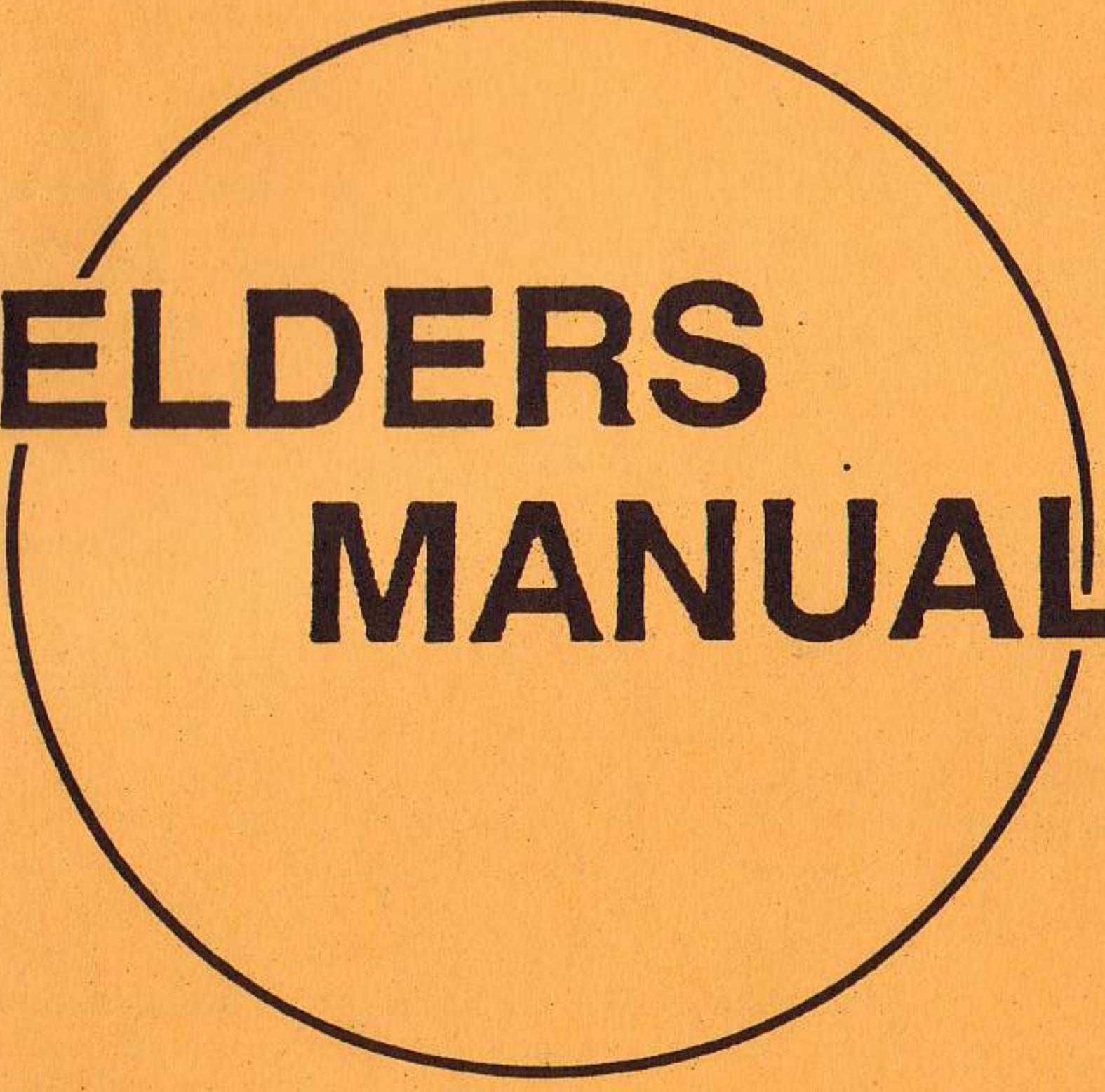


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EM



**ELDERS
MANUAL**

Chapter 1

THE ELDER AS LEADER

You are chosen to lead the Church.

For you this is not likely to mean public notice, news headlines, or interview on television. We are not talking about political or charismatic leadership.

The elder as leader is the elder who finds the time to get his job done, as effectively and as efficiently as he can. Your success will depend upon your ability to handle time.

PART I. TAKE CHARGE OF TIME

Time is a unique resource. All of us begin with the same amount each day, each week, each year. Time is a totally perishable gift. Your stewardship of time is primary test of your stewardship of the opportunity to serve the Church through leadership.

Though all have the same amount of time every day, some seem to do much in their allotted hours while others accomplish little. Strangely enough, very busy people seem to find time to do more things than do less busy ones. This is why civic projects are so often headed by the busiest people in town — not because they can delegate work, but because they have learned the secret of managing their time. And that secret is open to you: hours are short, but minutes are long!

Take control of your minutes, and the hours will take care of themselves. And at the end of the week you will be pleasantly surprised to discover how much you have accomplished.

DISCOVERY

To get a clear picture of what happens to your own time, you should run an inventory of its use. For this you can't trust your memory.

Many time-wasting habits are by now second nature. We follow them without thinking, and are unaware that precious time slips unused away.

There is no quick way to discover how your time is spent, but there is a simple way. Your ability to follow this way is a good test of your capacity for self-discipline.

Keep a running inventory, day by day, of your use of time for a period of several weeks. Call it a ledger, or a journal, or use an appointment calendar marked off into hours. Be especially precise as to how you spend time not required by your job or profession, inasmuch as this is the time most under your control.

If you keep such a record with care, in a real determination to learn how you can make best use of God's gift of this unreclaimable resource, you will soon have before you a profile: *My Use of God's Time!*

EVALUATE

Keep in mind the purpose of this investigation of yourself. You want to find out how well you are using the gift of life, especially in the light of the demands which being an elder place upon you.

Do not leap to conclusions as your time-use-profile emerges.

Think out a scale of values: the time required by your job, by your family, by essential recreation; the time due the Church, the community, your social obligations; the time required to stay alert to issues in the news, the issues in your country and community, to issues in the Church; the time essential to Bible study, meditation, and prayer. Consider essentials peculiar to your own circumstances, or those of your family, which require allocation of precious hours.

SET PRIORITIES

Having discovered how your days are spent, and having reflected on how your time should be allocated, set down a list of priorities for your own use of the years — that is, the minutes — God gives you.

Always allow sufficient time for your work, and for your family. Your work is your present financial resource, and your future. Your family all too soon is grown and gone.

What you are trying to isolate, and put to better use, are wasted minutes. Especially those which dribble away in waiting: for meals, for

transportation, for appointments. Time to be thinking, taking notes, writing a card, making a phone call, jotting down something to remember to do later. It is in wasted moments, not in big blocks of spare hours, that you will find time to mine for service.

ELIMINATE NON-ESSENTIALS

Aside from putting hitherto wasted moments to use (driving to work is a good time to pray, for example), sort out and get rid of activities you could just as well, or better, get along without. Only you can decide on these. But if you are to do full justice to your calling, to your family, and to your work as leader, some things may have to give. Surrendering a "pastime" — almost a sacrilegious word! — may seem hard at first, but in the long run both you and the Church will benefit by hours better spent. Try it and see!

ACT

Having decided how to use your time more efficiently, do it!

Good intentions so frequently fail to mature into fruit because we let slip until tomorrow what we should be doing today.

Try to plan your use of time, and stick to your plan.

If you have a number of things to get done, plan the most difficult or unpleasant first. You will find that getting these behind you liberates you for doing the rest.

DELEGATE

If the demands on your time are in fact greater than you have hours available, involve others. Seek out persons in your elder's district to help with visiting, and to do so in your place. Tap some suitable young adults to function as Big Brother or Sister to youngsters in need. Take care of the shut-ins through the energies of the deacons and others. Enlist your wife to do calling in your place. Leadership is getting the job done, not necessarily doing it all by yourself.

SOME FURTHER HINTS

1. Learn to use, and rely on, a pocket notebook. Relieve your memory thus of dates, appointments, needs, ideas, etc., while at the

same time you keep a record of your calls, plans, and projects.

2. Keep simple records at home. Use a file card system — a recipe box will serve very well. Keep track of the families in your district. A record of special days in their lives will remind you to send cards or to make a call. It will help you to remember names, and to keep track of those who may be drifting away. Such a file may be passed on to your successor when you retire from the active eldership.

3. Carry things through. Let your notebook and records remind you of promises made, or things left unfinished at a previous visit, etc. Find the time to finish the job!

4. Re-evaluate your time-habits occasionally. Have you fallen back into wasting precious moments? Or found new pastimes?

5. Be careful, in all this, to enslave time to your leadership, not yourself to time. Remember that order is a condition for freedom, and that good order is simply the right use of time. Enjoy your better use of this precious resource. God invests time in us so long as we live; our best use of it becomes His return on that investment.

PART II. THE EXERCISE OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership involves not only such control over yourself and the use of your time as to get your job done, but it also means the involvement of others in the callings of the Church. Leadership, seen from this perspective, is: the art of successfully achieving desired results through and with the energies of others. Leadership draws others into the common cause. This, too, is part of your responsibility — and opportunity — as elder.

Some are born with the gift of natural leadership of others, and often become successful politicians. You may, or may not, take easily to leading others. But the essentials of leadership required of the elder are accessible to you, if you prayerfully seek to master them. These essentials may be treated in the following order: planning, organization, giving direction, coordination, and control.

PLANNING

Planning is programming to achieve clearly stated results. Planning looks clear-eyed ahead. Planning sets goals, and then envisions them — tries to see in advance how they will work, what problems may arise, etc. Planning is day-dreaming with a purpose — a very good use for

otherwise wasted moments!

A plan governs the use of time and energy.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that planning is required only for "big" things, like a new sanctuary or program of outreach. Plan all your work as elder. Plan your visits, your approach to problems, your evaluation of church programs, your use of other people, the Bible passage you will read, the texts you will quote, the answers you will give to likely questions. And, of course, as an eldership, plan what the Church should be doing in every aspect of its activities.

