Visitation and Discipleship

So, what is a disciple? There are a lot of different definitions. It depends who you ask. For this training session, here’s the definition I’ll be working with.

Disciple: A follower of Jesus who is actively involved in building up the kingdom of God.

With that definition in mind what I’m about to share is really nothing new nor revolutionary. It’s actually back to basics. I’m actually here to affirm and remind. Sometimes it’s good to do that.

Let’s turn to a book that has been misused: The Seventh-day Adventist Church manual. I remember going to church board meetings where members would come ARMED with their church manuals. When I would see those books, I knew that this was going to be an interesting board or business meeting. They have come ready for battle. They’re going to use it to beat someone over the head with it.

Don’t worry, I’m not going to do that today. The truth is that it is a great and wonderful book that should always be used with much love and the well-being of the body of Christ in mind – not a personal agenda.

On page 129 we find some very valuable counsel in the section entitled, Church Board and Its Meetings. Let me read a few lines. By the way, the reason I’m reading this is because as pastors and local church leaders the majority of you serve on the local church board.

*Church Board and Its Meetings Definition and Function—Every church must have a functioning board whose members have been elected during a church business meeting. Its chief concern is having an active discipleship plan in place, which includes both the spiritual nurture of the church and the work of planning and fostering evangelism.*

Past Did you catch that? Let me read it again: The board’s chief concern is having an active discipleship plan in place. According to my working definition, that’s a plan to make every member a follower of Jesus who is actively involved in building up the kingdom of God. Are you with me?

That discipleship plan includes – back to what we just read – both the spiritual nurture of the church and the work of planning and fostering evangelism. Spiritual nurture and evangelism.

Then a list of NINE responsibilities are listed.

*Included in church board responsibilities are:*

*1. An active discipleship plan.*

*2. Evangelism in all of its phases.*

*3. Spiritual nurturing and mentoring of members.*

*4. Maintenance of doctrinal purity.*

*5. Upholding of Christian standards.*

*6. Recommending changes in church membership.*

*7. Oversight of church finances.*

*8. Protection and care of church properties.*

*9. Coordination of church departments.*

I believe these responsibilities are listed in order of priority. think they are probably listed in order of priority. All very important. Notice the first three.

As you look at the whole list, where do church boards spend most of their time? Think about it. We often, get stuck on items lower on the priority list.

Than the manual continues… Let’s read.

*The gospel commission of Jesus tells us that making disciples, which includes baptizing and teaching, is the* ***primary function*** *of the church (Matt. 28:18-20). It is, therefore, also the primary function of the board, which serves as the chief committee of the church.*

Let that really sink. Now, are you ready to be blown away? The next sentence is so powerful. Are you ready?

*When the board devotes its first interests and highest energies to involving every member in proclaiming the good news and making disciples, most problems are alleviated or prevented, and a strong, positive influence is felt in the spiritual life and growth of members.*

Wow! When a church prioritizes making disciples – followers of Jesus who are actively involved in building up the kingdom of God (that’s evangelism) – most problems are alleviated or prevented and essentially the church is spiritually healthy.

Since I’m on a roll here in the church manual, let skip ahead on page 129 and read this.

*True discipleship entails not only Biblical teaching (Matt. 28:20), but also a passionate commitment to loving our fellow believers unconditionally. This was the heart of Christ’s message to His disciples as He faced the cross (John 15:9-13). Christ’s command to them applies to us: that we “love one another.” Ellen G. White’s powerful insight into this historical scene is still vital for us: “This love is the evidence of their discipleship.”—DA 677, 678. Therefore, it is one of the primary functions of the board to ensure that members are nurtured and mentored in a personal, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ.*

I just want to repeat one sentence: True discipleship entails a passionate commitment to loving our fellow believers unconditionally.

The best model on how to disciple people is laid out by Jesus.

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, “Follow Me.”

MH 143

Jesus healed and preached and taught and THAT had a huge impact on the people. BUT what impacted the people the most was how he mingled with the people as who one who desired their good, He showed sympathy, and ministered to their needs. The outcome: He won their confidence.

Ladies and gentlemen, people don’t care how much you know, how well you preach, how great of an organizer you are, or how well you coordinate church programs until they know how much you care.

