



CENTRE FOR CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Imagine Church Differently

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Centre for Christian Studies' Response to **GC44 - NEW01 DIACONAL EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS FOR THE FUTURE (v2)**

When we at the Centre for Christian Studies (CCS) first heard of a General Council 44 proposal "Diaconal Educational Pathways for the Future", we were surprised and curious. Upon reading the first draft, we reached out to the Commissioner who had proposed it and asked if we could meet to discuss their perspectives, ideas, and the information contained. This consultation resulted in the Commissioner rewriting and clarifying some of the pieces of their proposal, hence v2. The Centre for Christian Studies was not asked to endorse this proposal, nor do we do so. We remain curious as to what will be sparked from this process and are committed to being at the table where appropriate.

What we can affirm:

CCS affirms the proposal's commitment to robust accessibility. In particular, we affirm an understanding of accessibility that does not merely consider 'entrance' or aspirational statements to be the measure, but a comprehensive consideration of all parts of a program, and the personal and financial implications of any required adaptation and accommodation.

Action: Engaged in a regular practice of organizational and program evaluation, CCS is committed to both proactively improving accessibility through universal design,¹ as well as responding creatively and comprehensively to individual student/inquirer requests and needs.

CCS affirms the proposal's call for the United Church of Canada to take an active role and interest in assessing whether and how its associated theological schools / ministry formation programs both meet the needs of candidates for ministry and are equally² accessible to students (ability-wise, but also financially, educationally, geographically, culturally, linguistically, etc.).

Action: Should this include conversation and participation of the General Secretary or General Council, or those appointed by them, CCS certainly welcomes this.

¹ Universal design is an approach that attempts to build accessibility into a program or process for the most variety of people, decreasing the need for individual adaptations (unless further necessary). It is a commitment to inclusion that seeks to minimize 'othering'.

² Clearly, the strength of having a variety of different programs is not to be discouraged; however, we know that students have for many years chosen different programs – and streams of ministry – based on the location, strengths, requirements, time, or financial implications of different programs.

CCS affirms the proposal's call for all UCC-affiliated theological schools to take an active role and interest in assessing whether and how their programs are accessible to students.

Action: This may include CCS reviewing and revising its current [accessibility policy](#), given the recent programmatic, technological, and pandemic-related changes. Individually and with other theological schools, CCS will advocate for funding and support for accessible theological education / ministry formation, and a particular emphasis on financial accessibility for historically marginalized groups and equity-seeking individuals, including those living with disabilities.

CCS affirms the proposal's commitment to ensuring that diaconal ministry formation is accessible to all who feel called to pursue this particular stream of ministry, and the United Church's role in ensuring it has not created implicit barriers to the diaconate, based on inequitable resources or requirements.

Action: Some of this has been addressed by the dissolution of the partially funded Internship program, though there are likely other historical barriers that could yet be addressed.

CCS affirms that some students, or those considering studies with CCS, have deemed the CCS [Diaconal Diploma program](#) inaccessible to them, for a variety of reasons. For some, other theological schools have been a viable alternative or preferred choice, while for others they have chosen to pursue other vocations. Some have brought this to the attention of CCS, while others have kept their decisions and discernments private. Consistent with an Action-Reflection model of education and as a learning-organization, CCS affirms that feedback, critique, external consultation and self-reflection are important, sought-after, and welcomed.

Action: From 2015-2017 CCS undertook a major program review and redesign ([here](#) and [here](#)), essentially 'dis-integrating' its 'integrated' program format (which had been created in 1999 and somewhat adapted thereafter), so that it was more accessible to those wanting/needing to study part-time, to work alongside studies, to access continuing education, or adaptation for non-church or non-denominational leadership. In part, this was spurred by the feedback that CCS students living with disabilities shared with the organization, when they were trying to navigate the previous format and expectations. In 2021 and 2022, CCS is just now seeing the first graduates who have fully experienced the redesigned program – and yet that, too, has been affected by COVID, of course. In 2022-2023 CCS has scheduled a Comprehensive Evaluation and Review of the impact of the program redesign. This proposal's request to review accessibility fits well with CCS's intended and current evaluative plan.

What we wish to clarify:

CCS wishes to clarify the distinctions between one's UCC [diaconal candidacy](#) (a decision of the Office of Vocation Candidacy Boards), diaconal testamur (an assessment by CCS or SSSC, in line with the requirements of the UCC for diaconal formation), and enrollment in/graduation from the Centre for Christian Studies' Diaconal Diploma [program](#). While these often overlap, they are in fact distinct.

