

CHAPTER VIII - PERIODIC VISITS

This Handbook provides that the Commission on Ministry shall coordinate visits with each session at least once every other year as follows:

To ensure that these guiding principles are being followed, those responsible on behalf of presbytery for the oversight and review of the ministry of particular worshipping 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. (W-1.4002)

One of the reasons that COM is organized along the liaison concept is the hope that closer relationships may be established between the COM (and through COM the Presbytery) and the Sessions in each of our churches. COM, in establishing its Vision Statement, envisioned that closer working relationships would be encouraged and ways would be found to build trust throughout the year and not leave to chance that such trust can be built by visiting a session only once every three years. There are many times and many ways in which members of COM interact with the pastors, churches and sessions under their care throughout the year. Generally these contacts tend to be event or circumstance driven so it is important that there be a specific time set aside to "discuss the mission and ministry of the particular church". That time is the Periodic Visit. There are different forms and formats that presbyteries throughout the denomination have used to facilitate and record these visits with the session. The process and format contained in this section have been used in the conducting Periodic Visits for a number of years. Partners are encouraged to seek improvements to this format and to share any new ways that have been successful with other COM members.

GUIDELINES FOR APPRECIATIVE INQUIREY (AI) VISITS WITH SESSIONS

Although Triennial Visits are no longer required by the *Book of Order*, it is highly recommended that COMs 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."

PLANNING BY THE COMMISSION

1. COM will establish an AI visit schedule each year at its February meeting and will inform those churches who will have a visit during the year.

- c. "So far as may be possible without serious departure from [the standards of the church], without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained" (G-2.0105).
 - d. The presbytery may not take any action which binds the judgment of future assemblies in the examination of Candidates, nor may it reject a Candidate's statement of exception without providing the Candidate an opportunity to defend the position or the presbyters the opportunity to weigh the position or its defense.⁴
14. Persons whose statements of "scruple" (exception) are deemed by the presbytery not to constitute rejection of an essential tenet are nevertheless required to act in conformity with the faith and polity of the church.⁵ Persons willfully violating mandatory provisions of the Constitution shall be subject to disciplinary action.
15. All steps in the above process must be completed prior to an individual assuming a call or contract within the Presbytery de Cristo. If a plenary examination is necessary, a special meeting of the presbytery may be called to ensure that the examination occurs in as timely a fashion as possible.

⁴ "One fact often overlooked is that by the Act of 1729, the decision as to essential and necessary articles was to be in specific cases. It was no general authority that might be stated in exact language and applied rigidly to every case without distinction. It was an authority somewhat undefined, to be invoked in each particular instance." (Report of the Special Commission of 1925 ["Swearingen"], PCUSA, 1927, pp. 56-86.)

⁵ "The Commission recognizes the right of individuals to hold views contrary to the Constitution of the PCUSA but, for the sake of order, actions contrary to the Constitution are not sanctioned" (PCUS, 1983, *Hambrick v. PJC, Synod of North Carolina*, No. 1-1983). See also *Londonderry et al. v. Presbytery of Northern New England* (RC 213-2, 2001). An examination concerns fitness for office. A decision to grant a "scruple" in examination for ordination does not abridge the authority of the Constitution to govern conduct of ministry or limit the grounds for remedial or disciplinary actions.

⁷ See Footnote #6.

PURPOSE OF AI VISITS

1. To discuss with the Session the mission and ministry of the congregation:
 - a. Objectives and results;
 - b. Strengths and weaknesses of the congregations' life and work; and
 - c. Other issues and questions.
2. To discuss the church's participation in the life of the Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly.
3. To provide counsel and guidance as to possible avenues for growth and development.
4. To receive counsel and guidance from the session of how the Presbytery could be of help to the session.

VISITATION TEAMS

1. COM will select teams of three including Elders and Ministers. The Church's liaison from the COM shall be the head of the team and shall make contact/appointments with the assigned churches.
2. Team members may be selected from outside the COM.
3. The same team can visit several churches during the three-year-cycle. Experience together is **an asset**.

PREPARATION OF TEAMS

1. Request a copy of the Congregation's reports from annual ecclesiastical or corporation meetings of the previous year, recent church bulletins, and recent church newsletters.
2. Check General Assembly's statistical reports for previous three years. Is there growth, decline, or no change?

QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY

1. A questionnaire/survey may be sent to the Pastor(s) and the session members two months prior to the triennial visit and shall be the basis for the visit.
2. A written response to the questionnaire/survey is not expected in advance.

(See items 1 – 14 below as examples.)

