

CHANGE LEADERSHIP TEAM (SPECIAL COMMISSION)

To the Venerable, the 151st General Assembly:

WHY WE ARE HERE

In June of 2025, the General Assembly entrusted to our team a task urgent and humbling, arising from the Narratives of Hope and Possibility Working Group report. We, the Change Leadership Team (Special Commission), were appointed to the “Hope and Possibility” Special Commission to lead change within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, grounded in that report’s watch words from John 20–21: that **Jesus Shows Up** and that **Jesus Sends Us**.

The Change Leadership Team (Special Commission) is clear that our work is focused on **encouraging and better equipping congregations, presbyteries and other ministries as Jesus sends us to make new disciples**.

Our Mandate and Terms of Reference define our deliverables to address challenges for congregations, presbyteries, and other ministries in the interconnected areas of resources, leadership and structure.

There is increasing recognition that we simply cannot continue the way that we have been. Change is essential. However, this change must not be seen, first and foremost, as plotting a survival route for The Presbyterian Church in Canada but must focus instead on how we can, with others, share the Good News of Jesus Christ much more effectively.

Stories of hope and possibility have traveled alongside the stories of anxiety and exhaustion since the first disciples, and this pattern has continued through the generations to the church today. The passages of John 20–21 caused us to ask the question: what does “fishing on the other side” look like?

FISHING ON THE OTHER SIDE – John 21:1-8

An excerpt from a recent meditation offered by the Rev. Dr. Richard Topping:

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So, they cast it, and now they can not haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

The disciple whom Jesus loved, says to Peter, “It is the Lord!” The stranger is recognized by his life-giving pattern. Peter jumps in the water—his confession is baptismal. All the disciples know that it is the Lord. For the third time he comes to them when they were not looking for him. For the third time he comes to do for them what they cannot do on their own.

He comes to energize, to calm, to commission, to accompany, to demonstrate that he is to be trusted, to bring delight in his service. It is his presence to disciples’ work and witness that makes them effective. And he comes to us in our time. He calls out to us from unfamiliar and unexpected directions. Our exhaustion has us paused, open and listening to advice we could never give ourselves. His voice is calling out to us. We hear an invitation to fish on the other side.

- through Holy Scripture,
- through other denominations,
- through churches of the Global South,
- through the Indigenous churches,
- through the wise practices of innovators,
- through the daring of those who persist,
- through congregations that are already fishing on the other side.

We have lots to learn about resources and relevance and God! Newness is on offer for those who have ears to hear and the humility to listen.

Fishing on the other side calls out to us.

RENEWAL OF SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

Concern about the future of the church in Canada, and in particular The Presbyterian Church in Canada, should not blind us to the amazing and faithful things that occur in every part of the land and in other places across the world. We need to be honest and say that too much of that wonderful work is happening despite our current systems and structures rather than because of them.

An Acute Shortage in Leadership for Ministries

- Many churches cannot afford a minister of Word and Sacraments.
- Retirements of ministers are outpacing new ordinations and at an accelerating rate.
- Many ministers are serving as interim moderators, at times in multiple congregations, and on a longer-term basis.
- Many ministers are now receiving part-time stipends (although they may be serving full-time hours).
- Volunteers are fewer and aging and many have limited Christian formation.

Beyond these anxious scenarios there are many stories of innovation and inspiration across our church. They inform these three related deliverables for our work:

1. **A design of multiple models of ministry** – the traditional one minister, one congregation model does not address the denomination's current and emerging realities.
2. **A robust lay leadership training program** – to equip more laity to use their gifts in service in the various ministries that define a thriving congregation (e.g., making disciples through leading worship, pastoral care, administering the sacraments, mission and outreach).
3. **A design and initial implementation of regional staff** – to bring additional leadership and resources to presbyteries and congregations, to support them in the work of making more disciples.

Administering Human Resources, Information Technology, Financial Management, and Legal issues is a significant burden on presbyteries and congregations.

- This burden distracts and detracts from the ability to focus on ministries.
- Competent resources to address these issues are often not available.
- Risk of mismanagement is expensive and time consuming.

