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Jim Blanchard
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February 23, 2005

Dear Roland:

Thank you for your letter of February 9, 2005 in which you extended an invitation to have a representative of the Ministry and Employment Policies and Services Permanent Committee (MEPS PC) and Unit staff attend the Annual Meeting of the Diakonia of The United Church of Canada, and inquired about the work of the MEPS PC.

With respect to the invitation to join you at your Annual Meeting, I very much regret we will be unable to have representation at your meeting due to the fact the MEPS PC is meeting at that same time at the General Council offices in Toronto. It is unfortunate because I would have taken advantage of the opportunity to attend to learn more about your work and your concerns.

The MEPS PC has a heavy workload with several major projects underway. In addition, both the staff of the MEPS Unit and the elected and appointed representatives are learning the new roles and expectations brought on by the structural changes within the General Council Executive and the General Council offices. It is easy to forget that these changes are relatively recent and it takes several years for a new culture to evolve in conjunction with their implementation. Thus, much learning is occurring and efforts are being made to ensure pieces of the puzzle are not lost in the restructuring. I have nothing but praise for the efforts of the staff and the elected and appointed members for their dedication and patience as things evolve.

The two major pieces of work under way are the compensation study and the isolation study. In addition, the sexual abuse policy is under review, another large task is the work being done to integrate the decisions of the General Council around Designated Lay Ministry, task groups are reviewing interim ministry, sabbatical leaves, the Pastoral Relations Handbook, lay presidency of the sacraments, and a major revision of the Human Resource Policies applicable at General Council offices is underway. While these tasks and others being undertaken do not address matters specific to diaconal ministry, much of the work relates to the work and working conditions of persons in diaconal ministry.

One issue the MEPS PC has been discussing in the context of the Committee's role is advocacy. We have had several discussions around this topic and have not arrived at conclusions as to the role of the Permanent Committee with respect to advocacy for specific groups and/or issues. We have determined that an opportunity should be provided at each meeting for us to meet for a brief time with a representative(s) of a group who wishes to bring concerns to our attention. In view of this decision, I extend to your group an invitation to meet with our Committee to bring to our attention issues of concern to you and to provide some input to us on what you view our role to be with respect to advocacy and the diaconal ministry. If your group is interested please contact me or the staff at the General Council offices. Related to this is representation on the various task and steering groups we have established. I would ask that members of the diaconal ministry be encouraged to respond to calls for volunteers so that your voice is present.

I wish you well with your meeting and know that you will enjoy being in the Maritimes, even though April is often still winter here and despite the fact the spring arrived on March 21st.

Yours in Christ

Jim Blanchard
Chairperson
MEPS Permanent Committee

c.c. Carol Gierak, MEPS Unit staff
Michael Burke, MEPS Unit staff