

A JOURNEY TO FULL COMMUNION – RE PROPOSAL GCE 1

Origin: The Report of the Joint Partnership Committee - The United Church of Christ and The United Church of Canada, April, 2015

The United Church of Canada and The United Church of Christ (USA) share a rich and similar history as “united and uniting” churches in North America. In 2013, both denominations authorized a Joint Partnership Committee to discern the call of God towards entering full communion. After a year of discernment, the committee is recommending through each denomination’s respective executive body that the 30th General Synod of The United Church of Christ, which will meet June 26-30, 2015, in Cleveland, Ohio, and the 42nd General Council of The United Church of Canada, which will meet August 8-15, 2015, in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador, approve a full communion agreement. This document is the formal report of the committee, and is meant to accompany the proposal and serve as a resource for those who will carry the commitment to a full communion relationship into the future.

United and Uniting

The United Church of Canada came into being in 1925 as the first union in the 20th century to cross historic denominational lines. While union discussions in Canada first began at the end of the 19th century, the Methodist Church in Canada, the Presbyterian Church in Canada (about one-third of Presbyterian churches in Canada stayed out of union), and the Congregational Union of Canada, along with a large number of Local Union Churches which had formed in anticipation of union, formally celebrated the formation of the new church on June 10, 1925 in Toronto, Ontario. In 1968, at the time of the formation of the United Methodist Church in the United States, the Canadian Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church also joined the United Church.

The United Church of Christ was formed on June 27, 1957, in Cleveland, Ohio, with the merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches. Conversation toward union began in 1938, but the impetus to union had started long before that as both denominations were the result of earlier mergers. The Congregational Churches traced their roots to the English Reformation and to Puritan New England, while the [Christian Church](#) had its beginnings on the American frontier. The Evangelical Synod of North America, a 19th-century German-American church, was prominent in the Mississippi Valley, and the Reformed Church in the United States, which was of German and Swiss heritage, was initially made up of churches in Pennsylvania and surrounding colonies in the early 1700s.

There are remarkable similarities between the two churches in their commitment to social justice and commitment to inclusion of diversity in sexual and gender identities, in disabilities, and in theological openness and expression. For example, The United Church of Christ, through its predecessor bodies, ordained its first female minister in 1853, its first black minister in 1892, and its first openly gay minister in 1972. The United Church of Canada first ordained women in 1936, and in 1988 declared that sexual orientation was not a criterion for determining eligibility for ordination.

The churches share many global relationships as well as similar commitments to the ideals of partnership in mission. They have a history of shared appointments in overseas personnel, and

ministry personnel already move through admission processes between the churches. Both churches have also played significant roles in the social transformations of their societies.

The mottos of both churches are based on Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-21, a passage that has often been cited as a foundation for church unions and ecumenism: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." The United Church of Christ's motto is "That They May All be One", while The United Church of Canada's motto is *Ut Omnes Unum Sint* ("That All May be One" in Latin). The United Church of Canada's crest also includes the Mohawk words *Akwe Nia'Tetewà:neren*, meaning "All My Relations," as well as the name of the church in French. These mottoes are a reminder that both churches share a common heritage and ethos as united and uniting churches.

It is also important to see this passage from John as an affirmation that full communion within the body of Christ is a gift that is already present. A full communion agreement expresses more visibly and fully what already exists through the eyes of faith. John 17 speaks to what theologians call a "proleptic" or "as if" reality. The unity we hope for has already been accomplished in Christ. It is not something we strive for, but rather something deeply true about ourselves that we can now only glimpse. It is not something we construct, but something that Christ gives to us. In full communion, we commit ourselves to living out in visible ways the central truth of our separate identities: that we are a part of each other and are one body.

Historically, full communion was first used to indicate the relationship between geographically separate churches that would likely become one body if they were in the same place. This early meaning is significant for the relationship between The United Church of Canada and The United Church of Christ. If Canada and the United States were one country, it seems inconceivable that the churches would not have entered an organic union. However, the United States and Canada are two distinct countries and each church is intimately connected to its national context. This proposal, therefore, does not envisage an organic or structural union.

Yet the Committee believes much can be gained through a full communion agreement and that such an agreement can contribute to the united and uniting movement throughout the world.

More than 60 churches throughout the world see themselves as part of the united and uniting family of churches. While not all use the name "united" or "uniting," most understood their unions as an ongoing process that points to the future. They also understood that their first or most recent union would not be their last, and that they would continue to bear witness to Jesus' prayer that all may be one. Yet today, almost 100 years after the first union of this modern era, few churches have any appetite for structural unions.

