

**“The gift of unity” a sermon preached at the evening service in Knox Church  
Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 30 July 2017.**

Three weeks ago representatives of the Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Methodist Churches signed an agreement ending 500 years of division about a core aspect of our faith.

For nearly a century, churches have tried to reach agreement about crucial issues to come together.

Our own church is a union of the southern and northern churches made in 1901.

The Church of Scotland is a union of previously divided churches and largely reached its present form in the early 1920s.

Across denominations, united churches formed.

In 1925, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and others joined to form the United Church of Canada.

In 1947, Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans and others formed the Church of North India and the Church of South India.

In 1957, churches from these traditions joined together to form the United Church of Christ in USA.

In 1977, Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists formed the Uniting Church in Australia.

In 1980, all the Protestant churches came together in China to form the China Christian Council, including Seventh Day Adventist and Pentecostal churches.

More recently, in South Africa, formerly mainly black and formerly mainly white churches have joined together to overcome racial divisions, and one of them is the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa.

More than that, there are dialogues underway between major Christian traditions.

I know of dialogues involving several protestant churches, the Roman Catholic church, Orthodox churches and Pentecostal and independent churches.

The participation of Pentecostal churches is important because they represent around a quarter of Christians around the world. The Pentecostal movement only started in a small church in Los Angeles in 1906. It is one of the most significant religious phenomena of our age and they are the largest churches here in Dunedin.

Such dialogues have led to agreement on matters that have long divided us.

For example, in the early 1980s, the major strands reached agreement about baptism, eucharist and ministry. Now that does not mean that everyone agreed to support the pope, or they agreed bishops were essential to being church. Among other things it enabled a person baptised in one church to be welcomed in another church without needing to be baptised again. In other words, the different churches recognised each other's baptisms, provided the baptism contained certain agreed elements.

Another example. I was involved in the situation in Fiji after 2006. We were able to take the situation in Fiji to the Roman Catholic – Methodist Dialogue to facilitate a more united voice among churches to address the military regime in Fiji.

So collaboration is very important on a whole range of levels, not just religious.

Why is unity important?

Let me quote from the constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia.

... the churches declare their readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church ... In this union these Churches commit their members to acknowledge one another in love and joy as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, to hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations, and daily to seek to obey his will.

My old minister said that such unity is not a matter of people on a mountain going round and round, calling out to each other until they find each other. Unity happens when people walk to the summit and meet on the summit who is Jesus Christ, finding each other in him, in Jesus Christ. Human attempts at unity are destined to fail.

Unity is about saying that our differences are less important than Jesus. We affirm that Jesus has the power to pull us out of all our caves, our differences, our tastes, our long traditions, our perspectives, into a deeper spiritual reality.

It is unity, not uniformity.

It is unity in diversity.

But we recognise that what constitutes us is not our similarity of views or our shared tastes or our personal likes held in common or our shared ancestry or our theological preferences or any other human categorising or arrangement.

The great theologian Jurgen Moltmann said that birds of a feather flocking together does not constitute a church, indeed is a denial of church.

Our life together and the expansiveness of our diversity needs to reveal that the only thing that holds us together is Jesus Christ.

That is unity as God gives.

When I was a student in USA, I for a while attended what had been the slave owners church and although it contained some black Americans it was still overwhelmingly white. After a while, I joined up with the church about 300 metres down the road which held some white people but which was overwhelmingly black. It had been the slave church.

Martin Marty once said that 11 am on Sunday morning was the most racially divided hour in America.

Which is a denial of the power of Jesus Christ to embrace all peoples, whose gospel emphasises how to include people who are very different from each other.

Think the stories of Samaritans, the Good Samaritan.

Think the writings of Paul and his relentless focus on the oneness of Jesus Christ.

The Uniting Church in Australia says of itself believes that Christians are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries ...

It acknowledges that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin.

The Church's call is to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole ...

So it is important for us as a church to belong to national gatherings of churches. In NZ that is the National Dialogue for Christian Unity.

We also belong to the World Council of Churches which is the most inclusive gathering of protestant churches.

We belong to the World Communion of Reformed Churches, 228 different churches from 108 nations.

In a letter John Calvin wrote to Archbishop Cranmer in April 1552 we can learn of his vision of church unity. "Amongst the greatest evils of our century must be counted the fact that the churches are so divided one from another that there is scarcely even a human relationship between us; at all events there is not the shining light of that holy fellowship of the members of Christ, of which many boast in word, but which few seek sincerely indeed. In consequence, because the members are torn apart, the body of the church lies wounded and bleeding. So far as I have it in my power, if I am thought to be of any service, I shall not be afraid to cross ten seas for this purpose, if that should be necessary."

And for ourselves, by reaching across denominational boundaries as opportunity enables, to learn of other churches, what is similar, what is different, but most of all to find spiritual affinity, reading the Bible and praying together.

It is right and good, and witnesses to Jesus Christ, that we keep seeing Christ as the centre, not us, nor our way, indeed to point away from ourselves to Christ, in what we do and who we are.

Christ is our sole ground of unity.



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