“One in Hope and Doctrine, One in Charity”: Ecumenism in the Context of Social Justice and Social Outreach Ministry

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“One in hope and doctrine, one in charity” is a line from the well-known Christian hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers.” This line links unity in belief with unity in action, and this hymn has often been sung to express a desire for ecumenism. Ecumenism describes worldwide co-operation among all Christians, despite doctrinal or denominational differences, as well as the movements and initiatives which support it. Michael Kinnamon, an American theologian and General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, USA, defines the ecumenical task, as “to address divisions of human origin in order that the unity God has given may be visible to the world.” In particular, charity and social ministry have historically been the issues around which ecumenical cooperation has been most easily possible, as these areas often provoke more agreement and less controversy among Christians than the finer points of doctrinal difference. Yet Christians’ approaches to outreach and charity are often deeply tied to these trickier issues of doctrine, as “social ministry” relates to beliefs being lived out.

In the mid to late twentieth century, numerous ecumenical movements shaped Christianity at national and international levels. Yet the relation of these large-scale movements to local ecumenism remains somewhat ambiguous. Social justice and outreach serve as rallying points for both denominations and congregations at neighbourhood levels, but the intricacies of doctrinal differences continue to affect approaches and understandings of this work. I will explore the relationship of national and local ecumenism in the Canadian context, by focusing specifically on local ecumenism in the inner-city community of St. James Town, located in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The churches in this community have
joined together to support a number of initiatives and have created an action-driven, though officially informal, coalition. This coalition has made work possible that the congregations could not accomplish alone, yet theological differences between the churches (and connected individuals) influence this work. Theology, doctrine, and belief are central to social ministry, informing what is done and how it is approached, and therefore must be addressed, particularly in ecumenical contexts where variation might be especially great. In this paper, ecumenical initiatives on the local, national, and international levels will be considered, as well as the relation between these phenomena. This is followed by a profile of a local instance of ecumenical cooperation taking place in the community of St. James Town in Toronto, Canada. The variety of “ecumenisms” taking place in this community will be addressed, highlighting both their benefits and potentially problematic aspects. While it is important to name the opportunities offered by ecumenical cooperation, particularly with respect best serving a community with many needs, ecumenism should not be seen as solely positive and a nuanced analysis is necessary to recognize the challenges and drawbacks which also exist.

Connected Histories: Large-Scale Ecumenical Movements and Grassroots Initiatives

Although national churches and ecumenical histories often imagine denominational identity to be fixed, constant, and exclusive, it is useful to trace this somewhat-“imagined” or simplified history to set the context for the local ecumenical activity I will consider later. The histories of the involvement of Canadian churches in social issues and ecumenism at the national level are clearly interrelated. John R. Williams offers a useful history of Canadian churches’ involvement in social justice and traces the movement to the idealism and economic prosperity of the late-1960s Trudeau era. Churches were some of the many
institutions which transformed their work to address societal injustice and this common aim created space for ecumenical co-operation. This ecumenism was further aided by the Catholic Church emerging from the Second Vatican Council with the recognition of its place in a multi-denominational and multi-faith world and the commitment to a faith which engaged with the larger social order. Ecumenism and social justice in both Protestant and Catholic churches was also encouraged by contact with progressive/liberation Christian movements in the Third World. Prior to these mid-century developments, an important achievement in intra-Protestant ecumenism was the creation of the United Church of Canada, through the union of Methodist, Congregationalist, and about 70% of Canadian Presbyterians in 1925. A number of Canadian national church denominations created internal structures to address issues of social concern and, later, a number of these began to co-operate, as inter-church coalitions were created. The denominations also share many similarities structurally and regionally (most denominations having offices in Toronto), which contributed to the creation of a number of co-operative ventures.

