



# The United Church of Canada General Council

## Pastoral Relationships, Thriving with Equity Research Project: Executive Summary

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Our website proclaims: “United Church faith communities welcome people from all backgrounds and orientations—wherever you are in your faith journey.” But as we scan across the country, as we listen to stories of people, of ministers, of communities of faith, it becomes clear that these words are not universally lived out across the vastness of the denomination. There is a disconnect with who we say we are.

In The United Church of Canada, we consider ourselves a church rooted in justice and equality with a vision of Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, and Daring Justice. Our church’s roots flow from the social gospel tradition of bringing Christian responsibility to public influence. The United Church also emerged from the colonial settler, patriarchal roots on which Canada was founded—a model based on power, wealth accumulation, and exploitation of resources. We are a story within a story, that we cannot simply shake off.

As a consequence, many people experience our church's ethos of justice and equality as aspiration rather than lived reality. Racism, ableism, heterosexism, sexism, cissexism, and other forms of oppression continue to exist in The United Church of Canada. And the people best able to articulate how this impacts their ministries and pastoral relationships are those who live the experiences. So those are the people whose stories this research project sought.

**The Pastoral Relationships, Thriving with Equity Research Project** aims to help guide the United Church in a paradigm shift to respond to the realities of a world that feels increasingly complex. It is deeply uncomfortable, yet also beautiful and powerful, work.

We heard, from ministry personnel and regional staff who work closely with communities of faith, a desire to shift structure from colonial ways to something aligned with an Indigenous world view, focused on relationship and reciprocity. While our past flows from a colonial settler world view, our future can be different. We can learn from other models.

We are in a moment of parable where our world is turned on its head. A moment in which we must listen to those whose voices have been silenced and journey together on a new path. And rather than see this as scarcity, we are called to recognize the abundance of God's kin-dom. It is the banquet to which we are all invited.

## **The Research Process**

This national research project launched January 2022 and ran until April 2023. It is interrelated with two other research and statistical projects exploring equity for ministry personnel in The United Church of Canada: Leadership Counts and Equity in Compensation.

Equity-seeking ministry personnel identify historically and often currently with marginalized or oppressed groups. In this study, "equity-seeking" includes those who are Indigenous, racialized (Black, Asian, mixed-race, and people of colour), Deaf, those who speak English as an additional language, francophone, disabled, neurodiverse, 2SLGBTQIA+ (Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual), transgender, non-binary, and female, based on self-identification. "Ministry personnel" includes diaconal (DM), ordained (OM), or designated lay ministers (DLM)

and candidates who are accountable to the Office of Vocation and are members of a regional council.

The authors of this report—Marcie Gibson and Kimiko Karpoff—worked with General Council Office staff Adele Halliday, Anti-Racism and Equity Lead, and Marlene Britton, Director of Policy and Programs for Ministry Personnel, to map out a plan for the project. A reference group of six diverse people was recruited to accompany and inform the process. Qualitative research, using a feminist, participatory action methodology was applied.

In addition to providing forums for equity-seeking ministry personnel to share their wisdom, experiences, and perspectives, three goals led this research:

- to identify current patterns of thriving and inequities in pastoral relationships with equity-seeking ministry personnel in The United Church of Canada
- to identify ways that inequities can be prevented or mitigated through denominational actions such as proactive education, early intervention, pastoral support, and systemic change
- to incite and foster positive change in The United Church of Canada and beyond

In brief, the project sought insights into how church structures can enable and support ministry personnel to thrive in pastoral relationship with communities of faith who are predominantly different than they are, and conversely, support communities of faith to thrive in such pastoral relationships. The findings are summarized thematically below; a final section of the report breaks down ministry personnel's experiences of discrimination by identity category.

Ninety-five participants chose to take part in an anonymous survey and 54 in interviews and focus groups. Concurrently, three Indigenous consultations were held through an oral circle conversation method developed in collaboration with Indigenous leadership.

