



**The United Church
of Canada
General Council**

GC45 COM05 Rescind and Review Manual Changes to “Voluntary Associate Minister” Requirements for Summer 2025

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

Since at least 2010, the Manual has stated that ministry personnel not in a call or appointment in a pastoral charge, community of faith, paid accountable ministry, or recognized ministry must be in “formal association” with a pastoral charge/community of faith in order to carry out the “functions of ministry.”

Many, but not all, regional councils have therefore created policies for ensuring “formal association” by requiring ministry personnel not in a call, appointment, or recognized ministry to become a “voluntary associate minister (VAM)” in a community of faith in order to carry out the functions of ministry. This includes retired ministry personnel. To become a “VAM”, all ministry personnel must be in “good standing” (not under discipline or review with the Office of Vocation) and must have completed the mandatory requirements (annual declaration with respect to criminal charges, racial justice training, boundaries and refresher trainings).

12.5.2 in the Manual 2025 and the associated implications and interpretations changes the United Church’s theological understanding of commissioning and ordination as a lifelong vocation. This theological understanding of commissioning and ordination is shared with Christian denominations who are members of the World Council of Churches, expressed in

the 1983 document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (BEM).. Any such change to our theological understanding of ordered ministry should require a remit.

2. What is happening now?

The impact of this change is to suddenly revoke a person's status as being part of the lifelong vocation as part of The Order of Ministry. If followed, it would leave communities and pastoral charges with few resources for pulpit supply, pastoral support, or emergency coverage. It would leave many retired ministers in even greater financial distress.

Further, it suggests that oversight of ministry personnel rests with a community of faith, which has never been the United Church's understanding of ministry. Rather, oversight of ministry personnel is held by the Office of Vocation currently; prior to restructuring, oversight was held by the Presbytery.

3. What is the Recommendation

GC45 could determine that this bylaw in the Manual should be reviewed.

The review will include a broad conversation regarding the understanding of ordered ministry as a lifelong vocation. It may be determined that this bylaw in the Manual should be rescinded or that a remit should be held, if this is a change to the United Church's understanding of ordered ministry, shared commonly with other denominations around the world.

GC45 could decide that the purpose of any requirement and the possibility for such formal associations as Voluntary Associate Ministers, in order to remain in "Good Standing" with the Office of Vocation, and any requirements regarding them should be explained explicitly as part of the review process, and that the responsibilities and limitations of each party be referenced.

4. Background Information:

The following are several of the concerns brought forward by ministers and congregations.

1. This constitutes a change to the traditional Christian theological understanding of Ordination and Commissioning (ministry) as a lifelong Vocation. Because of this change to the understanding of ordered ministry, this should have been a remit.
2. The reason for this change is nowhere explained or justified.
3. This is a very impractical requirement, because retired ministers are not permitted to be in such a relationship with their former congregations for 1-3 years after retirement, but other congregations likely depend on their presence to cover for holidays, sudden illness etc. It is especially difficult in small and rural communities. Indeed, the Regions depend on retired ministers in many roles, such as Pastoral Charge Supervisors, Educational Supervisors, active members of working groups and committees.
4. The responsibilities of congregations and ministers in this relationship are nowhere spelled out, and congregations are reluctant to enter an undefined relationship. There is potential in this to interfere with existing pastoral relationships, rather than supporting them.
5. The policy is inequitable because it affects women and minorities more profoundly. Congregations may be pushed to choose which retired minister they may be in relationship with, and are often inclined to choose white men.
This result
 - a. gives congregations less exposure to minority ministers as pulpit or temporary supply or speakers.
 - b. Financially penalizes all ministers not in a VAM relationship, and see above, affects minority ministers more.
6. This policy casts aside the investment the church has made in an educated clergy and will reduce the number of retired ministers available for coverage. This leaves congregations unable to avail themselves of local resources, restricts congregations' access to the sacraments, and further disadvantages small, struggling and rural congregations.
7. Increases the workload on employed ministers unable to find coverage for holiday, sick leave etc.

5. How does this proposal help us to live into our church's commitment on Equity?

Background information above.

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