

WE ARE GETTING VISITORS TONIGHT

In the previous installment of this series on governing the church, we talked about the mutual responsibility of office bearers in the church to encourage and, if needed, kindly admonish one another by evaluating the work they do in caring for the flock of Christ. That's in Article 73 of the Church Order.

What about mutual responsibility among the *churches* that have chosen to federate together in our Canadian Reformed federation because they are one in faith? Do they have any responsibility towards each other? Reformed churches have rejected the idea of local churches being supervised by a pope or bishop. Local congregations are autonomous churches. But how far does this autonomy go? Can a fully independent church be a faithful church of the Lord Jesus Christ? Of course it can. A federation is not a prerequisite for being part of the church. However, it is beneficial for the well-being of the church. And thus, by adopting the Church Order (CO), the Canadian Reformed churches have agreed to accept some level of mutual accountability. The question of the best way to make this work brings us to Article 46 (CO), which is about the role and work of church visitors.

Church visitation was not part of the ecclesiastical structure from the beginning of the Reformation. But the churches did feel the need for advice, help, and care to build up local church life, which was sometimes quite chaotic. Many ministers lacked proper training and quite often consistories just did their own thing. Lutheran churches had "superintendents," supervising officials with a permanent and powerful position. But the Reformed churches did not want to go there. They were afraid of any form of hierarchy. Introducing the instrument of church visitation was initially considered "unnecessary and dangerous" (1581). In 1586, an overture to have church visitors appointed by the classes was reluctantly approved, but with several restrictions to avoid

the impression that it might become a permanent hierarchical position. Soon after that, the practice was adopted by all classes.

WISDOM REQUIRED

Article 46 (44 in the old CO) was revised in 1983 and, apart from some minor updates, it is now explicit that church visitors are appointed for one year. They can be reappointed, but it is not a permanent position. It was also added that the church visitors are to submit to classis a written report of their visits.

Who should be appointed as visitors? "At least two of the more experienced and able ministers." Because of their training and experience, ministers may often be better equipped for this work, especially when they are confronted with conflicts and disagreements. However, I do not believe that there is anything wrong with the idea that a classis should also have the freedom to appoint a wise and experienced elder to this task. It makes sense that classis looks for experience, wisdom, discretion and tact when appointing church visitors. These men are not just going through a list of formal questions when visiting a local church but should use the opportunity as a time for encouragement and advice. Their work is also meant to be "preventive care," so that potential conflicts can be resolved locally, and formal ecclesiastical procedures can be avoided.

The limitation here is that church visitors are not authorized to make decisions in favour of or against a consistory decision.¹ When it becomes clear that such a judgment is required, church visitors must step back and suggest an appeal to let classis decide.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

A regular church visitation is usually done once a year. We have all heard the announcement that church visitors are coming. You

¹ In the rest of this article, I will use 'consistory' for 'consistory with deacons' and 'consistory without deacons.' It becomes a bit tedious to repeat constantly 'council and/or consistory.'

may not have given it much thought, but apparently it is important enough that the whole congregation knows on that evening: “we are getting visitors tonight.”

But why should you care? First of all, we are reminded of the mutual accountability we have accepted as federated churches. Church visitation is a tool to make sure that together we remain faithful to God’s Word and that we can trust each other to be loyal to the regulations we have agreed on in the CO. Secondly, it gives you, as a church member, the opportunity to voice concerns about decisions of your consistory to the visitors, and ask them for advice. The only condition is that you have first presented your concerns or complaints to your consistory, so that they are aware of the matters you want to talk about to the visitors.

This does not imply that you need the permission of your elders to meet and speak with the church visitors. Sometimes consistories may want to judge beforehand whether the matter you want to ask the visitors’ advice for is important enough, and in this way try to limit the access of church members to the church visitors. However, even if opinions differ whether or not a consistory has the right to do so, it would be utterly unwise. A member’s request to speak with church visitors is usually an indication of a (potential) conflict or difficulty with the consistory. This means that restricting members who want to speak with the church visitors is a sure way to make things worse. The same can be said about the rule some have defended that members can only speak with the church visitors in the presence of the consistory. Members should not feel intimidated and thus inhibited when asking help from the church visitors.

A CONVERSATIONAL INQUIRY

Article 46 does not give detailed instructions for the task of the church visitors. It does give three reference points that frame their work: the authority of God’s Word, the duties of the office bearers, and commitment to the Church Order. It also defines the character of their task: as guests, without ecclesiastical authority over the local office bearers, they can only inquire, ask questions. But Article 46 does not prescribe how they are to do this. Most classes, however, have regulations for church visitation, which usually includes a list of questions for that purpose. Consistories often have the habit to use these questions to prepare for an upcoming meeting with the visitors. That’s convenient, but it does come with a risk. It can turn the church visitation into a formal interrogation, following a checklist, with prepared answers given by the chairman or clerk of consistory. If that’s how it is done, you might as well get a mailed-in questionnaire.

I am quite sure that most church visitors will try to avoid such a formal approach, and want to make it more of a conversation that engages all office bearers around the table. This can be done with the help of an approved list of questions as framework. But it can also be done without such a list. Then the framework is formed by the three questions in Article 46. In this way it is also possible to avoid an annual repetition of the answers given in previous years, provided that all the major elements of the Church Order are still addressed. The latter set-up requires more preparation on the side of the church visitors. But I think it’s worth it. It gives them the opportunity to focus on a particular theme or emphasize some topics this year, while shifting to other aspects next year.

Some might ask: If there is no adopted list of questions to go by, how is a consistory supposed to prepare itself for a meeting with the church visitors? But is such preparation really necessary? Perhaps not. Perhaps it’s even better not. Why would a consistory not be capable of having an unprepared conversation with two ministers to give an account of how the authority of God’s Word, the work of the office bearers, and the loyalty to the adopted Church Order function in their local circumstances? And when all office bearers are invited and feel comfortable to participate in such a conversational inquiry, I am convinced it will give the visitors a pretty good snapshot of how this local church functions within the federation.

As I said earlier, a regular church visitation is done once a year. But what if difficulties arise in one of the churches of that classis? Does the fact that church visitors are appointed for a year imply that during that year consistories can also ask them to come and give advice in dealing with urgent difficulties? Some say no, that after one regular church visit their mandate is completed. They have no business going there again. When a church needs help or advice, they can ask for it at the next classis in the question period for that purpose (Article 44 CO). I have always wondered about that, for the simple reason that I think that every consistory has the freedom to consult anyone they expect to be able to give helpful advice. 



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