Therefore, we have been tasked with:

4. **Designing and establishing denominational/shared resource centres to reduce this administrative burden on congregations and presbyteries.** These centres are expected to bring economies of scale, along with enhanced expertise.

Much of the Change Leadership Team (Special Commission)'s work is predicated on the belief that increasing supports and reducing burdens at the local level will lead to more capacity to focus on gospel mission and transform ministries.

Additional Responsibilities

We are to present a proposal for the revised structure of the church at all levels to the 2027 General Assembly.

The Terms of Reference for the Change Leadership Team (Special Commission) also include revisiting the policy on the allocation of resources from the sale of closed buildings and making recommendations to the 2026 General Assembly. The Terms of Reference emphasize collaboration and consultation in all this work. For more information, please visit presbyterian.ca/gao/change-leadership-team.

Development of Contemplated Deliverables

Since our first meeting in August 2025, as guided by a detailed project plan, we have:

- Gathered information about existing training resources.

- Interviewed leaders about innovative models of ministry already in practice.
- Understood the trends in M.Div. graduates and retirements of current ministers.
- Learned about the formal and informal advisory services already provided by national staff.
- Disseminated communications through denominational channels.
- Sought input from agencies, committees, councils, staff, presbyteries, and other church partners.

Contemplated Deliverables

We believe that the deliverables we have been asked to design, test and implement will yield the following benefits:

- liberating the local church to be as effective as possible in mission and ministry;
- building the capacity of the church at a regional level to support local churches; and
- aligning our resources, distinguishing which functions are best handled at a national level versus what should be the responsibility of local or regional bodies.

The following deliverables to support local ministries have been developed thus far and are being reviewed with leaders across the church:

- A matrix for congregations and presbyteries to consider possible different models of ministry, the skills and gifts (charisms) required, and where to access related training resources.
- An assessment tool for use by ministries and presbyteries to reflect upon their strengths, based on markers of thriving and viable congregations or communities, and identify gaps for action.
- Regional¹ leadership resources for a new focus bringing additional resources and support to local ministries. An invitation to congregations and presbyteries to test drive this revised role is planned during the next year.
- Details of the services that the denominational-wide shared resource centres might provide to congregations and presbyteries in the areas of Human Resources, Information Technology, Financial Management, and Legal and preparing to implement these on a phased basis.

OBSERVATIONS SO FAR AND WORK AHEAD

Models of Ministry

There are many examples of innovative non-traditional models already in action, although there is a perceived cultural barrier for some congregations and presbyteries. Lay leadership will be key and is aligned with a reformed understanding of the priesthood of all believers. In addition to describing these “new” models of ministry, we will explore mechanisms to encourage the church to approach ministry from the perspective of the needed charisms, sourcing them where best available (versus defaulting to a minister of Word and Sacraments).

Lay Training

There is a wide range of high-quality lay training resources currently available, through the national office, the colleges, synods and presbyteries, congregations, and through other denominational and ecumenical sources. These resources seem to be underutilized for various reasons: perhaps lack of awareness, financial or convenience barriers, or discomfort with lay leadership. We will work with the Theological Education Liaison Group and others to develop a denomination-wide managing system, with a consolidated inventory of training, dedicated funding and human resources, Plan/Do/Check/Act effectiveness metrics and reporting/accountabilities and coordinated governance/decision processes, all in support of stronger Christian formation.

Regional Leadership

The criticality of regional leaders has become increasingly apparent. It seems that there is a significant gap between congregations and presbyteries, and denominational staff resources. Regional leaders who understand the local contexts are needed to bring the relevant tools and resources to the ministries in that region and to inform priorities at the national level. We are planning to test drive the reimagined role of a regional leader to confirm or adjust our recommendations.

Denominational/Shared Resource Centres

National staff currently respond to a variety of questions and requests, but this support is often quite informal and ad hoc. We will establish shared resource centres to formalize, enhance, and clarify these services for all congregations and presbyteries. The final design of the centres will be based on learnings from pilots of the service offerings.

