

# **Full Communion:** Ecumenical Partnership between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and The United Church of Canada

## Introduction

In 2016, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and The United Church of Canada identified an interest in exploring greater fellowship and potentially a closer relationship between our two denominational bodies. Preliminary conversations suggested there were distinct benefits in greater partnership, not only on the Canadian side of the border, but in our two nations.

In December 2016, a formal meeting of leaders in both denominations took place in Toronto, Canada. Over the course of two days, both sides decided that working towards a full communion relationship is desired. There are, of course, many local, regional, and international implications of such an arrangement, but the leaders determined that this provided an ideal opportunity to bear witness to the importance and power of Christian unity in North America and to strengthen the ministry of both of our denominations. Each denomination named six representatives to explore further the issues involved and prepare a proposal for a full communion agreement. The group met twice in person and in video conferences. This report offers their reflections on issues and implications relating to full communion, as background to the proposal that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, and The United Church of Canada undertake a full communion agreement.

Although many Disciples in the United States may not know The United Church of Canada well, the Canadian Region and the United Church have a long-standing history together. Our relationship spans from local congregational partnerships where United and Disciples have presence together in various towns and cities, to educational (a cooperative agreement with Emmanuel College in Toronto from 1930s-60s), to ecumenical (both founding members of the Canadian Council of Churches), to an unsuccessful union talk which took place between 1969-1985. A lasting and blessed product of those conversations and cooperation are two joint United-Disciples

congregations—one in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and one in Calgary, Alberta. In addition, many Canadian Disciples clergy are still educated at United Church seminaries, and some Disciples clergy now serve in United Church congregations and in general church leadership. Theologically, we both have a passion for justice and mission and hold similar “statements of faith.” There are significant differences in governance and the administration of the sacraments, but the Planning Group has discerned that these are not barriers to a full communion relationship.

The United Church of Canada reached a full communion agreement with the United Church of Christ (USA) in October 2015. The relationship between these churches is encouraging a closer relationship between Global Ministries, including the Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and the Church in Mission unit of The United Church of Canada. An agreement between the United Church and the Disciples of Christ would “close the triangle” and mark a new era of ecumenical partnership in North America.

The two denominations have understood a full communion partnership as a living and growing relationship. This partnership doesn’t simply mean that we accept one another. Rather, we embrace each other fully in the witness of Christians, the ministries of the Church, and the mission of God. In this covenantal relationship, we commit to being one Church, not in merger but in God’s gift of unity, that serves the world that God so loves. The two churches will learn how to live in this covenantal relationship through rich theological conversations, enhanced witness and mission, and diverse spiritual life and worship.

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls on the followers of Christ to live life in unity for the sake of the world, so “that the world may believe....” (John 17:21) The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and The United Church of Canada have been committed to the visible unity of the church and one ecumenical movement for decades. As the two denominations enter this closer relationship to participate fully in God’s mission for this world, may God lead this journey with divine wisdom and in grace.

## Brief History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada traces its beginnings to the early national period in the United States of America. Disciples point to the work of four founders to describe their origins. All four men had ties to the Presbyterian Church. Barton Stone (1772-1844), the only one born in America, served as the sponsoring pastor for the Cane Ridge revival, drawing 10-30,000 attendees during the Second Great Awakening. The camp meeting revivals brought controversy. Stone withdrew from Presbyterianism and, with others, formed a loose association of congregations resolving “to sink into union with the body of Christ at large.” These

congregations took the name *Christian* and gained strength in North Carolina, Southern Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio.

Thomas Campbell (1763-1854) and his son, Alexander (1788-1866), were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who arrived in the United States in 1807 and 1809 respectively. In 1808, Thomas withdrew from the Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania when he was rebuked for serving the Lord's Supper to Christians not associated with his brand of Presbyterianism. A year later, he formed the Christian Association of Washington, Pennsylvania. Shortly after this event, his family arrived. Alexander, 21 years old, quickly became a leading figure. Members of the Christian Association adopted the name *Disciples*. By 1830, with the help of evangelist Walter Scott (1796-1861), who had arrived from Scotland in 1818, the movement grew rapidly and formed congregations in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia.

The earliest Disciples congregations included African Americans as members, though Disciples also included members who participated in the enslavement of others. Disciples were able to hold the church together during the Civil War. Yet, when the Churches of Christ (Non-Instrumental) separated from Disciples in 1906 by arguing that Disciples had become a denomination through the creation of national missionary organizations, the majority of those associated with the schism were located in the South. Black Disciples formed a separate, but cooperating, organizational life in 1917 known as the National Christian Missionary Convention. During 1969, as part of the formal restructuring of the Disciples life, a merger was enacted that brought the National Christian Missionary Convention into the newly established Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The resulting National Convocation continues to meet to discuss special concerns affecting African-American Disciples.

