

SHUT-INS WHO FEEL SHUT OUT:  
INCREASING MINISTRY TO HOMEBOUND CONGREGATION  
MEMBERS THROUGH LAY VISITATION AND IN-HOME BIBLE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Is shut-in ministry as strong as it should be? Pastors often do not have enough time to visit members in their homes regularly. Involving lay members of the congregation can be an excellent way to combat this problem. Homebound members of the congregation need to be in God's Word just as frequently as the rest of the members who can make it to church every week. By involving lay members, shut-ins can be visited more often than if the pastor does visitation alone. The lay members ought to be properly trained before they can be expected to carry out this ministry faithfully and well. This also presents an opportunity to bring additional devotions and even Bible studies to the homes of the shut-in members with the ultimate goal of helping them grow in their faith in Jesus Christ until he ushers them into heaven's glory.

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## **Introduction**

“I don’t have time.” “My schedule keeps getting busier.” “I’m the only pastor here.” “Everyone else needs me too!” Every pastor will agree that ministry is important. Every pastor should also agree that it is his privilege to share God’s Word with the members of his congregation and to help them along in their journey through life until the goal of heaven is obtained. Yet when ministry is not accomplished, excuses such as the ones mentioned above are ready and waiting. Many pastors struggle to give shut-in ministry the amount of attention it needs. This is just as important as the other parts of a pastor’s ministry. Ministry is about sharing the gospel with people who need it. Shut-ins and elderly members of the congregation need to hear God’s Word at least as often as the rest of the members in the congregation do, perhaps even more. Yet on average, a shut-in member will receive one visit a month from their pastor.<sup>1</sup> People never outgrow their need for God’s Word. Shut-ins face many challenges as they grow older, so the comfort and strength which God’s Word provides should never be underestimated.

## **Importance of Ministry to Shut-ins**

### Elderly

The majority of shut-in members are elderly. Homebound elderly people often face many challenges in daily living which younger people do not. Physical challenges may lead to strong

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1. This average is based on the author’s observations and the results of a survey sent by the author to six pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod serving congregations across the United States and Canada. An exception to this average is medical emergencies or hospitalization. The pastors who responded to the survey reported much more frequent visitation in situations such as these. For the sake of the pastors and their current congregations, full anonymity will be maintained throughout this paper. Only general data and information will be used from the survey. See Appendix 1.

feelings of frustration and even anger. Simple tasks become painful as the range of motion and movement restricts, sometimes even ceasing altogether. The hands which used to do so much now tremble and shake, even when doing something as simple as lifting a fork or writing a name. A broken hip makes walking difficult or impossible. In an ever-growing effort to stall the aging process or slow the advance of death, pills become a part of every meal. Piles of pills are taken attempting to offset bodily functions that no longer work, to regulate blood pressure, and even to balance the side effects of other pills. Elderly people often “perceive themselves as being unattractive and anything but beautiful.”<sup>2</sup> Even simple physical changes can make a big difference to how a person feels. “Advancing years bring with them—for the elderly—fairly common changes in the skeletal system. The resultant stooped posture, stiffened joints and porous bone structure present not only a less attractive physical image, but also a limitation in mobility and in the independent activities of daily living, both at home and in the community.”<sup>3</sup> With so many physical challenges, *everything* can become a cause for frustration, sadness, and longing for the old days.

Mental challenges also often come with old age. Even people who are perfectly healthy in body often experience slow deterioration of the mind. Diseases such as Alzheimer’s destroy cherished memories. This leads to pain and frustration felt not only by the elderly, but by their loved ones, friends, and family. Not remembering the name of one’s own children or grandchildren is a terribly difficult burden to bear. Although some elderly people may escape the suffering of memory loss, often the mind will still slow down. The process of information happens at a slower rate because the mind cannot perform as it did when it was younger.

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2. Robert W. Schlicht, “Ministering to the Elderly.” WLS Essay File.  
<http://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/2536/SchlichtElderly.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 3.

3. Robert W. Schlicht, “Ministering to the Elderly,” 3.

The elderly almost always know about the challenges they face. They do not need people to come visit them just to tell them about the pain they are experiencing. The slow breakdown of the body is painfully obvious. As the sharpness of the mind slowly dulls, the mind knows this is happening. As a result of these daily struggles and challenges, aging can be an incredibly emotional experience. Anger, frustration, depression, and longing for the past or longing for the future make every day an emotional roller coaster. Pastors especially need to be conscious of these things. David Moberg addresses this point,

Religious leaders, like others who work with the elderly, usually pay most attention to conditions they would like to correct or change. As a result, they give the impression that most of the elderly are infirm or in trouble. They fail to accentuate the joys and benefits of old age and retirement and overemphasize its losses, burdens, and pains.<sup>4</sup>

Emotions of the elderly are not always negative; they often experience great joys too. In fact, many days may be filled with companionship and laughter. There is time to enjoy with people they love and to do activities they previously may not have had time to do. They think back on memories and moments they hope to be able to treasure forever. Many of these happy moments are the results of visits from their children, grandchildren, and dear friends. For elderly Christians, many of these friends may be members of the congregation to which they belong. Time spent with dear friends and family is sometimes the only thing keeping an elderly person going. It gives something to look forward to and it gives something to fondly look back on. Many elderly Christian people also understand their need for Christ and his strength. Their trust and reliance in God can often shine as an example to everyone around them. When other elderly people struggle to find any happiness or contentment in their daily lives, Christian men and women can shine as a light in a dark place when they demonstrate the joy they have and the love

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4. David Moberg, "Spirituality and Aging: Challenges on the Frontier of Gerontology," *ATLA - Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 31 no 3 Sum 1989, p 12-21, 19-20.

they experience because of Jesus. David Moberg discusses this and says there is increasing evidence that spirituality and spiritual well-being provide refreshment, renewal, inspiration, and growth for elderly and often greatly improves their psychological well-being. This in turn also benefits their physical well-being.<sup>5</sup>

### Lonely

One of the most painful emotions experienced in life is loneliness. This feeling is multiplied by an unmeasurable amount when the loneliness is due to the loss of a spouse. When someone's life partner of forty, fifty, even sixty or more years is suddenly gone, the heart is filled with a feeling of emptiness. The familiarity of a spouse's face, touch, and voice which had been present for so many years becomes nothing more than a memory. The beauty of the marriage bond is described in Genesis 2:24, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." (NIV 2011) The marriage bond and marriage union of two into one is severed.

