects above all suggest that the biblical teaching of mutual accountability is foundational to the practice of church visiting. Covenant life together includes a willingness to submit oneself to others and a willingness to live faithfully to agreed-upon commitments.

C. Role of church visitors

The church visitors come as fellow officebearers who are appointed by the broader church to learn about the spiritual health of the congregation, to discuss areas of ministry where the church is experiencing the Lord's blessing and where the church is struggling, and to ascertain whether the council, the minister, the elders, the deacons, and the evangelist (if there is one) are ministering properly and faithfully.

III. Arrangements for visit

A. Proper announcement and preparation for the meeting

1. Council members and congregational members must be informed in advance when and why the visit is occurring.
2. Councils should prepare for the meeting by reviewing the purpose for the meeting and by discussing the questions to be asked.

B. Councils should allow sufficient time for the visit—a minimum of one hour is required.

C. Official records of the church must be available for the visitors to review (council minutes, elders' minutes, deacons' minutes, articles of incorporation, audited financial statements, etc.).

D. Other suggestions

1. In order for the meeting with the council to be informative and beneficial, the visitors may want to consider having a separate visit with the minister and his/her spouse and/or having dinner with the executive committee or a small leadership group of the council.
2. Visits to churches which are some distance from the core of the classis may afford the visitors an opportunity to spend a weekend with the congregation, to lead worship, and to build closer ties with the churches of classis.

E. Requests for advice

If a council knows that it has some issue(s) on which it will seek advice, it should inform the visitors in advance of the visit so that they can give some thought to the advice they want to give.

F. Members of congregation meeting with church visitors

Members of the congregation who have a concern about congregational life and/or about the present leadership of the congregation may meet with the church visitors. Any members wishing to meet with the church visitors must inform the council of their intention, and identify the substance of their concerns before meeting with the church visitors.

IV. Guidelines for the conversation with church visitors

A. Role of council

1. The Church Order gives certain responsibilities to all church councils. Some responsibilities are regular and ongoing, and others are occasional and temporary. The responsibilities assigned to church councils are these:

- a. Oversee regular replacement of officebearers (Art. 4)
 - b. Ensure the signing of the Form of Subscription (Art. 5)
 - c. Oversee the calling of a minister and ensure that all regulations are followed (Art. 9)
 - d. Supervise doctrine, life, and duties of minister(s) (Art. 13)
 - e. Give consent for the minister to accept another call (Art. 14)
 - f. Provide for the proper support of the minister (Art. 15)
 - g. Approve a leave of absence for the minister (Art. 16)
 - h. Initiate and/or approve the release of a minister from service to the congregation (Art. 17)
 - i. Approve retirement of a minister (Art. 18-a)
 - j. Organize itself in certain ways (Art. 32-a - 32-c)
 - k. Provide for safeguarding property through incorporation (Art. 32-d)
 - l. Composed itself of ministers, elders, deacons (Art. 35-a)
 - m. Meet regularly and conduct mutual censure (Art. 36)
 - n. Call and conduct an annual congregational meeting (Art. 37)
 - o. Delegate a minister and an elder to classis meetings (Art. 40)
 - p. Give account of its work to classis at each meeting via answers to questions on the credentials (Art. 41)
 - q. Receive the church visitors yearly (Art. 42)
 - r. Hold worship services, ordinarily twice on Sunday, and on certain special days (Art. 51)
 - s. Provide for an educational ministry to nurture the faith of youth and enhance the faith of adults (Arts. 63-a; 64-a)
 - t. Provide pastoral care to congregation (Art. 65)
 - u. Maintain a complete record of all membership matters (Art. 68)
 - v. Encourage members to establish and maintain Christian schools; urge parents to have their children instructed in these schools (Art. 71)
 - w. Promote societies for the study of God's Word and serve the youth with assistance and advice (Art. 72)
 - x. Stimulate members to be witnesses for Christ and to support the work of missions (Art. 73-b)
 - y. Sponsor and govern the bringing of the gospel to unbelievers in the community (Art. 74-a)
2. Sample questions regarding the work of council

Note: It is assumed that the list of council responsibilities detailed above will be in the possession of each council member and that the conversation will move back and forth from some general questions to some very specific questions.

- a. Which area(s) of council responsibility has proven to be most rewarding this year?
- b. Which area(s) of council responsibility has been most challenging/frustrating this year?
- c. What creative or new ministries have you considered or initiated this year?
- d. What are you doing to equip the congregation for ministry?