In 1812, Alexander Campbell affirmed believers' baptism by immersion as the proper Christian baptism. This led to a brief (1815-1830) affiliation with Baptists. Disciples disrupted Baptist life by seeking reform and urged Baptists to eschew denominational names in order to unite around the simplicity of the apostolic faith, illustrated by the Disciples commitment to 'no creed but Christ.'

The first signs of these Disciples-like commitments in Canada appeared in the Maritime Provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island) by 1810 in the form of mostly Scotch Baptist connections. Most of these early leaders (John R. Stewart, Alexander Crawford, James Murray, and John Stevenson) had some connection to Scotland. By the 1820s, an American, William W. Ashley, married a Canadian and carried Alexander Campbell's writings to Halifax. During the 1830s, a number of the Scotch Baptist congregations established connections to the Disciples congregation in Halifax. By the 1850s, a more formal association of Disciples congregations emerged in the Maritimes. The first Disciples congregation in Ontario appeared at Cobourg in 1836. By 1943, some twenty-four congregations in Ontario were associated with Disciples. It took a number of decades before Disciples life appeared further west in Canada, in the area of the Prairies.

During the 1820s, Campbell's Disciples and Stone's Christians discovered one another. By 1832, they had worked out a formal union that combined about 22,000 members. This union left a legacy of two names. Present-day congregations are known as 'Christian' churches, while their members are called 'Disciples.' In 1968, the denomination adopted its current name, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

In the United States and Canada, Disciples membership stands at around 455,000 (around 274,000 participating members) divided into some 3300 congregations. Around 10% of Disciples members are African-Americans, with much smaller percentages of Hispanics and various Pacific Asian Disciples. The states of Texas, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, and Ohio contain about one-third of all North American Disciples. In addition, the church's Common Global Ministries Board (with the United Church of Christ) oversees work among some 2.7 million indigenous Christians across the world who call themselves Disciples.

Early Disciples hoped to unify the church by restoring the faith and practices of the earliest congregations described in the Bible. For this reason, their worship included the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, open to all who professed Christ. Contemporary Disciples continue this practice. Their early commitment to believers' baptism also continues, though contemporary congregations welcome infant-baptized persons into church membership without rebaptism. Essentially, early Disciples members expressed their commitment to four principles:

- (1) the *Interpretation Principle* represented their commitment to the Bible, primarily for its testimony about Christ, who, as revelation of God, has always represented the ultimate authority for Christian life. Disciples affirmed the role of interpretation in reading the Bible, as public process, informed by the ideas and understanding of the whole of Christianity;
- (2) the *Restoration Principle* emphasized the purity and simplicity of earliest Christianity as guide. Today, Disciples recognize apostolic Christianity possessed far more diversity than earlier Disciples understood, and this principle currently underlines the task of the ecumenical church to understand together the voice of God in the midst of the human voices that surround them;
- (3) the *Ecumenical Principle* stressed their longstanding commitment to church unity; and
- (4) the *Eschatological Principle* pointed to their confidence that God is at work in human history and their belief the church appropriately responds by working toward the realization of the kind of justice that is promised when the reign of God is realized.

Disciples ordained women to ministry as early as the late 1880s. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, leaders among Disciples embraced the scientific spirit that swept American Protestantism after 1870. They fashioned a critical approach to the Bible open to the newest developments in scientific understanding and human knowledge. As Disciples shared this budding "liberal" vision, they began to doubt that any group of Christians, even the ancient Christians, could truly capture the divine message in its entirety. This realization strengthened their historic commitment to ecumenism.

Disciples are perhaps best known for their deep yearning for Christian unity. Disciples often quoted John 17:21, "that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Both the United States and Canadian Churches are founding members of the World Council of Churches (1948). Canadians were founding members in the Canadian Council of Churches (1944), and the Disciples in the United States were founding members of both the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ (1910) and the National Council of Churches (1950). Disciples have served key leadership roles in all these organizations. In the late 1980s, Disciples and the United Church of Christ formed an ecumenical partnership. Together, they have helped to shape Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC), the partnership of nine denominations that grew out of the Consultation of Church Union (COCU).

Today, Disciples sponsor seventeen colleges and universities and four theological seminaries. Each of these schools is diverse, with the vast numbers of students coming from religious affiliations other than Disciples. They also maintain support for three 'foundation' houses located at the University of Chicago, Vanderbilt University, and in Claremont, California. These houses support Disciples masters and doctoral students in non-Disciples institutions.