Loneliness is caused not only by the death of a spouse, but also by the ever-increasing number of friends who pass away. Elderly people who live into their nineties and beyond often see most, if not all, of their friends go before them. A profound loneliness comes from sitting in one's home day after day with no one else present. In many cases, visits from family members are infrequent due to the busy lives they lead. When the family does visit, it often lasts little more than a day or two. This may cause homebound people to think that no one cares about them anymore since no one is willing to make time to see them. They may begin to think they are only a burden to those around them and wish for death. These feelings only compound the loneliness and often lead to related feelings of depression.

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5. Moberg, 21.

The desire for human interaction is powerful. People need people! Introverts and extroverts alike need to be with other people. During childhood, early adulthood, and all their working years, people were always around. Relationships were formed, adventures were created and experiences and memories were made. Human interaction is vital to a person's emotional well-being.

### Loss of Important Parts of Life

Many things which homebound elderly people held dear in their younger years are lost. They can no longer go places on their own, such as church, work, or social events. This is tied closely to the feelings of loneliness mentioned above, but adds another layer to the depth of the emotions tied to loss. In the case of elderly Christians, presumably church was a very important part of their lives. Many shut-ins belonging to a congregation attended every week for decades. The desire to continue attending has likely not left them, but the physical ability to attend has. They may feel the loss of the worship experience, missing the church building, the music, the art, and the people who were always there with them.<sup>6</sup>

Most pastors try to visit the shut-in members of their congregation regularly, but this "regular" pales in comparison to the regular attendance the shut-in once knew. The spiritual support is still desired, but not received as often. Those attending worship regularly receive the means of grace in Word and Sacrament. Shut-ins have that opportunity once a month at best. The

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6. A shut-in who will remain anonymous once remarked to the author that one of the things they missed the most was singing in the choir. They missed the people. They missed the songs. And they missed praising God with the gifts he had given them. This is just one example of the point illustrated above, but it shows that people used to attending worship who can no longer do so often feel an incredible sense of loss.

spiritual support cannot compare to what it once was.<sup>7</sup> They also lose the encouragement of gathering together with brothers and sisters in the faith, as talked about in Hebrews 10:23–25:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Something as simple as a conversation with another Christian can change someone's entire outlook on a situation. A difficult week or situation can be drastically improved with an encouraging word from a fellow believer. Most shut-ins miss seeing their pastor. They used to see him at least once a week in church. Now it is far less frequent, as they see him approximately once a month and only for a short time.<sup>8</sup> Most likely, members of the congregation still talk about this person. They have not forgotten their shut-in members. The members just might not know what to do or how to include the elderly homebound members anymore. Younger members often miss the older ones almost as much as the older ones miss the younger. Unfortunately, this is rarely acted upon for the good of all involved. More often they are simply left remembering when they used to come to church regularly and wishing they still could.

### Meaning in Society

In addition to loss in the spiritual side of life, the social side of life also experiences great loss. Elderly men who were the bread winners of their families may experience loss of self-

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7. One of the questions presented in the author's survey was, "Do you think they (shut-ins) are as spiritually fed as your other members who can regularly attend church are?" Some answered with ways their congregation attempts to remedy this, such as printed copies of the sermon or DVD recordings of worship. However, the general consensus was no, they are not as spiritually fed as those who can regularly attend. How could they be? It's a situation of four times a month versus one time a month. One pastor mentioned that approximately half of his shut-ins read their Bible regularly, which gives them great spiritual food. But shut-ins who are not faithful readers of the Bible every day are severely lacking in spiritual nourishment.

8. Something frequently expressed to the author by shut-in members was a desire for more visits from the pastor. This is an example from only one congregation, but is likely applicable to most situations. Shut-in members long to talk with their pastor and desire to hear him proclaim God's Word and the forgiveness of sins to them.

esteem and feel as if they are no longer important. Women who took care of their children and raised them and kept up the home may feel loss knowing they are no longer able to do these things. They may feel as if they are no longer needed by anybody.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the feeling of loss, the elderly have suddenly gained a large amount of something they are not used to having: time. There is all the time in the day to fill and very few things with which to fill it. Anxiety may overtake them as they can no longer support themselves with earned income. Will Social Security and Medicare be enough? Will the retirement fund last? Very rarely will these things equal what their paycheck did. Elderly people who had a title, whether in the work place or in the military, may feel loss because they can no longer fill the need in society as they did for so long. The feeling of being needed is powerful, but the realization that one's services are *not* needed anymore may be much worse.

Society values the young and energetic. Society values ideas that are fresh, new, and improved. As a result, the elderly are often left out as soon as society deems them no longer able to contribute. A lifetime of gathering information and experience seems as if it does not matter because no one wants to listen to them or take advantage of their experience. Younger people may think it takes too much time to listen or may consider their information outdated and no longer applicable. Most elderly people only want the respect they have spent their entire lives earning. Arthur Becker says, "Respect for themselves as persons is one of the most profound needs of the elderly in our society."<sup>10</sup> Here he is referring to the respect people find in knowing

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9. These examples for men and women are meant simply as examples. The roles may very easily be reversed or be entirely different. The point is the feelings of loss and unimportance no matter which specific roles they once served.

