

Visitations (church work)

~~Visitation~~

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**YE VISITED ME**

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# Ye Visited Me

Harold W. Reisch

“So this is now the mark by which  
we shall all certainly know  
whether the birth of the Lord Christ  
is effective in us:  
If we take upon ourselves  
the need of our neighbor.”

*Martin Luther*

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## Serving As Visitor and Friend

This is your guide to friendly visiting in your congregation and community. It provides some basic information on what you do as a visitor and why, and how your visiting helps the home-bound infirm aged.

It is designed to assist lay visiting as a service of the church because there is such a need for visitors among the infirm aged. In addition to yourself, there are others in your congregation who have time and may be willing to serve in this way. They need to be enlisted and guided to become visitors.

It emphasizes your role as a visitor. It is a way to give support to the faith of the person visited, and at the same time witness in an understandable way to your own faith. This service of the church is a reassuring event in the limited world of the shut-in. He need not feel shut out of the fellowship and concern of the the church.

It directs you to the aged not only because they are so easily overlooked and forgotten, or because visitors come so seldom, if ever, or because visitors are helpful. It is of greater importance to the home-bound to be reassured that despite being shut away they are still persons; they are persons in whom someone is interested; persons esteemed by their church, and community; persons loved by God.

## You Visit—Because

To be too much alone can be an unnerving experience for anyone, and it is especially so for the infirm aged. To be home-bound and to feel useless is bad enough. To feel forgotten hurts. To be forgotten is deadly.

Pastors and parish workers alone cannot meet the needs of the lonely. The lack of time, the distances to be covered, the numbers make this impossible. They minister with word and sacrament and counseling in times of acute crises. General visiting, however, can be only occasional.

Why are the home-bound lonely? Have they no friends? Have they no children? No neighbors? In too many instances they haven't. Children marry and often live far away. Old neighbors move or die and the new ones are strangers. Old friends move or become infirm too. The infirm cannot be cared for at home, as once they were.

Isolation comes very easily to the infirm. Too easily. It happens in nursing homes, homes for aged and even in their own homes or in the homes of children. It happens often without anyone except the home-bound person realizing it. He accepts this as part of aging.

It is the congregational visitor who replaces the absent family, the neighbor. He becomes the friend to break the spell of loneliness and to restore the feeling of belonging. He becomes the person who reassures him of the continuing fellowship of the church and the continuing love of God.

## The Older Years

As visitors, our special concern is for the home-bound and institutionalized lonely aged. Nevertheless, it is useful to know something about the aging process and growing old today. It is a common enough experience, but understanding what it is like is not common.

There are many older people . . .

20,000,000 Americans and 200,000 Canadians are 65 years of age or older. They represent 10% of the population. 300,000 persons daily reach the age of 65.

1,000,000 persons are in nursing homes and similar institutions. Almost as many more are confined to their homes.

Aging belongs to life. For some it takes place faster than for others. Some are old at sixty while others are still going strong at ninety. Why? We really don't know, yet.

The signs of aging we know because we experience them: the greying hair, the changing vision, the loss of stamina. These



are a few of the physical changes that are obvious. Basically, as persons, however, people are not changed much by the aging process. Unless they have had brain damage they remain pretty much what they were; only more so. The charming become more charming and the difficult more crotchety. Actually, life itself has as much effect as the aging process.

Learning ability continues well into the later years if incentive and opportunity are given. The old dog can and does learn new tricks. The aged still have many potentials. But they are often unrealized because so few are willing to release them.

The aged are troubled too by the attitudes of younger people as well as by what happens to them. Those who are young find it is easier to emphasize the inabilities than the abilities of the aged. Modern youth has much knowledge, but has difficulty seeing that the aged may have wisdom born of experience.

In a time when honor depreciates with the years after fifty, the aged find it harder to maintain a full sense of worth. The aged experience losses that are real and cannot be denied or ignored. For many the older years mean years of retirement and the loss of income, the loss of status and a feeling of lost usefulness. Aging may mean the loss of loved ones and friends. It holds the threat of illness and disability. What fertile soil for anxiety and fears.

