



GUIDELINES FOR A NON-DISCIPLINARY REVIEW OF MINISTRY

The Presbyterian Church in Canada
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Guidelines for a Non-Disciplinary Review of Ministry

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All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Corinthians 5:18–19)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Matthew 5:9)

INTRODUCTION & KEY PRINCIPLES

This resource is offered to assist presbyteries when it becomes a pastoral necessity to conduct a review of ministry in response to a non-disciplinary complaint against a minister (Book of Forms 324–44, especially 336–40). “The purpose of the review of ministry is to provide the opportunity for changes or actions to take place within the ministry that will help to rectify or improve the pastoral relationship or to determine fairly that the pastoral relationship is no longer viable” (Book of Forms 337). The primary intent of any presbytery intervention is pastoral.

As a Christian community of faith, we are called to Christ’s ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–19, Mathew 5:9). We give evidence to this calling by modelling healthy relationships, holding one another accountable in love, exercising power and authority responsibly, practicing good conflict resolution skills and engaging in respectful dialogue.

Presbyteries demonstrate a commitment to love and justice in all their relationships as they provide ongoing pastoral care to ministers and congregations under their care.

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

While it is true that ministers in our polity are accountable only to the presbytery for their conduct (Book of Forms 127–27.3 and 143), this should not prevent the minister and session from engaging in discussions about the ministry of the congregation or even questions of leadership.

Most congregations, ministers and presbyteries have ample opportunity to recognize issues well before they reach a crisis level. When difficulties arise, they can usually be traced to poor communication, lack of attention to the warning signals, ignorance of good conflict resolution techniques and sometimes the misguided assumption that, given time, the problem will go away. It is vital that every effort is made to keep small matters from turning into entrenched disagreement.

It is best if any issues are managed early before they get worse and become major problems necessitating remedial action by the presbytery. Below are some strategies for ministers and sessions to consider:

Ministerial Communication and Consultation

Ministers have a responsibility to keep lines of communication open within the session and within the congregation. Also, many ministers have trusted advisors outside of the congregation with whom they can consult and discuss, in confidence, their own concerns or concerns that have surfaced within the congregation.

Regular Check-in at Session Meetings

Include as an agenda item a time to raise any concerns for discussion. Foster an environment within the session which encourages elders to provide constructive feedback and raise issues openly and honestly in an atmosphere of non-reactive dialogue and respectful listening.

Institute an “Open Door” Policy for the Session

Communicate clearly to the congregation that the minister and session are approachable and welcome their concerns. Develop a process where concerns can be raised appropriately through clear channels of communication. Insist that individuals take responsibility by attaching their names to any concerns; anonymous complaints will not be received. Note that some concerns may be beyond the scope of the session’s authority (for instance, decisions or actions taken by higher courts).

Establish Annual Goal Planning and Evaluation by the Session

Based on:

- The ministry needs as set out in the congregational profile and the pastoral skills listed in the minister’s profile at the time of the call, recognizing that priorities can change over time.
- A yearly setting of goals, either at the beginning of the calendar year or at the beginning of the unofficial church year when fall activities start up after summer break.

Process:

- Set goals by asking, in prayerful discernment, “What does God want us to achieve this year?” Make the goals clear according to the SMART principle: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-based.
- Review and evaluate goals by asking, “How well did we do? What did we learn? What could we have done better?” Frame the conversation as one in which the session, as a leadership team working together, assumes responsibility and where the minister and the elders are accountable to one another for the overall mission and ministry of the congregation. Focus on constructive feedback. Avoid assigning blame or scapegoating.

These strategies can be effective where ministers, elders and congregational members are committed to the overall health of the church and can communicate with each other lovingly and honestly, having the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:1-8).