In this context, full communion agreements have become one of the few remaining expressions of deeper ecumenical commitment. The committee affirms full communion as an important avenue of ecumenism, but wishes to offer an important consideration.

The committee explored in its first meeting the implications of two northern and comparatively wealthy churches proposing a full communion relationship between themselves, potentially privileging their relationship over ongoing global partnerships with southern and historic mission-receiving churches. The committee affirmed the processes of The United Church of Canada, which paralleled this full communion conversation, to establish mutual recognition of ministry agreements with two global partner churches, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea and The United Church of Christ in the Philippines. From the beginning, the committee, therefore, wished to see the agreement as a contribution to the larger united and uniting church movement. It has explored the two “United” churches maintaining their own names but identifying themselves as jointly part of a “Uniting” family (for example, “The United Church of Christ - A Uniting Church” and “The United Church of Canada - A Uniting Church”). A proposal to rename the churches seemed premature, but the committee hopes both will explore the idea further.

This full communion agreement is at its heart an expression of the spirit of the united and uniting church movement. With it, both churches seek to lift up and reaffirm the “fire in the belly” for the ecumenical visions that brought them into existence. They also want the agreement truly to make a difference for them and for the world.

Context

A full communion agreement is not a back door to union. It does not mean the two churches are merging. Rather, it recognizes that the local context of each church is not incidental, but rather central to its identity and that each church has been called to God’s mission and ministry in its distinctive location and context. However, the fact that the churches share many common issues and challenges suggests there is much to be gained from increased collaboration.

Both churches recognize that social structures can harm people and that the gospel calls the church beyond a concern solely for individual redemption to work for systemic change. Both churches, therefore, work extensively on issues such as racism, poverty, and homophobia and engage actively in political and social issues.

Many of these issues, while specific to each church’s context, also are interrelated. For example:

- The churches are connected by a common land. Geographically, Canada and the United States share air and climate, water systems, mountain ranges, natural resources, animal migration, ecosystems, and more. As two churches with common commitments to ecological justice and openness to theological exploration, and as churches that share a common land, they can commit to journey together in developing theological reflection, resources, and capacities to heal relationships with the land and the environment.
- The churches can also work together in developing a Christian perspective on borders. Christians must not be bound by identities framed solely by national aspirations. Other churches in North America exist as unified bodies across the Canada/U.S. border. Both churches can benefit from a relationship that puts their distinctly national identities into perspective. How might the churches respect their common border, but not be contained by it?

- Both churches face challenges in adapting to changing social contexts. Demographic and sociological changes mean both churches must become far more diverse, while at the same time maintaining their core values and identities.
- Increasing secularization means Sunday worship will likely no longer be sustainable as the main identifier of church life. Both churches need to understand where God is leading them and discover spiritual practices that connect with new social realities.
- Both churches in their own ways are committed to engaging the great challenges of our time: the threat to life in human-driven climate change, the immense suffering and inequality created by unrestrained capitalism, the clash of religious ideologies, and the creation of new enemy images. Deep issues of spirituality are embedded in these challenges, and both churches need to rediscover a language of faith that connects their evangelical heritages with progressive and inclusive identities. Both need to learn again for a different time how to speak and live the gospel in new and compelling ways.

The gifts of relationship flow not just from what the churches hold in common. The differences between the churches also offer opportunities for collaboration and learning.

Ecclesial differences can provide opportunities for reflective engagement. For example, the Congregational polity of The United Church of Christ offers congregations significantly more independence (including control of property) than the Presbyterian and Methodist polities of The United Church of Canada. As The United Church of Canada considers expanding the role of congregations in its polity, it can learn from the experience of The United Church of Christ.

There are also differences between the two churches related to national voice. In The United Church of Christ's understanding, the General Synod speaks "to the church," not for it. In The United Church of Canada's polity, the General Council speaks "for the church." In reality both denominations are struggling to find an appropriate role for their national councils and can benefit from mutual reflection.

There are also differences in understanding of the role of doctrine. Because of its congregational polity, the doctrinal statement of The United Church of Christ has a limited function in the life of the church. The United Church of Canada recently expanded its historic doctrine section of the Basis of Union to include three additional statements developed since union and by doing so established an expectation that further statements will be added in the future. Neither church, however, requires either members or ministers to subscribe to the doctrinal standards of the church. (The United Church of Canada requires ministers to be "in essential agreement" with the doctrines of the church.) As The United Church of Christ seeks new ways to articulate its beliefs, it might benefit from The United Church of Canada's experience of developing new statements of faith.

