

Questions from webinar on Three Council Model

On May 16, 2016, participants in back-to-back webinars learned about remit 1, which proposes the church move to a three-council system. Many questions were asked that night, and here are responses to those queries. We hope this helps guide pastoral boards and presbyteries as they vote on the remit.

I'm concerned that the proposed system seems to be driven by \$\$ and not by the mission and ministry of the church. In addition, we are being asked to vote on a plan that contains some vague details.

Because there are several possible scenarios, depending on the results of each remit, a detailed plan is not possible. The Basis of Union gives its attention to principles, and the remits, which change the Basis of Union, are about high-level polity decisions, not detailed policy or operational decisions. Once the polity decisions are made, the decisions on how these policies get implemented is the purview of the Executive of the General Council and the Conferences, or regional councils. None of these happens in isolation but also none can happen simultaneously. Throughout the processes of decision making, however, the purpose is always to enhance the capacity of the church to engage the mission and ministry to which we are called by God. Yes, dollars are part of the consideration, but behind the dollars is how best to use the resources available to accomplish what we are called to be.

How will this proposed new structure save money?

It is not uncommon to have a “business case” that outlines a course of action and the expected savings or outcomes. Our situation is a bit more complex because there is a need to reduce the broader church cost structure in any case—whether any or all of the remits pass. The structural changes are proposed as a means to streamline governance and help us achieve those costs savings in a way that serves our mission. Some say we are trying to increase our “mission per dollar.” These remits are an attempt to take a holistic approach to the broader work of the church and how it is funded. Over 75 percent of the revenues for this work come from the membership—either as freewill offering (Mission & Service) or as assessments. The various actions taken together aim to save at least \$10 million.

What I see here is a name change for General Council and a bunch of folks (not in Toronto) in the presbytery/Conference system losing their jobs. Please tell me this is just cynicism.

Staff reductions will be necessary whether these remits pass or not. Staffing in the General Council Office has already been reduced by more than 40 percent in the last decade. It is anticipated that staffing will drop by another 10–15 percent by summer 2017 through retirements, layoffs, etc.

Is the main reason for all this change to reduce the costs of governance? If so, let's be clear about that.

Yes, reducing the costs of governance is one of the reasons for these proposals. But the larger, more compelling, reason is to establish a system of governance that will more effectively in this

time enable us to be the church, to love and serve God. While some changes may be prompted by finances or reducing costs, those reductions will only be temporary fixes unless they are accompanied by renewal, envisioned by programs such as Chasing the Spirit.

The idea of less staff and fewer councils seems to imply there will be more work for fewer people.

It is necessary to reduce total costs by at least \$10 million, but the remits are not solely a cost-reduction exercise. Governance structures designed more than 90 years ago in a vastly different church and societal context have become cumbersome, non-responsive, and inflexible, and are often not equipped to meet modern expectations for due diligence, accountability, and transparency. Additionally, many are not seen to be effective ways to support mission and ministry, especially new expressions of mission and ministry.

The study guide refers to staff being located regionally and serving more than one region. It would be helpful to see a draft model of the number of staff anticipated at the national level vs. the regional level.

It is difficult to sketch staffing models until the number and size of regions are determined and governance frameworks decided. If remit 1 (Three Council Model) is passed by an absolute majority of pastoral charges and presbyteries when the voting ends in June 2017, a commission appointed by the General Council will determine the number of regions and their boundaries. When this is done the General Secretary, in consultation with the Conferences, will be able to determine the most efficient place for and use of staff.

Will a pastoral charge remain a single community of faith, or will each congregation in a multi-point charge be looked at as a separate community of faith?

Remit 1 defines a community of faith as “any community of people within the United Church that gathers to explore faith, worship, and serve, including but not limited to pastoral charges, congregations, outreach ministries, chaplaincies, faith-based communal living, house churches, and online communities...” Remit 1 also sets out a basic governance framework for communities of faith. Since congregations are included in the definition of “communities of faith,” the framework would apply to them. However, it would be up to each congregation to decide whether they want to be a community of faith or to be one community of faith with multiple points. A key aspect of the proposed three-council structure is the covenantal relationship between a community of faith and a regional council. It seems likely that the community of faith and regional council would have to agree on any reconfiguration of the pastoral charge because it would be reflected in the covenantal relationship.

Please clarify “other groups” under communities of faith. I understand that incorporated ministries do not fit here.

These would be outreach ministries, chaplaincies, faith-based communal living, house churches, online communities....

I worry about Mission & Service and making sure the faith communities continue to promote and support it.

Ensuring that there is strong support for Mission & Service will continue to be a priority of the denominational council if remit 4 passes.

Will making aging congregations more autonomous benefit them?