CCS wishes to clarify that its educational pedagogy and practices are grounded in a tradition, specifically a [tradition](#) of modern diaconal education that spans more than 125 years and has evolved throughout that time. This tradition has always upheld a weaving of praxis - theory and practice, akin to other professional training programs such as medicine and social work - and draws on grass-roots education movements for social change. To state that CCS is “committed to non-traditional forms of learning,” though not intended as a criticism, nonetheless erases the traditions from which it comes and creates a false dichotomy between CCS and the wide variety of other UCC-recognized theological formation paths.

While CCS’s program is unique in many ways, this dichotomy has historically been used to perpetuate sexist and paternalistic tropes. For example, that CCS is ‘more appropriate for women, who couldn’t possibly hack it in the ordained stream’, that diaconal ministry itself is ‘less than’, or that diaconal ministers are not ‘real’ ministers with ‘real’ theological training. The CCS Diaconal Diploma program was not designed for the *purpose* of providing theological education for those who “do not have a bachelor’s degree or do not thrive in traditional academic educational systems to answer their call to ministry,” even if CCS is accessible in these ways, but rather for the purpose of equipping people for ministry in a diaconal tradition.³

CCS wishes to clarify that, while CCS does not require applicants to hold a university degree, most students do (some have many), and all must be able to function in a university academic setting. All Diaconal Diploma students are required to take a minimum of eight external university-granted courses (fulfilling specific subject areas) and engage in comparable levels of reading and analysis in the CCS-led learning circles and praxis. While many accommodations and adaptations are available for documented disabilities, and CCS will support students in gaining academic and executive function skills where remediation is needed, these expectations remain a part of the Diaconal Diploma program and fulfill the UCC expectations of an educated paid accountable ministry of leadership.⁴

CCS wishes to clarify that there is currently no time-limit on how long a student can take to complete the Diaconal Diploma program, nor a limit on the extent that a student can be employed alongside their studies. Some students choose to combine their field placements with paid student supply ministry, while others do not, for a variety of reasons. A student’s age does not determine their access to paid student supply ministry.⁵ A student’s ability to maintain a livable income during their studies is determined by their personal financial circumstances, their access to bursaries and student loans, their employment choices, and their choices of how they move through the program. CCS, like all UCC-recognized theological schools, seeks to make its program as financially accessible as possible, but does not have the

³ This may include commissioned UCC Diaconal Ministry, the Anglican Diaconate, or other forms of lay or ordered ministry and leadership that benefit from a diaconal style of formation.

⁴ <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/statement-on-ministry.pdf> .

⁵ The proposal’s claim “for some seniors who are answering their call to ministry, the program is not a good fit because of its length and limited time in active ministry” demonstrates a misunderstanding of this.

ability to pay students for participating in theological education, regardless of the length of their studies.

CCS wishes to clarify that, like other current ministry-integrated programs (the Atlantic School of Theology's 5 year [Summer Distance](#) Program, the current St. Andrew's [Designated Lay Ministry](#) Program, and the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre's 5- and 3-year [Community Based Ministry](#) Programs), graduates from the CCS Diaconal Diploma program are exempt from the 2-year post-degree Supervised Ministry Education [SME] requirement of the UCC Candidacy process. This allows diaconal candidates to be Commissioned to Diaconal Ministry directly following graduation, assuming their readiness is approved by their UCC Candidacy Board. Enrolled fulltime, a CCS student could finish the Diaconal Diploma and be commissioned in 4 years. Enrolled in a fast-track, or with significant PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment Review) Process, a CCS student could finish the Diaconal Diploma program and be commissioned in 3 years. Most students take 4-6 years and combine studies with employment and/or caregiving.

CCS wishes to clarify that, to our knowledge, the relative accessibility of UCC ministry formation programs has not been tested. To claim that "within the current [CCS] structure accommodations can only reach a certain level of change", and that this proposal is for the "purpose of determining the need and viability of an alternative route through the diaconal program at CCS", implies that the *current* range of options through the Diaconal Diploma program at CCS, are insufficient or inaccessible. CCS is certainly open to reviewing and discussing such. To date, CCS has not been advised of any specific cases where this is true, with any demonstrated grounds. Likewise, the claim that "the AST [Atlantic School of Theology] Summer Distance Program seems to be formatted in such a way that it is more accessible for those with energy-limiting disabilities" is similarly stated without demonstrated grounds. Reviewing the posted program requirements⁶ of the AST-SDP does not show an appreciable difference in its accessibility, although different factors may affect individual students.

These matters of clarification are just that; intended to provide clarity and information about the CCS Diaconal Diploma program. They do not invalidate what CCS affirms in the proposal, nor CCS's commitment to furthering accessibility and equity. We remain curious as to what will be sparked from this process and are committed to being at the table where appropriate.

In God's grace,

Centre for Christian Studies Staff and Co-Chairs

⁶ <https://www.astheology.ns.ca/webfiles/SDMDivprogramatAST-UnitedChurchstudents.pdf> .