And that happens by connecting with people through home visitation. The very best pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are not the great and charismatic preachers, they are the ones who really connect with his/her church members. It’s amazing how great a lousy preacher sounds when you know he/she loves you and has connected with you.

Any Amens?

By the way, let me clarify what I mean by home visitation. These are visits that take place in the home or through Zoom or at an agreed upon location for the purpose of connecting and praying individuals or families. Visitation as I’m defining here does not include a crisis visit (death, illness, etc.) – that’s different and very important as well. Visitation as I’m talking about does not happen as people are leaving the sanctuary on Sabbath or during fellowship lunch. Those visits are an extension of the home visitation NOT a replacement. Are we clear?

Poll (anonymous). Two questions. One for church members and one for pastors/elders because for this I’m lumping elders with pastors. Answer only in your category. Members answer your poll questions. Pastor and elders answer your poll question. Ready?

1. Church member: When is the last time a pastor/elder of the church has visited you?
2. Pastor/Elder: When is the last time you have made a home/zoom visit with a church member (not related to a crisis)?

Pastor, Elders, and church leaders, if you are visiting, keep doing it. If you are not, I recommend that you include that as part of your weekly menu of activities BECAUSE it is the one of the BEST way to disciple people – to turn members into followers of Jesus who ACTIVELY are building up the kingdom of God.

Home visitation helps to create a healthy culture in the church. Disciples don’t just happen by accident. There’s purposeful stuff that goes on behind the scenes. Disciples are the result of church leaders following the example of Jesus.

The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence.

*Elder H used to live here and preach to the people, but he was not a shepherd of the flock. He would tell the poor sheep that he would rather be horse-whipped than visit. He neglected personal labor, therefore pastoral work was not done in the church and its borders. The deacons and elders of the church have acted wisely and worked judiciously to keep the church in order, and we find the people in a much better condition than we had expected. We are happily disappointed. But when I look over the years, and think of what might have been done, if the man entrusted with the flock had been a faithful steward of God, watching for souls as one that must give an account, my heart is made sad. Had the preacher done the work of a pastor, a much larger number would now be rejoicing in the truth.* Pastoral Ministry 223

Since I’ve answered the why regarding home visitation, let me answer now the How, What, Who, and the When.

Several How’s.

**How should home visitation be done?** In-person (the best). Zoom (the new age we live in). Phone call (if everything else fails).

The point here is that it is a deliberate visit as opposed to happenstance (like at the end of the worship service or at fellowship lunch). It shows interest and care – like Jesus.

Lesslie Newbigin writes: "Pastoral visiting represents that loving, caring relationship [of God]. The pastor visits every member of his congregation, however poor and insignificant, not because he is useful for the parish program, or because he is influential or helpful, but simply because he is one of God's children." [11](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1991/08/visitation-a-dying-art#note11) 11 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*
(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), p.
39.

**How should home visitation be set it up?** When you call (always set it up in advance – especially these days), people will wonder why do you want to visit with me/us? What’s up? What have I done? Does the church want money? All sorts of idea float in their minds. Reassure them that there is no hidden agenda. No, you’re not in trouble. You simply want to connect with them personally and pray. That’s all. You could also tell them you want to give them a little gift (bookmark).

**How often should members be visited?** Depends. A good guideline is twice a year. Think about it like this. Let’s say you, pastor, dedicate four hours a week to home visitation. Let’s say you do that 45 weeks a year. That’s 180 hours of visitation. Let’s say each visit including driving time is one hour, that’s 180 visits or 90 individual/families. That’s a whole lot of visits when you add it up. Now, of course, don’t forget that the elders need to be part of the process and thus even more people can be visited. You’re on your way to a healthier church.

**How long the visit last?** Depends. But a good rule of thumb less than an hour – and sometimes much less. Less is more. People are busy. However, it’s important for them to know that their church cares for them. It makes a huge difference.