Recommendations for Structural Changes

We are gathering input on possible changes to structure that might help make The Presbyterian Church in Canada more connected and better able to prioritize worship, education, mission, and fellowship in our current context. We envision “lighter” structures that recognize that the denomination is much smaller. As recommendations are developed, we will consult with the Assembly Council and other affected stakeholders within the denomination before they are brought to the General Assembly in 2027.

Budget Implications and Allocation of Proceeds from Sale of Closed Properties

At the time of writing this report, we are still analyzing the costs to accomplish our mandate. Given that our primary focus is on equipping ministries at the local level, our motivation is to find mechanisms to sustain these deliverables without increasing costs at the presbytery and congregational level. Accordingly, we are recommending that we draw upon existing funds such as the New and Renewing Ministries Fund for at least the next three years. If considered necessary, we propose redesignating other internally restricted funds to support proposed changes in consultation with the Assembly Council.

Our Terms of Reference include consulting with the Management Team, the Assembly Council, clerks of presbyteries, the National Indigenous Ministries Council, the Life and Mission Agency, and the Trustee Board to consider revising the formula for allocating proceeds from the sale of closed properties. We do not have a recommendation at this time, as we perceive that it would be premature. We also observe that the magnitude of these proceeds is variable and may decrease as the congregations and presbyteries find new ways to utilize their buildings for ministry. We do believe that revenue and capital funding should be allocated around a set of agreed upon criteria focused on sustainability, growth, and impact that are associated with clear targets. Consequently, the question of the allocation formula will be revisited with more information.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Our work is influenced by the additional observations below.

Years of cost-cutting of key ministry resources have undermined development of leadership across The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The processes to identify and grow new leaders, both clergy and laity, through strong Christian formation for all need revitalization so that the denomination can sustainably fulfill God’s mission. Fishing on the other side will mean accessing the gifts, passions, unique experiences, and backgrounds of all those who call The Presbyterian Church in Canada their church family. We must ensure that our leadership structures and systems represent, and benefit from, our wide diversity. Additional strategies to recognize, recruit and retain leadership are needed.

Data systems are disjointed and unwieldy, reducing the denomination’s capacity to understand trends and key metrics.

Our denomination needs stronger capacity for data-informed decision-making. At present, relevant information exists in pockets but it is fragmented and not easily integrated into a coherent whole. The result is that decisions are often made without the benefit of timely, accessible, denomination-wide analysis. If we are to plan wisely, we need to better understand not only our own internal trends but also the changing religious and demographic landscape of Canada. Resources such as a mapping tool developed by Wycliffe College may prove helpful in showing where churches are concentrated, where communities are under-served, and where future investment could have the greatest missional effect. The Halo Project² type of analysis can inform where congregations may be at risk. The Intercultural Liaison Office rightly reminds us that if our instruments do not ask intercultural questions, our data will not produce intercultural answers. The emphasis needs to be on enabling the ability to make good decisions driven by a clear sense of purpose and calling.

Despite dedicated efforts at communication and engagement, there is a disconnect between congregations and presbyteries, and denominational activities and priorities. We lament that there is mistrust and sometimes anger.

It is not that no communication exists. Much good work is already being done. But communication in a decentralized organization such as The Presbyterian Church in Canada requires even more. It requires connective tissue: shared platforms, clearer pathways, regular touchpoints, channels for storytelling, transparent decision-making, and mechanisms by which people can both receive and contribute information. Our denomination already possesses a

substantial inventory of educational and other ministry resources but too few are aware of them to make meaningful use of them. Stronger communication tools are needed in an already crowded field.

Technology must now be understood as one of the environments in which ministry takes place.

The pandemic did not create this reality but it did accelerate it. Many of the people the church most needs to reach are shaped daily by digital habits, platforms, and networks. Some congregations have adapted well to this world. Many others have not had the capacity, expertise, or support to do so. There is growing interest in “digital church.” This is an area which needs further consideration and investment to complement emerging contemporary worship practices. We therefore believe a denominational technology strategy is needed—not because technology is the mission but because mission now unfolds partly within digital space. Such a strategy should include both national and congregational dimensions and should be attentive to multilingual and intercultural realities from the outset.

