

MULTIPLE-MINISTER CONGREGATIONS

(A&P 2008, p. 369-375)

The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirms that the covenantal relationships among congregations, ministers and presbyteries are rooted in our primary relationship with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Congregations and ministers covenant to work together in ministry, and presbyteries are responsible to care for both their congregations and their ministers.

These foundational beliefs do not stipulate the particular ways that we might exercise authority, responsibility and accountability within our Christian community. Church documents such as the Book of Forms provide much needed guidance. However, our experience demonstrates that we need specific policies and procedures to equip the church to enter with confidence into congregational ministries with two or more ministers of Word and Sacraments.

For this reason, recent General Assemblies have studied these matters and facilitated church-wide consultation, resulting in the General Assembly in 2008 adopting the following report of the Life and Mission Agency (Ministry and Church Vocations). It outlines staffing configurations, definitions and responsibilities of sessions and presbyteries in multiple-minister congregations. It also suggests ways the church can ensure that ministers serving in multiple-minister congregations have requisite opportunities for learning and development.¹

Theological Foundation

The church orders its life on the foundation of what it believes. The Presbyterian Church in Canada confesses the absolute centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our “Prophet, Priest, and King, the Minister of the covenant of grace.”² There is one ministry, the ministry of Christ, which is continued in the church and is the responsibility of all Christians:

The Lord continues his ministry in and through the church. All Christians are called to participate in the ministry of Christ. As his body on earth we all have gifts to use in the church and in the world to the glory of Christ, our King and Head.³

At the same time, Christ recognizes that Christian communities need specific forms of leadership, if they are to be renewed and nurtured continually for ministry. Christ endows and calls individuals to provide leadership as ruling elders, congregational deacons, diaconal ministers, and ministers of Word and Sacraments.⁴ Christ also requires and enables the church to confirm these calls. *Living Faith* describes the purpose of these ministries:

Through such ministries the Word is proclaimed, God’s people are nourished and nurtured, supported and guided. In the oneness of Christ we seek to serve God.⁵

Since Christ is the source, inspiration and pattern for ministry, how does he inform the ways we minister? The gospels clearly present Jesus’ call to loving service. John 13:35 states Jesus’ criteria for those who serve others: “By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Mark 10:45 describes Jesus’ model for ministry: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Hence, the covenantal relationships among us, rooted in our relationship with

the Triune God, are to be characterized by the spirit of mutual co-operation, respect and love as brothers and sisters of Christ.

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, authority and responsibility are never assigned to one individual, but rather are shared corporately and equally, “to take away all occasion of tyranny.” (Book of Forms section 4) Therefore, the members of presbytery (representative elders from the congregations and serving ministers of Word and Sacraments and diaconal ministers) share together the authority and responsibility of the presbytery for the care and good order of its congregations and its ministers. In a similar way, the members of session (ruling elders and serving ministers of Word and Sacraments and diaconal ministers) share together the authority and responsibility of the session for the life and ministry of the congregation.⁶

What Is the Same?

Multiple-minister and sole-minister staffing configurations have much more in common than not. First and foremost, the nature and purpose of the pastoral and teaching office is the same in both multiple-minister and sole-minister congregations. This is the case because our church’s theological understanding of ministry and mission provides the framework within which the particular ministry of Word and Sacraments is carried out, regardless of how many ministers are serving in the congregation.

The relationships of authority and accountability between ministers and their presbyteries apply whether a minister is serving as the sole minister of a congregation or as one minister in a multiple-minister staff. All ministers are called by congregations with the approval of the presbytery.⁷ All ministers are members of the presbytery, with voice and vote. All ministers serve in their congregations as the executive of the presbytery (Book of Forms section 111). All ministers are responsible to the presbytery for the conduct of their lives and ministries, and the presbytery, for its part, is responsible to care for, to guide, and if necessary, to discipline their ministers.

In a similar way, the nature of the session, constituted as one leadership team made up of ministers and ruling elders together, applies to both multiple-minister and sole-minister congregations. So too, the interactions within these covenant relationships are expected to display the same Christ-like witness regardless of the staffing configuration: patterned after Christ, they should be characterized by a spirit of mutual co-operation, respect and love.

What Is Different?

