

Cooperating communities of faith and alternative pastoral relationships

Origin: East Central Ontario Regional Council

1. Sustaining ministry in small communities of faith

We believe the Holy Spirit is calling us to find creative ways of responding to the large number of small communities of faith across the country that lack the financial ability to sustain full-time ministry personnel and are unable to call ministry personnel to part-time positions. This Proposal seeks the establishment of guidelines for the governance structure and the formation of alternative pastoral relationships as Pastoral Charges seek to form cooperative, collaborative partnerships to call full time ministry.

2. Why is this issue important?

In a post Christian society, and as many rural communities are being depopulated, and urban centers experience changing demographics, an increasing number of communities of faith experience declining membership resulting in financial limitations. The inability or unsuccessful search to call part-time ministry personnel results in pulpit vacancy and accelerates community of faith decline.

A reversal of this trend requires creative measures of support. As a denomination we have long held the belief 'that every pastoral charge shall have, as far as possible, a pastorate without interruption'. Our very being as a denomination was based on the cooperation of faith communities.

The preferential call for ministry personnel is fulltime ministry. Communities of faith unable to issue a fulltime call are significantly disadvantaged in Search. One of the creative solutions undertaken by pastoral charges is cooperating with other nearby pastoral charges. Such efforts have resulted in two Pastoral Charges seeking half-time positions to agree to call the same minister thereby creating full-time opportunity. In other locations the arrangement to create full-time ministry opportunity and the possibility of a successful call may involve multiple Pastoral Charges and a ministry team of a full-time member of the Ordered Ministry supported by a combination of retired supply, Congregational Designated Minister, and licensed lay Worship Leaders. The use of technology is also inviting Pastoral Charges and Congregations into new relationships. These creative ministries may be known as collaborative, partnered, cooperative or shared.

Historically Shared Ministry has been used to specifically describe a cooperative ministry that involves the United Church and another denomination.

The growing need for alternative pastoral relationships to ensure full-time ministry opportunities and to ensure ministry leadership in small congregations requires formal recognition of these arrangements and the establishment of minimum requirements and a guide to best practices. It has been demonstrated that a joint Ministry and Personal Committee is valuable in such arrangements.

Cooperative ministries of this nature, and alternative pastoral relationships have not been formally acknowledged and exist with a lack of consistency. Recognition will establish common practices and increased security for participating pastoral charges and the ministers that serve in these ministries.

Currently, and without a formal recognition of such pastoral charge relationships, the process of Search is greatly complicated and in some cases the service record of ministry personnel fails to recognize pastoral charges served concurrently.

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

Small congregations are disadvantaged in many ways; financial and leadership being two important considerations. Communities of faith that have entered cooperative ministry relationships have identified the absence of resources and guidelines. They have further noted that ChurchHub does not adequately nor correctly accommodate neither the pastoral charges nor ministry personnel who participate in such ministry arrangements. This proposal would recognize and support communities of faith that have already entered or are exploring entering a cooperative ministries partnership. The failure to recognize and accommodate these congregations continues to perpetuate an uncertain future.

4. How might the General Council respond to the issue?

The East Central Ontario Regional Council proposes that the General Council could:

- **Identify cooperative ministries as a faith community structure within the United Church;**
- **develop resources, guidelines for the formation and governance of cooperative ministries;**
- **provide support and preparation for ministry personnel serving in alternative pastoral relationships;**
- **ensure that cooperative ministries, pastoral charges and ministry personnel serving in such arrangements are able to participate accurately and fully through ChurchHub.**

5. For the body transmitting this proposal to the General Council:

Are there comments, affirmations, suggestions you would like to make with respect to this proposal? Is this proposal in response to a previous proposal, motion or action? If so, please name the previous action(s) and proposal number(s).

If you have questions regarding this proposal, please send them to info@generalcouncil44.ca.