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## Procedure: Visitation with Ministers and Sessions

### **INTRODUCTION**

- In accordance with BOO, G.-3.0307 the Commission on Ministry has the responsibility to

*“develop and maintain mechanisms and processes to serve as pastor and counselor to its ministers of the Word and Sacrament commissioned pastors [also known as commissioned ruling elders]), and certified Christian educators of the presbytery; to facilitate the relations between the presbytery and its congregations, ministers of the Word and Sacrament, commissioned pastors, and certified Christian educators; and to settle difficulties on behalf of the presbytery where possible and expedient.” (BOO, G-3.0307)*

- These guidelines are divided into two major sections:
  - I. Visitations with ministers, commissioned pastors, and sessions
  - II. Visitations with ministers or commissioned pastors serving in other places or at-large

### **PURPOSE**

- Visitations are to manifest the presbytery’s mission by helping elders, sessions and pastors grow and sustain relationships that might glorify God and accomplish the mission they are called to by the Holy Spirit in their ordination vows and in their call to the church.
- Visitations are not intended to be a check up to evaluate whether a session and/or pastor is doing things *right*.
- Hoped for outcomes:
  - ◆ Mutual encouragement in mission.
  - ◆ Sessions and congregations gaining a greater awareness of resources and support available to them and NWCP gaining a greater awareness of the mission / ministry of a particular church.
  - ◆ Partnering in mission / ministry between churches when mutually beneficial.
  - ◆ A deepening sense of community between congregations in the presbytery.
  - ◆ Building good will.

### **I. CONDUCTING TRIENNIAL VISITS WITH SESSIONS AND PARISH MINISTERS**

- COM liaison makes initial contact and schedules the visit 2 – 6 months in advance.
- Visit shall be conducted in 2 person teams - one minister and one elder.
- Confirmation of scheduling and purpose, 1-4 weeks in advance of visit.
- Arrange a visit with parish pastor, including the spouse if married, at a convenient time.
- For multiple staff congregations, arrange separate visits with each pastor and associate pastor. If possible, arrange a special meeting with only the pastor and associate pastor (s) present to discuss the staff relationships.

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## *Pre-Visitation Briefing*

- ◆ COM visitation can be beneficial when communication is strengthened, mission is encouraged, resources shared and mutual planning facilitated. However, the visitations can become counterproductive if a session views them as a waste of time and COM imposing on a session. Which outcome is experienced depends on the visitation team's preparation for the meeting, conduct during the meeting and follow-up after the meeting.
- ◆ 1 day – 2 weeks before visitation communicate with visitation team for briefing and resources to bring.

## *Pre-Visitation Preparation - "Know thy Audience"*

- ◆ Any given session will fit one of the following categories:
  - ✓ Excited about the ministry they are engaged in and are looking forward to sharing this information.
  - ✓ Enthusiastic about their church's ministry and looking forward to discovering some new ways of doing ministry.
  - ✓ Concerned about the ministry of their church and are not sure if they are measuring up.
  - ✓ Secretive. They may be aware of conflict within the congregation and do not want to "expose their dirty laundry."
  - ✓ Suspicious of NWCP because of benign ignorance, a past experience, negative stereotypes, or another reason. They may wonder what COM's agenda *really* is.
- ◆ If you do not know which of the above category describes the session you are about to visit – enter the visitation erring on the side of assuming they are suspicious of the COM visitation and wondering what your agenda is. Learn all you can about the congregation prior to the visit and make an informed judgment about their predisposition toward the visitation. This information can guide how you enter the meeting both verbally and nonverbally.

## *Pre-Visitation "Listening" Tools*

- ◆ Read all you can about the congregation: annual report, recent worship bulletins, web page, newsletter, statistical report, etc. Identify some strengths that the congregation does well and takes pride in doing.
- ◆ Discuss in detail with the pastor / moderator what your purpose is. Clarity of the purpose for the visitation is essential.
- ◆ "Appreciative Inquiry" is an important approach to use during the preparation phase and visitation. [See overview of "Appreciative Inquiry" at end of this primer.]
- ◆ Carefully and clearly communicate the purpose of the visitation to the session.
- ◆ Meet with COM chair and Executive Presbyter to pick up most recent and relevant information that may be helpful for your visit.
- ◆ In consultation with your visitation partner, identify areas where you believe some support and help may be useful. Discuss these with the pastor and offer suggestions for support and help. If the pastor values the ideas, suggest that he/she raise these during the visitation. Do not raise them unilaterally as a visitation team.

