

Policy #5 – Session Triennial Visitation
Committee on Ministry – Presbytery of Tampa Bay

The Committee on Ministry “shall visit regularly and consult with each minister of the presbytery.” (G-11.0502a). Also the committee “shall visit each session of the presbytery at least once every three years, discussing with them the mission and ministry of that particular church and encouraging the full participation of each session and congregation in the life and work of presbytery and of the larger church.” (G-11.0502c). Each COM area committee shall be responsible for the visitation of the pastors and sessions within its bounds.

Purpose of Visits

The purpose of the triennial visits is to build healthy relationships with the churches, to celebrate what the session and pastor feel good about, to listen to their concerns, to identify directions for the church’s ministry, to offer the presbytery’s encouragement, counsel and support. The purpose is also to express the character of scripture: “For I want very much to see you, in order to share a spiritual blessing ... What I mean is that both you and I will be helped at the same time, you by my faith and I by yours.” (Romans 1:11-12).

Triennial visits with session will not be examinations, inquiries into potential problem areas, or exercises in selling any program. By concentrating on healthy factors, celebrating with sessions what they are doing well, we can lay a good foundation for continuing growth in ministry together. However, an opportunity will be given for both the pastoral staff and the session to share in confidence any concerns that seem appropriate for the building up of the body of Christ so that the COM may help deal with conflicts and/or issues before they cause division.

Scheduling of Visits

Ordinarily the triennial visits will be made by a lay-clergy team, at least one of whom will be a member of the Committee on Ministry.

1. Visits in Ordinary Cases: A list will be kept of churches, arranged chronologically by date of the latest triennial visits with each church. Visits should be arranged in order, with the objective of visiting one third of the churches each year, and visiting each church every three years.
2. Visits with Churches with Recently Called Pastors: No less than 12 months after installation, churches with a newly installed pastor (or associate pastor) shall be visited by the COM representative who served as liaison to the PNC when that pastor was called, along with another member of the COM. These meetings shall provide private time with the clergy as well as time with the session without the minister present. This visit will constitute a triennial visit, even if three years have not elapsed since the last Triennial visit.
3. Visits with Churches with Recently Called Associate Pastors: If the newly installed clergy is an associate pastor, conversation would be held individually with each professional staff member of the church. There would be opportunity to meet with the professional staff. Session visitation would follow as in #2 above. This visit will constitute a triennial visit, even if three years have not elapsed since the last Triennial visit.

4. Visits with Churches with a History of Difficulty: If a committee of the COM or Administrative Commission of the presbytery has recently worked with a particular church during a time of difficulty, a visit should be scheduled approximately one year after completion of the work of such group. The team making the visit should include at least one member of the group that had worked with the church during the time of difficulty. This visit will constitute a triennial visit, even if three years have not elapsed since the last Triennial visit.

Format for the Triennial Visits

5. Setting: A special meeting of the session, using the format below (or something similar) is preferred for triennial visitation. Alternatively, the visit can be a part of a regular session meeting if at least a full hour is devoted to it, but it would be less productive and less informative to both the team and the session being visited.
6. Suggested Format: The visitation team meets with pastor. This may be done on another day, perhaps over lunch. The team meets with session with the following agenda:
 - a. pastor introduces visitation team.
 - b. they explain purpose of the visit, mentioning their earlier meeting with the pastor.
 - c. discuss the ministry and mission of the congregation and its relationship with presbytery (suggestions for this discussion are found in the Resource section of this policy.)
 - d. express thanks, offer assistance from presbytery in any way helpful, and encourage the session and congregation to be active in the work of presbytery.
7. After the Meeting:
 - a. The team evaluates the visit and prepares written report for COM.
 - b. The team thanks the session and pastor, in writing, for their time and attention.
 - c. The session receives a copy of the written report of the visit.