Here are some hints. Apply them, as needed, to your plans as individual elder and as member of the eldership:

1. Gather facts and information. Don't go into situations, if you can help it, blind or uninformed. Where applicable, learn things like these: what was done before? who were involved? what were the results? what is being done like this elsewhere?

2. Analyze and reflect. Consider the information you have acquired, and its effect on your plans. Be thus led to seek other information.

3. Foresee. Give free rein to your ideas: if this, then what? Keep your feet on reality, and don't go off on a guessing game — least of all as an excuse to do nothing. But try to foresee results of what you are planning to do, and how you are planning to get it done. This is a real test of good planning. Something, again, that can be done in moments otherwise wasted.

4. Set goals and results. What, specifically, are you planning to do, and to get done? If you have followed the previous steps, this should be easy. If it is not, then reconsider what has gone on before. Do not set goals in a vacuum, or put them out of touch with where you are and what resources you have.

5. Consider alternate courses of action. Reflect on all the ways open to attaining your goal. The results you achieve may depend on your alertness to several means, even detours. Weigh alternatives. Choose the best, but remain open to change if that becomes desirable.

6. Evaluate and check. Keep an eye on where you are, and where you are going. Be sure that what is being done moves toward the goals you have set. Be prepared to change, to pause, even to start over.

Obviously, a brief mental review of the steps outlined above will suffice for many simple tasks. But more complex objectives should be planned in writing, perhaps by sub-committee, and must be carefully mapped out. Costly and time-wasting mistakes can thus be avoided or minimized. Solicit, of course, the cooperation of God the Holy Spirit in

every step of either the most simple or the most complex process.

ORGANIZING

This involves defining duties, positions, relationships, and the assignment of personnel. Organization fits people and activities together in the best ways to get work done effectively.

No matter how small the congregation, or how routine the tasks, organize you must. To say, "We do things informally here" usually can be understood to mean, "We are not very efficient, nor very effective." Organization is the only alternative to aimless drift.

The congregation requires organization in terms of duties, positions, assignments, relationships, responsibilities, evaluation. And the elder must himself organize his own work and that of all those responsible to him. Let there be organization charts for standing relationships in the Church.

There must be descriptions for all positions within the congregation, which clearly define:

1. **Relationships:** what you are responsible for
whom you are responsible to
who is responsible to you
what authority you have
2. **Results:** what are the job goals?
what are your activities?
what are the means of evaluation?

Such a job description, or job profile, should be the product of combined thought and planning by all who are concerned, and should be subject to change when improvement is possible or redefinition is desirable.

GIVING DIRECTION

Directing is leading, supervising, motivating, delegating, and evaluating the work of those you are called to lead. The leader is actively directing when he sees to it that the efforts of each individual involved are focused on the common objective. This implies that the leader has a plan, and that all who work with him understand it. Here the presence, or absence, of a plan makes all the difference between success and failure.

The degree of vigor and initiative displayed by you as leader will

infect and stimulate those working with you. Let your enthusiasm show. It will be contagious.

COORDINATION

Coordinating is that phase of directing which unifies, *in proper sequence*, the participation of a number of workers. Coordination flows out of keeping an eye on the goal and on the whole of what is being done. Here, again, proper planning in advance pays dividends. Work gets done in time, and at the right time. Energies are harmonized.

The eldership must recognize that coordination of the congregation in the achieving of goals and purposes of the Church can be frustrated by keeping a cloak of secrecy over what the elders are doing. Decisions should, so far as possible, be openly arrived at, and clearly explained to the congregation. Let there be a constant flow of information from the eldership to the people, and of reaction from the people to the eldership.

When the programs of the Church develop opposition or contention within the Church, coordination requires a resolution of such tensions. To this end we offer the following suggestions:

1. Recognize that many conflicts flow out of misunderstanding; strive to correct that.
2. Always seek an atmosphere of integrity and honesty as between the eldership and the congregation, and within the eldership and the congregation. Keep it all on the table.
3. Avoid bringing things to an either/or situation if at all possible; give all parties a way out which does not require compromise of truth or principle.
4. Be fair and objective; insist upon that from others.
5. Be a good listener, but keep talk on the subject.
6. Compromise need not involve loss of integrity or surrender of principle, if both sides can discover prejudice and stubbornness in themselves, as usually there is. Fix the attention of both on the desirable end of working together.
7. Keep the pressure on for a resolution. Assign responsibilities for other courses of action, diverting attention away from differences.
8. If the tensions mount, a committee may be appointed to bring opposite sides together. Be sure that the committee has a purpose and knows what it is; to this end, we suggest:
 - a. Define the committee's goal.

- b. Be sure that it has an agenda and sticks to it.
 - c. Appoint members carefully — they must be “right” for the job.
 - d. Evaluate progress.
 - e. Aim to get the job done and the committee disbanded.
9. The elder himself aids coordination by:
- a. Setting a good example of cooperative effort
 - b. Seeking out the participation of others, even those with whom he may differ in some matters
 - c. Keeping an eye on results, and exuding confidence and determination

Keeping all shoulders to the wheel, whatever the project in hand, requires constant and often self-effacing leadership. Let this characterize you.

PART III. COMMUNICATION

Communication as used here means the meaningful exchange of words and the emotions that surround them.

Words are no doubt the most important factor in making communion possible among human beings, indeed in making us human and in getting God's work done in the world.

Here are some things to bear in mind about the sharing of thoughts and feelings by means of words:

1. Understanding only occurs when there is a common sharing in the meaning of words. Be sure that you say what you mean, and grasp what is meant by the words spoken to you. This may take some explanation and some questioning. This is especially important in visiting the family, and in dealing with matters of difference and discipline.
2. Not only what we say, but also how it is said conveys meaning.
3. Face to face conversation is less likely to lead to misunderstanding than that by phone or mail.
4. Keep your remarks simple, and keep them short.
5. Concentrate on what the other is saying. Avoid letting your mind wander, and take care not to let the words you hear fall into preconceived patterns of what you think the other believes.
6. Be able to hear, and try to understand, words critical of your own views, even of your “sacred cows” and deeply held convictions. Until you do this, communication comes to a dead end in these instances.
7. Remember that communication depends upon empathy, which is

the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another.

8. Gain a reputation for being a fair, understanding, compassionate, and trustworthy listener. It will draw people to you in times of their need.

PART IV. MOTIVATION

Motivation is that inner force which causes the individual to release his own unique resources toward achievement. What motivates one may leave another untouched. The springs of human behavior are mysterious.

The Christian is open to appeals to obvious sources of motivation, namely his love of God and neighbor and his gratitude for free and unmerited redemption in Jesus Christ. The Church leader should be conscious of the fact that obedience can be promoted by an atmosphere or climate that motivates. The creation of such an atmosphere should be the conscious goal of preaching and of teaching in the congregation.

Comprehensive planning for the congregation coordinates the efforts of all its agencies in the motivation of obedience to the will of God, and the desire to learn more and more of His revelation.

The Church has always prized the proclamation of the Word of God as the genuinely motivating force for the true Christian life. Recent experiments and studies confirm the relation between high levels of performance in commerce and industry and the spread of information among personnel. All organizations discover the importance of spreading knowledge in terms of motivation.

Trust the preaching and the teaching of the Word to fire the congregation with a zeal for participation in the projects for which you are called to give leadership.

And then give that zeal the leadership it requires and the Church so badly needs.

Chapter 2

VISITING THE MEMBERSHIP

A new and appreciative look must be taken at an old practice: elders' visits to parishoners' homes: house-visiting. Experience has long shown that family visits build strong churches. Such visiting should be done on schedule, covering the congregation each year, if possible.

We consider the following aspects of house-visiting:

Why?

The Lord provides for his Body in the visiting ministry of the eldership what the secular world tries to duplicate through encounter groups and the like. The confidence, security, and togetherness which can be created by carefully planned and conducted family visiting draws the Church together into the local communion of saints — a communion all seek and one which the secular therapist cannot give.

The Word specifies the dual responsibilities of both believer and elder which come to expression in such visiting: "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account" (Heb. 13:17). Both the visited and the visitor will one day have to settle their respective accounts with the Lord, who keeps close watch over any two or three gathered in His name (Matt. 18:20).

Visiting is a part of the Church's program for schooling the believer in faith and obedience. As such it may be considered a logical extension of the Word preached.

A regular program of family visitation promises the following benefits:

1. It extends the care and supportive concern of the Church into the homes of the membership. "Therefore," writes the Apostle Paul, "encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you in

the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (I Thess. 5:11-13).

2. Family visiting provides ways to determine the precise needs of the congregation, and thus give focus to preaching, diaconal assistance, teaching programs, and further attention to specific problems. Visiting takes the pulse and temperature of the Body.

3. It allows the elders to assess the people's reaction to the preaching, the teaching, and all other functions of the Church.

4. Visiting establishes a meaningful relationship between eldership and congregation apart from emergency situations, and makes handling difficulties the easier.

5. It provides a way to detect problems in the bud, and perhaps to nip them there.

Always assuming, of course, that both elder and believer take these visits as more than social occasions.

Before Visiting

It is the minister's responsibility to make family visiting most useful by preaching from time to time on its significance from a suitable Biblical text. The congregation must fully understand, and systematically be reminded of, the values for Church and member implicit in well-conducted family visiting: what they may expect from the elder, and what he may expect from them — and how the Lord is served through both. The minister may well set family visiting in the context of the key role played by the Christian family in the rearing of the young and the stability of society. Texts like the following apply: I Thess. 5:14; Heb. 12:15; I Peter 5:2.