## Brief History of The United Church of Canada

The United Church of Canada came into existence as a denomination in 1925, through a union of the Methodist Church, Canada, the Congregationalist Churches, and about two-thirds of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. These three denominations were joined by a number of local union churches or congregations that had formed, particularly in Saskatchewan, in expectation of such a union.

The driving forces for church union were largely practical, not theological. Chief among them was the challenge of finding the resources, both of finances and personnel, to serve a Canadian population growing rapidly in the early twentieth century, especially on the Prairies, as a result of heavy immigration.

Another key motivation was the conviction that a united Christian Church could help produce a "Christian Canada." The primary supporters of church union in all three denominations would have described themselves as liberal evangelicals; they held a strong attachment to both evangelism and social service. It is not accidental that these three denominations were key players in the Moral and Social Reform Council, founded in 1908, and its successor body, the Social Service Council of Canada (1912). Advocates of church union saw a "united church" as a stronger force to tackle social ills in early twentieth century Canada. These advocates were heavily represented among moderate Social Gospellers, but church union had significant support in both the radical and the conservative wings of that movement.

Practical motivations notwithstanding, these uniting denominations also shared a conviction that the lack of unity in Christianity was a scandal needing to be overcome.

They saw church union as a step in that direction. John 17:21, "that they may all be one," served as a guiding scriptural text and underlying theological rationale for this enterprise.

While most Methodists and Congregationalists entered the new United Church, church union proved sharply divisive among Canada's Presbyterians. Noticeable opposition in the Presbyterian Church was present from shortly after church union talks began in 1904. It grew in strength and intensity after the completion of a draft Basis of Union in 1908. In 1925 about two-thirds of the Presbyterian membership and about seventy percent of its clergy came into the United Church, those not entering remaining as a continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Two things marked the period from 1925 to 1939. The initial years saw a consolidation of the church union process as the denomination put together new pastoral charges, worked out governance details, and produced both a hymnal and a service book. The Great Depression also dominated these years. The United Church had many congregations in the southern Prairies, an area buffeted doubly by low commodity prices and severe drought.

The two decades after World War II saw immense growth for the United Church by almost every statistical measurement, e.g., candidates for ministry, the formation of new congregations, church membership, Sunday School enrolment. The mid-1960s to the present has seen a gradual but steady moving away from participation in organized religion in Canada; indeed, Canada could now be rightly described as an increasingly secularized society. The United Church has, along with many other mainline denominations, seen a steady decline since the late 1960s in all those statistical measuring points where it had seen growth in the immediate post-World War II era.

The 1970s saw the first wave of what would be a dramatic increase in the number of women being ordained. While the United Church approved the ordination of women in 1936, relatively few women were ordained prior to the early 1970s. In 1988, the United Church declared, after bitter debate across the denomination, that no impediment existed to the ordination or commissioning of self-declared gays and lesbians.

Similar to other Canadian denominations that operated residential schools for Canada's Indigenous population, the United Church has apologized to that Indigenous population for its role in the residential schools and also for its participation in efforts to destroy Indigenous cultures, a goal of both the missionary efforts among Canada's Indigenous population and the residential schools. As part of its commitment to reconciliation, including with its own Indigenous membership, in 2012 the United Church added the words "All My Relations" (in Mohawk) to the United Church crest. This action, and the apologies by the United Church, stand within a broader effort by Canadian governments and Canadian society to engage in a reconciliation process with Canada's Indigenous peoples.

From its beginning, the United Church has committed itself to ecumenism, declaring in the 1930s that it saw itself as a united and a uniting church. The 1960s probably represent the high point of the United Church's lived commitment to ecumenism. In 1968, a

significant portion of the Evangelical United Brethren denomination in Canada joined with the United Church at the same time as its American counterpart joined the Methodist Church in the United States. Discussions toward church union with the Anglican Church of Canada began in 1943. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) joined those talks in 1969. The Anglicans withdrew from the conversation in 1975. Conversations between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and The United Church of Canada continued until 1985 but ended without reaching the hoped-for goal. In recent years the United Church entered into a full communion agreement with the United Church of Christ and mutual recognition of ministry agreements with several other denominations.

The report of a "Commission on World Mission" to the twenty second General Council (1966) signaled a significant re-thinking of the United Church's approach to world mission and to its understanding of Christianity's relationship to other world religions. Among other things, the Commission recommended that "[t]he church should recognize that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all [hu]mankind." That re-thinking led to a new emphasis on interfaith relations and subsequent reports, beginning in 1997, on United Church relationships with Judaism, Islam, Indigenous Spiritualities, and Hinduism.

