

Title: BOARD AND OFFICE OF VOCATION ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

**Origin: The Reverend Norm Seli, chair of the Board of Vocation, and
the Reverend Marlene Britton, Director, Policy and Programs for Ministry Personnel**

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INTRODUCTION

God has guided the Office of Vocation into completing its fifth year of life! A review of the Office of Vocation will be undertaken by the General Council Office, and even before that is done it can be said that the work of ensuring that the Church is served by faithful, well equipped, effective ministry personnel has been done by this Team.

During the year under review, the Strategic Plan became fully operational, with all aspects of work at the General Council Office seeking to be aligned with this plan. Many of our team were intricately involved in areas of the plan, and involved in initiatives which were proving to be invigorating and innovative.

While this worked very well for many aspects of the work of the Office of Vocation, and for those who were engaged in specific activities, it was clear that this team is an operational one, doing the tasks that needed to be done on an ongoing basis, some of which did not find direct identification with the strategic plan as it existed. This was brought to the attention of those managing the plan, and assurances were given that this would be addressed.

STAFF

There were two changes in staff during the year, with one new program assistant and one new program coordinator being hired. The two new people have settled in well, and the staff team is currently working very well together.

In October an in-person training session was held for staff, the reviewers, consultants and investigators, and following that event the staff had the opportunity for a 2 day retreat. This time of reflection and learning was led by Revd. Dr. Jenny Stephens.

BOARD OF VOCATION

The Board of Vocation was kept busy during the year, utilizing all four meeting dates, all of which were 2-day, virtual events. There were some shifts in membership as the one vacant spot on the board was filled. At the same time, one person was hired by their Regional Council and had to step away, one person has been unwell and unable to attend and participate, and one person resigned. These shifts happened over the course of the calendar year, and the Board was able to manage these changes and to function well.

Highlights of the year included:

A meeting with the Moderator in November, with a rich discussion about what she was hearing from Ministry Personnel on the ground, and what the possibilities are for deepening spirituality and encouraging bold discipleship among our ministers.

The Board had no difficulty engaging in robust discussion and/or decision making on matters which were of critical import to the lives of ministers, including

- Designated Lay Ministry and the process for the way forward.
- Recording of interviews conducted by Candidacy Boards and other Boards and Committees of the Board of Vocation.
- Continuing Education standards for ministry personnel.
- The Publishing of the Discontinued Service List (Disciplinary).

There were agonizing moments spent reviewing cases where ministers were being recommended to the Discontinued Service Lists. And moments when deep care and concern were offered for the morale of ministry personnel, leading to the penning of a letter by the Chair of the Board to all ministers in the United Church of Canada.

INDIGENOUS OFFICE OF VOCATION

The Indigenous Candidacy Pathway and Grandmothers' Circle

The Grandmothers Circle met only 3 times this year as the transition to a new National Indigenous Council has put some of the work on hold as it relates to their request for support to do policy development work with Indigenous Communities

This office also supports the Indigenous Mission and Support group as it relates to Ministry personnel salaries. In the fall, the Principles for the 2024 Budget and the final budget draft prepared by this office were adopted. In the work of this committee, there were some trends that were identified that affect leadership in the Indigenous Church.

- a. Indigenous specific Lay leadership training requests continue to increase as Indigenous communities shift to a less "Christian Tradition" only view. This is especially true in communities within or near urban centres. This continues to be an on-going trend from 2020 as the Residential School news continues to evolve.
- b. Pay equity among Indigenous Ministers has improved compared to the prior year, however, systemic challenges remain as northern or isolated communities remain without a COLA assessment, and the capacity to determine those values have been challenged as response from Band Councils have not come forth or denied outright.
- c. There remain very different practices and, in some cases, different policies by the Regional Councils that affect the timing and support of this office. The support is based upon the Regional Councils relationships with the Indigenous Communities and their own requests for support.

Recruitment has seen an increase in Ontario mostly, with a couple from Manitoba. On a very positive note, there are 2 recruits under the age of 40.

In response to the Leadership Counts (Ministry Personnel) Survey, there has been an increase of another 9 additional Ministers who have identified as being Indigenous and to be supported by the IOV. It should be noted that there are Indigenous Ministers that are choosing to remain with their Regional/OV supports. In 2023, there are Indigenous Ministers in all but one Region.

As this office is the liaison to Sandy Saulteaux Spiritual Centre, there has been 4 meetings between the Keepers of the Circle/Vision Keepers with the ICB to help address systemic challenges and gaps created by the restructuring of the Church. There has been a re-commitment to a better relationship and create a more seamless experience for potential Candidates who feel called to the Indigenous Church.

