

NEW01 DIACONAL EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS FOR THE FUTURE (v2)

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1. What is the issue? (describe in broad terms)

We believe God/Jesus/Holy Spirit is calling us to:

Engage the topic of educational pathways in the diaconal ministry stream.

Ordered ministry in the United Church of Canada is made up of ordained and diaconal ministers. However, the current pathways of education available are not accessible to all who seek to answer God's call to ordered ministry.

As a point of clarification, this proposal addresses the diaconal program through the Centre for Christian Studies (CCS). The Sandy Sauteaux Spiritual Centre also provides a diaconal education program for Indigenous ministry. However, we respect the self-governance of this program and therefore will be focusing on the program available through the CCS.

The diaconal program is unique and blessed by its commitment to non-traditional forms of learning. This allows individuals who do not have a bachelor's degree or do not thrive in traditional academic educational systems to answer their call to ministry. However, the current format of the diaconal education program is not accessible to all people, especially in relation to disability.

The program at CCS is designed to be able to be completed over four years full-time, but is flexible in nature as the component can be stretched over a longer period of study. The components of the program are predominately remote with periods of intensive short-term learning circles. Additional components include eight university theological courses and three field placements at approximately 10-12 hours per week over eight months.

This format is flexible in many ways and has allowed students with a variety of needs to complete the required components. However, the combined commitment of education and working for a regular livable income is not tenable for those who are only able to work half-time in total. An example of individuals who might face this choice are those with energy-limiting disabilities. CCS has a robust accommodations policy and has a rich history of adapting the program to meet the needs of the students; however, within the current structure accommodations can only reach a certain level of change.

This is a gap in the United Church's commitment to theological education and social justice within the diaconal stream. Within the ordained stream of ministry there are multiple options for programs and formats to meet the requirements of ordination. For example, the AST Summer Distance Program seems to be formatted in such a way that it is more accessible for those with energy-limiting disabilities. In contrast, the program at CCS is currently the only option for diaconal education for non-Indigenous students. **Therefore, we believe that we are being called to examine this issue with the purpose of determining the need and viability of**

an alternative route through the diaconal program at CCS. We feel the driving focus of this inquiry should be to fill the gaps of accessibility for all demographics, while maintaining the integrity of the diaconal program.

2. Why is this issue important?

Examining the need for an additional pathway is important because 1. it is a justice issue and 2. it is important theologically for the discernment of those answering their call.

1. The United Church is committed to being a just church. Time and time again we have taken steps to become a justice-seeking institution, but we also know that work is not finished. Diaconal ministry has a long and rich tradition of engaging social justice issues but, even with that commitment, has limitations with its model. As the church becomes aware of the pervasiveness of ableism and begins to explore theologies of disabilities, the time is ripe to consider expanding the preparation for diaconal ministry to ensure no one is excluded. For example, for some who have illnesses, conditions, or disabilities that are energy-limiting, the program is not able to be stretched over time while maintaining a livable income. Additionally, 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. These are just two examples where someone may have to seek out the ordained pathway, or non-ordered ministry, not based on their call but on the accessible options available to them.

It can be hard to see the places where our systems are unjust until those with lived experiences speak out. It can be even harder to do something about it when it seems it may only affect a small population of people. However, it is essential that we as the United Church continue to be justice-seeking, which requires a faithful examination of where we may be creating barriers for our future leaders.

2. The calls to ordained, diaconal, and designated lay ministry are distinct from one another and need to be prayerfully discerned by candidates. This discernment should not be based on the educational pathways that are accessible to an individual, but based on God's call. This is a theological cornerstone of the candidacy process. However, within the current system individuals are having to make these decisions based on practical accessibility. At times, the programs available can even prevent someone from answering the call to ministry altogether. Our church is blessed by a diverse leadership, where our unique gifts and talents weave together into a greater picture. We need to continue to ensure that our systems allow people of diverse backgrounds and abilities to answer God's call to ordered leadership.

If you wish to continue to research the current diaconal pathway, the following links show the basic outline of the diaconal educational program:

<http://ccsonline.ca/program/diaconal-diploma/>

<http://ccsonline.ca/about-ccs/>

3. How might the General Council respond to the issue?

Name a possible response that the General Council might consider:

1. We could consider affirming the importance of accessibility to training for all streams of ministry.
2. We could ask the General Secretary to work in partnership with CCS to review, with a lens of disability justice, what needs to be changed within the diaconal program to become accessible, and if necessary begin designing an alternate pathway through the diaconal program.

If you have questions regarding this proposal please send them to info@generalcouncil44.ca.