

REFERRED OVERTURES – 2024

NO. 1 – PRESBYTERY OF OAK RIDGES

Re: Amending the policy re call process regarding students and Sunday supply

(Referred to Life and Mission Agency, p. 71)

WHEREAS, in the Procedures for Seeking Calls for graduating students under Rec. No. 11, to the 1993 General Assembly, two policy statements concerning pulpit supply for graduating students were added to the guidelines, stipulating that students in their graduating year should decline pulpit supply invitations in vacant congregations in which they have an interest in seeking a call or appointment, and interim moderations in these congregations should not extend pulpit supply invitations to students in their graduating year; and

WHEREAS, many churches have opted to conduct live-streamed services via YouTube, Facebook and Zoom, or recorded worship services online, making worship services led by students who have done pulpit supply at one of these churches readily available; and

WHEREAS, there are many vacant pulpits that require supply and students need these opportunities to develop their skills in conducting worship and preaching, and final year students who have completed their field placements are the perfect candidates to fill this gap; and

WHEREAS, it is important to develop healthy relationships between ministers and congregations: ordained ministers are familiar to many within The Presbyterian Church in Canada and they have an advantage over students who are not; pulpits filled by final year students give both the congregations and the students an opportunity to get to know each other, such that if a congregation chooses to call a final year student after graduation who has provided pulpit supply recently and that student is a good fit, this should be acceptable; and

WHEREAS, there should be clear communication between churches and the theological colleges that final year students are welcome to do Sunday supply with no risk to their interest in seeking a call after graduation;

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Oak Ridges humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to direct the Life and Mission Agency to amend this ruling by removing Rec. No. 11, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

NO. 2 – PRESBYTERY OF WATERLOO-WELLINGTON

Re: A taskforce to examine the impact of housing crisis on congregations

(Referred to Assembly Council Life in consultation with Clerks of Assembly and Life and Mission Agency Committee (MCV), p. XXX)

WHEREAS, the housing crisis is impacting millions of Canadians, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has a special obligation to reflect on the ways in which the housing crisis is impacting congregations and professional church workers; and

WHEREAS, in the present housing crisis appropriate housing allowances are over \$30,000 a year and some presbyteries over \$40,000 annually; and

WHEREAS, this is adding significantly to the cost of ministry, so a number of congregations are struggling to sustain the cost of ministry; and

WHEREAS, the present housing crisis is widening the economic divide present among the professional church workers of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, where some professional church workers have the good fortune of gaining significant equity through owning the residence in which they live and for which they receive a tax-free housing allowance, and other professional church workers who live in manses or whose housing allowance is insufficient to allow them to purchase a home gain no equity; and

WHEREAS, this is both an urgent and an important matter, yet at present among the many reactions to the housing crisis there are few thoughtful responses;

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Waterloo-Wellington humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to establish a task force to examine the impacts of the housing crisis on the viability of congregations and in widening the divide between two tiers of clergy within the denomination; to include rural and urban voices, clergy and non-clergy voices, along with those with a housing allowance and those who live in manses; to consult with the Assembly Council and Ministry and Church Vocations; and to have a two-year mandate with a preliminary study and report document ready for the 2025 General Assembly, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

NO. 3 – PRESBYTERY OF MONTREAL

Re: Arrangements for sale of denominational property

(Referred to Assembly Council, p. XXX)

WHEREAS, a growing number of church buildings, manses and other properties belonging to shrinking congregations in The Presbyterian Church in Canada will soon no longer be needed; and

WHEREAS, a helpful conversation has begun within The Presbyterian Church in Canada about how best to honour kingdom values with our underutilized properties; and

WHEREAS, we believe that many congregations and organizations that are not directly linked to The Presbyterian Church in Canada are nevertheless effectively doing the work of the kingdom, serving the same Christ, head of the church, and could make better use of these properties; and

WHEREAS, many of these properties are located in strategic urban areas where nonprofit organizations and community groups desperately need repurposed land and buildings to respond to one of the most dramatic affordable housing crises in the country's history; and