On a local level, a similar recognition of social needs, quite like what occurred in the national denominational organizations in the 1960s, also occurs on a smaller scale, particularly in urban high-needs areas where churches are generally acutely aware of the needs at hand. Similar in many ways to national denominational realizations of commonality, the programmes offered by local churches to alleviate social hardship may also share much similarity and lend well to co-operation. Reginald Bibby’s research on church demographics in contemporary Canada supports the notion that addressing poverty is generally accepted as a role of the church by church members, although it is usually seen as less important than internally-directed programming such as worship, Bible study, and Christian education for youth. It should be noted, however, that there is some
disconnectedness between churches at the national and local levels about social involvement, as when surveyed, Bibby found that affiliates of the United Church of Canada did not show significantly greater concern about social issues, despite the national denomination’s strong emphasis on such issues. In fact, in this instance, Bibby suggests that the “apparent discrepancy between the executive and lay levels may help to account for some of the charges of estrangement between ‘Toronto’ and ‘the grassroots.’”

It is important, however, to consider that there might be greater social concern in churches in high-needs communities where injustice is more obviously visible and may even be a personal issue for some congregation members. A particular high-needs community which illuminates this well is the community of St. James Town in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, which will serve as the focus for the rest of this paper. The situation in this community supports the claim, like the findings of Williams and Bibby, that local ecumenical activity does not merely follow from denominational and national work. In fact, at best this national work is poorly understood at the local levels. Ecumenism may emerge on the local level, as it does nationally, out of an awareness of common commitment to issues of social justice and human needs. Such local ecumenism is best understood as a potpourri of relationships emerging from grassroots catalysts to meet needs specific to the community.

“Ecumenisms” in St. James Town: Challenging Binaries

St. James Town is known for being Canada’s most densely populated neighbourhood and it is characterized by 18 high-rise apartment buildings just east of the downtown area. Historically an upper-middle class Victorian neighbourhood, the community was dramatically redesigned in the 1960s when virtually all of the homes were destroyed as the apartments were erected. Though intended to attract young urban professionals, the
apartments now house many new immigrants to Canada as well as individuals with mental health issues. The community is known for being: extremely transient, with over 50% turnover every 5 years; high needs, due to low income levels, mental health issues, lack of social services in the community, and lack of knowledge of English or French; and extremely multicultural, with over 83 cultures represented at Rose Avenue Public School, the local elementary school.

Religious life in St. James Town is also quite diverse, although the only communities with permanent and dedicated meeting places in the small community are Christian (Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic, and Mennonite/Salvation Army denominations). At the heart of one of the most religiously diverse cities in the world, St. James Town is emblematic of the religious diversity in Toronto reported by Statistics Canada. Its 2001 census identifies that the largest non-Christian religious populations in Toronto are Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, and Sikh, in that order, with the first three groups numbering over 100,000. As much of this diversity is fuelled by immigration, St. James Town, being the first home for many new immigrants, would likely have even greater populations of religious minorities as well as diverse Christian denominations from around the world.

Ecumenism in St. James Town takes a number of forms, although mainly through inter-church (which often means inter-denominational as well) coalitions and co-operation, and ecumenically-sponsored churches and ministries. Ecumenism also exists on a more personal level, as some individuals attend multiple churches and others participate in national ecumenical initiatives, such as KAIROS. There is also a more structured ecumenical network or coalition in the neighbourhood, generally referred to as the St. James Town Ecumenical Coalition, which is well-known and supported by the churches in the community. Membership is comprised of individuals (both lay and clergy) from Our Lady
of Lourdes Catholic Church, St. Simon the Apostle Anglican Church, the 614 Ministry (a joint Salvation Army and Mennonite Brethren outreach organization), and Rosedale Presbyterian Church (located in the wealthy community of Rosedale, just minutes north of St. James Town). It is notable that, like national coalitions, this local coalition emerged out of churches realizing the similarities in their outreach work and began as an issue-based body, forming an after-school programme for children in the neighbourhood. The coalition has widened its scope, however, as it is beginning to address more issues and is reflecting on how exactly it envisions its role (such as whether it needs to “formalize” itself). It is notable that the coalition has turned to local congregations inside and outside of the community for financial support, as opposed to denominational funding sources, perhaps due to the bureaucracy involved, as suggested by Robert Wuthnow.\textsuperscript{11}

