

Triennial Visit Procedures

Adopted 03/03/2016

Triennial Visit Procedures:

Purpose and nature:

According to the Book of Order each Presbytery is to develop and maintain mechanisms to fulfill its tasks to be connectional with the local churches and pastors. COM and the Presbytery has concurred that the COM continue to be responsible for maintaining a relationship with pastors and Sessions through the Triennial visits. These visits should be seen by both COM and Sessions as a positive and necessary vehicle for open communications and mutual assistance: connecting the connectional church. We are encouraged to live this out both in Scripture and throughout the PC(USA)'s Constitution:

- Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. (1Th 5:11)
- So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. (Rom 12:5-10)
- Q. 55. What do you understand by the “communion of saints?”
A. First, that believers one and all, as partakers of the Lord Christ, and all his treasures and gifts, shall share in one fellowship. Second, that each one ought to know that he is obliged to use his gifts freely and with joy for the benefit and welfare of other members. (Heidelberg Catechism)
- [Members of the Church] have one faith and one spirit; and therefore they worship but one God, and him alone they worship in spirit and in truth... Moreover, joined together with all the members of Christ by an unfeigned love, they show that they are Christ's disciples by persevering in the bond of peace and unity. (Second Helvetic Confession 5.135)
- All saints being united to Jesus Christ their head, by his Spirit and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as to conduce to their mutual good. (Westminster Confession, 6.146)

Goals of Triennial Visits

Building Relationships

Triennial Visits seek to foster mutually-supportive relationships among members of the Presbytery. This involves establishing fellowship and learning about each other. COM reps should come away from a visit with a greater appreciation of the ministry of that particular church and a sympathetic understanding of the challenges facing it. In their post-visit discernment and summary of the visit to COM, reps should identify specific opportunities for fostering mutually supportive relationships between the congregation and the Presbytery.

The church session and leadership should come away from the visit feeling that their voices have been heard and that they have advocates, contacts, and a welcoming presence at Presbytery in the persons of their COM representatives.

Connectionalism

The John Knox 2017 Vision Narrative reminds us that we are “a community of communities, centered in Jesu Christ, linked to one another, boldly responding to the Spirit’s call to join God’s mission.” Triennial visits are one of the many ways we stay connected as the body of Christ with COM reps able to express like activities to unite churches in ministry and support of one another.

Encouraging and Celebrating Ministry

Triennial Visits seek to recognize, encourage and celebrate what God is doing in the life of the Presbytery. COM reps are there to learn about what is happening in the congregation’s life. As an outside set of eyes, they may have a role in helping the congregation recognize and celebrate aspects of God’s work in their midst that they have taken for granted. Recognition and encouragement also may take the form of urging the session into conversation about issues, challenges or conflicts – both acute and chronic – that serve as stumbling blocks to healthy congregational life and ministry.

A Triennial Visit is also an occasion for churches and COM reps to reflect together on ways they see God at work in the life of the Presbytery. This can be an occasion for thinking together about how all of us can embrace and participate more fully in the work that God is doing in our midst.

Strengthening Each Other

Triennial Visits seek to strengthen connections among churches in the Presbytery by fostering relationships of mutual giving and receiving of gifts. It is a time for reflecting on practical resources the Presbytery has available to assist the church’s ministry and a review of ways the Presbytery may have been helpful in the past.

Discernment of Gifts

A triennial visit is also an occasion to reflect on gifts a particular church is able to share with its Presbytery partners. This is not limited to financial support, though where this has been present it should be noted and gratefully celebrated. Even churches that have very modest material resources, however, can be encouraged to think about particular gifts they can share. For example, they might provide fellowship or ideas to other churches facing challenges similar to their own; or they could engage in ministries of prayer for particular concerns that arise within the life of the Presbytery.

A Triennial Visit is *Not*...

- An occasion for passing judgment on a congregation’s life and ministry, although discernment about a congregation’s life and ministry is encouraged.
- An attempt to “fix” all the problems facing a particular church, although providing resources to address a problem may be part of the post-visit follow-up.
- A review of a church by a “higher” bureaucratic entity. *We* are the Presbytery—it is a working partnership among its member churches, teaching and ruling elders.

Visit Assignment and Training

- A. COM shall keep a running list of churches and visits made and review at the beginning of each year which churches will be visited in the upcoming calendar year.
- B. All COM members who do visits shall go through a brief training session that covers purpose, procedures and possible questions, including a brief review of the policy, procedures, and suggested questions. No one may go on a visit without having had this training.
- C. Teams of two COM members will arrange, complete, and provide a written summary of each visit. Whenever possible, a COM member who has done visits should be paired with someone on their first or second visit, and should include one teaching elder and one ruling elder.
- D. The visit shall include some individual time with the pastor or pastors, typically over a meal at a restaurant. The purpose is to get to know the pastor(s) and his or her sense of how things are going in the church and their personal and spiritual life. This should be a time of fellowship and supportive conversation. There is a list of possible questions in Appendix C.

Visit Preparation

- A. Arrange a date and time with the moderator, and confirm this conversation and the purpose of the Triennial visit with a letter to the clerk of session and pastor/s (Appendix A and B), including the request for up to an hour of the Session's time. Also arrange with the pastor/s a time of fellowship ahead of time, including spouses, over a meal if possible, before the Session meeting. Communicate clearly and send a reminder closer to the date.
- B. Check out the church web site if they have one, read annual reports, and request for review previous Triennial visit summaries (and potentially giving/attendance records for the congregation) from the Presbytery offices to become familiar with the ministry of the congregation.
- C. Decide ahead of time with your visit partner who will do what at the session meeting, so that notes are recorded for the visit summary and your process is clear for both of you.

Time with the Pastor(s)

- A. Having made arrangements ahead of time, this part of the visit is a time of fellowship and encouragement for the pastor/s and potentially spouse/s.
- B. There are a couple of guideline questions in Appendix C that might help generate conversation.
- C. Clarify with the pastor that this part of the visit is for personal support, with the time with the Session for support of the ministry and mission of the congregation.

The Session meeting.

- A. If the meeting has not already begun with prayer, offer to open with prayer.
- B. Introduce yourselves and state the purpose of the visit as representatives of the COM and give time for brief introductions for everyone at the meeting.

- C. Appendix C provides some questions to begin the conversation. Some points to be sure to cover include where the congregation is experiencing God and how they are engaging the community as well as ways the congregation and Presbytery can mutually support one another in ministry.
- D. COM's Check with the Session about whether they have a Safe Sanctuary Policy in place. Obtain a copy if possible.
- E. At some point, request that the pastor/s step out for a few minutes for conversation between you and the ruling elders. Invite the pastor/s back in again at the conclusion of this part of the discussion.
- F. Ask for prayer requests and include these in the summary as well as incorporating them into a closing prayer.

Visit Follow-up

- A. Send a thank you note to the session and moderator.
- B. Prepare a written summary of the visit that includes prayer concerns and, if appropriate, a summary of the meeting with the pastor/s as well.
- C. Submit this to the pastor first, to make sure the summary does not break any trust concerning the conversations ahead of time and then to clerk of Session to make sure it accurately reflects a summary of the visit.
- D. Submit the visit summary to COM for review and acceptance.
- E. When possible, follow up either by an electronic survey or touching base with the clerk and or pastor about the experience to see how well COM is doing on the goals of building relationships and extending support to the congregation and pastor/s.