

Church Union
Discussion
in Canada

from the 1960's to 1980's
Preceding the Full Communion of Today

A Canadian Disciples Perspective

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Christian
Unity &
Interfaith
Ministry

 Council on Christian Unity
A Disciples of Christ Ministry

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This edition first published in 2019 by
the Council on Christian Unity of the
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada
PO Box 1986, Indianapolis, IN, USA,
www.disciples.org/ccu
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Discussions of Church Union in Canada have been a part of the ethos of the church community for many years. In 1925 The United Church of Canada was formed after many years of conversations between four Protestant denominations with a total combined membership of about 600,000 members, the Methodist Church, Canada, the Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec, two-thirds of the congregations of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the Association of Local Union Churches, a

movement predominantly of the Canadian Prairie provinces. The Canadian Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church joined The United Church of Canada on January 1, 1968. In 1971, the ecumenical movement reached the stratosphere as a joint commission the United and Anglican Churches and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada approved a Plan of Union. In addition, The Hymn Book, a joint publication of the United and Anglican Churches was published.

The Plan of Union was the result of five years' work by 216 members of six commissions appointed by the three communions and stated, "Our intention in uniting is to come together in an enriched embodiment of the one church of

God, not to create a new church or to bring into being a merger of existing ecclesiastical bodies.” Borrowing Disciples terminology, discussion was made of “a new manifestation of the church” in Canada.

Considerable excitement was going on throughout the entire church. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada (dubbed by the *United Church Observer* as “the unknown third party in Church Union”) was decidedly the smallest of the three communions, but was seen to be a significant partner in the discussions because of the importance placed upon the sacraments which placed it in similarity with the Anglican Church and its importance on local congregational governance which allied it more closely with the United Church.

This exciting dynamic changed entirely in 1975 when the Anglican House of Bishops and National Executive Council declared that the Plan of Union was unacceptable, and in fact withdrew from the talks entirely.

Three union congregations had been established in the ongoing excitement of the initial church union discussions. They were located in the cities of Mississauga (near Toronto), Calgary (in the Western Canadian Prairies), and Lower Sackville on the East Coast. The three United/Disciples congregations were therefor placed in each of the three Canadian Disciples' geographically maintained "Areas" (sub-sections of the Canadian Region—each with distinctive governance models).

Although the Union talks did not end, the exciting dynamic between the churches was dampened significantly. In the three-communion discussions, Disciples saw a significant role for themselves as a broker between the second and third largest communions in the country (the Roman Catholic Church being the largest communion, and not involved). In the new relationship, Disciples found themselves as the mouse in relations with the elephant.

Leadership from both communions continued to take the discussions very seriously, but the understanding of these talks had virtually withered on the vine of the local congregations across the country. Local United Church congregations appeared surprised to know

that discussions were still ongoing after the departure of the Anglicans, and local Disciples congregations were afraid that their distinctiveness was going to be swallowed whole. For a decade after the departure of the Anglicans, both The United Church of Canada and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada gave significant leadership resources to the ongoing union discussions. On the Disciples' side this was augmented by encouragement and some staff support from the Council on Christian Unity's Presidents, Paul A. Crow, Jr. and Robert Welsh.

Unfortunately the dynamics of Church Union locally had been crippled. Faced with apathy from many local United Church congregations and fear from many local Disciples

congregations, the ecumenical dream seemed thwarted. National church leadership resources from both communions worked tirelessly in a failing uphill battle for the hearts and minds of the church.

By 1985, the Committee on Union and Joint Mission (CUJM) disbanded and in August 1986 Canadian Disciples passed a resolution which suspended Union Discussions with The United Church of Canada. Even in the wording of this resolution the word “suspend” was meant to leave open the possibility to leave the door open for whatever possibilities of unity or even union, the Holy Spirit might lead both of our churches in Canada towards.

The effect of this was the eventual closing of two of the three union congregations, leaving only Campbell-Stone United Church in Calgary as the survivor of our Church Union efforts.

A decade later, in 1996 I gave some leadership to the process which formed a “shared ministry” of the United Church and the Disciples of Christ which brought together three congregations, John Wesley United Church, St. Stephen’s-Broadway United Church and Home Street Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). At the time it was fairly unique to be a metropolitan Shared Ministry. I suspect it will be less rare in the years to come. The three congregations lived into a combined existence for seven months in 1996 and in

1997 a service of Covenanting marked the beginning of a permanent Shared Ministry which also included a call to me to serve as the founding minister of the congregation. We formed a new Shared Ministry called Broadway Disciples United Church in which all members of the congregation are fully members of both denominations. Serving as the minister of an ecumenical, inter-cultural congregation for all ages for 18 years was the highlight of my ministry.

It was noted early in our Ecumenical Partnership Meetings in 2017 that most Disciples in Canada have now largely forgotten the Union talks and the fears of previous decades. The United Church of Canada enthusiastically supported our new

full communion agreement at the 43rd General Council in July 2018, with delegates to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) voting in favor of the agreement in July of 2019. The 2019 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Des Moines, Iowa, approved Resolution #1922, which includes a Report on Full Communion with The United Church of Canada.

Now, with Full Communion as part of our identity it is my prayer that we see this as not a stop-gap in survival, but rather as a way for both Communion to find new opportunities to do God's mission together.



Graphic work for the Full Communion Celebration Service
World Communion Sunday, October 6, 2019

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