

JIM WILEY PHOTOS

Ministry behind the scenes

The role of diaconal ministers in today's church

They used to call them "dowdywomen." In 1928, for example, United Church deaconesses wore dark blue dresses with white cuffs and collar, a dark navy coat and matching hat. Perhaps people didn't understand the reason for their subdued dress, their self-effacing desire to work with those on the edges of society, the poor and immigrant and sick. Later, the uniforms disappeared; after a long struggle for recognition in the courts of the church, these laywomen began to be called commissioned ministers; later still, they chose the term diaconal ministers for themselves.

They dress like everybody else now. And some diaconal ministers are men. But most of us still don't understand what they do, and what's special about the skills and training they receive at the Centre for Christian Studies in Toronto, the comfortable, red-brick building where — until a new program was added at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton — all United Church diaconal candidates studied.

It's not a luxurious place. The old desire for plainness

persists. The bedrooms are modest, the bathrooms down the hall. A tap from one of the bathtubs fell off in my hand recently when I was staying there; the aging plumbing is clearly in need of renewal.

It raises a question about the future of diaconal ministry in general: Is the rich tradition which placed deaconesses in port cities during the great waves of immigration, in Native reserves, hospitals, with Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War, and in youth and children's work in churches all over this country dying, ready to merge with the ordained stream?

That would mean the loss of something terribly valuable, says Ann Naylor, the United Church's secretary for women in ministry and a diaconal minister herself. The relationship between the two parts of the ordered ministry is a little like the relationship between the Canada and the U.S. "If Canada were subsumed by the U.S. tomorrow, we

Above, principal Trudy Lebans outside Centre for Christian Studies, Toronto: different perspectives.

wouldn't die. But our cultural distinctiveness would disappear. To be aware of that is not to be anti-American. In the same way, we are not anti-ordination. But we need to honor the vision that comes out of our heritage."

Although the difference between diaconal and ordained ministers is often explained in terms of who does what — who preaches, who leads the youth group, who is there with hot tea and counsel for the neophyte Sunday school teacher — that's probably not the best distinction. It would be better, says Rev. Trudy Lebens, principal of the Centre for Christian Studies, "to say there are different perspectives on ministry."

To put it simply, the vision of the diaconate is very much from the bottom up, "consciously, intentionally, non-hierarchical." Graduating from the Centre means you have, in Naylor's words, "a justice-centred perspective."

Not that this sense of justice is "the property of the diaconate. There is all kinds of passion for it in ordained folk, too. But raising the questions about the needs of those who have less power, for us, is a passionate commitment. It's not a requirement for the ordained."

"Training for diaconal ministry doesn't give an option," adds Lebens. "If you are going to get through the Centre, you are going to consciously adopt that philosophy and value."

It also means giving up the notion that to lead in the church you must have an "emblem of authority" like "Reverend" in front of your name. Ironically, that very commitment to an enabling, behind-the-scenes kind of ministry may be costing the diaconate potential candidates. Many people have never knowingly encountered a diaconal minister, and so when they consider ministry as a vocation, it's ordination that comes to mind. Except in the West, where diaconal ministers are beloved for their mission work, they haven't been terribly visible.

It's because when we think "minister" we picture someone in flowing robes at the front of the church, preaching or marrying or inviting people to share in communion. Diaconal ministers, while they frequently do lead in worship — especially if they are the only minister on the charge — are just as frequently busy with the children on Sunday mornings. "We tend to do more work with outreach, mid-week groups, pastoral care; and these all have less prominence and visibility than the ministry of word and sacrament," says Naylor.

Their other distinctive quality is their enormous skill in education. "Their particular training is about encouraging groups to discover their own ministry," says Lebens. It's a model which places great faith in the power of people working and playing and learning together. "If we were to collect all the people in ordered ministry, they don't change worlds. Communities change worlds."