This is a consideration for members to weigh. Part of this consideration has to be that the elected members of both presbyteries and Conferences, and of their committees, come from those aging congregations. Can they continue to populate two courts? Concentrating resources in one council may ensure better support for communities of faith with diminished human resources.

My concern with the three-council model proposal is that it does not address the level of burnout that already exists in the church. Who will provide the inspiration and energy for this new model?

Part of what is driving these proposed changes is the level of fatigue, burnout, and age of many of our traditional volunteers. Streamlining and modernizing governance structures means fewer financial and human resources will be needed to govern. Communities of faith with limited resources will be better served by staff that can handle ever increasingly complex human resources, financial, and property responsibilities.

How will pastoral relations standards be enforced if there is more congregational autonomy?

Pastoral relations decisions will be made within denominational standards in cooperation with regional councils. Part of the covenant of communities of faith with regional councils will be adherence to denominational standards. Details of these will be defined by the General Council as it approves new bylaws and rolls out the decisions in the remits.

Will pastoral charges have more authority with regard to property and land in the new model?

They will have more latitude than they have now, but the remit motion by the 42nd General Council states that such decisions will be made by the community of faith “in cooperation” with regional councils. That “cooperation” will be determined after the remit passes.

Without presbyteries, who will set the vision for the church? Under the current structure, Conferences focus on organizational and operations issues, not on vision or the future of the church, etc.

Decision-making responsibility regarding mission priorities and vision for communities of faith will remain with those communities, with support from the regional councils. Broader denominational vision and mission will remain with the denominational council, which will be made up of members from the regional councils.

Outline which duties of presbyteries and Conferences will not be given to regional councils and where those duties will go.

In a general sense, almost all of the responsibilities of the presbytery and the Conference would be assigned to regional councils under the remits authorized by the 42nd General Council. Here are the key exceptions:

- Under remit 3, the presbytery's responsibility for oversight of ministry personnel would move to a denominational Office of Vocation.
- Under remit 4, the presbytery's responsibility for assessing pastoral charges has been revised so that the denominational council would make the assessment, with the regional council having authority to assess for any additional services the regional council wishes to undertake.
- Other differences are in the details rather than the general concept. For example, presbyteries have oversight of pastoral charges, including reviewing their records under the current structure. Under the three-council structure, regional councils have oversight of communities of faith, but a "review of their records" isn't specifically named. This means oversight would be left to the discretion of the regional council, acting in compliance with policies set by the denominational council in the future. Also, regional councils would have a more proactive role in exercising oversight through the additional responsibility of providing services and support to communities of faith.

How will the pastoral relations work now done by presbyteries be handled by a small regional council?

Over the last several years, many presbyteries have been testing the effectiveness of delegating much of their pastoral relations work to either presbytery commissions or to Conferences. In most instances, this has been found to be effective, efficient, timely, and fair. In the proposed models, regional councils and the Office of Vocation will share these responsibilities.

Many congregations cannot afford to pay their presbytery dues now. How will they be able to fund the new model?

Assessments will continue to be dealt with as they are now, with caring, flexibility, respect, and openness to individual circumstances. As an organization, there are certain things we have to ensure: governance, due diligence, transparency, and accountability. These require resources. The new model proposes an assessment base that will allow all communities of faith to contribute equally, according to their resources, for these administrative support services.

What would the oversight of clusters look like? What authority would the clusters have?

Clusters would not have governance decision-making responsibilities, so there would not be direct oversight of them. If, however, they undertook activities or actions not consistent with denominational doctrine, policy, or standard, regional councils could intervene.

How will networks be established and supported?

Networks are envisioned to be organic in nature. If funding is required, the networks will need to investigate which sources are available to them, in and outside the church.

Will there be paid staff at the regional council level? How many compared to presbytery/Conference staff now? Where is it envisioned that there will be resource staff? Regionally? Denominationally?

Regional councils will be staffed. While at the beginning of 2016 there were 120 regionally based (Conference and presbytery) staff, it is anticipated that funding will require an overall reduction of 20–40 people. Funding for the regional councils will come from investment income, donations, the reserve fund, and a portion from Mission & Service (if needed). If remit 4 (Funding a New Model) passes, assessments will fund governance, while Mission & Service dollars will provide for mission-related staffing.

Some Conferences cover large areas. Who will determine how many regions there will be and their boundaries? Will regions be determined by geography or population density, and how many offices will there be?

The 42nd General Council will be recalled electronically if remit 1 (Three Council Model) is passed by an absolute majority of pastoral charges and presbyteries. The purpose of the electronic meeting would be to establish a commission that will be charged with consulting across the church and deciding on the exact number and boundaries of the regional councils. No doubt geography, travel costs, and demographics will factor into their decisions. The Executive of the General Council is recommending 12–15 regions, and it is yet to be determined how many offices there will be. Regional councils will work together to determine their staffing needs and office locations.

