

A Call for Christian Unity
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Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Holy Spirit, we call upon you to enter this space, to fill us with your animating and energizing presence. We are ready for the chaos, ready for the unpredictability, ready to hear and respond to your Word.

For the last three years, it has been my privilege to serve as an elected member of the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations for our denomination. I'm hesitant to admit that when I was elected, I did not know much about the ecumenical movement. I wasn't even really sure what ecumenism meant. My own personal experience with ecumenism, as I understood it, included being raised in an interreligious household, attending a Jesuit university and then a nondenominational seminary. I was largely ignorant of the work of the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and the many other agencies that seek visible signs of Christian unity for the purpose of common witness and Christian service.

Yet, there I was, called to serve our denomination in its efforts to participate in the world ecumenically. And it is no small service, despite the fact that most of us in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) aren't aware of it.

There are two primary ways of understanding the ecumenical movement, in its most basic sense. One is a movement promoting unity among Christian churches or denominations. The other is as a movement promoting worldwide unity among all religions through greater cooperation and improved understanding. In our denomination, we serve both movements of ecumenism. The Committee on Ecumenical Relations focuses on Christian Unity, and the Office on Interfaith Relations seeks an even larger, interreligious unity.

What this means concretely is laid out in a document called the "Ecumenical Vision Statement of the Presbyterian Church (USA)." It lists briefly the primary ecumenical commitments of our denomination:

- We are members of organizations such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the National Council of Churches.
- We are in a special relationship of full communion with other denominations, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ.
- We explore possibilities for living out common faith and witness with other denominations under the umbrella of Churches Uniting in Christ.
- We participate in global mission with ecumenical church partners and in national mission with regional councils, local associations, and neighboring congregations.

- We engage in dialogues with other churches and traditions in order to remove barriers of misunderstanding and establish common affirmations.¹

This ecumenical work is a mammoth responsibility, and the reality of the work is often slow, bureaucratic, sometimes hostile, always tricky. The diversity of the Christian Church is staggering, and many of our differences are carved in stone, locked in a vault, guarded around the clock. We are often protective and defensive about our practices, our histories, our theologies. We don't want anyone near them, for fear that those things we hold most dear will be dismantled or diluted. And so, ecumenical work requires enormous patience, delicate maneuvering, and lots of grace. It's no wonder that we don't know much about it, and no wonder that the numbers of people involved in ecumenical work are dwindling.

In our day-to-day lives, it's likely that we are uninformed about the ecumenical movement, and also likely that we are uninterested in adding one more complicated layer to the task of Christian life. We have enough to tend to within our own denomination, as we struggle to hold together a body of people who seem no longer interested in sharing a common identity; we have enough to tend to within our own congregation, as we struggle to be in community when a million other things demand our attention; we have enough to tend to in our own hearts, as we struggle to live out our faith in a world that seems likewise uninformed or uninterested in our pursuit.

But the task of Christian unity, embodied in the ecumenical movement, is **not optional**. And though I am still far, far away from the kind of knowledge and experience that would qualify me to be an ECUMANIAC, as my colleagues often refer to each other, I have been converted to the cause. And every day that I open the newspaper and read about the hostilities between fundamentalist, evangelical, charismatic, progressive, and liberal churches, I become more and more convinced that we are urgently called to seek out Christian unity. Every day that I turn on the news and watch the escalating violence and expanding poverty in the world, I become more and more convinced that the purpose of Christian unity is for the sake of the whole world, not just for Christians. And every Sunday when I walk into this sanctuary, and witness the diversity within these walls, I become more and more convinced that Christian unity is possible.

The chaos of the Pentecost story is a fitting entry point to any discussion of Christian unity. Having described the complicated task of ecumenism, it makes sense that the unpredictable and chaos-inducing Holy Spirit is the animating force in our discussion of unity. Though I have not had the privilege of attending an international ecumenical event, I have the vision of the gathered commissioners, religious leaders and their translators, a cacophony of voices in every conceivable language, speaking the Gospel message of reconciliation in Christ. It is probably very loud, very confusing, and a little like Penn Station at 5:30 on Fridays, or the line for the Statue of Liberty on a holiday weekend, or maybe an Upper East Side bar during March Madness.

And perhaps that is what it was like for those gathered in Jerusalem on that day, devout Jews from all over, who had come for the Jewish holiday of Pentecost which was held fifty days after Passover to celebrate the giving of the Torah by God to Moses. A cacophony of voices, not in the

¹ "Ecumenical Vision Statement, Presbyterian Church (USA)," adopted by the 212th General Assembly <http://www.pcusa.org/dear/vision.htm>

language they expected, but in their own, native tongues. Those gathered around the disciples heard the message of the Gospel in their own language. One message, a multiplicity of voices. The Holy Spirit did not come down and speak one language, which everyone understood. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and gave them the ability to speak the language of many, in order to reach out to the gathered community, so that they might hear, and in hearing, understand. One message, a multiplicity of voices. There is unity in the message, but no uniformity in its delivery.

It is doubtful that the author of the Acts of the Apostles could have foreseen the division of the Body of Christ as it has taken place in history. Yet this chaos of diversity is placed at the beginning of the book describing the early Christian community, as if there was never any doubt that Christian unity would be anything other than chaotic, confusing, disorderly, and ill-received. Those who witnessed that instance of one message, many voices, reacted with bewilderment, and some with condescension.

