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Association of United Church Clergy  
Part-Time Ministry Report  
Fall 2021

# Introduction

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Part-time ministry (here understood as calls/appointments for less than 38 hours per week) is a growing phenomenon within the United Church. Since its inception in May 2018, the Association of United Church Clergy (aUCC) has heard a range of concerns that continue to grow in number and scope regarding part-time ministry. So, we welcome the opportunity to work with the Region and Regional Minister on this question and trust that this will be the beginning of a fruitful dialogue leading to constructive action.

The Regional Minister, whose role includes helping the Region's clergy to thrive in ministry, has also expressed concern about these trends. He has been supportive of the Association's attempts to support clergy in these challenging times. In September of this year, he sent an Excel spreadsheet entitled "Hours Allocation for Ministry Personnel." It apparently arose in a Presbytery of the former Maritime Conference and has seen limited use within the Region. The Regional Minister asked for our input in response. Given the continuous concerns expressed by membership since 2018 regarding part-time ministry, in crafting a response, the Association decided to consult the clergy of Region 15. As a result, this report expands beyond the spreadsheet which was the original focus for discussion and offers some suggestions for continued shared engagement in this area.

# Consultation

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A survey was designed to ask clergy how many hours they felt various ministry tasks should be allocated in a 20-hour week. These tasks included pastoral care, worship preparation, worship, attendance at governance meetings, funerals, Christian education, community relations and so on. Fourteen clergy took the time to complete the fairly extensive survey and offer comments.

The Excel spreadsheet, "Hours Allocation for Ministry Personnel" was made available on the aUCC Facebook group. It was circulated amongst the Council with encouragement to share with

other colleagues. At the aUCC Council meeting the results were shared and a lengthy discussion ensued.

The Excel spreadsheet was deemed (at best) marginally useful in helping CoFs and, perhaps even clergy, understand the limited capacity of part-time clergy to do all the things that may be expected of full-time clergy. It may foster helpful discussion in that regard as it is maddeningly difficult to fit so many “minimal” and “basic” duties into a 20-hour week. However, the big danger the Association perceives is *incrementalism* (discussed further below). We would strongly urge that this spreadsheet not receive wider use and offer some alternative possibilities.

## Issues of Broader Concern

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Just as the entire church is changing, so too the understanding and practice of ministry is shifting. Even if all factors could be identified, it is clear that many are not within the purview of the Region to address. As part of the Region, therefore, the aUCC raises the following and invites deeper conversation with appropriate parties.

### Incrementalism

We define “incrementalism” as the increasingly common practise through which the Community of Faith (and particularly Search Committees), divide the duties and actions of ministry into increasingly smaller segments and then assign time to them (either as hours per week or a percentage of the total). We understand this as an attempt to identify the priorities of the Coff for themselves and prospective candidates for a ministry position. However, we are concerned that this form of intense focus shifts attention from the overall mission and values of the Coff. We would encourage (and would be pleased to help with) the development of other tools for identifying ministry priorities that are not as susceptible to misuse, misunderstanding and/or position-hardening. That latter refers to the tendency of some Coff and some clergy to harden ministry descriptions into the narrow confines of stated increments.

## Communication

A significant number of concerns raised by our members are rooted in communication (or a felt lack of it). Recalling that, in the previous governance structure, clergy as part of Presbytery were privy to regular reports and input into all aspects of the work of the Court. They were informed about the process of decision-making even if they did not agree. Increasingly, since January 2019, clergy feel isolated and disconnected from the very decisions that often impact them most. Their previous experience of direct engagement has been given to committees and task groups which are experienced as insufficiently communicating. Of course, this is not just a Regional phenomenon but the collective experience is one of increased isolation and disempowerment. In the absence of information, speculation fills the void. Further, as all clergy have responsibilities toward Regional government and representation, lack of communication means they experience those responsibilities as almost impossible to fulfill and to influence.

Relevant to the topic of this report, there are a growing number of CoFs who *appear* to opt to go to part-time ministry from full-time without exploring other options which may include shared ministries, alternative models of ministry and/or strengthened stewardship programming. We understand that there is a process to explore all of those options *before* a part-time vacancy is approved. The issue arises in the *perception* that the part-time option is being easily and quickly approved, which increases a sense of employment threat amongst clergy. As well, it is perception of clergy that approving low-hour part-time ministries for a CoF has a viral effect. When a neighbouring CoF sees that it is possible, they become increasingly resistant to share a clergy person or consider alternative models. The aUCC would welcome opportunities to work with the Region to clarify these processes for clergy and, if desirable, work with the Region to strengthen them.

