

## ***Differing concepts, similar pastoral challenges animate Roman Catholic/United Church dialogue in Canada***

The energetic participation of six new members gave a fresh-start quality to the most recent meeting of the **Roman Catholic/United Church of Canada dialogue**, gathering in Toronto from **November 5 to 7, 2007**.

The dialogue is continuing its focus on marriage—a topic on which the two churches appeared before Supreme Court of Canada in May 2004 with opposite recommendations on the issue before the Court, that of changing the legal definition of (civil) marriage to include same-sex unions.

With over half the participants new or almost new to the dialogue, a generous stretch of time was allotted to sharing life-histories and personal experiences, especially of marriage and family. Later in the meeting, the group decided that every participant would begin the next meeting (April 2008) with a personal reflection on all the presentations offered in the three years of the dialogue's focus on marriage. Such a communal review will, it is hoped, begin to make clear the outlines of what the dialogue will choose to say about marriage, within the next year or two, to the members of both churches.

The major theological presentation at the November meeting was by Dr. Michael Attridge of the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto. As a way of opening up contemporary Roman Catholic thought on marriage, Dr. Attridge piloted the group through the text of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS). Solemnly promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, GS opens with a first section on human dignity and on the place of the church in God's plan for transforming the world in Christ. Part Two of GS concentrates on a few "particularly urgent needs of the present age", and it begins with marriage and family in the modern world.

Dr. Attridge began by presenting Vatican II in its historical context. He showed how GS sees marriage contributing crucially to four levels of human fulfillment: personal, social, cosmological and eschatological. There was lively discussion of some traditional convictions which are implicit in the GS text—or perhaps only read into the text out of habit. For example, what about natural law as the background of GS? What about the complementarity of man and woman—an idea vigorously rejected by 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminism, but very influential in Christian traditions? What definition of family is assumed or given in GS? United Church participants pointed out that at least since the early 1980s, their church statements have worked from a new definition of family, not the traditional one. What about children in the marriage covenant? In United Church teaching and pastoral practice, the decision to have children is separable from the decision to marry. Children are not referred to in the liturgy of marriage unless the couple wants such a reference. Although GS moves away from older Catholic terminology which spoke of the birth and nurturing of children as the "primary end" of marriage, Catholic teaching preserves the intuition that conjugal love and the acceptance of children profoundly belong together, not merely as a personal option but in the human vocation as it comes from God.

While several conceptual differences between the visions of marriage in the two churches were discussed, it was noted that pastoral work on the ground is not as different as are the theological concepts. Younger Canadians have all grown up in a culture which prizes individual liberty, strict gender equality, and a widespread sense

that traditions are fragile and intellectually unreliable. Mentoring members of such a culture into a life of permanent covenant love is delicate work for pastors and parents in any church.

Dr. Attridge encouraged the group to look for common ground on marriage in the *theological anthropology* of each church, before dealing with their sacramental or moral theology. Discussion of that point resulted in the offer of two United Church members—Dr. Gail Allan and Rev. Dr. Richard Bott—to begin the spring meeting with an exploration of the theological anthropology of the United Church as it relates to marriage. Bishop Luc Bouchard will lead a discussion on the symbolism of marriage in sacred Scripture, which will open up dimensions of how Catholic theology does hermeneutics and how it understands the application of Scripture to life.

One dialogue member raised the question of the different kinds of language in which churches must be ready to offer teaching and guidance. The affectual language of Vatican Council documents has many strengths; but it is not the language in which ordinary people think through the meaning of their actions. Our churches—and we ourselves as a dialogue, he urged—must be ready to speak also in the language of everyday experience, accessible to the majority.

The Roman Catholic/United Church dialogue includes an observer from the Anglican Church of Canada: Rev. Pierre Voyer of the Diocese of Quebec. At this meeting, Rev. Voyer had offered reflections on the contemporary Anglican theology of marriage. He began with his church's liturgical formulas, since in Anglican tradition, worship (with, of course, its roots in Scripture) is the most important source of norms for teaching. Recent Anglican synods, in spite of their major emphasis on debates about the doctrinal and ethical status of same-sex relationships, did not even discuss same sex *marriage* as such. Why? Because marriage is defined in Anglican liturgy as *a gift of God, and a means of God's grace, in which man and woman become one flesh*. But, asked one participant, Canadian civil law now insists that same-sex couples are as fully "married" as are man-woman couples. How will the Anglican Church of Canada make room for that change in the law of the land? Pierre Voyer said simply that Canadian Anglicans are deeply divided on the same-sex question, and that it is not possible to foresee where the church will go.

The dialogue also paid attention to recent events in the life of each church which might affect ecumenical work or outcomes. Catholic participants described the June 2007 meeting, in Ottawa, between Roman Catholic members of all the current dialogues and all the bishops of the Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-Faith Relations of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. United Church members explained the complex priority-setting process currently under way in the United Church of Canada. Decisions flowing from this process, together with budget decisions, have already resulted in the termination of twenty positions in the national staff. There is a major emphasis on empowering congregations to work locally in education and advocacy for justice. David Lee, a United Church member of the dialogue, pointed out that our own work should take that congregational emphasis into consideration. Offering ecumenical materials for use by congregations could be crucial in maintaining ecumenical dialogue as a priority for the United Church, he noted.

As always, the dialogue members prayed together each morning and evening, with prayer leadership alternating between the two traditions.

The next meeting of the dialogue will take place April 15—17, 2008, in Toronto.

***Present at the November 2007 meeting:***

**For the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops: Most Rev. Luc Bouchard, Diocese of Saint Paul, Alberta; Dr. Michael Attridge, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto; Mr. Julien Hammond, Archdiocese of Edmonton; Dr. Maureen McDonnell, Regis College, Toronto School of Theology. As secretary to the dialogue on behalf of the CCCB: Miss Janet Somerville, Toronto.**

**For the United Church of Canada: Rev. Dr. Richard Bott, St. Andrew's Haney United Church, Maple Ridge B.C.; Rev. Gai Burns, Gabriola Island Pastoral Charge, Gabriola B.C.; Mr. David Lee, Ottawa ON; Mr. Allan Seal (member, General Council Executive), Banff, AB. As staff for the United Church of Canada: Dr. Gail Allan, Inter-church and Inter-faith Program Coordinator.**

**For the Anglican Church of Canada (as observer): Rev. Pierre Voyer.**