

POINTERS FOR ELDERS AND DEACONS

Part 1 of an article from

DIAKONIA

translated from the Dutch language

1. Introduction

Office-bearers come and go; that happens to be the custom of our church-life. As a consequence 'green' elders and deacons begin their work in many congregations at the beginning of the new season. As a rule these men approach their task with some trepidation. Questions such as: What is expected of us? How shall we go about it? are on their mind.

For that reason alone it would be good if each consistory would organize an instruction day or at least an evening at the beginning of each new season. On that occasion office-bearers could talk with each other about their work and the best method and approach to it. That way the new-comers would have some idea of what to do and how to go about it. For that matter it would also be instructive for the seasoned elders to re-examine their way of doing things through mutual discussion. In that way Art. 73 of the Church Order, which states that office-bearers "shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office" is honored.

In order to give such an instruction session some direction, it would be advisable to prepare an essay or paper of limited length on some pertinent topic which would be studied by the participants beforehand. The following constitutes such a paper. In view of my limited experience as office-bearer and because of the relative value of various methods, no one should expect final answers to all practical questions. It is my intention to give some pointers, hoping that with the help of these everyone can arrive at a good plan of action as an office-bearer.

When an instruction session is held my paper or essay can be used as follows:

The chairman gives a short summary of each section, supplemented if needed, by his own insights and experi-

ences. The summary of each section should be followed by a discussion. In all probability certain sections, particularly those dealing with the principles of being an office-bearer, will raise few questions. Other points, such as the opening of house visits, the subjects to be discussed and perhaps the ward division, will elicit much discussion. It might be good if the chairman tables worked-out proposals regarding these points so that the meeting can come to well-founded conclusions. It would be useful to review the adopted decisions and methods to see if they are workable, if not during the year, then certainly at the end of the season.

2. An Overview of the Proposed Discussion.

In 1.3 I will deal in greater detail with the common position of both elder and deacon in connection with the form for the ordination of elders and deacons.

In II some aspects of the work of elders are related. That essay corresponds in structure and in sub-division 3 and 6 with what is said about the deacons in III. That parallel is not to be seen as a shortcut, but what is said about the one office also applies to the other.

In III some aspects of the deacons' work are related. This is intended for discussion on a deacons' meeting. It is a revision of the article "What do deacons actually have to do?" (Dienst, 27-2, March/April, 1979).

3. The Common Position of both Elder and Deacon

If office-bearers are to view their work correctly, they must above all be aware of their position vis a vis the congregation. We are inclined to think that elders and deacons are elected by the congregation under the guidance of the consistory. That is, of course, correct. However, a crucial factor has been left out, for as the form states, behind

the election by the congregation stands God Himself. So in the final analysis the office bearers are called to their task by Him.

When we say that, we must take into account that God concerns Himself with the congregation via Christ, who is the head of the Church. As such He rules over her, but He does not do so directly. That is why the form for ordination says more, for not only are the office-bearers called by God, but they are also appointed by Christ. According to Eph. 4:8,11 we may see them as gifts from Christ to his congregation.

The office-bearers may never see themselves as the bosses of the congregation who are only accountable to their colleagues. They should deport themselves humbly, for they are only executors of the Lord's will for His congregation. That is why they may never impose their own will on the congregation. The opposite is true; they have to realize that their work is subject to what God considers beneficial for His children.

That means at the same time that office-bearers are never to be viewed as errand boys, appointed and accountable to the members who elected them. They are in fact in the service of God and of Christ. Aware of that, they can work boldly in the congregation and if necessary oppose those who try to dictate to them. Not the likes nor the dislikes of the congregation but the instruction of their Divine Commissioner is determinative.

The conduct of the office-bearers in the congregation is then determined by two things. They are to be humble, for their significance derives only from the fact that they are God's servants. At the same time they ought to be bold, because their task consists of doing God's will. In all this the office-bearers strive to make the congregation grow towards Christ. It is therefore important for them to test their actions constantly in light of all scriptural teachings.

