



**The United Church  
of Canada  
General Council**

# **GC45 Board of Vocation Accountability Report for Summer 2025**

True Document Date: June 22, 2025

**Origin: Board and Office of Vocation**

## **Overview**

The Office of Vocation's purpose is to "support faithful, well-equipped, effective ministry personnel," from initial discernment of a potential call to ministry through formation for ministry, the practice of ministry, and into retirement stages. The Board of Vocation is the elected member body which oversees the Office of Vocation, honouring and living into intercultural mission and ministry.

The Office of Vocation and the Board of Vocation are six years old and entering a seventh year of existence. While responsibilities around oversight, discipline, and formation for ministry are similar to those carried by presbyteries and Conferences prior to restructuring, these responsibilities are now held nationally, by the Office of Vocation, and entail a shift in practices and processes. The "split episcopate" now means that the responsibility for collegiality and "health, joy, and excellence" for ministry personnel rests with regional councils and the responsibility for formation, oversight, and discipline rests with the Office of Vocation. This was intentional in the restructuring to separate the place of collegiality from the place of discipline. While these are clearly defined responsibilities, there are also shared responsibilities around support to ministry personnel (whether in a pastoral relationship or not) and working together to ensure healthy pastoral relationships when conflict or concerns about ministry personnel and communities of faith arise.

As the Office of Vocation continues to develop, the Board also continues to learn in its development and guidance of the work of the Office. The Board of Vocation sets standards and exercises decision-making authority in these areas of responsibility:

- Standards for training, accreditation, and continuing education
- Fitness and readiness for accreditation for ministry
- Registry of accredited ministry personnel
- Oversight and discipline of ministry personnel
- Support to Regional Councils
- Conflict resolution facilitators lists
- Interim ministers and educational supervisors (ministry of supervision)
- Discontinued service lists (voluntary and disciplinary)

(The Manual, section E, E.2.2-E.2.10)

The Board of Vocation has 4 committees (Credentialling, Standards for Accreditation, Response, and Remedial), 7 Candidacy Boards, and the Admission Board, each composed of elected members and supported by General Council Office staff. The committees and Boards oversee the work of the Office of Vocation. The Office of Vocation is responsible for implementing the above and any decisions made by the Board of Vocation.

## Trends

### 1. *Number of ministry personnel, including Admission ministers, and part-time vacancies*

Consistently the church has seen an increase in the number of part-time vacancies and a decrease in the number of full-time vacancies over the last several years, including for Supervised Ministry Education sites. While there is a narrative in the church that there is a shortage of ministers, the shortage is in the number of full-time vacancies.

Increasingly, there are also more and more “collaborative” arrangements between pastoral charges, agreeing to share a minister between them. For most ministers, full-time work is a necessity, including for the approximately 50 Admission ministers who are currently searching for appointments and whose gifts, skills, and experience have much to contribute to the vitality and health of local communities of faith and to the denomination as a whole. Consequently, the Board of Vocation has maintained the pause on new Admission applications for 2025 while we continue the work already in process around supporting these ministers as they seek appointments and encouraging the church to be open to the gifts that admission ministers bring to our denomination.

The number of applicants and candidates decreased slightly in 2024, to just under 200,

from a high in 2023 of almost 250.

## *2. Concerns and complaints about ministry personnel*

Increasingly, the concerns that come to the Office of Vocation concerning ministry personnel are a reflection of the global context around us. Through the exploration of these concerns, we hear that complainants, respondents, lay leaders and communities of faith are feeling more disconnected from colleagues; the wider church; their support systems, and the type of ministry than they have experienced in the past. The polarization in society is also adding distress to our lay leaders and ministry personnel alike. Analysis of formal complaints resulting in investigations and reviews, from 2019 to 2023, indicate that there are some common factors in a majority of the findings. A broad interpretation is that a lack of self-awareness and emotional intelligence, and unhealthy approaches to conflict management are prevalent. If the complaint relates to sexual misconduct or workplace harassment policy breaches, the common finding is “misuse of power”. We see benefits and healthier pastoral relationships where ministry personnel and lay leaders find connection with others in the United Church and share wisdom and resources.

Finding pertinent ways and resources to minister in the world’s ever changing and challenging context often feels elusive. Phrases like “we haven’t been equipped for this” have become familiar refrains for our ministry personnel. Ministry contexts that are struggling for stability and security place added burdens on our leaders when faced with already difficult secular environments to navigate.

## *3. Mental health concerns*

Mental health concerns and overall well-being are a concern in the country as a whole, including in the church. We recognize that ministry personnel are not immune from these concerns; the church’s Employee and Family Assistance Plan and its restorative care provider have data that indicates mental health access amongst ministry personnel is consistent with what they are seeing in other professions. While it is good news that ministry personnel rates are not higher than in other professions, this does not eliminate the need for support and care for ministry personnel throughout the church.

# Leadership Needs for the Church We Are Becoming

We are seeing some unique challenges of preparing leaders in this time in the life of the church. It has always been true that the gap between formation and reality on the ground in ministry leaves newly formed leaders frustrated with what isn't possible for them to do with their passion and vision but this has been exaggerated by the rapid decline in vitality in congregations. And at the same time, there is a desire and need for the church to rethink its leadership. The challenge of forming and educating leaders for the church we are becoming, who must minister in the church we currently are, is a significant challenge before the church. The expectations, hopes, and formation for ministry are significantly different than the reality of expectations and hopes of many communities of faith.