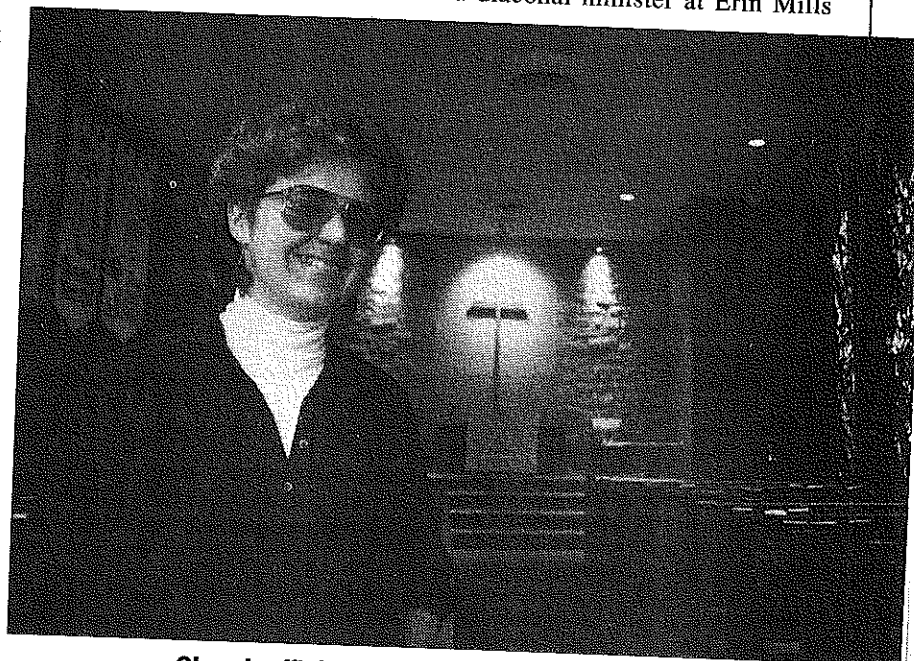
So there are no stars in the diaconal world. Just ordinary people, quietly figuring out how to get along together, and learn something, and be attentive to those who have no power at all. It's hard to understand if you've never before encountered education that starts with the experience of the learners. Lebens gives an example: "The diaconal minister finds the places where ministry can begin. Maybe it is in a

community that is concerned about a landfill site. They raise the questions: 'What does this mean about our garbage, about our affluence, about how the Earth recovers?' You just begin with the landfill site, and you end with questions like 'what have we learned, and now what do we do?'"

It's confusing for people used to nicely laid-out goals and flow charts. She conjures up a picture of a pastoral relations committee meeting with a diaconal minister: "What's your program for getting kids into the church?" they say. 'We'll have to talk with the kids,' we say. For a lot of people, this sounds like intangibles."

But those intangibles go right to the places where the United Church is not feeling very successful. Adult study, for example. "I hear people talking about the small numbers in study groups," says Lebens. "Most of us join groups that look like they are effective, fun and empowering, that will give meaning to our lives. The church needs the skills in animating communities that diaconal ministers have."

Kathy Toivanen is a diaconal minister at Erin Mills



Church official Naylor: more outreach, less visibility.

United in Mississauga, Ont. Her colleague, Rev. Harry Oussoren, remarks gratefully on "her real focus on the educational ministry of the congregation," while Toivanen herself points out that "children are still often forgotten. They still need an ombudsman in a congregation." With a diaconal minister in the congregation, even committee meetings have a "different flavor. The business of the meeting is not separate from the Gospel."

Again, it's not that effective small groups are the property of diaconal ministers. "Ordained ministers," says Lebens, "may have that skill. But we expect that diaconal ministers will be able to empower and motivate groups."

So what is going to happen to the diaconate, and the Centre for Christian Studies, with its small core groups engaged in passionate social analysis, raising awkward questions about the way things are, and the way things might be? Is it going to continue long enough for the plumbing to get fixed?

It certainly looks like it. The central council of the

Centre is investigating, for instance, a co-operative program with nearby Emmanuel College to prepare people for the diaconate. Some courses could be taken at either school. There would still be a minimum number of courses that must be taken at the Centre itself, though, in order to protect that peculiar and valuable set of qualities that is the diaconate. "Diaconal identity isn't developed in isolation," explains Naylor. "When there are two or three diaconal students studying in the same group as 70 students heading for ordination, you are always 'other.' What the Centre provides is a place where you are mainstream."

What may be more important is the council's understanding that the needs of their students have changed. "It's clear to all of us that many people can't relocate to Toronto" for their training, says Lebens. So they are finding ways to package their programs "so they are accessible, by adjusting the timing and how and where they are delivered." What they won't compromise is "the justice-centered, experiential, feminist perspective."

