

When you visit members of the church family or strangers on behalf of the church, you communicate God's love. You affirm their worth by giving them your time, presence, attention and care. You share the gift of a common faith, regardless of the human condition, with no thought of what might be given in return.

History and Background

God's visitation through Jesus Christ is the model for visitation. "...The Word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth," we are told in John 1:14. The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ explains, "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot." The emphasis is on **incarnation**--making visible in the flesh.

Jesus called in homes to understand people's needs and to communicate his care and concern. He visited Mary and Martha, the beloved, and Zacchaeus, the sinner, where they lived and worked. Jesus gave a new commandment, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). Visiting is one way to show that love for one another.

Common Practices

If people in your church complain that "the pastor never comes to see me," it may be because it is impossible. The size of the church, the age of its members and the size of the territory all determine whether the pastor can visit everyone as often as desired. But the pastor isn't the only person in the church who can communicate God's love through visits.

Even in churches with no formal visitation plan, the visitation ministry is shared by the laity. Deacons or elders may join with the pastor to represent the communal nature of the sacrament in taking communion to people who cannot leave home. Someone may deliver flowers from the church to those who cannot get out to enjoy them. Crafts from vacation church school may be taken to people in nursing homes. The stewardship committee visitors go to members' homes. Church members visit other members in the hospital or stop in with a covered dish when someone dies. Some churches have a visitation committee or membership committee that visits new or prospective members. Deacons or elders often take on a special relationship with members who cannot easily attend church services. Sometimes the visit is with an individual, but there are times when whole families or people in one neighborhood are visited.

Some churches have a very intentional program in which some members volunteer to keep in contact with others in a geographical area. The visitors (sometimes called shepherds) report illness, special needs and changes of addresses of members within their territory and call on prospective members. Other churches have a system of cluster families in which groups of families keep in touch with each other in good times and bad.

Responsibilities

Your responsibilities will depend on the reason for your visit. You'll have special duties if you visit someone in the hospital, solicit a pledge or introduce someone to your church. If you are visiting to express concern and compassion in a general visit, you will be responsible for:

- Listening carefully.
- Being aware of needs expressed.
- Staying only a short time.
- Being sensitive to the need for reading scripture or praying.
- Informing the pastor of special needs.
- Recording the visit if records are kept.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Genuine care for people.
- Ability to listen with empathy.

- Understanding of the needs experienced by people who are elderly, young, sick, developmentally disabled, poor, alone, or depressed and the ability to feel comfortable with these people.
- Ability to give your undivided attention to the person you are visiting.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Use **Called to Care: A Notebook for Lay Caregivers**, developed by Parish Life and Leadership, to help your church organize a stronger caregiving ministry and train church members to make effective visits. Order from United Church of Christ Resources. Telephone, toll-free, 800-537-3394.
- Maintain a list of people who have been hospitalized, who have been absent from worship or have had a death in the family.
- Keep an information card for each member of the church family where you can note visits and make comments.
- Ask church members to inform you when people should be visited.
- Plan time for your own regular spiritual renewal through Bible study, meditation and prayer.
- Use the discipline of praying daily for certain members of the church, going through the membership list.

- Study and practice active listening skills.
- Schedule visits so you won't fall prey to procrastination.

Issues Facing the Church

- Opinions differ about whether an appointment should be made for a personal visit. Advantages of an appointment are: It recognizes the rights and individuality of the person to be visited; it gives time for the person to anticipate and prepare for the visit; it establishes time limits. What are the disadvantages? Do you think the disadvantages outweigh the advantages? What do you think are the expectations and wishes of members of our congregation about unannounced visits?
- The goal of a visit is to share a relationship of common love and faith. How does the offering of a prayer, or scripture and a prayer fit into that relationship? How can you be certain that you are filling the need of the person you are visiting rather than your own needs? What is your own comfort or discomfort with such a request or offer? The pastor's role creates a license for offering communion and prayer. How do lay people deal with these issues?

- Some people's work space is a vital part of their lives and a place where they seek to fulfill God's mission in their lives. Are there ways you can visit in the work setting?
- If several members of the church are in a nursing home, is there a way of visiting them together over a meal or in their recreation area so that they can continue to identify with the church and with one another as members of it?

Questions

- What are the reasons lay people visit on behalf of the church?
- Who in your church besides the pastor makes visits?
- Does your church have a planned method of lay visitation? If not, how could such a program add to the life of your church?
- How would you define a "short visit"? Would it be the same if you were planning to visit or to be the recipient of the visit?