The stewardship of resources, both property and finances, requires renewed clarity and alignment with mission.

Our identity as Presbyterians is fragmented; some congregations work independently, choose not to participate, and prioritize local survival over denominational vitality. Property is both a gift and a growing challenge. Many congregations are faithfully maintaining buildings that once served vibrant communities but now require increasing financial and volunteer resources to sustain. At the same time, other communities—particularly newer, intercultural, or emerging ministries—often lack access to suitable space for worship, formation, and outreach. Similarly, shrinking operational budgets, while protecting significant “nest eggs” at the expense of ministry, creates a tension that must be addressed not only practically but theologically. We believe that the denomination would be well served by a more intentional, denomination-wide framework for resource discernment—one that helps us ask “How does this resource serve the mission to which Christ calls us?” and “How might this asset be used for the benefit of the wider Church?”

CONCLUSION: LISTENING FOR THE VOICE FROM THE SHORE

We have not been called merely to redesign structures, introduce new programs, or redistribute responsibilities. Collectively, we have been invited to discern how Christ is calling his church, in this time and place, to live more faithfully into its identity as a people who are gathered, formed, and sent.

The image that has accompanied our work is the one with which we began.

The disciples labour through the night and catch nothing. Their effort is real. Their experience is deep. Their commitment is not in question. And yet, the nets remain empty. Then comes the voice from the shore: “Cast the net on the other side.”

It is not a dramatic change in location. It is not an entirely new vocation. It is a reorientation—a willingness to listen, to trust, and to act differently in response to the voice of Christ.

We believe The Presbyterian Church in Canada finds itself in such a moment.

There is deep faithfulness across the denomination. There are leaders who continue to serve sacrificially. There are congregations that witness with courage and care. There are signs of innovation, renewal, and possibility. And yet, there is also fatigue. There is strain. There are patterns that no longer yield the fruit they once did. And there are emerging realities—cultural, demographic, technological—that we have not yet fully understood or engaged.

We are encouraged that the Assembly Council is embarking on creating a clear and shared strategic vision for the denomination. This vision should address the above observations, inform the structural changes that will support the vision, and most importantly, sustain the conviction that our central calling is to participate in Christ’s mission of making disciples. Members of the Change Leadership Team (Special Commission) look forward to collaborating with the Assembly Council in the development of an intentional, denomination-wide strategic plan that:

- clarifies our shared identity as disciple-makers,
- integrates structural, cultural, intercultural, and missional priorities,
- is grounded in both theological conviction and reliable data,
- establishes clear goals, accountability, decision-making frameworks with accompanying timelines,
- strengthens our capacity in communications, technology, and ministry tools,
- and equips congregations, leaders, and regions to participate more fully in Christ’s mission.

Our Gratitude

We give thanks to God for the generosity of leaders who have shared their time and experience, their faithfulness and hopes to inform our work. The Management Team and national staff have spent many hours with us, helping us to understand current and past programs and processes, as well as their sense of possibilities. We continue to be humbled by the trust the denomination has placed in us. We are deeply grateful for the prayers offered in support.

We continue our work with hope. Because the same Christ who stood on the shore then still stands with his church now. The same Lord who called the disciples beyond their exhaustion still calls us. The same Spirit who formed the church continues to gather, equip, and send us. And so we listen again. We hear again the voice of Christ.

We are invited to trust. We are invited to reorient. We are invited to cast our nets on the other side where we are assured that there are plenty of fish.

The Change Leadership Team (Special Commission) members are Yvonne Bearbull, Colin Conrad, the Rev. Roberto DeSandoli, Maeve Forde, the Rev. In Kee Kim, Peter Kinch, the Rev. Dr. Heather Malnick, the Rev. Debora Rolls, Cindy Stephenson (convener), the Rev. Dr. Richard Topping, and Renée Yardley.

Cindy Stephenson
Convener

Footnotes

¹Regions to be defined responsive to presbytery needs and input.

²The Halo Canada Project identified various indices of congregational financial health as a key practice in helping congregations remain economically viable.