

Backgrounder #9: Other Models Considered

The Comprehensive Review Task Group used the wisdom it gathered in conversations with the church, research, and analysis to consider and evaluate alternative structural models, including the following:

1. Two courts: Communities of faith and a denominational council
2. Two courts: Communities of faith and regional councils, with a small secretariat to support the Moderator
3. Three courts: Pastoral councils, 40 regional councils, and a General Council
4. Four courts (current structure): Pastoral charges, presbyteries/districts, Conferences, and a General Council

The task group received variations on these models from individuals; congregations; presbyteries, districts, and equivalent bodies; and Conferences, and reviewed and analyzed all of them in its discernment process. In extensive consultation and its own deliberations, the task group determined the following about each of these models:

1. Two Courts: Communities of Faith and a Denominational Council

Implicit in the model, which the task group put forward in its discussion paper [Fishing on the Other Side](http://www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/140206) (www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/140206), was a shift from oversight and discipline to support for and services to communities of faith.

Pros

- Time and money spent on governance and support services would be reduced.
- Resources could be redirected to ministry and mission.
- Decisions would be made only once with limited, if any, right to appeal.
- Structure would be financially feasible within projected resources.

Cons

- Too many communities of faith would relate to a single denominational council.
- Unhealthy communities of faith might not seek assistance until the damage is done.
- The church is too large geographically to be managed effectively with this model.
- It would be difficult to hear unique voices in the church, such as French ministries and the Bermuda Synod, and to recognize unique regional needs.
- It would be difficult for a volunteer organization to accommodate such a radical change.
- The task group heard in its consultations that such a model would be unacceptable.

2. Two Courts: Communities of Faith and Regional Councils, plus a Small National Secretariat

In this model, representatives of communities of faith would participate in regional councils, which could have quite different policies from one another. National policies would be determined by consensus among regions. In the structure reviews the church undertook in 1994, 1997, and 2000, this model was called the Federation model. It is similar to the structure of the Uniting Church in Australia, which was created in 1977 with the merger of the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches. It is also similar to the model proposed by Maritime Conference during its consultation on the task group's discussion paper, [Trust God; Trust the Body](http://www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/140520) (www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/140520).

Pros

- Most decision-making power would rest with regional councils, allowing for regional differences to be honoured.
- Two courts would be efficient since decisions would be made only once and travel would be reduced.
- Regional councils would be geographically closer to communities of faith than in the two-court model the task group put forward in "Fishing on the Other Side."

Cons

- Resting decision-making in relatively autonomous regional bodies would result in a decentralized church, a less effective national voice, and less sense of being "united."
- National standards for ministers would be difficult to achieve.
- It would be challenging to create national policies and guidelines.
- It would be difficult to achieve the consensus required to make decisions as a denomination and to fund denominational initiatives.
- It would be challenging to deal with regional economic disparities.
- It would be difficult to establish global partnerships for ministry and mission and ecumenical initiatives.

3. Three Courts: Pastoral Councils, 40 Regional Councils, and a General Council

In 1994, 1997, and 2000, a three-court model was proposed in which the responsibilities of presbyteries/districts and Conferences would have been combined into 40 regional councils. This model was approved by the 37th General Council in 2000 but failed to secure the necessary approvals in the remit process.

Pros

- This model would make better use of human and financial resources by eliminating one layer of decision-making.
- It would replace the 86 presbyteries/districts and the 13 Conferences with an intermediate court, which would enable connection by geography.

Cons

- More staff would be needed to provide support, advice, and services to regional councils, which would be mandated to do all of the functions of presbyteries/districts and Conferences, including oversight and discipline of pastoral councils and ministers.
- It would be difficult to staff and provide infrastructure for 40 regional councils.
- The model would not save money; in fact, it could be more expensive to resource 40 regional councils than the current structure of resourcing 13 Conferences, as most of the 86 presbyteries/districts have no staff.

4. Four Courts: Pastoral Charges, Presbyteries/Districts, Conferences, and the General Council

In this model, the church would maintain its current four-court structure and work to streamline its current processes. This model speaks to the perception that more efficient processes, with a smaller General Council Office, could resolve the financial challenges the church is facing.

Pros

- Both the strengths and the weaknesses of the current structure are known.
- There would be no need to make fundamental changes that would take at least three years to implement and would require remits.
- There would be no need to disrupt the operation of a large, volunteer-driven church.
- Pilot projects that are currently underway could continue.

Cons

- In mandating the Comprehensive Review, the 41st General Council (2012) recognized that managing the current and future challenges of membership and finances would require action beyond more pilot projects.
- Communities of faith, presbyteries/districts, and Conferences recognized that fundamental change was both necessary and welcome, and this model does not honour that recognition.
- The current model requires many volunteers and pulls resources away from local faith communities. The church lacks volunteers to populate all the committees of our current structure and do the necessary work.
- We have been living beyond our means by funding deficits from reserves. The church can no longer fund deficits this way because it has drawn down unrestricted reserves to a point where they will soon be depleted. Cutting at least \$11 million from the current structure to live within our means would require shrinking all activities by 33 percent, which is either not possible or unwise without considering new and different ways of doing things.