

General Health and Safety Information for All Ministries

“Health and safety—they’re everyone’s responsibility.” There is a lot of truth and responsibility packed into those six words. The United Church of Canada is concerned about the health and safety of everyone who works or comes in contact with its ministries. We are committed to ensuring that the work environment is a safe environment. Consequently, health and safety regulations and procedures need to be a priority in all ministry settings.

Many people see churches only as a place of worship, not a workplace. However, every ministry is a workplace whether there is one employee or one hundred. We have a legal responsibility to ensure we are in compliance with the provincial Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA). Adherence to and compliance with occupational health and safety laws needs to be a priority for the governing body and the minister/executive director/administrator of each and every ministry.

The OHSA creates an internal responsibility system where everyone has a role to play in ensuring a healthy and safe workplace. The working conditions of staff in a congregation are the responsibility of the Ministry and Personnel Committee. In non-congregational ministries, this may be the responsibility of the human resources department or the board directly, particularly in smaller organizations that may not have a formal human resources department.

Workers include ministry personnel, office staff, case workers, paid honorary assistants, independent contract cleaning staff, food service staff, paid musicians, and anyone else who performs work or provides services on the premises of the ministry for monetary compensation. The worker has three rights:

1. to know how to work safely
2. to refuse unsafe work
3. to participate in creating a safe workplace

Many interpret these as being related to physical work, but they also apply to the environment and the conditions under which an employee works. Bullying and harassment have become priorities for those responsible for health and safety in the workplace. Ministerial staff may be the targets, even unintentionally, of this workplace hazard more often than we think. As well, many ministerial staff work alone, making them vulnerable to external harassment and even physical violence.

Make a Ministry as Safe and Healthy as Possible

1. Leaders (board/council members, clergy, directors, and supervisors) must be committed to health and safety principles and processes and lead by example at all times.
2. Safety must become an integral part of the ministry’s work, rather than simply compliance with specific legislative requirements.
3. Workplace safety must not be seen as an option but be recognized as part of a legal and moral obligation and an essential component of what constitutes good performance. Getting the job done quickly is not more important than working safely.
4. Employers, supervisors, and workers must learn and understand their respective health and safety duties and that they have a right to a safe and healthy workplace.

Developing a Safe and Healthy Work Environment

All workplaces are subject to the provincial or territorial legislation related to health and safety. What it is called varies from province to province, but Occupational Health and

Safety or Workplace Safety are the two most common terms. Many provinces have an “act” as well as “regulations.” Owners/employers must adhere to both the act and the regulations specific to the type of work/service provided. Currently, Industrial Regulations cover office-type workplaces. It is important to know which regulations apply to your workplace in your province.

Although requirements may vary, some basic components to include in developing a safety program for your ministry include

- Safety Policy
- Copy of the act available for employees
- Workplace Violence and Harassment Policy
- Worker representative
- Health and safety inspections: mandatory when the number of employees exceeds a specific limit
- WHMIS Training and MSDS Sheets for all hazardous products used in the ministry; includes household chemicals that may be used for cleaning, etc.
- Committee: mandatory when the number of employees exceeds a specific limit
- First aid kit and names of people trained in first aid: for workplaces where the number of employees exceeds a specific limit

It is important for the employees, employer, and governing body to be aware of and support all aspects needed to create a safe work environment.

Where Do I Go for Assistance?

1. Health and safety issues should be brought to the attention of the supervisor. This may be an individual or the official board/church council (through the Ministry and Personnel Committee) or board of directors.
2. If the governing body requires assistance or the individual finds that the governing body is not responding, the next step is to go to the Presbytery Pastoral Relations Committee/Pastoral Oversight.
3. Presbytery may seek the assistance of the Conference Personnel Minister.
4. Contact your local provincial health and safety office.
5. Where an individual's personal safety is at risk, particularly from an external source, call the police.

NOTE: This document is intended only as a resource tool to assist board/council members become familiar with the key principles of occupational health and safety. It is not intended as a comprehensive summary of occupational health and safety requirements in the workplace. Each ministry is responsible for reviewing the Occupational Health and Safety Act (or equivalent) and all other applicable regulations specific to its province/territory. This document in no way relieves each congregation or ministry from its statutory duties and responsibilities as an employer.

Please refer to “Health and Safety Acts and Regulations” on www.united-church.ca/local/duty/health for government website links.