



New Stories to Tell: Living Ecumenism Today

A project of the
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*Members of the Anglican–Roman Catholic Bishops’
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CHAPTER XV

Signs of unity: Sharing in “episcopate”

Bishops are often described as being visible signs of unity. As such, their ministry seems to carry with it a special concern for the ecumenical task. In Canada we are a unique expression of this, an account of which follows here:

Because both of our churches are episcopal in structure, it did not take long, following the close of Vatican II, for Anglicans and Roman Catholic bishops in Canada to

recognize that they themselves were being called into dialogue with one another as part of the growing desire for Christian unity. The first meeting of the Anglican/Roman Catholic Bishops Dialogue in Canada, which is sometimes known in short form as ARC-B, took place in Toronto in 1975. ARC-B got together again in 1977 and 1978. After that it was agreed that “a national group of bishops meet yearly to be informed of work in the theological area, to consider ways of disseminating information throughout the churches, and to consult each other on common issues.” ARC-B has continued to meet annually ever since, and stands as the most well established and longest standing such meeting of Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops anywhere in the world.

Five bishops from each church participate in these two to three-day meetings, and membership rotates every few years to ensure that there is a mix between continuing partnerships as well as new encounters. The result is an important, regular opportunity for Anglican and Catholic bishops from across the country to encounter one another as fellow pastors, to share common concerns and approaches to ministry, and to learn more about the international and national theological dialogues carried out by both the international ARCIC and the national ARC.

Some of the topics that have come up for discussion have included interchurch and interfaith marriages, approaches to lay ministry, clergy formation, aspects of First Nations spirituality, the Gospel and inculturation, and approaches to religious pluralism. The dialogue has also developed written resources that are intended as guides to the clergy and people of both churches in specific circumstances, including: *Pastoral Guidelines for Interchurch Marriages Between Anglicans and Roman Catholics* (1987), *Pastoral Guidelines for Churches in the*

Case of Clergy moving from One Communion to the Other (1991), and When Anglicans and Roman Catholics are at the Eucharist Together (2006, revised 2007). Moreover, the fact that many of our bishops have had the opportunity to meet and to share prayer over an extended period of time has facilitated the development of relationships which invite consultations and collaborations in all kinds of ways. We have much to celebrate!



In 1968 a pre-ARCIC I Preparatory Commission of Anglicans and Roman Catholics globally produced a text called the Malta Report (MR). Of its many suggestions for new steps in relationship, one of them was the following: “In every region where each communion has a hierarchy, we propose an annual joint meeting of either the whole or some considerable representation of the two hierarchies” (MR, 8). The Canadian bishops wasted little time in embracing this suggestion, and they have been at the forefront in this regard ever since.

That this possibility was being realized in some places was noted during ARCIC II in *The Church as Communion*, which noted: “Meetings of Roman Catholic and Anglican bishops are becoming customary, engendering mutual understanding and confidence. This often results in joint witness, practical action and common statements on social and moral issues.” (CC, 52). It is hard not to imagine that they had the Canadian example in mind. A few years later *The Gift of Authority* put the call out again: “Wherever possible, bishops should take the opportunity of teaching and acting together in matters of faith and morals. They should also witness together in the public sphere on issues affecting the common good. Specific practical

aspects of sharing *episcopate* will emerge from local initiatives” (GA, 59).

The very fact that in most places across Canada there are Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops (and other bishops as well) with overlapping episcopal jurisdictions is a visible reminder of the reality that our churches are divided. However, our present situation of real but incomplete communion suggests that the separation between Anglican and Roman Catholics is not and need not be total. There is a sense in which, while we may not as yet have a common episcopacy, our bishops are capable of exercising their ministries in communication and partnership to such a degree that we might be able to approach a situation where there is some genuine sharing of leadership in the ministries of mission, justice, and teaching – what is commonly called the ministry of “episcopate” (cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 23ff).

In an earlier story we heard about the 2016 commissioning of nineteen pairs of Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops to go out into the world and to be in mission together as fully as possible. Here we see a testament, demonstrated more fully than ever, to this sense of the possibility of sharing episcopate even as our churches are still divided. During the commissioning service the bishop-pairs were asked several direct questions by Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby which state this very clearly in the form of an interrogative charge: “As our Lord sent out his disciples in pairs, will you be true pilgrim companions to one another in this missionary journey?... Will you in word and deed proclaim the good news of peace for those who live under the threat of violence, the good news of mercy for those who live in want and with shame, and the

good news of justice for those who are oppressed?” (Commissioning of IARCCUM Bishops, 2016). While these words can be applied as a description of the ecumenical calling that is upon all baptized Christians, our bishops have a clear vocation to lead the way in this regard.



*The IARCCUM Bishop Pairs at Canterbury Cathedral /
Anglican Communion News Service*

In what ways do the bishops and church leaders where you are either help or hinder progress towards visible Christian unity?

Can you imagine other forms of what a “shared episcopate” might look like?