



The Presbytery of
DONEGAL

Guidelines to Develop a Covenant for Connected Relationships and Healthy Boundaries

Between Member-at-Large Teaching Elders, Validated Ministers, and Retired Teaching Elders and Congregations of the Presbytery of Donegal

Whenever a Teaching Elder who is not the pastor of the congregation is connected to a congregation, God is in the mix. God's purposes are for shalom – for wholeness, for health, for good boundaries, and for hope and health for the future.

There are three groups of Presbyterian Ministers of Word & Sacrament/Teaching Elders who are likely to be related to congregations for which they are not the pastor. These include Members-at-Large, those in Validated Ministries, and Retired members of the presbytery.

In this document, the term Teaching Elder is used to describe someone ordained in the PC(USA) as a Teaching Elder/Minister of Word and Sacrament. (Both titles are now used interchangeably.) Member-at-Large is abbreviated as MaL, in a Validated Ministry is VM, and Retired is R.

The Connecting Our Ministry Commission encourages Teaching Elders to be connected to a congregation or worshipping community. With that life-giving affiliation, there is also the responsibility to consider healthy boundaries that benefit the congregation, the pastors serving the congregation, and the Teaching Elders connected to the congregation.

Sometimes a Teaching Elder who is a MaL, VM, or HR may have a formal relationship with a session for contracted service, either as a volunteer or on a compensated basis. That relationship is often called "Parish Associate;" other titles are acceptable. This contracted relationship must have a position description, must be adopted by the session, must be approved by the COM, and must be renewed annually.

Other times, a Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR may be connected to a congregation or worshipping community without a formal position, and yet with a leadership role in the congregation. Examples of this include occasionally assisting in worship, leading a Bible Study or other class, or helping with pastoral care.

Sometimes a Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR may simply attend worship and participate in the fellowship of a congregation without a leadership role.

In cases where the Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR does have a leadership role, the session and COM are partners in defining a Covenant of Expectations and Healthy Boundaries. The Presbytery of Donegal does not believe that a policy can cover every situation. A list of mandates quickly becomes top-down regulation imposed without regard for what would make for shalom. Therefore, every situation is addressed on a case-by-case basis.

This process will be followed when:

1. A session wishes to extend a formal role, such as “Parish Associate”, to a Teaching Elder who is not the pastor of the congregation. This will usually be a Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR.
2. A Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR becomes involved in a leadership role, even if there is not a formal title extended.
3. A new pastor begins service, and a Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR is already involved in a leadership role in the congregation, whether formal or informal.
4. COM receives a report of friction of any sort involving a Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR, which needs to be addressed.

The responsibility of all parties is to have the necessary conversations to adopt a covenant for connected relationships and healthy boundaries that honor God and one another. The goal is health and wholeness for all parties. The Connecting our Ministry Commission is the shepherd for transitions. COM guides the conversations, and is responsible to ensure a clear covenant is adopted. This covenant will be renewed whenever there is a pastoral transition.

Questions for conversation include: What is healthy for the congregation? What is healthy for the pastors now serving? What is healthy for the Teaching Elder who is connected to the congregation, either as a parish associate or as a Teaching Elder who attends the congregation?

There are a number of topics for conversation in order to develop the Covenant for Healthy Boundaries. COM will meet with the pastor or pastors of the congregation to talk about their perceptions. COM will then meet with the session or session representatives, to bring forward their perceptions. COM will meet with the Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR to talk about her or his perceptions. There will then be a meeting with the pastor, Teaching Elders connected to a congregation, and session representatives together to produce the covenant.

Topics for Conversation in Order to Develop The Covenant for Future Relationships and Boundaries

1. Process for accepting responsibilities in the congregation
2. Process for communication with the pastor/s and the session
3. Procedures for handling requests for pastoral services such as weddings and funerals
4. Social media agreements
5. Any arrangements for family members that should be discussed
6. Agreement to handle situations when someone in the congregation attempts to engage the Teaching Elder in a conversation about the pastor or other staff. Likewise, agreement about how the Teaching Elder will engage in conversations with members of the congregation about the pastor, staff, session, or issues in the congregation.
7. Agreement on how the pastor/s, staff, and session will describe the role of the Teaching Elder who is MaL, VM, or HR
8. Agreement for process to handle boundary issues that might arise

After the Covenant for Connected Relationship and Healthy Boundaries is adopted by the session, it should be signed by Teaching Elder, the pastor/s, the clerk of session, and a COM representative. Plans for communicating the provisions of covenant to the congregation should be developed.