II. SOMETHING ABOUT THE WORK OF THE ELDER.

1. The task of the elder in general.

We can follow here the form for the ordination of elders. This form is in fact the instruction to the elders and as such gives a broad survey of what their task is.

1.1 The Elder as Shepherd

The form states that elders (together with the minister)

are shepherds, who in the name of the Good Shepherd feed the flock. The form borrowed that comparison from the New Testament, for both the apostle Paul (Acts 20:28-35) and Peter (I Peter 5:1-3) make use of that image. In doing so they are in line with the Old Testament, where not only God Himself but also the leaders appointed by Him are called shepherds (See Ezk. 34:1-23). Now a true shepherd cares for his sheep. He leads them to green pastures, brings back the strays, binds up the wounded and heals the sick (cf. Ezk. 34:14,16). The implication of this for the leaders of God's people is clear: as shepherds under God they must devote themselves to the faithful entrusted in their care. For elders this means very concretely (according to the form) that they must make sure that the members of the church confess the true biblical doctrine and live accordingly. In order to fulfill that task the elders have to visit church members in their homes. During such visits they should comfort, instruct and/or correct the people with the help of God's own Word.

That is a difficult task. In ordinary life we associate for the most part with people that are compatible with us. That can be because they are sympathetic, because they have the same interests, or because they occupy a similar social position, etc. As an elder, however, you will have to associate with all kinds of people, regardless of your attitude towards them. Put more strongly, you as a shepherd must care for them. That is why you may not let them go even if their attitude is negative towards you and your Divine Commissioner.

That is difficult, but at the same time beautiful. Elders in their contact with church members may not confine themselves to the usual polite chit-chat. They have to pass on God's promises and, for that matter, His commandments and His threats. With them they must support or guide church members in their choice for or against God. No effort should be too much. Shepherds devote themselves with all their power to the sheep entrusted in their care.

1.2 The Remaining Work of the Elder.

The form for ordination mentions still more when it comes to the task of the elders.

a) Their correction of church members can lead to the application of discipline.

b) Furthermore, they will have to take care that everything in the church happens in an orderly fashion. From this phrase one may conclude that the consistory may not

act arbitrarily, but only with forethought in order that the church members always know where they are at. In the first place we can think here of the calling of office-bearers, but there are many other matters which also demand a systematic approach, which in turn promotes mutual harmony.

c) Finally, the elders must assist the minister. In view of that they must see to it that he doesn't go wrong in his opinions and behavior. They must prevent the minister from adversely influencing the congregation. According to the form, this means that they are to pay attention to his visits and preaching, and to see that they indeed edify the congregation. This underlines the importance of a regular discussion of his preaching during consistory meetings. Such a point should be on the agenda.

Perhaps the minister, fearing criticism, hesitates to put it on the agenda. That being the case he will have to learn to listen and to deal positively with critical remarks. That is beneficial for both him and the congregation. He should therefore be prepared to urge the office-bearers to make their critical remarks and their praise (for a minister needs that also), truthfully known.

To give such a discussion some direction, we do well to make a distinction between form and content.

With reference to the matter of *form*, the following could be discussed:

- How is the sermon structured? (Does it develop logically?) Is sufficient or insufficient use made of repetition? What about linguistic usage and how is the sermon delivered? (Does he speak too loud, too soft, or is he boring? Are his gestures functional?)

With reference to the matter of *content*, the following should be discussed:

- How does the minister deal with the text? (Does he remain faithful to the whole of the Bible and the confessions? Does he explain enough? Does he remain superficial or is he too profound) and

- How does the minister approach the congregation with the text? (Does he deal with the concerns of the congregation or does he leave the situation for what it is and avail himself only of the usual clichéd applications? Does he make an effort to let the chosen text speak in light of the situation today?)

To be sure, it is extremely difficult to criticize in such a way that it becomes useful for the minister in the preparation of his sermons. Don't expect the minister to act upon all sensible criticism either, for as it is, each of us has his own character and capabilities. The intent of all criticism then is to help the minister reach the maximal development within

his own limits, for the sake of the growth of the congregation toward Christ.