Most of the participants identified with at least two if not multiple aspects of equity-seeking identities, and all have different contexts—of Indigeneity, racial and ethnic identities; language and citizenship; age and disability; gender, gender identity, and sexuality; regional council; ministry streams and years of service; as well as relationship status, parenting role, mental health/neurodiversity, and so on. This intersectionality is crucial to recognize; the ways that equity factors interact are

often most influential or detrimental to a person's experience. "It's not just one thing or another," as one participant said.

## **The Wisdom of the Indigenous Church**

The United Church website says: "For more than thirty years, the United Church and Indigenous peoples have been on a journey towards mutuality, respect and equity. Towards reconciliation.

Towards justice."

True reconciliation is preceded by truth. In this moment, as we speak about living into the

[Caretakers of Our Indigenous Circle Calls to the Church](#) and the [Calls to Action](#) given in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we are also called to address the mistakes of the first settlers that continue even now. Rather than learn from the peoples who had inhabited the lands for thousands of years about how to live in a way that allowed all to thrive, settlers brought a different way. It is the outcomes of this that we lament now. Collectively, we are not thriving. The Earth is suffering; churches are closing. We can learn now by listening to Indigenous voices in our church.

Indigenous ways are a call to connection and reciprocity. Indigenous people are intimately and reciprocally connected to the land and value relationship. When an Indigenous person acknowledges "All my relations," she does not just mean her human family, but all beings. Plants, animals, birds, bugs, mushrooms, and stones are all relations, as well as communities of people beyond nuclear families.

*Walk with us* is a call to relationship. More than one relationship, this call extends beyond the wider church relationship to the Indigenous church. It's an invitation to reconsider how we are, denominationally and in each community of faith, in relationship with each other and with the communities in which we are located.

How does this speak to the real challenges faced by equity-seeking ministry personnel and the communities of faith they serve? It means recognizing the changes that come, like changes of season or aging, and to greet each moment with inquisitiveness, curiosity, and invitation. It is an invitation to be open to the new that comes with the moment that we are in.

The United Church of Canada emerged out of a foundation of colonization, patriarchy, and White supremacy. To many of us, this statement sounds harsh. However, it is the truth of our history, and it is important to acknowledge. This is the history at the roots of Canada. Acknowledging this history helps us to understand how it is that in 2023 we are still hearing stories of people hurt by racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. It's part of the water in which we collectively swim. It's so normalized, it's often difficult to see.

Personal and individual experiences of racism were shared by ministry personnel in the

Indigenous church, particularly from Indigenous people who serve in non-Indigenous contexts. However, much of the conversations' focus was toward institutional racism, the ways in which policy, procedure, structure, and broad decisions negatively impact Indigenous communities of faith and ministry personnel. Indigenous participants also took part in interviews and in the online survey, so their input is included in the other sections of this report. But specifically at the Indigenous gatherings, the following six themes emerged:

- colonialism continues to impact the structures of the church
- systems and policies go against Indigenous ways of being/doing
- personal stories of Indigenous ministry personnel's interactions with non-Indigenous communities of faith
- relationship as a foundational value
- Indigenous ways: "truth, honesty, kindness, respect"
- spiritual connection and healing

## **Awareness in Pastoral Relationships**

In the context of general levels of awareness and openness in the pastoral relationship and the ministry setting's enthusiasm and willingness to engage with diversity, half of survey respondents reported being very comfortable talking about their identities to the community of faith. Half noted some level of discomfort: it's exhausting, they get pushback, are perceived as creating conflict. Equity-seeking ministry personnel are more often seen to represent all people who share their equity identity, risking the potential implied judgment that "we had one of those and it didn't work out." And communities of faith, much like Canadians, have a strong belief about who they are, generally open and welcoming. They do not like to have

those beliefs challenged.

Ministry personnel who are “the first”—the first woman or the first 2SLGBTQIA+ ministry personnel in a particular setting, the first racialized minister in a predominantly White congregation—often encounter assumptions both about who they are and who they should be, less support, more discriminatory behaviour and are, therefore, less likely to feel able to bring their full selves to their ministry.