- e. What obstacles stand in your way of doing more effective ministry in the congregation? In the community?
- f. How are the distinctives of being a Christian Reformed church fostered in this congregation?
- g. What creative ways have you found to minister to those often forgotten by others such as shut-ins, persons with disabilities, and others?
- h. Is your level of financial support for the minister appropriate and sufficient? Do you discuss this matter with your minister(s) yearly?

B. Role of the minister

1. The Church Order identifies certain aspects of the minister's vocation. The following responsibilities are mentioned:
A minister shall
 - a. Sign the Form of Subscription (Art. 5)
 - b. Proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture (Art. 11)
 - c. Preach, administer sacraments, conduct public worship, teach catechism, train members for service, supervise the doctrine and life of the congregation, exercise admonition and discipline, exercise pastoral care, and engage in and promote evangelism (Art. 12)
 - d. Be properly supported by the council (Art. 15-d)
 - e. Be a member of the council (Art. 35-a)
 - f. Be a member of the consistory (Art. 35-b)
 - g. Serve as a delegate to classis (and may be called upon to serve classis in various functions) (Art. 40-a)
 - h. Conduct the worship services (Art. 53-a)
 - i. Officially explain and apply Holy Scripture in worship services (Art. 54-a)
 - j. Ordinarily preach the Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism at one service each Sunday (Art. 54-b)
 - k. Administer the sacraments in public worship (Art. 55)
 - l. Be expected to solemnize marriages which are consistent with the Word of God (Art. 69-c)
2. Sample questions concerning the work of the minister(s)

Note: It is assumed that the above list of specific responsibilities of the minister will be available to council members during the visit. Questions about any of these responsibilities may be asked during the visit.

- a. What themes (emphases) in the minister's preaching have been especially beneficial and/or necessary for this congregation?
- b. What challenges has the minister placed before the congregation this year?
- c. How does the minister encourage an appreciation for and an understanding of the Reformed faith and confessions?
- d. How does the minister foster an involvement in and appreciation for the broader church (classis, denomination, ecumenical endeavors)?
- e. What do you understand the minister's calling and duties to be?
- f. How do you evaluate the minister's faithfulness to his/her calling and by what standards?

- g. How do you evaluate the minister's effectiveness in his/her work and by what standards?
- h. What policies have been established in order to provide adequate time, sufficient funds, and proper accountability for continuing education for your pastor(s) and ministry staff (see *Acts of Synod 2000*, pp. 642).

3. Associate ministers

It is expected that during each visit the church visitors will inquire regarding the council's care for and supervision of any associate minister who is serving in a specialized ministry (see Church Order Supplement, Art. 12-c, Regulation d).

C. Role of the elder

1. The Church Order identifies those areas of responsibility given to the elders or the consistory. They are as follows:

Elders/consistory shall

- a. Sign the Form of Subscription (Art. 5)
- b. Supervise doctrine, life, and duties of minister(s) (Art. 13-a)
- c. Oversee doctrine and life of members and fellow officebearers (Art. 25-b)
- d. Serve as member of council (Art. 35-a)
- e. Serve as member of the consistory (Art. 35-b)
- f. Be available to serve as delegate to classis (Art. 40-a)
- g. Regulate the worship services including Bible versions used, hymns approved, and liturgical forms employed (Art. 52)
- h. Approve persons leading worship and reading sermons (Art. 53)
- i. Authorize the administration of the sacraments (Art. 55)
- j. Make sure that baptism is requested and administered to covenant infants as soon as feasible (Art. 56)
- k. Have the authority to admit a "baptized member" to "confessing member" status after hearing a profession of faith (Art. 59-a)
- l. Have authority to admit confessing members from other denominations after exploring their doctrine and conduct (Art. 59-d)
- m. Provide for the administration of the Lord's Supper (Art. 60-d)
- n. Supervise the instruction of the youth (Art. 63-c)
- o. Supervise the instruction of adult members (Art. 64-b)
- p. Extend pastoral care to members (and others). The means and purposes are given in the Church Order Article 65.
- q. Instruct and admonish members to marry only in the Lord (Art. 69-a)
- r. Instruct and remind members of their responsibility to encourage and admonish one another; foster a spirit of love and openness so that erring members may be led to repentance and reconciliation (Art. 79-b)
- s. Exercise the authority of Christ regarding public sins brought according to Matthew 18:15-17 (Art. 80)
- t. Faithfully discipline those who sin in life or doctrine (Art. 81-a)
- u. Inform congregation and encourage its involvement in both the exclusion from and readmission to membership (Art. 81-d)

2. Sample questions concerning the work of elders

Note: It is assumed that the list of specific responsibilities of elders will be available to council members during the visit. Questions about any of these responsibilities may be asked during the visit.