Were it not for the capacity for continued growth, spiritually and mentally, the later years could be hopeless. Were it not for wisdom to be shared, service still to be given, and hopes and dreams yet to be realized, they would be bleak indeed.

To help the aged realize the potentials of their remaining years and to enable them to use them as God intended they should, is the challenge to the church. To support them with the stimulating love of understanding friends is one of the ways for bringing this about.

## The Home-Bound Days

There are many persons for whom the later years hold no fears. They are calm; they weather their adversity with serenity. Somehow they keep cheerful and busy. But even then, they get lonely and appreciate friends who come and visit.

For many others, the impact of infirmity and handicap



strikes hard. Some find it difficult to be sweetness and light, always. They are hurt and unaccepting of their lot. They face difficult times when they need help. They need the interest and strength of friends to keep them on an even keel. They need those who understand and who continue to accept them even when they show resentment and hurt.

Visitors to be truly helpful must be prepared to deal understandingly and patiently with the negative feelings of the home-bound which may take the following forms:

Loneliness—they miss friends they had.

Guilt—God must be punishing them.

Despair—God doesn't care or help.

Fear and suspicion—they may not understand what is happening to them or what others are planning for them.

A feeling of being unworthy—otherwise people would come.

These are some of the feelings that may be expressed which often are symptoms of deep unmet spiritual needs, feelings born out of intense loneliness. Don't stifle or scold them. The ability to resent may be their only grip on reality. Understand them.

Visitors who come regularly help relieve those feelings by assuring the home-bound

of the continued concern of their congregation and community;

of their continued acceptance as a person of worth;

of their usefulness, however limited;

of new experiences and interests to be explored and to be realized;

of the continuing love of God in Christ.

These are some of the needs which you as a visitor meet. Your contribution to the physical, spiritual and emotional well-being of the aged is vital. Your coming may mean the difference between life and death.

## For the Visitor

You have three reasons for being a visitor for your church. They are the need of the home-bound for a friend, your own need to share some time with others, and the need of the congregation for lay visitors to reach out to the home-bound.



### What is Friendly Visiting

“Friendly Visiting is regular visiting between two people, one a volunteer and the other a man or woman known to a staff member of a health or welfare agency as being in need of a ‘friend.’ An essential feature of the program is the continuing companionship which each volunteer is able to maintain with one lonely isolated person who learns to look forward



to his dependable visitor as to a personal friend." (Volunteer Bureau—Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, Chicago, Illinois)

### A Visitor's Qualifications

Do you like people? Can you be patient enough to try to understand and accept others? Can you listen well? Can you be discreet? Are you willing to take the time to learn what a visitor does and why? When you have these qualities you have talent.

### Training for Visiting

Training is a "must" if you are to understand the goals of the program and the needs of the aged. To want to serve is important, but to know what to do and how to do it makes you feel more secure and sure of yourself.

Training is usually provided by the pastor of the congregation, by an institutional chaplain or by a social worker from an agency working with the aged. In some communities, training classes are organized and conducted by councils of churches, volunteer bureaus or social agencies. Or, you may have to do it yourself using this guide and the materials listed in the study helps.

### Supervision

Supervision is a "must!" Face it, you will work more consistently if you have direction.

Visiting is of sufficient importance to be directed and supervised by the pastor or by someone delegated by him, and related to the social ministry of the congregation. Supervision includes periodic meetings where you can evaluate the work, and where you get further information.

## What a Visitor Does

What to do and how to go about doing it are real concerns for the thoughtful visitor. The following suggestions are basic:

1. **BE FAITHFUL:** Don't ever disappoint. When you can't come explain why.
2. **BE A LISTENER:** Remember it is the lonely person being visited who needs to do the talking. He doesn't have the opportunity very often. Even loving children don't give time to listening.
3. **BE A CHEERFUL FRIEND:** Visit because you enjoy it.
4. **LEAVE YOUR GIFTS AT HOME:** Friendship is the best gift. When the person visited knows you well enough, small gifts for anniversaries or holidays may be acceptable.
5. **TREAT** the aged as your friend and equal. *He is.*
6. **PLAN VISITS:** Select the time for coming to suit the convenience of the person and of those who are taking care of him. Send word when you can't come as expected. He is waiting for you