## Context: Why Now?

The context to which we bring this conversation of full communion is one of an increasingly diverse society, rural depopulation, expanding secularism, and in the case of The United Church of Canada, an incredible amount of denominational change. As with a full communion agreement, this is not a backdoor to the union; it is an attempt to find common ground in which to plant seeds for God's mission and ministry.

Because the Disciples of Christ has an existing presence in Canada, it is important that both denominations are clear that this is a partnership not an amalgamation. We must show that together we are stronger and able to continue the work of Christ's church in our varied communities while maintaining our own unique identities.

Specifically, in the Canadian context, our two denominations share a common land and social context. We may even think that we are the only progressive voice in our communities. A full communion agreement can benefit both denominations in supporting one another, possibly sharing resources at all levels of the church, giving congregations permission to reach out to one another on common issues or projects when in the past our differences might have kept us apart.

Although both denominations are distinct entities within the one body of Christ, we recognize a number of commonalities that encourage us to pursue greater collaboration and partnership:

- Our ministries are rooted in the gospel imperative to work for justice, personally but more importantly systemically;

- Mission is at the heart of who we are as Christ's church. We are aware of the centrality of mission to our identity both globally and locally. We are likewise critically cognizant of the damaging impact of colonialism on our shared involvement in the world, and therefore a renewed emphasis and intentionality to live and interact differently with our global partners. We also repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery;
- We are both engaging diverse heritages and changing overall contexts and are challenged by the question "how do we speak and move with integrity in this new landscape?";
- Mission and partnership are part of the important, reconciling interfaith work in which we are both actively engaged. We recognize that we live within a landscape of religious pluralism and that as Christians, we are not the center of the universe. We share a common cause in the desire to live into the equity of all faiths and find ways to partner across the spectrum for the greater good;
- God is working in ways that have humbled both denominations and have called us to seek greater collaboration across the body of Christ, living into the call to be one body, and to seek unity not uniformity;
- In the local context we are already working together: we share two joint United Church-Disciples of Christ pastorates (Campbell-Stone United, Calgary, and Broadway Disciples United, Winnipeg); in many rural and urban settings where the Disciples of Christ and the United Church exist within close proximity our congregations have been working together in public witness and service for decades;
- We face similar challenges and strategies which include but are not limited to: the challenge of generational splits; the challenge/opportunity of new technology and communication patterns; the opportunity of engaging immigrant and marginalized communities, recognizing the diversity of the gifts they bring into the body of Christ;
- We are both in full communion relationships with the United Church of Christ in the USA;
- We share global partners through Global Ministries and Church in Mission;
- We have gifts to share with respect to the justice work we have done independently of one another: the Disciples of Christ with respect to anti-racism/pro-reconciliation in the life of the church, and the United Church with respect to full inclusion and celebration of LGBTQ+ in the life of the church; and
- We recognize that being Christian today is counter-cultural, and that there are abundant blessings and challenges as we engage the rich diversity of belief, worship, theology, and Christology exhibited in different generations and cultures. We are committed to being open to the movement of the Spirit as we work to greater inclusivity, acceptance, and collaboration.

Many of our congregations are in a rural context where they are the only Protestant denomination in the community. Those of other denominations may or may not feel



welcome or comfortable. The more we can identify our commonalities, the greater the chance that those who feel isolated in their faith may cross the threshold and find a supportive Disciples or United Church community.

### The Bigger Picture: Why “Now” is Exactly the Right Time for These Talks

The immediate context out of which we have emerged, namely, the “modern” period, worked under a different set of principles and realities than those we are embedded in today. A time of building and reinforcing institutions and ideologies within a technological framework vastly different from today, the recent past celebrated the triumphalism of Christianity in identity silos which provided little opportunity to truly engage in the partnership models we explore today. We mistakenly believed that we were all successful doing our own things in our own denominations and whatever unions we dreamt of and pursued were perceived to be about compromise and competition rather than collaboration, assimilation rather than mutuality and celebration of difference. We, perhaps, were unable to conceive of this kind of partnership in our recent past.

The future for the church in North America is uncertain at best and bleak at worst, as our nations appear to continue on the journey of public secularization. At its bleakest, many denominations will merge with great compromise, hurt, loss, and some measure of humiliation until there are only a handful with the resources to continue to function. At its best, the continued persistence of denominations is called into question as more and more post-modern thinking Christians question their validity in light of the call to Christian unity. The continued erosion of denominations leads to a weakened universal church in North America with few able to muster the energy and resources to effect significant transformation in the public sphere, focusing instead, on survival or at least how to have dignity in death. To wait until some undecided point in the future to have these courageous conversations, may indeed, be too late.