This could mean developing a program that could be done from anywhere in the country; some courses might be done at a local college, some by correspondence and some at one of the Christian training centres, with people coming together for two weeks to integrate the learning they have been doing at home.

In any case, the Centre and its programs are definitely not going to go away. Even though "diaconal ministers are tired of having to defend their existence, role, and right to work in the church," says Lebens, they aren't complaining. "They have chosen the more risky, less secure vocation in terms of employment, status and respect. They have chosen that."

And in many ways, the 120 diaconal ministers who are active today epitomize what the United Church stands for. Lebens speaks longingly of the day when that is recognized. "I've never had a conversation with anyone saying we'd like to see 200 diaconal ministers in the field by the end of the century."

Too bad. Two hundred diaconal ministers, with their ability to turn us into a community, might just transform our church.

Donna Sinclair



On-the-job theology school

Things haven't been the same at Marg Lange's house since she turned "Goddy" — the term her three kids have been using ever since the Stony Plain, Alta., homemaker and former teacher decided to become a diaconal minister.

The children keep ushering friends into the kitchen to watch Lange, 39, pore over her theology texts. "Your mom's gonna be a minister?" the friends whisper incredulously. Lange's children have adopted some new communication patterns, too. "They use diaconal phrases, like negotiate, discuss and mutuality," says Lange. "If they don't agree with me, they say: 'That's not in my experience.' I say: 'But you're only nine!'"

Lange's family has also been forced to become more independent. Now that she is a student with a part-time staff associate's position at Edmonton's Robertson-Wesley United, Lange no longer has time to be "Super Mom."

Lange and her brood are lucky. They would have encountered far more traumatic changes if St. Stephen's College in Edmonton hadn't launched a unique program two years ago that allows diaconal and lay professional ministry students to live, work and study in their home communities. Before the Western Field-based Diaconal Ministry Program came along, diaconal ministry hopefuls had to move to Toronto, either alone or with their families, to enrol at the Centre for Christian Studies. Neither Lange nor her schoolteacher-husband felt such an upheaval was practical.

"Even if you thought your marriage could sustain a one or two-year absence, it would be an incredible financial strain," says Lange.

Betty Marlin, co-ordinator of the St. Stephen's project and one of the half-dozen diaconal ministers who pushed for two years to get it established, says the idea actually originated with some of the women now in the five-year program. "Our whole intention was to meet the needs of the people, particularly women, in Western Canada. Most are second or third-career women — including home-making as one career — and they are not able or willing to disrupt their families to further their education."

Marlin says the project is proving extremely popular. So many people have expressed an interest that, in addition to the original class of 22 women and two men, the program is now accepting 31 additional students to first-year studies.

The program, which is open mainly to people from the four western Conferences, is co-ordinated by St. Stephen's College with consultation from other theological institutions. The project combines academic studies with intensive group learning sessions and on-the-job training. Students take theology courses from their closest university or theological college. The entire class

Lange (right) and fellow field-based diaconal student Marilyn Carroll: "We're thought of as whole people."

gathers at least three times a year to set learning goals in areas such as spirituality, church polity and personal and professional ethics. Students who live relatively close to each other meet occasionally in regional learning "clusters." Participants are also expected to work part-time in a church or social ministry setting.

Lori Crocker, the program's public relations coordinator and a diaconal minister in Innisfail, Alta., says the program could serve as a model for other ministry training programs. "This program may be based in the West, but due to its field-based nature and the co-operative way that it is being developed, it represents a new and innovative way of doing a theological education program."

Crocker says a scheme like this makes sense in view of rising costs. The program "uses financial resources differently and makes use of courses and programs that are already in place. For example, we make use of those already active in diaconal ministry as resource people for leadership and supervision."

Crocker says students plan some of their own courses, execute them and write papers on them. One group of participants studying power structures in society recently toured a mental health institution and spoke with the institution's chaplains in Ponoka, Alta.

Lange likes the program's blend of theory and work experience. "I think it's a really creative way to learn. The process of learning is as important as the end product."

Diaconal student Mary Ann Pastuck, 43, first realized she was "looking for something" five years ago. A part-time book-keeper, homemaker and Sunday school superintendent at Camrose (Alta.) United for 10 years, she wanted to expand her involvement in the church, but felt limited by her lack of theological knowledge. She watched her church's diaconal minister, Faye Greer, at work and longed to emulate her. But her husband had just become a partner in a business in Camrose and she felt she couldn't ask him and their three children to move to a different city so she could study diaconal ministry.