In the St. James Town coalition, it is clear that each of the congregations brings particular assets that allow work to be accomplished collectively. St. Simon the Apostle Anglican Church is an aging and shrinking congregation, but has a great deal of space in its building (allowing it to host most of the coalition’s initiatives). The 614 Ministry also has a fairly small congregation and ample staff (two full-time pastors and a youth pastor), although it is already engaged in extensive outreach work and many of the parishioners/individuals connected to its work have fairly high-needs, drawing on staff time. At the same time, the ministry was created for the sole purpose of outreach and is connected to other 614 Ministries, so it offers much expertise in outreach and social ministry. Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church is a large and active congregation (due to an influx of Catholic immigrants to the area), which allows it to contribute many volunteers to joint events. Finally, Rosedale Presbyterian Church offers significant financial assistance to the activities of the coalition. Located in the wealthy neighbourhood of Rosedale, just north of St. James Town, it is able
to finance many of the projects of the initiative. The congregation has a great desire to participate in social ministry, but their initiatives in the Rosedale neighbourhood generally do not require significant funding assistance (as most individuals can pay to attend events). The coalition serves as a helpful bridge, bringing individuals from this congregation directly into the work of St. James Town, serving as a “familiar face” when appealing for funds from the congregation and ensuring that the stories of the work done in St. James Town are brought back to Rosedale. The needs and assets of each of these four congregations are quite well suited to those of the others, causing ecumenical co-operation to be, in many cases, quite essential to the physical ability of the congregations to provide particular services.

Feminist views, which challenge familiar binaries of social identity are also important to understanding ecumenical work in St. James Town. Community members do not belong to any one denomination, congregation or social group exclusively, and these divisions themselves are not themselves internally homogenous and stagnant over time. For example, some individuals participate fully in multiple congregations and cannot be assigned a single denominational or congregational identity. Others, such as many of the participants in the 614 St. James Town Ministry, do not have a Mennonite or Salvation Army background but participate in this new congregation, coming from varied denominational and religious backgrounds. Ecumenism, therefore, exists in a variety of ways in St. James Town and identities can be multiple and change over time and according to circumstances.

**Undercurrents of Diversity: Doctrine and Ethos Complicate Convenient Co-operation**

Ecumenism can also become problematic, as differences do exist in denominational and congregational approaches to, and awareness about, social justice issues. A foundational
principle in ecumenism is found in the *Lund Statement* (adopted at the 1952 meeting of the World Council of Churches at Lund University in Sweden), which describes the ecumenical challenge for churches to “‘act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.’”¹⁴ This principle is interesting, as it focuses on unification in action and acknowledges the fact that a diversity of beliefs might exist. Paul Ramsey critiqued this focus on unification in action in the World Council of Churches. Rather, he believed that ecumenism should not involve taking positions on social or political issues and that it should first attempt to establish consensus on theological principles.¹⁵ While such theological commonality might also be difficult on a local level, as each individual might have a theology that is somewhat eclectic and less-defined than a denomination, dialogue on theologically-based issues is noticeably absent at the local level in St. James Town. These issues and beliefs do, however, impact one’s approach to social outreach, informing what issues will be addressed and how work will be carried out. The following examples demonstrate how divergent beliefs can be problematic for common work.

Diversity of theological underpinnings in one’s approach to social justice in ministry is evident in St. James Town’s ecumenical community. Although the ecumenical coalition works together to sponsor a number of initiatives, in personal interviews these are described quite differently by the various supporters and sponsors. For example, a Christmas dinner held for new immigrants was described, in some instances, as a chance to use this religious holiday to offer “secular elements” of Christmas (such as food and gifts for children) while others emphasized how the “secular elements” of food and gifts might draw people to the event where they would have the opportunity to learn about the religious aspects of Christmas. The dinner was themed “Christmas in Canada” – a title with quite different
interpretations for two congregations in particular, the 614 St. James Town Ministry and St. Simon the Apostle Anglican Church. During the announcements at a service of 614 St. James Town, the dinner was described as “an opportunity for us to share with newcomers to Canada the true meaning of Christmas in Canada – that is faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

When I questioned Frances Keller*, Assistant Curate at St. Simon’s, about the dinner’s theme, she responded that she saw “Christmas in Canada” as a way to make the dinner seem less Christian-centric, focusing on images of snowflakes and winter sports as opposed to religion. Meanwhile, in the ecumenical gatherings, the details of arranging the event were discussed at great length, but not the reasons behind or the meanings of this event, perhaps as they might bring up some discomfort or conflict. This seems a notable omission due to the quite divergent descriptions of the dinner’s intent provided by those of two of the participating congregations.