What makes multiple-minister congregations different from sole-minister ones? It is the issues of authority, responsibility and accountability that arise within the ministerial staff teams that lead to the unique and sometimes challenging dynamics within them. Central to these issues is the sharing of the responsibility for leading the congregation, in partnership with the session. There appear to be two approaches: either the ministers share this responsibility equally or they share it unequally. The decision made about this central matter, in turn, affects decisions about lines of authority and accountability among them.

Staffing Configurations

Two staffing configurations for multiple minister congregations have been established. Both require the clear and understood expectations of the session and the congregation. In this regard, the congregation’s use of position descriptions for all its staff positions, including its ministers, will promote role clarity in the use of these staffing configurations.

Collegiality among ministers is obtainable and sustainable in both. In both, the ministers can work together to enhance and strengthen the ministry of the whole congregation.

Definitions

In the “tiered” staffing configuration, the responsibility for leading the congregation, in partnership with the session, is shared unequally by the ministers of Word and Sacraments. In fact, the minister serving in the “lead minister” position, as the head of staff, holds responsibility, with the session, for the congregation’s overall ministry. Ministers serving in “associate minister” positions have clearly defined areas of responsibility and are accountable to the lead minister for their day-to-day work, in consultation with the session. Ministers serving in “assistant minister” positions assist others and are accountable to the lead minister for their day-to-day work, in consultation with the session. Assistant ministers are called and inducted for limited periods of time.⁸ Associate and assistant ministers, like the lead minister, are part of the session. There is no requirement that the lead minister must always serve as moderator of the session.

In the “peer” staffing configuration, the responsibility for leading the congregation, in partnership with the session, is shared equally by the ministers of Word and Sacraments.

“Staff” consists of all those individuals, ordained or lay, paid or volunteer, who, with the authorization of the session or presbytery (as appropriate), assume major responsibility for the ministry and work of the congregation.

The characteristics of the two staffing configurations are presented below.

	Tiered Staffing Configuration	Peer Staffing Configuration
Congregation’s Ministry	The lead minister holds responsibility, with the session, for the congregation’s overall ministry.	The ministers together hold responsibility, with the session, for the congregation’s overall ministry.
Team Functioning	The lead minister, as head of staff, is responsible for facilitating the functioning of the whole staff team.	The ministers together are responsible for facilitating the functioning of the whole staff team.
Leadership, Vision, Encouragement	The lead minister, with the session, ensures that leadership, vision and encouragement are expressed fully in the life of the congregation.	The ministers together, with the session, ensure that leadership, vision, and encouragement are expressed fully in the life of the congregation.
Titles	One minister is given the title “Lead Minister”. Other ministers are given the title “Associate Minister” or “Assistant Minister”.	All ministers in the team are given the title “Minister”.

<p>Areas of Responsibility</p>	<p>Associate ministers have clearly defined areas of responsibility. These may be denoted in the position title, as “Associate Minister for (Area(s) of Responsibility)”.</p> <p>Assistant ministers assist others, as assigned by the lead minister in consultation with the session.</p>	<p>Ministers have clearly defined areas of responsibility. These may be denoted in the position title, as “Minister for (Area(s) of Responsibility)”.</p>
<p>Accountability</p>	<p>All ministers are accountable to the presbytery for the conduct of their lives and ministries.</p> <p>Associate ministers and assistant ministers are accountable for their day-to-day work to the lead minister, in consultation with the session.</p>	<p>All ministers are accountable to the presbytery for the conduct of their lives and ministries.</p>
<p>Decision Making</p>	<p>Associate ministers make decisions in their areas of responsibility, in consultation with the session. However if necessary the lead minister as head of staff, in consultation with the session, may override the decisions of an associate minister.</p> <p>Assistant ministers make decisions within aspects of the work delegated to them, as they assist others.</p>	<p>The ministers make decisions in their areas of responsibility, in consultation with the session.</p>
<p>Term</p>	<p>Lead ministers and associate ministers are called and inducted without term.</p> <p>Assistant ministers are called and inducted for limited periods of time.</p>	<p>All ministers are called and inducted without term.</p>

Succession

The question has been asked⁹ whether associate and assistant ministers should be permitted to apply for the position of lead minister in the same congregation. If permitted, this leads to a second question regarding the process by which they might be considered along with other minister applicants.

