

MODERATOR'S REFLECTION ON THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

(JAN. 18–25, 2018)

My first pastoral charge was St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Flin Flon, MB. Flin Flon had an active and diverse Ministerial Association. (I learned this week that it still does.) There were the usual mainline suspects – Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United, also the Roman Catholic and the Salvation Army – and some unexpected partners – Baptist, Mennonites of two kinds, Pentecostal, Full Gospel, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and a charismatic house church. The Ministerial played well together.

Sadly, in many communities in Canada, including Winnipeg, the body of Christ is divided among two or more Ministerial groups: the mainline and the non-mainline; the charismatic and the non-charismatic (not particularly helpful labels.)

I had the humbling privilege in December of speaking to the largest non-mainline Ministerial group in Winnipeg. In closing I asked: “Have you met the pastors/ministers/priests of the mainline and Roman Catholic churches within 5 kms of your church building? In times of prayer in your church, do you pray that God would bless the mainline and Roman Catholic churches within 5 kms of your church?”

I re-orient the questions for this context: “Have we met the pastors of the Pentecostal, evangelical, and non-denominational churches within 5 kms of your church building? In times of prayer in our church, do you pray that God would bless the Pentecostal, evangelical, and nondenominational churches within 5 kms of your church?”

In the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we are invited beyond the safe conversations we have with colleagues with whom we are comfortable. We are invited to engage with – introduce ourselves to, have coffee with, pray for – Christian sisters and brothers who are also committed to following Jesus and seeking the reign of God but who attend churches we tend to ignore, shun and even deride.

These words have been addressed primarily to ministers. Our actions as ministers are examples to the members of our congregations, if we are open to engaging with unexpected partners from the Christian community, a powerful message is sent to the people who attend the congregations we serve.

PRAYER:

Triune God, Three-in-One and One-in-Three, teach us to live unity-in-diversity, diversity-in-unity. Far too often, God of the church, we have written off people from other Christian churches as being “wrong,” “too narrow,” “wishes-washy,” “dogmatic,” “not Reformed,” and so on. For our judgmental attitudes towards people who are our sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ, we are sorry.

So easily when gathering with those who You, O God, have made our sisters and brothers in the faith we engage with people who think like us, talk like us, understand us. And we ignore those with whom conversation requires us to stretch in uncomfortable ways. We acknowledge we act like this at presbytery meetings, at General Assembly, in Ministerial gatherings, and even during the week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We confess the shallow-ness of our commitment to the unity of the body of Christ.

We thank you, O God, for the Holy Spirit who has called the church, kaleidoscopic community that we are, into being. Cause us to rejoice with sisters and brothers of other Christian churches as together we are part of the “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” May we cry out together with the whole church from every time and place, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9,10). These things we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.