

Roman Catholic-United Church of Canada Dialogue

Common Baptism, Common Ministry

2021

Introduction

The United Church of Canada and the Roman Catholic Church face significant challenges and opportunities with respect to their particular and shared approaches to mission and ministry of the whole people of God, living as disciples of the Risen Lord. “The Church is ordered through Baptism, in which all who believe in Christ are not only washed and signed by the Triune God, but are ‘built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood’ (1 Pet 2:5).”¹ The two churches share a consensus around our common baptism² which leads this current iteration of our dialogue to make this statement about the common ministry that we share as members of the Body of Christ, participating in the *Missio Dei*, God’s mission in the world. Continuing from our discussion in the previous phase of dialogue on Creation and the environment, and our report *The Hope Within Us*, the current phase of dialogue expands our imagination about the inclusion of all creation within the ministry that God has given us.

Some of the challenges and opportunities facing both our churches are contextual and internal.

- Climate change with its related environmental and social effects that require greater global ecumenical and interfaith cooperation.
- An opportunity to learn from Indigenous perspectives to rethink our place and role within God’s creation.
- Various forms of cultural polarization, along with secularization and the associated decline in the status of the church as well as of clergy.
- Discrimination in the life and ministry of the churches.
- The challenge of clericalism in our ministries.³
- Fewer people from within our local faith communities preparing for ministry. These internal challenges also present us with opportunities to revise aspects of formation for ministry and to expand the leadership of laity in the life of our churches.

¹ Reformed-Roman Catholic International Dialogue, *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* (1990), para. 134. <http://www.prounione.it/dia/r-rc/Dia-R-RC-03-1990.pdf>

² In 1975, our two churches joined with the Anglican, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches in an agreement on the mutual recognition of baptism celebrated with water and the invocation of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our dialogue’s 2000 report, *In Whose Name? The Baptismal Formula in Contemporary Culture*, addressed questions related to the use of Trinitarian language in our common baptism.

³ cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Apostolic exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, November 23, 2013), no. 102.

The members of the dialogue also identified a number of questions to guide our discussions: How do we define ministry? How might theologies of Creation become more integrated into our expressions of ministry? Could a greater focus on mission renew the church? What then is our theology of ministry and how does it address these issues and questions? We are not only unified in facing these questions in our respective churches, but we are united in our common baptism, which provides the resources to address together these challenges to ministry.

Our dialogue notes that our churches have cooperated in ministry in various ways over the past sixty years. For example, we share buildings, educational and justice initiatives and programs, ecumenical worship on occasions of significance, retreat and spiritual formation programs, theological education, and social service. We are aware that there are also significant barriers to a fuller expression of mutual ministry or the sharing in the Eucharist, impacting our ability to do mission together. We identified fundamental differences between our two churches' theologies of ministry: apostolic succession; ecclesial organization and structures; the ordination of women; lay and ordained/ordered ministry; and the permanent effects of ordination.

We began our work on ministry together by examining the ministry section of the World Council of Churches' convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM)⁴ and each of our churches' responses to BEM. We recognized in BEM a number of areas of agreement, particularly that ordained ministry finds its identity within the ministry of the whole people of God, that Jesus is the centre of all ministry, and that baptism includes each Christian in Christ's mission. We acknowledge below, there are differences in understanding between the Roman Catholic and United Church of Canada regarding our theology of ministry.

The Life and Ministry of Jesus of Nazareth

The Roman Catholic and United Church traditions agree that the historical ministry of Jesus is inseparable from the proclamation of Jesus as Son of God. Christians affirm that Jesus has two natures, human and divine, and yet is undivided in his person. These two affirmations are embodied in Jesus Christ. Jesus was born a displaced poor person in a rural area of the Augustan Roman Empire. He prayed to God his Father in the wilderness and the lonely places. He taught, healed, and broke bread with the hungry and the outcast, and proclaimed the Kingdom of God through parables shaped by the fields, vineyards, and fishing communities of his time and place.