There are communities of faith who are both aware and working toward what it means to embrace diversity. But in many, difference and diversity are held in tension with power and change. As long as things are essentially the same, diversity is okay. Diversity is not recognized as possibly requiring a shift in how things are done.

When asked who bears the burden or is most affected if there are negative consequences from highlighting differences, more than 50 percent of respondents said the ministry personnel or mostly the ministry personnel. Only 8 percent felt that either the Ministry and Personnel Committee (M and P), the lay leadership, or the community of faith bore the burden fully.

How can the United Church support congregations to move toward equity and thriving? Education for boards and M and P committees (or a new structure?) could flip the issue from, for example, talking about racism, which puts the focus on the racialized person, to talking about enforced Whiteness, which asks us to look at ourselves as a church and the culture in which we swim. There needs to be wider support for making all church spaces accessible, taking seriously and modelling accessibility at every level of events (regional meetings, General Council, speaking engagements). The church could also ensure adequate communication about supports that already exist, such as funding for ramps. When congregations hire someone equity-seeking, the church could provide upfront resourced interventions (e.g., an in-person facilitated workshop about gender and sexuality).

## **General Experiences in Pastoral Relationships**

Some equity-seeking ministry personnel feel valued as a resource or for bringing a particular skill set to a ministry setting. Some are called or chosen because of these talents and skills informed by their equity-status experience, not simply because of their identities. But for many, there is nagging anxiety, and they wonder if equity is

a factor, especially with experiences of intersectionality and multiple identities. This leads to difficulty trusting their own instincts, fear of failure, and so on.

Women and racialized participants particularly mentioned feeling underappreciated, unrecognized, or devalued in comparison to their teammates. An incongruence between a minister's and community's expectations of "how well a community will get to know its minister" leads some to feel invisible and others to feel overexposed.

Participants frequently brought up experiences of vulnerability, though they had not been specifically asked about this. Ministry personnel who are feeling vulnerable may have a fear of involving the wider church, a lack of clarity about whom to approach at the regional level, and a fear of involving the Office of Vocation disciplinary process.

One implication is that some will speak up less or take fewer risks out of fear of losing a position. The church needs to recognize the burden on equity-seeking ministry personnel to trust that they will be supported, in the face of doubt. And when bullying is taking place, there is a need for the wider church to step in as bystander intervention.

The experience of isolation can be exacerbated by many equity factors. Some 43 percent of respondents experienced severe or moderate isolation and only 8 percent reported that their setting is wonderful/not isolated at all. Even if it's less about the pastoral relationship itself and more to do with the surrounding community and network, isolation is a significant factor in mental health and staying in a pastoral relationship.

Clusters are a useful support in theory, but because they are voluntary or by invitation, some people are excluded or not on the radar of their colleagues, especially if they are new to an area or there are other equity differences. A prevailing assumption is that it's an individual effort that's needed to avoid isolation, so when that doesn't work out, it is extra disappointing and can be seen as a personal failure. There is a role here for regional staff and commissions: being proactive in making sure clusters continue; being proactive in helping new people connect in with networks; and reaching out when identity-specific tragedies happen (such as racially motivated killings, Indigenous residential institutions' graves).

When asked about their Ministry and Personnel Committee (or board/council), only 45 percent of participants found them supportive and effective. Many reported that coaching M and P committees is seen as part of their ministry, and a number wondered whether M and P is really the best system for addressing personnel issues. There is a clear role for regional support here, both with the M and P committees and with supporting equity-seeking ministry personnel. Regional pastoral relations ministers or their associates need to be available to be more involved to facilitate the relationship with specific ministers and M and P committees, especially in cases of language or disability differences. There also need to be more opportunities to share best practices among members of M and P committees, and robust equity training as part of the M and P national training.

The lack of oversight from the wider church, including financial oversight (such as consistency in pay scale across genders), and the impact of living with threats of closure/finances/palliative/ decline on the horizon, even if in a long-term call or appointment, can be quite taxing. Sometimes this overshadows equity considerations or puts them at the bottom of the agenda, making it more difficult to raise concerns. The issue of fair compensation has been a particular flag that bears more consideration. What is the regional or national church's role in directing stability? Complications of parenting as equity-seeking ministry personnel—especially when one's child(ren) are ill or have complicated needs—need to be considered as an additional area for support.

