

Office of Vocation

The work of the Office of Vocation is to ensure that the United Church of Canada has effective ministry leadership. We support that work in a variety of ways, including supporting new leaders through the candidacy pathway process, and assisting ministers in becoming more effective and accountable through the remedial and support processes.

The 45th General Council gave us a frame worth holding close. “Vocations of the Whole People of God” (a new statement on ministry adopted by 4th General Council) is not merely a programmatic theme - it is a theological claim about who belongs to the ministry of the church and whose calling the institution is responsible for honouring. It pushes the Office of Vocation to ask whether our processes, our formation pathways, our governance structures, and our culture of accountability genuinely reflect a conviction that God's call is wider than any one form of ordered ministry. This question has animated much of the work reported here.

That question also has a strategic partner in Toward 2035. The call to be “guided by hope-filled, adaptive and effective ministry leaders” is not a slogan - it is a mandate. In a church navigating rapid cultural change, significant financial constraints, and an ongoing reckoning with its own history of harm and exclusion, the quality of its leadership matters immensely. The Office of Vocation is one of the principal bodies responsible for ensuring that the people called to lead communities of faith are genuinely equipped, genuinely supported, and genuinely accountable. This report reflects how seriously the Board and staff team take that responsibility.

As in the whole church, the office of vocation has been navigating real transitions within its own team. Staff changes - including a renewed leadership configuration within the Office of Vocation staff, the departure of long-serving colleagues, and the welcome of new ones - have tested the resilience of the team even as the work has continued without pause.

In October 2025, all the committees of the Board of Vocation gathered in Toronto to begin its work as a community. One hundred and five elected members and seventeen staff came to that gathering with the intention of building something more than a functional governance committee, and something more was indeed what happened. There was an electric quality to the connections being made across committee lines and across the country - ideas beginning to flow, enthusiasm kindling, people discovering in each other colleagues they could not wait to work alongside. Committee members left with a palpable sense of the importance of their work and a genuine eagerness to get on with it.

Staff

In 2025, the Office of Vocation experienced significant change within the staff team. Most significant was the departure of Marlene Britton from her role as Director of the Policies and Programs for Ministry Personnel and staff leader of the Office of Vocation. Here position was reconfigured and the work of the Office of Vocation was divided into two halves. I was appointed as the Director of Emerging Ministry Leadership, essentially having responsibility for policy and procedures leading to ordination and commissioning and managing the Vocation Ministers. As well I am devoting significant time to continuing a General Council Executive priority of co-operative ministry. Adam Hanley was appointed as the Director of Emerging Ministry Leadership

which includes remedial processes and support to clergy leadership. Together we co-direct the Office of Vocation.

In addition we had two Vocation Ministers leave and began a search for the Vocation Minister for the Atlantic Regions. By the time of the AGMs these positions will be filled.

Candidacy Pathway

The Candidacy Pathway is served by 66 elected members of seven Candidacy Boards across the church including our own Atlantic Board. These individuals commit to three to five days a month of service to the Boards and bring tremendous dedication, wisdom and skill, including the commitment to on-going learning and practice, to the work they have taken on, on behalf of the church.

As opportunities are taken for Candidacy Boards to meet and work together regionally and denominationally, the commitment for greater consistency of practice across the Candidacy Boards is being realized. The pathway is built to ground the discernment and preparation for ordered ministry on the Competencies for Formation for Ministry and Lifelong Ministry Leadership. This is also the document that links theological education, field education and supervised ministry with the Candidacy Board's assessment of readiness for ordered ministry, making the candidacy process coherent, collaborative and focussed on hope-filled, adaptive and effective practice of ministry.

Candidacy Pathway Trends

- increased number of candidates from other denominations;
- candidates are trending slightly younger;
- no significant increase in number of racialized candidates
- many second-career applicants and candidates who desire to be bi-vocational;
- younger candidates are without much United Church experience or formation;
- candidates tend to enroll in local theological school, without much knowledge of the variety of theological education opportunities and streams of ministry (an area of improvement for Candidacy Boards)
- applicants with a call to serve their own congregation are turning to opportunities to train for lay-led/clergy-supported ministry rather than entering the candidacy pathway.

One significant piece of work for the next triennium is a re-examination of the current model of supervised ministry education. The many factors leading to this widespread call include:

- fewer congregations able to offer an appropriate learning site;
- off-site supervision proving less effective;
- working students in part-time programs which include SME
- emerging models of church suited to SME but without finances for compensation.

A decision was made in 2025, as part of a successful application to the Lilly Foundation with the church's theological schools, to employ a Supervised Ministry Education specialist to take on the re-examination of SME and DFE in partnership with all related parties. I am delighted that Rev. Dr. Sally Shaw has been hired to this position. This position began on April 1st and will be funded through the Lilly grant.

In 2025, five Supervised Ministry Education sites were made available through a memorandum of understanding between the community of faith and the Office of Vocation which offered grants for two years of half-time salary for SME candidates eager to be formed on-the-ground for a model of ministry that is lay-led and clergy-supported, rather than clergy-led and lay-supported. This model of ‘mutual’ or ‘cooperative’ ministry was supported by Rev. Dr. Andrew Richardson, Strategic Lead for Cooperative Ministry. The initial report of these varied SME opportunities demonstrates that no single model of cooperative ministry is emerging in the denomination, but rather a variety of models, each with its own challenges to governance, sustainability, staffing and ministry focus. All candidates report commitment to, and gratitude for, learning from these challenges and opportunities. The Pilot will be evaluated at the end of 2026.

Atlantic Candidacy Board

In the Atlantic Region we are well served by an excellent and competent candidacy board that is a model for boards across the country. At the beginning of the new triennium Susan Butler-Jones began her term as the chair and several new members were added. The board members are: Susan Butler-Jones; Barbara Cairns; Erasmus Madimbu; Kathleen Anderson; Kimberly Douglas; Liz Dawson; Stephen Fram; Alicia Walls; Marie-Beth Wright; Gneid Lackey. In 2025 the board held 28 interviews with candidates and applicants. Currently there are 21 candidates with 4 being ordained at the various AGMs. The majority of candidates are from the two mainland regions with only 2 from FDEE Regional Council. Eight of the candidates are in or beginning their Supervised Ministry Education all of whom are in appointments on the mainland. Overall there has been a decrease in the number of applicants to the candidacy pathway. All of those in the pathway are in the ordained ministry stream and all but one are doing theological studies at the Atlantic School of Theology.

This is my last report as Vocation Minister for the Atlantic Regions. I have been working with candidates and ministers in these regions since the inception of the Office of Vocation in 2019. During that time I have been supported in that work by the Regional Staff across the regions. I have had opportunity to talk and support ministry leaders and candidates in their vocational journey. It has been a privilege and an honour to work with such dedicated and able leaders, many of whom are exceptional. To all those who continue to minister among us I can only offer deep gratitude for your dedication, commitment and continued calling. This is not an easy time to be church, but I am inspired and strengthened by your leadership and faithfulness.

Respectfully

Rev. Dr. Andrew Richardson

Director Emerging Ministry Leadership and Co-Director of the Office of Vocation