The eldership may decide to structure family visiting around one or several themes for a given season, to be introduced by appropriate preaching. Or the visiting elders may decide to highlight a topic or topics on their visits. Some suggested themes or topics follow:

1. The Family

- a. Biblical view of the family
- b. Worshipping as a family, table devotions, singing, prayer
- c. Ways in which members relate to each other
- d. Special problems of one-parent families, and the Church's concern
- e. Working parents, absence of mother from the home, traveling father

- f. Discipline in the home
- g. Nurture of growing children, entertainment, church attendance
- h. Christian education
- 2. The Church
 - a. Why the Church gathers to worship on Sabbaths, as a family
 - b. The role of preaching and of listening
 - c. The liturgy, what and why
 - d. Participation in Church activities
 - e. Financial contribution to the Church.
- 3. The following general subjects could be developed into similar topics:
 - a. The Bible
 - b. Christian growth, the Christian daily life
 - c. Prayer
 - d. Afflictions
 - e. Special problems of youth
 - f. Stewardship of goods and talents
 - g. Values
 - h. Faith and works
 - i. Providence and human responsibility
 - j. Missions and evangelism

We make these practical suggestions for the conduct of family visiting:

1. This is a team effort. Usually the minister and an elder, or two elders, constitute the visiting team. Be sure to plan matters like these: who is to take the lead in opening subjects? who will read the Word? offer prayer? close with prayer? Who makes the necessary arrangements? Who takes the initiative in leaving? Planning is the key to a good visit.

2. Make each visit a matter of prayer.

3. Ascertain in advance, if possible, what special problems or needs are likely to be encountered, and plan on response to these.

4. Know the names of all in the family, occupation, school levels, etc.

5. Be certain to be expected, with the visit pre-arranged by phone, bulletin announcements, or the like.

6. Yet, despite careful planning, avoid the "canned" rehearsed appearance. Think things through, but trust the Lord for words to speak when the visit is taking place.

During the Visit

Remember that you, as elder, go in the name of, and on errand for, the Lord of the Church. Make the visit serve Him and His Body and He will lend authority and power to your words.

Some practical suggestions for conducting the visit:

1. The Bible places high value on healthy family relationships (Eph. 6:1-4, for example). Make this, therefore, a *family* occasion, inviting both parents and children to gather 'round for this short hour.

2. Be cheerful at arrival. Wait to be invited in. Wait to be seated. People can be touchy about such things. Get off on the right foot.

3. Keep the good humor, courtesy, modesty, love all the way. Remember that children especially may dread family visiting, and must be won by sincere attention to their concerns.

4. *Work* at involving all family members in the visit. Do so with sympathy and understanding. What you do not already know about their interests and occupations, as appropriate to the purposes of your visit, try to learn — but keep the conversation aimed at spiritual realities.

5. If you intend to open with reading Scripture, select the passage before hand and bring your own Bible. Perhaps a short, crisp comment on the reading will get things going. Do not, however, start with a sermon(ette).

6. Generate discussion by avoiding questions which demand only Yes/No answers. For example, in discussing personal relationships with the Lord, tongues may be loosened by mentioning ways in which the Christian does grow in the knowledge of God: through the preaching, personal Bible study, church school, affliction, tensions, temptations, prayer, obedience.... Ask which benefits the most, and why? the least, and why? Other means of grace? Or again: rather than inquiring whether the member is enjoying the preaching (which tempts a critique of the minister — which must, of course, be dealt with in its proper setting), the elder may ask, "Why do you suppose that the Bible emphasizes preaching so much?" And, "How does one get the most out of the sermon?" And, "How might one prepare himself best to appropriate the Word preached?" This manner of approach will bring about a fruitful and often stimulating visit.

7. Let the closing prayer indicate that you have heard the needs, concerns, joys of *this* family. Pray by name for those who require this, always tactfully.

8. Don't overstay your welcome. There will be another day.

9. Decline controversy. If the family has a genuine complaint about the Church, the minister, the liturgy, hear it and promise to report to the eldership. If the matter is serious, arrange to have it aired at appropriate time and place. Avoid, also, seeming to sweep criticism under the rug, and whitewashing faults. There is no better way than that to lose credibility with the member.

10. Be aware that some member of the family might have a matter he wishes to discuss privately. Sense this. Make arrangement for it on another occasion.

After the Visit

Reflect personally on what you can learn from the visit: better ways to open, to develop discussion, to sense problems, to advise, encourage, admonish. Pray over the visit. Confess your mistakes; ask blessing on your efforts.

The eldership as a whole must turn visiting into congregational profit by:

1. Reports and discussion: strengths, weaknesses, problems real and potential among those visited since last meeting. Gifts for service in the Church discovered during the visits. Potential for wider service. The "state of mind out there" as revealed by the visiting. The spiritual level. Concerns and challenges to be met from the pulpit.

2. Reactions to the Church revealed in the visits: criticisms, just and unjust; suggestions; appreciations; pointers to new ways, higher goals.

3. Visiting techniques: an especially successful approach; one to be avoided hereafter; something to be tried again for another look.

Summary

Family visiting can be tedious and boring for visitor and visited alike. It can also be the glue that binds the congregation closer and closer together as elders and people come better and better to know and understand each other.

It all depends on you, and your solicitation of the aid of the Spirit in this important aspect of an elder's calling.

Chapter 3

PROMOTING OBEDIENCE

PART A. FRUITS OF OBEDIENCE

The teaching Church never graduates her pupils. Education under the preaching of the Word continues all the believer's life. The Church's goal never changes: "that we may present every man mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). This is the Church's pedagogical task. Its oversight is the primary responsibility of the eldership.

Maturation in Christ is always a combination of hearing and doing, of doctrine and life, of Word and obedience. Truth enters by way of ear and eye, is received in the soil of faith, and bears fruit in countless acts of love. The Word leaves God through inspired revelation and returns to God in the form of obedient living, the cycle for which it is sent thus made complete.

God instructs His people from the pulpit. Preaching His Word is, therefore, first mark of the true Church.

Overseeing the pulpit, and working alongside it, the eldership is assigned the task of promoting congregational obedience: "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13).

The elders further carry out their assignment through regular family visiting, care for the sick and elderly shut-ins, and general supervision of the Body.

OVERSIGHT FOR OBEDIENCE

The elder will note that the Apostle Paul, as himself an overseer of the Church, does not begin his epistles with outright appeals for good works. His practical suggestions conclude his letters. He begins with instruction in sound doctrine, and thus confirms an already

established Biblical principle: good works flow from sure knowledge. The path to sound living runs through sound doctrine. The Bible itself achieves the goal of its revealed teaching in obedient behavior: "All Scripture is inspired by God . . . that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (II Tim. 3:16-17).

The Church schools the believer in doing good works because this is why redemption is given: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Obedience, then, roots in knowledge of the Scriptures. The elder's first concern is that the congregation *know* the Word. Lacking such knowledge, trying to do good works would be like trying to make bricks without straw. Appeal to will and emotion waits upon approach to the head.

KNOWLEDGE

What the believer must know is summarized in the creeds and confessions of the Church. Here begins the road which leads through the strait gate and along the narrow way to life eternal (Matt. 7:14).

The way pointed out by the Commandments begins with the knowledge that, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage . . ." (Ex. 20:2). The parallel passage in the New Testament, the Great Commission, begins with the knowledge that through Christ the believer is still rescued from Egyptian bondage to the world, the self, and the Devil: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations . . ." (Matt. 28:19). Men are discipled by instruction in revealed doctrine: the knowledge of God as Creator and Sustainer, and the world as His; the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Redeemer, and the believer as His; the knowledge of the Holy Spirit as active Agent, applying God's work in Christ to the believer's redemption through faith working in obedience.

CONDUCT

God leaves no doubt as to what are the good works He saves the believer to do. They are defined negatively in the Decalog, and positively in the two great commandments which each summarize one table of the Decalog. One sentence summaries of God's will are given by the Prophet Micah: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and

what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8), and by the Lord Himself: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

The Bible is itself inspired commentary upon the will of God for man thus summarized in the Law written with His own finger on tablets of stone. Congregational obedience to the teaching of the Scriptures is the elder's abiding concern. It is what the Bible means by "love".

IN PRACTICE

Scriptural teaching on the life of love is far too abundant to outline here, but some pointers may be taken from the Word, as follows:

1. As touching humility, the believer is not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but with all lowliness of mind to think others better than himself (Rom. 12:3; Phil. 2:3). The poor and unknown are to be as highly esteemed as the rich and powerful (Rom. 12:16; Jas. 2:1-4).

2. As touching human relations, the believer is to live peaceably with all men so far as possible, give no grounds for offense, and believers are to live at peace with one another (Rom. 12:18; II Cor. 6:3; Heb. 12:14).

3. As touching love, believers are to bless their enemies, make prayers and supplications for all men, and must be tenderhearted, forgiving one another as Christ forgives them (Matt. 5:44; I Tim. 2:1; Eph. 4:32).

4. As touching purity, believers must let the presence of Christ stand guard over their thoughts, meditate on elevated themes, let no corrupt words or foolish talk proceed from their mouths, and hate even to touch what is tarnished by sensuality (Phil. 4:7-8; Eph. 4:29; Jude 23).

5. As touching joy and contentment, the congregation is to give thanks continually, to joy in God through the Lord Jesus Christ, to rejoice in the hope of His coming, and to be content in whatever state providence assigns them (Rom. 8:28; Phil. 4:4-6,11).

6. As touching their deportment, Christians are to live blamelessly before the world so that their good deeds will not be evil spoken of; they are to be epistles of Christ, known and read of all men (Rom. 12:17; 14:16; II Cor. 3:2).

7. As touching their words, they should speak evil of no man nor

bring a railing accusation against any. They should be at all times ready to believe the best of every person. They should be ready to hear, slow to speak (Titus 3:2; Jude 9; I Cor. 13:7; Jas. 1:19).

8. As touching temperance and self-control, they must not obey the dictates of the flesh. They should have appetite and passion under control at all times and be temperate in all things lawful (I Cor. 9:25-27; Rom. 8:12).

9. As touching good works, they are to be zealous in their practice, doing good works to all men, especially those of the household of faith (Gal. 6:9; Titus 2:14).

The diligent elder, schooled from the pulpit by the diligent pastor, knows that the Scripture also contains countless practical instructions for parents, children, employers, employees (master, servants), preachers, elders, listeners, rich, poor, husbands, wives, rulers, subjects—for every calling and situation.

The path to eternal life is so plainly marked that no one need guess about anything pertaining to the life of holiness and thankfulness. Posting these markings is the task of the Church, under oversight of the eldership.