## **Experiences of Discrimination in Pastoral Relationships**

The United Church has in some cases been at the forefront of pushing against systems of racism, sexism, cissexism, and homophobia. But too often, our own systems, structures, and policies simply uphold the status quo. For example, structures around hiring and negotiation assume a level playing field that does not exist either for ministry personnel or communities of faith. And there is no accountability for communities that perpetuate or allow inequities to exist.

Equity-seeking ministry personnel, in pastoral charges as in wider society, are more at risk of discrimination and continue to bear the brunt of being othered.



While 95 percent of respondents to the questionnaire noted English as their language of most comfort, it is not English proficiency but accent that garners comment. All of us speak with some sort of accent or local dialect, and as more ministry personnel come from other countries or across this country, differing accents will be more prevalent. The United Church has a role in preparing communities of faith through education, methods of mitigation, and also addressing other issues (such as inadequate sound systems) that hinder understanding.

Equity-seeking ministry personnel often work in situations of heightened levels of tension or in ones that are abusive or unsafe, experiencing both macro- and microaggressions.

Macroaggressions are more overt and potentially violent experiences of discrimination. One third of equity-seeking ministry personnel reported having been belittled. One in five had experienced one or more of shunning, lies, sexualization, and verbal abuse. Macroaggressions reported also included threats to personal safety, family, or property and threats to withhold or withdraw support for the church.

Microaggressions, often quite subtle but more prevalent, include assumptions and stereotyping, along with bias, lip service, unequal criticism, and gaslighting. As one participant put it, "It is many little things that leave you feeling exhausted." While microaggressions may seem less harmful, the cumulative impact is great. For example, assumptions, a sometimes-subtle form of discrimination, can heighten equity-seeking ministry personnel's sense of always having to be "on," to be alert. And having your sympathetic nervous system always activated leads to mental and physical health issues.

Equity-seeking ministry personnel are often placed unsupported into the position of serving people with less experience of diversity and high levels of unacknowledged privilege. Instances of discrimination were reported within communities of faith from lay leaders, colleagues, congregation members, and others. And although negative experiences can be counterbalanced by support and trust from the community and colleagues, the impacts of discrimination are experienced through feelings of isolation, verbal abuse and threats, and financial consequences.

Addressing discrimination can sometimes have a positive impact on a pastoral relationship. It can be a rallying cry, a watershed moment when new allies find their

voices, or validating to be heard and respected, even if not by everyone. It can build honesty and trust and deepen working relationships with colleagues.

Just short of half of equity-seeking ministry personnel participants noted that these conflicts are just part of ministry and they are working through it fine. This suggests that the other half notice a rift, acknowledge that there are conversations that they avoid, or feel that they bring less of themselves to ministry. One in five believe experiences of discrimination will shorten the pastoral relationship, and some are looking for positions elsewhere. Others have already left.

A question emerges: Who holds the communities of faith accountable for their behaviour? The answer seems to be no one. Also, why do we, as The United Church of Canada, continue to approve pastoral relationships where there is a pattern of abuse and conflict? And if we do place people in those positions, who would be best suited to be there?

The lives of ministry personnel are lived most in the community of faith, but our council-based structure means that ministry personnel also interact with regions and with General Council. And they also experience discrimination within these levels of governance, either through interpersonal connection or systems. Systems, interactions, and accountability need to be considered at every level.

All structures of the church must be discrimination-free or we cannot truly be who we say we are. People who already feel the impacts of discrimination in society will feel them even more acutely in the church. Equipping ourselves at every level to be and behave and model equity is the work of the church.

## **Experiences of Communication in Pastoral Relationships**

Open and effective communication between equity-seeking ministry personnel and communities of faith is vital to a healthy, thriving pastoral relationship. When there are concerns to raise, 54 percent of survey participants said the ministry personnel or mostly the ministry personnel takes responsibility, as opposed to the community of faith. Only 22 percent said they both do this/they share the responsibility. When asked if equity-seeking ministry personnel feel comfortable raising concerns and/or issues of discrimination, 60 percent said they feel comfortable or at least with some

people, which hardly encourages confidence.