The context we must embrace at this point in our shared life together is that the church is not ours but belongs to the Divine who uses as much of it as has heart and openness to be so used. As such, we are stewards of the resources—human, infrastructure, wealth, creativity, compassion—that have been entrusted to our care. In this age of lightning-fast technological change, communications that we could not have dreamed of 20 years ago, and seemingly limitless information at our fingertips 24/7, we have an unprecedented opportunity to be leaders in the restoration of Christian unity to the heart of the church and in the minds and hearts of the children of God under our care. We do so not for our own survival, but so that the gospel of Jesus Christ might be lived out anew, impacting and transforming communities and lives in ways we could not have accomplished in the past. We have always been called to be one body; now is the time to believe it and live it.

To answer the question, “why now?” we ask, “if not now, when?” Our young adults and mature adults are already exploring options to be church differently in this post-modern age. Many of the systems that served us well in the past are in the process of becoming obsolete and something new must take their place. The demands of ministry and mission in the world are infinitely more complex while financial and other resources are reduced.

Why would we wait any longer to embrace the call to be partners, joined together more intentionally to accomplish the task of being the hands and feet of Jesus in the world?

## Full Communion

What does an ecumenical partnership or “full communion” mean? These terms do not define a merger between different denominations. An ecumenical partnership emphasizes more a style of pragmatic unity in terms of witness, service, fellowship, worship, and the proclamation of a common faith. Both the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the UNITED STATES and Canada and The United Church of Canada each currently have a full communion agreement with the United Church of Christ. These ecumenical partnerships or “full communion agreements” generally rest on five pillars of acceptance and cooperation. Each of these pillars is rooted in scripture and based upon theological understandings reached and explored by both *COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting* (1984) and the *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* document (1982).

### The Five Pillars of Full Communion

- (1) “Common Confession of Christ.” This pillar is built upon the common faith shared by both churches, that God is in Christ, reconciling the world to God’s self, and is the One in whom “we live and move and have our being.” (2 Cor. 5:19; Acts 17:28) In an ecumenical partnership, both churches covenant to be mutually accountable in their witness to Christ in the world today.
- (2) “Mutual Recognition of Members.” Both churches believe that we have much to learn from the expressions of faith found in other Christian communities. In this second affirmation of full communion, both the United Church and the Disciples of Christ recognize and affirm one another’s baptisms, and also affirm the members of one another’s churches. In full communion, both churches would agree to the “transfer of membership” between their local congregations “by letter.” Neither church would give up its own approaches to the practice of baptism or church membership. Instead, their commitment to one another represents a desire to express their commitment to the fact that any differences in practices in this area should not divide them as churches.
- (3) “Common Celebration of the Lord’s Supper/Holy Communion.” Since these churches confess Christ in common, and since they recognize one another’s baptism and accept one another’s members in each other’s congregations, it naturally follows that they should encourage congregations to cross borders where they might be geographically close to one another and to share worship and communion together. Both churches celebrate an open table, open to all who are connected to Christ, and both recognize the table calls us into community and toward a commitment to justice for all God’s children.
- (4) “Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ordered Ministers.” In full communion, the two churches would affirm one another’s ordered ministries as belonging to the one ministry of Jesus Christ. Such ministers in one church will be recognized as ministers in the other church. Each may serve, when invited, as minister to the other. Though

ministerial credentials are immediately recognized, each minister will need to go through the standard processes established by each denomination to gain official "standing" within the denomination.

- (5) "Common Commitment to Mission." This fifth pillar of full communion between our two churches recognizes that mission is not an option for the church; rather it, like unity, is part of its very essence. When churches are not engaged in mission, they cease to exist as a church. As our two denominations enter into full communion, we will explore ways of supporting each other in God's mission in our own countries and around the world.

## The Local Congregation as the Incarnation of Full Communion

One of the great gifts of the Christian faith is the knowledge that God became one of us. The incarnation is a demonstration that God cares for us enough to be one of us. Another insight given to the Christian faith is that the church is the Body of Christ, and as such is another manifestation of the incarnation.

Within The United Church of Canada and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, full communion is an important aspect of our witness to the world about God's desire for us to "be one, so that the world might believe." (John 17) However, there is a tendency within the ethos of the church to think of full communion as something "out there" or "up there," rather than being an action with local currency. In other words, one might say that full communion needs an incarnation of sorts to bring what might seem to be an ethereal concept into a living, breathing reality.