With respect to this divergence, Frances Keller* responded to my inquiry by explaining that in a situation where the needs of the community are so immediately evident, there is the perception of an urgency to act and to do as much as can be done. She added that time spent discussing the “big picture” is seen as taking away from this work and is probably unproductive as consensus seems unlikely. Sarah Cooper*, involved in numerous local and national ecumenical projects, also commented that “in a more intimate atmosphere, it is more difficult to challenge others, particularly on issues as central as their faith. It is often the case that individuals get caught up in a project and their relationships with each other – this is so encouraging for many who spend long hours working alone in their respective congregations. They simply do not want to lose the spirit of the newly-formed community by introducing issues that might be controversial.” As these explanations are both quite plausible in the St. James Town context, it is then also possible
that this avoidance of the central issues of why particular initiatives are being undertaken adds to the tension and possible conflict during the event, when participants might arrive with very different expectations (or choose not to come due to the source and content of the information they received). Without discussing these issues, the depth of the relationships between those in the coalition is restricted and these issues may surface during the event or at another point after something is said or done, provoking a reactionary response (rather than a collaborative strategy, which could be created beforehand).

Another issue involves the focus of this coalition (as is common in many congregations) on these immediate needs of the community. Although important, and in some cases critical, this focus does not address the root causes of poverty, which will continue if the systemic structures are not examined. Laura R. Olson describes this trend, stating that it is quite common for churches to only address the most localized and immediate symptoms caused by poverty. However, these local needs are “often political and or/economic in nature, and so the quest for social justice involves critiques of the local, national, and international structures of political and economic power.” The congregations in St. James Town demonstrate awareness and commitment to these larger issues in a variety of ways, although placing the larger issues mainly in the realm of individual action and choice. For example, St. Simon the Apostle Anglican Church employs the use of fair trade chocolate Easter eggs as a stepping stone to begin the discussion of international systems of trade, while simultaneously serving the local community by distributing these items to the local children. Although this step does not exist in all of the congregations, it demonstrates an important acknowledgement of global poverty and economic injustice. While individual congregations embark on some degree of internationally-connected work, it is notable that
the work of the ecumenical coalition itself is solely focused within the St. James Town community.

In addition to the differing understandings of the joint “Christmas in Canada” dinner and differing engagement with issues of international economic justice and fair trade among individual congregations, other “contentious” issues involving differences of belief and practice exist. One instance occurred while attending a meeting of the St. James Town ecumenical coalition when the prospect of soliciting funding from the Ontario provincial government’s Trillium Foundation (which is partially funded by gaming establishments) was discussed. Later, the topic of increasing the number of churches involved with the coalition was addressed, and two churches suggested were St. Andrew’s United Church (just west of St. James Town) and Rosedale United Church (in the Rosedale community, north of St. James Town). However, one individual suggested that the United Church of Canada’s stance against gambling might preclude these United Churches’ participation if funds from the Trillium Foundation were received, so it was decided that these churches would not be approached at this time. This example demonstrates how differing beliefs can result in lack of invitation to ecumenical community and also how denominational stances can affect local ecumenism.

Another example of contention was addressed by an individual who described how she is personally supportive of LGBT rights and marches in solidarity in Pride parades, though she would not do so with a banner displaying her church’s name. When probed, she revealed that she believed that some members of her church might be angered by such a banner as there is no congregational consensus on the issue. Further, she stated that she also worried that it might affect the positive ecumenical relationship in the community, as homosexuality is an issue that has not been addressed because she believes it is too
controversial. This individual also described her discomfort with her church’s participation in the Operation Christmas Child campaign, which sends “shoeboxes” of toys and gifts to children in developing countries. She expressed concern about the fuel used to transport the boxes, the inappropriateness of some of the gifts (such as those requiring batteries, supporting “western” notions about gender, etc.), and its organization as an opportunity for charity that does not build any long-standing connections, increase awareness about issues in developing countries, or allow for “recipients” to request particular items or forms of aid that would be most helpful to them. However, when probed, she appealed again to congenial relationships amongst members of the ecumenical coalition as the reason she does not challenge this project, as all of the churches in the coalition come together to participate. These examples call into question just how “positive” relationships in the coalition can be, if so many issues, some being of great importance to certain individuals, must be suppressed (and certain churches excluded) to keep the atmosphere “upbeat.”