This earthly life of Jesus, along with his death by crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem, and his resurrection and ascension to glory provides the framework of our doctrine of salvation; "that what was cast down is raised up, what had become old is made new, and all things are restored to integrity through Christ, just as by him they came into being" (The Easter Vigil, *Roman Missal*,

⁴ World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order paper, no. 111. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

2011) and that “the Risen Christ lives today, present to us and the source of our hope” (*A Song of Faith*). Through the Spirit working in the Church and beyond, the ministry of Jesus Christ continues to redeem creation – advancing justice, resisting evil, overcoming sin, and renewing the cosmos to God’s glory and to our good.⁵

Christ is our source of life, our ground of being, and our promise for the future (1 Cor. 12). As branches of the true vine (Jn. 15:5), all our ministries – whether lay or ordered/ordained, formal or informal, in the church or in the world – find their model and their purpose in the living ministry of Jesus. The Holy Spirit generously bestows gifts upon all, yet we all function as different parts of the same body – the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12). “The members of the Body of Christ receive from the Spirit of the Risen One, in various measures and with a diversity of expressions, those gifts that allow them to offer the necessary contribution to the edification of the Church and to the proclamation of the Gospel to every being.”⁶

Together with Christians of all times and places, we confess that “we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). In our common baptism, Christians die to our old ways of life so as to be made alive to a new life in its fullness. We die to service of self and are made alive to the service of God and others (1 Cor. 15:22). We are brought into this new life to participate in its abundance by our participation in Christ’s ministry. Baptism is the way in which God brings us into Jesus’ life and ministry.

Common Baptism Calls Us to a Common Ministry

Baptism unites us to Christ and incorporates us into his Church. For the two dialogue partners, common baptism calls us into a common ministry. Together we participate in the ministry of Jesus, following him by preaching good news to the poor, release to the captives, and liberation to the oppressed (Lk. 4:18). Baptism is a life-long growth into Christ in which the baptized are called to love the world as he does (BEM, Baptism 9; Rom. 8:18-24).

Both of our churches understand the “whole people of God” as a priesthood of all believers, albeit with theological differences, while together celebrating the value and dignity of every member of the Church. The Biblical notion of a priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5) is

⁵ In 2004, the Roman Catholic-United Church of Canada dialogue released a joint statement entitled *Sin, Reconciliation, and Ecclesial Identity*. In it, the dialogue affirmed the following: “We agree that *sin is a reality* in our world, although people may not always use this theological term to describe it. We also agree that *sin and reconciliation are at the heart of the Christian message and mission*. We cannot talk about who we are as human beings and who God is in relation to us without reference to these realities” (p. 3, cf. p. 4, section 1.d).

⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio, Spiritus Domini*, Modifying Canon 230 §1 of the Code of Canon Law Regarding Access of Women to the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte, January 11, 2021

associated with the churches of the 16th century Reformation,⁷ however, it is also affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*: “The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood.”⁸

The sacrament of baptism is the foundation of the vocation and ministry of every Christian. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “one becomes a member of the people of God not by a physical birth, but by being ‘born anew,’ a birth ‘of water and the Spirit.’”⁹ Similarly, the United Church’s “Statement on Ministry” (2012) says, “through the Spirit, who enlivens and renews the church, all members are empowered to share in Christ’s ministry, the work of the church. The church is about God’s mission in the world—living out the gospel message through action—that there will be *shalom* for God’s creatures and healing for God’s creation.” In baptism, each member of the Church has been united to Christ, blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and made one with all those of every time and place “who call upon the name of the Lord” (cf. Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). Those baptized into the Body of Christ are mandated to share its mission: witnessing to the work of God and the good news of the Gospel (1 Cor. 12:27).

Roman Catholics believe that the Eucharist, “the source and summit of the whole Christian life” is the supreme expression of the Paschal Mystery from which all ministry flows.¹⁰ Members of the United Church believe that in Holy Communion we are “nourished, confirmed, and renewed” by Christ for the work of ministry in the world.¹¹ The Triune God commissions Christians to participate in God’s mission in the world through the grace of Word and Sacrament. The baptized in all their diversity hear the Word and are fed at the Table.

Thus, Christians – in all their complexities – are called and equipped for the work of ministry (Eph. 4). The United Church affirms that “for the sake of the world God calls all followers of Jesus to Christian ministry. To embody God’s love in the world, the work of the Church requires the ministry and discipleship of all believers.”¹² In *Lumen Gentium*, the ministry of the people of God is articulated in the following way: “All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank and status

⁷ See Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520); John Calvin situates the priesthood of all believers within the church’s participation in Christ’s ministry as priest, prophet, and king. “All believers ... should seek to bring others into the church, and should strive to lead the wanderers back to the road, should stretch forth a hand to the fallen and should win over the outsiders.” John Calvin, “Commentary on Hebrews”, 10:25, in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 12:144.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, November 21, 1964), no. 10: “... Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.”

