

## General Proposal 3

### Adjustment of the work unit principle (wellbeing of ministers)

#### That the Synod

1. Directs the Placements Committee together with the Remunerations and Nominations Committee to adjust the work unit principle in the Ministry Agents – General Placements Conditions (Previously called the Ministry Agents Handbook) from 14 Units per week (one day off) to 10 Units per week (two days off) for ministry agents for a trial period of 18 months.
2. Directs the Placements Committee to work with the assistance of the office of the Synod, including the Health and Wellness Coordinator, to develop discussion material and pre and post evaluation metrics for an 18-month trial, to assist in conducting research into the contributing factors that are leading to a significant decrease in the wellbeing of ministers.
3. Having gathered appropriate data, the Placements Committee and Health and Wellness Coordinator report back to the 38<sup>th</sup> Synod in Session with further recommendations.

#### Scope

This proposal is underpinned by the premise that there is great variation in when and how ministry agents serve their congregations most effectively. The expectation that ministry agents work 14 out of 21 units (or have only a single day off) per week is an established but outdated and unhelpful principle that has a number of key impacts. For example:

- contributes significantly to the levels of burnout, unhappiness, and fatigue, in ministry agents.
- seriously limits the opportunity for ministers to model missional living by engaging with the wider community themselves in a meaningful way.

The work unit principle as it currently stands in the Ministry Agents – General Placements Conditions (previously called the Ministry Agents Handbook) perpetuates an unsustainable expectation in Synod, Presbyteries and congregations and is (at least in part) contributing to what is fast becoming a

work practice where the mental health, wellbeing, and productivity of ministry agents, is negatively impacted.

**This proposal seeks an 18-month trial where the work unit principle is changed to 10 units to reflect a more sustainable, productive, and healthy balance.**

While the practical aspects and outworking of this trial will still need to be negotiated between ministry agents, councils and congregations, and a measurement and evaluation process will need to be established, this proposed adjustment to the current policy:

1. Creates a platform for intentional conversations to reset expectations/processes of effective long-term ministry and healthy agents
2. Facilitates ministry agents taking the necessary time to rest and reset for productive and long-term ministry
3. Creates space for a minister to live missionally outside the congregational context/ in the wider community and model missional living to the congregation.
4. Encourages ministry agents to engage more intentionally with the 'priesthood of all believers' by making room for and empowering ministry and leadership from within the wider congregation.

It is proposed that discussion material be developed and provided to church councils and ministry agents to facilitate the whole congregation and council being proactive in this process, and which would include specific pre and post evaluation measures.

At the 38<sup>th</sup> Synod in Session, a comprehensive report can be tabled by the Placements Committee and the Health and Wellness Coordinator, considering the evaluated data and experiences of church councils, ministers, Presbyteries, Presbytery ministers, and the Synod. Following this report, the 38<sup>th</sup> Synod in Session can make an informed, permanent decision on the Work Unit Principle.

## Rationale

### Mental health / wellbeing:

Following the 2023 Moderators Convocation on "*Wellbeing and Resilience, Sustainably having and supporting life in all its fullness,*" it was clearly apparent that one of the greatest obstacles to wellbeing and resilience, as well as to the mental health and happiness of ministry agents is that there is simply not enough time or opportunity to rest, refresh and be rejuvenated for the work of ministry. Ministry agents have been operating on the "one day off per week" principle for many decades, but during that same period of time, the level of productivity required, the expected availability, the pressures faced, and the expectations laid upon ministry agents has increased dramatically. As a result, ministry has one of the highest rates of burnout, and has fewer and fewer people (especially young people) offering themselves for full time service. The emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental demands of ministry have only increased over the years, making meaningful rest essential for effective ministry and healthy ministry agents. Society in general is realising that

happy, healthy, and well-rested workers are highly beneficial to productivity, however, the Work Unit Principle in the Ministry Agents – General Placements Conditions, from which many congregations and church councils draw their expectations, does not allow ministry agents to meaningfully rest in the course of a normal week.

### Theological

From a theological perspective, the current work unit principle also makes it difficult for ministry agents to live missionally and model missional living in their community outside of their congregational responsibilities. The current expectations and workload tend to mean that almost all ministry opportunities and work for ministry agents are limited to within the congregation. The single day off is required for rest, recovery, and home/family commitments. There is no time to participate meaningfully and regularly in community activities beyond the congregation where ministry agents can engage with, witness to, and model missional living as a means of outreach.

The current principle also leans heavily into a “minister-centric” model and creates an expectation of ministry involvement that is not consistent with, or helpful to, the furtherance of our theological practice of the priesthood of all believers.

As a Church seeking ways to embrace the initiatives of “Shared Life Flourishing Communities,” this proposal offers a meaningful way to “refresh our discipleship culture,” to “transform our communities in terms of wellbeing and mental health support,” and to “become fit for purpose in terms of Mission presence, health and vitality,” as well as improving “Operational Efficiencies.”

The Church must proactively examine our structures and processes to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society and we need to be willing and courageous to trial new ways in which ministry can operate. The expectation that ministry agents can work as they always have regardless of the change in society and increased expectation placed upon them, will only lead to a decline in our discerned missional initiatives, an increase in burnout, fatigue, and cynicism, limiting the church’s capacity for growth.

An 18-month trial in which ministry agents are encouraged to work towards 10 units (or having 2 days off in the week) will give ministers, congregations, Church Councils, Presbyteries, Presbytery ministers, and Synod, sufficient time to gauge the long-term effects and changes in mental health, productivity, effectiveness, missional engagement, and church growth.

renewal

## Proposers

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