CANDIDACY PATHWAY

Ministry Formation

In addition to the work of the Candidacy Boards and Vocational Ministers in support of those in the candidacy pathway (see reports below), oversight of the candidacy pathway as a whole focussed on three main areas in 2023:

Candidacy Boards: a denominational team

While the objective of gathering candidacy board members over the first triennium of their mandate was largely for training purposes, the work in 2023 was strategically focussed. Regular gatherings of Candidacy Board Chairs and Vocational Ministers is building a denominational team across the Boards. These gatherings promote best practices in offering leadership to Candidacy Boards and has established a set of priorities for on-going maintenance of the pathway:

Interviews: The BOV policy on recording interviews (in response to proposal put forward by SWO CB) will be implemented at such time as technological issues are overcome that currently present obstacles to complex, simultaneous, multi-room recordings, create potential storage liabilities, and incur labour or software costs. In the meantime, policies for creating and storing written records are being followed.

Also concerning interviews, Candidacy Boards sought guidance on dual roles and perception of bias on the Board and interview teams. They continue to share best practices and pursue in-serving training for assessing their candidates' self-knowledge (EQi), ability to lead United Church equity aspirations, and commitment to life-long ministry leadership development.

The commitment to in-person interviews remains strong, this being a particular challenge for larger geographic Regions on limited budgets.

Vocational Assessments: The pause on exercising the current policy of mandating vocational assessments for all applicants allowed for a thorough review of the purpose, value, cost and use of assessments in the candidacy pathway. This review is on-going

and a proposal to the BOV is forthcoming in 2024. An objective is to keep in view the lifelong leadership development of ministers, rather than focussing on candidacy alone.

Relationship with UCC formation faculty: With distinct roles and responsibilities for formation delineated, both schools and Candidacy Boards desire a forum for conversation about areas of concern, communication and collaboration. This development promises fruitful relationships, beginning with a virtual gathering in spring 2024 of United Church formation faculty, Vocational Ministers, and Candidacy Board chairs.

Theological Schools: the testamur

Leading up to, and in light of, the proposal concerning the future of the Designated Lay Ministry program, the question of the testamur came into focus: where is it offered, how is it attained, and how accessible the path toward achieving it is.

Resources have been created for applicants, candidates, schools and Candidacy Boards outlining the various paths toward the testamur, including programs which DO NOT require undergraduate education for admission. These resources include the entrance requirements and the available accommodations/supports in each program leading to the testamur. Work continues across the schools to harmonize the cost and approach to assessing the testamur for those with degrees and diplomas from non-UCC schools.

Supervised Ministry Experience: pastoral charge realities

In response to feedback about the excessive demands on lay supervision teams, revisions were made to their responsibilities for support and evaluation of SME candidates. Assessment of the candidate's on-the-ground practice of ministry is now based on The Ethical Standards and Standards of Practice for Ministry with a practically focussed evaluation report. The Educational Supervisor's role continues to focus on skills for theological reflection, reflective practice on learning goals, and Competencies for Formation for Ministry and Lifelong Ministry Leadership.

Educational Supervisors benefited from regular virtual in-service gatherings hosted by Vocational Ministers.

In 2023, two SME moving grants were administered, seven salary grants were initiated and four were continued. The Operational Plan's stated priority for collaborative ministry spawned interest in developing collaborative ministry SME sites for 2024-2025, also to be supported partially by SME grants.

Progress was made on drafting Indigenous candidacy pathway resources, now in the hands of the Indigenous Candidacy Board for further development.

A Discernment Retreat (in collaboration with LeaderShift, Pacific Mountain Region), led by two Vocational Ministers, was held in-person in November 2023 with 12 participants from 5 Regions.

The reports which appear in the appendix give a numerical synopsis of the work of the Vocational Ministers and their Candidacy Boards, as well as a brief commentary summarizing trends which they have noticed over the last year.

ADMISSION

The number of ministers in the Admission process reached 200 people in 2022. This led to a shortage of accompaniers meaning that ministers expressing interest in admission were told there were dozens of ministers ahead of them waiting to speak with someone about applying for the Admission process. For those who reached the entrance or final interview stage, there was a queue of approximately three months before an interview slot was available.

Most significantly, the Admission Board noted an alarming reality: when it came time to seek an admission appointment, the process was not functioning equitably for racialized ministers. Consequently, we entered 2023 with the Admission process paused. Throughout 2023, the focus of admission work has been on addressing these bottlenecks and inequities.

One specific effort has been the work of the Admission Matching Pilot program. Five ministers willing to participate were easily selected in February 2023, but five Communities of Faith willing to participate were harder to come by. Evaluation of the struggle at the end of May yielded feedback that we needed to do a better job of inspiring and inviting, that search teams wanted the opportunity to interview the ministers, and that finances were a barrier for a few congregations unable to afford a category F minister full time. In response, the Matching Task Group sought a six month extension to their mandate.

