



EQUIPPING FOR... LEADERSHIP

Presbytery Visitations to Congregations – Living out a covenantal relationship

Produced by Canadian Ministries

“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

(1Thessalonians 1:2-3 in a letter from Paul to the church of the Thessalonians)

We are not alone in our congregational ministries. Our work is supported, prayed for and overseen by the presbytery. But how often do we think about the relationship between congregations and presbyteries? And how often do we think about the relationship in terms of a covenant? If we are not aware of – or do not understand the meaning of – the covenantal relationship between a congregation and its presbytery, how then can these two groups within the same church faithfully live out their covenant with each other?

This issue of *Equipping for Leadership* draws on the resource book *Called to Covenant* and the work of Peter Coutts, General Presbyter of Calgary Macleod Presbytery. It explores

- the nature of the congregation-presbytery covenantal relationship
- the nature of presbytery visitations to congregations

A list – and the web links – for specific resources for presbytery visitation to congregations can be found on page four.

What does it mean to covenant with one another?

Read

Jeremiah 31:31, 33; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 8:10

Discuss

1. What does the word “covenant” mean to you?
2. What does it mean for us to say that our congregation is “part of a covenant community”?
3. What do these ideas mean for you personally – for your behavior and relationships? How do you think people in a congregation might act if they are living out a covenant relationship with each other? With their presbytery?

Pray

Loving God, root and ground us in your love. Open our minds and senses to the breadth, length, height and depth of your love working among and through us. Guide us to join together, to grow together as church, to fill our lives and our world with your presence. Amen. (Based on Ephesians 3:14-21)

Covenant

The biblical term “covenant” refers to “a solemn promise established by God, in which we receive God’s blessing and seek to love and serve God with all of our lives” (*Gifts of God: The Sacraments Study Guide*). Dictionaries define the word covenant as an agreement or contract or promise, between two parties, voluntary, and reciprocal. The word “covenant” appears throughout the Bible – the first time in Genesis 6:18 in the story of Noah and the last in Revelations 11:19. Douglas Spanner, in *Biblical Creation and the Theory of Evolution*, writes, “The Bible as a whole is fundamentally about relationships. The very names Old ‘Covenant’ and New ‘Covenant’ should make this clear.”

Called to covenant

God calls us to be one body in Christ. The emphasis on relationships is evident in the New Testament. Throughout his ministry, Jesus sought to create a community of followers. Paul’s letters frequently addressed the behavior of members of the early churches, particularly with directives about relating to “one another”:

- “live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:16)
- “pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:19)
- “bear one another’s burdens” (Galations 6:2)
- “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- “look to the interests of others” (Philippines 2:4)
- “teach and admonish one another” (Colossians 3:16)
- “pray for one another” (James 5:16)

Litany *(Living Faith 7.1.1 and 7.1.2)*

One: God’s Church is Christ

All: Together with his people

One: Called both to worship and to serve him

All: In all of life.

One: God’s Church is one.

All: It is one family under God

One: Whose purpose it is

All: To unite all people in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Presbytery-Congregation Relationship

“The church is described as Christ’s body. Within it, we are as intimately connected and dependent on one another as the members of one body. We are instructed to look not only to our own interest but also to the interest of others, having the mind of Christ and practicing his self-giving love.” *Called to Covenant*, pp. 8-9

“Relationships of responsibility and accountability mean that we are not alone when we face challenges. Within a presbytery, for instance, a congregation may be able to draw on the resources of others. The sharing of our human, material and monetary resources provides the context for genuine community to develop, even as it allows us to accomplish more than we could on our own.” *Called to Covenant*, p. 11

Responding faithfully to being called to covenant means developing relationships characterized by respect and Christian love. It means taking the time to know one another. It means acting out of pastoral concern and seeking to help the church fulfill its mission by encouraging people to offer their gifts in Christ’s ministry.

Visitations have been called “the cornerstone” of the covenantal relationship between a congregation and the presbytery. How is the covenant relationship between your congregation and presbytery lived out through visitation?

Intentional Visitations to Congregations

The goals of a presbytery visitation with a congregation might include:

- Shared learning about congregational life
- Opportunities to affirm, encourage, and/or foster hope
- Reflection on becoming more future/mission minded
- Learnings about how to care for, support, and/or coach the minister(s)
- Discovery of how presbytery can care
- Reduce isolation of congregation and the presbytery from each other

- Intervention to address a concern before it becomes a crisis
- Strengthening relationship between congregation and presbytery
- Allowing presbytery to focus on offering help, support
- Generating insights about strategic initiatives for congregation and/or presbytery

“Within the Presbyterian system the immediate care and pastoral oversight of both ministers and congregations is the responsibility of the Presbytery. One of the tools that Barrie Presbytery uses to fulfill this responsibility is a congregational visitation. It is the deep desire of the Presbytery to express joy, care, and concern as required, through the visitation process. Congregations and presbyters are encouraged to embrace this process as one that seeks to affirm and strengthen the faithful ministry of local communities within the Presbytery.” From *Barrie Presbytery Congregational Visitation Standards*

Presbytery visitations to congregations are mandated. The Book of Forms (199.1 and 199.2) says

The presbytery should visit the congregations under its care; call the session and the office-bearers before it; inquire into the state of the congregation and its affairs generally and deal with all parties as may be deemed for edification.