Will there be lay people as well as clergy on the various councils? What role will volunteers play in the regional council?

Representation of both lay and ministry personnel will continue to be a principle if a three-council model is adopted. The council's elected members will be more focused on establishing policies and practices in line with denominational standards for their region. Paid administrators will implement those policies that elected members have established.

Will personnel in the General Council Office be reduced?

Staffing in the General Council Office has already been reduced by more than 40 percent in the last decade. It is anticipated that staffing will drop by another 10–15 percent by summer 2017 through retirements, layoffs, etc.

There is a lack of trust about these changes. How will a less-is-more-strategy improve inter-council communication and diminish anxiety and frustration across the church?

Change always pushes us into unknown realms where we are uncertain of the boundaries, terms, and expectations. This will be no less so. Inherent in our faith tradition, however, is the assertion that we are not alone; we live in God's presence. That said, practical things are being

done. Consideration is being given to how best to resource the regions so they can provide support to communities of faith and clusters as they negotiate the changes. A team of Conference and General Council staff are now planning for all scenarios (if all or just some remits pass). What needs to be done, by whom, where, and when will be mapped out.

I'm curious about the accountability relationship between regionally located staff and the region, vs. their relationship to the General Secretary.

The General Secretary considered this question at the direction of the General Council, and reported to the Executive of the General Council that this would become clearer as staff roles are determined in any new structure that is approved. Regional executive secretaries would likely remain directly accountable to the General Secretary. Depending on the configuration of an Office of Vocation, if approved, it may be more effective for the equivalent of the current personnel ministers to be accountable to it for some or all of their responsibilities. This will be decided when the remit results are clear.

I am in an Affirming presbytery and Conference. Will regional councils have to go through that process again?

The Affirming designation is not granted by the denomination but by Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble. It will be for Affirm to determine the transferability of the designation.

What change will be made to the Basis of Union if the remit passes?

The polity section of the Basis of Union would be substantially rewritten. The starting point would be the new structure set out in the appendix attached to remit 1 (if that is approved). Other remits that pass establish principles that would then be described in the actual wording, which would be subject to approval by the General Council or the Executive of the General Council.

What is an absolute majority?

An "absolute" majority is a vote of the majority of all of the pastoral charges, and a majority of all of the presbyteries, not just a majority of those that vote.

Will the All Native Circle Conference be broken up, or will it retain its current cross-country scope?

Aboriginal ministries are conducting a consultation process right now to determine how they would like to relate to the rest of the church.

Who votes on the remits and when? One presenter said that the council or board decides on the remits. However, *The Manual* says that category 3 remits should be considered at a regular congregational meeting or a special one called for that purpose.

Within our polity, only courts vote on remits. Therefore, it is the court of the pastoral charge (board or council) that votes on behalf of the pastoral charge on a category 3 remit, not the entire membership of the congregations in the pastoral charge. This reflects the official

interpretation of our polity as determined in formal opinions that have been issued by the General Secretary.

While the board may not delegate its decision-making responsibility to the pastoral charge/congregation, it may wish to hold a meeting of the pastoral charge/congregation to get their views on the issue before the board itself votes. It's up to the board to decide whom it wishes to seek input from. That might mean just the members, or it could be members and adherents.

What happens if remit 1 (Three Council Model) passes and remit 4 (Funding a New Model) is defeated?

The remits are independent of one another, meaning that if some are voted down, the others can still be approved. However, changes sparked by the approval of one remit will automatically be applicable to the others. For example, if remit 1 passes, changing the church's four-court structure to a three-council one, all references to the four-court structure in other remits should be considered a reference to the three-council system. Even if the remits do not pass, cost-reduction activities across the broader church will be implemented.

I assume the church will make much more use of technology for the meetings. However, there are challenges with Internet connection in many places.

Technology does allow us to connect and work together differently from before, and most Canadians have access to high-speed service and use it daily. However, accommodations will need to be made for those who do not yet have access to this service.

Here's what I think will happen: We'll pass this remit, the regions will be very large, and then they'll break down into manageable units suspiciously looking like presbyteries but without any institutional power. Am I way out of line thinking that?

It seems to be a natural human trait to resist change, and when change is imposed, to seek ways to return to what was known...what was it about returning to the fleshpots of Egypt? That being said, the composition of clusters within a region is not defined. A particular region may want to begin clusters in one way and let them evolve over time as everyone becomes familiar with the new council structure. A benefit of the cluster approach is the flexibility it offers.