10. Arthur H. Becker, "Values and Aging," *Theological Education*, 1 January 1980. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=a3a32932-f3cc-4bcb-bec0-45b0a5079164%40sessionmgr101>, 343.

that Christ died for them, but the statement is true in a more general sense as well. People want and need to feel respected.

These are just some of the daily experiences elderly people may face. Many of the ones mentioned here were struggles or challenges. These are reasons why shut-in ministry is so important. When life is difficult, a reminder that God is there and God is still caring for them can make a tremendous difference. Letting them know that God has not forgotten them and neither has their church family can bring quite a positive change to their mood. Not every day is a difficult day though. Many moments the elderly experience are positive and enjoyable. These are also reasons shut-in ministry is important. Joyful moments and precious memories ought to be shared and celebrated. The importance of ministering to the homebound elderly members of congregations and sharing God's Word with them cannot be overstated or overemphasized.

### **Training Laity for Visitation**

The importance of shut-in ministry has been clearly stated, and very few would argue against it, but the question remains: Who is going to do it? Many people assume the pastor is the one who should do visitation on behalf of the church, since it is part of his call. They are right. The pastor should regularly visit his members, especially those he does not see every week. However, pastors often have to-do lists filled with important things which can make accomplishing and prioritizing difficult. Many pastors are also husbands and fathers who need to spend time with their own families. Unexpected situations arise, such as the sudden death of a member or someone walking into the pastor's office with tears streaming down their face because of family issues, and the pastor's schedule becomes even tighter. The best of intentions is not always enough to accomplish every task in a given day. Sometimes the "out of sight, out of mind" mindset can set in and a pastor may be tempted to push off shut-in visitation. After all,

they are not going anywhere and he is expected to have a sermon, Bible class, and meeting information finished very soon. All of these things can make regular shut-in visitation from the pastor difficult or even impossible.<sup>11</sup> Time is usually the biggest obstacle to overcome in shut-in visitation.

Another challenge is the growing number of older people. The Baby-Boomer generation is reaching the age of retirement and the percentage of elderly people is steadily increasing. According to the United States Census Bureau, on July 1, 2015, the number of people age 65 and older in the United States was nearly 48 million. This accounts for around 15% of the entire population. The Bureau expects this number to increase rapidly, projecting that by 2060, the population aged 65 and older will be around 98 million, comprising nearly 25% of the population of the United States.<sup>12</sup> This will have a tremendous impact on the number of shut-in members in congregations.<sup>13</sup> The number of people in the younger generations, the future caregivers of this large senior population, is much smaller. This only adds to the reality that pastors will no longer be able to do all visitation alone. They will *need* help from other members of the congregation.

One concern members of the congregation may have, which has already been hinted at earlier in this paper, is that ministry and visitation is solely the job of the pastor. “Regular members” of the congregation may feel inadequate or out of place visiting shut-in members with

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11. Some of the pastors in the author’s survey expressed how difficult it is to visit shut-ins as often as desired, both by the pastor and the shut-in themselves. Some pastors with lower numbers of shut-ins are able to visit more often, but pastors who have ten, twenty, even thirty or more shut-ins find it difficult to see all of them as often as planned or hoped. The responsibility for this is partially on the pastor, but not exclusively, as this next part of the paper will explore.

12. *Facts for Features: Older Americans Month: May 2017*. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/cb17-ff08.html>. (Editors noted that these are not exact figures, just estimates based on information gathered from a variety of sources. Presumably, these figures are expected due to the number of people who are part of the Baby Boomer generation and the increase in life expectancy based on advances in medical science and technology.)

13. One pastor from the author’s survey has already experienced a congregation with over 100 shut-in members. The number of congregations like this will likely increase in the near future.

God's Word. However, if congregations want to continue to bring God's Word to their shut-in elderly members, this will become absolutely necessary in many situations. Professor emeritus John Brug, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, addresses this concern and misunderstanding that only the pastor ought to visit with God's Word in his book *The Ministry of the Word*. There he writes concerning the priesthood of all believers. He explains that the ministry in its purest form is sharing the gospel and quotes Martin Luther who says even a child is able to do these things.<sup>14</sup> The priesthood of all believers is not intended to replace the pastoral ministry. It is actually intended to help supplement the pastoral ministry. This is also not something created by the Wisconsin Synod or any other church body. It comes clearly from Scripture. The most comprehensive presentation of the priesthood of believers is 1 Peter 2:4–10:<sup>15</sup>

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone,  
and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame.” [Isaiah 28:16]

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,” [Psalm 118:22]  
and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall.” [Isaiah 8:14]

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

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14. John F. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009, 38. The Luther quote Brug uses here is from LW 8:309.

15. Brug, 43.

This universal priesthood was established by Christ himself. People become part of it in the water of Holy Baptism, so it is therefore given to every baptized member of the church. The concern presented is valid in the sense that there are certain acts, such as preaching, which are given only to pastors for the sake of good order in the church. However, sharing in the ministry of the gospel is clearly given as a gift and responsibility to all believers. Any member of the congregation is able to share God's Word with anyone else.