This concept will become real when congregations actually embody full communion. Both communions have within their local worship a faith-filled recitation of the elements of their faith in the proclamation of shared truth. *A New Creed* of The United Church of Canada begins with the words "We are not alone, we live in God's world." These words tend to bring the transcendent quality of God's existence into the physical everyday world in which our people live. However, these same words might also have a reference to our sisters and brothers the planet over, and a particular reference to those denominations with whom we share a close walk of faith through ecumenical bonds. As the Preamble to the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) puts it "we enter into newness of life and are made one with the whole people of God."

In order to help incarnate the oneness of the church, we recommend that congregations be invited to consider the practice of reciting the statement of faith from their own denomination alongside the statement of faith of those other communions with whom they share a formal ecumenical relationship. The worshipping life of Broadway Disciples United Church (a shared ministry in Winnipeg) was enriched by rotating our statements of faith along with the historic Nicene-Chalcedonian Creed and the Apostles' Creed. This would not be limited to The United Church of Canada and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, but would include statements of faith from other communions with whom they share this ministry, such as the United Church of Christ (USA), the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, and the Presbyterian Church

in the Republic of Korea. It might also be possible to develop membership/confirmation materials based upon these shared affirmations of faith to learn more about what we share and to value how God has made us unique. Neighbouring congregations could develop studies for Lent or Advent exploring our respective and historic creeds. This would be a major and noticeable move within the life of local congregations to show that something new is happening within the life of the church. As Isaiah 43:19 reports God's intention, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

It is important to note that both the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and The United Church of Canada extend an open invitation to the Lord's Supper. "All are welcome" is a common ground in which the Disciples of Christ and the United Church endeavor to mirror God's invitation to a ministry of healing and wholeness to the world. Both denominations affirm an open table where we come together in unity with our Christian brothers and sisters to remember Jesus' life, death and resurrection and that he will come again. For Disciples, a weekly tradition of sharing the Table is part of their Christian nurture, and it might be commended to sisters and brothers within the United Church. United Church congregations are invited to remember the affirmation made by The United Church of Canada following the adoption of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper no. 111, World Council of Churches, 1982) in the wider church, in which the United Church urged an exploration of the move towards a weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Whether a weekly part of Christian nurture or "[a] taste [of the] mystery of God's great love for us" to be enjoyed on special occasions, in the words of *A Song of Faith*, "the open table speaks of the shining promise of barriers broken and creation healed."

Our two denominations also differ in their usual practice of baptism. To bring these varying perspectives within the life of the local congregations, one might teach the gifts of "infant" baptism and "believer's" baptism again, as part of membership/confirmation classes—to place these perspectives within the setting of the ecumenical Church and help us come to a deeper understanding of God's grace and love.

While we share much in common, our differences can offer one another new perspectives. One of the gifts of The United Church of Canada has been its placement within one country with a localized and incarnational sense of mission and ministry. One of the gifts of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada is that because it is not rooted in only one country, it has some sense of its allegiance to the whole world.

Our existing shared ministries, Campbell-Stone United Church (Calgary) and Broadway Disciples United Church (Winnipeg), are invited to tell their stories, including the gifts and challenges of worshiping and serving together, to help others imagine ways for our partnership to become a living, breathing reality.

Where congregations of our two denominations are close geographically, we encourage shared worship or pulpit exchanges and shared mission projects such as refugee sponsorship or shared studies. Including one another in correspondence about special

events and regular programs and activities will help relationships develop and open possibilities to imagine new ways to be the church together. Where congregations are at a distance geographically or in different countries, a relationship could develop through social media, exchanges between groups from congregations and longer exchanges between clergy. As the United Church moves to clusters and networks, neighboring Disciples congregations could be invited to be a part of clusters and Disciples and the United Church of Christ (USA) congregations could be included in networks where there are shared passions for mission and ministry.

It is our belief that without some local incarnation of full communion with methods such as those outlined above, and others, as discovered within the life of our shared faith, that our ecumenical partnership will be wanting in the crucial life-lived of our local congregations.

During Vatican II there was the talk of *aggiornamento* – a new, refreshing wind of the spirit blowing through the life of the church. This putting a word to the name for renewal helped the church grasp what was being attempted. Perhaps for The United Church of Canada and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, we might adopt the Western Canadian notion of the Chinook wind as blowing warmth within our lives as people of faith.