The justification in Christ which is the heart of the gospel works in the justified by faith, and out of its working emerges the life of thankful obedience to the commands of the Lord. So intimate is the connection between gospel and obedience, that both St. Paul and St. Peter speak of divine judgment against those who "obey not the gospel" (II Thess. 1:8; I Pet. 4:17).

PART B. THE ELDER AS COUNSELOR

You, as an elder, are inevitably a counselor.

Your efforts to encourage godly living will encounter many Christians bogged down in family and marriage problems, or beset by anxieties, insecurity, wrong priorities, self-centeredness, etc., etc. Cure must be preceded by counsel.

This brings the elder face-to-face with the immense claims and pretensions of the counseling industry. For such it is, an industry reaping profits in wealth and prestige for a professional clique. Until he has examined the largely hollow "front" of this industry, the elder is apt to feel himself incompetent to counsel. This is a serious mistake. It is the elder, and not the secular counselor, who is given the key to mental health and personal growth. Bear these things in mind:

Chapter 4

BY DIVINE APPOINTMENT

Any office has its authority from its author. In a democracy political office has its authority from the people; they create and fill that office by way of constitution and political process. The people author the office, give its holder his authority, and require an accounting of his stewardship.

"Tis not so in the Church."

The Author of the office of elder in the Church is God. Elders have their authority, therefore, from Him. They exercise their authority effectively only in conformity to His Word. God holds them accountable to Himself. All this we have already drawn from the Scriptures.

GOD FILLS THE OFFICE

The Ephesian elders to whom Paul was speaking were no doubt appointed by himself, or may have been elected from a slate of nominees chosen by the Apostle. Each man now hearing Paul's voice vividly remembers when his name was added to the roll of that great company chosen across the centuries, from the dawn of Israel's history, of elder-leaders of the people of God. A company in which you who read these lines as elder or elder-designate are also now enrolled by name. Your office was not authored by man, nor created only yesterday.

But to those elders of Ephesus who remember their appointment through Paul's hand, the inspired Apostle now says: "God the Holy Spirit made you guardians." Clearly, he goes out of his way to stress two things: a) he, Paul, was only the means, while God was the active Agent in their appointment; and b) God in a very specific sense, as "God the Holy Spirit".

So then. So now.

The means to your selection as elder was election by the congregation. The active Agent in your selection was God Himself. He not only ordained the office of eldership, He fills it.

Paul stresses "God the Holy Spirit" to impress upon the mind of all elders an awesome truth. Yours is not only an office instituted by God long ago; you now occupy that office by the active and efficient working of God then and there in your selection.

God is tri-une, three Persons in one — and one Person in three. When the Bible speaks of God as Father, the stress is on God as creator and sustainer of all that is and will be. When the Bible speaks of God the Son, the stress is on God as Savior and Redeemer of His people. And when the Bible speaks of God as Holy Spirit, the stress is on God's governing activity and dynamic energy in all that happens in His creation, including human history. God was thus active, Paul is stressing, in the appointment of just those men before him, and not others, to the eldership of Ephesus. And God was no less present and active in your selection to this same office in your congregation. The Author of the office, and the Author of your occupying it, are one and the same: the Triune God! Keep this awesome truth ever in your mind, on your heart, and before your conscience.

GOD REQUIRES THE OFFICE

Certain truths follow from what has been said so far:

1. God the Holy Spirit is administratively active in the Church through the eldership. God uses the office He has established and filled to effect His will for order in the local congregation and the Church at large. The eldership is God's board of directors in the Church, His means for channeling the active power of His Spirit administratively into the Body. Good order is not by accident. It is effected through an eldership conscious of its Authority and responsibility to the Word.

2. Churches which have no eldership lack God's instituted means for effecting His administrative will. Such churches will evidence either the looseness of everyone's going his own way, or the domination of one or a few strong-willed members or charismatic "leaders".

3. The eldership is the administrative hub of the congregation, and, through classes and synods, of the Church at large. This means that *all* congregational activities fall under jurisdiction of the eldership. They are appointed to oversee the Church in action and obedience. And

through them the Spirit chooses to energize the Body in corporate action. To evade the elders' supervision is to avoid the Spirit's participation. Clubs, groups, the choir, classes in doctrine, societies, and the like must all seek the blessing of the elders' supervision.

4. The eldership is not responsible to the congregation as a politician is to his constituency. The elders have their authority from God, not the congregation. To God's will as revealed in His Word the eldership is alone responsible. But of course to such responsibility the congregation may call their elders both by word and in prayer.

5. The health and effectiveness of the Church in the world will be in large measure dependent upon the dedication, courage, and perseverance of the eldership. As goes the elder, so goes the Church.

GOD SETS THE QUALIFICATIONS

It is not surprising that for the office He has instituted God sets the qualifications for admission and retention there. These qualifications are explicit in His Word. The congregation must bear them in mind in acting as the means through whom God selects His overseers. The elder-candidate must bear them in mind as he contemplates a call to stand for election or appointment to this office.

The demands laid by the Scriptures upon all Christians are laid also upon the eldership — both teaching and ruling. Through Paul's letters to Timothy and to Titus, however, the Lord sets down specific requirements for appointment either as teaching (preaching) or ruling elder. You will notice that in his first letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of the elder as "bishop," that is, as overseer:

"The saying is sure: If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into condemnation of the devil; moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (I Tim. 3:1-7).

Observe that, in writing to Titus, the inspired Apostle uses the terms "elder" and "bishop" interchangeably, as we have observed

before:

"This is why I left you at Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you, if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate. For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled; he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it" (Titus 1:5-9).

These are high qualifications. They set guidelines for the congregation in the nomination and choice of elders; they set guidelines for the eldership in setting goals for their own conduct.

The elder must avoid, here, both a false pride and a mistaken humility:

1. *A false pride:* do not too quickly suppose that your appointment by the Spirit, through the congregation, to your high office endorses all your behavior as fully in accord with the Spirit's requirements. What the Lord sees in you is the aspiration to become, year by year, more of what He expects His elders to be — this is why He gives the guidelines. What the Spirit inspired Paul to set down regarding the elder serves as a measure for mutual watchfulness by the eldership, and by the congregation. You will serve the Lord and His Church best so long as you recognize that, in meeting His standards, you have not arrived but are on the way. God will bless that attitude.

2. *A mistaken humility:* do not refuse nomination to the eldership if, in the judgment of the congregation you merit that honor, by letting Paul's high measure of the office discourage you. Recall the comfort of the Psalmist: "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:13-14). He has observed in you the will to do His will, not the perfect doing of it. So long as your aspiration is to be, as best you can, what the Lord requires of stewards in His Church, do not hesitate to take this office, even though you may know, as perhaps others do not, of your shortcomings.

PROFILE OF THE ELDER

We draw the following profile of what the elder ought to seek to be

from the prescription given above:

1. Is the elder to be male? While we believe that the Bible responds to this question in the affirmative — yes, the eldership is restricted to men — we also recognize that many churches are opening the office to women. At issue is the interpretation of crucial passages in the New Testament. First, was Paul influenced by the customs of his time in assigning the office to males? We think not, because there were countless female priestesses in Paul's time. Second, precisely what is meant by the texts on which Paul anchors his position: a) in God's creation of Adam first, with Eve as his helpmeet (I Cor. 11:8-9; I Tim. 2:12-14); b) in Eve's faulty initiative in the fall of man (I Tim. 2:14); and, c) in the model of Christ's headship of His Church (Eph. 5:22-24). Peter supports Paul's position (which is, we believe, the inspiring Holy Spirit's position) with reference to Sarah's obedience to Abraham (I Pet. 3:6; Gen. 18:12). As we understand these texts, we hold that the Lord's blessing will fall most evidently upon those churches which devote the manifold talents of women to services other than the ruling eldership. We have, however, structured this *Handbook* for practical use; and we trust that the advice offered here is applicable to the office of elder, as *office*, without regard to incumbent.

2. The elder must be mature, and not a new convert. He must be describable by terms like these: temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, gentle, generous, not a victim to drink or greed or bad temper.

3. Some demonstrated ability to manage a family well. He who serves the Lord well as head of his own household thus commends himself as likely to serve the Lord well as one of the leaders of the Household of God.

4. The elder must be apt to teach. This qualification applies most emphatically to the teaching or preaching elder. This is his primary task. But the ruling elders should also share in the instructional program of the Church, though some will be more gifted than others for the classroom. In any case, the elder should so well acquaint himself with sound Christian doctrine that he can obey the command: "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (I Pet. 3:15).

5. Good reputation. It is desirable that the elder be well thought of in his community, with a reputation for honest dealing, openness to others, respect for those who differ, participation in community affairs. This does not imply that the elder has a repute for running

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with every wind that blows, never standing for anything controversial. It only means that, by God's standards, the elder is entitled to be well thought of among men.

PREPARATION FOR THE ELDERSHIP

The Church requires preparation of its teaching elders. In this the Church does well.

But the Church should also concern herself with the preparation for office of her ruling elders. This concern is long past due. We think of options like the following:

1. Allow up to a year between election and installation of the elder. During this time he can thoughtfully prepare for his term of service. He may observe eldership meetings; accompany experienced elders on calls and visits; be invited to study problems confronting the congregation and denomination; attend sessions of broader assemblies; work his way through manuals like this one; be diligent in the study of the Scriptures and the Confessions.

2. Seminars and conferences on the eldership and its functions should be organized by congregations and classes or presbyteries or districts. Evening courses might be offered by Bible colleges and other instructional institutions.

3. An elders' newsletter might be circulated in a given area, edited by an experienced elder, perhaps one in retirement from his vocation. It could deal with issues before the Church, with special problems in oversight of the Church and ways to handle them, with stories of successful methods in training the youth, and accounts of challenges to sound doctrine, etc.

Courses and guidebooks to witnessing for Christ abound. The Church should give equal concern to training those who lead the Body into which converts come.