WHEREAS, the wishes of local donors who contributed to purchase the land, erect the buildings and maintain them in their own community over many years would be better served if the properties themselves were allowed to continue blessing the local community by being sold at more favourable terms to another local congregation or community organization rather than being sold at maximum profit for commercial development; and

WHEREAS, the scriptural principles of Christian stewardship are about more than just maximizing the financial return of our material possessions; and

WHEREAS, the Trustee Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada continues to interpret its mandate solely in terms of maximizing financial returns when immovable assets are sold; and

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Montreal humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to instruct the Trustee Board either to more generously interpret its mandate, or to find some other mechanism, to facilitate such missionally minded transactions, and encourage local congregations, and the presbyteries that oversee them, to favourably consider the sale of immovable properties at less than market value when that would benefit another Christian congregation or another non-profit serving the same community, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

NO. 4 – PRESBYTERY OF MONTREAL

Re: Financial assistance during judicial process relating to sexual abuse and sexual harassment

(Referred to Assembly Council in consultation with the Pension and Benefits Board, p. XXX)

WHEREAS, a congregation whose minister is on a leave of absence facing charges related to sexual abuse or harassment faces several difficult challenges, including the extended loss of their minister; and

WHEREAS, the presumption of innocence requires that the minister's full stipend, housing allowance, contributions to the pension plan and medical insurance and all related costs continue to be covered during the entire duration of the trial; and

WHEREAS, the judicial process related to these often very complex cases can be lengthy; and

WHEREAS, the questions surrounding the minister's context often result in a significant drop in attendance and in the offerings; and

WHEREAS, it is difficult to encourage a congregation to contribute more generously to cover the stipend of an absent minister facing suspicion; and

WHEREAS, the crippling combined impact of the absence of a lead minister who cannot be replaced until the judicial process is complete, the congregation's loss of reputation in the community and the financial strain would make dissolution almost inevitable for most congregations; and

WHEREAS, in cases related to the Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment Policy the financial assistance provided by The Presbyterian Church in Canada covers less than half of the full stipend and related costs beginning with the start of the second year of the judicial process; and

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Montreal humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to revise the Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment Policy so that The Presbyterian Church in Canada fully covers the entire stipend, allowances and other costs for a minister on an extended leave during a judicial process, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

NO. 5 – PRESBYTERY OF LONDON

Re: Assistance with long-term and short-term disability benefits

(Referred to Assembly Council in consultation with the Pension and Benefits Board, p. XXX)

WHEREAS, ministers of Word and Sacrament, diaconal ministers, and other professional church workers participate in the health and dental plan and group life insurance plan of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that is administered by SunLife Health Assurance; and

WHEREAS, these benefits include insurance for short-term and long-term disability; and

WHEREAS, applications for short-term and long-term disability insurance benefits are submitted in conjunction with applications for disability benefits from both Employment Insurance (EI) and the Canadian Pension Plan (CPP); and

WHEREAS, these applications must be completed by the claimant and by medical providers; and

WHEREAS, a presbytery must place a minister on medical leave; and

WHEREAS, there is no staff person of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to help a claimant complete these various applications; and

WHEREAS, there are no published guidelines for the responsibilities of the presbytery; and

WHEREAS, there is no designated employee(s) of SunLife Health Assurance to work directly with claimants from The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and

WHEREAS, a claimant making these applications may find himself or herself dealing with overwhelming medical issues; and

WHEREAS, the application process for short-term and long-term insurance benefits is in and of itself stressful; and

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of London humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to:

1. train and make available a designated staff person of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to assist in the application for short-term and long-term disability benefits,
2. request that SunLife Health Assurance designate an employee(s) to work directly with claimants from The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and
3. develop clear guidelines for claimants to assist in the application for long-term disability benefits and guidelines outlining the responsibilities of a Presbytery to claimants, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