The United Church of Christ representatives on the committee have identified the ongoing work of The United Church of Canada in building right relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples as a key area of learning. They note the significance of the two apologies The

United Church of Canada has offered to Aboriginal people, the movement towards Aboriginal self-government in the church, the work at healing in response to the history of residential schools, the affirmation of traditional spiritual ways, and the changes to the United Church crest and historical section of the Basis of Union as some key examples of how The United Church of Canada is building this relationship. They note that The United Church of Christ is just beginning a similar journey and would benefit greatly from the experience and accompaniment of The United Church of Canada.

The United Church of Canada representatives have noted the significant work The United Church of Christ has done on identity. In particular, they noted the clarity of core values and goals at the national level of the church: the “Core Values” of continuing testament, extravagant welcome and changing lives; and the “Bold, Inspirational Goals” of bold, public voice, welcoming, reachable congregations, engaged discipleship, and excellent, diverse leaders. They also noted the importance of well-designed, unified national campaigns as an example of how the church maintains a cohesive identity in the context of a highly congregational polity. The United Church of Canada representatives believe their church could benefit particularly from the experience and wisdom of The United Church of Christ in maintaining a strong national identity.

Both churches need to understand that the challenges they face into the future are not unique to them and they cannot address them alone. It will take a refreshed web of interconnectedness, experimentation, and prototyping with partners who share common commitments and vision. The kind of work each church needs to do is distinctive to the North American context, a liberal and progressive theological identity, and to churches committed to social justice.

Together in ecumenical partnership, the churches can bring their distinctive and perhaps contrasting approaches, gifts, and skills to the task of building a new church of the future.

The Marks

Full communion has been identified historically by five marks:

- common confession of Christ
- mutual recognition of members
- common celebration of the Lord’s Supper/Holy Communion
- mutual recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministries
- common commitment to mission

The World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission meeting in Bangalore, India, in 1978 offered the following vision of full communion agreements:

They will then recognize each other’s ministries; they will share the bread and the cup of their Lord; they will acknowledge each other as belonging to the body of Christ in all places and at all times; they will proclaim together the Gospel to the world; they will serve the needs of humankind in mutual trust and dedication; and

for these ends they will plan and take decisions together in assemblies constituted by authorized representatives wherever this is required.¹

Full communion agreements, therefore, have a significant history within the ecumenical movement. A rich history of theological reflection supports their content and direction ([Full Communion - Appendix A](#) found in the online Reference Materials).

The committee explored the doctrinal statements as well as understandings of ecclesiology, sacraments, membership, and mission of each church. The committee believes the beliefs, practices, and polity of each church are consistent with a full communion agreement.

It noted the general assessment of many that both churches share remarkably similar identities and positions. Furthermore, it would be foreign to either church's understanding to question the legitimacy of any other church within the World Council of Churches family. Both churches also share the practice of an open table. The committee concluded that the core aspects of full communion related to common confession of Christ, mutual recognition of members, and common celebration of communion flow naturally out of the life of both churches.

The challenge and meaning of full communion lie more directly instead in mutual recognition of ministries, common commitment to mission, and the aspiration found in the Bangalore statement of planning and taking decisions together in joint assemblies whenever it is required.

Mutual recognition allows for an "orderly exchange" of ministers, or flexibility among ministry personnel to move back and forth across denominational lines with as little hindrance as possible. In essence, it means two denominations that agree to mutual recognition would:

- accept the credentials of each other's ministers
- authorize ministers to accept calls and be employed in the other denomination's churches under the same or similar processes used for processing a call in their home denomination
- if possible, allow for the continuation of pension, group insurance, and other benefits in the home denomination

The committee understood its work did not include the formal development of the agreement on mutual recognition of ministry. Instead, the details of this agreement would follow the approval of the full communion agreement. Each church would need to change its by-laws to enact such an agreement, develop mechanisms to establish ministerial standing in each church, and explore what arrangements, if any, can be made for pension continuation.

The United Church of Christ has established mutual recognition of ministry within a full communion agreement with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The United Church of Canada has used this agreement as a model for the proposed mutual recognition of ministry agreements with the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea and The United Church of Christ in the Philippines. The overall structure of an agreement, therefore, is already available,

¹ Bangalore Report, cited in Michael Roo, "Full Communion Between Episcopalians and Anglicans in the United States: What Would it Look Like?" *Concordat Essays*, 179.

but both churches would need to identify aspects that are distinctive to the context of the two churches and any by-law changes that would be required.

