

**Report of the Roman Catholic – United Church Dialogue Group
to
The Diocesan Commission for Ecumenism of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon and
River Bend Presbytery of the United Church of Canada**

February 2016

Preface:

A local bilateral dialogue between members of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon and River Bend Presbytery of the United Church of Canada took place between April 2014 and July 2015. The members were recommended to their diocese/presbytery for appointment by a small coordinating committee, consisting of Tim Jelinski (Catholic) and Jordan Cantwell (United Church) as co-facilitators and Nicholas Jesson (Catholic) and Sandra Beardsall (United Church) as resource persons. (See the appended list of dialogue members).

The initial meetings involved sharing our lives, our faith journeys, and our curiosity and questions about one another's faith traditions and doctrine, in the context of a meal and worship together. The group then embarked upon a thorough discussion of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, produced in 2013 as a "convergence" text on the churches' "understanding of the nature of the nature of the Church itself" (*The Church*, Introduction).¹ The 69-paragraph document, which was commended to the churches for study and action, intends to help the churches see the extent of their current convergence on the church's identity, life, and mission, but also to find concrete ways to grow towards greater unity. Our goals were to read this document together, to learn from it and from one another, and to envision new ways that our diocese and presbytery might model and strive for unity.

The dialogue group met monthly from September 2014 to May 2015, with a concluding day-long gathering at Queen's House of Retreats in July 2015. Each meeting began with a light supper and prayer, with members taking turns providing meals and prayers. We then read the document aloud together, pausing after each paragraph for comment, questions, and discussion. This process drew us into deep and rewarding conversation and mutual learning. The document led us to moments of profound insight, of delighted agreement, of repentance and reflection, and of clarity about our differences. We asked one another questions and struggled to grasp unfamiliar viewpoints. We grew personally in our care and respect for one another.

This dialogue group and its task were personally enriching for the members, and for that reason alone such dialogue is a worthwhile enterprise. **However, we believe that the fruits of our dialogue also have something to say to our sponsoring churches.** We wish to share what we learned in areas of consensus and encouragement for our churches, as well as places where we recognized the need for continuing discussion and further work. This report gathers some of our insights, questions, and challenges, in the hope that the Roman Catholic Church and the United Church in the Saskatoon region may continue to live in peace and strive for unity, for the sake of the world.

¹ *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013). All subsequent references to the document will list simply the paragraph number(s) in parentheses following the quotation.

This report touches on our common ground, the investigation of our differences, and our challenges to our two churches around ways we might live more fully into unity. It does not attempt to name all the things we agreed or disagreed upon but offers significant examples that demonstrate the breadth and depth of our discussions.

I. Our Common Ground

a) *Responsiveness to our Shared Context*

The Church text showed us that as Catholic and United Church Christians living in Saskatoon in twenty-first-century Canada, we share significant common ground. Both our churches are active outside our walls, “called to live out their discipleship in a variety of forms of service” (par. 18). We hear the moral demand of the gospel, and it impels us “to work for a just social order.” Both our churches “engage with political and economic authorities in order to promote the values of the Kingdom of God” (par. 64-65). We both understand that there are mystery and transformation at the heart of mission and that the mission is Jesus’; we are its instruments.

Such activism is not without its dangers. Both our churches have had to repent of the grave sins committed as a result of our mission to the world, most obviously our involvement in Indian Residential Schools, but also other actions that have wounded creation and caused pain rather than healing to others. We agreed that it is important for both our churches, which have wielded considerable power at times, to make a distinction between power and authority, as described in *The Church* (par. 49). We recognized together that it is difficult to enculturate the gospel in a particular context without misappropriating the culture. As one member put it, “One person’s enculturation is another person’s syncretism.”

b) *Church as Family*

We recognize a common struggle to be the church as “family” in a context that features the fragmentation of church and society. *The Church* prizes the Church as *koinonia* (deeply held “communion” – with God, other Christians, and indeed all creation), but it is difficult to practice and maintain *koinonia* when we are surrounded by insularity and mistrust of institutions. Further, we respond with openness to the rich religious and cultural plurality of our context (although we differ on approaches to evangelism – see below). We have learned to be open to each other as churches, and gradually to see each other as “family.” In spite of our differences, we recognize that we are the Body of Christ.

c) *Sacramental Life*

The Church speaks to a growing convergence around baptism (par. 41), and we reminded ourselves that the majority of Canadian Christians have mutually recognized each other’s baptisms since 1975. Other aspects of our liturgical lives have also grown closer in the past forty years, as the liturgical renewal movement strengthened the awareness of what we do in worship. Perhaps most significantly, we have moved towards one another in our understanding of what happens at the Table. We agree that Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper are “signs” in a profound way; although we do not completely share our theology at this point we see that it may be more a matter of emphasis than of disagreement. We should not underestimate this progress on a topic that divided the churches of Europe so bitterly in the 16th century.