Believers also benefit from studying God's Word together. Bible class is an important part of weekly activities in most congregations. Studying God's Word at home ought to be an important part of every Christian's daily schedule. But a pastor does not have to be present for group Bible study to happen. Christians are free and strongly encouraged to gather together anytime and learn from God's Word. It is for mutual encouragement, growth, and strengthening of faith that Christians have family devotions at home. Family prayer time is essential to a Christian life. Christians desire to be in God's Word and learn from it personally and with others who share the same beliefs and convictions. While shut-in members may not have the opportunity to have devotions and prayer time with family members anymore, this certainly does not mean that the desire to participate in these things is also gone. Margaret Krych says this about life-long learning, "Instruction and learning for all age levels is not a new idea. It is part of the heritage of the church."<sup>16</sup>

If members of a congregation are going to be asked to participate in shut-in ministry, or any ministry of the church for that matter, the church should first provide proper training. Being a leader in the congregation is a privilege that comes with responsibility. Sharing God's Word with others can be frightening if one is not used to doing so in a public way. Yet with the proper

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16. Rebecca Grothe, *Lifelong Learning: A Guide to Adult Education in the Church*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997, 12.

training and practice, visiting someone and studying God's Word with them can become one of the greatest joys they have.

### The 5 S Method

One method which may be used to train lay members for shut-in visitation is the "5 S Method." This method was put together by the author using ideas based on an interview with Professor Thomas Kock, professor of Education and Old Testament at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI. Professor Kock served for 22 years as the pastor at Living Word Lutheran Church in Johnson City, TN and most of these ideas and practices come from his time there. This plan presents a methodical way to help members grow in God's Word personally, gain confidence in their abilities, and gladly visit others with God's Word too. This method is intended to be useful for any age group of members, since members of all ages are capable of visiting shut-ins, as will be discussed later. Congregations may adapt this method to better fit their needs with parts two, three and four, but the first and last must remain. The results of this training method will likely be the most positive if all five parts are used, but a congregation can certainly still develop a successful program without using all of them. An extremely important part in the success of this method is setting clear goals and expectations from the very beginning. When people know exactly what is and will continue to be expected of them, they will better understand how to proceed.

The first S is "Study God's Word." This should seem rather obvious, but it needs to be said. Studying God's Word is the first because it is the most important part of this method. In order to share God's Word with anyone, a person needs to immerse themselves in God's Word first. This is true of everyone, called workers and lay members alike. People who will bring God's Word to others should regularly read it on their own in personal devotion time and in

family devotions at home. They should also regularly hear it proclaimed in worship and Bible class on Sunday mornings. Professor Kock said once a pastor knows his members, he will be able to ask specific people to serve in specific areas of church ministry. When searching for congregation members to serve in shut-in visitation, pastors ought to consider members who have a strong background in God's Word, regularly gather together to hear it, and have a steady personal devotional life.

The second S is "Seminar." A congregation can plan to hold a training seminar for members interested in participating with shut-in ministry or whom the pastor has approached and asked about participating. A pastor may run this seminar since he would have the most familiarity with the shut-in members of the congregation and would therefore be able to tailor the presentation to meet specific needs as necessary. Dennis Williams and Kenneth Gangel say, "One valuable principle (decentralization) states that training should be done by the person closest to the ministry and who knows the most about it."<sup>17</sup> The pastor would also know the members attending the seminar and be able to communicate with them in a familiar way. A pastor ought to be willing and able to provide reading materials, or at least direct people to where they may find them, for whatever the study material used during visitation will be. This will often be better than if members try to look for material on their own, because in many cases they may not know where to begin searching. The pastor should know which sources will be beneficial and which ones may only complicate matters. If members have questions, it is always better to answer those questions before they bring a Bible study to another person, lest they cause additional confusion and doubt. The author recognizes that not all questions related to the Scriptures may be answered on this side of heaven. However, if an answer does exist, the pastor

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17. Dennis E. Williams and Kenneth O. Gangel, *Volunteers for Today's Church: How to Recruit and Retain Workers*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993, 110.

should provide it as best as he is able in order to avoid error and confusion as much as possible on the part of members involved in visitation. The seminar may also include presentations by educational staff if the congregation has a school. The principal and teachers at the school will likely be able to complement the pastor's presentation with some additional education tips, information, and advice. The congregation may also choose to bring in an outside presenter, either from another congregation or from a high school, college, or seminary run by the synod. Williams and Gangel say, "Sometimes, to bring visibility to a training experience, churches bring in outside consultants to provide motivation, challenge the workers, and provide some basic training."<sup>18</sup> This may benefit the members on the educational side of visiting shut-ins, but the familiarity with the specific members of the congregation would be lost. In this case, a joint presentation with both the guest speaker and the congregation's own pastor would likely be beneficial. One issue with training seminars is mentioned by Williams and Gangel, "Requirements should be set for training ministry throughout the church, but if people cannot find the time to attend training sessions, the entire concept will fail. Somehow we must find ways to accomplish the needed training without destroying already busy schedules."<sup>19</sup> Professor Kock found that sometimes "less was more." Minimal training was needed provided that the pastor carefully chose members who would likely thrive in this ministry setting. Two of the biggest parts of the training and recruitment process which may be taken care of in a seminar are equip the members with the tools they need and lay out exactly what is expected of them as members of a ministry team. Clear expectations and proper tools are essential for a ministry to succeed.

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18. Williams and Gangel, 110.

