

[OVT-038] On Benefit Equity Among Mid Council Executive Staff

Sponsor: John Calvin Presbytery

Recommendation

The Presbytery of John Calvin overtures the 224th General Assembly (2020) to instruct the Board of Pensions to allow ruling elders serving in mid council executive staff positions the option of enrolling in the Pastor's Participation Plan of the Board of Pensions.

[Note: Definition of Mid Council Executive Staff: For purposes of this overture, mid council executive staff is defined as any ruling elder employed by a mid council of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who, if ordained as a teaching elder/minister of the Word and Sacrament, would qualify for enrollment in the Pastor's Participation Plan of the Board of Pensions. Descriptive (not prescriptive) examples include: executive, general, pastoral, or associate presbyter; stated clerk; director or coordinator.]

Rationale

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has, both in polity and tradition, held parity between ruling elders and teaching elders/ministers of the Word and Sacrament. As a denomination, we have recognized that both ruling and teaching elders bring unique gifts to the work of ministry at all levels of church leadership. In particular, ruling elders have a long history of serving the mid councils of our denomination as executive staff.

Until recently, ruling elders serving in mid council executive staff positions were eligible to participate in what is now termed the "Pastor's Participation Plan" of the Board of Pensions. However, with the introduction of the Menu Plan in 2017, this eligibility was ended and these individuals were shifted to the Menu Plan. While the Menu Plan offers the possibility of the same coverage as the Pastor's Participation Plan, in some cases the cost of this coverage is significantly higher. In the case of one executive staff person in the Presbytery of John Calvin, the cost difference between the Menu Plan and the Pastor's Participation Plan was nearly \$20,000 per year for medical coverage alone.

In conversations between the Presbytery of John Calvin and the Board of Pensions, it was shared by the board representative that this experience is the minority experience and for many cases the Menu Plan is no more expensive than Pastor's Participation Plan. The Presbytery of John Calvin is deeply thankful that this is a minority experience; however, in conversations with other mid council leaders, we understand that we are not alone in this experience. Our hope is by allowing the option (but not the requirement) for ruling elders in mid council executive staff positions to enroll in the Pastor's Participation Plan that we can minimize the financial impact of this minority situation.

In the latest edition of "Living by the Gospel," the Board of Pensions presents a Theology of Benefits on the first page, which states in part:

The very character of God as revealed in the Scriptures compels those who worship and serve God to “maintain justice, and do what is right.” Hence, from its inception the Church has affirmed just compensation for its servants. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has repeatedly confirmed this commitment to support its servants with compensation that includes salary, benefits, vacation, and opportunities for spiritual growth and renewal. ... We call people to varied forms of service and covenant to support them so they may devote their best gifts and energies to the work of God’s kingdom.

By opening the option to enroll in Pastor’s Participation Plan to those ruling elders in mid council executive staff positions, we are making it possible for all mid councils to live up to the calling presented by the Board of Pensions in their Theology of Benefits, supporting all those who are called to “varied forms of service” as we “support them so they may devote their best gifts and energies to the work of God’s kingdom.” The current situation leaves some mid councils in the challenging position of having to choose between meeting budgetary obligations or providing benefits to ruling elders, or even worse, having to decide between the ideal individual for an executive staff position who happens to be a ruling elder or someone who might be a less-ideal fit, but who is cheaper to provide benefits for as a minister of the Word and Sacrament.

Among ministers there is “call neutrality” when it comes to the provision of benefits to make it easier for a smaller congregation to call a qualified individual. It is the hope of the Presbytery of John Calvin that we could return to the pre-2017 pattern of a similar “neutrality” for mid council executive staff to empower our smaller mid councils to call the best person for the work of ministry in their context.