Demographically, racialized ministry personnel were most often comfortable addressing issues only with some people; and queer, trans, and non-binary/gender-queer respondents were most often those who don't feel safe or are rarely comfortable.

By far the strongest factor for not raising concerns was "it's exhausting," followed by "there will likely be pushback or negative consequences." Some were concerned that their congregation/organization is fragile or declining so they won't engage in conflict, that it already has a pattern of denial and not addressing bullying, or that it would blame the ministry personnel for ruining the church. Some expressed a fear of physical violence/displays of threat, or the cycle of speaking out being met with shock-nod-denial-no change and then repeat, or accusations of hysteria. Communities of faith also blame ministry personnel for creating cognitive dissonance between the accusation and the community's perception of itself as welcoming/inclusive/progressive.

How can concerns be addressed with less stigma or blame? How can we foster an environment where these conversations are normalized so they don't generate as much backlash? Support or intervention must ensure that ministry personnel are supported directly through the process and that intervenors are aware of the potential for fallout.

A community of faith's willingness and comfort in discussing concerns may not necessarily match their capacity or ability to do so. And unfortunately, communities of faith may overestimate how welcoming they are and to whom. In general, avoidance and overcoming discomfort are major barriers to addressing concerns, alongside communities' capacity to engage in open conversations or engage others to help them when support is needed.

There is a need for opportunities to discuss inequity issues at times when the stakes are less high, a need for skills on how to "lean in" to conflict, and a need to recognize that avoidance is damaging to the pastoral relationship and cumulative. With the closing of churches, especially in rural areas, there are fewer local support options when there is an identified lack of capacity. This means a higher reliance on regional staff who are able and willing to travel. Furthermore, some communities of faith may require intervention and support without them first approaching the

regional council or General Council Office.

Ministry personnel may have personal or situational barriers that prevent them from raising concerns in the first place. Personal finances is the most frequent barrier, including the fear that raising issues will jeopardize their job security. The next most common personal barriers are housing and family responsibility (including parenting and/or caring for an ill partner), current immigration status, and future employability. These issues—especially finances and parenting— disproportionately affect women in ministry.

Barriers may also arise from their position within the church—a fear or perception of being judged by peers, by peers seen to have particular power, or by regional staff or M and P committees. The lack of effective institutional support and lack of trust in the community of faith's leadership also dissuade equity-seeking ministry personnel from raising concerns.

In terms of implications of these barriers, the church needs to be reminded that ministry personnel who are also balancing parenting and the immigration process are particularly vulnerable to having to stay in abusive or unhealthy situations. Similarly, for candidates transitioning into new ministry personnel, it is difficult to lay down the feeling that colleagues are evaluating you. Because they are less likely to come forward, more proactive support (semiregular check-ins through a regional network) should be considered, as well as considering what can be done to support this shift, and how we balance mutual accountability with mutual support, while maintaining appropriate confidentiality. As more and more ministry personnel are in part-time positions and/or dealing with rising housing costs, their lack of a financial buffer is a significant factor that is likely affecting the health of their pastoral relationships. Paid administrative leave for those who file complaints through the Workplace Discrimination, Harassment, and Violence Prevention and Response Policy or mandated financial help with moving costs should be considered.

Equity-seeking ministry personnel generally experience that they bear the burden or are most affected if there are negative consequences to raising concerns or addressing discrimination. This is a disconnect from other spheres in society where, officially, it is the employer's responsibility to ensure a safe workplace.

One of the consequences of attempting to raise concerns or communicate about discrimination can be the end of a pastoral relationship. Further research on ministry

personnel retention could be useful for the United Church, particularly into how retention affects general morale and willingness to engage in dialogue and healing.

