

## Triennial Visits

Among the best opportunities for building relationships with congregations is the Triennial Visit. This is essentially a pastoral visit by the presbytery to its churches.

When Triennial Visits are most helpful to everyone involved, it is likely to be because the COM goes to them with prayerful preparation, and a respectful, appreciative attitude to the mission and ministry of each congregation. Visitors to congregations who expect to find evidences of faithful ministry and mission are more likely to find them than those who go with a predisposition to be disappointed. Every congregation is doing something that is important and valuable to its members and pleasing to God!

If the Triennial Visit is to be received by sessions as more than a checking off of a *Book of Order* requirement, or an unpleasant intrusion by the presbytery, it will be because the COM takes the initiative to make the visit an occasion for pastoral affirmation and appreciation. When there are issues to be addressed or concerns to be responded to, it will be in a context in which some trust has been built.

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!

The tools of appreciative inquiry are particularly useful for triennial visits.

*The purposes of a Triennial Visit are:*

- to affirm and support the good ministry being accomplished in the name of Christ,
- to connect the session with the resources of the presbytery, the synod and the General Assembly,
- 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,
- to help them deal with any problems which may exist.

Triennial visits can serve to strengthen the connection between the congregation and 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.

Three specific areas to be considered by the COM in triennial visits are identified in the *Book of Order*:

- the mission and ministry of the particular church (G-3.0307)
- full participation in the life and work of the presbytery (G-3.0307)
- the quality of and standards for worship, and the fruit it is bearing in the life of God's people (W- 2.0305)

Triennial Visits may be structured in a variety of ways -- including visiting with sessions more often than every three years! 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 size and geographical location of the 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.

## **Planning for triennial visits**

### ***Purpose***

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 so that the church leaders are 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 expectations regarding confidentiality, to whom will reports go, and how referrals will be handled. In addition, the session and the pastor will need to know what will happen if a visitation team uncovers serious problems. In such cases, the COM must state clearly who will be notified and how the information will be handled. In the case of triennial visits, as in all the work of the COM it is important to consider ahead of time how conflicts of interest will be avoided.

### ***Who will be visited?***

- Will churches which have had other significant COM intervention (in vacancy or conflict) need a 'triennial visit'?
- Who will be included in the visit? This can be determined with Session and pastor input:
  - 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?

### ***Scheduling***

- Work with the pastor and Clerk of Session to schedule the visit.
- What will be the basic format and time frame for the visit?
- Will a meal or refreshments be part of the visit?
- Will sessions be asked to schedule a special meeting for this visit?
- There should be a separate time with pastor or pastor and spouse.

### ***Personnel***

- Will visits be scheduled during seasons set aside for this purpose or continually throughout the year?
- At least two persons should be assigned to each visiting team. No one should make a visit alone. Both persons can listen actively to the session, the minister(s) and others.
- Will the visitation teams be made up on COM members or will non-COM persons be asked to assist?
- Will all COM members be expected to do triennial visits or will certain persons within the COM be assigned this responsibility?

### ***What paperwork needs to be created?***

- Letters of notification of the proposed date of the visit with an invitation to negotiate the date if necessary
- A document to explain the triennial visit to the congregation and pastor
- A list of questions or general script to help visitors prepare
- General information about presbytery activities and resources
  - Academy for Ruling Elders, scholarships, mission opportunities, etc.
- Summary reports distributed to the COM, pastor and session.
- A follow-up letter to the pastor and the session

The COM must also decide who will be responsible for mailings, tracking completed visits and following up on referrals.

### ***These skills are helpful in conducting a triennial visit:***

- listening skills
- basics of appreciative inquiry
- knowledge of programs and resources of our presbytery

- basic consultation skills
- ministry assessment
- basic conflict management
- small church and corporate church dynamics
- life cycles of pastoral relationships and congregational life

### ***Preparing for the visit***

The teams must make preliminary contact with the sessions of the churches to which they are liaisons. 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 church that 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.
- Some information about the community in which the church is located.
- Presbytery file material, such as the most recent MDP and the PDP 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.
- Pray for the visitation team.
- Consider scripture about visitation such as Romans 1:7-12

### ***Encountering resistance***

It is not unusual for some sessions or pastors to be reluctant to have the Committee on Ministry visit. They may feel such visits are a waste of time or they may resent or be fearful of the possibility of 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 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. There may be inappropriate secret-keeping 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 the COM to get at each other!

