

Short Introduction to Church Visiting

Created by a Pastor-Church Relations Team
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Note that this introduction is intended to be a quick summary of the CRCNA's Guide to Conducting Church Visiting. Click on this link to see the complete Guide.

<http://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/churchvisiting2012.pdf>

Section I Brief History of the Practice of Church Visiting

Church visiting has a long rich history, going back to Paul's practice of visiting and "strengthening churches". His visits were pastoral and informative. He would discern how the believers were doing and would bring news of decisions made in Jerusalem to guide all the gatherings scattered throughout the region.

By the 4th century, the Eastern Orthodox churches had a pattern of visits underway. The Western church followed moving more in the direction of supervision. By the 1500s, the practice in the West had become hierarchical focusing on control, correction, and worse, abuses of power. This set the stage for some "Reformation".

Luther apparently had his doubts, but he eventually promoted visits. He saw it as inquiring about doctrine and practice, as well as confession, discipline, and liturgy. While a certain aspect of hierarchy remained, Luther had succeeded in shifting back toward a priority on strengthening congregations.

Calvin too introduced the practice. His visitors included both ministers of the Word, *and* city council members. Over in Scotland, Knox introduced visits to ensure healthy church life, but he saw visiting as somewhat more temporary—until there were enough preachers to supply all the congregations.

In France and Holland, the practice of church visiting took the least hierarchical approach, cautioning in 1571: "No church shall in any way lord it over another church, and no office bearer shall lord it over another office bearer." This sentence appears in the CRC Church Order today. (See article 42) The absence of the word "superintendents" is not an accident!

The genius, and the art, of the practice of church visiting is to embody healthy accountability, not to superiors, but to the accumulated authority of the broader body as expressed in the classis. Strengthening the congregation is the first priority—checking for, and helping to attend to, emerging concerns is something that happens in the context of mutual sharing and caring.

Section II Purpose

Historically, the practice of church visiting is for the purpose of "strengthening" churches, not ruling or policing them. Section II provides text from Church Order article 42 specifying practices and purpose. There is a strong emphasis on accountability while avoiding hierarchy. Together we hold each other accountable, but no lording it over each other. The aspects of church visiting are: ascertain (data

gathering); admonish (when necessary); advise (upon request); and hold accountable (church visitors report to classis). It is up to classis to appoint church visitors who are experienced and competent in the task.

Section III Arrangements for Visit

Both the council and the congregation must be notified in advance about the *when* and the *why* of the visit. Councils should prepare, using the standard questions (found in section IV of the *Guide*) for review. Plan enough time. Have all official church records available for review: minutes, membership, finances, etc. A separate visit with the pastor and spouse (if the pastor is married) may be valuable. Church visitors may want to plan a weekend visit to allow for travel if the church is distant. Thoughtful preparation by all parties should ensure “no surprises”. If members of the congregation wish a private meeting with the church visitors, this may be arranged providing a few basic guidelines are followed.

Section IV Guidelines for the Conversation with Church Visitors

This section of the *Guide* lists the two dozen specific duties assigned to councils (taken from the Church Order) and offers eight sample questions for church visitors to ask of councils. Ministers’ duties are listed (taken from the Church Order), and again eight sample questions are given. Elder and Deacon responsibilities are then listed with sample questions for each office. The same is true for Commissioned Pastors.

(A few sample questions for the pastor, council, elders, and deacons are included in this summary. See the appendix.)

Section V Report of the Visit

After the visit, the church visitors are to write a report and submit it to classis. This both completes the circle of accountability and allows the classis to encourage, support, and admonish the local church as appropriate. Each classis is encouraged to develop its own standard reporting form to ensure both consistency and confidentiality.

Appendix

Sample Questions for Church Visitors

Be sure to refer to the Guide for Conducting Church Visiting for many more questions to use.
<http://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/churchvisiting2012.pdf>

Questions for the Council

Tell us what has been the most rewarding activity of the council in the past year.
What opportunities do you see for the coming year?
Share with us some fault lines/conflict in the church during the past year.
What best practice might you have to share with other councils in the CRC?
Describe one thing your council could do to strengthen its relationship with your pastor.

Questions for the Pastor

What preaching theme stands out in the past year as particularly rewarding to you? to the congregation?
Tell us about the key expectations for your work in this congregation.
Share with us some fault lines/conflict in the church during the past year.
How does the council provide support and feedback to you?
Describe one thing you could do to strengthen your relationship with your council.

Questions for the Elders

Tell us about the most rewarding part of your work as elders.
What are the key duties of the elders in this church?
Share with us what you'd change about how elders function in this church.
Talk about a challenge you've experienced in your work over the past year.
What tells you, as elders, that discipleship is a growing discipline in this church?
Describe the training you've received in the past year for your work as elders.

Questions for the Deacons

Tell us about the most rewarding part of your work as deacons.
What are the key duties of the deacons in this church?
Share with us what you'd change about how deacons function in this church.
Talk about a challenge you've experienced in your work over the past year.
What tells you, as deacons, that stewardship is a growing discipline in this church?
Describe the training you've received in the past year for your work as deacons.