

**Ministry Support Task Group
Report to Toronto Conference Executive**

April 4, 2009

Let us find our health in seeking the health of others (Parker Palmer)

At the September 10, 2008 meeting of Toronto Conference Executive a motion was made by Allan Parker seconded by Tom Clark that a Task Group be established to examine the following concerns on behalf of ministry personnel in the conference

- To look at current sources of support for Ministry Personnel
- To consult with the Conference's Division of Ministry Personnel and Education to determine what has been done or has been planned regarding support for Ministry Personnel
- To find ways of helping the Church to be a better employer
- To make recommendation for ways of being supportive to Ministry Personnel in the future.

I, as President, was authorized to establish this task group. The group consisted of the following individuals, Jan Aylward, Grant Kerr, David Bruce, Rick McKinley, past president and me. We were joined for our first meeting by Nancy Knox who made an important contribution but was not able to continue to be with us. The group met in October, November, January, February and March. At the March meeting we consulted with a number of other colleagues, 14 of us were present in all, representing a wide range in theological position, years in ministry, age and context of ministry. In gathering the group for the March consultation, we sent out 30 personalized letters and emails to every presbytery. A few people chose to respond and send regrets expressing their longing to be part of such a gathering but saying they were unable to be present due to work load. We had no response from many others.

First, to address our efforts at fulfilling the mandate given to us: we did look at current sources of support for ministry personnel. All of the people who are part of this task group have had many years of experience in pastoral relations work, so, it was easy for us to name the policies and procedures which are already in place to support ministry personnel. We acknowledge the Restorative Care Program, Warren Sheppell, our insurance policy coverage for health and dental and the Salary and Housing Schedule used as a guide for Pastoral Charges and Presbyteries. There is an awareness that the MEPS Unit of General Council works on behalf of ministry personnel in these structural ways. It was also acknowledged that it is helpful to have a centralized payroll now that ensures that all ministry personnel are paid appropriately and on time. We know that compensation issues are being addressed by the General Council. However, there are some significant concerns remaining, primarily these are regarding the "minimums" quoted in the Salary and Housing Schedule. There is a wide spread awareness that many pastoral charges will continue to pay the "minimum" which tends to keep highly trained ministry personnel in difficult financial straits.

This leaves us with a question: how can we help pastoral charges value the work of ministry personnel in ways that acknowledge their expertise and dedication?

Much of our task group conversation, and that of the larger group we consulted with, revolved around the Isolation in Ministry Report which we are waiting to see implemented. Since the general consensus of the group is that ministry personnel are not well supported as individuals and as professionals by the United Church, disappointment was expressed repeatedly at the slowness of the Church to address this critical issue. It was clear from our conversations that one does not need to be geographically isolated to feel isolated.

The second point in the mandate was to consult with the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education on the concerns felt and expressed by ministry personnel. We did that. What we heard in asking our question is that the concerns will be addressed by new policies which will be implemented by the General Council after the next meeting in August 2009.

Unfortunately, we felt the division missed the point. We believe that as a large institution, the United Church may be doing the best it can under the circumstances by developing policies that attempt to meet the needs of all. However, what the church cannot address and what is more important, are the inter-personal relationships among clergy and clergy and the congregations. That is the area in which the pain and disillusionment lie. As Tony Robinson and others have pointed out, we are attempting to fix problems with technical solutions when what is needed is an adaptive, cultural change.

All of this leads us to the third point of the mandate: helping the church to become a better employer. Our feeling as a task group is that this is beyond the scope of our capability. Other groups are advocating for changes in the church's compensation policies that will continue to address some needs. We are satisfied that what can be done is presently being done. The one issue that continues to recur in conversation around compensation is the narrowness of the gap between salaries of ordered ministry and designated lay ministry. This has been a concern expressed for a number of years in various courts of the church. We are left again with another question: how does the United Church value an educated clergy?

The last point in the mandate is to recommend to the new presbyteries ways in which the new structure may be more supportive to ministry personnel. It was this last point which prompted us to gather people together which we did on March 11, 2009 at St. John's, Alliston.