NO. 6 – SESSION OF KIRKWALL CHURCH, CAMBRIDGE

Re: Proposed changes to housing and utilities in Maternity and Parental Leave Policy

(Referred to Pension and Benefits Board, p. 12)

WHEREAS, the current Presbyterian Church in Canada Maternity and Parental Leave Policy states, “The congregation will continue to pay housing and utilities for clergy during the 17 weeks of maternity and 10 weeks of parental leave top-up period. (A&P 1998, p. 219.) A \$2,000 lump sum payment for 27 weeks of leave, or prorated amount for a shorter leave, will be paid to congregations that pay housing allowances or provide a manse during a maternity/parental leave”; and

WHEREAS, the cost of housing and utilities over 27 weeks is not in any meaningful way covered by the current reimbursement of \$2,000 from the health and benefit plan, meaning an individual congregation is left to bear the majority of the housing costs during a maternity/paternity leave; and

WHEREAS, the Ontario Human Rights Commission notes discrimination can happen when individuals or organizations impose extra burdens that are not imposed on others; and

WHEREAS, the Ontario Human Rights Commission defines systemic or institutional discrimination as attitudes, patterns of behaviour, policies or practices that are part of the social or administrative structures of an organization or sector, and that create or perpetuate a position of relative disadvantage; and

WHEREAS, section 6.4 of the Ontario Human Right code states that organizations and institutions have a positive obligation to make sure that they are not engaging in systemic or institutional discrimination; and

WHEREAS, there is no staff person of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to help a claimant complete these various applications; and

WHEREAS, Overture No. 4, 2021 notes that “the requirement to absorb the cost of a maternity/parental leave can be seen as discriminatory against ministers of child-bearing age. It must be highlighted that the implication of discrimination against those of childbearing age is unlawful and strictly prohibited under the Employment Standards Act.” The overture sought reimbursement to congregations of 100% of stipend and housing allowance top-up for the maternity/parental leave top-up period; and

WHEREAS, the Pension and Benefits Board stated in its response in 2021, that the cost of the 100 percent top-up would place an undue financial burden on the health and dental fund and recommended no changes to the current policy. (A&P 2021, p. 574–75); and

WHEREAS, the Pension and Benefits Board stated response in 2021 did not respond to the noted issue of discrimination, but only the cost of the overture's request; noting "The Pension and Benefits Board was correct that the cost of reimbursing congregations for 100 percent of parental leave stipend and housing was not feasible as it would create an additional financial burden on an already underfinanced feature of the health and dental fund"; and

WHEREAS, Overture No. 4 2021 was rejected by the General Assembly, with the recommendation of the Pension and Benefits Board being adopted; and

WHEREAS, the guiding principles of The Presbyterian Church in Canada note our belief in fairness and equality to all; and

WHEREAS, all congregations with a call from a minister availing themselves of the maternity/paternity/parental leave bear the majority of additional expenses of housing support during this leave; and

WHEREAS, by the legislative definitions, the current Presbyterian Church in Canada Maternity and Parental Leave Policy presents a position of relative disadvantage for ministers of childbearing ages during the call process, as a congregation considering such a call can be reasonably expected to consider such a minister will represent a higher cost, owing to the limited coverage of housing costs by The Presbyterian Church in Canada health and dental plan during a maternity/paternity leave; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada faces a risk of both financial and reputational damage that a case may be brought against it from the position of either ministers or congregations, on the basis of claims that the current Policy as unlawful; and

WHEREAS, the previously noted position of the Pension and Benefits Board, that the additional financial burden of this coverage on the pension plan could not be supported, is inconsistent with any policy or law promoting equity of treatment or in preventing discrimination against congregations as well as ministers of childbearing years, expecting said 'burden' could be ably supported by an individual congregation within the church, but not by the church as a whole.

THEREFORE, the Session of Kirkwall Church, Cambridge, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to correct a policy that represents a clear form of systemic discrimination, through extending reimbursements to congregations for 100% of mandated housing/utilities expenses for the full period of leave, within guidelines of the CRA in place at the time of any covered maternity/paternity leave. This revision will replace the current \$2,000 housing/utilities reimbursement, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

Transmitted with approval by Presbytery of Hamilton.