Visits with Ministers

8. The Year of the Triennial Visit: The triennial visit with the church shall include a visit with the pastor and other staff.
9. Between Triennial Visits: The area committees shall contact the ministers of their churches, to consult about the health of their churches and the relationships between pastor and church. Contacts should be alert to ways the presbytery can be a support for both pastors and churches. In the case where a pastoral retirement may occur before the next triennial visit, COM shall review with the pastor the process of Dissolution of a Pastoral Relationship (Policy #11).
10. Non-parish Clergy and Honorably Retired Pastors: A meal (breakfast or luncheon) specifically for non-parish clergy might be held annually. Likewise a meal (breakfast or luncheon) specifically for Honorably Retired pastors who are members of the presbytery might be held annually. These two meals would include representatives of the COM (chairperson and area chairperson) and presbytery staff.

Resources for Triennial Visits

Content of the Triennial Visit with the Session

The visit begins with a word of appreciation and explanation of purpose: (1) to celebrate the positive ministry of the church and wholesome, supportive relationship between the church and presbytery, as well as (2) to give opportunity for raising issues of conflict or potential conflict so that the COM can offer assistance if requested. The conversation should begin and end on positive, supportive notes.

Possible Opening Statements

11. We are here with you to learn from each other about our common mission....
12. We are here to make the requirement of the Book of Order more than a requirement, but to increase our sense of being part of one church....
13. We would like to be able to share some good things that are happening with your church and in the Presbytery of Tampa Bay....

Suggested Questions

14. As a church, what are your strengths? What do you do best? What has worked well for you here that other churches should know about?
15. What changes are taking place in the life of your church and community that impact your ministry? How is your church responding to these changes?
16. What are the areas of greatest concern to you as a session?
17. How can the presbytery, as your partner in Christ's mission, better support the ministry of your church?
18. Are there programs or mission activities that you would like to see the presbytery carry out on behalf of all the churches, recognizing that some ministries are beyond the scope of individual congregations?
19. Are there persons in your church with special gifts and skills that could be helpful to presbytery or to other churches in your vicinity? Let us know who they are.
20. Is there anything in particular that you would like presbytery to hear or know?

Meeting in the Absence of the Pastor (and Pastoral Staff)

At an appropriate time the pastor and/or staff should be excused and questions raised:

21. Is there anything you would like to say without your pastor's presence?
22. Are there areas of praise or concern, that you would like for us to be aware? (Permission should be received from session if the team feels it appropriate and helpful, for sharing these concerns/praises with pastor/staff and if necessary, for referrals to appropriate individuals and/or committees within presbytery.)

Pastor/Staff Returns to the Meeting

Invite the pastoral staff to rejoin meeting. Conclude with a positive note of appreciation for the Session's time and confidence and for the ministry of the church and pastor. Close with prayer. After Session has adjourned, the team would review with the pastoral staff issues raised during their absence from the meeting.

After the Visit

A letter of appreciation, encouragement and support is sent to the Session following the visit, along with a copy of the written report of the visit.

Sample Letter to Pastor and/or Clerk of Session

A letter like the following should be sent prior to the triennial visit:

In reviewing triennial visit rotations, the Committee on Ministry finds that it is time to schedule a visit with your session.

As you probably know, triennial visits fulfill the requirement of the Book of Order, but we believe they also build healthy relationships between churches and presbytery. To this end in our visits we want to hear what the session and pastor feel good about, to listen to their concerns, to identify goals and directions of the church's ministry, and to offer the presbytery's encouragement, counsel and support.

The visit usually involves an hour with the pastor followed by a visit with the session. The visiting team ordinarily has two members, lay and clergy.

I will call to find a mutually convenient date for the visit and to answer any questions which you may have. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions before our visit. According to our records, the last triennial visit with your session was held on (date).

Report of Triennial Visitation Team

In addition to the name and address of the church, the names of visitation team members, the date of visitation, and the name of the pastor(s), please include the following items in your report:

23. What did the session affirm or celebrate about the life of the church?
24. What unique ministries and developments can this church share with other churches in the presbytery?
25. How long has the pastor (or pastoral staff) been at this church, and what are the strengths of the relationship?
26. What concerns were identified?
27. Indicate any help requested from the presbytery and any concerns that should be brought to the attention of the Committee on Ministry.
28. Other comments.