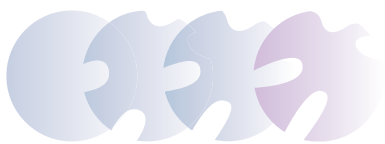


Knocking on heaven's door: why visiting matters

Home visiting is an option to be considered, because personal invitation is effective and because personal relationships are formative of Christian discipleship. This paper explores the value of visiting as part of a Giving in Grace programme.



Please be clear that home visiting as described here is an optional element in Giving in Grace. It is quite different from the follow-up visiting after people have returned response forms, which should always be managed by making a personal visit. For more on this, see under Follow Up Visiting.

One of the advantages churches have over other charities is that we know most of, if not all, our givers and have a personal relationship with them. We are not restricted to writing letters, sending emails or making phone calls. That personal relationship counts for a great deal. It enables us personally to encourage a response, provides opportunities for storytelling and asking questions. Home visiting takes these personal relationships seriously and should be considered as an option that will richly enhance a Giving in Grace programme in the church. Once a staple element of giving programmes, today home visiting is much less common so it is worth reflecting on why home visiting can be so helpful.

A normal way of growing disciples

We don't travel the journey of life alone. Most of us are privileged to have people who travel with us and help shape who we are. It is the same in our faith, where other people are often the midwife of our spiritual birth and growth as Christian people. One-to-one conversations are a normal way in which new or long-standing Christians are encouraged to grow in faith. So we should not be surprised that a personal invitation to consider our discipleship in the area of money should be so important.

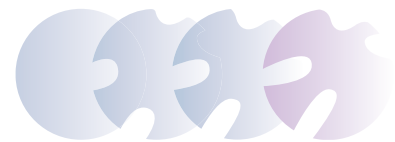
Visiting helps change the money culture

Sad but true, it can actually be harder to talk money *in* church than outside!¹ For many pastors, money is an issue largely in pastoral situations where confidentiality matters. When we do talk money, it is often around church budgets rather than generous giving as an aspect of Christian discipleship. We tend to treat our congregations as passive givers, assuming their continued support and that they know and will respond to the financial needs of the church and that they connect giving with worship.

Home visiting can not only benefit a Giving in Grace programme but it also helps change the money culture from passive giving to active investment in the ministry of the church. Each visit is a two-way conversation. We want to know the views and concerns of those we visit about their church and those things that move them to give or make them reluctant to do so.

Visiting is about education

Many people perceive the church to be a wealthy institution and have little idea of the realities of church finance. For many, their response to the financial needs of the church is conditioned by a fundraising culture from outside, and often even within, the church. Yet fundraising cannot hope to address those needs save in small part. A new awareness of financial reality prompted by genuine discussion in the church is a major benefit of parish visiting.



Visiting makes the programme special

The fact that someone has bothered to visit and talk shows how important this issue is both for the church and for the person visiting on behalf of the church. It also shows respect by the church towards those people it is asking to support its ministry and affirms and appreciates their involvement. This is not just handing out letters and hoping. Lay people have invested time and commitment in this programme, and are people who care enough to knock on someone's door.

Visitors add their own personal advocacy to the needs of their church. It follows then that the essential qualification for any visitor is that they themselves have already reviewed and increased their giving. We cannot ask someone to do what we have not done ourselves.

Visiting is listening and storytelling

Visiting is about listening to others and sharing our stories. It is not about arguing about church finances in someone's home. The visit is a blend of three stories. The first is the story told in the Giving in Grace literature, a story of the church's financial need. The second is the visitor's story, said or left unsaid, of why this initiative is important. The third story is that of the one visited and it is the one to which we have to listen most carefully. There may be a willingness to listen and respond, misunderstanding, resistance or a simple refusal to engage. There may also be hidden stories that we need to read between the lines, which may explain some of what is said or how it is said.

Getting practical

So much for the value of visiting; what of the practicalities? Some brief points:

- Visiting is very, very rarely cold calling on strangers. It is usually a visit to church members or, in some places, to those who don't attend but are good friends of the church.
- The goal of visiting is to retain and build relationships with existing givers and encouraging a response to the invitation to renew and review their giving. It is not just to extract a financial gift.
- Good administration is important, so appoint a visiting co-ordinator.
- Recruit visitors carefully. The planning group and church council are the first place to look, then other leaders in the congregation. And, of course, invite them to be visitors personally, face to face!

- Visitor training will help to dispel fears and ensure good conversations. Training resources are available under Design the Programme at the Home Visiting tab.

The clergy letter

If home visiting is part of the programme, then the clergy letter can help make things very much easier for visitors. Simply insert into the clergy letter a sentence stating that someone will call to discuss the literature and ask that a warm welcome is extended to the visitor. The note should also state that the visitor will not ask for, and will not know, the details of any personal response.



Keep it real

You may be able to visit everyone in a smaller church but don't bite off more than you can chew. It may work to visit just some people. For example, you might visit just the loose plate givers, requesting that they take envelopes; or to planned givers, asking for a move to standing orders. As you build the case statement you will identify where any visiting can make the greatest difference.

Conclusion

Home visiting is an option to consider and, done well, it will prove most rewarding in building relationships and growing givers. There are also benefits for the lay visitors, for whom visiting often cements their own giving commitment, spiritual growth and their engagement with the church.

Notes and Resources

- i* Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America*, p140