### ***After the visit***

- **Report** - Some teams meet for coffee immediately after the triennial visit to collect their thoughts and to put together the report that will be made to the COM.
- **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.
- **Review** - Completing the feedback loop is also important. Correspond with the pastor and session after a visit and include a copy of the report that is given to the COM. Be mindful of sensitive information shared in separate conversations.

### **Additional Guidelines for North Central Iowa Presbytery**

- In multi-staff settings, it is important to offer pastors (associates and heads of staff) a separate meeting, and a safe place to discuss their concerns.
  - This does not need to be separate occasions. There could be a dinner with all pastors, and spouses if the pastoral staff wants.
- It is essential that everyone involved in triennial visits is clear about expectations regarding confidentiality, to whom will reports go, and how referrals will be handled.
  - Pastors should be reminded that while confidentiality is valued, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. If the COM liaison determines that information needs to be shared with the session, COM, or another pastor, the liaison will notify the pastor who shared the information.
  - Associate pastors should know in advance that a summary of the evaluative comments and concerns will be shared with the head of staff.
- If the COM liaison is a ruling elder, effort should be made to bring a teaching elder as their partner. Similarly, if the liaison is a teaching elder, effort should be made to bring a ruling elder as their partner.
- Before going into the meeting, the COM representatives should discuss any potential conflicts of interest that might arise during the meeting e.g. Did one of the liaisons attend that church previously? Do they know the staff or elders in a special way?
- Before attending the triennial visit, the review of church materials should include reading the most recent triennial visit report in order to discover potential ongoing issues.
- While the top of page 3 of this document lists great questions to think about, here is the standard answer to those types of questions:
  - The Triennial visit usually includes a dinner/meeting with the pastor(s) before the session meeting. This can include a spouse at the pastor's discretion.
  - Other staff or church members typically are not included in the meeting but can be included with the suggestion of the pastor.
  - Worship can be a component of the visit, but usually this takes the form of whatever devotional time or worship is offered at the beginning of the session meeting.
- Give the session some time to offer comments without the pastor(s) present
  - This is not done in order to give the session a time to gripe, but to encourage open, honest dialogue.

# **Triennial Visit Report Form**

## ***MINISTRY AND MISSION REFLECTION FOR SESSION***

Pastor:

Congregation:

Date of Visit:

COM Team:

Please be ready to reflect on these questions with the Committee on Ministry liaisons. The liaisons will likely not have time to go through all these questions, but they provide a helpful starting point for conversation.

1. What do you see as important work of this congregation over the last three years?
2. How do you see God at work in the ministry of this congregation?
3. What are some areas of concern about the ministry of this congregation?
4. The church is called to be the Body of Christ in the world. When has the church best resembled the Body of Christ for you?
5. When, in this church, was prayer most important and effectual for you?
6. What do you see as Christ's dream for the future of your ministry here?
7. What concrete steps have you taken to translate Christ's dream into reality in this church and in the community?
8. What concrete steps will you continue to take to translate Christ's dream into reality?
9. In what ways is your congregation involved in the presbytery?
10. Has there been a happening in the life of your congregation that you would like the presbytery to celebrate with you?
11. How could the Presbytery be more helpful to your congregation?
12. Do you have any comments or concerns you would like to share?

**Excuse the pastor(s) for a brief time and speak with the session.**

13. What is going well with your current pastoral relationship(s)?
14. Do you have any concerns with your current pastoral relationship(s)?

# **Triennial Visit Report Form**

## ***MINISTRY AND MISSION REFLECTION FOR THE PASTOR(S)***

Pastor:

Congregation:

Date of Visit:

COM Team:

Please be ready to reflect on these questions with the Committee on Ministry liaisons.

1. When has the church or the Presbytery best resembled the Body of Christ for you?
2. Describe the time when you felt the most spiritually fulfilled/excited during your time at the church you are now serving?
3. What do you see as Christ's dream for the future of your ministry here?
4. How can the Presbytery, session, COM, etc. help you to fulfill this dream?
5. Taking care of self...
  - a. Do you think you are adequately compensated and how do you feel about your financial stability?
  - b. Describe the quality of your relationship to the staff, the session, and to the congregation?
  - c. Do you take all of your vacation time and how have you been using study leave?
  - d. How many hours a week are you working?
6. What would you like to see happen in your congregation in the next 3-5 years?
7. Do you have any comments or concerns to share?
8. How could the COM support you and your ministry better?