- a. What do you understand the elder's calling and duties to be?
- b. Are the members being visited and cared for in a timely and beneficial way?
- c. The elders have many supervisory responsibilities. What makes your work satisfying, and what difficulties do you face?
- d. What instruction and training have you had to help you in your ministry, and what training is planned for the next year?
- e. What successes have you seen in your ministry this year?
- f. Leadership is exercised differently in the Reformed tradition than in nondenominational or independent settings. How does your leadership reflect those Reformed emphases?

D. *Role of the deacon*

1. The Church Order identifies those areas of responsibility given to the deacons or the diaconate. They are as follows:

Deacons/the diaconate shall

- a. Sign Form of Subscription (Art. 4)
- b. Represent and administer the mercy of Christ (Art. 25-c)
- c. Stimulate members to faithful, obedient stewardship (Art. 25-c)
- d. Give biblical encouragement to assure the unity of Word and deed (Art. 25-c)
- e. Serve as members of council (Art. 35-a)
- f. Serve as members of diaconate (Art. 35-c)
- g. Extend pastoral care to members (and others) (Art. 65)
- h. Carry on the church's ministry of mercy—including conferring and cooperating with diaconates of neighboring churches (Art. 74)

2. Sample questions concerning the work of deacons.

Note: It is assumed that the list of specific responsibilities of deacons will be available to council members during the visit. Questions about any of these responsibilities may be asked during the visit.

- a. What do you understand the deacon's calling and duties to be?
- b. Since the diaconal responsibilities are given in broad categories, what have the deacons done to make the broad directives manageable?
- c. What percentage of the membership is practicing faithful stewardship? What is being done/proposed to enhance stewardship in the congregation?
- d. What challenges do you face in trying to carry on the church's ministry of mercy?
- e. What successes have you seen in your ministry this year?

- f. How do you understand the diaconal responsibility of assuring the unity of word and deed (see Church Order Art. 25-c)? What have you done to assure the unity of word and deed ministry?
- g. What kind of training do you need to help you in your ministry?

E. Role of the ministry associate

1. Not every congregation will have an ordained ministry associate serving within it. If there is a ministry associate, then this officebearer's work should also be discussed. A ministry associate is "acknowledged as an elder" of the calling church, but the role of a ministry associate is much like that of a minister of the Word. The Church Order identifies the areas of responsibility for a ministry associate.

A ministry associate shall

- a. Be a witness for Christ (Art. 24-a)
- b. Call for comprehensive discipleship (Art. 24-a)
- c. Minister by preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, doing evangelism, educating youth and adults, and providing pastoral care (Art. 24-a)
- d. Equip fellow believers to participate in the work of evangelism (Art. 24-a)

2. Questions concerning the work of a ministry associate

Note: It is assumed that the list of specific responsibilities of ministry associates will be available to council members during the visit. Questions about any of these responsibilities may be asked during the visit.

- a. What do you as a council understand the calling and duties of the ministry associate to be?
- b. What ways for doing this ministry effectively have you initiated or tried this year?
- c. What within the life of the congregation inhibits the work of effective ministry? How are you meeting the challenges?
- d. What within your target community makes the work difficult? What makes the work rewarding for the ministry associate?
- e. How do you measure the effectiveness of this work? What criteria is used to evaluate the work?
- f. How are you equipping fellow believers to participate in the work of mission and outreach?

V. Report of the visit

As was noted above, the church visitors are appointed by the broader church to assess the spiritual health of the congregations they visit. They are expected to prepare a "written report of their work" for classis. The report completes the circle of accountability and allows the classis to provide whatever encouragement, support, or admonition may be necessary.

No standardized church visitors' report form has been prepared. Some classes may have developed their own form to ensure consistency of reporting and at the same time to protect whatever confidentiality need protecting. A standard format within a classis also ensures that all churches will be treated the same way.