

NEW01 DIACONAL EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS FOR THE FUTURE

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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 based on age or ability. To complete the required components of the program while also providing for oneself requires a three-quarter to full-time commitment, a reality that not all individuals are able to make. Many modifications that would make the program accessible to those who cannot work full-time lead to the program being unreasonably extended, and the financial consequences that accompany reduced earnings and continuing education costs. Additionally, it is less accessible for older adults who may have fewer years of service before retirement due to the length of the program with limited time in active supervised ministry.

This is a gap in the United Church's commitment to theological education and social justice.

Therefore, we believe that we are being called to examine this issue with the purpose of determining the need and viability of an additional pathway through the diaconal program.

This may look similar to the different pathways of ordained education (3-year MDiv vs. AST Summer Distance Program), or may take a new unforeseen direction. 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, ages, 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:

<https://www.ducc.ca/diaconal-education/centre-for-christian-studies/>

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

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 provide for the General Council to work in partnership with CCS to develop alternate/additional pathways for meeting the requirements of the diaconal program.

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