7. **KEEP ALL CONFIDENCES:** Don't talk to others about what you heard or saw. You must be trusted.
8. **WITNESS TO YOUR FAITH:** Don't preach. Remember that coming is itself a witnessing deed. Use words when they are appropriate.
9. **BE OBJECTIVE:** Do not get personally involved in the problems of the person being visited. Be concerned, but if more help is needed, try to find the person who has responsibility.
10. **BE ACCEPTING:** Adapt to the moods, the situation and the circumstances of the home-bound.
11. **REMEMBER ANNIVERSARIES:** Birthdays, holidays.
12. **LIMIT VISITING:** Know that the fewer persons you visit the better you can serve. Don't spread yourself too thin. Don't try to do everything yourself. Recruit others.

## What One Does Not Do

Just as there are things to be done, there are also things visitors need to avoid. Here are some of the obvious ones.

1. Don't be a no-show: Come when you say you will. If you can't come, send word. If you have to give up visiting, explain why.
2. Don't patronize: The aged home-bound person is a mature adult and needs to be treated as friend and equal, not as a child or a piece of fragile china.
3. Don't make promises that you cannot or will not keep.
4. Don't try to give advice: (You wouldn't take it either).
5. Don't pity: Be sympathetic, but don't encourage self-pity.
6. Don't be impatient over stories often repeated. You have never heard them before.
7. Don't be disturbed or obviously shocked at anything that may come up in conversation.
8. Don't be upset by conditions of illness or the situation. Your calmness and reassurance are needed.



9. Don't monopolize the conversation: You didn't go to talk to the home-bound but to be a friendly listener and companion.
10. Don't dwell on unpleasant events: They will come up, but tactfully try to change the subject.
11. Don't be a Santa Claus: Your friendship itself is valuable. Occasional small gifts may be given, but remember that they can't be returned. Under those circumstances adults don't like to accept gifts.
12. Don't be a busy-body: Meddling and gossiping can undermine the values of a visiting program.
13. Don't take on more visiting responsibilities than your time permits.
14. Don't talk about the person visited to your friends or family. If something must be discussed, with his permission, do so confidentially with your pastor.

## Teamwork

The relationship between a visitor and a home-bound person usually grows into a very close one. Because of this, you may be asked to give services or asked for advice on family or personal matters. A request may arise so quickly and the answer seems so easy that you may be tempted to try to give it. Without special skills and understanding of all that is involved, you may become more deeply involved than you should.

It is no breach of responsibility if you avoid any other role than that of a visitor and a friend. When other services are needed, you can be most helpful when you suggest that he tell his pastor, his social worker, his nurse or his doctor. Or, if this isn't practical, you can help by securing permission to do this on his behalf. If they can't respond, do the best you can.

Normally the visitor is part of a team of persons, professions and skills helping the home-bound aged. This is why your training acquaints you with the other persons who work with the aged and teaches you how to make use of their particular skills when a situation arises.

*As a visitor you come to visit and befriend. The service agencies and professions of the church and community are better able to give the other services that are needed.*

## The Lifting Up of Hearts

The question frequently arises whether the visitor should have brief devotions with the person he visits.

There may be situations when this is desirable and appropriate, and may be suggested. It should not be routine. You will always need to exercise careful judgment. You should, however, recognize that as a member of the priesthood of all believers you are privileged to minister with the scriptures and prayers.

It may be much more helpful and satisfying simply to read and discuss favorite psalms, scripture passages, prayers, and hymns on occasion. This leads to a mutual sharing of the resources and heritage of the Christian faith and can be mutually edifying.

When formal devotions are planned for the home-bound, you should make every effort to have this event be an experience not a perfunctory ritual. When possible, you and the person you visit should plan it together.

## What to Take

It is neither wise nor kind for a visitor to bring gifts to the person visited except on those appropriate occasions when a thoughtful remembrance can mean so much.



However, there are materials of various kinds which may be supplied, depending upon the interests and capacities of the person you visit.

