

Prairie to Pine Committee on Community of Faith Support
“We can’t continue like this” – closing, amalgamation, re-imagining or ???
Information to consider and requirements along the way

The Committee on Community of Faith Support will normally work with a congregation or pastoral charge which is beginning to think about the possibility of amalgamation, disbanding (closing), realignment, or reimagining a different future. Pastoral Relations Commission and Property Commission will also become involved as necessary. Once a decision is made to move toward such a change, it usually takes 12 months or more to complete the necessary work, so that the Committee on Community of Faith Support can make the appropriate request to the Regional Council Executive to enact any disbanding or amalgamation or realignment. Reimagining a different future may require other resources.

What follows is a summary based on the policies and procedures in *The Manual 2019* and of Prairie to Pine Regional Council, as well as other resources.

The Manual, the *Congregational Board of Trustees Handbook 2004*, the *Financial Handbook for Use of Congregation*, and other supplemental resources are all available online at www.united-church.ca/handbooks. (click on The Manual and Related Resources).

Regional Council involvement

1. Amalgamation, Disbanding, and Realignment that changes the make-up of a Pastoral Charge are among the changes that require approval of the Regional Council. (G.1.3; G.1.4; G.1.5) In order to help the decisions and work move smoothly it is wise for the congregation to involve the Regional Council Committee on Community of Faith Support at an early stage, and throughout the deliberations and decision making.
2. If an Indigenous Ministry is involved, the process will be adjusted so that culturally appropriate procedures will have priority.
3. Be aware of the difference between disbanding and amalgamation as it impacts a potential bequest to a community of faith. If a community of faith has been disbanded there is no legal entity to receive a future bequest. If on the other hand, a community of faith has amalgamated, it continues to exist within the amalgamated community of faith and is entitled to receive bequests. See G.1.4.7; G.1.4.8
4. The Regional Council Committee on Community of Faith Support may name persons to attend meetings of the governing body or community of faith as necessary (in person or by electronic means), to offer support and counsel as the community of faith comes to its decisions. Phone calls and email can be helpful and should be used appropriately to ensure good communication and information-sharing.
5. Pastoral Relations Commission must be involved if ministry personnel positions will be affected by the amalgamation, disbanding, or any other changes. There are additional processes, motions and notice requirements for any changes in a pastoral relationship that must be honoured.
6. All congregations in a multi-point pastoral charge must be made aware of the possible intentions of one to disband or amalgamate or continue in a different way.
7. Whenever disposal of property is involved, the Regional Council Property Commission must be consulted early in the process. Become familiar with “Property Policies and Process, Prairie to Pine Regional Council” and “DISTRIBUTION OF ASSETS FROM SALE OF PROPERTY FOR A CONGREGATION THAT IS CLOSING.” Trustees should also be aware of the requirements outlined in detail in *Congregational Board of Trustees Handbook*. A representative from the Regional Council Committee on Community of Faith Support, Prairie to Pine Regional Council

Property Commission may be available to help ensure that motions needing Regional Council approval are complete and according to required form.

8. The Regional Council may name a person to be present at the final service of worship & celebration prior to disbanding, or at the service which brings an amalgamation into effect. This person may speak on behalf of the Regional Council to declare the congregation officially amalgamated or disbanded.

Procedural Highlights (required by The United Church of Canada according to *The Manual 2019*)

The United Church Manual has very specific requirements regarding steps to be taken regarding membership, records, and property of congregations. Note that the Manual now allows adherents to vote on any matter at meetings of the congregation if the full members decide to allow it.

Most of the following requirements are found in section G. Congregational Life, subsections 1.4, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3. In addition to *The Manual* there is also the *Congregational Board of Trustees Handbook*. It outlines responsibilities of trustees, and procedures for trustees' meetings. The appendices of this booklet have sample wording of the final motion by Trustees seeking approval for property transactions. Close attention to the requirements of this motion will help to ensure smooth passage through the Regional Council.

****Note** that a disbanded congregation will not be able to receive any future bequest whereas as an amalgamated congregation may receive a bequest designated to a pre-amalgamation congregation.

1. **Membership & Records** – The membership of all people listed in the formal membership roll, also called the historic roll, of the disbanding or amalgamating congregation(s) must be dealt with by a) transfer to another congregation, b) giving a certificate of membership to the individuals or c) removal by motion of the Board. This includes both resident and non-resident members. Contacting members prior to making these decisions can be a rewarding exercise and may lead to the sharing of meaningful faith stories. **Do not transfer membership of key active members until the date of final disbanding because they need to be able to act on behalf of the congregation as decision makers, Trustees, and signing officers.**

Official records (minute books; baptism, burial, marriage records, historic roll) of a disbanded congregation are to be forwarded to the Regional Council Archives.

2. **Denominational Assessment** amount should be paid in full for the year in which a congregation disbands. Consider it as contribution to the broader work of the church and that assessment amount has already been factored in to the workplans of the region and General Council.

3. **Property – A congregation must inform and seek Regional Council approval before acting on any intentions or decisions regarding property, real or personal.**

In the case of amalgamating congregations, the Regional Council consults with the congregations on the property needs of the newly amalgamated congregation. Any property not needed for the newly amalgamated congregation will be considered “surplus property.” The Regional Council is responsible for surplus property following amalgamation and will determine how to use it for the benefit of The United Church of Canada. The amalgamated congregation may make recommendations to the Regional Council.