## National, Bi-national, and International Possibilities for Partnership

Our two churches have long understood engagement in God's mission in the world to be a primary responsibility of our ministries. In its framework document *Mending the World*, the United Church affirms that "the churches are called to make common cause with individuals and institutions of good will who are committed to compassion, peace, and justice in the world.... God, who loves this world, works for its mending, and calls the church to make this work its first priority." Thus, the church has committed itself to a vision of ecumenism that is world-centered, understood as "whole world ecumenism," calling us to work in partnership with all who seek the health and well-being of the whole creation.

Similarly, the Disciples of Christ have stated in *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today* that "[t]he church exists for the sake of praising God and participating in God's mission in and for all the world." The Disciples of Christ also affirm that it is the world that God so loves and in which the church finds its purpose and mission to exist as a faith community. The Disciples clearly understand that God has given unity as God's gift to all followers of Christ, and in unity, Christians must work together to bring just peace to the world.

Both denominations have strong national and international program work and relationships that may be enhanced through full communion. This includes some global partnership work in which both churches are already involved, such as membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Communion of the Reformed Churches

(WCRC), and the Global Christian Forum (GFC), and global partners who relate to both the Global Ministries, which belongs to the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ (USA), and the Church in Mission unit of The United Church of Canada. In this area many possibilities exist for further cooperation, and where some joint work is already underway. Staff members of Global Ministries and Church in Mission have met to share their work and review avenues for increased collaboration. These avenues also include particular global issues where we may support each other in our education and advocacy, such as peace and justice in the Middle East, North and South Korea, and Colombia.

Another area where collaboration with both national and international dimensions may be possible is a response to the challenges of migration, immigration, and refugee issues. The Migrant Church Task Group of the United Church is addressing the ways that migration is re-shaping the church. It is endeavoring to develop structures and processes that will enable the church to be more welcoming and supportive of people migrating to Canada. The Church in Mission unit includes staff working in the area of refugee sponsorship, settlement, and support, as well as advocacy on immigration and refugee issues. The Disciples Refugee and Immigration Ministries (RIM) addresses similar concerns, including the particular challenges of immigration in the present United States context. Refugee and Immigration Ministries equips the church to respond to Jesus' call to welcome the stranger through refugee resettlement, ministering to immigrants and advocacy. RIM provides resources for local congregations, legal consultations, and connections to hands-on mission work. In the rapidly changing political current, this office has promptly responded to certain U.S. policy changes. The Disciples have also provided legal services to the church and community members with Disciples Immigration Legal Counsel, which helps congregations protect their rights, understand their options, and work through the U.S. immigration system.

Significant aspects of refugee and immigration issues in our two countries are impacting each other at this point, and the potential for joint work on this issue is great. In addition to the work that members of both churches in Canada might do in our own context, there may be opportunities for joint advocacy and action that would include the concerns of both countries, as well as for learning from each other about best practices in our work.

A range of program work offers opportunities for cooperation, for learning from each other, and for action together. The youth and young adult networks and ministries of both churches might meet together or attend each other's regional or national gatherings (e.g., the United Church's Rendezvous event and the joint National Youth Event of the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ). Opportunities for learning and collaboration may arise from meetings or other connections of those working in the areas of stewardship, human resources, and communications. These might include ideas for sharing or joint production of some resources or shared planning of educational events. Collaborations in communication could include partnering on social media, a joint website, or an agreement to include newsfeeds from ecumenical partners on each denomination's website.

Possibilities for resource-sharing may be numerous. Many of the justice issues in which both churches are engaged may involve the development of resources (and in some cases campaigns) that could invite collaboration. As well, those developing liturgy and producing worship resources might work together on some projects or share with each other resources created by members of their particular denomination.

One of the most important (and complex) outcomes of a full communion agreement will be the development of a process for implementing mutual recognition of ministries. This will involve national and regional offices in both denominations, as well as local congregations open to the possibilities of being served by a minister from the partner denomination. The bi-national nature of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada and the already existing flow of people across our borders suggests that as these processes are put into place new and creative opportunities for ministry together may be opened.

As well, ministry personnel may find ways to meet with and learn from each other, such as through joint continuing education events. Theological colleges related to each denomination could also be encouraged to participate in the development of relationships arising from full communion. A meeting of Deans and Principals could identify possibilities for partnership or exchange that would enhance students' education.

As we journey together in the spirit of full communion, other ways of accompanying each other in the challenges and joys we face could be explored. The appointment of representatives to each other's regional or national governing bodies, meetings, assemblies, and other significant gatherings, would recognize that a full communion relationship implies a new dimension of accountability to one another as we make decisions about the life and work of each of our churches. Supporting connections among local faith communities and ministries with similar contexts and commitments (e.g., Indigenous ministries, outreach ministries, migrant or ethnic ministries, African-American and Afro-Canadian communities, etc.) would be one way to bring the resources of partnership and accompaniment to local communities.