Further, we have learned to focus beyond ourselves when we celebrate at the table. Both our churches appreciate that the Eucharist calls us to solidarity with the outcast (par. 43), even as the majority of the members of our two churches in this diocese/presbytery live comfortably in the middle class. This

orientation towards the dispossessed struck us as perhaps being more significant than our remaining differences around sacramental theology.

d) *Mending the Church's Divisions for the Healing of Creation*

The Conclusion of *The Church* emphasizes that the Church carries within its life and witness the “new cosmos” that God plans for the end of history. Its ministry must be life-giving, compassionate, and oriented towards that final *koinonia* of all creation in unity with the Triune God. It also recognizes that our brokenness as a church family thwarts this ministry while our attempts at reconciliation help to empower it. Our dialogue confirmed our shared belief that all creation longs for fulfillment, and that the Church is intended as the “sign and servant of God’s design for the world” (par. 27-29). In order to be that witness, Christians must continue to work at mending our divisions with one another.

II. Investigating our Differences

It is no secret that our churches harbour differences with one another. We are part of a great rupture that has not yet been healed, although we have made amazing progress. When we came to a place of disagreement in our encounter with *The Church* text, occasionally we realized we stood in stark opposition to one another. More frequently, we realized we did not understand each other’s position very well. Here are four areas that stood out as places where further dialogue is needed on ecclesiological matters:

a) *Salvation and Other Faiths*

At various points in our dialogue, we realized that our churches tend to operate with different views of God’s “plan to save the world” or the “*missio Dei*” (par. 3), particularly in relation to how persons of other faiths participate in this saving plan. On one hand, we agreed that our two churches are moving away from an “exclusivist” position that understands non-Christians as “damned.” However, to put it in simplified terms, Catholics tend towards an “inclusivist” view, which understands non-Christians as being drawn into salvation as “anonymous” Christians, while the United Church tends to a “pluralist” view that other religions are distinct and equally valid in their communication of the truth about God, the world, and salvation. *How our churches understand salvation of those of other faiths will affect how we enter into interfaith dialogue.*

b) *Authority in the Church*

Some of our most intriguing conversations stemmed from our attempts to understand the differing theologies and exercise of authority in our two churches. We agreed that we have witnessed the exercise of truly grace-filled personal authority in our churches, naming Pope Francis as an obvious, but not the only, example, yet much separates us on this topic. It became obvious that the United Church of Canada, which is small and mostly bound by a common national identity (there are just a handful of United Church congregations that are not within Canada) has quite a different task in exercising authority than the Roman Catholic Church, with its 1.25 billion members extending across the globe. The authority structures of our churches operate vastly differently.

The Roman Catholics asked the United Church members what, if any, authority their church grants to the early ecumenical councils, and how the church honours the ancestors in the faith. Further, they asked how leadership is exercised effectively when authority is diffused and no one is “set apart” for the task, as described in *The Church* (par. 52). United Church members asked the Roman Catholic members why they accept in the church something they would not accept in political life: a non-democratic

structure in which they have no “vote.” They also asked how the laity understand that their voices are heard in their church.

While we made some progress in these discussions – for example, recognizing the role of the “*sensus fidelium*” in the Catholic Church, and the United Church, at its best, modelling true conciliarity – we know that there is more to discuss and that *we could mutually enrich each other’s exercise of authority by continuing to explore our differences of theology and practice.*

c) Ordained Ministry

Another obvious point of difference in our two churches is the exercise of ordained ministry. United Church members focused on the Roman Catholic restriction of ordained ministry of word and sacrament to men only. While the official issue for Catholics is the question of “authority to change a constant tradition,” the dialogue members agreed that the subject is highly politicized and culturally difficult. A number of Catholic members indicated they personally would welcome ordained women in their church. The United Church members asked if Catholics could speak more openly about the political and cultural struggles, rather than justifying theological positions. Catholics wondered about the integrity of the ordained ministry in the United Church, where laity can be set apart and paid to perform all the functions of ordained clergy. United Church members acknowledged that power and authority in ministry are confusing – and perhaps confused – in their church, and that the United Church thus faces the challenge of “covert authority” in the hands of those who are not officially chosen and set apart by the church’s councils. While we cannot as two local expressions of the church effect great change on these matters, *we agreed that continuing dialogue on ministry will help us to be more faithful to the vision of ordained ministry set out in The Church.*

d) Moral Issues

The Church raises the issue of “the moral challenge of the gospel,” as it addresses the church’s responsibility to serve the world (chapter IV). Moral issues have both united and divided the Roman Catholic and United churches in very public ways. While we have come together on issues of justice, environment, and peace, we have remained divided over questions of sexuality and issues related to the beginning and end of life. These issues are becoming increasingly complex and immediate.