Moving Forward: Diverse Beliefs, Common Action?

Social justice and outreach work are not independent of theology and values. In fact this work is highly motivated by such beliefs, and therefore diversity in these principles will certainly result in a diversity of approaches to social outreach ministry. Ecumenical activity in the area of social outreach, however, can certainly be beneficial as outside of congregational and denominational structures, real creativity and liberation can occur and work can be directed specifically to the context of the local community. Maria Power’s consideration of local ecumenism in the context of Northern Ireland from 1980 to the present, suggests that sometimes greater ecumenical progress can be made at local levels than can be achieved nationally, due to greater personal contact and recognition of shared
circumstances and commonalities.\textsuperscript{19} Real change is being achieved by the churches in St. James Town, as their work does alleviate the symptoms of poverty for the individuals their work touches. Conversely, many of the benefits of large-scale ecumenism are less sure or immediate (such as policy-changes, as even when achieved, they do not necessarily result in any change for individuals). Nonetheless, the structural change that national coalitions work to achieve serves the equally important purpose of alleviating symptoms of poverty on a much larger scale and addressing its root causes.

Larson suggests in her piece that “the very purpose of [ecumenism] is to hold together in creative tension that which is different”\textsuperscript{20} and this creative tension can surely be transformative. Such tension therefore is not necessarily problematic as it is through ecumenical activity that denominations have the opportunity to evaluate their work in comparison with bodies sharing much regional and demographic similarity, and also to challenge one another on matters of difference. However, these tensions must be discussed to ensure that they do not build and erupt, and that the co-operation is deeper than merely joint work on undisputed service projects and short-term, direct charity. While it is unlikely that individuals and churches will ever be “one in hope and doctrine,” working together in acts of charity and social justice can allow for beliefs to be creatively explored by these bodies. Addressing material needs of the immediate community is surely a starting place to begin developing the supportive relationships needed to go deeper and further in establishing the trust that is needed to transform communities and the world.

*Names changed to protect identity
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Appendix 1:
St. James Town: The Physical Evolution of the Community

St. James Town Aerial View 1962 (Photo Courtesy of the Toronto Archives)

St. James Town Aerial View 1992 (Photo Courtesy of the Toronto Archives)
Appendix 2: St. James Town Churches Today

St. Simon the Apostle Anglican Church - left, facing Bloor St. (towards the affluent Rosedale Community) and right, facing Howard St. (towards St. James Town)

Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church – left, interior, and right, exterior with St. James Town high rises in backdrop
Art displayed by the 614 Ministry in their meeting space in the sub-basement of a St. James Town high-rise
Left, graffiti-style art at the 614 Ministry and right, signs outside Trinity Lutheran Church (for Trinity Lutheran Church and the Korean Lutheran Church who share their space)

All photos taken by Sheryl Johnson, September-October 2007.
1 Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How it has been Impoverished by its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 9.


3 Williams, 1.
4 Williams, 2.
5 Williams, 2-3.
6 Williams, 3-4.
8 Bibby, 171.
9 Bibby, 172.
10 Bibby, 172.

12 Teresa Berger, theologian, notes that feminist discourse has offered alternatives to imagining denominational lines in a binary fashion. It allows for intra-church and intra-denominational variation, spectrums, and shifting identities which are similar to feminist ideas of gender. Teresa Berger, “‘Separated Brethren’ and ‘Separated Sisters’: Feminist and/as Ecumenical Visions of the Church,” *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life*, ed. David S. Cunningham (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 228.

13 Additionally, some members of this congregation are both recipients and providers of social assistance as they participate in the life of this ministry. One individual noted that his under-employment allows him to participate extensively in the community outreach aspect of the 614 Ministry, and, at the same time he has benefitted from pastoral and practical support from this congregation. This joint role of receiver/provider is quite unique to local ecumenism and is another instance of a binary complicated by examples observed in ecumenism on the local level.

16 Sarah Cooper*, Personal interview, 30 November 2007.

17 Wuthnow, 55.
18 Williams, 11.
20 Lind and Mihevc, 296.