A congregation that intends to disband must make decisions about the disposal of their property prior to disbanding. Decisions about the future of the church buildings are necessary, crucial, and sometimes difficult. There are several options:

1. Do nothing and the Regional Council will end up having to decide what to do with the property. In some cases, buildings have been left unattended, fallen into ruin, and been a legal liability to the church. Obviously, this option is not a desirable one.
2. Land and buildings may be sold – the community of faith makes decisions about their priorities for dispersing the money and must seek approval from the Regional Council. The Regional Council has a policy about how funds may be used. See “DISTRIBUTION OF ASSETS FROM SALE OF PROPERTY FOR A CONGREGATION THAT IS CLOSING.” If there are some uses the congregation would not consider acceptable for the building, they should try to protect their interests, but not be so rigid as to make a sale impossible.
3. The building can be taken down and the site cleared, leaving perhaps a memorial marker.
4. The building might be preserved, but unless there are ongoing funds and plans for upkeep this option quickly turns into option one.
5. If the congregation is disbanded without making decisions regarding land and building, the Regional Council is responsible for making a decision.

A congregation will have major assets (financial resources and all that “stuff” in the church building) as well as real property. Inventory must be taken of personal property, and decisions made regarding its disposal, which must be presented to the Regional Council Property Commission for approval. An up-to-date inventory helps this process go easier. Consider what might be given to another ministry, what might be sold, put into a local museum, etc.

In deciding how financial resources are to be dispersed it is important to note CRA regulations require that monies given for charitable purposes must be used for charitable purposes, i.e, given by one charity to another charity or see the following information re charitable purposes.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/registering-charitable-qualified-donee-status/apply-become-registered-charity/establishing/what-charitable.html>

It is the policy and practice of the United Church (*The Manual 2019*, G.1.5.4) that monies that have been given to a United Church congregation that is disbanding will normally be used to support some area of ongoing work within The United Church. This can be an opportunity for a congregation to leave a legacy, give a gift, that will be important to another ministry that has particular meaning for the congregation.

Regional Council approval is required, and the disposal of a charity’s financial assets are also subject to CRA regulations.

Keep the charitable number active until the final charitable return has been submitted after disposal of all assets and the community of faith has been disbanded by motion by the Region. Failure to maintain the charitable number will bring about very precise and restrictive polices and deadlines of the Canada Revenue Agency.

The Community of Faith should not be disbanded until after the final details of all property transactions have been completed. (Former) Trustees & signing officers of a disbanded congregation do not normally have the authority to sign documents on behalf of a now non-existent congregation!

Celebration

Congregations amalgamating will likely plan a worship service that acknowledges both endings and the new beginning – there may be processions bringing together both the people and significant pieces of property from the amalgamating congregations, and symbolic ways to indicate the “letting go” of some things so that new life will flourish.

The final worship service of a disbanding congregation is the place to officially declare the congregation disbanded, its members transferred or released for continued life in other congregations, its memories archived in hearts as well as documents, and its years of faithful witness celebrated with enthusiasm. Regional Council Reps may share in this service and may offer suggestions and samples of liturgies for the planning of the service.

Pastoral Issues

A congregation facing the prospect of amalgamation or closure often does so with mixed feelings, and sometimes with divided opinion. This is normal!

Don't be hard on yourself or others. Take time to get used to the ideas being proposed. Not everyone needs to be on the same page at the same time. Disagreement is ok.

Leaders, members, Regional Council representatives need to remember to listen reflectively, honour the feelings (which may be different from the facts), and help members explore options.

Some feelings are similar to those commonly experienced as part of the normal grief reaction. There may be denial of facts, reluctance to make decisions, wanting someone else to make the decision – the minister, the Regional Council. But the decision to cease being a congregation is one which the congregation itself needs to make, not someone else.

Anger is often present, even when it goes underground or is denied; anger may lead to naming scapegoats - “them” who have left, don't come, fail to support, minister, God, Acknowledging anger is a healthy way to begin dealing with it.

Bargaining may be seen – last minute programs, what did we do wrong? maybe we can fix it (appease an angry God).

There may be depression in individuals or as a congregation – listless, lack of interest, denial, feeling guilty, sleeplessness.

Acceptance comes to different people at different times. It is hard for those who have accepted the idea of closing, and those who haven't, to hear one another. As acceptance is reached there is energy released for the work that must be done.

A certain degree of acceptance is necessary before there can be a congregational meeting to vote on closing. No one wants to be the only one or the first “traitor” to go public. Acceptance of the loss makes it easier to share the memories of the past, and the grief of the present, and the promise of a future not yet unfolded.

Gradually, or perhaps quickly, the congregation will make decisions regarding property, membership, and the final worship – a celebration of their life and acknowledgement of their ending. Even after the decision is made, all of the above feelings may continue to resurface, just as they do in the months following the death of loved one.

The above material on pastoral issues is adapted from “Death and Dying of a Congregation” by Daphne Burt in *Action Information*, July/August, 1990, The Alban Institute.