

GETTING STARTED IN ECUMENICAL SHARED MINISTRY

TEXT TO ACCOMPANY POWERPOINT SLIDE SHOW

1. TITLE SLIDE:

Welcome to the ESM Toolkit of the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism! This slide show is a good place to begin thinking about ecumenical shared ministry. It situates ESMs in the Canadian context, defines them, and provides some examples. It then outlines the processes involved in considering and developing an ESM.

2. MATTHEW 13:44

One of the many parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is this one: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” In one sentence, this parable captures the overwhelming experience of finding something so precious we would give anything to have it. For Jesus, that is what life in God’s reign is like. Ecumenical Shared Ministry can be a taste of that: once encountered, it becomes a compelling gift for Christian life and witness.

3. A LONG HISTORY OF SHARING IN CANADA

Throughout history Christians have found ways to share ministry across denominations in all parts of the globe. This sharing tended to be unique to particular situations, only becoming more formalized in the late 20th century.

In Canada, with its vast spaces and small population, local sharing involving two or more denominations began in the late 1800s and developed in significant ways in the early 20th century among Protestant churches. Many of these “union congregations” entered the United Church of Canada when it was formed in 1925. In the mid-20th century, the development of mining and other resource communities encouraged further sharing, especially among Anglican, Lutheran, and United churches. In some places, buildings were shared with Roman Catholics. In the 1960s these sharing arrangements became formally recognized and known as “Ecumenical Shared Ministries” from coast to coast.

The photo on the left is St. Mark’s, an Anglican-United Church shared ministry, worshipping in a church building shared with Roman Catholics. It was formed in 1969 in Churchill Falls, a company town in Labrador. On the right is Naramata Community Church, formed in 1968 in Naramata, British Columbia, also as an Anglican-United Church ESM. Both these churches are still ecumenical shared ministries, over 60 years after their founding.

4. ESMs Defined

It is important to clarify what the term “ESM” means. In Canada, the Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United churches developed a common definition: “An Ecumenical Shared Ministry is people worshiping and serving God in a unified way while still maintaining their denominational identity and connections.”

The two important parts of this definition are:

- a. ESMs worship and serve God “in a unified way” – which, as we will see, varies from one ESM to another, as the ESM defines itself and its sharing relationship; and
- b. The sharing denominations maintain their original denominational identities and links. They do not become “non-denominational,” but “multi-denominational.” We will

develop this idea further during this slide show.

ESMs are two or more denominations sharing at least one of: building, worship, ministry personnel, programs, and/or outreach. The ESMs we will focus on share most or all of these aspects of local congregational life.

ESMs do all this sharing through a covenant agreement they have shaped under the oversight of their denominationally designated leaders, who, in ESM jargon, are called "judicatories." They represent the Diocese, Presbytery, Region, Synod, or other regional oversight body.

5. Participating Denominations

It is difficult to know precisely how many ESM faith communities there are in Canada, but a recent count suggests about 120. The figures on this slide represent 111 congregations. Anglicans are the most frequent partners, at 84%. This is in part because early sharing in Canada was largely Anglican and United Church churches. Then, in 2001, the Anglican Church in Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada entered into a "full communion" partnership in 2001. This covenant made it much easier for Lutherans and Anglicans to form local shared ministries.

You will also note that there are Disciples of Christ, Mennonites, Moravians, and Baptists in ESMs. Roman Catholics share church buildings and sometimes also programs. There is no rule about which denominations can partner. The right partner is the one with whom you can imagine sharing ministry in your community.

6. St. Peter's Ecumenical Church, Slave Lake AB

To help describe how ESMs form and function, we will briefly "meet" four ESMs, beginning with St. Peter's Ecumenical Church, in Slave Lake, 250 kms north of Edmonton. Slave Lake was a young community in the mid-1970s. In 1976 the Lutherans began worshiping with the United and Anglican parishioners in the elementary school. In 1981 the Anglicans built a church, and the congregation elected a "Tri-Church Board." Eventually they felt truly integrated, three denominations in one congregation.

In 2011 fire devastated Slave Lake on Pentecost Sunday, just after an inspiring three-denomination confirmation service. Many parishioners lost their homes, but the flames spared the congregation's new church, still under construction. They began worshiping in their new building in 2012 – their first church purpose-built for the shared ministry.

The St. Peter's Board makes equal space for Anglican, Lutheran, United Church, and also "Other" denominational representatives, to include the many parishioners who choose the shared ministry because its ecumenism makes it welcoming to all. The congregation follows a rotating model of worship. You will learn more about worship models in the "Going Deeper" PowerPoint presentation.

