

GOING DEEPER: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

TEXT TO ACCOMPANY POWERPOINT SLIDE SHOW

1. TITLE SLIDE:

The “Getting Started” presentation introduced the history, concept, and basic practices of Ecumenical Shared Ministries, and offered suggestions for getting started in thinking about and discussing ESM in your own context. This slide show takes us deeper into the functioning of shared ministries by addressing some key topics in ecumenical shared ministry life.

2. SOME KEY TOPICS

All communities of faith have many “moving parts.” ESM have the usual issues, but with a special twist: they are working ecumenically. Prominent distinctive issues include worship, working with the judicatories, and recognizing triggers for conflict.

3. The Worshiping Life

Aiden Kavanagh, who studied the importance and theological meaning of worship life, wrote: “A liturgy of Christians is nothing less than the way a redeemed world is, so to speak, done.” When we worship, he is suggesting, we are doing more than gathering with our friends and seeking peace and understanding. We are bringing the reign of God to life. We are enacting the love and forgiveness and hope that Jesus said were marks of God’s rule. Whatever our denomination, our Christian worship is powerful and sacred. We take that reminder into our discussions of worship life.

4. Finding our Common Heritage

For many centuries churches quite deliberately developed worship patterns to distinguish themselves from other traditions and denominations. As barriers to dialogue and cooperation began to fall in the 20th century, historians began to investigate the earliest Christian worship patterns. They determined that a four-fold worship pattern emerged by the 4th century: Gathering, Hearing the Word, Giving Thanks at the Table (which may then lead to Eucharist or Communion), and words and gestures of Sending the faithful into the world.

Church traditions, including Anglican, Protestant denominations, and Roman Catholic began to shape their worship using that basic pattern. Having this common understanding of the rhythm of Christian worship can help congregations in preparing for shared worship.

5. How Do Ecumenical Congregations Worship?

Most ESMs in Canada involve shared worship – that is, the sharing denominations worship together. How do they do it? There are two different approaches: “Rotational” worship and “Blended” worship. Those who use a rotating pattern use the liturgies of each denomination in a pre-determined way. St. Peter’s in Slave Lake, for example, sets one Sunday per month as Lutheran, one as Anglican, one as United Church, and one as special or children’s service or the pastor’s choice. All the church members participate in each other’s liturgies. As you can imagine, there is a learning curve involved. It is like learning a new language, and it can be disconcerting at first. But members of ESMs will tell you that eventually, they become bilingual, or more accurately “bi-liturgical.” And like those who understand more than one language, they come to see their worship experience as enhanced and sometimes transformed.

Those who use "Blended" worship have usually been together for some time in shared ministry. They have experienced the common ground, and they want to express their worship life with a liturgy that represents their togetherness. This involves receiving judicatory permission if there is an Anglican partner, and it entails the hard work of creating a liturgy that is true to the worshiping traditions and the shared faith of the people. Ann Salmon, a Lutheran pastor who ministered in two Anglican-Lutheran shared ministries, describes the patient effort required to create a blended liturgy, and then says, "The result is a new and very powerful way to speak and to live God's love in the world."

Meanwhile, some ESMs use a combination of both rotational and blended worship.

6. Preparing to Worship Together

Whichever worship pattern an ESM decides to follow, it is crucial that the church members understand what is important to those of the other denomination(s) in worship life. Putting people into their own denominational groups, invite each group to determine the following:

- **WHO decides the shape/content of worship?**
For Anglicans, the approval of the liturgy is determined by the bishop. In Lutheran, United, and Presbyterian churches and others, there is usually a local group, including the pastor, who makes the decision. Sometimes the pastor has a "veto." What happens in your context?
- **What elements MUST be in all worship services?**
Can you agree what, in your denomination, is essential to worship? In this exercise people name things like scripture, prayer, music, a sermon or message, a creed.
- **What must be present sometimes or regularly, but not necessarily every service?**
People sometimes name confession, communion, anointing prayer, coffee hour
- **What do you love most about your church's worship life?**
- **What are the "sticking points" in your church's worship?**
Where is there disagreement *within* your denomination about an element of worship? It helps others to know what might cause internal conflict.
- **What pattern (rotating/blended) do you prefer?**
Which worship pattern best suits your denominational worshiping style?

These discussions can be enlightening and helpful both in planning for worship, but also for getting to know one another better as a faith community.

7. Special Liturgies

Most churches have special celebrations or services that are specific to their own denomination. Perhaps the most challenging for ESMs is "Confirmation" Sunday. Despite decades of complaints from young people who have grown up in a shared ministry and want to have Christian "dual (or more) citizenship," the churches in Canada have not developed a way to recognize that membership choice.

That could be painful, but long-standing ESMs have chosen instead to make it ecumenically joyful. The pastor confirms people in Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United churches, but the bishop confirms in the Anglican church. Confirmation Sunday can be multi-denominational, while acknowledging the specific churches into which the candidates are being confirmed. When

it comes to these special liturgies, as one minister who served in ESMs observed: "“We do not do these things in complete unity, but we do them in solidarity.”"