### READING MATERIALS

Books, periodicals, church publications

Bulletins from Sunday services

"A Message for the Day." A brief weekly devotional tract following the church year. (Lutheran Book Stores)

Large Print Bible Portions

Large Print Portals of Prayer (Concordia Publishing House)



Large Print Books — general and devotional reading  
“The Good News,” a monthly devotional for troubled people. (Board of Social Ministry — The Lutheran Church — Mo. Synod)

#### ACTIVITY MATERIALS

Needlework and craft supplies for the busy-fingered  
Stamps for the collectors  
Stationery and stamps  
Other materials that may be requested

#### TIME PASSERS

Games, and jig-saw puzzles  
Recordings  
A loaned television set or radio

#### FOR THE GRAND OCCASION

A birthday or anniversary gift—possibly the makings of a party if such is convenient. When you bring food, be sure that it is on the person’s diet.

These are suggestions. A little creative imagination and a study of the situation will suggest other things to bring or to do.

## A Congregational Visiting Service

- SPONSORSHIP:** The congregational social ministry committee should sponsor the service.
- RECRUITMENT:** Visitors should be recruited from the whole congregation. All age groups should be represented; also both sexes.
- TRAINING AND ORIENTATION:** *At least two sessions of orientation are needed as a “must” before assignment.* These may be conducted by the pastor, a chaplain or a professional worker working with the aged. Additional faculty may be recruited from community health and welfare agencies, or from the staff of homes for aged.
- ASSIGNMENT:** Assignment should be made by the pastor or by someone designated by him to guide the program who is familiar with the home-bound and their needs.
- FOLLOW-UP:** Regular reports on forms provided by the committee should be expected, and periodically evaluated and reported by the chairman of the volunteers. It is important to know who is visiting whom and how often. Meetings of volunteers for the purpose of further education and for the discussion and sharing of experiences and problems should be held at least quarterly. These meetings should be informal



and designed to further the interest of the visitor.

**RECOGNITION:** Visitors should be installed or recognized in some official way and the program identified as an arm of the congregation. There should be some public recognition given to visitors annually.

## A Visitors Pledge

I promise that as a visitor for my church, I will be faithful to the persons I accept as a responsibility and who need my friendship, doing whatever is helpful and leaving undone that which may wound or hurt.

I will work in close cooperation with the pastoral ministry of my congregation. I will keep all confidences shared with me by the persons into whose homes I go.

I will serve to the best of my ability, dedicating all that I undertake to my Lord, Jesus Christ.

## Be Faithful

Faithfulness and responsible thoughtfulness are the marks of a good visitor. When you don't come as expected you not only disappoint, but you may contribute to feelings of rejection and hurt which may already be troubling the home-bound aged. Unless you are obviously irritating or you find the visiting too upsetting to you, be reassured by the fact that your coming is helpful.

Endurance and patience are necessary elements. You may feel discouraged when you don't seem to "get through." You may have doubts about visiting. But, the lack of response may not be the result of ineffective visiting at all. The reasons may be within the person visited. These cannot be verbalized but will be solved by a continuing demonstration of friendship. Aged persons who have been hurt and rejected need time to be sure that you are really a friend, and mean it.

Giving of one's self is an important part of being a visitor. This is a demand which cannot be minimized and unless there is a willingness to accept it, a person should not try to become a visitor. The responses which many visitors report and which are very satisfying may be delayed for others and in some instances may never be experienced. This is not easy to take, but an *act* of love to *be* an act of love must be an act of *love*. The response to it must always be secondary.

## Study Guides and Helps

There are many publications dealing with the general subject of aging and volunteers available in public libraries. Two valuable resources however are listed:

*Project Compassion – Visitors Kit*

Board of Social Ministry and World Relief  
210 N. Broadway, St. Louis, Missouri 63102

*The Nursing Home Visitor*

A View from the Inside  
Frances Avery Faunce – Abingdon Press,

*Published by*

Board of Social Ministry  
Lutheran Church in America  
231 Madison Avenue  
New York, New York 10016

and

Board of Social Ministry and World Relief  
The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod  
210 North Broadway  
St. Louis, Missouri 63102