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## *Visitation Meeting Plan*

- ◆ Arrive in time for informal conversations and introduction. Be available ahead of their proposed agenda time. When they are ready for you, be present and ready for them.
- ◆ The Visitation is with the session, including the moderator / pastor. [If a pastor desires to be excused during the visitation questions, he/she may do so but it is not recommended.]
- ◆ Open by reiterating the purpose of the visitation clearly and carefully. Confirm mutual understanding of the visit. During the visitation reiterate what the purpose is (and isn't).
- ◆ Tell the Session four questions will be asked that will take 20 – 30 minutes:
  - 1) What is God doing through your congregation today?
  - 2) What gifts do you bring to follow this call?
  - 3) What do you need to follow this call that you might not have right now?
  - 4) What do you want your fellow congregations / sessions in NWCP to know about your ministry that they might not be aware of?
- ◆ Proceed by asking the questions from an “Appreciative Inquiry” perspective. This will assist the session sharing their excitement about their church and their concerns.
- ◆ If adequate time remains, inquire about the “The great ends of the church are...
  - 1) the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
  - 2) the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
  - 3) the maintenance of diving worship;
  - 4) the preservation of the truth;
  - 5) the promotion of social righteousness;
  - 6) and, the exhibition of the Kingdom of heaven to the world.”

*Does your session and congregation have a growing edge related to one of these? Is there something you feel called to do that you haven't yet done? Are there any of these that can be better accomplished by working with other sessions in our presbytery?*
- ◆ Seek to listen first, speak infrequently and only to prompt their responses. Remember you are not there to “be heard.” You are there “to listen.”
- ◆ Take notes to show you are listening carefully and demonstrate to the session you heard them in the post-visitation communication.
- ◆ Toward the end of the visitation, you can provide the session with any useful resources identified in the pre-visitation phase.
- ◆ Explain the follow-up; you will be writing a report for COM (two weeks maximum) and sending copies to the pastor and session.
- ◆ Close in prayer.

## *Some “Don'ts” During COM Visitation*

- ◆ Do not suggest you are there to tell them how to solve their problems.
- ◆ Do not suggest your own church has the best answer to the problem.
- ◆ Do not suggest the problem is the result of a lack on their part.
- ◆ Do not indicate you suspect there is a problem unstated or that there is a problem between the session and pastor. If you suspect this may be the case, refer the

matter to the COM chair and/or the Executive Presbyter so the matter can be explored without tainting the visitation.

- ◆ Do not ever change the agenda as you stated it in your conversation with the pastor.

*Post Visitation Follow-up*

- ◆ Meet with / call your visitation partner to compare / consolidate your notes and impressions.
- ◆ Send a thank you note to the session and pastor
- ◆ Write COM report sending copies to the pastor and session.
- ◆ Identify relevant follow-up steps in consultation with COM chair / Presbytery staff.
- ◆ Ensure follow-up steps are executed.

**“Concepts of Appreciative Inquiry”**

**Problem Solving Focus**

Felt Need  
 Identification of problems  
 Analysis of Causes  
 Analysis of Possible Solutions  
 Action Planning

**Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciating What Is  
 Valuing What Is  
 Envisioning What Might Be  
 Dialoguing What Should Be  
 Innovating What Should Be

“Problem Solving” is based on the assumption that “reality” is a set of problems to be solved: “Appreciative Inquiry” is based on the assumption that “reality” is a miracle to be embraced and enhanced. [Adapted from Barrett, F.J. & Cooperrider, D.L. (1990) Generative metaphor intervention: A new approach for working with systems divided by conflict and caught in defensive perception. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 26, No. 2. pp. 219-239.]

**II. VISITATIONS WITH MINISTERS SERVING IN OTHER PLACES OR AT-LARGE**

- Contact the Executive Presbyter / Presbytery staff before a visitation to receive background information.
- Arrange meeting at a convenient time / place for the minister.
- Visits should be at least annually
- Possible Questions:
  - ◆ How do you or would like to actively participate in NWCP?
  - ◆ Are there ways you would like NWCP to be engaged with your ministry?
  - ◆ Depending upon the non-parish pastor’s situation, other questions may be appropriate and necessary.

## **Summary Form of Session & Pastor Visitation**

Send Report to: Executive Presbyter, Stated Clerk, COM moderator who will share with COM.

Date of Visitation:

Session / Congregation Visited:

COM Visitation Team members:

Number on Session:

Number Present:

Observations of Visitation Team:

What the session / pastor values about their ministry and mission:

Does the session / pastor identify any needs to better follow their call?

What does the session want other NWCP congregations / sessions to know about them?

Did the session / pastor identify any collaborative efforts with other NWCP congregations?