## **Experience of Supports to Pastoral Relationships**

Interestingly, half of all survey participants have reached out for support privately in the wider church. Far fewer have reached out beyond the United Church or publicly, so any public requests that are visible are only a small percentage of the requests for support in general. The requests for support that are known about, then, do not represent the extent of the problem.

Equity-seeking ministry personnel will seek support motivated by trust: confidentiality, no possible retaliation or mark on one's record, assurance of effective intervention, or referral when requested. Just being heard (pastoral care/confidentiality) is also a significant motivator, and there is a need for specific kinds of advice that include theology and church cultural awareness.

Equity-seeking ministry personnel also strive to protect the church (or faith community) from further criticism, even if they wish to address a particular concern or dynamic. Respondents either appreciated having a regional pastoral support minister or commented on the absence of one in their regions. More mechanisms are needed to provide pastoral care for ministry personnel—in consultation, in being heard, in recognizing equity issues.

Numerous participants underscored the importance of supportive colleagues, of needing someone to consult with to discern whether what they're dealing with is a personal reaction or an external issue. When equity-seeking ministry personnel reach out for spiritual support (such as pastoral care, discernment, spiritual direction, wisdom, prayer), they are most likely to do so from more than one source, including teachers, partners, Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble, Unifaith, and Facebook groups specific to certain identities. Support for healthy colleague networks, clusters, and groups should not be considered optional in our church structure. For the thriving of equity-seeking ministry personnel, these groups play a significant role.

If equity-seeking ministry personnel are going to reach out to regional council staff, they generally do so relatively early on in the situation. We did hear of a willingness to engage regional support for pastoral support, strategic advocacy, proactive action

and resources, and intervention. Regarding the allyship of regional staff, there is a mixed perception; roughly one third of respondents very much do perceive regional staff as allies and another third very much do not.

Some positive interactions were reported with regional council on equity issues, but other respondents felt ghosted, resented, or undermined when they reached out. Overall, there is a clear recognition that regional council staff are overburdened. But this impact should not have to be absorbed by those who are in crisis or experiencing discrimination.

A number of participants mentioned the importance of relationship and trust over the need for policy. Ministry personnel want to be known, acknowledged, and noticed. There is a clear call for trauma-informed support. When there's injustice, there's trauma, and whether that trauma is from the church or from previous experiences, it must inform our structures. Well-trained and well-equipped pastoral supports ("ministers for the ministers"), who can also occasionally act as advocates or strategic mentors, would be of significant value.

A range of available supports that helped were reported: specific people, actions, resources; the importance of communication and of regional involvement and advocacy. Certain kinds of supports are unhelpful, though: offering misguided advice, blaming the equity-seeking ministry personnel, ineffective words with no action or justice.

Other supports were not available when they were sought out. The most frequently mentioned was someone to contact who understands United Church ethos, followed by pastoral care when there is a crisis such as personal grief or community trauma, and follow-up from regional staff to see how something turned out.

There was also discussion of a lack of supports related to specific groups, whether that means bilingual resource people, resources for young ministers, or legal support when it's needed. A theme that came up multiple times was the isolation, lack of support, and lack of opportunities to serve for ministry personnel who are on long-term disability. A specific strategy for engaging with ministry personnel on long-term disability needs to be developed.

It is risky for ministry personnel to raise concerns or seek support. Even if a community of faith is put under review, likely the minister will be also, which can look bad.

Equity-seeking ministry personnel often just need someone willing to listen, validate, and show their support. They need a trusting relationship, knowing that regional council or colleagues are willing to step in and advocate when needed. This trust is not automatic, must be built, and is difficult to rebuild once compromised. It is worth considering the difference between believing the institution has your back, trusting the institution, and being confident that you will receive support/the support you wish/the support you need.

Regional council and educational institutions can help ministry personnel and candidates find and create culturally appropriate networks, in addition to location-based clusters. It may seem like equity-seeking ministry personnel require more direct time from regional ministers, but these ministry personnel are often doing the heavy lifting on other aspects of ministry that benefit regional councils, such as interculturalism, advocacy and education, denominational committee work, and supporting other equity-seeking colleagues. We should also acknowledge the unpaid labour of informal/identity-based support networks that will step in to provide pastoral care, though they do so without authority to intervene in situations.