It was not the place of a dialogue on ecclesiology to debate the issues themselves, but to understand the churches’ theologies about moral decision-making. We agreed that we have made headway in our ability to recognize that our churches, even in disagreement, are acting in good faith. We further agreed that the churches need to work to define more carefully what “morality” is, before assuming to tell the world how to exercise it. *Thus, it could be fruitful for our churches to continue to discuss our theologies and practices of moral discernment.*

III. Challenges to our Churches

The Faith and Order Commission invited the churches to consider how *The Church* text challenges our churches to work for unity and to form closer relationships with other churches (Introduction). Perhaps the most exciting part of our dialogue came in recognizing that we can offer ways for our diocese and presbytery to live towards true *koinonia*. These are the challenges we would like to pose to you, our sponsoring church bodies:

a) Model Pastorally the Unity We Already Share (Recover the “Lund Principle”)

The Church reminded us again and again of how much we share as churches. We challenge our two churches to model that unity pastorally and visibly. Here are some examples we considered:

- i) *Ask the churches to recommit themselves publicly to the Lund Principle (to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel us to act separately).*
- ii) *Begin this commitment with baptism, where we have long-standing mutual recognition. Could we commit to sending representatives to witness each other’s baptismal liturgies? Could we conduct shared baptismal liturgies across denominational lines?*
- iii) *Interchurch families offer another opportunity to model unity. Could we create formal guidelines for interchurch marriages, which include the pastor conducting the marriage contacting a clergy member of the other denomination, and offering ways to make the liturgy a welcoming experience for those of both churches?*
- iv) *Ordinations tend to be liturgies that are heavily focused on our own denominational traditions. Could we invite clergy and/or leaders of other denominations to participate (as appropriate) in ordination services?*
- v) *Diocesan Study Days for Clergy and Pastoral Leaders could include invitations to the pastors of other denominations*
- vi) *River Bend Presbytery could include corresponding members from other denominations at its meetings.*

b) Respect our Mutual Agreement on the Baptismal Formula

Recognizing the importance of mutual recognition of baptism, we remind our churches of the conclusion of the national United Church-Roman Catholic Dialogue's report *In Whose Name?* that unauthorized changes to the baptismal formula undermines mutual recognition and raises new difficulties in ecumenical relations between our churches.

c) Attend to Each Other’s Significant Statements/Teachings

We are aware of significant documents that emerge from each other’s denominations (*Laudato si* and “That We May Know Each Other: United Church-Muslim Relations Today” are examples.) We should be reading and discussing each other’s documents, both in our own churches and ecumenically.

d) Consult before Acting

Our diocese and presbytery regularly take decisions that will affect the life of the church. We suggest that as a measure of the mutual accountability envisioned in *The Church*, our churches should engage in consultation with ecumenical partners on significant decisions. We recognize that while we are not in a place to demand or expect to change one another’s decisions, consultation will make our decisions more faithful and grounded in the Gospel. It will also allow us to disagree respectfully and thoughtfully, if need be.

e) Honour Diversity: Degrees of Communion

The question of “diversity in unity” arose many times throughout the dialogue. We agreed that we do not anticipate or want a unity that squashes all difference in the Church. We believe that we can honour diversity by emphasizing that there are degrees of communion: we can participate in some aspects of shared mission and ministry more so than in others. We

encourage our churches to develop covenants that allow for participation in differing levels of communion depending on the topic and the level of agreement already reached. We understand that such models have been practiced (e.g., in Queensland, Australia).

CONCLUSION:

It has been an honour and a gift to participate in this dialogue experience. Throughout the process, we grew in our appreciation of how the Holy Spirit was working through us. We truly felt that that our time together was a grace-filled experience, for which we are most thankful. We are also grateful to the Diocese of Saskatoon and River Bend Presbytery for supporting this important ecclesial practice. We encourage our two churches to remain in formal dialogue and to build another group to continue what we have inherited and now pass on to others. May God journey with us as we support and nurture one another in faith and witness.

DIALOGUE GROUP MEMBERS:

ROMAN CATHOLIC:

Tim Jelinski (co-facilitator)
Nicholas Jesson
Erin Lang
Sr. Cindy Lewans
Dr. Darren Dahl (resigned due to scheduling issues)
Fr. Ron Griffin (two meetings)

UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA:

Rev. Jordan Cantwell (co-facilitator)
Rev. Dr. Sandra Beardsall
Eva Biederman
Carol Lynn Howe
Rev. SunDo Hyun
Rod McPherson