

## **Advocacy Committee Report to the September 2024 National Gathering of DUCC**

### **Introduction:**

Our work since the 2022 National Gathering has emerged out of our understanding of our mandate, informally understood as upholding diaconal ministry in The United Church of Canada. This includes being/becoming aware of issues/policies/practices affecting diaconal ministry, Diaconal Ministers, students and Candidates, educational preparation programmes for diaconal ministry - and taking action as deemed appropriate.

### **Individual Advocacy**

Normally we do not get involved in doing advocacy with/for individuals. If approached for individual support/advocacy, our practice has been to determine whether it appears that policies or protocols are being honoured. This is complicated by the fact that re-structuring of the United Church has resulted in significantly more variation in policy, practice, and protocol amongst the Regions and the Indigenous Church. This variation sometimes leads to individuals in similar circumstances being treated very differently. These differences are sometimes responsive to specific needs and realities in the Regions/Indigenous church and are experienced as helpful. In other situations the differences seem to be more arbitrary and influenced primarily by differing perceptions and opinions and, sometimes, by lack of knowledge about diaconal ministry. DUCC does not have the authority to require particular actions from the courts of the United Church. We can make sure that the people seeking advocacy are:

- aware of all relevant policies, practices, and protocols in their Region/Indigenous church that pertain to the concern(s) they are raising;
- aware of any recent decisions related to these policies etc;
- aware of Diaconal Ministers or others in their context who might be able to clarify the concerns and provide advocacy as needed.

### **Individual or Systemic?**

#### **Regionally Recognized Ministries Policy (an example)**

When we hear from/about several diaconal folks who are experiencing similar challenges, this may point to a wider/systemic issue that needs to be investigated with the help of diaconal folks in particular areas and/or in consultation with General Council staff. One example of this was that several Diaconal Ministers and Candidates were experiencing resistance to having Regionally Recognized Ministries being considered as eligible for appointment sites. Our discussion with General Council staff led to them gathering information from Executive Ministers regarding how decisions are made about Regionally Recognized Ministries. This led to an opportunity for members of the Advocacy Committee and some GC staff to have time designated on the agenda of the monthly meeting of the Pastoral Relations Circle and, subsequently, to meet with Executive Ministers, General Council staff, and members of the Advocacy Committee. In addition to learning from listening to one another, this meeting led to the production of an assessment resource by the General Council staff with input from the Advocacy Committee. This resource addressed several important issues related to Regionally Recognized Ministries and was made available across the United Church by the General Council staff.

By way of follow-up, we wrote to the Manual Committee, noting that significant sections of *The Manual* dealing with Regionally Recognized Ministry had been removed from *The Manual* when it was simplified a number of years ago, leaving no direction in some key areas. We asked about having those sections reinstated but DUCC does not have standing to make this request. A Proposal from the General Secretary, addressed some of our key concerns.

This was a good example of effective collaboration between DUCC and the GC staff whose work connects with diaconal ministry. Years of developing respectful relationships between DUCC (particularly DUCC Staff) and GC staff, contributed significantly to the effectiveness of the work on this issue. We are grateful for Eric's leadership, discernment, wisdom, and accountability.

### **Welcome Designated Lay Ministers discerning a Call to Diaconal Ministry**

Our conversation with GCO staff regarding DLMs becoming part of the Order of Ministry was a highlight of our recent advocacy work. Upon learning about this Decision of the General Council, various members of the Advocacy Committee researched the background to the decision, the decision itself, the content of the DLM program, and other interpretive material. We acknowledged the strengths of the DLM program and its graduates and the fact that the DLM program did not include diaconal formation. Concern was raised that the decision of the Council could be used as precedent in other circumstances to grant testamur for educational preparation for Diaconal Ministry that did not include diaconal formation. Open conversation with General Council staff was an essential component of our work on this complex issue.