**What do you do during the visit?** Let me be clear: this is not a therapy session. If that’s what they need refer them to an expert – most pastors and elders are not experts or therapists and we should not try to take on that role. This is here are happy visits following the model of Jesus – mingling, desiring their good, sympathizing, and ministering. Ending with a Prayer. I use the acronym FORT (not just evangelism). Ask them about their Family, Work, their journey with God. Ask and then LISTEN. Listen. Listen. Take mental notes. Why? For the prayer and for your personal notes about each member/family in your church. These notes are just for you so that you remember details about your church family. **Day One App**. I speak my notes and then it transcribes it for me. In seconds I’m done. FORT – Thoughts (instead of testimony). This is your opportunity to share your thoughts of encouragement. Share a Bible promise and then pray. The prayer needs to include the details about what you have heard. Needs – pains – joys – struggles – issues. Make the prayer personal. That prayer is probably the most crucial part of the visit. It tells people you care because you listened – you’re mentioning things you heard them say. It validates them. Powerful.

*Ellen White instructed the minister to "visit every family, not merely as a guest to enjoy their hospitality, but to inquire into the spiritual condition of every member of the household. [The pas tor's] own soul must be imbued with the love of God; then by kindly courtesy he may win his way to the hearts of all, and labor successfully for parents and children, entreating, warning, encouraging, as the case demands."*[12](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1991/08/visitation-a-dying-art%22%20%5Cl%20%22note12)

12 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 347.

Who? Two who’s.

First, **Who should do the visiting?** Pastors and elders. Elders what? Back to the church manual, page 74.

*The pastoral work of the church should be shared by the pastor and the elders. In counsel with the pastor, the elders should visit members, minister to the sick, foster prayer ministries, arrange or lead out in anointing services and child dedications, encourage the disheartened, and assist in other pastoral responsibilities. As undershepherds, elders should exercise constant vigilance over the flock.* Page 74

Sometimes elders think all they need to do is show up at board meetings or take their turn up front. No way. That’s just the tip of the iceberg.

As a pastor, I always liked to take an elder with me. Why? There’s a bond that is created when we work side by side. Why? I train him/her in the art of visitation. When visiting, please use good common sense. If visiting an individual of a different gender, go with another elder. If visiting a family, by yourself is fine if no one else is avaible.

**Who should be visited?** All members including your church leaders. Especially church leaders. We sometimes overlook that group because, after all, they’re okay. Yes, but you need to nurture them so they stay okay. Don’t you want to focus on the people who lead and influence the congretation??? Another group that I particularly like to focus on are the antagonists in the church. Visit them. Love them. Listen to them. Slowly they’ll become the most fervent supporters of the church. It’s sheer foolishness to ignore them and hope they will change or go away. In your visit, don’t overlook those that have backslidden. Include them. Those visits may be a bit harder but well worth it in time. Home visitation is the best way for people to know that their church CARES for them. They are valued.

**Where should a person be visited?** Wherever the person/family feels most comfortable. Some people prefer not at their home – for whatever reason. That’s fine. Find an alternative. At work, in a coffee shop, at a restaurant, at a park, or on Zoom.

**When should the visits take place?** Whenever the person is available. Since evenings are so precious, set up as many afternoon visits (plenty of retirees who will be fine with that option). Remember, as you set up visits, you are there to serve and thus need to adjust to the people not the people to us. A great time to visit is on Sabbath afternoon.

Outcome of home visitation is going to be rapidly visible. By the way, home visitation is fun. It really is. No pressure – no agenda – just enjoy.

Poll

Who are you most likely to serve with?

1. Someone who preaches powerfully.
2. Someone who organizes well.
3. Someone who is truth centered.
4. Someone who genuinely cares for you.

Visible outcome:

1. Members are more likely to get involved in ministry, in other words, become disciples instead of pew warmers.
2. There’s a special bond that is fostered between the pastor/elders and the members. They know you – you know them. “How are things at work? I’ve been praying for you.”
3. When members feel that they are loved, they’re less likely to complain.
4. Church members will be more likely to invite their friends to attend their friendly church.
5. Doing evangelism will NOT be such an uphill battle. Think about this: after Jesus returned to heaven, the men and women he had discipled, turned the world upside down for Jesus.
6. Board meetings will be more enjoyable because people are much more on the same page.
7. Stewardship will also be stronger (fringe benefit).
8. Preaching will be stronger. When you know where you’re people are spiritually, you can address those needs better. Preaching is not about pounding people but about uplifting Jesus.
9. It's the gift that keep on giving. You get so much in return by visiting.

My testimony: Changed things too quickly. Visited my antagonists like crazy. Loved them. And things changed.