PRESBYTERY OVERSIGHT

- To fulfill their responsibility for the care and good order of the congregations within their bounds (Book of Forms 200), presbyteries often assign the role of liaison with congregations to the appropriate presbytery committee (e.g., Presbytery Pastoral Relations, Congregational Care or Ministry Committee). The goal is to enable timely communication and intervention so that problems are recognized and addressed at an early stage before they reach crisis proportions. The better prepared the court is to deal with such matters, the better the chance of the issue being resolved in the spirit of Book of Forms 325, for example, “by friendly conference”.
- Presbyteries are encouraged to assemble helpful resources in advance of any crisis and have a committee or individuals who are well versed in the church’s policies and procedures. Presbyteries are also encouraged to identify and orient a small presbytery resource team to be ready for situations requiring the presbytery’s intervention in matters involving ministers and congregations.

When conflict situations emerge, often they do not allow much lead time for the presbytery to prepare to handle them. As a result, sometimes these situations are handled by well-meaning individuals with inadequate training or knowledge of guidelines or techniques.

While the Book of Forms makes it clear (section 315) that the church should not be “interfering with matters which are purely civil”, church courts must exercise wisdom and judgment when issues are raised. So-called civil matters (for example, a neighbour who is also a congregation member complains about the minister’s dog barking loudly), when left unattended, can grow to be the subject of conflict and potentially result in the dissolution of a pastoral tie.

REGULAR PRESBYTERY VISITATIONS

“The call to a minister of a congregation forms the basis of a covenantal relationship between the minister, congregation and presbytery. Regular presbytery visitations should, among other things, seek to ascertain and nurture the health and good order of this relationship.” (Book of Forms 328)

“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.” (Book of Forms 199.1)

“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.” (Book of Forms 199.2)

Regular presbytery visitations can identify issues in sessions and congregations early and recommend remedial action to resolve conflicts before they become damaging to the health of the pastoral relationship between minister and congregation.

Many presbyteries’ standing orders stipulate that each congregation will receive a regular presbytery visitation every two or three years. The presbytery should set a rotational cycle indicating when congregations will be visited. The document *Called to Covenant: Strengthening Presbytery-Congregation Relationships* (vol. 1, p. 19–21) and its companion *Resources* (vol. 2, p. 6–17 and 24–30) can help presbyteries with this important oversight responsibility. These resources suggest questions for presbytery visitation teams that provide a good starting point for discussions that can expose tensions between a congregation and a minister. Visitation teams should feel free to ask follow-up questions that give parties every opportunity to raise their concerns. When problems are identified, secure agreement from those involved on a way to proceed and provide adequate follow-up to monitor progress. Be available to visit as regularly as necessary, providing assistance with repeated attempts to renegotiate expectations and solve problems. Be sure that the presbytery’s interventions are carried out in a manner that is fair, orderly and caring to all involved.

REVIEW OF MINISTRY

It must be remembered that a review of ministry takes place as part of a larger process involving a non-disciplinary complaint against a minister. The presbytery must take care to ensure all steps in the Book of Forms 328–34 have been followed before commencing a review of ministry.

When significant conflict arises between a minister and a congregation, and a presbytery, upon receiving the report of the committee appointed to investigate a non-disciplinary complaint against a minister (Book of

Forms 335), recommends a non-disciplinary review of ministry, the presbytery “shall notify the minister and session of this action and prepare clear terms of review” (Book of Forms 336). The terms could include the following:

- In accordance with Book of Forms 335 (c), the [PRESBYTERY NAME] appointed a committee consisting of [MEMBERS’ NAMES] to conduct a non-disciplinary review of ministry at [NAME OF PASTORAL CHARGE], as provided for in sections 336–38 of the Book of Forms.
- The review committee will use the findings of the investigation committee as a basis for identifying issues and suggesting plans for resolving them.
- The review committee will meet with the minister (who may choose to bring one person as an advisor), elders on session and any other parties it considers necessary, to further identify and clarify issues and suggest plans for resolving them.
- The review process will follow the principles of natural justice and procedural fairness (impartiality in decision making, opportunity for parties to be heard, reasons given for findings).
- The review must be at least four months’ duration (Book of Forms 338) to provide sufficient opportunity for all parties to engage in the review process in good faith and come to a resolution.

