

## What is the Purpose of the Triennial Visit?

The Committee on Ministry's responsibility "... to facilitate the relations between congregations, ministers, and the presbytery ..." (G-11.0501a) is accomplished in part through its triennial visit with each session of presbytery. This is essentially a pastoral visit by the presbytery to its churches to affirm and support the good ministry being accomplished in the name of Christ, to ask questions and share information that will raise the vision of church leaders, to encourage them as they seek to respond to God's call, and to help them deal with problems which exist. The intention is that of strengthening the connection between the local congregation and the other governing bodies in the denomination, while helping the congregation to consider its ministry and mission not only within the local community but also throughout the world.

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[Purpose](#)

[Ethical Issues](#)

[Who Will Be Visited](#)

[Format](#)

[Scheduling](#)

[Personnel](#)

[What Paperwork Needs To Be Created](#)

[Training](#)

[Preparing For The Visit](#)

[Encountering Resistance](#)

[After The Visit](#)

### **G-11.0503c:**

*[The COM] ... shall visit with each session of the presbytery at least once every three years, discussing with them the mission and ministry of the particular church and encouraging the full participation of each session and congregation in the life and work of the presbytery and of the larger church. (W-1.4002)*

### **W-1.4002:**

*To ensure that the guiding principles are being followed, those responsible on behalf of presbytery for the oversight and review of the ministry of particular worshiping congregations should discuss with those sessions the quality of worship, the standards governing it, and the fruit it is bearing in the life of God's people as they proclaim the gospel and communicate its joy and justice. (G-11.0503c)*

In these two sections of the Book of Order, three specific areas to be considered by the COM in fulfilling this responsibility are identified:

1. the mission and ministry of the particular church

2. full participation in the life and work of the presbytery (*G-11.0503c*)
3. the quality of and standards for worship, and the fruit it is bearing in the life of God's people ... (*W-1.4002*)

Each Committee on Ministry will determine for itself the approach for triennial visitation it will use. While most presbyteries have a general framework for each visit, adaptations must be made with regard to the type of church, the present circumstances of the congregation, and its present attitude toward presbytery. Some committees have found it helpful to focus on different aspects of ministry with each successive triennial visit.

If these visits are truly to strengthen connections, then the conversation must flow two ways. Church leaders will want an opportunity to say what they need from presbytery and offer suggestions for strengthening the ministry of presbytery. **Visitors must be good listeners!**

## Purpose

### **What is the purpose of this visit?**

The visit will be most constructive when the visitors and the church leaders are clear about the purpose of the visit. This should be communicated in writing to the pastor and session prior to the visit and the church leaders invited to prepare in an appropriate way for the visit.

Rather than telling the church "The Book of Order says we have to visit you every three years" (which sets up a feeling that no one wants to do this), it may be helpful to communicate one or more of the following purposes for your time together:

- Celebration of the ministry of this congregation!
- Faith sharing
- Two-way information sharing - presbytery learning about the church - its ministry, challenges, and concerns;  
and the church hearing about presbytery - its activities, resources, and challenges;
- Dealing with special issues of concern;
- Mutual ministry assessment process;
- Invitation to participate more fully in the life and ministry of presbytery;
- Inspiration and encouragement to reach out to changing community;
- Interpretation of the mission of the larger Church;
- Information gathering for presbytery planning;
- Invitation to strategic planning for future ministry in their area;
- Strengthening the pastoral relationship;
- Follow-up interventions at significant points in a pastorate;

## Ethical Issues

It is essential that everyone involved in triennial visits is clear about:

- What expectations are there regarding confidentiality?
- To whom will reports go?
- How will referrals be handled?
- When a visitation team uncovers serious problems, who will be notified and what will be said to the church and pastor about how the information will be handled?
- How will conflicts of interest be avoided?

## Who Will Be Visited?

- Will churches which have had other significant C.O.M. intervention (in vacancy or conflict) be visited again?
- Who will be included in the visit? - Only the session and pastor(s)?... the session with other church members who wish to attend? Other church staff? The treasurer? The pastor's spouse?

## Format

- What will be the basic format and time frame for the visit?
- Will a meal or refreshments be part of the visit?
- Will there be a worship component of the visit? If so, who will do this?