19. Williams and Gangel, 115.

The third S is “Simulate.” Practice will also be helpful to the success of this method and the shut-in visitation program of the congregation. In an effort to help all the members feel more comfortable participating, teaching a “practice” lesson is recommended. This idea is based mostly on Professor Kock’s Education classes at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Students are expected to practice teach their peers as if they were members of a certain age level or in a certain class, such as catechism students or adults attending Bible class. The seminary students practice teaching lessons to their “students” in order to make them more comfortable and prepared when they teach in “real life” situations. This same principle may easily be applied to preparing members for participation in congregational ministry. It can be done several different ways and should be tailored to meet the specific needs of the congregation. There is no book of the Bible or Bible study topic which is the best for taking to shut-in members. The pastor and congregation are free to choose. After a course of study has been chosen, even if it is only for the practice teaching, the pastor ought to teach the first lesson. This will be an important step, because it shows the congregation what the expectations will be, an example of a way to proceed, and that the pastor is working alongside them. The ultimate goal is not to replace the pastor’s visitation. Shut-in visitation is to be a joint effort between the pastor and the members. Once the pastor has taught his lesson, each individual member or pair should also teach a lesson, at least in part. This may take a bit of time to complete, especially depending on the size of the group being trained. Bigger congregations with bigger shut-in lists may require more members to participate in the program. Therefore it will likely take longer for all of them to have a chance to practice teach. Smaller congregations who don’t require as many participants will be able to finish more quickly. Regardless of how long it takes to complete the practice teaching, it is an important step which may greatly benefit the participants. People should not be expected to do a

job in their workplace without the proper training. The same is true for the church. In order for a visitation team to have maximum success, time must be put into properly training them.

Williams and Gangel say,

Large corporations invest great sums of money and time in the training of workers. They know that for people to be successful they must know what is expected of them. Businesses do not develop new programs without adequately training their personnel.

Church leaders often overlook this approach. They develop a vision for a ministry and charge ahead without asking important preparatory questions. They usually expect workers to know, without training, how to perform a certain ministry. Implementing [new ministries] in your church takes more than an idea or a wish.<sup>20</sup>

The fourth S is “Shadow.” Professor Kock believes this is an important step. Whenever he involved members in shut-in ministry, he always had them shadow him on a shut-in visit first. This allowed them to see how he did the visit before visiting on their own. This also worked for him when a new vicar, pastor-in-training, came to his congregation. The vicar shadowed him and usually shadowed the members involved too. This benefited everyone involved. People are blessed with different abilities in differing amounts, so some members will naturally feel more comfortable teaching and leading than others. This will allow them to witness an actual visit and allow for more realistic expectations which will in turn help them to more easily and accurately prepare for future visits. In many cases, this will be an invaluable step in assuring consistency in visitation practices. Will every visit be exactly the same? No. Will every visit be perfect? No! But this is true of pastors too. Pastors and lay members of the visiting team will all make mistakes. But it is important to make sure there is as much consistency in good visiting practices as possible. Having new participants shadow the pastor will also allow the shut-in members of the congregation to see the members who will be coming to their houses with God’s Word in the near future. If shut-ins know and personally see that the pastor is helping the members prepare,

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20. Williams and Gangel, 102-103.

any skeptical ones will likely be more receptive to the visits when they come. Some older members, although always happy to have visitors, may have concerns about hearing God's Word and studying it with someone other than their pastor. But with patient endurance and instruction, this may not be an issue for long. The power of God's Word does not come from the person proclaiming it; the power is found entirely in God's Word itself. Professor Kock said he and his visitation team rotated shut-ins. This also helped to alleviate some concerns because the shut-in is not visited by the same person each time. The pastor and all involved members visit each shut-in on a scheduled rotation.

The fifth and final S is "Support." This program will be doomed to failure if it does not have the support of the congregation and its leadership. John Hendee puts it this way,

[The Apostle] Paul referred to those who worked in the church with him as his partners. I like that word. It pictures people working side by side, seeking to accomplish common goals with more concern about achieving the goals than about rank, status, power, or honor. We have a responsibility to those we recruit and train, our partners. It is to support them or prop them up in their work and ministry.<sup>21</sup>

What exactly the support involves will vary from congregation to congregation, but certain parts must be present. A congregation should pray for these members, just as they do for their pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. They ought to pray for God to strengthen and uphold them, keep them faithful and true to the Word, and grant success to their visits and ministry. John Hendee says it this way,

We prayed to the Lord to lift up workers for the harvest. Now let's continue to keep them in our prayers. Note how often Paul prayed for his partners:

Philippians 1:4–5, "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."

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21. John Hendee, *Recruiting, Training, and Developing Volunteer Adult Workers*, Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 1988, 39.

Philippians 1:9–11, “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”

Colossians 1:10–12, “[And we pray] that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father.”

1 Thessalonians 1:3, “We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

In some situations, shut-in visitation may become a paid position in the congregation. This will not happen everywhere, but depending on the amount of time and work required, it is something a congregation may want to consider. If they decide to make it a paid ministry, then the congregation should faithfully support this with their finances as they would any other aspect of ministry. The leadership of the congregation ought to agree as much as possible on how to support this ministry. A congregational program with the support of the elders and council will experience much greater success than a program lacking the support of the leadership. The pastor and any other leaders directly involved in visitation also need to be openly supportive and encouraging. The participating members will continue to want and need the support and help of their pastor. Support in the form of encouraging words to one another is never out of place. One member going to another and thanking them for taking the time to care for the homebound sheep can make a big difference in whether someone will continue to participate or not. People like to know that their work is both noticed and appreciated. Regular sessions for feedback will also benefit this program. Members may want to meet together monthly (or even more often) to discuss how the ministry is going so far, what has worked well, what has not worked as well, and

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22. Hendee, 39.

any new ideas they have. This will be helpful in keeping the program fresh and growing.

Keeping an open line of discussion is important in such a program, for the sake of the pastor, the participating members, the shut-ins, and the whole congregation. Regardless of what the support looks like, all congregations who undertake a program of shut-in visitation involving lay members need to support the program and its participants.

