

Learning Together

A Covenanting Resource for Supervised Ministry Education

The United Church of Canada



L'Église Unie du Canada



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Contents

1. The Learning Covenant	4
What Is a Covenant?.....	4
What Is Included in a Learning Covenant?	4
2. Participants in the Learning Covenant	5
The Supervisor and the Supervisee.....	5
The Lay Supervision Team and the Supervisee	6
3. Developing the Covenant: Goals, Action Plans, and Evaluation	7
Learning Goals (What?).....	7
Action Plans (How?).....	7
Evaluation (What Have I Learned?)	8
4. Resolving Conflicts.....	9
Stages in Dealing with Conflict.....	9
5. Celebrating the Covenant.....	11
Appendix A: Learning Covenant Format	12
Appendix B: Sample Learning Goals.....	13
Appendix C: Feedback	16
A Model for Non-violent Communication.....	18
Appendix D: Sample Covenanting Service	19

1. The Learning Covenant

What Is a Covenant?

The dictionary defines a **covenant** as a contract, a written agreement between participants. But in the biblical tradition it has a much richer and deeper meaning, building on the ancient promise that

“I will be your God, and you shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 7:23)

Covenant, in this sacred sense, refers to the binding together of people in mutual trust and loyalty with God and within the community of faith.

In supervised ministry education, the **learning covenant** is the agreement of all participants to pursue certain goals—a commitment to work, learn, and grow together. Covenant is rooted in faith. It assumes and encourages mutual respect, support, openness, and honesty. It anticipates difficulties and offers help in a constructive way. It is intended, primarily, to support learning and growth in ministry.

What Is Included in a Learning Covenant?

A typical learning covenant includes a signed statement (see the example in Appendix A) plus attachments. The total package might cover some of these points:

- supervisee’s learning goals, action plans, and methods of evaluation
- supervisor’s learning goals
- Lay Supervision Team’s learning goals
- aspects of ministry in which the supervisee will be involved
- educational assumptions (e.g., mutual respect, confidentiality)
- practical considerations (e.g., time commitments)
- agreed procedures for conflict resolution
- basis for revising or renegotiating the learning covenant
- rituals of covenanting and closure for the learning covenant
- signatures of all participants

2. Participants in the Learning Covenant

The Supervisor and the Supervisee

Identifying Learning Needs and Styles

At the beginning of the supervised ministry education, it is helpful to identify the learning needs and styles of both the supervisor and the supervisee. This may include discussing hopes, fears, and expectations. For instance, some like to plunge in, while others may wish to observe or to read some material before engaging in some tasks. Some supervisors like to have regular progress reports, whereas others leave primary learning responsibility to the supervisee.

Off-site supervisors may not be able to observe tasks and offer direct feedback. In those cases, it is helpful to discuss how the supervisee can seek feedback from people on the charge. It will be useful to identify ways the supervisee can report to the supervisor about overall work and specific incidents that arise each week.

Where a staff team exists, it is important to discuss working style, expectations, and responsibilities for the whole staff. Some areas of learning may involve working with a staff person other than the supervisor (e.g., chaplain at a local hospital or other ministry personnel). The nature of this relationship needs to be discussed—in particular, how a staff person who is not in a direct supervisory relationship may comment on the supervisee's work.

For both to deepen their learning, the supervisor and the supervisee must develop trust. You may want to reflect on ways to develop trust and how power dynamics work within the supervisory relationship. For instance, the supervisor has power to evaluate the supervisee, yet the supervisee carries personal power through the self-evaluation process. The supervisor may be in a familiar setting, yet the supervisee has power to speak from a different perspective. Or the supervisee is the pastor in a pastoral charge and the supervisor is seen as an outsider.

Not all issues can be discussed in the initial stages of forming a relationship, but it may be helpful to identify how each person works through difficult issues, whom each may talk to, and how resolution may occur. If other staff members are involved, they may also need to discuss how to resolve conflicts.

Scheduling Time Together

During the supervised ministry education, at least one hour per week should be set aside for intentional supervision. This is an opportunity for the supervisee to reflect on and discuss the progress of the learning goals. Initially, the supervisee will spend time writing the goals down clearly and concretely, with input from the supervisor and the Lay Supervision Team.

Once goals are in place, the supervisee can use the supervision time to reflect on how incidents that arise relate to the stated learning goals. It may be helpful for the supervisee to write a critical incident report or a theological reflection to give to the supervisor before the supervision time. This will help each person prepare for that time and contribute to deeper reflection.