During this time, they produced a video, which was circulated to 45 Communities of Faith with full time vacancies; and a shortened version later shared at the General Council recall meeting in October. The task group followed up with an Open House for search team members and pastoral relations liaisons in November for which registrations exceeded our zoom account's capacity of 99 people. We also agreed to a modified matching process presented by one Community of Faith who wanted to be able to interview the ministers; and expect an appointment will be made soon for one minister in the Matching group. Although three Task Group members have not been able to continue long term, those who remain have sought a second extension to continue their efforts into 2024.

Funding was sought to create an admission appointment for one minister who although unsuccessful for eight years in finding an admission appointment has gone ahead and planted a new Community of Faith that is thriving.

In anticipation of ministers who entered the Diaconal/Ordained Supply process in 2022 needing to seek admission in 2024, a process was created and approved by the Board of Vocation that allows them to do so without starting from the beginning of the Admission process. Admission related information on united-church.ca has been updated.

While we made great progress on getting the admission process ready to flow smoothly when it reopens for new applications, the reality remains that all of the ministers actively seeking admission appointments are racialized, many of whom have been searching for years. Their responses to our emails about whether they are still searching for an appointment are heart wrenching! Several people responded that they remain without an appointment after applying to “more than 30”, “80-90”, “130”, “300”, and even “500” churches. Despite these large number of applications, many indicated that they have had only between zero and four interviews. Some spoke of interviews canceled at the last minute or being told the search team doesn’t want to interview anyone from outside the country. Those who have had interviews, sometimes even after being asked for references and a sermon video, have often not heard anything more from search teams despite promises to be in touch. One person even asked if maybe he should give up because there must be a surplus of ministers in The United Church of Canada and clearly his help isn’t needed. All of them asked for any help we could offer because they feel called to minister with us.

This suggests that in addition to getting the process ready to run smoothly, two additional types of work must remain a priority.

- We need to help these ministers get their foot in the door. They have so many skills and gifts that The United Church of Canada has identified as needed in our strategic plan. One fifth of them are people who have or are currently working on PhDs. Almost all of them speak at least two languages, with many of their additional languages being those that newcomers to Canada also speak. All of them bring diverse theological backgrounds and life experiences that can enrich our denomination. Many of them have specialized experience in ministry such as youth ministry, church planting, chaplaincy, and ecumenical work.
- We need to continue working with congregations to confront xenophobia and racism; as well as making sure that support for search teams are well informed of the Admission process and the benefits of considering an applicant from another country. While the myth exists in our denomination that we have a shortage of ministers, the reality is that we have more than 50 who are available. They simply need our search teams to recognize that they are highly qualified, experienced ministers who are keen and feeling to called to serve in The United Church of Canada.

The appendix to this report contains more statistics related to Admission.

ONGOING VOCATIONAL SUPPORT, FORMATION, AND DEVELOPMENT

STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION COMMITTEE

In 2023, the Standards committee met 8 times (last meeting was November 27, 2023).

During 2023, the Standards for Accreditation Committee worked hard to finish meeting its responsibility to set standards for the continuing education and professional development of ministry personnel (The Manual E.2.2.d). Following from learning from 2022 surveys with ministry personnel and Ministry and Personnel (M&P) Committees about the continuing education, the committee created a draft continuing education standard that wove together the [Competencies for Ministry Formation and Lifelong Ministry Leadership](#) and the calls to Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, and Daring Justice. In the spring, the committee designed and implemented a consultation process to receive feedback on the standard from Office of Vocation and regional council pastoral relations staff, chairs of M&P Committees, staff of United Church theological schools who design continuing education programming, and groups of ministry personnel in two regional councils. In September, the committee recommended the continuing education standard to the Board of Vocation for their input and feedback. In November, the Board of Vocation approved a revised continuing education standard. In early 2024, staff will work to animate the standard with ministry personnel, M&P Committees and regional council pastoral relations staff.

Because of changes to the way that racial justice training is being delivered on ChurchX, including a mix of synchronous and asynchronous modules, and training designed for three distinct cohorts of people (Indigenous and Racialized Ministers in North America, White Ministers in North America, Ministers Applying for Admission from Outside North America), the committee consulted with staff about updating the Standard for [Online Racial Justice Training](#). The updated standard was approved by the committee in November.

CREDENTIALING COMMITTEE

The Credentialing Committee has been tasked with overseeing the process of Designated Lay Ministers seeking testamur towards commissioning or ordination. Some of the other work that the committee is involved in:

- a) the committee continues to provide support to intentional interim ministers;
- b) partnering with Office of Vocation staff to lead a community of practice for active educational supervisors;
- c) the committee reviewed three applications to the Interim Ministry Sabbatical Fund; and

The statistics included in the appendix to this report will give a detailed view of the work of the committee.