There is a need to examine compensation equity for ministry personnel. Equity-seeking ministry personnel are vulnerable to being “stuck” in unhealthy pastoral relationships because of economic pressure or lack of other viable positions. Numerous participants are still naming situations where they realize, with little disclosure or discussion, that they are being paid (or offered) less than the previous non-equity-seeking ministry personnel. Women of colour, in particular, have been denied holidays, study leave, sabbatical, or continuing education funding, and are particularly affected by financial pressures, such as the cutting of health benefits.

It creates a strange dynamic that the M and P Committee is both a volunteer de facto human resources committee/employer and under the ministry personnel’s pastoral care. In other nonprofit settings, one’s “clients” are not usually one’s Human Resources department. This makes it difficult to ask about or negotiate the terms of call/appointment. Negotiation information should be discussed by search teams before they start interviewing.

The Office of Vocation and vocations ministers could be a new opportunity to establish a United

Church point person for ministry personnel who are in “other employment” and those on Long Term Disability (LTD), and so on, who are not served by a pastoral relations minister. Likewise, the office might act as an advocate or advisor to the ministry personnel when a pastoral relations minister is mediating a conflict or is in a conflict of interest.

But there is some repair needed in the Office of Vocation’s relationship with equity-seeking ministry personnel. According to participants’ observations, there is a discrepancy in the response-time from Office of Vocation staff based on race, gender/sexual identity, and possible other factors. White men get a quicker response when raising issues with the Office of Vocation. This must be addressed in both reality and perception in order to build a system of trust.

## **Experiences with Policy Related to Pastoral Relationships**

The church’s Workplace Discrimination, Harassment, and Violence Prevention and Response Policy is the most directly relevant policy to address equity concerns. Over two thirds of survey participants have read the policy and are familiar with it. In terms of use, one person reported having used the policy successfully with a positive outcome, three with a negative outcome, five have used the process informally, and four tried but didn’t follow through.

While the presence of the policy is a good first step to publicly resisting workplace discrimination, harassment, and violence, there are still multiple reasons that ministry personnel are not engaging with it. Some are the perception that it is heavy-handed, or that these kinds of issues just aren’t addressed effectively by enacting policy.

To discern whether to engage the policy, the strongest factors noted by respondents were the need or severity of the situation, and trust in the process itself. There is also the factor of weighing the potential cost to oneself and the cost to the church.

Regarding trust: Are the policy actors at arm’s length from the harasser/respondent? Are they fair, impartial, and trustworthy? Is there openness to engage without predetermined conclusions? A number of participants voiced a concern about perception of bias and protectionism among inner circles or those who hold power in



church structures.

There were suggestions about how to better publicize the workplace discrimination and harassment policy and make it more accessible, including a plain language summary and guidelines on who it is for; and to consider having consultants available outside the decisionmaking structure, similar to the sexual misconduct policy. In essence, equity-seeking ministry personnel want to know that their complaint will mean something, be assured of follow-through or consequences, and want to know of others who have used the policy successfully to resolve an issue.

There was further discussion of specific policies equity-seeking ministry personnel wish the United Church would create or update, but also this general wisdom: Equity-seeking ministry personnel have significant experience navigating, writing, interpreting, and interacting with policies; often policies that were not written with them in mind, which they have had to adapt or advocate to change. And the oversight and discipline are directed more at ministry personnel than at communities of faith. There is a realistic pessimism among this group, recognizing the limitations of policy to affect change, and that change moves slowly because policy is set nationally but implemented by each community of faith. Despite these limitations, policy is important as both a position statement and to outline processes for intervention. But, as one participant said, “policies must be based on relationship, not the other way around.”