1.3 The Elder over against Himself

The form of ordination mentions one more task for the elder, not over against the congregation, nor over against the minister, but over against himself. It is stated that in order for the elders to be able to fulfill their task they must study the Bible diligently and train themselves in serving God. In agreement with that the final task, to be examples to the flock, is impressed upon them.

In it the necessity for elders to live close to God is indicated. There must not be a conflict between an elder's official function and his private life. This is something which can happen quite easily. You might do what you can to keep the flock within the fold, meanwhile your own faith is found wanting. The busier you are, the greater that danger. For that reason the apostle Paul remarks in I Cor. 9: 27, "*I beat my own body and make it my slave so that after I have preached, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*" Office-bearers, therefore, must make sure that their own faith keeps pace with what they tell the church members. They must pay attention to their own bond with God, and for that reason must busy themselves with God's Word. Then there will be harmony between their personal opinions and behavior and what they have to say and do as office bearers.

1.4 The Elder and the Minister

Until recently the minister alone was denoted among us as the shepherd. When a church became vacant, it was called shepherdless. This terminology arises from an unscriptural over-estimation of the minister's task. Not only he but all elders are shepherds. The new form for the ordination makes this clear.

At the same time it means that an elder absolutely cannot unload the visiting on the minister. Of course, a minister has been freed from non-ecclesiastical work, so that he can devote himself to the congregation all day long. That is primarily because of his teaching function, which requires much study and thus much time. You may expect too that pastoral work, which requires extra time, effort and skill, will be pre-eminently his domain. For the rest the minister and the elders are equal. Both are to involve themselves intensely with the sheep.

2. QUESTIONS TO WHICH THE ELDER

SHOULD TRY TO GET ANSWERS.

In what follows I will leave what has been said under 1.2 and 1.3. It is not so much my intention to deal with the enforcement of discipline, nor with the task of the elder over against the minister and himself. Above all I wish to give pointers for the ordinary work in the congregation. Therefore, I will deal in detail with his task as shepherd. It has already been determined in 1.1 that he has to comfort, instruct and/or correct the congregation. If he is to do that effectively, he must be well-informed about someone's relationships. That will bring about all sorts of questions.

I will mention a few. In parenthesis I have added some practical remarks, which are intended to help the elder to speak about cases in question (much of what follows can be discussed with children from age ten and up, it is good therefore, that they are present at the beginning of a house-visit). The questions an elder must ask themselves are related to:

2.1 The External Circumstances

- How long has someone lived here and where did he originally come from? (This can be of importance for getting to know the person); What type of a job does he have (or has he had) and how can he be a Christian in it? (because of the time and energy jobs demand they often mark a person. In addition the cares and the joys one experiences while working have everything to do with being a Christian. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance to talk about it as an elder.)

- What is the make-up of the family and how do the children view the church? (It is also important to ask if there are children who have left home. In that case they are outside of the direct concern of the visiting elder, however, it stands to reason that their welfare plays an important, if not dominant role, in the parents' life); What kind of education are the children who are still at home receiving; are they going steady? (information about that can lead to a separate discussion with the children).

- What about a special ecclesiastical task? (e.g. office-bearers, organist, care-taker, committee member; such a task often demands a great deal of the person concerned and his family, while the appreciation for the work done is often not forthcoming. Interest shown in the work done by the visiting elder contributes to a greater pleasure in that work.)

- Are there certain needs present? (For a detailed

summary of possible needs I refer to section III-2. It is primarily the task of the deacons to care for those who are single, old, sick, or find themselves in financial distress. But elders too should keep an eye open for those whose external circumstances are difficult. In the first place because of the interest one has in the church member in question, but also to be of service as long as it is remembered that it is the deacons' task to do so in depth).

2.2 Living with the Bible.

- Is the Bible read at the table according to a system? (Passages arbitrarily chosen for reading leave much of the Bible a closed book; if one is busy with the O.T. it is recommended that it be alternated daily with the N.T. Singles too, should make Bible reading a regular habit.)