During the four hours we spent together in conversation, questions were asked and some answers received. The afternoon session was reserved for the following three questions:

- A. What are the gaps in our feeling/experiences?
1. What we heard is that there is a lack of knowledge among our colleagues concerning the support that is already available to them. Only a few of those present were aware of the services of Warren Shepell and that they are all covered by that service. A few who had accessed their services in the past found it hard to communicate their circumstances to people who were not aware of how the church functions. They were also not aware that that concern has begun to be addressed. Some did not know that our insurance coverage includes psychological counseling and some alternative therapies.
 2. We heard there is a sense of lack of trust among colleagues at presbytery. Some there are perceived of as "power" people and one doesn't know how power and knowledge will be used against one in some circumstances. How can we re-define a sense of

belonging as we begin life in our new presbyteries (do we need help from people outside of the church who specialize in change management?)

It was also noted that we need to separate accountability from support.

3. Congregational understanding: congregations don't seem to grasp the role of the minister, either in terms of identity or in expectation/responsibility. Clergy are feeling more and more like hired employees rather than as being understood as leaders in a covenantal relationship. In our society which is in great transition, are congregations aware of the reality they are living out and the impact it is having on the life of the congregation and ministers' vocational identity?
 4. Institutionally speaking, clergy are not feeling helped by the United Church in an "uplifting:" manner. It is no one's fault, but staff are too busy and too pre-occupied with what is in front of them and must be done. Attentiveness to individuals is lacking in every court of the church, congregation, presbytery, conference and General Council. There is also deep concern over the various streams of ministry especially Designated Lay Ministry as opposed to Ordered streams such as Ordained and Diaconal.
- B. In small groups people were asked to complete the following sentence. "I wish we could..."
- ◆ -work closer as colleagues
 - ◆ -rid ourselves of the "Jesus" complex
 - ◆ -be more cooperative and meet in small groups for fellowship and study
 - ◆ -not be so tied to the ministry of the "building"
 - ◆ -have someone like a bishop!
 - ◆ -put our money where our mouth is – all like each other!
 - ◆ -truly understand how the system works and "play nice"

The next question was: "I wish we could structurally..."

- ◆ really change things
- ◆ have something in the system that bridges the gap between personal hurt and a 363
- ◆ update our JNAC's more frequently
- ◆ strengthen our Ministry Personnel Committees
- ◆ creatively use a trained chaplain in our presbyteries
- ◆ have a closer relationship between the General Council staff and those "on the ground"
- ◆ help people on the "front lines" feel part of the structure
- ◆ recognize the malaise of the presbyteries
- ◆ equalize salary and housing more fairly
- ◆ "thin" our bureaucracy
- ◆ mandate a pastoral charge and ministerial leadership review

C. Some major themes noted:

1. Use of a trained Chaplain in the New Presbyteries - for support, for presence and confidentiality. There's a yearning for a different pro-active presence in our midst to enable Pastoral Charge ministerial leaders be more effective and productive in their individual commitment to mission and ministry. It's a kind of outside connection for local personnel.
2. Local Congregations - There's a great need for on-going education, and a consistent reminder of the responsibility of local Councils (Boards) and M/P committees in particular - both for accountability and 'fairness' in ministry expectations and local support. Also congregations need to recognize Ministerial needs re 'experiencing worship' as an individual (not in leadership roles) from time to time...for personal renewal and spiritual growth. (NOT holiday time!)
3. Create useful opportunities for local Ministerial leaders to be a part of the National Church - as policies are developed, as hopes are expressed, as changes occur in themes etc. Included is a much more effective tool for helping local Ministerial leadership to understand (and indeed) be aware of supportive elements already in our policy and procedures.

In conclusion our sense from the stories we heard is that there is a possibility for the new presbyteries to take these concerns into consideration as new models and ways of doing things are being planned and implemented.

We are making the following recommendations:

- ✓ That educational opportunities will be available for all pastoral charges to inform and re-orient congregational life to a more clear understanding of the role of ministry, that it is a calling and ministers are not employees. We are in a covenantal relationship with one another. In order to facilitate this, I will be sending a letter to each pastoral charge and each ministry personnel encouraging this action.
- ✓ That ministry personnel be encouraged in every way to take time for small group gatherings for mentoring, study and fellowship for mutual nurture and enrichment. A suggestion for how this can happen is through the establishment of small cluster groups in the new presbyteries. Pastoral relations committees and commissions may find ways to help facilitate this.
- ✓ That it appears to be a good and helpful thing, to have a trained chaplain available to ministry personnel to be a listening ear. Each presbytery is encouraged to consider this option.
- ✓ We believe that none of these recommendations is extreme or asks anything beyond our capabilities. However, the recommendations do require that we take our relationships with each other seriously and that we have care for each other.