We are aware that a number of CoFs (or prominent parishioners within them), have expectations for part-time clergy that exceed the parameters of part-time ministry. Some even expect full-time work from part-time clergy and become angry when it cannot be supplied. Clergy are usually on the receiving end of this anger and are not always sure where they can turn for support and/or coaching in appropriate responses to these demands. We encourage

efforts to make clergy aware of the helpful supports that currently exist, encouraging them to reach out to the Regional Minister to share their experience and would welcome discussion of strengthening and expanding those resources.

It would seem that CofFs are, from time to time, operating out of inconsistent information and advice, particularly in regards to expectations of part-time clergy. While this does not appear to arise from official sources, the Region and its committees need to be aware of the phenomenon and its impact on clergy. Again, it is possible that educational resources for CoF, in particular, may be helpful.

## Clergy Morale

The state of clergy morale is impacted by many factors. Relevant to this report is that the seemingly relentless growth of part-time ministries across the church (currently 39% of all calls and appointments and 54% of all vacancies) results in increasing concern for clergy about their employment and financial security. This is expressed in another way, when part-time clergy report feeling increasing pressure to work hours well beyond their Covenanted agreement to keep the income they currently receive. Part-time clergy work, on average, 6.4 extra hours every week. The aUCC would be happy to participate in discussions/programming for strategies to assist clergy in addressing and responding to such pressures. We believe that such actions, well-communicated, would help to address another concern articulated by clergy: where to turn for support and counseling/coaching in such situations. In the previous structure there was greater clarity about where such resources were likely to be found. In the current context, there are concerns about where authority, responsibility and determination as regards these matters actually resides. This lack of clarity contributes to an overall sense of clergy malaise. As well, as articulated previously in this report, in the current UCC governance structure, clergy feel there is very little capacity for transparent input into governance processes that affect their day-to-day work conditions. The abolition of Presbytery as a court has removed the capacity for both

observation of governance and input into it. The primary condition for “burnout” is having responsibilities inherent in one’s role, but little to no control over the capacity to fulfill those responsibilities.

## Proposals

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With these concerns in mind we would like to propose the following as the basis for ongoing consultation and work.

### **Toward a faithful model of part-time ministry**

A primary challenge in the current model of part-time calls/appointments is the use of full-time as the standard to which part-time is compared as an inferior relative. This is both unfair and unhelpful. Part-time Ministry is a specific model of ministry that requires new ways of being faithful for both the CofF and clergy. It is not simply a reduced way of being full-time. It is a shift of vision. CofFs move to part-time, in part, due to shrinking pools of volunteers and financial givers. In order to succeed, the transformation requires education and empowerment of lay people, for the CoF and clergy to be healthy and faithful. An educational piece needs to happen with the congregation before the call is articulated. Regardless of what pre-consultation may be currently occurring, clergy often feel that their CofFs do not understand what a move to part-time ministry means in terms of legitimate expectations of clergy. As well, while the aUCC acknowledges that CofFs can be hesitant to envision new models, they do not seem to understand the full scope of arrangements that are possible.

Recognizing that it does not fall to the Region to define the United Church’s understanding of ministry but, in the absence of any apparent action on the part of the General Council or the Office of Vocation to address the question, we would welcome the opportunity to participate in a wider conversation within the Region about what healthy, faithful, and sustainable ministry looks like. Such a project might involve partners such as Atlantic School of Theology, the

Licensed Lay Worship Leader (Atlantic) programme and so on. It could involve making arrangements (including grant applications) for test models of new ministry styles within the Region. It might (re)engage models such as those adopted by several denominations in England that have moved into such models<sup>1</sup> and/or sharing clergy with other congregations and other denominations. This is a well-known idea, with some successful models in the Maritimes, but does not seem to be chosen very often. A step-by-step process for this was developed by the Anglican-United Church dialogue over a decade ago.<sup>2</sup>

We suggest that such a project might be a key element of the success of living out the new Regional Mission Statement.