- Are certain parts skipped? (The reading of Gen. 38 and Song of Songs could be a good starting point for sex instruction and may promote a relaxed attitude towards sexuality).

- Do the parents and older children read the Bible privately with or without study-aids; do the parents encourage their children to do so? (Most people have to force themselves more or less to study the Bible, but for the sake of our personal bond with God we cannot do without it).

- What is done for the younger children? (In this connection an appropriate children's Bible can be of great help.)

2.3 Prayer

- Do the parents pray aloud at the table; is regular attention paid to family circumstances, everyone's daily work, the church and her members, those who because of their faith are in distress, the government etc.; are the children allowed to lead in prayer as well? (This is of great importance in training children to pray, and it strengthens the common bond with God)

- Besides meal time prayers, does one pray extensively at other set times? (It is much better to do so at a set time rather than deciding every time when to pray. To such an extensive prayer belong praise and thanks to God; the recognition of one's sin and the request for forgiveness, the petition for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and for all that you need to do your work and prayer for others. To keep your attention focused it is perhaps advisable to do as the people did in Bible times, namely to whisper or to speak the words aloud.)

- Do the parents discuss with their children whether or what they pray? (It does happen that adolescents still use their children's prayer or even omit their personal prayer. This is often so because they do not notice that God answers prayers and how. For that reason there is much work here for the parents as well.)

- How do the parents deal with the younger children on this point? (It seems sensible to me that parents say or sing an evening prayer for the one and two year olds; with children of three years it can be expected that they will begin to participate in the prayer, and occasionally they could be prompted to pray for certain people and matters.)

2.4 Church Attendance

- Do we attend church twice if possible, or do we skip once in a while e.g. to receive visitors or to go visiting? (Because a church service is a dialogue between the two parties in the covenant, God and His people, we cannot remain uncommitted. The more since according to Heb. 10 non-attendance and contempt for Christ's redemption work naturally follows, one from the other. In Lord's Day 38 we recognize that faithful attendance is a command of God.)

- Do we attend the church we belong to? (Regular weekend recreation is harmful for the bond with our own local church and for involvement in church life. Simply attending church twice somewhere is not in keeping with the command for faithful attendance. In our going to church we strengthen the bond with the community in which we live.)

- Are we actively taking part in the worship service, by singing and praying along and by listening intently to the sermon. Are we open to the preaching in order to be changed or strengthened by the Word of God? (In listening your attention may come to a halt because you find the form of the sermon uncomfortable or you object to the application.)

- Do we think and speak about the sermon; do we restrict ourselves to the superficial side of the sermon, or does the Word of God receive full attention? (You can neutralize the beneficial effect of the sermon for yourself and/or others by keeping silent or by tearing the sermon apart.)

2.5 The Attitude towards the Office-bearers.

- Do we see the office-bearers in the right light? (It can happen that in them we only see weak fellow church

members. With all their limitations they must be recognized as people whom Christ uses and through whom He concerns Himself with the congregation).

- Do we pray (at the table) for the office-bearers and their work; do we prepare ourselves in prayer for the church services and house visits? (Important for the children as well, for he who prays, promotes in himself, and in others, a correct attitude towards office-bearers, church services and house visits).

2.6 The Place in the Community.

- Do we go out of our way to do something for fellow church members; in other words, do we visit them, and if necessary, do we do things for them (shopping, little jobs, baby-sitting); do we pray for them? (Complaints about lack of contact within the congregation are often a sign that we don't do anything ourselves. Do not ask: "What are others doing for me", but "What am I doing for others?" Of course you cannot be everybody's friend, but you should feel responsible for those to whom you are especially related, e.g. those of the same age, those that live close by or those you especially can help. You will have to emphasize constantly that together with the other members you belong to Christ and commonly share in His gifts. This aspect must also have the attention of the deacons).