The message of Pentecost also came as apocalyptic foreshadowing. Peter tells the gathered crowd that the Spirit's descent is a sign of the last days, as prophesied by Joel. So not only is Christian unity loud, chaotic and ill-received, it is also an indication of the last days. And that was the reality for the early Christian community. Though the end did not come, and did not come, and has not come, our preoccupation with the end times has hardly slowed down. We can witness the prevalence of apocalyptic fervor within certain parts of the Christian community and now our popular culture—some more outlandish than others—but often drawing on stories such as this. And though we remain cautious in approaching these apocalyptic texts, there is truth in them to be confronted.

In some sense, we are always in the last days. The PC(USA), for instance, is in a mighty battle for its life and its future, and it is quite likely that the denomination as we know it will not exist much longer. Even as it is now, with recent staff cutbacks on the national level, with the harsh divisions being drawn between liberal and conservative, and much more, we are not the Church that Christ built. We are a shadow of that, a torn remnant of that blessed gathering on Pentecost, when each heard the glory of Christ's message in his/her own language, both the unity and particularity.

The universal church, the holy catholic and apostolic church that we confess in the Nicene Creed, is divided now, fragmented into distinct traditions, communions and denominations that live in various degrees of estrangement from one another. The church is in danger of losing its life, of holding too tightly to the multiplicity of voices, and not tightly enough to the message of reconciliation and hope that those earliest disciples spoke of through the Holy Spirit. Even when these divisions do not eradicate the church's unity, they obscure it, impairing common witness and weakening common mission.²

And so, it might be accurate to say that we are in the last days, and we need the Spirit to pour out upon all flesh, for our sons and daughters to prophecy, for our elders to dream dreams of Christian unification. We need to hear that message of unity within the particularities of our

² Ecumenical Vision Statement, <http://www.pcusa.org/dear/vision.htm>

different traditions, not so that we might hold on tight to what makes us different, but that we might have a greater vision of God in the diversity of our experiences.

We need Christian unity because it is what God seeks for us, because “there is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4-6). We need it because we cannot heal the world alone. We cannot feed the hungry all by ourselves; we cannot end war and heal the wounded all by ourselves. We cannot eradicate poverty and establish justice for all people all by ourselves.

What Christian unity will look like is a little harder to describe. Christian unity is not uniformity, and it is not the dismantling or diluting of our particular traditions. The Holy Spirit has taken care of that. And it is not, as Thomas Merton says, the imposition of one division on another, or the absorbing of one division by another. Neither is it blind acceptance or careless friendliness.³ There is, within the Church, much that we cannot affirm and accept. There are folks, unfortunately in growing numbers, who are attempting to use God’s Word to advance an agenda of power and exclusion, both within and outside our denomination. However, there are many Christians, who like us, are seeking a living truth, though perhaps they go about it in a way that is strange to us. Maybe they dance in church, or speak in tongues. Maybe they talk about Jesus differently, or speak more fluently about things like the Second Coming, sin, and judgment. Maybe they use a pool or lake for baptism, or flat wafers for the Lord’s Supper. Maybe they sing different hymns, have a drum kit and electric guitar in the choir loft. Maybe they are African, or Asian, or South American.

And no matter how exotic and unsettling these other traditions may seem to us, we cannot stay set apart, holing up in our little corner. We cannot become isolated, because we will become idolatrous as we worship our tradition at the cost of greater unity. It is not, after all, our Church; it is God’s Church, and we have been equipped with Christ’s message, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, to be God’s Church in the world; to share one message in a multiplicity of voices; to cry out what is true and also what is not; to be joined in Eucharistic fellowship; to share our common witness; to engage in Christian service by serving human need, breaking down barriers between people, seeking justice and peace, and upholding the integrity of creation.⁴

If this shakes you up, dislocates you, and confuses you—**great!** It means the Spirit has entered this place. It means that we are enjoying a little of what it means to be Pentecostal; to let the Spirit in, not knowing what it might do, but allowing for its unpredictability to do amazing things.

Though the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has an ecumenical vision, we do not have an ecumenical stance—a document for use on the local, regional, and national levels as a guide for our engagement in ecumenism. This September, the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations is holding an Ecumenical Consultation, with the express purpose of creating an ecumenical stance, of making as clear as possible the ecumenical commitments of the Presbyterian Church. I will be there, and I cannot wait. And though, even after all of this, I still won’t be able to call myself a full-fledged ECUMANIAC, I will be ready to make my own

³ Thomas Merton. *Essential Writings*, Christine M. Bochen, editor. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.

⁴ World Council of Churches Web site, <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/index-e.html>

stance for the unity of Christ's Church, to encourage you to do likewise, and to watch something incredible unfold.

I give thanks for the people in this church, for those of you in the pews, who come from all over, from different denominations, faiths, cultures, ethnicities, political persuasions. You do not force one another to speak in your native tongue, yet you hear one another clearly. The Spirit is among us, perhaps more quietly than that first Pentecost, perhaps more quietly than in the sanctuaries of our Pentecostal and charismatic brothers and sisters, but the Spirit is here.

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