### Who May Be Involved

One of the most difficult parts of getting any program started in a congregation is finding people to participate. Peterson says, “Although the recruiting and training of leaders is often named as one of the greatest needs in the church, it is also one of the most neglected. It takes prayer; it takes detailed work; it takes a personal approach; and it takes the enthusiastic follow-up of one or more individuals committed to leadership development.”<sup>23</sup> Involving members of the congregation in shut-in visitation will be no different. Many people are often willing, even eager, to participate and assist in the work of the congregation, but they do not know how or where to begin. The elders and the pastor are well-equipped to find people who have gifts to serve in all areas of ministry. People may object, claiming they do not have gifts in a certain area, but when the Bible lists qualifications for pastors, overseers, and deacons in the church, it talks almost exclusively about *characteristics*, not gifts, as seen in 1 Timothy 3:1–13:

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap. In the same way, deacons are to be worthy

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23. Gilbert A. Peterson, *The Christian Education of Adults*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984, 138-139.

of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Congregations may also wonder which age group should visit shut-ins: young, middle-aged, or senior. Every congregation will have to determine this for itself. All age groups will bring good things, so ideally all age groups can and should be involved. Inter-generational ministry is something in which congregations are beginning to see great value as they explore how every age group has something to offer the rest.

Young people often have a sense of optimism about life in general. It can be refreshing to the elderly to see again the vigor of youth and may even inspire them to try things they otherwise might not have tried. It may help them to find hidden strength and energy which had long been forgotten. Elderly people sometimes see younger people as disrespectful and wild, and therefore see the church as doomed. Or they may look at the church and not see many young people there at all and come to the same conclusion. This will not only help quell some of those feelings, but it will also build relationships between age groups which seldom interact. The young have much to learn from the elderly. Rather than seeing them as burdensome, visiting with them and building these relationships will often have a powerful impact on youth. They will show more respect and listen to what the elderly have to say with greater interest. Bringing the church youth group to a nursing home or an assisted living facility where church members live and having a large group Bible study together is a fine activity idea for both sides. If this is carefully planned and scheduled with regularity, schedules can adapt and become accommodating to this important ministry.

Middle-aged people have plenty to offer to shut-in ministry too. They have enough life experience to better communicate and relate to past experiences of the shut-ins than the youth can. While scheduling with the youth is an issue, scheduling with middle-aged people may be an even bigger obstacle. Jobs and families seem to be taking an increasingly high level of priority, often, sadly, to the exclusion of church-related events. However, this is an overgeneralization and is not true in many Christian homes. Middle-aged people who are willing to serve the congregation in ministry to shut-ins have enough energy and vigor from their youth combined with life experience to be very effective in visitation and Bible study.

An idea which should not be shocking is including senior members of the church in visitation. Many people retire and find themselves with hours of extra time every day. While time is a factor in the involvement of youths and middle-aged adults, seniors often have much more free time. They will be better able to relate to struggles the shut-ins are facing, because they too may be facing similar issues as part of the body's process of aging and slowing down. Gilbert Peterson describes senior adults in this way, "They are a force to be reckoned with, a group to be ministered to, and a fantastic resource to be drawn upon."<sup>24</sup> Senior members will also often be able to relate to shut-ins in their desire for companionship. They can show care and love in a way that only comes with time and with age. If a congregation has multiple members living within close proximity to each other, they may also consider traveling a short distance to gather together for the study. This becomes even easier when multiple members live in the same assisted living facility or nursing home. Gathering together with other believers to study God's Word helps remind shut-ins that they are still members of the church and the church militant has not left them behind.

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24. Peterson, 180.

How many people should go on a visit? Should it be a single person, a team of people, or a married couple? These are good questions and should be seriously considered. However, there is no right answer. It all depends on the congregation, location, and specific shut-ins. Any of the above options can work just fine. For some shut-ins, a visit from just one other person might be all they can handle at one time. Others may feel awkward and uncomfortable if just one other person comes and would prefer two or three instead. It is certainly possible for a married couple to take these studies to shut-ins. There would be tremendous benefit to this because they can prepare at home together and they would be able to visit either male shut-ins or female shut-ins.

Can both men and women participate in this? This too depends on the congregation and their practices, but biblically speaking both men and women can participate in this without breaking their biblical roles.<sup>25</sup> In the case of one or two women teaching the lesson, they should go only to female shut-ins. In the case of men teaching the lesson, it might be better for them to visit only male shut-ins, especially if a man is without a teammate. An exception to this could be church elders, who may be asked or even expected to visit single shut-ins, regardless of whether they are male or female. Single shut-ins may feel uncomfortable by a visit from one or two members of the opposite sex, even if they went to church with them for years. This will not

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25. For more information about the biblical teaching on the roles of men and women, which is too extensive to include in detail here, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod website discusses the roles of man and woman in a doctrinal statement. Here is an excerpt from the article which deals specifically with work and positions of authority in the church.

**In the Church**

17. The biblical principle of role relationship applies also to the gatherings of the church. All believers, men and women, will participate at gatherings of worship, prayer, Bible study, and service. The scriptural applications that a woman remain silent (1 Co 14:34) and that a woman should not teach a man (1 Ti 2:11,12) require that a woman refrain from participating in these gatherings in any way which involves authority over men.

18. In church assemblies the headship principle means that only men will cast votes when such votes exercise authority over men. Only men will do work that involves authority over men (1 Co 11:3-10; 14:33-35; 1 Ti 2:11,12).

19. All Christians, men and women, are to use their God-given gifts to serve each other (1 Pe 4:10). Women are encouraged to participate in offices and activities of the public ministry except where the work involves authority over men.

