



Great Lakes Presbytery

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Chair - Jackie Kershaw, Elder
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Chair - Janet Dumford, Elder
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April 16, 2020

Dear Great Lakes Presbytery Commissioner,

Your Presbytery Council is taking an unprecedented action, which is to offer a recommendation to **vote against** an actionable item in April's docket.

As many of you are aware, ECO terminated its health and benefits coverage for pastors and church employees effective January 1, 2020. In July 2019, churches were informed by John Terech, ECO's Executive Director of Operations, to expect higher rates for benefits in 2020. It was only on September 11, 2019 that churches and pastors were informed via email that benefits would be terminated effective January 1, 2020.

We believe that our ECO Staff are working hard to faithfully serve Christ and His church. But we also are concerned that events have happened so fast at the Synod level, that they have not had proper time to carefully and diligently think through the consequences of terminating these benefits so quickly.

You are being asked, at April's Presbytery Gathering, to vote on changes to our ECO Polity. Specifically, with ECO Polity and Discipline Resolution PD-1, we are all being asked to add the following language to ECO Polity #1.0603: *The session shall offer the congregation's full- time pastor(s), and by law, full- time lay employees medical, short- and long-term disability, and life insurance. Sessions shall meet the minimum terms of call set by their presbyteries for all called and installed pastors, and by their own rule assistant pastors.*

Your Council is taking the unprecedented step of recommending that you **vote against** approving this change to our Polity. This change in language was introduced and approved at our 2020 Synod Gathering in Dallas. In order to vote on this Polity change, the ECO Synod had to enlist the help of the Presbytery of Texas since there was not enough time for the ECO Synod to follow the usual process for introducing changes to Polity. Upon a 2/3 vote at the Synod Gathering, this change to our Polity was approved and has now been sent to all the Presbyteries for ratification.

However, delegates from our Presbytery were among the few to challenge this Polity change recommended from our ECO Synod. The concern that we have is simple: the NEW language of our Polity states, clearly, that Sessions "shall offer . . . medical, short- and long-term disability, and life insurance."

We have noted that this language does not say that churches should “ensure” that their members have benefits – instead it insists that Sessions “shall” provide these benefits. The ECO Synod Executive Council has authorized an interpretation of proposed section 1.0603 which states that their intent in the Polity change is that churches will “ensure” coverage, not that every church must come up with a health plan of its own. However, language matters, especially to lawyers and benefits providers. There is a clear and decisive difference in the language that ECO Synod is proposing and the language that we think would be best.

Many of our churches and pastors are benefiting from being able to obtain coverage from a spouse’s provider or other coverage such as Medicare. If we approve this proposed amendment to our ECO Polity, pastors and other employees may be prohibited by their spouse’s benefits plan from being eligible for coverage. Additionally, the clear and plain language of this amendment would require Sessions to “provide” coverage rather than ensuring that coverage is provided.

Upon notification in September 2019 of the cancellation of the national health plan, presbytery leaders were told to take steps to ensure that pastors and full-time employees had coverage. Due to the rush to action to enact new Polity, your Council did not have time to come up with a solution that would work best for the churches of our presbytery. We believe the rush to enact new Polity also kept national leaders and the Presbytery of Texas from being able to fully consider the consequences of the Polity changes and how it would impact individual congregations, especially smaller ones.

Therefore, it is your Great Lakes Presbytery Council’s recommendation to vote NO on approving ECO Polity #1.0603. Please note that as we make this recommendation, we are committed to being part of the solution! It is your Council’s intent to prepare new Polity language to present for approval at our ECO 2022 Synod meeting.

Yours in Christ,

The Great Lakes Presbytery Council