

United Church, Roman Catholic ecumenists use AV link-up to meet

OTTAWA—After a hiatus of nearly eighteen months, the national-level Roman Catholic-United Church of Canada dialogue group met, in Ottawa and in Edmonton, April 30—May 2, 2007.

This was the first Canadian ecumenical dialogue meeting held through the mediation of Skype audiovisual technology. Bishop Luc Bouchard of the Diocese of Saint-Paul (north of Edmonton), who co-chairs this dialogue on behalf of the CCCB, and Julien Hammond, Ecumenical Officer for the Archdiocese of Edmonton both needed to be present at the May 1 installation of the new Archbishop of Edmonton, Most Rev. Richard Smith. Hence the innovation of meeting via AV link-up.

Rev. Dr. Richard Bott, who co-chaired the meeting on behalf of the United Church of Canada, kept the sound and vision going at the Ottawa terminal.

The theological focus of this meeting continued a serious conversation already begun about the understanding of marriage in the Roman Catholic Church and in the United Church of Canada. The dialogue group chose this topic shortly after the two sponsoring churches had argued (in May 2004) opposing positions before the Supreme Court of Canada on the federal legislation opening the way for same-sex marriage in this country. In 2005, the group studied those Court factums. But, as one member wrote, *“documents produced for the legal system (an adversarial system that presumes competing self-interests and the necessity of one side winning out over the other)...seemed counter-productive to our aim in this dialogue. We knew that if we were to proceed with a theological dialogue on marriage, we would have to abandon...polemics, and approach the topic as people of faith, followers of Jesus, members of one family, and friends.”*

Thus it was that on May 1, Dr. Bott took the group through a comparison of the ritual of marriage as set down in the official service books of each church. Elements common to both (the consent of the spouses, the language of *promise* that commits the spouses to a relationship that is covenantal and not merely private, the expressed intention of life-long commitment, the conviction that God is present to the promises) were noted. Elements that now diverge (the most recent United Church marriage ritual has been re-written to make it equally applicable to same-sex partners) will be considered as other aspects of each church's theology of marriage are presented in subsequent meetings.

From his pastoral experience, Bishop Bouchard spoke about the depths of spiritual awakening that are possible when a couple is carefully prepared for the sacrament of marriage in the context of the Eucharist. Marriage preparation is, he said, “a crucially important form of evangelization and growth... Marriage builds the parish, builds human society, and builds the church in love.” When both spouses are Catholics, Mass and sacramental communion are the appropriate setting for the marriage ceremony, since the sacrificial love of Christ is the source and the strength of the couple's commitment to each other, to their children and to their community.

At a meeting in the fall of 2007, Dr. Michael Attridge, a married Catholic theologian newly appointed to the dialogue, will respond to a scholarly study of United Church statements about marriage prepared for a previous meeting by United Church theologian Dr. Philip Ziegler. Because the group wants to get a clearer picture of the theological anthropology (doctrine of the human person) underlying each church's teaching about marriage, Dr. Attridge will use the text of the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* as the framework for his response.

Nearly half of the discussion time of this early May meeting was devoted to evaluating the recent past of the Roman Catholic/United Church dialogue. One reason for this: in June, the CCCB's Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism, Inter-Faith Relations, and Religious Relations with the Jewish People will meet to consider the fruits and the future of the ongoing dialogues of which the CCCB is a participant. Another reason: the Inter-Faith, Inter-Church Committee of the United Church of Canada is currently searching for three new appointees to this dialogue, to replace

Rev. Dr. Philip Ziegler, Rev. Angelika Piché, and Ms. Laurie Smith, who have completed their terms of service as members of the dialogue.

Helpful in the effort of evaluation were two documents produced by members of the group. In the summer of 2003, the Journal of Ecumenical Studies published a study of the first thirty years of Roman-Catholic-United Church dialogue by Rev. Angelika Piché. And in preparation for this May 2007 meeting, Julien Hammond wrote a summary of the life of the dialogue in its last three or four years. With this background work in hand, the members of the dialogue exchanged candid reflections on the rewards and difficulties of this decades-long effort at mutual understanding between two of the largest churches in Canada.

Angelika Piché recalled for the group the official mandate for this dialogue. Worded with no reference to church union, mutual recognition of ministries or other goals often associated with formal ecumenism, the mandate urged this dialogue to *increase understanding and appreciation between the Roman Catholic Church and the United Church of Canada*. The group is to *explore pastoral, theological and ethical issues, including those which may divide our churches*. *Participants in the dialogue group expect to learn from and be challenged by one another, and commit themselves to countering misinformation, stereotypes and prejudices that may influence the members of our churches.*

Thirty-three years after its launch, Catholic and United Church members who have taken part in this dialogue retain enthusiasm for the task, and gratitude for the experience itself. No member suggested that the dialogue be discontinued, curtailed, or even drastically changed—although there was widespread concern over the lack of a way to communicate regularly with the wider church membership.

As for the innovation of meeting via webcam and microphone, the consensus was that AV link-up definitely isn't as good as sitting at the same table, going to meals together, enjoying social time and praying together in a shared physical space. But it is a great deal better than simply leaving out the people who can't travel.

The next meeting of the RC/UC dialogue is set for **October 9, 10 and 11, 2007.**

Present in Ottawa: as United Church of Canada participants: Dr. Gail Allan, Rev. Dr. Richard Bott, Rev. Angelika Piché, and Ms. Laurie Smith.

As Roman Catholic participants: Dr. Michael Attridge and Ms. Janet Somerville.

Present in Edmonton: Bishop Luc Bouchard (co-chair of the dialogue on behalf of the CCCB) and Mr. Julien Hammond, both Roman Catholic participants.

Regrets: Rev. Pierre Voyer, Anglican observer for the RC/UC dialogue.

(Note: Dr. Gail Allen is Ecumenical Officer for the United Church of Canada, and acts as staff for this dialogue. Janet Somerville is secretary to the dialogue on behalf of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and was the recorder at this meeting.)