(<https://wels.net/about-wels/what-we-believe/doctrinal-statements/man-and-woman-roles/>)

always be true, of course. But for the sake of good order and practice, precautions ought to be taken to ensure the best possible experience for the shut-ins and the members of the visitation teams alike. The congregation should be aware that concerns of this nature may exist among their members. This visitation program is meant to benefit the faith of these believers, not become a stumbling block to them. In this, as in all things in the church, a pastoral heart, scriptural practices, and due diligence must all be taken into account.

### **Bible Studies for the Home**

Why is it so important to bring Bible studies to the homes of shut-ins? Because they can no longer come to the Bible study. So it must be brought to them if they are to have it. Bible study is just as important for shut-ins as it is for any other member of the church. Christians are blessed by God with the gift of faith which comes from hearing his Word and spending time in it. This faith gives a desire to always keep learning more and to continue growing in God's Word until this earthly life ends and eternal life begins. People never graduate from God's Word or outgrow it. God's Word never ceases to be useful or timely. And almost everyone who reads and studies the Bible continually agrees that they never stop finding new things and they never reach a point where they know it all. A verse that spoke to someone when they were seventeen may not speak to them in the same way when they are seventy. As people grow and gather life experiences, how God's Word applies to them changes. This is why it is so important for people to remain in God's Word for their entire lives. It never stops speaking to them. It never becomes stale or outdated. James Wilhoit and Leland Ryken express concern that teachers do not apply God's Word as well as they should. God's Word is applicable, but people want to know how.

“Bridging the gap” is the phrase used by Bible expositors to refer to the process by which we make the biblical text relevant to modern living. Good biblical interpretation must ask and answer the questions of what a passage *meant* to the original audience and what it *means* to us today. Bridging the gap requires us to perform both activities. This is exactly

what is often missing. Despite our affirmation that the Bible is our rule of faith and practice, many Christians read it with a disquieting sense that its shepherds, kings, and battles have little to do with modern life...[Some]thing that signals inadequate bridging of the gap is insufficient application of the biblical principles to a [person]'s life. The question often left unanswered in contemporary Bible teaching is, what difference is this supposed to make in my life this week?<sup>26</sup>

The Word of God is living, active, useful, and applicable from the moment life begins and never stops being that way.

Even though God's Word never changes and never stops being useful, people do change. The needs that people have and the challenges which people face change. This becomes increasingly true as people age. Homebound elderly people have many challenges which younger people do not. This will sometimes cause difficulties when members visit with Bible studies. These Bible studies cannot all be presented in the same way. They must be adapted to fit different physical and mental capabilities. Some elderly people will face memory loss challenges or have difficulty focusing. Many shut-ins must face the reality of degenerating eyesight and some entirely lose the ability to see words on a page. Hands may become shaky or even unable to write at all. These are challenges which must be taken into account when visitation teams are preparing their individual studies for these shut-in members. Lessons will often have to be modified, sometimes only in minor ways, but other times they must be simplified. The pastor must also keep these things in mind when choosing a Bible book or a course to study.

These in-home Bible studies are not confined to any particular design or topic. However, the pastor should be careful when selecting a study. They may be chosen from existing studies or they may be written each month or week, depending on what type of study is chosen. Most importantly, these studies must be able to be taught by lay members of the congregation. A

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26. James C. Wilhoit & Leland Ryken, *Effective Bible Teaching*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012, 22.

pastor or teacher or staff minister has likely had much more theological training than the other members involved in the visitation program. While they can certainly teach from God's Word, they should probably not be asked to handle deep theological topics. Deep and serious topics would also likely not appeal to many shut-ins.

Preparation for these studies may take place in a number of ways. The pastor may prepare the lesson for the month and teach it to all the visitation teams before sending them on their way for the month. The pastor may teach a weekly Bible class from which the visitation team may take their lesson for the week or month. The pastor may just find a series of lessons and give them to the teams to prepare on their own, asking him any questions they have as they prepare. While this third way might work, it is not recommended. The pastor ought, as much as possible, to prepare the lessons with the visitation teams. In this way, the pastor is not only taking an active interest in their work, but he is actively supporting them and leading them by example. When the pastor demonstrates how to teach a certain Bible lesson, how to address difficult topics, and how to answer questions in a loving and helpful way, his example will make a major impact on how the visitation teams share the studies too. Peterson says, "It is important that leaders actually lead. Leaders must be involved in doing the type of work and ministry they expect others to do."<sup>27</sup>

### Bible Study Format

Format for the Bible studies will vary depending on the shut-in, as briefly mentioned above. They will all have different mental and physical capabilities. Some may be able to read out of their own Bible and write answers on a sheet like they used to in adult Bible class, while

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27. Peterson, 142.

others will no longer be able to. Some may be able to take cognitive steps to reach logical conclusions, while others may need a simple Bible message about Jesus and nothing more. These possibilities will all have to be evaluated and taken into consideration by the pastor, church leadership, and visitation teams as they decide how best to serve the shut-in members of the congregation. The author of this paper conducted a few interviews with shut-in members of a WELS congregation. The majority of them said if such a study were ever to be offered to them, they would prefer a discussion-based study involving nothing more than the reading of Scripture and talking about what it means and how it applies to daily life. Ultimately, this is what all Bible studies are at their core and is therefore an appropriate method. It will be up to individual congregations to determine how to best serve the needs of their members.

One way an in-home Bible class may be done is for a pastor to develop a full series on his own. This study may be based on a book or portion of a book in the Bible. The study may address a specific topic, such as current political issues or growing old. No matter what the study is, the pastor and visitation teams ought to make it as relatable to the current lives of the shut-ins as possible. If it is something with which they will easily connect or something from which they will find personal benefit, the people will be much more likely to participate and look forward to these in-home studies.