7. Broadway Disciples United, Winnipeg

Many ESMs are in rural communities and towns, but you can also find them in large cities. Broadway Disciples United Church is located in the heart of Winnipeg. In the late 1990s St. Stephen's Broadway United Church decided to close and sell its building. However, a Disciples of Christ congregation, mostly Filipino-Canadian, who had outgrown their small church, asked if

instead they'd like to share their building and ministry. Another small Filipino United Church congregation joined the discussions. They planned to "go slow," but a wonderful Palm Sunday service shared by the three congregations was so powerful they realized they wanted to be together and stay together, and in 1997 they covenanted as a shared ministry.

Broadway Disciples United members blend not only their United Church and Disciples of Christ traditions, but also their Filipino and Anglo-Canadian cultures and experiences. Sharing brought life to a dying congregation, and visibility and opportunity to another.

8. Shell Lake, Saskatchewan – Perfect Pitch

At Shell Lake, a resort town in Saskatchewan's parkland, 140 kms north of Saskatoon, the Lutheran and United Churches, along with some Anglicans, had long cooperated in special events. They began to worship together, rotating every six months between the Lutheran and United churches – using the United Church in the winter because it had better insulation. Then they decided to join their two small church buildings together. "Miraculously," according to the congregants, the pitch of their roofs fit almost perfectly.

In 2000 they formally covenanted as a Lutheran-United Church ministry, "Partners in Worship." They worship with a "blended liturgy." Again, this is explained more fully in the "Going Deeper" presentation.

9. Knox United and Christ Anglican, Fernie BC

The United and Anglican church members in Fernie, a mountain town in southeast British Columbia, love their respective congregations and church buildings but did not have the funds for a clergy salary. Shared ministry offered a solution, and they began sharing the ministry leadership of the Rev. Andrea Brennan in Fall, 2019. Andrea led worship in each congregation. They planned to share worship "someday." However, just months later, the COVID pandemic hastened the sharing – initially online. They now worship together weekly; alternating buildings and Anglican/United Church rites. They have learned that sharing has not threatened their faith and worship, but rather enhanced it.

10. Why Do they Try It?

Why do faith communities seek out ecumenical shared ministry? You've gotten some ideas from the previous vignettes. A survey several years ago asked that question of ESM practitioners, both lay and ordered. These next two slides show the top four reasons.

It is not surprising that all the respondents named practical and financial necessities, is it? However, notice that almost as important was the desire to provide a more unified witness in the community. As the people of Slave Lake reported, Christians of many "stripes" feel at home in an ESM because the people are already denominationally diverse.

11. More Factors in Shared Ministry Formation

Along with witnessing to the community, people in shared ministries speak of the desire to know one another better. Many folks say that they are with their neighbours everywhere *except* church. It just makes sense to join them in their faith lives, too. And the advantage of sharing programs is familiar to many churches.

12. Why Try? Theology in Practice

There is lots to discuss theologically around ecumenical shared ministry. You can find some of that in the resources of this Toolkit. These two quotations provide interesting and succinct views. The first is from an interview with the Rev. Clare Holmes, who served ESMs on Vancouver Island in the 1970s. The second is from an ecumenical "convergence" text that seeks to describe the church: *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, from 2013.

13. How Do We Get Started? – Title Slide**14. First Steps**

As you read through these "first steps," you will see that the entry point is an inventory of needs and resources. You might name a small group of representatives to begin the discussions. It is OK if the first issues on the agenda are practical ones like buildings and clergy salaries. What can help you be better equipped to share the Good News in your community? Trying things out is an excellent way to begin – worshiping together occasionally, building on the events you may already share (such as church suppers or community outreach). And don't be afraid to invite others into the conversation.

15. Then What?

Sometimes the church officials, the "judicatories," are involved at the outset. They might even propose the sharing option. If not, it is important to inform them as soon as you realize you want to pursue the possibility of ESM in your faith community. They should be able to tell you some of the parameters of sharing and should help you navigate the logistics.

16. Get to Know the Handbook

The ESM Handbook, available as a resource with this PowerPoint, walks you through the processes for ESMs in the Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United churches, but can be useful even if the sharing is other than those four denominations. Everyone on the "steering group" should have a copy.

17. Work out a Shared Ministry Agreement/Covenant

Eventually, you will be ready to hammer out an agreement or covenant, to be ratified according to the polity of your own denomination and that of the partner denomination(s). This list fills just one slide but may represent many hours of deliberation. Like a marriage "pre-nup" its purpose is to be sure that all partners understand what they are getting into. And do remember you don't have to share everything from the outset. Start with what is possible and useful.

18. Helping Each Other on the Journey

It is easy to get anxious and overwhelmed when contemplating a shared ministry. As you read through the points on this slide, consider which ones might be most helpful and reassuring to you and your fellow parishioners. Those who practice ecumenical shared ministry do see it as a gift. That sense of being enriched is the ultimate goal of shared ministry.

19. A Treasure Hidden in a Field

Is there one near you? Blessing on the journey.