The review will lead to one of three recommendations to presbytery:

1. That the pastoral relationship is affirmed.
2. That a limited extension of the review is warranted under the same or revised terms of review.
3. That the pastoral relationship is deemed not viable.

During the review, issues will be acknowledged and dealt with honestly, fairly and prayerfully. Dealing with conflict will necessitate careful efforts to identify and address the root problems and not merely to focus on the symptoms. Strenuous and sincere efforts will be made to effect reconciliation by facilitating honest and caring communication between all parties and rigorous avoidance of rumour and innuendo. Whenever possible, the desired outcome is the rebuilding of the pastoral relationship so that ministry can carry on under the terms of the call or appointment.

The review committee’s report could follow this suggested structure:

- **Preamble:** an introductory paragraph outlining the committee’s membership and terms of review.
- **Introduction:** a brief statement of the investigation team’s findings.
- **Process:** a description of the steps followed during the review (for instance, who the committee met with and when).
- **Findings and Recommendations:** the particulars of the plans to resolve issues or the recommendation to dissolve the pastoral tie, with reasons.

Where the review committee determines that the pastoral relationship is affirmed, it may make additional recommendations to address particular issues to strengthen the pastoral relationship (for instance, conflict management training for the session or regular meetings with a mentor or advisor for the minister).

Where the review committee determines that the pastoral relationship is not viable, it may make additional recommendations to address any serious underlying matters that contributed to the breakdown of the pastoral relationship. It may, for example, recommend counselling for the minister or a period of intentional interim ministry for the congregation. The presbytery, if it approves the review committee’s recommendations,

may also take additional steps. For instance, the presbytery may withhold permission from the minister to accept another call until they have completed any assigned conditions or to permit the minister to accept a call only with the stipulation that the calling presbytery agree to oversee the completion of any assigned conditions.

The review committee will normally present its report at a regular meeting of presbytery, though the presbytery may choose to hold a special meeting to receive the committee's report and recommendations. The review committee will notify both the minister and the clerk of session in advance of the report's recommendations. This could be done verbally, though the committee may choose to meet separately with the minister and the clerk of session to permit them to read (but not keep) a copy of the report. This would provide an opportunity for the committee to receive corrections on matters of fact in the report. It will also ensure no one is taken by surprise when the report is presented to the presbytery.

Because of its sensitive nature, the presbytery may elect to sit with closed doors when considering the review committee's report and its recommendations (Book of Forms 10 and 10.1). Normally the decisions taken by the presbytery with closed doors will be included in the public minutes.

The sole copy of the review committee's final report will be kept by the presbytery clerk. The presbytery minutes will contain a brief summary of the review committee's work and its recommendations. The minister and clerk of session will be provided with this summary and such other information as the presbytery considers necessary.

If the presbytery accepts the review committee's assessment that the pastoral tie is not viable, it should hold a separate special meeting to consider a recommendation to dissolve the pastoral tie. The minister and congregation will be cited to appear (Book of Forms 340). If the presbytery dissolves the pastoral tie, the next steps would be to follow the Policy for the Dissolution of Pastoral Ties.

PASTORAL CARE

The presbytery needs to make arrangements for pastoral care of the minister and the minister's family whenever a pastoral tie is being reviewed. It is important that the minister and the minister's family do not become isolated or forgotten during the review and decision making or at any time in the future while the minister remains under the care of the presbytery. The presbytery should designate a specific individual (or individuals) to contact the minister and the minister's family regularly and to offer appropriate pastoral care. In cases when the presbytery withholds the minister's presbyterial certificate until conditions set by the presbytery are met, the presbytery has some responsibility to help the minister fulfill the requirements. When courses, counselling or career assessment are assigned to the minister, the presbytery should agree to pay for or share the cost with the minister.

The presbytery needs to make arrangements for pastoral care of the congregation throughout the period when a pastoral tie is being reviewed and after decisions are made and implemented. Congregations may experience the review of ministry period as stressful and disturbing and presbyteries must recognize and respond to the special needs for pastoral care that can arise in congregations.



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