8. Judicatory Challenges

Over the decades there have been several ESM Conferences, some regional, and some national. Invariably, these conferences include serious talk, but also gentle teasing, about the challenges for local churches in working with judicatories, *and* for judicatories in working with local churches. This slide will address a little of both:

- Sometimes the biggest hurdle is the **unevenness of denominational support**. Even though the Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Churches in Canada cooperate in the support of ecumenical shared ministries. Ideally, then, those denominations' judicatories would be uniformly encouraging of ESMs. However, indifferent or hostile judicatories can be found in every denomination. The power judicatories wield can make the process of forming and sustaining an ESM either smooth or difficult.

Sometimes, the judicatories are supportive but more cautious than the local churches would like them to be. Judicatories say that they are trying to make sure people don't rush into a shared situation unprepared.

A structural challenge in the ESM process is that judicatories are entrusted with upholding the denomination's values and principles. They serve as ambassadors for the denomination and can be more focused on denominational goals than ecumenical imperatives. Judicatories need to help one another remain open to the gospel call to oneness in Christ, and what that might mean in local ministry. Those in local churches working towards or within ESMs need to help each other be both firm and patient as they pursue the ministry of sharing.

- **Mutual Recognition of Ministries** means that denominations recognize the fullness of ministry of clergy within each other's denomination. This recognition of the main ESM partners is explicit or implied for Lutherans, United churches, Presbyterians, and Disciples of Christ, and possibly other churches. The Anglican Church of Canada recognizes Lutheran ministries through the full communion agreement.

The challenge comes when Anglicans need to work with clergy of any of the other usual Protestant partners. Because United Church and Presbyterian clergy are not episcopally ordained – that is – by a bishop, the Anglican church does not practice full mutual recognition of these clergy. **They can still serve in ESMs**, but they are usually not "licenced for the sacraments," meaning they cannot celebrate the Eucharist **using the Anglican liturgy**. United Church clergy serve in many Anglican-United Church ESMs, but if they celebrate Communion, it must be with a United Church rite. The Anglicans *will still have participated fully in a genuine Eucharist*, just not through their own liturgy.

This reality can be painful, and the two denominations are struggling to solve it. There is an article in the resources section of this website page that describes the latest efforts (2020). Meanwhile, ESMs have handled this by having an occasional visit from an Anglican priest who can administer the Eucharist using an Anglican rite.

- **Geographical boundaries** frequently differ for any two or more denominations. Parishes or communities of faith with more than one congregation may find themselves straddling these boundaries. This problem is not insurmountable, but it requires thoughtful consideration by the judicatories to work it out.
- The churches are full of **overworked people**. In shrinking Canadian churches judicatories find themselves with ever expanding regions and roles and can be slow to respond even if they are supportive of the ESM project. Faith communities have to find the right balance between patience and persistence. Keep the hopefulness of the ESM goal alive: a shared life that will enrich all partners.

9. Some Conflict Triggers

Conflict can be triggered in ecumenical shared ministry in the same ways it is in non-shared ministries. You are probably not surprised to see that imbalances of wealth and power, and persons who see themselves as the custodians or gatekeepers of parish life can disrupt and even upend the desire to work ecumenically. If one partner has most of the resources, the other one may feel (or be) beholden to the vision of the wealthier party. Gatekeepers can be threatened by a new structure that might sideline their power and authority.

ESMs are also vulnerable to the "better offer" – often coming from within the denomination, or even the congregation: a bequest, or a judicatory suggesting a same-denomination partnership – that can derail an ecumenical ministry in formation, or even after formation. They can also find their members experiencing cold feet, worried that something precious will be lost in the coming-together. Maybe it's about moving to another church building; maybe it's about who has the keys to the church kitchen. Again, that balance of patience and persistence has gotten many nascent ESMs through such growing pains.

Perhaps the best advice is to expect conflict, to see it as a way to flush out concerns and flesh out possibilities. But that takes courage and leadership. So, it's also good to pray for both!

10. Grace, Discipleship, and Daring to Share

Ecumenical shared ministry may begin with needs and opportunities, but it survives through the faith and practices that bring Christians together in the first place. In ESMs, every task involves an "other" – a person not of our original group, someone who may have odd ideas and practice their faith in strange ways. Jesus called this "other" our neighbour, and then he told us to love them. Ecumenical shared ministry, then, means choosing the "other" over the urge compete with or ignore one another, or to assume our superiority over them.

That is hard to do. That's why we depend on God's grace to uphold, forgive, and guide us. And yet, "grace" itself is a dare, isn't it? God in Jesus dares to love the world without reserve. We might see that sharing the journey ecumenically is a way to accept the dare, to risk all we have for the sake of the Gospel. Can you picture yourself, can you see your community, daring to share the ecumenical life?