ON CHOOSING YOUR ELDERS

The whole congregation has a vital interest in the selection of both the teaching and ruling elders. The choice of teaching elder, or minister, is governed by congregational or denominational regulations. We make the following suggestions for the choice of ruling elder:

1. The nomination must be carefully made by whatever body is

entrusted with this responsibility, the session, consistory, council, board....

2. While reluctance to serve as elder must sometimes be overcome, if possible, by challenging the proposed candidate to this high service, nominees should normally be willing, when requested, to stand. It may be, however, that highly qualified candidates are modestly unaware of their talents; encourage such to accept nomination.

3. Paul advises, "Know them which labor among you, and are over you" (I Thess. 5:12). This suggests that sufficient time must elapse between the announcement of nominations for the eldership and their election to office. The congregation has a right to know how each man stands on issues before the Church at the time. A profile in a newsletter would be helpful, giving details of the nominee's background, education, vocation, family, interests, etc.

4. A slate of possible nominees might be presented to the congregation for the selection of the final list of nominations from which, later, the elders shall be elected. In this manner, the people are involved from the first in the selection of their leaders.

5. There is reason to believe that elders in the early Church were accorded life tenure. Just as, it appears, ministers were wedded to one congregation for life. There are those who hold for life tenure for the eldership today. The Bible gives no specific direction. The options are obvious:

a. Highly qualified elders should serve as long as possible, growing in wisdom and usefulness.

b. Rotation, however, does relieve the Church of the burden of less qualified elders, and opens the office to others who might be better servants.

c. Even the most gifted do begin to display the weakness of age if life lasts long. Will they know when they should take inactive status?

We assume that your congregation or denomination already has a policy, as to tenure, and we see no strong reason for advocating its change.

Chapter 5

CARING AND COMFORTING

PART A. THE AGED, SHUTIN, RETIREE

Age slowly transforms those who once were pillars of the Church into those who lean upon the Body. The aged saint has progressed from the childish into the childlike, and now is threatened by senility with childishness once more. You as elder have a special responsibility to the aged in your district.

Why You Must Visit the Aged:

1. To give visible expression, through your visit, of the spiritual unity of the Body of Christ. Your visit incarnates the Church's love.

2. You may find that the elderly are the forgotten members of the communion. Yet their spiritual needs may be among the most urgent. Tucked away in rest homes, or elsewhere, the aged are easily forgotten. They are rarely seen, and all too commonly neglected.

3. There may be needs which you as elder can meet through the resources of the Church: lack of funds, transportation, communication, reading material, tracing of relatives, etc.

4. The proportion of the aged in our population is growing. Your own efforts to visit the elderly may fall short of their needs, and you should enlist the attention of other members of the Body to this growing challenge. Perhaps your congregation should appoint deaconesses for regular visiting.

Before Your Visit

Well-planned is, as always, half done. Consider things like these:

1. Expect, usually, to go alone. This makes your visit more a personal than an "official" one. You may decide, of course, to be accompanied by your wife who may minister very effectively to the oldster's needs.

2. Consider, in advance, the differences between your way of life and that of the elderly. You freely come and go; you have your job to give meaning to life; you plan for the future. The older person may be bound, most of the time, by four walls; he or she may find the rest home unpleasant; anticipation of the future confronts the fact of death. You must strive to enter into the mind and feelings of the aged, and to see things from his limited perspective. Try to understand in advance what you may find of discouragement, frustration, apathy, or anxiety. It may be profitable to discuss at elders' meetings what the "mind" of the aged is apt to be.

3. Know, if you can, something about the person you are going to visit, if this be the first time: previous occupation, family, children near or far, even financial circumstances and physical condition.

4. Learn from the experience of others that certain problems and concerns are common to the elderly, and consider your response to these, like:

a) The gnawing loneliness. Often a spouse has passed away; friends are dead, or too old to visit; children may not be coming very often; Sabbath services can no longer be attended (try to arrange for regular delivery of tapes of these, and for equipment to play them). The pastor probably does find time to visit, but not often enough to please the aged member. You can help the elderly to understand the busyness of others, and to avoid crabbing at the children when they do drop by. Point to the presence of Christ in the Word, and to His always hearing prayer.

b) Doubts and fears. Age does not always bring tranquillity. The elderly are often plagued by doubts and fears. There may be some ground for this, in a sense of wasted years, missed opportunities, disobedience. Listening renders a real service in these circumstances; let the older person talk it out. Be patient. Decline giving glib answers. Meet doubt with promises out of the Word. Do not expect that problems reaching back into youthful indiscretions will readily be brushed aside. Expect to hear the same catalog of concerns on many visits; and each time respond from the Scriptures. Try to lead the thoughts from self to God, from unhappy past to glorious future. Assure the doubtful that heaven awaits upon faith, not works, and that the Christ died to liberate us from the curse and burden of all sins.

c) Expect to encounter the physical disabilities of age: failing vision, poor memory, bad hearing, and even embarrassing physical handicaps. Overlook these.

d) Think over the doctrinal problems which seem to trouble many of the elderly; draw answers from Word and confession. Problems like these:

(1) Will we know each other in heaven? (No doubt we will)

(2) Why must the believer still undergo physical death? (The last remnant of Adam's sin, used by God as gateway to His presence)

(3) Will Christians be judged for their works? (Yes, but in terms of Christ's forgiving love, and the believer's will to do His will — even now in declining years)

(4) Why are my prayers unanswered, perhaps for wayward children or grandchildren? (God has His own mysterious ways; but He lays upon us the duty to pray without ceasing, and He will do what is best)

(5) Why does the Lord keep me here with my ailments and in my loneliness? (He has His appointed time, and until then calls upon each of us to serve Him in our circumstances, with prayer and praise and in faith)

(6) Why do I live on while another is snatched away, perhaps in accidental death? (No one is the Lord's counselor, or knows the secrets of His hidden will, but He does all things well, as one day we will all understand)

(7) Will God forgive sins like...? (God forgives all sins confessed and repented of, and eagerly awaits such turning to Him)

(8) Could I be guilty of the sin against the Holy Spirit, which is not forgiven? (Not so long as you are concerned that you might be)

(9) How can I warn my child, or someone else, against my mistakes? (Write. Call. But most of all use your free time to pray)

The answers suggested above are simply points of view from which to develop your own responses to these, and like, questions. We list some texts at the end of this book to assist you further. Discussion of these and similar questions in elders' meetings is helpful and important.

Select a Bible passage for reading and application before you leave for your visit.

During the Visit

1. Be on time. Despite the time on their hands, the elderly expect others to be punctual; they have little to do but watch the clock.

2. The purpose of your visit is spiritual, but don't slight the social aspects of life. Be willing to hear, perhaps for the so-manyeth time, the

same stories, and to laugh at the same jokes. Listen with interest to stories of the past, no matter how often repeated.

3. Remember that the Word of the Lord has power to give peace, and will linger on long after your words have been forgotten. So keep that Word foremost on your lips, as opportunity affords. Apply Scripture as frequently and naturally as you can.

4. Try making appropriate application of the Bible passage you selected, and have brought your own Bible to read. You could compare the green pastures of Psalm 23 with the eventide of life, a time of security because the Good Shepherd is always at hand. Psalm 139 points to the never-failing presence of God. John 14 speaks of the many mansions that await us. John 15 stresses the unity of Christ and His children.

5. Remember that the elderly need a listener more than they need a talker, most of the time. Your listening is their therapy. They seek someone to talk *to*, often, more than to talk *with*. Be that someone.

6. Take the problems told you seriously, while yet aware that they may be complaints made to everyone. But offer to help with unpleasant living conditions, changes required in nutrition or medication, indifferent children, etc., to the extent that you can. Do not promise correction. There probably are circumstances which account for situations complained of. But do what you can.

7. Let your parting prayer indicate that you have indeed heard the words spoken to you, and care about the problems raised.

8. Despite entreaties, do not overstay. The oldster who urges you to stay overtime may, when you are gone, complain that you tired him out too much. Just as he may spoil his childrens' visits by saying that they never visit him.

9. Promise another visit. Soon, if you can, or can get another to share visiting duties with you. Having something to look forward to means much to the elderly.

After the Visit

1. Find time to pray God's blessing on the results of your visit.

2. Remember the elderly in your district and congregation in your daily prayers.

3. Reflect on what you yourself learned from the Word spoken to the older one. It speaks to you also. Old age is the future of most of us. Remembering that will help you cope with the tasks of visiting the elderly now.

4. Carry through on promises you made, and problems you think should be corrected. Contact wayward or thoughtless children. Help them arm themselves against recrimination when they do visit. Alert deacons to financial problems.

5. Be prepared to discover that you heard complaints made to every visitor, and long since as nearly met as possible. Do not feel taken in; this is what age does to all of us.

6. Always seek out, by reflection, what was effective and what was not in your approach to these visits. Stress the one; drop the latter.

7. Acquaint yourself with studies on the nature of aging; there are many of them.

8. Keep a notepad close as you read the Bible for your own devotions, and jot down passages of especial import for your next visit. You will develop your own effectiveness, and have a treasure to pass on to another elder later.

A Program for the Elderly

Many of the elderly are not confined to their rooms, and have a store of talents for the Church to put to use. The eldership should have a committee to facilitate such use. Be sure some of your retirees serve on the committee to represent their age group. There will be things like these for the committee to plan and implement:

1. Prayer chains among the elderly to make regular intercession for congregational needs. Keep the chain informed of special problems like illnesses, surgeries, accidents, troubles, and the myriad other matters which touch people's lives.

2. Card and letter chains: furnished stationary and postage, the elderly can correspond with missionaries, others who no longer get about, and those suffering special needs or celebrating special events.

3. Skill chains: with materials provided, the elderly can knit, sew, mend, paint, carve, repair, etc. This may be done not only for members of the Body, but in the name of the Body for others in the community.

4. Influence chains: the elderly can be encouraged to keep their places of influence in society by writing letters to public officials, to local newspapers and radio/television stations, and wherever a voice for righteousness might be heard.

5. Many other tasks could be planned for putting the talents of the active elderly to use in and for the Church, like:

a. Duty in the Church library.

b. Assistance in keeping the building neat and clean.