The mutual recognition of ministry between the churches is historic but it will take many years before the effects of the orderly exchange of ministry personnel become fully visible.

Common commitment to mission, another mark of full communion, has the potential to be more immediate and transformative. Several possibilities for mutual engagement and learning have already been named, including developing jointly a church-wide mission focus and campaign. This would allow both churches to share resources, and could open the possibility of addressing a common issue across national boundaries. It could potentially invite congregations across the two churches to link together in common initiatives and learning and dramatically expand the impact of a campaign.

Another potential area is in global partnership and mission. The full communion agreement between The United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has led to the formation of the Common Global Ministries Board of the two churches. The board works with 270 partner churches and organizations in 70 countries around the world.

The committee recognized that merging The United Church of Canada's global mission program into this common board is not likely in the near future. Such an exploration would require much more consultation, particularly with global partners that would be impacted by such a direction.

However, the committee did see potential for increased collaboration and sharing. For example, while there is already significant overlap in partners, the breadth of the board's relationships could offer The United Church of Canada opportunities to link with areas of the world and partners with which it currently does not have capacity to engage. This is particularly important as both churches seek to respond to the interests of congregations in nurturing their own global connections.

Shared work, including joint consultations on issues of common concern, is another area of possibility. Respectful and transformative relationships with people of other faiths and the impact of oil pipelines on the environment are two examples of pressing issues that could perhaps effectively be undertaken in partnership.

The churches could also explore together one of the most significant identity issues facing progressive Protestant churches: secularization. In the midst of increasing secularization in both societies, how might the churches be bold in still impacting their respective societies? How might they foster and encourage a compassionate humanity?

A commitment to doing mission together will require planning. The committee believes there are many possibilities for collaboration that can strengthen and widen the engagement of both churches in God's mission. But both churches also need to continue to pay attention to the potential for local engagement.

Michael Kinnamon has noted that recent full communion agreements seem to have made little difference in the ways most local members of congregations live with one another.² He argues that if full communion agreements remain primarily at the national level, they are not truly “communion.” The two churches need to establish formal bonds between congregations and between regional bodies. Examples already exist between conferences and between congregations in border regions of the two churches. The committee believes the true potential of the full communion agreement lies in these connections being established both as a witness to the visible unity to which Christ calls us, and as a means of strengthening each other in commitment to God’s mission.

It is why the creation of an implementation committee or committees is a central part of the full communion proposal. The rich potential of this full communion agreement will require careful nurture and planning at various levels of the churches. This is in part what the Bangalore declaration suggested above in noting that “they will plan and take decisions together in assemblies constituted by authorized representatives wherever this is required.”

The committee urges the churches to put in place structures that will allow the experience and commitment of full communion to grow deeper. These structures should enable opportunities to learn, worship, and engage together at both the national and local levels of the churches.

The structures of this full communion agreement, therefore, can keep before the churches the vision of the prayer of Jesus “that all may be one” and that through them the world might be blessed.

The Possibilities

While these activities of full communion are important, it could be argued that they represent an established framework that should be happening anyway, rather than a true opening to something new.

It is possible, the committee believes, to see this full communion agreement as honouring this historic framework and pointing beyond it to new visions in ecumenism; to the emergence of new relationships that enhance current partnerships and opens new possibilities for united and uniting churches throughout the world. It therefore offers some final thoughts on what might flow from this agreement.

In opening themselves again to their calling as united and uniting, the churches can be drawn once again to the core of their identity as followers of Jesus. In their growth together in full communion they can discover the unity that is already present in Christ. They can learn once again the vision of a church that transcends the divisions of the world. They can seek to be more than just a body of faithful people struggling on their own to survive. They can rediscover what it means once again to be a movement of people who choose to follow Christ into the unknown.

The committee therefore encourages the churches not only to go deeper to live out this full communion agreement, but also to go wider.

² Michael Kinnamon, 2014, Can a Renewal Movement be Renewed? Question for the Future of Ecumenism.

In this, the committee urges the churches to continue the vision of a wider united and uniting church movement. It hopes this agreement can be extended to other united and uniting churches that seek to reimagine and recover the ecumenical vocation that brought them into being. More specifically, the committee believes that this is a time for closer relationships between united and uniting churches that are working intentionally at radically inclusive identities grounded in progressive theological exploration.

The committee believes the two churches are being invited to a wider commitment to God's vision and purpose for united and uniting churches in the world, and that this journey of full communion is an opening to something truly transformative for them and for others. That through this initial step the churches can live more fully into the prayer of Jesus "that all may be one" and that the world might be blessed

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