

Church Visitation Ministry in Classis Alberta North

History

Note: this is a brief summary of the history provided in the Christian Reformed Church's Guide to Conducting Church Visiting. Click on this link to see the complete Guide:

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

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

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

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

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

In France and Holland, the practice of church visiting took the least hierarchical approach, expressed in 1571 with this caution: "No church shall in any way lord it over another church, and no office bearer shall lord it over another office bearer." This sentence appears in the CRC Church Order today. (See articles 42 and 85) The absence of the word "superintendents" is not an accident!

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

Purpose

The church visitors come as fellow office bearers who are appointed by the broader church (classis) to learn about the spiritual health of the congregation, to discuss areas of ministry where the church is experiencing the Lord's blessing and where the church is struggling, and to ascertain whether the council, the minister, the elders, the deacons, and the commissioned pastor (if there is one) are ministering properly and faithfully.

Historically, the practice of church visiting is for the purpose of "strengthening" churches, not ruling or policing them. Church Order article 42 describes the practices and purpose of church visiting. There is a strong emphasis on accountability while avoiding hierarchy. Together we hold each other accountable, with no lording it over each other.

There are four aspects to church visiting:

- Ascertain: This involves data gathering, conversation, and listening.
- Admonish: A limited aspect, but occasionally required.
- Advise: Councils have questions that can be dealt with at the official visit or between visits.
- Accountability: Church visitors report their work to classis.

The four aspects above all suggest that the biblical teaching of mutual accountability is foundational to the practice of church visiting. Covenant life together includes a willingness to submit oneself to others and a willingness to live faithfully to agreed-upon commitments.

Practice

At its March 2022 meeting, Classis Alberta North approved the following recommendations presented by our Healthy Church Task Force:

Church Visitors are expected to visit a particular church once every three years and will use "survey-based conversations" (A New Approach to Church Visiting Process Guide).

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The approach to church visiting that is described in this Process Guide, produced by our denomination's Pastor Church Resources in 2016. It focuses on ministry fruitfulness and fosters discussion about how God is at work within his church. While exploring how the church is responding to God's leading, it celebrates ministry!

At the centre of this process is an online survey designed to help church leaders gain a clearer understanding of how they view the spiritual health of their congregation and of themselves. This survey has 22 statements covering 11 areas of church health:

- Centrality of God's Word
- Kingdom Extension
- Loving Relationships
- Authentic Spirituality
- Transforming Worship
- Servant Leadership
- Generous Stewardship
- Disciple Making
- Mission and Vision
- Justice and Righteousness
- Children and Youth

Each health area is represented by two statements. Council members taking the survey respond to all statements using these categories: *definitely untrue, hardly true, somewhat true, mostly true, definitely true, and unsure*. For each health area, one of the statements refers to the church and the other to oneself. In other words, the responses indicate how true the statements are about the church as perceived by those taking the survey and how true they are about themselves. Survey results are reported back to the council through the Church Visitor Team. These survey results, along with some open-ended questions, will serve as a basis for the church visit discussion with Council.

Church Visitor Teams (2023)

<p style="text-align: center;">CHURCH VISITOR TEAM 1</p> <p>VISITORS: Jacob Boer & Sid Doornbos</p> <p><u>Cluster 1</u> Rocky First Red Deer New Life Rimbey</p> <p><u>Cluster 2</u> Edmonton Fellowship Edmonton MosaicHouse Edmonton River Leduc Ebenezer</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">CHURCH VISITOR TEAM 3</p> <p>VISITORS: Michelle Kool & John Taekema</p> <p><u>Cluster 5</u> Edson Barrhead Neerlandia Fairview Faith Fellowship</p> <p><u>Cluster 6</u> St. Albert Edmonton CentrePointe Edmonton Bethel Community *Edmonton Avenue*</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">CHURCH VISITOR TEAM 2</p> <p>VISITORS: Ken Douma & Peter Rockhold</p> <p><u>Cluster 3</u> Red Deer First Red Deer Korean Rocky Covenant Ponoka Sunrise</p> <p><u>Cluster 4</u> Lacombe Bethel Lacombe Woodynook Lacombe Wolf Creek</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">CHURCH VISITOR TEAM 4</p> <p>VISITORS: Dale Melenberg & Harry Cook</p> <p><u>Cluster 7</u> Edmonton Covenant Edmonton Inglewood Edmonton West End *Fort Saskatchewan Bridge*</p> <p><u>Cluster 8</u> Edmonton Trinity Edmonton Maranatha Edmonton First Fort McMurray Evergreen</p>

*** Church Visits are not required for emerging churches, but they are still included within clusters*