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 782.

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11.

¹¹ United Church of Canada, *Statement of Faith* (1940), X.

¹² *A Song of Faith*.

are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity... The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one.”¹³ There are many ministries yet all participate in the one, ongoing ministry of Jesus in the world.

From the Council of Jerusalem recorded in the Acts of the Apostles to the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea and beyond, the faithful have gathered together to discern God’s will for the ministry of the church. While expressed in diverse ways in the United and Roman Catholic churches, we affirm together that the Spirit guides the Body of Christ, that diversity enriches the community, that we need to be attentive to the voices of those who are voiceless, and that we have a preferential option for those who are marginalized. Building upon the conciliar and post conciliar documents of the Second Vatican Council, in recent years, Pope Francis has called Catholics to a renewed understanding and practice of synodality, particularly to find ways that will include the voices of women, Indigenous peoples, and the poor. In the United Church, both laity and members of the order of ministry are involved in discernment and governance in all congregational, regional, and denominational councils of the church. While our churches diverge in how we conceive of and practice governance, we share the conviction that the Spirit gathers the whole people of God to discern God’s will and follow Jesus together.

Christ’s Ministry in our Time

As a dialogue, we came to the realization that our shared baptism and the participation of the whole people of God in the ministry of Christ are key to addressing the issues our churches face. We live in a time of rapid change presenting both opportunities and challenges for ministry. We face such issues as the global climate crisis, institutional breakdown, secularism, relativism, rising nationalism, xenophobia and racism, religious and political polarization, the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples, climate and political refugees, increasing disparities between rich and poor, and ongoing sexual discrimination and abuse.

The challenge of following the Crucified One requires us to walk with the pain and struggle of the world. In these times, the Spirit of resurrection calls and empowers us to be transforming agents in our Earth community. God calls our churches to come together with others in social and ecological movements to work for a more just world. We welcome the opportunities for ministry provided by harnessing the positive contributions of communication technologies. We are compelled by prophetic visions of greater inclusion, equity, and justice for all. What are the implications of these challenges and opportunities for the ministry of Christians today?

Following Christ, the whole church joins him at the peripheries. Pope Francis tells us, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not

¹³ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 4.

want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.”¹⁴ With the World Council of Churches, the United Church names the challenge of mission from the margins. “We affirm that marginalized people are agents of mission and exercise a prophetic role which emphasizes that fullness of life is for all... In order to commit ourselves to God’s life-giving mission, we have to listen to the voices from the margins to hear what is life-affirming and what is life-destroying. We must turn our direction of mission to the actions that the marginalized are taking.”¹⁵ As Pope Francis says, Earth “burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor” (LS 2).

1) Ecological conversion

In a time of profound climate crisis, we confess that our human sin has desecrated Earth (LS 2; *A Song of Faith*). This confession challenges us to expand our understanding of God’s salvific will as extending beyond the human species to include all of Creation (Is. 45:22). As Christians, we are called to respond to the cry of the Earth, which is inseparable from the cry of the poor: to live an integral ecology. In our previous report, *The Hope Within Us*, we “celebrated the beauty and goodness of creation, lamented the degradation of the web of life, and ... [called] for action based on the hope within us.” We affirmed that “the profound impact of climate change, particularly upon vulnerable peoples and ecosystems, calls for an equally profound response from people of faith” and we called our churches to “a spiritual conversion that gives priority to those on the margins, to those who are most vulnerable in our world.”¹⁶

2) Global church

While each of our churches has distinctive identities and ministries, we are increasingly aware of our oneness in Christ on our ecumenical journey. We are called to minister in global partnerships as the one Body of Christ throughout the world. “To locate ourselves in spaces of hope is to begin working beyond Empire. It is to create life-giving alternatives for everyone.”¹⁷ The

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, November 21, 2013), no. 49.

¹⁵ Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, ed. by Jooseop Keum (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), no. 107.

¹⁶ Roman Catholic-United Church Dialogue in Canada, *The Hope Within Us: A Report on Climate Change* (2018), p. 2, and especially pp. 13-16 on integral ecology, human ecology, and integral human development. For Roman Catholics, the call to an ecological conversion is heightened by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (February 12, 2020) and the Encyclical *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015). For the United Church, the call in *A New Creed* “to live with respect in Creation” is expressed in the Faithful Footprints program, which offers United Church congregations inspiration, tools, and grants to help the church and its communities of faith live our climate commitments. See <https://www.faithfulfootprints.org>.