PROCESS FOR THE TEAM'S VISIT

1. Prepare carefully for the AI visit. Review documents requested.
2. Arrange with the Pastor or the Clerk of Session for date, time and place of visit. Arrange with the moderator of Session if the pulpit is vacant.
3. Send the questionnaire/survey with covering letter to the Pastor and the Clerk of Session at least two (2) months before the visit.
4. Phone the Pastor or Clerk of Session one week before the visit to check on meeting arrangements.
5. Plan to visit with the Pastor(s) and spouse prior to the meeting with the Session.
6. The visit with the Session normally will be scheduled for about one (1) hour.
7. At the visit, following introductions and greetings, the team leader will explain the purpose of the visit and the process to be followed. The Pastor(s) will be excused for a period of time during the meeting so that the Elders can speak freely concerning their evaluation of and concerns for their Pastor(s).
8. Conversation during the visit will center around the questionnaire/survey previously sent to the session. Time will be given to matters of concern to any Elder or member of the team.
9. Soon after the visit, the team Leader will prepare a report of the team's findings for the session and COM.

QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY FOR THE SESSION IN PREPARATION FOR AI VISIT

1. What are some of the exciting things going on now at the church?
2. What is the image of your church in the community?
3. In what ways do you do annual planning? Budget planning?
4. What are the top three priorities of the session at the present time?
5. What is your most successful educational program?
6. What has been the meaningful worship experience for this year?
7. How is the congregation responding to the stewardship program?
8. What are your missions beyond the church's walls -locally and globally?

PURPOSE OF AI VISITS

1. To discuss with the Session the mission and ministry of the congregation:
 - a. Objectives and results;
 - b. Strengths and weaknesses of the congregations' life and work; and
 - c. Other issues and questions.
2. To discuss the church's participation in the life of the Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly.
3. To provide counsel and guidance as to possible avenues for growth and development.
4. To receive counsel and guidance from the session of how the Presbytery could be of help to the session.

VISITATION TEAMS

1. COM will select teams of three including Elders and Ministers. The Church's liaison from the COM shall be the head of the team and shall make contact/appointments with the assigned churches.
2. Team members may be selected from outside the COM.
3. The same team can visit several churches during the three-year-cycle. Experience together is **an asset**.

PREPARATION OF TEAMS

1. Request a copy of the Congregation's reports from annual ecclesiastical or corporation meetings of the previous year, recent church bulletins, and recent church newsletters.
2. Check General Assembly's statistical reports for previous three years. Is there growth, decline, or no change?

QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY

1. A questionnaire/survey may be sent to the Pastor(s) and the session members two months prior to the triennial visit and shall be the basis for the visit.
2. A written response to the questionnaire/survey is not expected in advance.

9. Identify any particular concerns or issues facing your church?
10. What does your pastor(s) do best?
11. How does the session evaluate pastoral staff?
12. How does the session recommend pastoral compensation to the congregation?
13. How well is the Session doing its job?
14. What can the COM/Presbytery do for you?

CHAPTER IX - ETHICS

ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING ELDERS POLICY

The vows from *The Book of Order* which clergy persons take at ordination address principles which are tested constantly, but these principles stand as guides for behavior. This document is a way to recognize those vows and illustrate their relevance and power in daily ministry.

All Presbyterian teaching elders have the responsibility assumed in their ordination vows, to trust Jesus Christ as Savior, to acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and to believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are further committed to obedience to Christ, under the authority of Scripture and guided by the *Book of Confessions*. In their personal lives all teaching elders, acting as God's servants, follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love their neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world. In both their personal and professional lives they strive to further the peace, unity, and purity of the Church, and serve society with honesty, imagination, and love. Each teaching elder has also promised to be governed by this church's polity, to abide by its discipline, to be a friend among all colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit. (W-4.4003). Every time a teaching elder is installed in a new position these same commitments are reaffirmed. Every ministry shall be carried on in accountability for its character and conduct to the presbytery (G-2.0502).

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

1. In all professional matters, teaching elders maintain practices that give glory to Christ, advance the goals of the Church, and nurture, challenge, and protect the welfare of church members, parishioners, clients, and the public.
2. Teaching elders act in such a manner as to uphold and enhance the honor, integrity, morality, and dignity of the profession.
3. Teaching elders limit their practice to those positions and responsibilities for which they are qualified.
4. Teaching elders conduct all professional matters in a manner that assures security and confidentiality and avoids conflicts of interest.
5. Teaching elders demonstrate respect, honesty, and fairness when interacting with clergy colleagues and persons in related professions.
6. Teaching elders maintain professional competency throughout their careers.
7. In personal as well as professional relationships teaching elders have honest and sincere motives, upholding the peace, unity, and purity of the church, and sharing faith, hope, and love with all people.