Typically, these questions have arisen within the context of multiple-minister staff teams experiencing serious difficulties. This denomination's experience suggests that, in some cases at least, associate or assistant ministers would be well advised to seek a call in a different congregation if they feel ready to serve in a lead minister position. Nevertheless, there appears to be no biblical or theological reasons for restricting them from applying for the lead minister position in their current congregation. Furthermore, the proposed staffing configurations, if adopted, will provide the church with much greater clarity about roles, responsibility and accountability in multiple-minister staff teams, potentially reducing the confusion and disagreement about these matters that have characterized most troubled situations. Hopefully, this will help prevent the kinds of turmoil and distress that have prompted the succession question in the first place.

For this reason, no policy restriction on associate or assistant ministers is proposed. However, in cases when associate or assistant ministers indicate their desire to be considered for the position of lead minister, the session, with the presbytery representative, should consider carefully the dynamics of the situation, and whether the person should be considered as sole candidate.

Responsibilities of Sessions in Multiple-Minister Congregations

The better the session understands its leadership role within the congregation, the better leadership they will be able to offer in all respects, including the calling of a minister to a multiple-minister staff team.

In exercising its overall supervisory role for the governance and mission of the congregation, the session is responsible for putting in place the support necessary for the good functioning of the staff and the fruitfulness of the congregation's ministry. For this reason, the session shall ensure that position descriptions are developed for all ministry staff positions. These documents shall state clearly which staffing configuration (tiered or peer) has been chosen. The division of responsibility among ministers must be agreed by the session and approved by the presbytery. Adequate finances are also critical. Since the session cannot assume that concerns of and about the staff are solely the responsibility of the ministers,¹⁰ it shall establish a personnel or pastoral support committee¹¹ to facilitate healthy communication about issues and concerns.

Before moving to add a ministry staff position, the session (and congregation) shall articulate clearly the reasons for doing so. Typically these should include some expansion of the congregation's ministry. Calling an additional minister primarily to compensate for an incumbent minister who is not functioning well is not a good idea. Our denomination's experience indicates that such contexts form a poor basis on which to build a ministerial staff team.

Sessions shall receive the permission of the presbytery before beginning a search for a new minister (whether a new position or an existing one).

Session shall work with the appointed interim moderator (who may be called a "presbytery representative") on all matters related to the search, selection and call of a minister. The incumbent minister(s) shall not serve in this role, but shall continue to

serve as moderator of session for all other matters. Incumbent ministers who will be continuing to serve in the congregation will be given the opportunity to provide input into the selection of the new minister.

Sessions shall be aware of the kinds of gifts and skills ministers need to thrive in a multiple ministry staff configuration. These include spiritual and emotional maturity; strong abilities to communicate well, to form interpersonal relationships and to respect and work co-operatively with others who are different; and the ability to resist getting drawn into triangles.¹²

Sessions shall be aware that lead ministers who will serve as “heads of staff” in tiered staffing configurations need additional abilities to guide and support other ministers in doing their best, and to provide leadership and vision to the congregation. It should not be assumed that the position of lead minister must be filled by the minister with the strongest gifts in preaching, the greatest age or the longest number of years of service. Similarly, there is no reason why responsibility for preaching and worship can not be assigned to an associate minister with strong gifts in these areas.

Sessions shall encourage their ministers to have regular meetings with a frequency suited to helping all staff members to serve well.

Sessions shall encourage their ministers to engage in appropriate and ongoing continuing education, and to make use regularly of their vacation entitlements.

For their part, ministers shall take responsibility for continuing to develop their own gifts and skills for ministry, thereby strengthening the leadership and service they offer. As well, ministers in multiple-minister congregations will ensure that they have networks in place to support them in their unique kind of ministry.

Sessions shall ensure that lay staff engage in appropriate and ongoing continuing education and regularly make use of their vacation benefits.

Responsibilities of Presbyteries towards Multiple-Minister Congregations

The better the presbytery understands its responsibility to care for and guide its congregations and its ministers, the better it will be able to provide this leadership.

Prior presbytery permission is required before sessions begin a search for a new minister (whether a new position or an existing one).

Presbytery shall appoint an interim moderator (who may be called a “presbytery representative”) to look after all matters related to the search, selection and call of a minister. The incumbent minister(s) shall not serve in this role, but shall continue to serve as moderator of session for all other matters. Incumbent ministers who will continue to serve in the new ministerial staff team will be given the opportunity to have input into the selection of the new minister.

Presbytery shall ensure that position descriptions including position title are prepared for all ministry positions, prior to a search for suitable candidates. These documents shall state clearly which staffing configuration (tiered or peer) has been chosen. The division of responsibility among ministers must be agreed by the session and approved by the presbytery. Presbytery shall also be assured that the congregation possesses adequate finances to support the ministry positions.