- c. Work in yard and flower garden.
- d. Painting and decorating.
- e. Keeping records of various kinds.
- f. Helping with outreach programs for the distribution of goods and clothing to the needy.
- g. Teaching the youth, and working with them in various projects.

Putting talent to use results from being aware of needs and fitting the skills others have overlooked to meeting them. You can do that if you try.

PART B. THE SICK

"I was sick and you visited Me" (Matt. 25:36).

"Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (Jas. 5:14).

Illness respects no one.

Just as shadows are better perceived in sunshine, so sickness is better prepared for in health. Such preparation is the task of the pulpit. The elders' care of the sick must be facilitated by the minister's instruction of the well.

God does not explain in detail why He visits some with illness. It is not for man to make God's explanations for Him. But illness is not desertion. It is, rather, one form of God's dealing with His children. This the congregation must clearly understand, and of it they must constantly be reminded. Elders who encourage such instruction from their pulpit will find their effort amply rewarded in their own ministrations to the ill. Both patient and elder will start from a common understanding and shared faith in the fatherly goodness of God.

The Bible bears ample testimony to chastisement by illness, and otherwise, as testimony to God's love:

"Behold, happy is the man whom God reproves; therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty. For He wounds, but He binds up; He smites, but His hands heal" (Job 5:17-18).

"My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of His reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom He loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:11-12, quoted also in Hebrews 12:5-6).

The writer to the Hebrews adds: "It is for discipline that you have

to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (Heb. 12:7).

Illness is no doubt one of the dark fruits of Adam's fall, and may itself be the mischief of the devil. But in His controlling providence, God uses illness for purposes of His own with the believer. The congregation must frequently be reminded of this in good health and bad.

Physical illness illustrates spiritual sickness — not just in the patient but in us all. Attention readily focuses on the material goods of life, often to the neglect of the soul. We strive for comfort, security, wealth in things rather than in God. Illness, our own or that of others, can alert us to this grave imbalance by reminding us that health is always precarious, and the material affords no lasting habitation. Illness is a reminder of that, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24).

The attention given physical illness highlights by contrast the little attention commonly given things of the spirit. The state of the body and its symptoms crowds out concern with the state of the soul.

The minister who instructs his people in these and like lessons to be learned from the ill prepares the way in advance for the elders' ministry to the sick.

We make these suggestions regarding visiting the sick:

Why Visit the Sick?

1. Because the Lord wills to be found in them: "I was sick and you visited Me" (Matt. 25:36). Ministry to the sick is ministry to Him. He waits on the sickbed and in the hospital.

2. Because the Lord's Body, the Church, thus extends its loving concern to those unable by reason of illness to come to her. Thus the arms of communion of saints embrace the physically separated one, to unite together in visible concern and love.

3. To assist the patient to set this trial in Biblical perspective, as suggested above (and in many other appropriate texts), and thus cooperate with the Holy Spirit in reaping fruit out of adversity: "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet" (Judg. 14:14).

4. To permit the patient to give expression to fears, resentments, questions in the context of loving and understanding concern.

5. To share with the patient in prayer and the reading of the Word.

6. To ascertain if there are needs of patient or family that are not

known or being met. To relieve his mind of worry over these, and to alert the diaconate if necessary.

Before the Visit:

1. Plan carefully. Know the illness, but do not intend to play amateur physician. Know his condition. What hospital, or whether at home, and when is suitable visiting time. Anticipate problems, like concern over job, or family, or future.

2. Select Scripture passages in advance. Bring your own Bible. Come to comfort through the Word and prayer, not as professional counselor.

3. Reflect on what you will say in prayer. Don't plan on lecturing the patient, or God. Learn, and plead on, the promises: "I will never fail you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5), and the like.

4. Pray for the "success" of the visit, for a right spirit in yourself and the patient, for the right words and responses. Commit the outcome to the Lord, and go in His strength.

During the Visit:

1. If you are new to the office of elder, go with your minister or an experienced elder or deacon. Observe and learn from them, and let the patient benefit from their greater wisdom.

2. Once the visit becomes necessary, *do it!* Don't procrastinate, tempting as that will be.

3. If you need to make a visit in an intensive care unit, explain your mission at the desk and they will give you proper instruction. Obey especially time limits and avoid taxing the patient's strength.

4. Do not sit on the bed.

5. If the patient cannot speak, ask him to squeeze your hand if he can hear and understand.

6. Use Biblical passages to bring the conversation to spiritual things. Invite reaction from the patient. Refer to sermonic instruction regarding illness. Be prepared to receive instruction from the patient, who may see things from his perspective more profoundly than do you. Avoid matters of controversy or dispute. There are better times for these.

7. Address the patient by name. Try to use names of family and near relatives if appropriate. Show thus a familiarity with the patient's circle.

8. Sometimes you may want to include the roommate in conversation and your prayer.

9. Keep the visit short. Leave with your welcome still warm.

After the Visit:

- 1. Pray for God's blessing upon it.**
- 2. Reflect on what went well, what went poorly, what can be better done next time and what will be generally useful.**
- 3. Decide if another visit is desirable, and if so when and by whom.**
- 4. Alert fellow elders or the deacons to needs discovered by the visit.**
- 5. Compare notes with the eldership as to how these difficult visits can be made ever greater blessing for patient and Church.**
- 6. Reflect, for your own encouragement, that you have done the Lord's work, both in extending the love of His Body to the sick and in serving Him through serving the sick. Retire this evening in peace.**

The handling of illness, both by patient and by the Church, becomes God's opportunity for schooling His children. Do it that way.

PART C. THE CRITICALLY ILL

You may very well shrink from the idea of visiting the critically ill or the dying in your capacity as elder. After all, you are not a pastor, and you feel ill-prepared to extend pastoral care in such situations. Your fears are real. Prepare to defeat them now, when no such calls may be pending. Consider that the pastor may not always be available, or the congregation may be without one for a time. Then the needs of the patient, and of his family must overshadow your own timidity. Moreover, even under ordinary circumstances, a member of the Church does have a right to the care and prayer of the elder.

Before the Visit

- 1. Prepare yourself for what you are likely to encounter. The patient may well be tired, in pain, confused, or unable to communicate. You will need to be brief, to make the most of the time by putting the Word of God foremost, and prayer next to it. Consider texts suitable to the needs you anticipate.**
- 2. Remember that members of the patient's family are apt to be on hand, also seeking strength and comfort. Be prepared to minister to their needs, also from the Word and in prayer.**
- 3. Do not anticipate dramatic events, nor hold yourself responsible if there are none, like: ringing testimonies of faith, deathbed conversions or confessions, last memorable words.**

4. Try to take a realistic view of death. It is indeed, "the last enemy," as St. Paul calls it (1 Cor. 15:26). But it is an enemy already defeated in our Lord's glorious resurrection (consider carefully all of 1 Cor. 15). Now it is possible to say "blessed are those who die in the Lord" (Rev. 14:13). "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54). Difficult as it may be, death for the Christian can be met with the triumphant cry, "O grave, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). The awesome fact of the body's dissolution cannot be ignored or glossed over, but underneath your sympathy must be your conviction that death is not the end but the beginning of life for those who love the Lord. Try to let this perspective master your soul as you approach the sickroom if death seems likely there.

During the Visit

1. On arrival at the home or hospital, find out whether the patient is able to communicate with you. If he is in a coma, or otherwise unable to appreciate your presence, your concern goes out at once to the relatives and friends present. Minister comfort in the Lord, and from His Word, to them. Perhaps you can find a quiet room in the hospital to meet a few moments with those concerned about the patient.

2. If the patient is able to communicate, even only through the clasp of a hand, request from others present that you be left with him alone for a few moments. It is very difficult to have a meaningful visit unless you are able to concentrate all attention upon the patient.

3. Avoid playing doctor. Even if the patient appears to have but a short time to live, you do not know this and must not suggest it. How frank you can be will depend upon what you know of the patient, upon previous experience, and always upon prudent and cautious judgment. Death need not be imminent to be mentioned in the context of illness and viewed as under the providence of God: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou art with me" (Ps. 23:4) is always appropriate if you express it as a solemn joy, and not as a prediction.

4. Try to respond honestly to the patient's concerns, be it fear, doubt, lack of trust, gloomy expectation, concern for spouse and family, and the like. Lean on the Word. Promise to convey messages, get help, etc. to the degree that you actually can deliver.

5. Try to lead the patient to a declaration of his own faith, prodding him with the promises and knowledge that the Lord is ever near. If he has difficulty, draw out if you can the root of that difficulty so that you

may encounter it with the Word if possible.

6. Have your Bible with you. Let the patient suggest passages he treasures, or subjects he would like to hear the Word speak of: "In the few minutes we have together shall we read of God's presence, forgiveness, love?" (for example).

7. Be prepared to make a quick summary of the Gospel if that be called for by the patient's extreme uncertainty.

8. Avoid argument. Meet doubt with Scripture. Reckon that the Devil is very busy aggravating fear and uncertainty. Defeat him with the Word and its boundless promises.

9. If the patient wants to talk about his illness, hear him out but not too long.

10. Do not overstay. Ten to fifteen minutes is usually long enough.

After the Visit

1. Pray earnestly for the patient and all others involved and for blessing on your visit.

2. Learn from each visit how to do the next one better for patient, for Church, and for the Lord.

3. Carry out any promises made or report to relatives why you cannot do so.

Conclusion

"It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). But a little experience at the side of the deathbed will convince you that this judgment falls not only upon the one dead. It falls also upon:

1. You. How much ministry has this person enjoyed from you as an elder? How much warning of that impending judgment? How much encouragement in well-doing? How well did you know the patient's circumstances, his inner life, before this last visit so that you could minister best? Your eldership comes, too, under judgment.

2. The Pastor. How pastoral has he been over this member of the flock?

3. The eldership. How much instruction has the congregation received, from the pulpit and by other means, in the reality of death and judgment? How aware is the congregation that the Lord Himself speaks most often of hell and final judgment? that the death and

resurrection of Jesus point those who believe toward the strait gate and narrow way rather than excuse living like everybody else?