After the pastor has written his study, or at least part of it, he may begin giving it to the visitation team. Once he has taught it to them, they are free to begin their visits in whatever manner the congregation has decided to do. One option is for the pastor to teach the lesson to all the visitation members, who will then take it to their assigned shut-ins. Another option is for the whole study to be prepared beforehand and for one lesson to be taught to each visitation group. Each group will then systematically visit each shut-in in the congregation. In order for this to

work, the whole series would have to consist of individual lessons that can be taught out of order. If the series requires a specific order for the lessons, it would not make sense to use the method of each team taking only one lesson to all the shut-ins. There are both benefits and downsides to this method. One benefit is it puts less pressure on the team because they only have to learn one lesson. They will certainly become very good at teaching it. They will also get a chance to visit all of the shut-ins in the church. A downside is the lesson could become stale after teaching it a few times. Another downside is the team may not get to develop as close of a relationship with any of the shut-ins as they might like, since the teams would always be moving and changing.

Another way for the pastor to provide in-home Bible study materials is to give the visitation teams the lessons from the Sunday morning Bible classes. The members would be expected to attend Sunday morning Bible classes and then take the lesson to the shut-ins during the following week. This could possibly work in a once-a-month plan, but would be a challenge. It would work better if the shut-ins were able to get the lessons every week, as the rest of the congregation would. Otherwise, they would only get 25% of the Sunday morning series and would likely not benefit very much from it. However, bringing a lesson every week would be difficult because it would require much more time from the visitation teams and the shut-ins too. It may be more likely to work in a smaller congregation where the number of shut-ins is relatively low, but if the program has highly involved people and is strongly supported, it could achieve a lofty goal such as this.

A Bible study method which may work quite well is a Bible class called a “Week in the Word.” This is a Bible class format which was introduced to the author by Rev. Dan Heiderich, who serves as the pastor at Good News Lutheran Church (WELS) in Lehi, Utah. The lesson is a

simple format involving information about the season of the church year and the Sunday in the church year on the front. The rest of the lesson is based on the three Scripture readings for the upcoming Sunday. It can be taught to members of the congregation in an informal Bible study during the week. If this study were used for shut-in visitation, it could be brought to the shut-ins either before or after the Sunday, depending on what plan the congregation makes for visitation. This study format would be very beneficial because it would help the shut-in to stay in touch with the church year and learn more about the seasons and days in it. It is also a format which would not require visits every week if time and visitation teams are limited. Each lesson stands on its own and any one of the four or five in a month could easily be brought to shut-in members. Since it is designed to be an informal lesson with the intent of learning more about the upcoming Scripture readings each week, it is also a lesson which could be taught by visitation teams without having to worry about too many deep theological questions. Any questions which do come up can be addressed with the pastor at the church Bible study first. No matter which Bible study format a pastor and congregation choose to use, it ought to be easily adaptable for in-home study and designed in a way that any of the participants in the visitation program will be able to teach it.

### **Conclusion**

What is the most important part of ministry? Preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ? Strengthening the members of a congregation? Reaching out to the people still sitting in the darkness of unbelief? Yes to all of these and to many other things too. It can easily become impossible for a pastor to find enough time to do everything asked of him in a given day. Yet the importance of accomplishing all these parts of ministry never goes away and never becomes any less important. The work of the church is urgent – people only have so long on earth. People who

have been members of the church for seventy, eighty, or even ninety years are no less important. Even if they spent their whole life in the church, they still need to hear God's Word applied to them and their lives regularly.

Pastors and members alike need to recognize the truth found throughout Scripture – God's Word is for all ages. Shut-in members are certainly not excluded from this. In the foreseeable future, the number of elderly people is only going to increase. It is therefore imperative that pastors find ways to continue ministering to them even after they can no longer attend church. The views and ideas expressed in this paper are far from complete in covering this topic. The search and journey only begins here. Pastors will burn out if they try to do everything themselves. Including lay members of the congregation who are strong in God's Word in the ministry of the congregation can be the difference between a pastor staying in the ministry or resigning from it. But even more importantly than that, it can be the difference between a person remaining a Christian to death or losing their faith and trust in Jesus because their soul starved to death in their final years.

An illustration frequently used for how often people need to be in God's Word is eating meals. How often does a person eat in one day? Three or four times? This food is very temporary and often lasts only a few hours. And it feeds a body which lives for usually less than 100 years. How then can the church abandon its members who are nearing their eternity? A life of 80, 90, even 100 years is nothing more than a second when compared to eternity. The soul needs to "eat" God's Word to be nourished and stay strong. It is the privilege of the church, the pastor, and the members to bring this spiritual food to the shut-in members. The Apostle Paul frequently talks about the importance of hearing God's Word, trusting in him all our days, and rejoicing in the peace we have knowing eternal life is ours in Christ.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16–18)

Shut-in ministry has the same goal every other aspect of ministry does. The end goal is helping children of God, who are redeemed and dearly loved by him, to finish their lives in faith and attain the crown of glory which awaits them in eternal life.

## APPENDIX 1

## Survey Sent to Pastors

1. Where do you currently serve and are you the only pastor there?
2. How many total members does your church have?
3. How many shut-ins do you have?
4. How often do you plan to visit those shut-ins?
5. How often do you actually visit them?
6. What do you typically use for a devotion text with them? (e.g. a Psalm, a Pastor's Companion text)
7. Do you think they are as spiritually fed as your other members who can attend church regularly are?
8. What do you see as the biggest obstacle you face in carrying out shut-in ministry?
9. What have you tried doing to overcome these obstacles? Did it work? Why/why not?

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