Then Greer told Pastuck about the St. Stephen's program. "I felt I was really being nudged in a certain direction," says Pastuck, "and when I finally spoke the words 'diaconal min-

istry' aloud, I knew that's what I wanted to do."

Now entering her third year, Pastuck finds it a challenge to juggle classes, studying, her part-time field placement, and family responsibilities. "There are times when you're really excited about what you're doing, and times when you don't know when you're going to get it all done."

A typical day for Pastuck means rising at 6:45 a.m., getting something out of the freezer so the kids can make their own supper that night, and leaving at 8:10 for the 90-minute drive to Edmonton, where she works at Grace United as a staff associate handling Christian Development. She attends a one-hour staff meeting, and then may plan an upcoming Sunday school lesson, a Sunday school teachers' workshop, or a children's story for Sunday worship. She tries to squeeze in a few visits to congregation members before lunch time, when she rushes

over to St. Stephen's College to pick up some theology books and meet with other diaconal students to work on a group paper. Her afternoon includes more of the same.

In the evening, she may end up staying in Edmonton until 10 p.m. for a church Board meeting. On days when Pastuck isn't working, she studies in the afternoon and — "depending on how high the mountain of laundry is" — she may hit the books again from 9 to 11 p.m.

The program may be fast-paced and leisure time may be limited, but both Pastuck and Lange say they get the emotional nourishment they need to carry on. They receive supportive phone calls from other members of their regional cluster, and program co-ordinator Marlin is always available to discuss personal stresses and offer guidance.

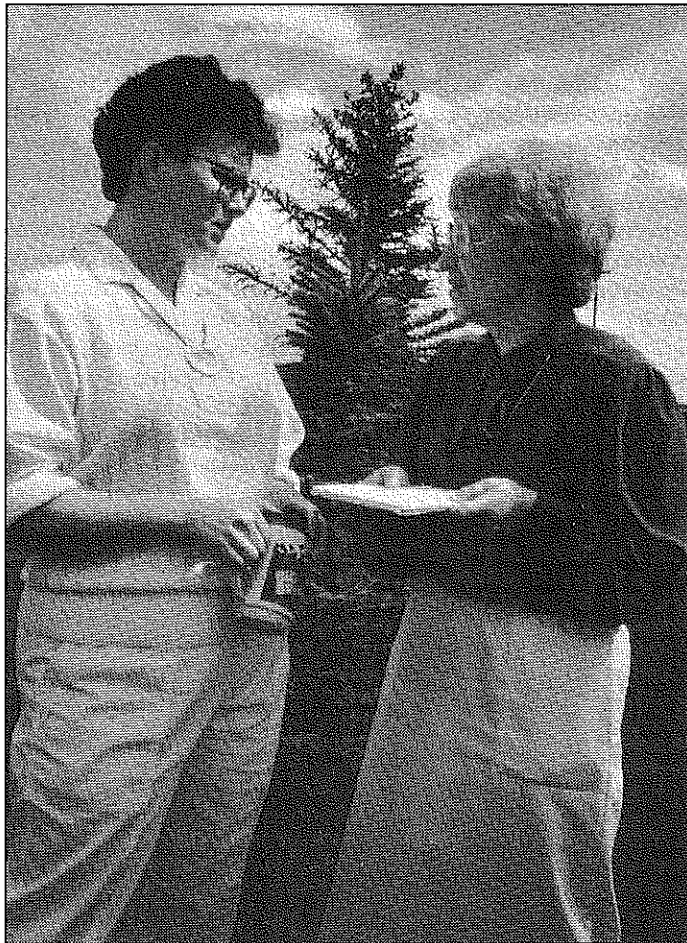
"We're thought of as whole people," says

Lange. "We're not dissected into different parts. No one says, 'This is only an intellectual exercise. We don't care that you have a sick child at home.'"

For both Lange and Pastuck, the benefits of the St. Stephen's program far outweigh the drawbacks.

"I've grown a lot," says Pastuck. "I'm doing something I want to do, and the house hasn't fallen down, nobody's starved to death, the kids have learned to be more independent, and I'm probably a better parent when I'm not at home all the time."