4. The Church as communion of saints. How well does the Body extend its arms around the bereaved family? meet its needs? give peace of mind to the dying that this will be so?

All this comes to judgment in the death of a member of the congregation. Take sober note of that. Prepare against it by diligence in your duties as elder: "And that servant, who knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes" (Luke 12:47), "for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness" (Jas. 3:1).

Much of life and "culture" is a conspiracy against facing the ultimate reality of death. But you as an elder cannot lightly push aside the responsibilities which come to the surface when the death of a member of the congregation has to be faced. Let this sober experience stimulate you to greater diligence in doing your duties toward the living while "it is yet today" (Heb. 3:13).

PART D. THE BEREAVED

"Naked came I from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

In this age of comfort, security, insurance, pension, promise, mobility, and freedom, at least in the Western world, the Church desperately needs instruction in Providence and God's pedagogy. For life is not, in fact, unblemished by sorrow and concern, but the mood of the times ill prepares even the believer to surmount them when they strike.

The elders' ministry of comfort begins, once again, with obligations laid upon the pulpit. The Bible is full of instruction regarding God's sovereign disposition of men's lives and fortunes, and the believer must be prepared, by preaching, to stand where Job stood: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" asks the Master in Jesus' parable (Matt. 20:15).

The congregation must be given a living perspective on loss, sorrow, fear, insecurity, anxiety, concern. Life must be understood as divine pedagogy. God's education of His children through means He chooses as best adapted to the believer's growth toward full maturity: "The

Lord disciplines him whom He loves and chastises every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6, quoting Proverbs 3:12). The writer adds: "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (Heb. 12:7). This teaching prepares the congregation to accept God's disposition of their lives in the spirit of Job. It is antidote to cynicism and despair. When well and persistently done, the elder will find his own burden in communicating comfort to those in need of it greatly relieved.

A fine line must be drawn, however, between appropriate instruction in God's pedagogy and sentimentality. God is not praised for suffering, loneliness, and sorrow in themselves; all these are fruits of man's fall. Christians do not seek out hardship or loss; even the Lord Himself sought, if possible, to avoid the cross: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). Christ's suffering on the cross was sin in its deadliest form. For that He gave no thanks. Nor should we for whatever suffering, pain, anxiety, hardship we must endure as descendants of Adam and candidates for heaven. The believer must learn that out of hurt, loss, anxiety, and sorrow God can bring forth blessing in stronger faith, deeper maturity, larger sympathy for others, more profound trust in Him: "Out of the eater came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (Judges 14:14). It is for this overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:21) that the believer learns to praise God, and in it discovers the reality of the divine promise: "I will never fail you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). And he can comfort others who has learned to say: "It is good that I was afflicted, that I might learn Thy statutes. I know, O Lord, that Thy judgments are right, and that in Thy faithfulness Thou has afflicted me" (Ps. 119:71;75).

The Bible prepares the believer for the results that sin has brought into the world. The Church should be the instrument for diffusing this preparation into the consciousness of the congregation.

VARIETIES OF SORROW

Sharpest grief is occasioned by the loss of a loved one in death. The elder must school himself in the rich promise of the Word if he is to be of any use to the bereaved at this awesome time. But the Church must be sensitive to many other sources of hurt and sadness, not always conspicuous or even known: divorce in the family, the straying away of a child, loss of friendships, loss of job, disappointment of hopes, ending

of an active involvement in life, a settled depression, a "what's to live for" attitude. Moreover, grief may be accompanied by some sense of guilt — lack of love for the departed, lack of concern for the errant child, indifference to opportunity. The elder must be aware, too, that some are tempted to dote on their sorrow because it gets them attention not otherwise shown. The antidote to all hardship and grief is the Word. The elder must not be quick to shift the burden of concern to professional counselors as we have observed in chapter 9.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. Strive to put yourself into the frame of mind of the sorrowing one, and be prepared to admit that, most often in the case of death, you cannot wholly succeed. Do not betray your inability by overmuch talk, or superficial suggestions. Death remains, in the Apostle's words, "the last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26), not only of the dying but also of those left behind. Try to enter into that, and recognize how little all words but God's can mean.

2. If death has not taken place, try through the Word to prepare the survivors for its coming. Lay stress here on the promises suggested in the texts at the end of this book. Be sure that you believe them yourself.

3. If you are present when death occurs, or arrive shortly thereafter, extend your sympathy to the family and friends and quickly go to God's Word. Say, perhaps, something like this: "I know that you want to be together as a family and friends, so just allow me to read some words of comfort from the Word of God and to pray with you for God's nearness and blessing." Do so. Then leave. Assure them of your eagerness to be of whatever help you can in the trying days ahead.

4. Remember that when the bustle of the funeral is past, sorrow invades lonely hours. Be on hand with comfort from the Word and indication of the Church's compassion as often as you can and find advisable. Be prepared to meet some anger or hostility, probably in the form of, "Why my spouse, or my son or daughter, while they...live on?" Patience, prayer, love are absolutely essential here.

5. Understand yourself, and try to help the grieving understand, that the Lord uses life itself gradually to heal wounds. Effort must be made to live the day, do the things required, or found, to be done. Living must be in the present. Focus must not be on the seemingly endless hours ahead. Memories of the past may ease the present.

Judge when they overshadow it.

6. Take note of practical needs, and discourage the bereaved from making hasty decisions as to disposal of property, investment, change of residence, etc. Help, or find help, in the matter of wills, debts, doctor and hospital bills, etc. when this seems necessary. Do so without intruding yourself into private affairs, and only when no one else seems available.

7. The bereaved may have to be encouraged to participate in Church or civic affairs not previously done. Funds from the Church itself may have to be used for re-training for employment if the bereaved is young, a widow, and there are children to support. This road is hard, and the elder should keep in touch. Mothers of young children should be kept, and supported, in the home.

8. Beware of problems growing out of loneliness, like drinking, finding bad company, spending too freely, and other efforts to "drown" sorrow in ungodly ways.

9. Do not try to make the funeral home a place for eulogies of the dead, or mistaken efforts to comfort the living by references to "how nice" the body looks, and the like. Be brief, be kind, and promise to keep close to the family and its needs in the days ahead. Better to send a personal note than a printed sympathy card.

11. Surround your visits and your efforts with prayer. The depths of sorrow are accessible to God alone. His Spirit must comfort and heal. You are but His agent, albeit a most important agent nonetheless. Keep this consciousness before you, nourish it by fervent prayer before and after your visits.

12. Always compare notes with fellow elders and your pastor on those who need comfort in the congregation. The believer needs to experience the communion of the saints. You need ever to improve your calling as comforter.

PART E. THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED

Can the elder, who is untrained and nonprofessional, minister to the mentally ill?

Of course he can! And must!

Only remember that you come to extend the love of Christ, to make real the communion of saints, and to minister from the Word of God. Yours is an errand of fellowship. You come, not as an amateur psychiatrist, but as representative of the Church of Jesus Christ. To this

you are called, and for it the Spirit will equip you if you are faithful in living with the Word.

ONE CAUTION

We are naturally impatient and often expect quick results. These impulses you must subdue when dealing with mental problems. A "cure" or even a change may not come quickly. If you expect that, you may become discouraged or delinquent in your visits. Think about the mystery of mental handicap; try to enter somehow into the mood of the "patient," and come simply hoping to let a little light into a dark world. God will bless your efforts in His own way, not only to those you visit but also to you.

PARENTS OF THE HANDICAPPED

We divide this section into two parts: dealing with the parents of handicapped children, and dealing with the handicapped themselves.

As to the parents:

1. The first problem these parents must face is acceptance of the trial God lays upon them. The birth of a retarded child, or the loss of normalcy in a seemingly fully healthy child, can be a severe blow to the parent. There may be:

a. Feelings of rebellion: why does God do this to us? how can we still love Him?

b. Feelings of guilt: what did we do to bring this upon us? how did we go astray? were we poor parents (if it is a changed older child)? were we lacking in preparation for parenthood (if it is a child born abnormal)?

c. Feelings of withdrawal: how can we face our friends after this? how can we be seen with the child? everyone will be staring at us!

d. Feelings of resentment toward the child: if only...?

2. Do not suppose that by the quotation of a few texts you will drive these and similar reactions away. People are in fact cruel. They do assess blame. They will stare at the abnormal child, and their eyes or faces will reveal distaste or pity or indictment. Yours is the task, as part of the Body of Christ, to help parents live through these experiences, to regain or retain their faith that "in everything God works for good with those who love Him" (Rom. 8:28) — a conviction that may be long in coming. Keep them close to the Church, regular in

attendance upon its services; and keep the Body close to the family, in prayer, by word and deed, by card and by call. Plan on taking months, if necessary, to bring about the parents' understanding that God indeed holds all things in His hand.

3. Although, therefore, you must not expect — as pointed out above — that your quotation of a few Biblical texts will produce instant results, in the long run it is only by constant, and patient, and understanding application of the Word that you may hope to be of lasting service here. Persevere!

4. Parents of handicapped children may be slow to seek your assistance, for some of the reasons listed under point 1 above. They may fear that you will come on with blame or accusation, or that you will expect their "confession" of fault. You may have to seek them out, therefore, and by your conduct indicate how baseless such fears were. Let them make their confessions, if they have any, to God, while you bring Word of His love and that of the congregation.

5. If such a situation does indeed arise in your district, try to familiarize yourself with the experience of other parents of handicapped children. There are published stories of how families overcame this trial. You can read them and, at the right time, recommend them to the parents to whom you are ministering. No doubt there are families in your community who have had to overcome this experience, and you can learn from them. Public service agencies probably could put you in touch with such cases. You will find that parents of handicapped children draw naturally together, and you may be able to help bring this about. This, too, is the communion of the saints.

6. As the handicapped child grows older, or if such illness overtakes an older child, there may be major expenses involved in care, cure, or lodging in an institution, or for special education. Tactfully find out if the family needs the concern of the deacons, and if so then enlist them in your service to this home. Discover, too, if local civic groups have programs to aid both the child and his parents. You will find many more open doors than you might at first suspect existed, if you take seriously your responsibility for both parents and child.

