



**The United Church  
of Canada  
General Council**

# **GC45 FSLDW02 Modernizing Human Resources Models within The United Church of Canada for Summer 2025**

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**Origin: Rev. Michelle Armstrong – St. Paul's United Church**

## **1. What is the issue? Why is it important?**

I believe the Holy Spirit is calling the church to overhaul the human resources processes used to address concerns raised by ministry personnel in regard to working conditions and to encourage the church to provide more effective interventions to ensure safe and healthy workplaces.

Unhealthy work environments inhibit the achievement of the church's call to “encourage and support ministry personnel towards health, joy and excellence in ministry practice” (*The Manual*, 6.3.9). Ministry Personnel are facing issues of bullying, discrimination, and unhealthy pastoral dynamics that can lead to unsafe work environments. The pressures of reduced financial and human resources in many Communities of Faith exacerbate these issues.

Ministry personnel are experiencing inadequate support in resolving issues when concerns are raised to M&P committees. Regional Personnel Ministers (RPM) work to assist but are often overwhelmed with work, and some clergy have experienced a reluctance of the RPM to use the authority of the region in congregational matters. This lack of adequate response and support leaves ministry personnel in vulnerable positions and contributes to a decrease in clergy wellness. Communities of Faith are also put at risk of lawsuits for lack of due diligence.

## **2. What is happening now?**

I am bringing forward this proposal because of the numerous ministers across the country who have lived/are living through unhealthy responses to real concerns in their working environments. I am also motivated by my personal experience of seeking to resolve an issue and being unsuccessful, while watching competent lay leaders get overwhelmed and frustrated as they worked to facilitate resolution.

Currently, there are cracks in our Human Resources system that allow for situations (especially conflict involving congregational accountable staff) to be pushed aside and downplayed. The M&P committee is required in our polity (*The Manual*, B.7.8.5) . It is populated with volunteer members of the congregation who frequently lack adequate training and are often conflict-avoidant. There is often a lack of clear processes that must be followed when issues are raised. This means that our Human Resources system is less rigorous and responsive than human resources in other sectors, such as government and educational institutions.

We have wonderful church members in the role of M&P—they are supportive and well-meaning, but often are not skilled in human relations and conflict management. When conflicts arise among ministry personnel and other staff members, the advice given by some M&P committees has been to just get along with each other without exploring what is occurring, or telling the complainant that their issues will be looked into without any further response. In all congregations, but especially in smaller and rural congregations, there is a distinct possibility that members of an M&P committee could be extended family members directly involved in concerns raised or the member may have other conflicts of interest because of personal interactions and connections with the clergyperson. There is also a significant discrepancy in the skills and functioning of M&P committees across Communities of Faith and between regional councils. This leads to a system that is not sufficiently rigorous or consistent across the church. The result is a situation where we do not effectively deal with complaints or prevent situations from escalating.

Even if an M&P member has HR experience, if that level of understanding is not present in the committee as a whole, it can become a challenge to implement good processes. In addition, unlike their workplaces, there is not a strong HR resource team to back them up and provide additional tools and insight. When faced with challenging situations, this can lead to stressed and overwhelmed volunteers.

Regional council response and support varies and, at times, is not adequate to ensure that good policy and procedures are followed. This includes not referring ministry personnel to

policies under which they could take action, i.e. workplace harassment policy. When situations are not resolved, and the ministry personnel decide that they will not/can not minister in a given situation any longer the same problems are often encountered by the new personnel.

In an environment where people want to be nice and caring, where grace is a virtue and volunteers in the congregation do not want to rock the boat, there is a high potential for people to try to excuse, downplay, and avoid situations of conflict. This is also particularly problematic and demoralizing when others in the congregational system who are experiencing similar challenges do not speak up because of fear of retribution for raising concerns, and where there is a congregational pattern of not dealing with concerns effectively.

