

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2014



## THE ECUMENICAL CONTEXT IN CANADA

Canadian religious experience is influenced, first of all, by the sheer size of our country. Stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the United States to the North Pole, Canada has ten provinces and three territories, surrounded by three oceans. A confederation of former British colonies, it is a strong proponent of international engagement and cooperation.

Known for its natural splendour, with land rich in agriculture and natural resources, Canada is also a land of diverse peoples: First Nations, Inuit and Métis, and many people who came to settle here from around the world. Although French and English are the two official languages, many Canadians also celebrate the cultural and linguistic heritages of their ancestral homelands. French explorer Jacques Cartier was the first European to hear the indigenous people use the word “Canada,” meaning “village.” Most of the first settlers from France were Catholic, but there were also Protestants, mainly Huguenot merchants. Early collaboration between Protestants and such groups as the Jesuits gave way to discrimination, and eventually only Catholics were officially admitted as settlers to New France. In the mid-18th century, New France was ceded to Great Britain, and although the mainly Catholic French-Canadian families became subjects of the Anglican king of England, religious, linguistic, educational and cultural freedoms were granted by the Crown. Until the 1950s, most of the social institutions in the

French-speaking communities were overseen by Catholic bishops. English, Scottish and Irish settlers began arriving at the end of the 18th century; they were joined in the 19th and 20th centuries by large numbers of Caribbean, Latin American, African, Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian peoples coming to Canada as immigrants and refugees, including significant numbers of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christians. Today, Canadian Christians worship in hundreds of languages and dialects and preserve distinctive elements of their cultures within a rich religious mosaic. Members of other religions have also settled in Canada, including Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists and Baha’i. Canadian cities rank among the most multicultural and multi-religious in the world.

Even so, there have been significant issues facing the Canadian churches, particularly relationships with their First Nations peoples. For over 150 years, some Canadian Christian denominations worked with the federal government to operate residential schools for Aboriginal children, who were often taken against the will of their parents. These schools, whose goals were both education and assimilation, sought to eradicate indigenous languages and culture and were often sites of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. The largest churches in Canada – Roman Catholic, United Church of Canada, Anglican and Presbyterian – have recently apologized in a variety of ways and now work closely with Aboriginal people in the search for

justice, healing, truth and reconciliation.

From the earliest frontier years, Canadian churches have developed an instinct for cooperation. As early as the 1880s, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalist churches worked together doing mission in western Canada. This led to union churches, which formed part of the impetus for the founding of The United Church of Canada in 1925, the world’s first modern ecumenical church union. Today, cooperation in ministry among Protestants and Catholics takes many other forms. Spiritual care is shared through ecumenical chaplaincies in prisons, hospitals, universities and the military; most formal theological education across the country occurs in ecumenical schools or consortia; and Ecumenical Shared Ministries have developed, in which two or more denominations share buildings, clergy or programs and engage in weekly common worship.

Twenty-five denominations have come together in The Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), one of the broadest and most inclusive church councils in the world, encompassing Anglican, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. Founded in 1944, the current denominational membership of the CCC represents 85 percent of Christians in Canada. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops is a full member of the CCC, as are six Evangelical denominations. In addition to their CCC affiliation, many Canadian churches are engaged in bilateral and multilateral relationships at both

national and local levels. Although the most significant organic union was the formation of The United Church of Canada in 1925, many other forms of fellowship and communion have developed, including the Anglican-Lutheran Waterloo Declaration on full communion in 2001.

One of the many innovative aspects of Canadian ecumenism has been the formation of more than fifty interchurch coalitions for social justice.

Project Ploughshares, the Women's Interchurch Council of Canada, KAIROS (Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives), the Canadian Churches' Forum on Global Ministries and others have assisted the churches and government in research and engagement with complex social issues. The Canadian Centre for Ecumenism, founded in Montréal in 1963, offers national resources such as *Ecumenism* magazine, published in French and English and sent to subscribers in forty countries.

The calling of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s positively impacted the growth of ecumenism in Canada, and in 1963, the World Council of Churches chose to hold the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montréal. This gathering of over 450 theologians from many different denominations and countries, warmly welcomed by a mainly Roman Catholic population, constituted a major ecumenical happening. At Expo 67, the World's Fair held in Montréal, Canada's main churches and the Vatican came together in one common "Christian Pavilion," the first time an ecumenical pavilion had been erected at a World's Fair.

Other ecumenical groups emerged after Vatican II and in the decades that followed: of particular note are the Atlantic Ecumenical Council (1966), the Quebec Ecumenical Network (1982) and the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism (1984).

Across the country, local ecumenism is promoted by ministerial groups and councils of churches in rural and urban communities, and ecumenical initiatives flourish: shared celebrations of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, World Day of Prayer, and activities for peace and social justice. A highlight of recent ecumenical life has been the growing involvement of Evangelical churches and pastors in ecumenical worship and dialogue, with opportunities for new partnerships.

In spite of much ecumenical cooperation, there are still divisions among Christians in Canada, as the Christian community is divided over the role of women in both church and society and over such ethical issues as abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage. But even though we continue to be divided by doctrine, polity and practice, our pilgrimage toward unity continues under God's guidance.

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<sup>1</sup>First Nations is a term used in Canada to acknowledge the presence of the indigenous peoples before the arrival of Europeans. The indigenous people in the Arctic call themselves Inuit. Métis is a term used to refer to people of both indigenous and French ancestry.