Cristine Bye



CRISTINE BYE OBSERVER PHOTOS

Pastuck (left) and Marlin: an unmistakable feeling that you're "being nudged in a certain direction."

A proposal**Two pathways to the same ministry**

Recently at a church meeting, I asked casually, "Why do we have two groups of ministers in the United Church? Why do we divide commissioned and ordained people? Why don't we just put them all together and say that these people are professional ministers for the church?" I was immediately met with an impassioned response from the commissioned ministers present, who reminded me of how difficult it was to have diaconal ministry recognized; and from the ordained ministers who accused me of trying to blur the obvious distinctions between the two groups.

But neither of these was my intention. Rather, from my experience within the church, I have become aware of the fundamental overlapping which exists between our two existing ministerial streams.

The theory says that we have two groups of ordered ministers — one of which is concerned with Word, sacrament and pastoral care, the other with education, service, and pastoral care. On paper, that seems clear enough, but I have never been able to see the precise distinction in practice.

At present, for example, between 40 and 50 percent of those in active diaconal ministry (the group without "sacrament" in their job description) have already been given authority to administer the sacraments. This practice began as a means of ensuring that the sacraments would be available on isolated pastoral charges which were without the services of an ordained minister. But now this granting of permission has become almost a standard procedure. Diaconal ministers who are involved in team ministries are given the right to administer the sacraments within the

team structure, and those who are just a few kilometres from ordained ministers are granted such permission, because it is inconvenient for others to help them out. But does this not make a great number of diaconal ministers *de facto* ordained ministers?

I have known at least two congregations which have relied solely on the services of diaconal ministers. I do not understand how these people who visited hospitals and facilitated courses and prayed and preached and presided at communions and baptisms on their charges were doing anything different from what I do as an ordained minister on mine. So why do we not just call all of us "ministers" and leave it at that?

On the other hand, there are many ordained clergy who are concerned primarily with education at colleges or universities, or who are chiefly administrators in church offices. But is not this emphasis on education and service supposedly the realm of the diaconal worker? Indeed most ordained ministers hold Bible studies and conduct seminars on a variety of subjects without ever having to ask permission to become involved in "the ministry of education." In fact some ordained clergy who are in associate or assistant positions teach almost exclusively, yet are not de-ordained and commissioned instead.

Why do we have two groups of ministers in the United Church? Why don't we just put them all together and say that these people are professional ministers for the church?

One answer is that those involved in our two streams approach their work from differing perspectives. But should differences in style be enough to necessitate a division of

A response**A difference that helps make us whole**

It's amazing how often the question comes up: Why did you go into the diaconal ministry? People seldom ask ordained people why they chose the ordained ministry. Many don't understand why there are two traditions of ministry in the first place, and why we need both.

And yet the importance of the diaconate was underlined almost 30 years ago, when the United Church made deaconesses and certified churchmen part of the order of ministry. As well as affirming a long and distinct tradition, this provided these professional workers — most of whom were women — with access to the courts of the church, communication networks, and the salary guidelines ordained clergy were already enjoying.

One reason for having both streams in the order of ministry is found in the rich history of the diaconate. Deaconess work began in North America in the late 19th century, originally focusing on visiting, charity activities, and the religious instruction of children and women, particularly for urban areas and immigrant communities. Deaconesses pioneered the development of both religious education and social work. The Deaconess Order represented a dynamic and practical

enactment of the social gospel, expanding the ministry of the church to include new communities of people, new ways of practising ministry, and new types of training and skills. It was quite different in focus and activity from the ordained ministry, but it proved the value of women's professional work in the church, and along with the Woman's Missionary Society, contributed to the decision to ordain women in the United Church.

This work is too valuable to be diffused into a more generalized form of ministry. Diaconal ministers bring their rich heritage and training in education, social justice, and pastoral concerns more centrally into the church's view. Their work calls the church to reaffirm the importance of its educational and pastoral work — work which is often sidelined or given second place in the distribution of the resources of the church.

That "visibility" question means diaconal ministers are often seen as "new" and unknown by many in the church, and evaluated in terms of their resemblance to ordained ministers. They have tried over the last 30 years to describe their ministry's history and philosophy to those unfamiliar with it, challenging the perception that it is a subsidiary to the

the ministry itself? There are differences in style within both ordained and diaconal groups already. I have worked as part of an ordained ministerial team for the past 13 years, and one of its strengths is that each person who has been a part of our staff has had a different way of doing things.