7. Remember also that the handicapped child affects other children in the same family. They too may find him hard to accept, an embarrassment before their friends. They may come to resent the extra care he requires and extra attention he may receive. Help the parents meet these difficulties as best you can.

8. Finally, both as individual elder and as council or session draw on the resources of professionals in the mental health field. Get their advice. Draw on their assistance. But remember that yours is the unique role of representing the Body of Christ to these afflicted parents and children.

THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED THEMSELVES

There will be those in your congregation who experience "mental illness" in one form or another. Try to understand enough of the symptoms of such illness to know when professional or institutional assistance is mandatory, and then seek it for the person involved.

These suggestions may be useful:

1. If the handicapped is a child, like those considered above, treat him with love, care, and without reflection upon his deficiencies. Be "normal" in your relationship so far as possible.

2. If the mental problem strikes an older child or adult, avoid trying to "joke" them out of it, or giving lectures on "backbone". The need is for the hand and voice of love, not the rod of discipline. Don't play detective as to why and how "this" happened. Listen. Love. Speak the Word. Pray. And be very, very patient. Remember that often feelings are simply out of control, and no amount of lecturing from you will restore the victim's power over himself. Let God do this via His Word.

3. Remember that modern medicine now scores many victories over depression and other forms of mental disturbance. Point the person to help, and see that he gets it. But be sure that it is genuine help, and not endless "counseling," to which you direct him, help such as is offered by Christian institutions and professionals.

4. If the patient is admitted to a mental hospital, remember several things:

a. Your visits, and those of others, will threaten to taper off as the months go by. Don't let that happen to you.

b. Other expressions of sympathy and concern also dwindle. Try to keep cards and calls coming from within the congregation.

c. Make visits as natural as you can, and don't play professional.

d. Have church bulletins and announcements and news letters mailed regularly to the patient. Check on this from time to time to make sure it has not been dropped. Send the church magazine at diaconal expense. Be sure that the minister regularly calls.

5. When the patient returns home, give him a warm welcome. Don't

exaggerate this first meeting, and plan on regular visits for a while. Encourage those of others. Always treat the patient as normally as possible, and keep eyes looking up and ahead in hope.

6. Understand, and be sure that the congregation understands, that it may be difficult for someone recently released from a mental hospital to resume regular church attendance at once. Express pleasure, but not surprise, when the patient is able to attend. This should be the mood of the whole congregation, and perhaps the minister needs to make clear how Christians should treat such fellow members, from time to time as part of his regular preaching (not, of course, with specific reference to anyone).

IN SUMMARY

Ministry to the parents of handicapped children, and to such children, and to those caught in the toils of mental problems and illness will tax your patience, exceed your competence sometimes, and yet will be a source of growth for yourself and of great blessing to those to whom you minister. As always, turn to the Word (for which purpose we list some useful passages — add to them your own) and to prayer. Keep the eldership informed of these families and persons; they need the concern of the whole Church.

Chapter 6

THE GREAT COMMISSION

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

These words spoken by Jesus to His disciples just before His ascension are commonly called the Great Commission.

The disciples to whom this Commission is given represent the New Testament Church, the very Church in which you, as elder, now hold important office. The Church's responsibility for discipling now rests upon your shoulders. How shall you do your part in fulfilling it?

THE TASK

Notice first what the Lord asks the Church to do.

She is to make disciples.

This is your key to evaluating the countless forms of "evangelism" being promoted today. Judge each carefully. Endorse for your congregation only those which seek to gain *disciples* for the Lord. Ask: is that the aim? how well is the aim accomplished?

Separate this one aim from other attractive alternatives or substitutes: the Lord simply said, "make disciples"!

DISCIPLE

What is a disciple?

A disciple is a follower. A disciple is a chosen follower. All of the Lord's disciples were called into His service by name: "Follow Me,"

He said.

Notice that disciples follow according to the Master's purpose, not according to their own.

The Lord makes clear, in the Commission, what He wants His disciples to be, namely baptized ones. What does this mean?

Baptism means that the disciple acknowledges who Jesus Christ is: He is the one to whom has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth".

Baptism means that the disciple is cleansed of all guilt inherited from Adam, and of all sin committed in serving another authority, like that of the Devil or himself.

Baptism means that the disciple is liberated from the burden and the bondage of sin and death. Like Israel passing through the Red Sea (by which baptism was foretold), the disciple is freed in baptism from the threat of bondage to another lord.

Baptism signifies the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Death to sin and sinfulness

Burial of sin and the old self

Resurrection to newness of life in Christ Jesus.

And baptism means that the disciple liberated from the servitude now commits himself to the service which truly frees.

And the Lord defines exactly what this service requires: "Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

A disciple, then, in terms of the Great Commission is one who is enlisted by the Church in the life of obedience to Jesus Christ. Just as Israel, once delivered from Egypt entered the service of God as defined by the Commandments given from Sinai.

The elder who keeps this in view will have no great difficulty in discriminating appropriate evangelistic methods from inappropriate ones. The test: making disciples, that is those committed to learning the will of Jesus and doing it.

THE COMMANDS

What are "all that I have commanded you"?

The eldership which takes the Great Commission seriously — and you should! — must come to grips with this question: what does the Lord command?

Begin with the Gospels, and sort out His commands. You will fill several pages with them, among the hardest being His requirements laid down in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7, and parallel passages). How will the Church teach disciples to do what their Lord commands?

The answer to this question defines the Church. She teaches

through the Word preached, and taught; and through the Word made visible in the Sacraments. And the Church surrounds her teaching with the encouragement and admonition of discipline. Together these three — preaching, sacraments, discipline — are the marks of the true Church, assumed by the Great Commission.

But the Church preaches more than the Gospels. Yes, the entire Word of God is His Word — for Jesus is God. To teach *all* that He has commanded, then, is to teach all the commands of the Scriptures, summed up in the Decalog, which in turn is summarized in the two great commandments: to love God above all, and the neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:34-40).

The Church fulfills the Great Commission by being truly herself.

The elder fulfills his role in the Great Commission by striving to make the Church the Body she ought to be.

TACTICS

If the above outlines the strategy of the Great Commission, what about the tactics? How will the elder choose among evangelistic methods?

The aim of evangelism is, obviously, to make disciples. The method is by bringing those who are presently outside the Church into the Church, where they can come under the power of the Word preached and taught. Only in and by the Church can the disciple become the kind of servant the Lord seeks.

Notice that Christ calls disciples to follow Him into obedience. He does not hold out promise of ease, or bliss, or even heaven: "Then Jesus told His disciples, 'If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it'" (Matt. 16:24-25).

Do not permit your congregation to be misled into using the Christ as their servant, as their guarantee of bliss. His call is *for* servants, who will take up the cross of obedience to His commands.

Never be anxious about evangelism. Never succumb to the "numbers" game of seeing how many "commitments" your congregation can boast of. Your task is to keep your congregation faithfully the Church. And, while you will eagerly extend the influence of the Church over as many lives as you can, be assured that the Lord knows His own, and none will be lost who is His: "My sheep hear My voice,

and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (Jn. 10:27-29).

We make the following tactical suggestions for carrying out the Great Commission:

1. Evangelism is the Church's business; the Commission was given to the disciples who laid the foundations of the New Testament Church.

2. This means that evangelism must be done under the supervision of the eldership, by means and through persons approved by them, according to the Word.

3. The preaching and doing of the Word are the calling of the Church, and are, therefore, her primary means of evangelizing.

4. Preaching is the Church's special mark and prerogative; doing is the congregation's special task and obligation. Combined, these draw others into the Body of Christ.

5. The order laid down in the Commission is normative: preaching the gospel of liberation from sin and self; baptism upon repentance and confession of faith in the exalted Lord; then training in good works and obedience. See to it that this is the order of priorities under your administration. Good works flow from sound doctrine. Sound doctrine flows from a pulpit which preaches the Truth of the Word.

6. Overwhelming stress is laid upon the life of discipleship, the life of obedience, in the Scriptures: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). To the disciple whose heart is aflame to do Him service, the Lord declares: "No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a bushel, but on a stand, that those who enter may see the light" (Luke 11:33) — and the light of which He speaks is that shed abroad by the good works of obedience.

IN PRACTICE

Not only must each disciple witness by his good works, but your congregation must do so as well. We make these suggestions:

1. Aid to the poor and needy. The Church, through her deacons, should ever be on the alert to demonstrate Christ's love to those in need. This task begins with those within the body who suffer want, and extends to the whole community: "So then, as we have

opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). The Lord's command is stringent: "Lend, expecting no return" (Luke 6:35). Give, even at the risk of being "taken in," just as the Lord healed ten lepers, knowing that of these only one would return thanks to Him (Luke 17:11-19).

2. Community services: set up, if you can, counseling services, using the talents of the congregation. Be helpful, have the church door open. Extend a hand to victims of alcohol, of drugs, of their sex drives. Let the public know that the Church serves her Lord by being willing to serve others in these ways.

3. Legal and business advice: using members of the congregation, offer legal and business services to those without means otherwise to afford them. The ignorant are easily cheated by the unscrupulous, and the poor know little about the business of handling money. Help them! Let the city know that your congregation holds out the hand of love!

4. Invite the community to share in the organizations of the Church: discussion groups, Bible study, youth activities. Pay attention to the kinds of outside influence brought to bear upon the congregation in these ways, and be prepared to step in and prevent the spread of bad habits.

5. Consider hot lunch programs for the children of the poor, and warm meal programs for the elderly shut-ins.

Spend time in eldership meetings on other means, perhaps more suitable to your situation, of letting the light of love shine brightly in the place where the Lord has placed you. Not as social-gospel dogoodism, but as sober and obedient witness to the Lord of the Great Commission: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (I Jn. 3:17). What is true for the disciple is equally true for the Church: "Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth" (I Jn. 3:18).

SUMMARY

The Great Commission is the Church's charter for enlisting disciples in the service of the Lord to whom all authority has been given. The Church does so by being the Church, preaching and practising the inspired Word of God. To oversee this witness of Word and work is the elder's grave responsibility toward his Lord's Commission.