ENHANCING EFFECTIVENESS, OVERSIGHT AND DISCIPLINE OF MINISTRY PERSONNEL

This area represents a significant portion of the work of the Office of Vocation, and is managed by staff, elected members who sit on the response and remedial committees, along with consultants, reviewers and investigators. There was one staff change during the year, with a new person being hired in the summer to replace one who departed in the spring of 2023, while membership on the committees remained stable throughout the year.

There was a training event held in person over 5 days for 39 Consultants, Investigators, Reviewers and Staff of the Office of Vocation in October, including the revisions made to the *Sexual Misconduct* and *Workplace Discrimination, Harassment and Violence Response Policies & Procedures* and *Office of Vocation: Structure & Responsibilities, Appendix A*.

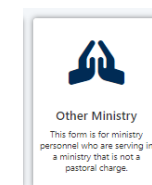
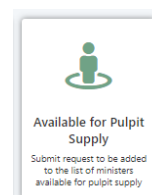
The statistics presented in the Appendix to this report will reveal the magnitude of this work.

CHURCHHUB

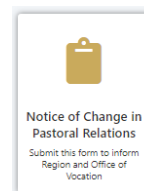
ChurchHub.ca is now entering its 6th year since it was launched Jan 1 2019 – fulfilling the intended function of gathering data and storing documents about ministers and communities of faith into one virtual space.

There have been several enhancements/improvements to ChurchHub (and all its related entities – such as Dynamics and Sharepoint) over the past year. Here are a few examples:

1. Most Regional Councils have provided the list of names available for pulpit supply and this information is stored in Dynamics and Communities of Faith can access the pulpit supply list via ChurchHub.
2. Ministers can make the request to be available for Pulpit Supply via their ChurchHub pages. In order to be added to the pulpit supply list they must be “On the Registry” and they are requested to indicate the “name of the pastoral charge with which they have a formal association”. Each year (on June 30th – after annual declarations have been submitted), the updated list of pulpit supply ministers is sent to Regional Council staff for information.
3. Ministers are invited to complete this form if they are serving in ministries other than pastoral charges (chaplains, community ministries, etc.). This information is entered into their assignment table in Dynamics.



4. In order to improve the accuracy of assignment information, this form providing notice of change in pastoral relations is available to ministers on ChurchHub. The form is forwarded to the relevant Regional Council and the proposed end date is entered into their assignment table in Dynamics.



5. New fields have been added to the database:

- a field with “anniversary year” number that is easily viewable by all staff and helpful in planning for anniversary letters
- a field indicating if a minister entered UCC via Admission
- a field indicating if minister is Indigenous

The screenshot shows a minister profile for Debra Kiger. The 'General' tab is active. Fields include: Contact (Debra Kiger), Minister Type (Diocesan Minister), Minister Status (Retired), Minister Date Recommended (4/05/07), Minister Entry Date (5/28/11), Anniversary (12), Article Expiration Submission Date (4/05/23), Registry Status (Comment), Minister Comment (Commissioned by Hamilton (2011) - Settled), Retirement Start Date (7/01/18), Not in Covenant End Date, Current Assignment (General Council Office), Entry via Admission, and Indigenous Minister. The 'Active Functions' section shows various roles and dates.

In 2023 ChurchHub use has expanded beyond ministry personnel, communities of faith (Administrators, Treasurers and Search Teams), and General Council volunteers. Users now include 100s of volunteers on many of our Regional Council committees. This new group of ChurchHub users has of course increased requirements for support from staff at Regional and General Council levels.

ChurchHub is in continuous improvement as all users share feedback, identify glitches and request enhancements.

Table 3: ChurchHub Use 2023

Record of Call/Appointment forms created	727
Record of Call/Appointment Approved by Regional Councils	552
Annual Declarations completed by May 30 th deadline	2216
Annual Declarations completed after May 30 th deadline	250
Ministers requested to be approved for search	542
Ministers on the Available Ministers list as of December	225
Communities of Faith Submitted Positions new in 2023	132
Available Positions list as of December	194
Total number of ministers in Calls	1093
Number of ministers in appointments as of Jan 1 st 2024	446

Number of visits to ChurchHub	5557
Number of ChurchHub users	9257

CONCLUSION

The Board of Vocation is grateful to the staff of the Office of Vocation, and to all the elected members across the country who have enabled this work to continue in this way. The Board appreciates that this work is holy, and hard, and commits, along with the Holy Spirit, to being partners in the journey.