NO. 7 – SESSION OF CHAPEL PLACE CHURCH, MARKHAM

Re: Presbytery funds supporting withdrawing congregations' ministries

(Referred to Assembly Council, p. XXX)

WHEREAS a congregation completing the voluntary withdrawal receives 50% of the residual assets, which presents a significant financial hardship for continuing its Christian ministries; and

WHEREAS the congregation's presbytery receives 30% of those residual assets; and

WHEREAS presbyteries must currently use funds gained from departing fellowships for ministries within The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and

WHEREAS a presbytery may deem that the best use of its share from a voluntary withdrawal is to support the ministry of the departing fellowships, even though it is outside The Presbyterian Church in Canada;

THEREFORE, the Session of Chapel Place Church, Markham, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to allow presbyteries to use up to 50% of the funds received from a congregation's dissolution through voluntary withdrawal to support the ministry of the departing fellowships so that they can continue to worship and effectively carry out their ministry outside of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

Transmitted with approval by Presbytery of Oak Ridges.

NO. 8 – SESSION OF MARKHAM CHINESE, MARKHAM

Re: Presbytery's funds supporting withdrawing congregations' ministries

(Referred to Assembly Council, p. XXX)

WHEREAS, a congregation completing the voluntary withdrawal receives 50% of the residual assets, which presents a significant financial hardship for continuing its Christian ministries; and

WHEREAS, the congregation's presbytery receives 30% of those residual assets; and

WHEREAS, presbyteries must currently use funds gained from departing fellowships for ministries within The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and

WHEREAS, a presbytery may deem that the best use of its share from a voluntary withdrawal is to support the ministry of the departing fellowship, even though it is outside The Presbyterian Church in Canada;

THEREFORE, the Session of Markham Chinese, Markham, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to allow presbyteries to use up to 50% of the funds received from a congregation's dissolution through voluntary withdrawal to support the ministry of the departing fellowships so that it can continue to worship and effectively carry out its ministry outside of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

Transmitted with approval by Presbytery of Oak Ridges.

NO. 9 – SESSION OF FRASER CHURCH, TOTTENHAM

Re: Presbytery's funds supporting withdrawing congregations' ministry

(Referred to Assembly Council, p. XXX)

WHEREAS, a congregation completing voluntary withdrawal receives 50% of the residual assets, which presents a significant financial hardship for continuing its Christian ministries; and

WHEREAS, the congregation's presbytery receives 30% of those residual assets; and

WHEREAS, presbyteries must currently use funds gained from departing congregations for ministries within The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and

WHEREAS, a presbytery may deem that the best use of its share from a congregation completing voluntary withdrawal is to support the continuing ministry of that congregation, even though it is outside The Presbyterian Church in Canada;

THEREFORE, the Session of Fraser Church, Tottenham, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to allow presbyteries to use up to 50% of the funds it receives from a congregation's voluntary withdrawal to support that congregation so that it can continue to worship and effectively carry out its ministry outside of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.

Transmitted with approval by Presbytery of Oak Ridges.

NO. 10 – PRESBYTERY OF OAK RIDGES

Re: Repayment of the denomination's portion of a withdrawing congregation's distributable assets

(Referred to Assembly Council, p. XXX)

WHEREAS, a congregation completing voluntary withdrawal receives 50% of the residual assets, which presents a significant financial hardship for continuing its Christian ministries; and

WHEREAS, said congregation is likely to find it difficult to pay 50% of the value of the assets in a lump sum; and

WHEREAS, loans from external financial institutions would come with a high rate of interest; and

WHEREAS, a commitment to the work of God's kingdom should be paramount to the denomination;

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Oak Ridges humbly overtures the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly to create a plan to offer departing fellowships the opportunity to pay back the denomination's 50% share of the value of the assets over a 10-year period, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, deems best.