Calls to associate ministers shall specify the specific functions that they are responsible for fulfilling.

Calls to assistant ministers shall specify the period of time to which the term is limited, and may specify the particular areas in which they will be assisting others.

Interim moderators shall assist the session and congregation in clarifying as fully as possible the gifts, skills and interests needed in their new minister.

Presbyteries shall ensure that ministers serving in multi-minister congregations have networks in place to support them in their unique kind of ministry. Such networks may be ecumenical or, if Presbyterian, could be regional (perhaps a contribution of the synod). In addition, presbyteries shall ensure that ministers engage in appropriate and ongoing continuing education, including specialized learning about serving in teams, and regularly make use of their vacation entitlements.

Learning and Development for Ministers

Serving in multi-minister congregations presents ministers with challenges for which specialized training might prove beneficial. In other fields such as education, extensive training in personnel and management issues is required before a person serves in a supervisory role, for instance as a vice-principal or principal.

The church has a responsibility to ensure that ministers serving in multiple-minister congregations have opportunities and resources to learn and develop in their roles. To address this need, the General Assembly in 2008 made two additional decisions. The Life and Mission Agency (Ministry and Church Vocations) has been asked to discover, review and recommend educational resources and opportunities for ministers serving in multiple-minister congregations. Presbyteries have been asked to consult with ministers who are serving or who are seeking to serve in multiple-minister congregations about their preparedness for such roles and to follow up as may be appropriate.

Concluding Remarks

To equip the church to enter multiple-minister staffing arrangements in congregations with confidence, staffing configurations, definitions and responsibilities have been adopted. This document also gives guidance to the church in exploring the learning and development needs of ministers serving in multiple-minister congregations.

Endnotes

¹ In recent years General Assemblies have considered the following requests and reports concerning multiple-minister congregations: A&P 2002, p. 346-47; A&P 2003, p. 415-19 and 574-75; A&P 2004, p. 392-93; A&P 2005, p. 414-20; A&P 2006, p. 358-64; A&P 2007, p. 353; A&P 2008, p. 368-75.

² The "Preamble to the Ordination Vows" summarizes what The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes about the church and its ministry. It is read by the presbytery in every worship service in which a minister of Word and Sacraments is ordained or inducted. (Book of Forms section 447)

³ *Living Faith (Foi Vivante): A Statement of Christian Belief*, Toronto: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1984, section 7.2.1. *Living Faith (Foi Vivante)* is one of the standards of the church, subordinate to scripture.

⁴ Fuller discussion of the theology and practice of ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, as expressed by the people of God, church courts, ruling elders, congregational deacons, diaconal ministers and ministers of Word and Sacraments, is found in *Together in Ministry: The*

Theology and Practice of Ministry in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Toronto: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2004. See also A&P 2003, p. 372-412.

⁵ *Living Faith (Foi Vivante)*, 7.2.6.

⁶ Book of Forms sections 176-176.5, 200, 201, 105, 109, 110, 111.1, 112, 113.

⁷ Exceptions include presbytery appointments of ministers to stated supply or interim ministry positions, or appointments by the Life and Mission Agency. In such cases, the full call process is not followed, but the approval of the presbytery is required still.

⁸ Book of Forms section 235.2. In our legislation at present, the call of an assistant minister is the only situation in which a minister may be called and inducted to a ministry for a limited period of time. However, assistant ministers may also be called and inducted without term. This proposal, if adopted, would necessitate a change in our legislation, such that the call and induction of assistant ministers would always be limited to a specified term.

⁹ This question forms the substance of Directive No. 15 of Special Commission for Appeal No. 7, 1997, which was assigned to the Life and Mission Agency (Ministry and Church Vocations) in consultation with the Clerks of the Assembly.

¹⁰ Gray, Joan S. and Tucker, Joyce C. *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers*, 3rd edition, Geneva Press, 1999, p. 93.

¹¹ Although a committee of session, this committee does not need to consist solely of ruling elders. Ideally, the committee includes someone with knowledge of human resources practices and of legislation such as the Employment Standards Act. The committee shall model and foster healthy patterns of communication, which means, among other things, accepting no anonymous feedback from staff or people in the congregation.

¹² For instance, a minister has entered a triangle whenever he or she engages with others in defending, criticizing, covering for, "fixing," or "doing an end run around" the other minister.

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