



Home Visiting Season

We're well and truly into the home visit season; several families have already received their annual visit from the elders. Some of us look forward to the visit; others of us do not. Perhaps *A Bit to Read* on the topic may be in place.

What is a home visit?

The Lord Jesus Christ laid down his life for his sheep many years ago. This same Christ continues today still to care for us in our needs. Part of that care comes through elders. As Paul told the elders of Ephesus: "Pay careful attention to ... all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

The elders exercise that care, in part, by stepping into the lives of each of the congregation members. The best place to step into their lives is surely the home. In their visit to the home the elders seek to get a sense of how each person is working with his faith in the midst of life's many challenges.

To get a sense of how each member is doing, the elders try to initiate an open conversation with those visited. Perhaps those receiving the visit hesitate to open up because of the suspicion that what gets said at the home visit will be discussed at a subsequent consistory meeting. So I want to state emphatically that what is shared with the elders during the visit *stays with the elders*. The visit is *not* discussed at the consistory meeting, other than a qualification whether the members' relation with God is healthy or not. Only if the relation with God is not healthy will the elders share that fact with the consistory – and then only if the elders need advice on how to help the family in question cultivate a healthier faith.

Who takes part in the visit?

The elders

Obviously, the elders do. These elders are two normal people, men who struggle with the same sort of questions and injustices and joys as anybody else. Perhaps these two men are well known to you; perhaps they are not. The important thing to remember, though, is that they do not come to your home on their own authority. They will ask some very personal questions, and you may be much inclined to reply that the answers to those questions is simply not their business. Please be aware, then, that no elder comes because he is nosey or bored. Instead, your elders come to you because none less than Jesus Christ has sent them. Christ Jesus already knows what is going on in your heart and life, and he would provide answers or give correction through particular men he has called to the office of elder. In real terms this means that one needs to prepare for the home visit genuinely, welcome the

brothers warmly, and be determined to be open with them. Remember that the brothers have done a full day's work, have left their family (again) to visit you, and are no doubt somewhat nervous as they step inside your home. Treat them as honored ambassadors of Christ, including praying for them before the visit, dressing up to receive Christ's ambassadors, and during the visit being open and honest with them, as if Jesus Christ himself were present.

The family

Equally obvious is that the entire family ought to be present for the visit. Each member of the family, after all, belongs to Jesus Christ, and he is interested in them all. As a rule of thumb, anyone old enough to go to school should be present for the visit. Parents do well to explain to the children ahead of time what the visit is about, what the children should expect, and also what attitude they ought to have towards the elders, namely, receive them as Christ's ambassadors, and so be open and honest. Parents should also ensure that each family member is dressed appropriately for Christ's visit, has his or her own Bible and Book of Praise at hand, and is ready and waiting when the elders arrive. Of course, at the kitchen table God's blessing should be sought upon the visit beforehand.

The whole family need not be present for the entire evening. In fact, the elders will want to engage the parents in discussions that best happens when the children are not within earshot. The elders will typically close the children's portion of the home visit with prayer, commending each child's circumstances to the Lord's care. Parents would do well at that point to send their children to their rooms, so that the elders can speak more personally with the parents about the issues of their lives. Once that part of the visit is complete, the elders will again lead in prayer, with both thanksgiving and petition for what they've heard.

What sort of things will be discussed?

Below is a random list of the sorts of questions that may come up for discussion. Of course, the elders may see need to raise areas of life other than these. In fact, they will invariably raise the theme chosen for the year (see below).

Personal and Family Matters

- Have you grown in your service to the Lord since the previous visit? If so, how? If not, what might explain the lack of growth? How could you improve that?
- What are your personal Bible reading habits and prayer habits? How does your Bible reading help you handle the demands of the day?
- What are your family Bible reading habits and prayer habits? How do you as father use the Bible reading as an opportunity to teach the family further in the Lord's way? Do you pray for your children's individual needs?
- Do you as husband and wife know what goes on in each other's hearts? How do you lead and support the other in the burdens and trials the other carries?
- Do you as father and mother know what goes on in the hearts of your children? How do you guide them further in life's questions?
- Are there any matters in your personal or family life that would require the elders' (or deacons') special attention? Be prepared to raise the matter in the course of the visit.