Supervision time must not be used to do regular weekly planning or church business in general. That kind of work needs its own time set apart from supervision, such as at the weekly staff meeting. If church business arises during a supervision meeting, arrange another meeting to deal with it.

The Lay Supervision Team and the Supervisee

The primary role of the Lay Supervision Team is to offer support, give feedback, and share in theological reflection with a supervisee. Although an internship involves three-way conversation among the supervisee, supervisor, and Lay Supervision Team, the principal relationship for the Lay Supervision Team is with the supervisee.

Through planned times for conversation, prayer, and reflection, the team and the supervisee learn together and enrich their lives spiritually, personally, socially, and in other ways. This is a learning partnership. To give the supervisee a realistic experience of congregational ministry, the Lay Supervision Team must be actively involved in the partnership.

As co-learners with the supervisee and supervisor, Lay Supervision Team members are asked to decide what they want to learn during this process. Learning possibilities may emerge during personal or group reflection or when the supervisee and Lay Supervision Team have an open discussion about hopes, fears, and expectations. Lay Supervision Team members formalize their specific learning hopes on a Learning Goal sheet similar to the ones in Appendix B.

Remember: We do not learn from experience; we learn by reflecting on experience. The learning covenant enables all participants to reflect both during and after an experience.

For more information, see *Lay Supervision: A Guide* (SME 222).

3. Developing the Covenant: Goals, Action Plans, and Evaluation

Learning Goals (What?)

- Learning goals identify what you want to learn and why.
- Learning goals should be as specific as possible.
- Learning goals may be related to at least four areas of ministry:
 - worship, sacraments, and preaching
 - pastoral care
 - education
 - social/outreach ministry
- Learning goals are usually stated with an awareness of where you are beginning and how far along you hope to be by the end of the process. You might use phrases such as “begin to,” “increase my skill in,” or “develop more understanding of.” Learning in ministry is lifelong; this learning covenant is one phase of that learning.
- Begin by assessing your current strengths and weaknesses. What strengths need further development?
 - What areas are challenging for you and do you need experience in?
 - Identify things about yourself personally, such as your sense of self, your relationships with others, and your spirituality. What areas do you need to develop?
 - What theological questions do you have—i.e., how do you understand and apply your understanding of the Bible, theology, justice, and so on?
 - What skills for ministry do you need to obtain—i.e., theological reflection (exploring where God is for you in the midst of ministry), leading groups, communicating as an effective listener and speaker, etc.?
 - What skills do you need to learn to nurture your relationship with God and the community?
- The supervisee, Lay Supervision Team, and supervisor may have some goals in common. All of these participants may also have individual learning goals. These goals should relate to the realities of the learning site, including tasks and responsibilities outlined in the pastoral charge’s application to be approved as a supervised ministry education site or in a position description, as well as those discovered during the supervision time together. It is important to be realistic about what each participant can expect from the experience.

Action Plans (How?)

- How will you work on your goals? How will you know that you have accomplished them?
- Action plans are specific to each learning goal; they refer to how learning goals will be achieved.
- Be as concrete as you can.

- Action plans need to be defined in the learning covenant. They are worked out in consultation with others, as appropriate; and discussed as part of supervision, with feedback shared.
- Action plans include an agreement on how much work/time is appropriate to spend on tasks, how tasks are assigned/accepted, to whom the supervisee is accountable for the various tasks, and what resources are available (for example: people, materials, and space).
- Action plans may be accomplished by using
 - case studies
 - written verbatims (reports of conversations or visits)
 - a journal of reflections
 - a theological reflection
 - evaluation questionnaires
 - reflections on specific tasks, such as visiting patients in hospital or leading Bible study

Evaluation (What Have I Learned?)

- Evaluation should be ongoing in any accountable learning process, and this learning covenant is no exception.
- Evaluation usually works best when it takes place at agreed times and in previously agreed ways.
- It involves growth in understanding and competence in a spirit of trust, openness, honesty, and mutual respect.
- The emphasis is on what the participants have learned together, taking into account all the discussions that have happened over the duration of the period of supervised learning.
- The process includes self-assessment, feedback, critical reflection, and future planning. (See Appendix C for suggestions on feedback.)
- The learning covenant includes a description of how the evaluation process will take place with all participants in the covenant.
- The standard evaluation form, SME 225: Internship Evaluation, is available on the United Church website.
- All participants in the learning covenant must have their own copy of the form so they can prepare for evaluation at the mid-point and end-point of the learning covenant or at other specified times.

4. Resolving Conflicts

As in all human relationships, tensions or disagreements may arise. It is hoped that these are dealt with face to face and resolved as soon as possible. However, sometimes difficulties arise that two people cannot work out themselves. In these cases, sometimes a third party is asked to assist in the process.