One of the marks of full communion is mutual recognition of members. What are the practical implications of this commitment? A national implementation team could consider situations where such recognition would have an impact and processes for giving it meaning. Examples include individuals participating in the other denomination for a period of time, or Disciples members in Canada attending the United Church in a community with no Disciples congregation, or United Church members who live part of the year in the United States and choose to participate actively in a Disciples congregation.

Finally, it will be important to be aware of the implications of our partnership for our involvement in wider ecumenical and interfaith networks. Might we encourage the networks of ecumenical officers in both countries to meet together on occasion? How does our involvement in the ecumenical and interfaith councils of Canada and the United States (as well as globally) inform our relationship, and what do we bring to those bodies

as full communion partners? How will we share with each other the gifts, resources, and challenges of our ecumenical and interfaith engagement?

The energizing and creative possibilities in our relationship are many, and others will be discovered only as we live into a deeper understanding and vision of our mission and ministry together.

## Challenges to Full Communion

Any Full Communion agreement between denominations presents challenges as well as opportunities. That these challenges are shared by the partner churches indicates that both have much to gain through increased collaboration.

### Institutional Capacity

Both denominations face a future of declining resources and a decreased ability to carry out the full range of mission and ministry activities, including ecumenical work. Both denominational offices are likely to become smaller, with fewer staff and less funding. In the United Church much institutional time and energy has been and will be devoted to major changes in the church's governance, structure and funding. This may affect not just commitment to full communion at the national level, but enthusiasm in local communities of faith to work alongside their full communion partners in Canada and across the border.

### Knowing Each Other

The Disciples of Christ congregations in the United States may know very little about The United Church of Canada. In Canada, United Church and Disciples communities of faith may know each other if they are in proximity. Otherwise, it is doubtful if the more numerous United Church congregations have much familiarity with the Disciples. As well, some Canadian Disciples may still think of the United Church in terms of the end of talks in the 1980s. An increased knowledge of each denomination's full communion partner, at local and regional as well as national levels, is essential to a rich relationship and affirmation of both churches' ecumenical visions. Presenting the full communion agreement to both partners must include upholding that such an agreement is not a "backdoor" to union. The local contexts of each partner church are not seen as incidental, but rather as central, to their identities, and each denomination has been called to God's mission and ministry in its own distinct location and context.

### Immigration

In recent years Canada has tightened visa requirements for foreign clergy being admitted to Canadian churches. In the United States, restrictions on immigration are increasingly common. A full communion agreement, with its mutual recognition of ministries and embrace of mobility between the two partner denominations, may encounter obstacles to the movement of ministry personnel across borders.



## Diversity

Both the United Church and the Disciples of Christ are, as North American denominations, predominantly white in their makeup, although both are committed to an intercultural vision. Yet the worldwide church is shifting its center of gravity to the global South; by 2050 white, non-Hispanic Christians will be only one-fifth to one-sixth of the world's Christian believers, while both the United States and Canada will see increases in the non-white proportion of their populations. Although the dynamics of race, ethnicity, language and culture are different in Canada and the United States, both denominations must grapple with how to move from their current base into becoming more intercultural, during a period that will likely see resistance to these shifts in racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural makeup.

## Justice

Justice is an essential part of our respective identities. Both the United Church and the Disciples of Christ are known to have a deep passion for justice. Both churches heed the biblical mandate, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) The two denominations may explore means of collaboration and cooperation across borders when called on to denounce injustice and oppression. As both denominations consider justice in society and the world, it is vital not to forget justice in the Church. There are concerns of a "take over" when it comes to numbers, reputation and the size of the respective churches in Canada. It is important to be cognizant of the concern that "mission" has different connotations in both countries, especially for Indigenous persons. The term "mission" for some brings irredeemable memories. Opportunities to make full communion a reality in global missions and ecumenical relations and activities need to be explored.

## Conclusion

Movements of faith always involve openness to the Spirit. The Planning Group offers the hope that this full communion agreement might be led by the Spirit. The two denominations should put in place structures to allow the experience of full communion to grow into deeper relationships. This will mean intentional efforts to develop opportunities to learn, to worship and to engage together at denominational, regional, and local levels. While structures seem contrary to the experience of movements, in fact all movements require organizational attention. Most importantly, structures enable this full communion agreement to keep before the churches the vision of the prayer of Jesus "that all may be one" and through them the world might be blessed.

The Planning Group believes this journey of full communion may be an opening to something truly transformative for us and for others.

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