## Scheduling

- Will sessions be asked to schedule a special meeting for this visit?
- Will a separate time with pastor or pastor and spouse be included?
- How will the C.O.M. involve the congregations in determining the schedule?
- Will visits be scheduled during "seasons" set aside for this purpose or continually throughout the year?

## Personnel

- How many persons will be required for each visit? At least two persons should be assigned to each team, and that no one attempt to make a visit alone. Both persons can listen actively to the session, the minister(s) and others.
- Who will conduct the visits?
- Will the visitation teams be made up on C.O.M. members or will non-C.O.M. persons be asked to assist?
- Will all C.O.M. members be expected to do triennial visits or will certain persons within the C.O.M. be assigned this responsibility?

## What Paperwork Needs To Be Created?

- Letters of notification of the date of the visit?
- A document to explain the triennial visit to the congregation and pastor?
- A questionnaire to gather information?
- A list of questions or general "script" to help visitor prepare?
- A packet of information for the visitors about the church? General information about presbytery activities and resources? Standardized report and feedback forms?
- A follow-up letter to the pastor and the session?
- An evaluation form for pastor and session to assess the visit?

Who will be responsible for: mailings, tracking completed visits, and/or following up on referrals?

## Training

- How will these persons be trained? Who will conduct the training, and what topics will be covered?

Some presbyteries have offered training in these formats: a one day or evening session in a central location, several duplicate events scattered around the presbytery, and/or a retreat.

### **These subjects may be helpful to include in training:**

- listening skills
- basic consultation skills
- basic conflict management
- life cycles of pastoral relationships and congregational life
- "Programs and Resources of Our Presbytery"
- ministry assessment
- small church and corporate church dynamics

## Preparing For The Visit

Having received their basic training the teams must make preliminary contact with the sessions of the presbytery. Each team will make its first contact, contracting for a date, and alternate date (in case of emergency), the amount of time needed for the visit, any preliminary requirements of the session (such as answering a questionnaire before the team's visit).

It is important to obtain some information about the particular church which will be visited.

- A look at annual statistical reports for the last few years (Research Services has these and other statistics including community demographics and maps readily available for your use. Call (800) -997-8934.)
- Some information about the community in which the church is located.

- Presbytery file material such as the most recent CIF and the PIF of the pastor, mission studies, bulletins, newsletters, anniversary histories, etc.

**The most important preparation you and your visitation team can make is to prepare spiritually for the visit.**

- Pray for the congregation and its leaders.
- Consider scripture about visitation such as Romans 1:7-12:  
*"To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.*

## Encountering Resistance

It is not unusual that some sessions or pastors may be reluctant to have the Committee on Ministry to visit. They may feel such visits are a waste of precious time or they resent "outside" intervention. Usually a competent caring visitation team can dispel such feelings and build trust. If churches have had bad experiences with presbytery intervention in the past, it may be helpful to acknowledge their feelings about that experience (without judging previous encounters) and move on with a good experience.

Some visiting teams have been met by stony silence. Wise teams will not rush in to fill the silence with small talk, nor will they leave early. They may ask, "What's going on here? We feel like you don't want to talk about something? Is there something you want to say to us that you are reluctant to say or have difficulty expressing?" Sometimes a member of a visitation team will receive a parking lot contact or a phone call after the visit when an elder wants to share that which was left unsaid in the meeting. Information gathered this way should be considered carefully. It may be that "family secrets" have been hidden or it may be that one unhealthy person wishes to cause trouble. Presbytery visitors should encourage open conversation among individuals in disagreement rather than reward triangular conversation among parties using C.O.M. to "get at" the other!

## After The Visit

- **Report** - Some teams meet for coffee immediately after the triennial visit to collect their thoughts and to put together their report which will be made to the C.O.M.
- **Refer** - Referrals must be handled faithfully. If a session, for example, asks for presbytery's help with their stewardship efforts, it is essential that the referral is made promptly and help given.

- **Feedback** - Completing the feedback loop is also important. By this I mean that it is a good practice to correspond with the pastor and session after a visit. And include a copy of the report that is given to the C.O.M.