The learning covenant should spell out any process for resolving grievances and differences that cannot be resolved by those involved. A grievance or conflict procedure is like a spare tire on a car—you hope you will never have to use it, but you are glad to have it when you need it. The supervisee, supervisor, and Lay Supervision Team should discuss the procedures to follow should a conflict arise and at what point the third party, as named in the covenant, will be called upon.

The United Church of Canada has guidelines to follow in cases of sexual harassment. These guidelines are available from the Conference office. Each Conference has a committee that deals with cases of sexual harassment, and this committee is available to individuals through the Conference office. See *The Manual*, section 073.

The Conference Personnel Minister and the Convenor of the Conference Committee on Internship and Educational Supervision are available to discuss any concerns or problems.

Stages in Dealing with Conflict

Stage 1: The supervisee, supervisor, and Lay Supervision Team meet to try to resolve the issues. Depending on the nature of the conflict, the issues discussed in the meeting and a plan of action to resolve the issues are put in writing and given to all three parties.

Stage 2: If the issues are not resolved as a result of the first meeting and follow-up, a second meeting is called and the consultant or committee member named by the Conference Committee on Internship and Educational Supervision or the third-party consultant named in the learning covenant is invited to attend.

Note: This meeting may be called by any one of the three parties to the learning covenant. The Conference Personnel Minister should be informed that this meeting is taking place.

Stage 3: If the issues are not resolved as a result of the second meeting, a third meeting is called by the consultant, with a representative of the Conference Committee on Internship and Educational Supervision present. This representative needs to be clear about his/her mandate from the CIES. The Conference Personnel Minister and the home Presbytery/District Education and Students Committee should be informed that this meeting is taking place.

There are times when the difficulties encountered in the supervised ministry education experience lead to a decision to dissolve the learning covenant and end the education experience. The following outlines the steps to be followed:

- Stage 4:** The representative from the Conference Committee on Internship and Educational Supervision reports her/his findings and any recommendations to the CIES, which makes a decision about continuing or terminating the internship in consultation with the Conference Personnel Minister and the Program Coordinator, Leadership and Ministry Vocations at the General Council Office. This decision is communicated to the home Presbytery/District Education and Students Committee.
- Stage 5:** The Conference Committee on Internship and Educational Supervision determines the end date of the internship and any other administrative details or conditions. The three parties to the learning covenant and the Conference consultant each write a report based on the experiences to date and the standard evaluation form. These are sent to Ministry Vocations in the General Council Office and to the supervisee's home Presbytery/District Education and Students Committee.
- Follow-up:** The Conference Personnel Minister ensures that pastoral care is available to the supervisee, supervisor, Lay Supervision Team, site, and Conference Committee on Internship and Educational Supervision during this period of conflict and resolution. The supervisee may contact his/her home Presbytery/District Education and Students Committee at any time for support and pastoral care. The supervisee, as a candidate for ministry, is eligible for the United Church's Employee Assistance Program.

5. Celebrating the Covenant

Rituals are important in the learning process. Through appropriate liturgies, participants identify and celebrate the various stages of the covenant. A liturgy at the beginning of the learning covenant can help to clarify terms of the covenant and confirm the commitment of all participants. It is also a way of involving members of the pastoral charge. See Appendix C for a sample.

An ending liturgy offers a way to celebrate the learning experience and acknowledge closure.

Your rituals can be created especially for the occasion or they can be borrowed from the traditions of the church. Usually, they can be included in a regular service of worship at the learning site. In some non-congregational settings, it may be necessary to create a special occasion or to use some regular occasion such as a board meeting.

What matters is that you acknowledge and celebrate the various rites of passage in the learning covenant in ways that are appropriate to the site and meaningful to you.

Appendix A: Learning Covenant Format

Learning Covenant

This learning covenant covers the period from: _____ to _____

➤ Supervisee _____

➤ Supervisor _____

Supervision will take place on _____ (date) at _____ (location)
with opportunities to reflect on learning goals.

➤ Lay Supervision Team representative _____

Lay Supervision Team meetings will take place at _____ (location)
with opportunities for reflection on learning goals.

Evaluation will occur at the mid-point and end-point of the internship through the following process:

Acknowledging our humanity, we agree to the following process for conflict resolution:

This learning covenant with attached learning goals is agreed to by all participants, with opportunities for revision as learning unfolds.

Signatures _____ (Supervisee)

_____ (Supervisor)

_____ (Lay Supervision Team representative)

Date _____

(Attach the learning goals and action plans of all participants to the covenant.)