There is no law as to the manner of conducting a visitation. The presbytery must use its discretion in the inquiry, determine its own mode of procedure, and frame its own questions.

The visiting team

Selection and training of the team leader and members are critical for ensuring that the visitation experience benefits both the congregation and presbytery. Here are some tips:

- Team members do not have to be elders.
- Hand pick them for this role.
- Provide training about relationships, roles and responsibilities in the church. See *Equipping Elders, Board of Managers Handbook* and the article “Listening skills” that follows on this page.

- Provide mentoring.
- Let presbytery visitation be like a separate committee i.e. visiting team members are not members of other presbytery committees.
- Consider giving an honorarium to those who lead visitations.
- Take the time to outline a detailed, reproducible process. (See Visitation Resources on page 4.)
- Build into the process follow-up actions and accountability to the congregation.
- Provide continuity from one visit to the next e.g., provide the visiting team with the team’s report, have the same team members.

The team gathers information by questionnaires (that are mailed out or made available online e.g. survey monkey), reading congregational reports, interviews/meetings with individuals, group meetings, and observation.

Listening skills

Listening skills are important for visitation team members. Consider these tips.

1. Remember your role is to hear what is going on, to reflect with people on what they need from presbytery and on how they are related to the larger church. You are not there to solve problems.
2. Keep your own talk to a minimum. You can’t talk and listen at the same time.
3. Give the person/people your full attention. Leave behind your own issues, comparisons with your congregation, your feelings about presbytery.
4. When someone is talking, focus on that person. When she or he has finished and if it is appropriate, ask how others react to what has been said. Notice if there is a general feeling of agreement on a point.
5. Acknowledge what you are hearing: nod; say, “I see” now and then; ask questions for clarification if you do not understand what was said.
6. Listen for feelings, and the attitudes and perceptions they suggest. What feeling words are used? What tones of voice? How much agreement is there in the group? For example,
 - When the session shares the celebrations and good things, do they have a lot to say, does one

person do the talking, do many share accomplishments of their church, does there seem to be agreement?

- When the session shares problems, are elders clear in description of problem areas or vague, is there consensus?
 - When you ask about help needed from presbytery, what is the response? Do you sense that this session sees presbytery as a resource for them? Do they know whom to ask for help? Do they know what help they need?
 - Do they see their church as a resource for the presbytery? Where are their mission dollars going and why? Are pastors and elders serving on committees of presbytery or the national church? Do they participate in presbytery events and relevant conferences?
7. Look for non-verbal messages that people are giving. For example: Do people look at you when you are speaking? Look at other speakers? Do people lean forward, seeming to participate actively or sit back looking disinterested? Who do people look at for agreement with what they are saying? When the pastor or moderator speaks, are there nods of agreement? Is there response in agreement or disagreement or no response to moderator's statements? Non-verbal messages can give you ideas for follow-up questions to ask; they can help clarify your own understanding of what's happening in this session.
8. Reflect with people on alternatives for dealing with the needs and issues raised. Ask, "What can you do about this need?" Suggest resources. Tell them that you will note the need or issue in your report so that someone from presbytery can follow up.

From "Listening Skills: A List for Session Visitors" available at <http://oga.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/midcouncilresources/listenskillspbygreateratl.pdf>

Visitation Resources

- Book of Forms (Suggested questions for visitations can be found in Appendix A)
<http://presbyterian.ca/gao/>
- Called to Covenant: Strengthening Congregation-Presbytery Relationships*
- Called to Covenant Resource Book*
presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/
- Equipping Elders* presbyterian.ca/elders/
- Board of Managers Handbook* presbyterian.ca/elders/
- From Presbytery of Calgary Macleod
- Cover letter to congregation
presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/
 - Congregational visitation checklist
presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/
 - Visitation questionnaires
presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/
 - Process for the visitation team
presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/
- Presbytery of Barrie
- Congregational Visitation Standard
<http://pccweb.ca/barrie/files/2013/11/Visitation-Standards.pdf>

The Last Word

- Make presbytery-congregation visitation a mutually valued, welcomed part of the relationship.
- Involve in the presbytery team and process people who are informed, committed and skilled.
- Develop a standardized process or template – well thought-out, detailed, and complete.

Canadian Ministries wants to hear from YOU!

What parts of this resource are most useful? Share your story of a presbytery-congregation partnership. Recommend a resource! Make a suggestion or ask a question!

Contact us at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 416-441-1111 or 1-800-619-7301 Ext. 271. Find us on Facebook.