As the Office of Vocation looks to the future of ministry leadership in the church, staff are engaged in work in the "Invigorate Leadership" objective of the [strategic plan](#) around mentorship, co-operative ministry models, and the lay and ministry personnel leadership formation and training that will be needed in these models of ministry. Mentorship and peer support is vital for the health and well-being of ministry personnel; this is being built into Candidacy Pathway. Looking to co-operative ministry models and the possibility of an increase in bi-vocational ministries, we anticipate the need for leaders (lay and ordered) who are team-oriented, experimental, deeply rooted in faith, who help reach out to the communities, and who can be a "teaching elder" to help form and deepen faith in seekers, newcomers to the United Church, and long-time United Church people.

And as the church seeks to become more diverse, we continue the work of identifying and attempting to address barriers to ministry for those who are "equity seeking" (including but not limited to those who identify as Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQIA, living with disability, English as an additional language, neuro-diverse). The [Pastoral Relations Equity Report](#) has led to work currently in process to identify ways in which pastoral relations processes can be strengthened so as to support equity seeking ministry personnel and communities of faith. "The Leadership Counts project (<https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/leadership-counts>) has helped the church be aware of the equity identities of our ministry personnel.

While current Supervised Ministry Education (SME) appointments can help fill a need for some communities of faith who can only offer part-time ministry, the intent of SME is to enable the integration and practice of skills and knowledge for the practice of ministry. These two intents often intersect but not always. As the church continues to identify the leadership and formation needed for the church we are becoming, SMEs will become even more crucial in formation.

## **Learning and Shifts in Practices and Culture**

Along with the development of new policies and practices for formation, oversight, discipline, and accompaniment of ministry personnel, the creation of the Office of Vocation has also entailed something of a culture shift. Some of the shift in culture results from this work now being held nationally rather than primarily at presbytery and Conference. The Office of Vocation holds two principles in tension: consistency throughout the church alongside an expressed desire of the church to allow for contextual and experiential interpretations of polity.

The clearest example of this are the six national Candidacy Boards and Vocational Ministers, who are connected geographically to specific regional councils. The Indigenous Candidacy Board is a fully national expression, connected to the National Indigenous Church, and therefore with candidates and elected members from across the country. And the Québec and Eastern Ontario Candidacy Board is the national Board for Francophone applicants and candidates. While the same national policies apply for all six of these Boards, each Candidacy Board has also developed its own ways of attending to context, candidates' experience, prior learning, and identified needs for education and formation. This is in keeping with the three core principles of Candidacy Pathway: flexible, nimble, adaptive. No one candidate's Pathway will look the same as another's, as each will bring different gifts, skills, education, and experience to the Pathway.

The Indigenous Candidacy Board and Indigenous Vocational Minister, with support from the Program Coordinator for Ministry Vocation and the guidance of the Grandmothers' Circle, have been working diligently on creating an Indigenous Candidacy Pathway. This Pathway was called for in the Caretakers' Calls to the Church in 2018 and now is with the Grandmothers' Circle for review. This is a significant step within the Indigenous Office and the Office of Vocation; we anticipate learnings from the Indigenous Candidacy Pathway will also be of value for the non-Indigenous Candidacy Pathway.

As elected members and staff live into the work of the Office of Vocation, changes in policies have been needed. For instance, based on feedback from Lay Supervision Teams, part of the Supervised Ministry Education requirement for candidates for ordained and designated lay ministry, changes were made to policies and practices. These changes allowed for feedback from the ministry site to occur but on a less onerous and cumbersome basis, taking into account changes in volunteers' time and energy.

While the Board of Vocation and the Office continue to learn as this ministry unfolds, the Board and staff anticipate learning more out of the mandated restructuring review. This will provide opportunity for strengthening the ways in which the Office of Vocation can support ministry personnel from applicant through to retirement stages. This includes continuing to work collaboratively with regional council staff, particularly those with pastoral relations responsibilities, so as to support healthy pastoral relationships.

## Gratitude for the Board of Vocation

We are very grateful to the members of the Board of Vocation, all its committees, and the Candidacy Boards for their willingness to jump into this new work and continue to shape the development and growth of the Office of Vocation. In particular, we recognize and give thanks for the ministry and gifts of the Chair of the Board since its beginning, Rev. Norm Seli. Rev. Seli has completed two terms (seven years) as chair, through the challenges of the Covid pandemic, and has served with grace, compassion, and wisdom.

**For more information, including statistics, please see:**

- 2023 Board of Vocation Accountability Report to GCE  
<https://generalcouncil.ca/document/gce44-board-and-office-vocation-accountability-report-january-2023>
- 2024 Board of Vocation Accountability Report to GCE  
<https://generalcouncil.ca/document/gce44-board-and-office-vocation-accountability-report-january-2024>
- 2025 Board of Vocation Accountability Report to GCE:  
<https://generalcouncil.ca/document/gce44-board-and-office-vocation-accountability-report-march-2025>
- <https://united-church.ca/leadership/supporting-ministry/office-vocation>

Document Type: [Report](#)

General Council: [GC45](#)

Originating Body: [Other](#)