Church Matters

- How do you work with the preaching the Lord sets before you Sunday by Sunday? How do you lead your family in benefiting from that preaching?

- How are you involved in congregational life? Would you describe yourself as a living member or a sideline member? Explain why you answer as you do.
- What strengths and/or weaknesses characterize the congregation? What thoughts do you have about making the most of the strengths for God's greater glory? What thoughts do you have about correcting the weaknesses? What contribution could you make to encourage healthier church life?
- Do you follow the work done on the mission field, and support it in prayer? Why or why not? What are your thoughts in Smithville being involved in local mission work? Why do you answer as you do?
- How do you support the needs of other congregation members to obtain a solidly God-focused education? Explain why your support is as it is.
- Do you willingly give your first fruits to the Lord, or do you do it grudgingly? Explain why you feel as you do.

Theme

The theme Consistory settled on for the home visits this year is *Living faith, living member*. After last year's home visit reports and considering last year's Ward Bible Study topic (Thomas Rainer's book, *I am a Church Member*) Consistory considered it beneficial to pay attention to this topic. Being a living member of the church obviously involves first of all having a living faith, and that's a reference to having a living relation with the Lord God. Let's call that the vertical dimension. That living faith necessarily comes out in one relates to others (that's the horizontal dimension). One can think, then, of how one conducts ones marriage, how one interacts with family members, how one relates to those in the workplace, how one connects to those in the wider community, and of course how one participates in the needs and goings on of the Lord's church.

As the elders explore this topic with you in their visit, they may well end up reading with you from Colossians 3, and bringing up aspects of the sermon we recently heard on that portion of Scripture. It may be reasonable to read that passage before the elders come, and speak about it again with the family. The questions listed below could perhaps help with that conversation.

Some Questions to think about before the visit:

The Bible reading was: Colossians 1:13-23; 3:1-17, and the text Colossians 1:11b: "but Christ is all, and in all."

1. What does Paul mean when he says, "Christ is all"? To answer the question properly, you will need to refer to Col 1, and cover two aspects:
 - a. Who Christ is,
 - b. What Christ did.
2. What benefit do *you* get from Christ's identity and his accomplishments? In other words, what does it mean that "Christ is all" (=everything) to you?
3. To follow on from Question 2: produce a list of three things in your life that could be more important than Jesus Christ. Then: make a game plan to push those three things away from the center of attention so that Jesus Christ in fact is *everything* to you.
4. Christ is "everything", and so also the winner. In the dressing room Paul wants the Colossian Christians to "put off" and "put on".
 - a. How does what you're wearing show what sports team you're on?
 - b. How does what you're wearing (and maybe *how* you're wearing it?) show what you think about the team you're on?

- c. Why should a Christian not be dressed in the things mentioned in 3:8? That is, why would wearing the things on this list fail to show that you're on Christ's team?
 - d. Why should a Christian dress himself with the list mentioned in 3:12,13? That is, why does wearing the things on this list show you belong on Christ's team?
5. Do you struggle to "put off" the one set of clothing and "put on" the other? Can your family see that you're making progress in this? What was their reply when you asked them?
 6. Paul mentions the need to forgive another (3:13)? Are you holding a grudge against a family member or a congregation member or a workmate? Do you struggle with resentment or anger?
 7. What happens when team members play as loners? Do you play as a loner in your family or in the church? If yes, what do you propose to do about it? If no, how can you improve your game?

Finally

It is my prayer that the Lord graciously bless the labors of the elders at your home richly. It's all about Christ's glory, and so our growth in Him.

C Bouwman
October 2, 2015