- Do we attend ecclesiastical meetings, such as congregational meetings, mission evening, annual meeting, etc. (It is contradictory if we pray, for instance, for the local church or mission work but fail to attend the meetings where information about these activities is given. In addition, meetings such as these strengthen mutual bonds).

2.7 The Giving and Receiving of Instruction.

- Do the parents free themselves or make any effort to talk with the children about the service of God today? (This for example in connection with a certain incident, a book, a T.V. program, a particular question asked by someone, etc. It is not enough for parents to command and forbid, or just to say "because it is that way", or "because I say so". You will have to give children and especially young people arguments based on the Bible. It should be noted here that the most important part of upbringing takes place at home, not in school or in catechism classes).

- Do the parents pay attention to the education their children receive in school, notably the ideological subjects and the literary works they read and have to read? (In case

of non-reformed education corrections may be necessary. Even if the education is reformed, the interest of the parents is indispensable).

- Are young people stimulated by their parents and/or peers to be active members of a study society; do the parents show interest in what the young people do there? (Parental involvement promotes the interest of the young people).

- Concerning those twenty years old and up: Are they members of a Bible study society and do they study beforehand? (Many remain on the side lines saying "I am not a society-person". In the meantime it is a fact that a systematic, private Bible study often fails. By going prepared to a study meeting you force yourself to be busy with the Bible on a regular basis. In addition you receive the opportunity to learn from others and/or to serve others with your insights).

2.8 The Further Life of a Christian

- Do we make an effort to read Reformed magazines and Reformed books about parts of the Bible and Biblical doctrine; do the parents stimulate their children to do so? (It is remarkable that many church members have a color television and/or an extensive collection of modern novels, while they have hardly any books about the Bible and Biblical doctrine. What then is the value of recognizing the Bible as God's Word?)

- Are we conscious of the fact that in the matter of money we are stewards of God's possessions; do we donate a proper percentage to the church, mission and various (charitable) organizations in and outside the church community? (This again is an area which pre-eminently falls within the domain of the deacons. In case the deacons have not adopted the new procedure elders can busy themselves with these matters as well. This also applies if the member

in question, despite the efforts of the committee of administration, continues to donate little or nothing to the church).

- Do the parents speak openly about sexual matters with their children? (Today young children have to be informed plainly about such matters; it is also necessary to give concrete directions for sexual behavior based on Biblical norms).

- Have young parents any problems with starting a family? (Many have difficulty in dealing with that matter and would like to talk to someone they trust. Others, who are not experiencing any problems in that respect, are rather selfish in their approach to the subject and are, therefore, in need of counseling.) How do the unmarried experience their status? (Because of their personal difficulty with it and their possible mistaken view regarding the single life, many of them would experience relief in a discussion of their situation.)

- What is the relationship of young people going steady? (Do they recognize the fact that physically they must exercise restraint? Do they talk enough with each other about matters of substance and principle? In a society dominated by sex the danger is great that the physical side of a relationship begins to dominate, while the spiritual dimension of the relationship remains superficial.)

- Does one make an effort to be known in the neighborhood or at work as a Christian ?

(Most of us tend to hide those aspects of our Christianity which an outsider finds unacceptable. Furthermore many of us do not make use of opportunities to witness because of uncertainty or even fear. Everyone of us must therefore learn to witness unashamedly, when the right moment presents itself. The person who does that will notice that he is strengthened in his choice for God.)

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Pointers for Elders and Deacons

Part 2

From DIENST

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 look-out 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'll 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, baby-sitting), 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, baby-sitting, 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, house-cleaning, mending, or baby-sitting 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 ear-phones 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?

This article originally appeared in *DIENST*, and is used here by permission. The third and final installment will appear in the next issue of *Ordained Servant*.

Pointers for Elders and Deacons

Part 3

From DIENST

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.

4.2 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 dea-

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 meaning-

ful 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 house-keeping, the doing of odd jobs, baby-sitting, the welcoming of new church members, etc.. Such instances of mutual service require some organization. The arrangement of these activities is pre-eminently 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