Appendix B: Sample Learning Goals

Example 1: This goal could be for the supervisee.

Learning Goal: I want to begin to learn how to offer pastoral care that enables individuals to feel supported and better able to work on issues themselves.	
Action Plans	Evaluation
<p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be assigned specific individuals with whom to relate on visits • practise active listening and referral skills • learn about community resources • reflect on how I relate to people who are different from me in age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, economic class, and educational background • share four written verbatims with my supervisor 	<p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • observe whether some people are further enabled to work on their issues • request feedback from the supervisor and the Lay Supervision Team • request feedback from those experiencing my pastoral care

Example 2: This goal could be for the Lay Supervision Team members and/or the supervisee, with some different action plans.

Learning Goal: I want to develop my leadership skills in facilitating learning and discussion in a group setting.	
Action Plans	Evaluation
<p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify skills I already have and specific skills I want to work on • rotate leadership in Lay Supervision Team meetings for planning and leading discussion • lead an adult Bible study group for six weeks during Lent • test different educational methods (experiential, storytelling, audiovisuals) to discover my own comfort and convictions about learning and the responses of adults to different methods • work to integrate my academic learning in biblical and theological understanding with the experience/understanding of lay people 	<p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify the changes in my skills • keep a journal to reflect on my learnings • identify the educational methods that were most effective

Example 3: This goal could be for Lay Supervision Team members, the supervisee, and/or the supervisor.

Learning Goal: I want to learn more about how to give feedback, both affirming and critical, in a way that enables growth and openness to trying new methods.	
Action Plans	Evaluation
<p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work with the information provided in Appendix C, identifying ways of implementing the rules and reflecting on different specific comments that could have been made • ask the feedback recipients what could have made the feedback more helpful 	<p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assess which methods were effective and comfortable

Example 4: This goal could be for the supervisor, supervisee, and/or Lay Supervision Team as a group.

Learning goal: I/We want to learn to identify moments of God's grace in the internship experience.	
Action Plans	Evaluation
<p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflect with others on the meaning of God's grace and on specific experiences in the internship that can be interpreted as grace-filled • identify how I understand myself as a spiritual being in the experiences of life 	<p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • articulate the meaning of God's grace

Example 5: This goal could be for the Lay Supervision Team and the supervisee, with additional focus for the supervisee on enabling others to learn.

Learning Goal: We want to understand and learn to do theological reflection and learn how to enable others to reflect theologically.	
Action Plans	Evaluation
<p>We will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discuss what theological reflection means and include a time of theological reflection in each Lay Supervision Team meeting and supervisory session • find tools for doing theological reflection • read books (named) about theological reflection 	<p>We will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • describe what theological reflection means • assess the various tools/methods used and their effectiveness

Example 6: This could be a goal for the supervisee.

Learning Goal: By the end of the learning covenant, I want to discover my gifts in preaching and try out various preaching styles.	
<p style="text-align: center;">Action Plans</p> <p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• discuss my understanding of preaching with my supervisor and the Lay Supervision Team• try various preaching styles (storytelling, teaching, evangelistic, drama, using no notes, etc.)• create a reaction sheet/feedback form for the Lay Supervision Team to use• keep a journal of my discoveries and learnings	<p style="text-align: center;">Evaluation</p> <p>I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• discuss my reflections with my supervisor, including sharing written copies of my sermons and video or audio tapes• meet with my Lay Supervision Team soon after the worship service to share their written reflections on the reaction sheet/feedback form• on a regular basis, share my journals of self-discovery and learning

Appendix C: Feedback

Feedback is a way of helping someone to consider making changes by offering information about how they affect others. It involves naming both positive areas and those that need more growth. Feedback should be ongoing. The regularly scheduled assessment or evaluation time provides an opportunity to summarize the feedback.

Useful feedback is

- descriptive
- specific
- appropriate
- requested
- usable
- timely
- clear
- accurate
- related to the learning covenant

Descriptive

Be descriptive rather than judgmental. By describing your own reaction, you leave the other person free to use the feedback as she/he sees fit. By avoiding judging language, you reduce the likelihood of a defensive reaction. It is important to use “I” language in offering feedback, thus owning your observations, perceptions, and feelings.

Example: “When you refer the word ‘girl’ when referring to me, I feel put down and not recognized as an adult woman.”

Specific

Be specific rather than general.

Example: To tell someone he/she is “dominating” is not as useful as saying, “Just now when we were deciding the issue, I felt you were not listening to what others said. I felt forced to accept your arguments.”