#### **Observations/Our Approach:**

- *Groundwork of relationship building with GCO staff so that conversations are constructive and collaborative*
- *Discerning echoes of gate-keeping around ministry that has impacted diaconal and designated lay ministries*
  - *Second class*
  - *Ordained ministry seen as 'normal/proper/real' ministry - the standard to which other ministries are measured*
  - *Ignorance and disparagement of community based education streams*
- *Constructive plan for invitation into diaconal community for DLMs discerning a diaconal call*
- *Learning that the DLM discernment process was producing proportionately more diaconal discernments (compared to candidacy pathway)*
  - *Possibly because intentional conversation with a diaconal minister was required as part of the process*
  - *Possibly because current DLMs would include people who entered ministry as staff associates with focus on educational/youth/children's ministry*
- *Expression of gratitude from GCO staff for the diaconal invitational response to DLM entrance to order of ministry*
- *Discovery of another anecdotal geographic clump of diaconal discerning (big SW Ontario Committee of folks choosing diaconal ministry)*

Observed that we may need to resume initiating contact with DUCC folks on the GC

- **Decisions:**
  - Send names to GC staff of Diaconal Ministers who can be available for vocational conversations
  - Send a Welcome to DUCC – celebrating newcomers
  - Regionally and nationally
  - Invitation to national gathering
  - Develop an educational piece on DUCC
  - Host a webinar for explorers
  - Restock the DUCC pins

## **The Path Not Taken**

When issues are brought to our attention we always need to bring to our consideration the clarity of good analysis, the wisdom of thoughtful reflection, the urgency of the issues, the impact of taking action or not taking action, and the assessment of our time and energy. It has been suggested that we develop an advocacy strategy/assessment tool to use in making these decisions but the Committee has not had time to pursue this possibility. A draft of the idea is included here because we would welcome ideas about the value and the content of developing this kind of resource and because we think it might be used/adapted for use in other contexts

Such a tool would need to include things like:

- naming the issue(s)
- source of the request
- policies related to the concern
- who has jurisdiction?
- does DUCC have standing in this concern?
- What assumptions about diaconal ministry are evident?
- does this appear to be an individual or systemic issue?
- where is the (perceived) injustice?
- what is at stake? For whom?
- previous work on this issue and the outcome of that work
- is there an appropriate role for DUCC? In what ways does this concern relate to the mandate of the Advocacy Committee?
- would this matter be addressed more effectively through informal approaches or by deferring action?
- do we have the capacity (time/energy) to act?

## **Diaconal Who? What? Where?**

The Advocacy Committee has not had time to consider how advocacy might happen in situations where concern is raised about the continuing invisibility of diaconal ministry in many aspects of the life and work of the United Church. Despite decades of intentional work to educate the church about diaconal ministry, and despite the strong leadership of Diaconal Ministers/Candidates in all parts of the church, ordination continues to be regarded as normative, and diaconal ministers continue to be under-represented in leadership positions, even in areas in which diaconal ministry brings expertise. Examples include events offered by the United Church Foundation, United in Learning, programming for Licensed Lay Worship Leaders. Some church policy (example Formal Association) continues to be based on the functions of ordained ministry. Advocacy in this context is more complicated. Discussion at /direction emerging from the National Gathering would be help to determine possibilities and priorities.

## **Needing More Attention**

In order to increase the effectiveness of our work we need to strengthen our relationship with the schools providing educational preparation for diaconal ministry, (Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre and the Centre for Christian Studies) and become more familiar with their programs and areas in which advocacy might be needed.

### **Advocacy Committee Leadership Roles**

The Advocacy Committee has relied heavily on the DUCC Staff person for convening the meetings, preparing the agendas and reporting on the Advocacy Committee's work to the Coordinating Committee. The Committee is of the opinion that this ad hoc and staff dependent role is needing to be replaced by a duly appointed chair who would assume those responsibilities. The DUCC Staff person would continue to be liaison with General Council Office Staff, monitor General Council policy or practices related to DUCC's interest, and provide staff support to the Advocacy Committee.

***We ask that the request be granted and that the Nominating Committee act as quickly as possible to fill the position of Chair of the Advocacy Committee.***

### **Record Keeping**

Our record keeping has been sporadic. We hope that the addition of the position of Chair of the Advocacy Committee will help to strengthen our administrative work. e.g. minutes, resources created...

It has been an honour to do this work on behalf of DUCC and to work with General Council staff who bring to this work respect, vision, wisdom and accountability.

Advocacy Committee

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