## **Education for Communities of Faith**

The United Church has moved into online educational delivery modes. It should be possible to create a series of videos and study guides for churches considering part-time ministry for use with liaisons and the Region. There have been several successful initiatives created by the Region already in this regard, namely the excellent confirmation resource “Narthex” and the marriage preparation course which is now used all over the world, “More Than Friends.”

## **Alternative Models of Part-Time Ministry**

We would propose (and would be glad to assist in) the development of alternative models of ministry for part-time calls/appointments. There are different ways being implemented that move away from the “Sunday-by-Sunday” model of individual clergy serving one Pastoral Charge. This is part of a revisioning of part-time ministry as something other than “full time ministry lite.” It would also address the creeping incrementalism which pictures ministry as little more than a series of discrete tasks. By doing so, it might engender greater clarity about the ministry priorities of a Coff and, as a result, foster greater cohesion between clergy and congregation.

These options would describe an entire part-time ministry. For example, one option might be heavily weighted for worship and pastoral care hours. Another might be weighted for pastoral care and community development. Another, for use with Pastoral Charges made up of multiple CoFs, might have to be heavily weighted for governance meetings. Having only four models to choose from would provide some clarity to CoFs and also help clergy and the Region assess accountability to covenant for all participants. It will reduce confusion for CoFs around expectations. We would be willing to help develop a series of four or five models.

Another (potentially complimentary) approach would be a series of models suggesting different structure. Engaging clergy in a covenant that sees them work full-time for a portion of the year, and empowering lay people to lead during the other months. This schedule will need to be developed in the context of local rhythms of life, depending on the ebb and flow of activity. For instance, someone in a three-quarter time appointment might work full-time from September to April and congregations would exercise ministry the remaining months. Alternative arrangements can also be imagined. These, somewhat outside the box, models might be received as a pleasant surprise and alternative.

## Other Proposals

### **- 1 - Adequate administrative support**

A constant issue for many part-time calls/appointments is the absence of volunteer or paid administrative support. The administrative work of a CoF is often overlooked or greatly minimized in position descriptions and the hours demanded by these activities need to be transparent. Certainly, it remains the CoF decision whether they want their clergy doing such work, but the cost of that decision must be evident, both in the hourly expense and those ministry activities which will not be done as a consequence -- activities more suited to clergy training and call. We would encourage a re-emphasizing this aspect of the terms of employment.

## **- 2 - Travel between points**

In calculating the hours for clergy who have more than one preaching point, the travel time between points must not be considered *personal* time. We have heard reports of this being expressed as an expectation. It *must* be counted as work hours. This is a justice issue. Other professionals (nurses working in community, teachers with responsibilities in multiple schools and so on) do not treat this travel time as personal. We would request that liaisons emphasize this when part-time positions are being discussed.

## **- 3 - Nominations**

One point of significant vexation is the expectation reported from numerous CofFs that the minister be expected to serve on (or in some cases, *act as*) the nominating committee. This despite the explicit *Manual* statement that the clergy should not be part of the CofF nominations process. We would ask that liaisons be directed to remind CofFs at the time of Search and Call /Appointment that this is not a legitimate expectation.

## **- 4 - Church Dynamics**

Almost all churches that move to part-time ministry are family-sized churches.<sup>3</sup> CofFs often do not often understand how their own dynamics impact ministry. We suggest that some method be found to undertake a congregational education process as part of the pastoral relations process. This may help them understand the pressures on ministers in such systems which, it is hoped, will assist in adjusting expectations around clergy workload.

## Conclusion

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The move to part-time ministry from previously full-time ministry brings challenges as well as opportunities for both clergy and Coff. It is not within the scope of this report to ponder whether this is good for the overall health of the ministry of God’s people. We have listened carefully to clergy and report here what we have learned. Region 15 has within its authority to continue to respond to many of them. We look forward to ongoing dialogue and work with the Region as we try and implement the wisdom we have gleaned from the “workers of the fields of the Lord.”

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See the Arthur Rank Centre for Rural Ministries. <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> See the St Brigid’s Report <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/eir/dialogues/sbr/>

<sup>3</sup> “Congregational Size and Common Challenges” United Methodists of Arkansas, Centre for Vitality. <https://docs.arumc.org/Center%20for%20Multiplying%20Disciples/Resources/Size-Theory-chart-expanded-2>.