### **3. What is the recommendation?**

I am requesting that the General Council take action to improve the outcomes for ministry personnel, congregations and the church, with an eye toward improving health, joy and excellence in ministry. To do this, the church could:

A. Research what is currently happening:

- Gather data on the experiences of ministry personnel to understand the scope of the challenge faced by ministry personnel attempting to get support for workplace issues.
- Identify the factors that increase the likelihood of a prompt and adequate response and understand what occurs when ministry personnel have experienced protracted complaint processes. Then strategically foster the conditions for good outcomes and mitigate stumbling blocks to resolution.
- Review how our polity and practices hold up to current best practices on supervision, clarity of accountability and authority, complaint processes and types of response given to complaints. Plan revisions to incorporate best practices, not as optional, but as standard operations for M&P committees.
- review the impacts of M&P committee member's multiple roles on their effectiveness. Members of the committee are supervisors, but they are also volunteers, governors, funders, recipients of services and part of the web of relationships among the community of faith. These multiple roles mean that there is an increased chance that one will be unable to remain neutral and unbiased towards both

the clergyperson and the situation.

- investigate alternative ways to deliver Human Resource services in congregations, especially around conflict/complaints so that issues are dealt with expediently, by well-trained people who are adequately resourced.

#### B. Low-stakes initial responses:

- Standardize training for M&P committees across the church and provide clear and directive processes in easy-to-follow language.
- Move to mandatory training and develop a structure to ensure that those serving on the committees complete the training and have retained knowledge. For example, the Presbyterian church requires all paid and lay leaders to take their Leading with Care Training (equivalent to our Tender-Trust and Faithful Footsteps documents) and score a certain level on a comprehension test. This may help mitigate some of the challenges but is not a sufficient solution in itself.
- Regularly communicate to clergy what resources are available when issues are not being addressed. Ensure processes are laid out so ministers under stress can easily navigate the system and layers of response if elevation is needed. This would lead to the clergy feeling less isolated and increased support, both of which are critical for wellness.

#### C. Forward-thinking Pilot Projects

Leaving change until all of this study is done will not fix the problems. We could run bold pilot projects to investigate the outcomes of alternatives to M&P committee oversight such as:

1. Allow one or more regional councils to experiment with a system where:
  - The role of the Ministry Personnel Committee is taken on by regional council program staff, a regional council committee or a combination thereof. There could be a single point of contact in the community faith with the regional council body.
2. Allow one or more regional councils to experiment with a system where:
  - Communities of Faith operate under a policy governance model, with one paid role identified as head of staff. Head of staff would carry out all M&P functions related to

other paid staff and key volunteers. Head of staff would report directly to the board, who would directly supervise the head of staff.

3. Allow one or more regional councils to experiment with a system where:

- The Executive Minister of the regional council became the direct supervisor of ministry personnel and lay staff in the communities of faith. There could be a single point of contact in the community faith with the regional council body.

4. Allow one or more regional councils to experiment with a system where:

- Ministry personnel and lay staff, working in clusters, undertake mutual supervision and oversight, replacing the role of M&P. Regional councils would provide training, support, and act as the appeal body. There could be a single point of contact in the community faith with the cluster and regional council.

The regions would gather data on how these pilot projects (or others) have worked over a three-year period and make recommendations to the next General Council regarding potential changes to our Human Resources model across the church.

## **4. Background information:**

The church has well-defined processes in place for complaints raised by members concerning clergy conduct. However, similarly robust processes are not in place when clergy experience difficulties in congregations.

Many of the trainings offered by regional councils are voluntary. There are no processes in place to ensure basic knowledge. This means ministry personnel sometimes are the ones trying to get the committees to function as they are supposed to.

Beyond informal groups and anecdotal stories, we do not have an accurate picture of the scope to which unaddressed issues are impacting minister personnel, including the number who have left the ministry, and the costs incurred by our short and long-term disability and health plans.

## 5. How does this proposal help us to live into our church's commitments on equity?

The M&P committee can significantly affect the formal and informal working conditions of ministry personnel and staff and how concerns are dealt with. It is possible because the M&P committee's role in living into the church's commitments to equity has not been clearly articulated, that ministers from equity-seeking communities and admissions ministers could experience greater vulnerability when seeking support for pastoral concerns.

### **For the body transmitting this proposal to the General Council:**

Please select the appropriate option and provide the key discussion points for items being forwarded to the General Council:

- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree without forwarding to the General Council
- ☐ Disagree and forwarding to the General Council

If you have questions regarding this proposal, please send them to: [GCinfo@united-church.ca](mailto:GCinfo@united-church.ca)

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