

April 17, 2020

Dear Colleagues in Ministry,

I am guessing that you have never presided at Easter services like you presided at services this Easter Sunday! These are extraordinary times.

Extraordinary times require extraordinary responses. You are demonstrating this with the many and varied ways that you have moved worship, pastoral care, and devotional study to telephone calls, YouTube and Zoom, social media and e-mail. Kudos to you! I hope that with Holy Week and Easter Sunday now celebrated you will have a chance to catch your breath and establish sustainable paces. This is not over yet.

The Executive of the General Council took an extraordinary action on April 15 when it **temporarily** amended pastoral relations policies in *The Manual* to allow the governing body, rather than a congregational meeting, to make certain pastoral relations decisions (see [GS 49](#) on united-church.ca). Specifically, the governing body, after consultation with the congregation, in whatever way is possible, may initiate a call or appointment, revise the terms of a call or appointment, or end a call or appointment when it is necessary to do so in a critical situation that cannot be effectively dealt with under any other bylaw or policy of the church. **What has not changed is that a decision by the community of faith is subject to the concurrence of the appropriate regional council body.** There is no change to the other requirements for ending a pastoral relationship (advance notice of meeting, 90 days' advance notice, etc.).

The temporary amendment makes reference to the "temporary layoff" of ministry personnel. This is not a concept that in normal circumstances we have ever contemplated, but these are not normal circumstances. Again, a governing board may not do this unilaterally. It must be with the concurrence of the regional council **only after demonstrating that there are no funding sources available** to maintain the ministry personnel position and **only after a declared intention that the ministry personnel will be recalled upon the cessation of the COVID-19 pandemic.** This provision is a last-resort action and would enable a minister to access government benefits for the duration of the layoff because of the crisis.

The Executive of the General Council has taken this action only after prayerful and thoughtful consideration.

The role of the regional council is critical at this time. In conversation with regional council staff I know that they, and the committees and commissions with which they work, are keenly aware of the astute assessment and discernment that they will have to bring to any proposals from governing boards in this time.

It is hoped that there will be few, if any, instances where it will be necessary to initiate a ministry personnel layoff. Many resources are available, from community of faith assets, government wage subsidies, and regional council and denominational emergency loan funds. If, however, it does become necessary, then every effort will be taken to do so transparently,

according to our polity as amended, in respect of the tradition and practice of call, and in full consideration of the rights of ministry personnel.

I pray blessings upon you and upon the ministries with which you are engaged. May you remain strong in faith and well in body.

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