Appropriate

Take into account the needs of the receiver of the feedback. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only our own needs. What we offer needs to be supportive and responsible.

Example: “I know that speaking in large groups is difficult for you, and I appreciated the effort it took for you to make your contribution at the board meeting. Your comments were helpful to me.”

Requested

If you want feedback, ask for it; if you have feedback to offer, wait to be asked. Feedback is most useful when the receiver has formulated the kind of question the observer can answer.

Example: “Interns can create a worship feedback sheet listing the areas they want feedback about.”

Usable

Direct your feedback toward behaviour the receiver can do something about. It is frustrating to be reminded of some shortcoming or characteristic over which one has no control.

Example: “I enjoyed your Children’s Time last Sunday, but I would have found it more helpful if you had used the microphone so the adults in the congregation could have heard it too.”

Timely

Time your feedback carefully. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after a given behaviour depending, of course, on the person’s readiness to hear it and the availability of support from others. It is not helpful to make a quick critical comment immediately following the observed behaviour unless you are prepared to spend time with the receiver.

Example: “The process you used in Bible study tonight was not as helpful to me as it might have been. Do you have time to sit down and talk about it a bit, or can we set up a time soon?”

Clear

Ensure you are communicating clearly. One way of doing this is to have the receiver try to rephrase the feedback to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind.

Example: “Let me see if I understand what you are saying to me. Was it the specific word I used in the sermon that concerned you or the expression of my theology that you heard?”

Accurate

Check for accuracy. When feedback is given in a group, both the giver and the receiver have an opportunity to check with others about the accuracy of the feedback. Is this person’s impression shared by others?

Example: “In this evaluation time, one of you said that more printed resources would have been helpful. What do the rest of you have to say about that?”

Related to the Learning Covenant

Relate feedback to the learning covenant—its goals and action plans.

Example: “In relation to your goal to learn more about offering pastoral care, I noticed that when you responded to Jane in our Bible study group, she seemed to withdraw. What do you think was going on there?”

A Model for Non-violent Communication

Marshall Rosenberg¹ has developed a form of communication that can empower people to exchange resources and resolve differences non-violently. His model is based on speaking honestly and responsibly about one's perceptions, feelings, values, and desires, as well as listening to the perceptions, feelings, values, and desires of others. This model is one way to give feedback as outlined above.

There are four basic pieces of information to exchange:

When you said/did _____.

I felt _____,

and because I value _____,

I would like _____.

¹ Marshall Rosenberg is Director of the Center for Nonviolent Communication in Sherman, Texas.

Appendix D: Sample Covenanting Service

From Trinity United Church, Nanaimo, BC.

- Lay Supervision Team member: Let us make a covenant together with God and with each other as we begin this internship journey together.
- LST member: Into this circle we welcome our intern, _____, who will be sharing our congregational life until _____.
- Minister: A covenant is a promise we make with God and with one another, a promise to live God's way. Let us now make a covenant with God and with one another.
- Congregation: In the presence of God and one another, we give thanks for the example and lasting love of Jesus Christ, who shows us how to live God's way.
- LST member: The church recognizes the different paths that lead to ministry and celebrates the particular ministry of each person. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them.
- LST member: There are different ways of serving, but the same God is served. Christ is like a single body that has many parts. All of us are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it.
- Minister: God has called _____ to be an intern at _____ and he/she has accepted this call. _____, are you willing to share your God-given gifts for ministry as you work and worship with this faith community, and are you willing to serve as the Spirit enables you?
- Intern: I will, God being my helper.
- LST member: _____, God has called you to be _____'s supervisor. Will you share with her/him your knowledge and passion for ministry and your love of God, supporting her/him throughout the internship in our faith community?
- Supervisor: I will, God being my helper.
- Minister: Members of the Lay Supervision Team (*name them*), you have accepted God's call to fulfill the role as lay supervisors. Are you willing to share your faith, offer wise counsel, and support _____ in his/her learning path and thus, by sowing seeds of the Spirit, participate in _____'s growth into ministry?
- LST team: We will, God being our helper.

LST member or
Chair of Board:

Members of the congregation, you have heard the promises of
(*intern*), (*supervisor*), and the Lay Supervision Team, who have
answered God's call to service. Let us pledge to them our support.

Congregation:

**We promise to support you with love as we all try to live God's
way.**

LST member:

Let us say our United Church creed together...

LST member:

Let us pray...

All:

**Loving God, we have made a covenant with you and with one
another. Help us make sure that in our circle everyone is welcome.
No one is excluded, and everyone's gifts are received with love. In
Jesus' name we pray. Amen**