¹⁷ Nestor Miguez, *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire*, Report to the 39th General Council 2006 (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 2006). Empire is “the convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic and military imperial interests, systems and networks that seek to dominate political power and economic wealth. It

dialogue members find wisdom in the words of two recent popes: “We are reminded that it is possible to overcome the various colonizing mentalities and to build networks of solidarity and development. ‘The challenge, in short, is to ensure a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalization.’”¹⁸

3) Inclusion of marginalized groups in ministry

The dialogue recognized that there are continuing differences in the ways that the Roman Catholic and United churches have included women in ministerial positions. We are encouraged by the increasing inclusion of women in lay leadership within the Roman Catholic community, including recent appointments of women to senior leadership roles in the Vatican. At the same time, we acknowledge that both our churches continue to struggle with issues related to gender, for example, in the family, church, and society.

In both our churches, Indigenous members are calling for solidarity, healing and deeper attention to the development of Indigenous ministries and leadership within the wider church. In the United Church, the move towards a self-determining Indigenous church is critical to constructing new ways of being church “so that all may shape and have a place at the table.”¹⁹ The Canadian Catholic Indigenous Council, representing First Nations, Métis and Inuit Catholics, has served as an advisory body to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops since 1998.²⁰ Indigenous Catholics have shown a special connection to Our Lady of Guadalupe alongside devotional practices such as the Rosary and Marian pilgrimages.

As a consequence of sin, the ministries within both of our churches are vulnerable to prejudices. Our understanding of ministry and leadership within the church must be a model of a society transformed by “intercultural relations where diversity does not mean threat, and does not justify hierarchies of power of some over others, but dialogue between different cultural visions, of celebration, of interrelationship and of revival of hope.”²¹ This is a challenging “vision of a diverse justice-seeking–justice-living church engaged in the world for love, justice, and the

typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities and countries to the more powerful. Empire today crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation states and either marginalizes or co-opts religious communities.” From *Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*, 24th General Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), Accra, Ghana, October 2004.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, no. 17, quoting St. John Paul II, *Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace*, no. 3; *Acta Apostolica Sedis* 90 (1998), p. 150.

¹⁹ United Church of Canada, Executive of the General Council, March 2012, “Towards 2025: A Justice Seeking/Justice-Living Church”, p. 130d.

²⁰ See <https://www.cccb.ca/indigenous-peoples/>

²¹ Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document* (29 June 2007), no. 97.

integrity of creation, transformed from the inside out and from the outside in”²² Consistent with our statements above about discernment, we affirm that people with diverse identities belong within the Christian community.

Conclusion

Our dialogue agreed that the key to addressing many of the issues that face our churches is our common baptism that includes us in the ministry of Jesus Christ as he redeems Creation. The United and Roman Catholic churches affirm the work of the Spirit in our common baptism. We profess that the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ to share in his risen life and his ongoing ministry in Creation. We participate in Christ’s ministry in the Church and beyond: mending the broken, reconciling the estranged, and renewing Earth.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus chose to minister among the least, the last, and the lost. As participants in his risen life, we continue that ministry at the peripheries. This dialogue discerns places where Christ beckons us to follow him. We identify the need for ecological conversion in both our churches: to minister within God’s bountiful yet wounded Creation. We celebrate the rich diversity that ministry in an increasingly globalized world brings to our traditions and the opportunities that intercultural ministries open in promoting God’s shalom for all. We lament the challenges of fully living-out our baptismal vocation in both our churches due to the present realities of prejudice and discrimination. We discern with enthusiasm some ways in which the life-giving Spirit of God is overcoming our prejudices and reconciling all to each other, to Creation, and to God.

It is the hope of this dialogue that in local ecumenical contexts, mutual recognition of common baptism will mean that local Catholic parishes and United Church faith communities will look to one another as true partners in this ministry to which we are all called as members of the Body of Christ.

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²² “Towards 2025: A Justice Seeking/Justice-Living Church”, p. 130d. Cf. United Church of Canada, “Theologies of Disabilities”, *Record of Proceedings*, 42nd General Council (2015), pp. 604-613.

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