It is also true that each of our streams now has a distinctive educational background. But perhaps this should be seen as the result of common sense. Different academic routes promote alternative ways of approaching tasks. And this choice also recognizes that different people begin with different strengths and learn best from different methods. The primary scholastic, classroom approach of most theological colleges prepares some better for preaching and teaching, while the person-oriented emphasis now enjoyed by diaconal candidates might be preferable for those who wish to concentrate on counselling and committee work.

The acceptance of a single order of ministry would not necessarily stop individual ministers from specializing in pastoral care or preaching or education or administration. In fact, it seems that many professional staff already move from one area of emphasis to another. A minister may begin on a small pastoral charge doing all aspects of ministry, then transfer to a larger urban parish to do visiting and counselling, and then to another congregation where liturgy is stressed. This reflects an ability to grow in ministry and to experience different aspects of service into which one may be called by the Spirit. All of these areas are part of one playing field and should not be divided among various lobby groups.

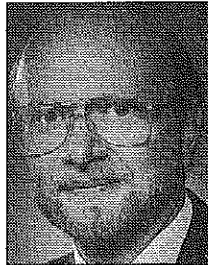
I predict that the main opponents to the concept of different educational pathways to one undivided order of ministry

would be found in the schools which now provide ministerial training. I am sure each would stress that its method of teaching or curriculum is better than the other. But surely as long as suitable skills for ministry are nurtured within the system, it does not really matter what degree is granted at the end. Perhaps what is entering the debate here is institutional snobbery rather than Christian wisdom.

Some congregations may even insist that they would prefer a minister with one educational background over another. But the fact is that they are doing this already. Search committees intent on finding someone with a specialty in education would probably still seek a graduate from the Centre for Christian Studies, while a congregation looking for a preacher might still look for a person with a Master of Divinity degree.

Much time and effort in our denomination seems to be spent defending the fact that we have two groups of ministers, and much bureaucracy is there to support both. But certainly there is not one distinct ministry of education, service, and pastoral care and another of Word, sacrament and pastoral care, but just one ministry, involved in all aspects of church life. Paul was always so quick to point this out.

Why do we have to obscure the obvious with restrictions which seem to be overlooked already and with divisions which do little but confuse laypeople and separate those involved in professional ministry?



Grant Dawson

Dawson is on the ministerial team at Knox United in Calgary.

Do we need two groups of ministers in the United Church?

ordained ministry, or a stepping stone to the "real" ministry of the church recognized through ordination. But diaconal ministers are still asked, "When are you going to be ordained?"

Their history and philosophy is contained in their very name, identifying them as part of the scriptural and early church tradition of *diakonos*, or service to Christ. It describes what diaconal ministers see as central to their vision of the church: service, in the name of Christ, to the Christian community and the world. It's a facilitating, being-with-others form of ministry, with a vision of journeying with the faithful community, equipping people at the various stages of their faith journey for ministry where they are in the world.

The continuation of the two distinct traditions, diaconal and ordained, benefits and strengthens the church by helping it understand its ministry to include the calling of the whole people of God. Ministry is a partnership between all people, in the order of ministry and in the laity. Diaconal ministry grew out of the ministry of the laity and is still strongly committed to it. Because of this, as well as its practical training and the way it draws on the perspectives and gifts of women, it acts as a corrective, a prophetic way of being that chal-

lenges the hierarchical, separational model of ministry present in some parts of the church.

The differences between the two traditions can even help us talk about our visions of ministry, and about the nature of power and empowerment within the community of faith. The comment "you don't look or act like a minister" is received by most diaconal ministers sometime in their ministry; it often leads to interesting dialogues about what ministry is.

Ordained and diaconal ministry working in partnership remind us of the multi-faceted variety of places where ministry can and does occur within the church, and keep in tension the church's double tasks of self-nurture (through worship, preaching, the sacraments, education and pastoral care) and outreach to the community through service to others. Both traditions of ministry challenge each other, and are essential for a healthy and faithful Christian community.



Mary Anne MacFarlane

MacFarlane is a diaconal minister who recently completed post-doctoral studies in Toronto.

The two distinct traditions benefit and strengthen the church