## **Experiences of Health, Helps, and Hopes in Pastoral Relationships**

To promote the health of a pastoral relationship, different approaches and supports are needed at different stages. Equity-seeking ministry personnel experience many of the same dynamics typical of ministry personnel in general, but these dynamics can be accentuated by various equity factors, and there can be more dire consequences if a healthy pastoral relationship is not maintained. Participants in this study expressed that to support thriving pastoral relationships, they sought intentional welcoming; clarity and openness, from all parties; and support and accountability throughout the church structures (local and regional/national).

When equity-seeking ministry personnel are hired, the community of faith should be given specific training about the implications of that and possible issues before the

ministry personnel arrives. While this aspect affects all equity-seeking ministry personnel, it is particularly important for those hired through admissions, mutual recognition agreements, and those who are racialized.

There were many stories about positive experiences. Trust and relationship seem to grow through risking vulnerability, genuine care, shared grief experiences, mutual understanding and appreciation, and intentional time. Good communication grows with trust, time, honesty, boundaries, theology, and creative thinking. Spiritual growth and community growth go hand in hand with learning and experience, both for equity-seeking ministry personnel and for their communities of faith.

Despite some pastoral relationships being unhealthy or struggling through a rough period, equity-seeking ministry personnel's hopes for pastoral relationships, in large part, parallel the United Church's vision: for thriving and equitable community life for all of God's children, including ministry personnel. These include hopes in the areas of safety and respect, equity in the community of faith, lay capacity and involvement, time and financial resources, connection with the wider church, and spiritual skills and healing.

Safety and respect are shown by effectively addressing bullying; collaborative teammates; a recognition of the humanity of equity-seeking ministry personnel; and respect and regard for their families, especially by lay leadership. Equity in the community of faith looks like the whole community embracing the diversity and equity not just of their equity-seeking ministry personnel but of the community in general, everything from being "less racist" to genuine transformation.

Out of their lived experience, equity-seeking ministry personnel have valuable wisdom about how to enact change. We asked participants for one tangible change that would make a significant positive shift in their pastoral relationship. Responses can be summarized in the themes of financial support, pastoral oversight and pastoral relations advocacy, intentional connection and accompaniment, effective lay structures, staff support and teamwork, and opportunities for growth.

In addition, most equity-seeking ministry personnel have found some form of mentoring relationship not just helpful, but invaluable. The method of setting up the relationship, the nature of the support, and the equity-seeking identities of mentors have all been significant factors. While many equity-seeking ministry personnel find the mentors and supports they need through their own efforts or informal support,

regional ministers, vocational ministers, and candidacy pathways could play a more active role in connecting ministry personnel with well-trained potential mentors, and introducing them to others in the area, particularly to other equity-seeking ministry personnel and networks.

What can the wider church do to support pastoral relationships? Responses highlight a shift to relationally based ways of being that include support and accountability for ministry personnel and communities of faith. With shrinking budgets and increasing complexity, this is a challenge, but one that aligns with shifting our paradigm from a colonial world view to more Indigenous ways of being that include interconnected and reciprocal relationships.

While many equity-seeking ministry personnel do find support from the wider church, many others feel isolated. They are looking for pastoral support as well as people who will step in and intervene with congregations on critical equity issues. For ministry personnel to feel supported is critical to their well-being and the well-being of the pastoral relationship. Whether it's around urgent issues or a simple check-in, connection with staff at regional or national levels that is intentional, supportive, and personal is critical.

Asked to comment on things the wider church (regional councils, Office of Vocation, General Council Office, National Indigenous Council, admissions process) has done right to help their pastoral relationships, and things the wider church could do to support pastoral relationships and equity-seeking ministry personnel, participants' perspectives can be summarized in these eight themes:

- direct connection—the most frequently mentioned area
- supporting connection, proactively
- practical support and intervention (around church processes and resources, as well as accountability from communities of faith)
- prioritizing equity
- addressing internal inequity
- valuing participation
- training and education
- benefits and policy

Lastly, numerous participants on both the surveys and in conversations remarked on the importance of the wider church undertaking this project and were grateful for

the opportunity to share their experience, concerns, and wisdom.

To read the full report, which includes quotations from participants, theological reflection, and methodology, email [officeofvocation@united-church.ca](mailto:officeofvocation@united-church.ca).

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