

## Christian Unity



The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians 12:12: "Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and we were all made to drink of (the) one Spirit."

In 1866, the year after the Civil War finally ended, the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church held their annual meeting in the city of Chicago. At this gathering, these American Bishops surprisingly approved a stirringly emotional appeal for Christian Unity --- what some contend was the beginning of the modern Ecumenical Movement. In the statement, the Bishops declared their "earnest desire that the Savior's prayer, 'That we all may be one,' may, in the deepest and truest sense, be speedily fulfilled." The Bishops went on to declare that "this Church is

ready in the spirit of love and humility to forego all preferences of her own," that they "did not seek to absorb other Communion, but rather, co-operating with them . . . to heal the wounds of the Body of Christ," thereafter enumerating a short, four-part list of what they considered the essential elements for the church, namely, the Old & New Testaments, the two Great Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, the Nicene Creed, and the Historic Episcopate. The Bishops concluded that "Deeply grieved by the sad divisions which affect the Christian Church in our own land, we hereby declare our desire and readiness, so soon as they shall be any authorized response to this Declaration, to enter into brotherly (sic.) conference with all or any Christian Bodies seeking the restoration of the organic unity of the Church." Sadly, no other American Church responded to this call.

Two years later, the Anglican Bishops from all over the world met at Lambeth Palace in London, and re-affirmed the American Bishops' Declaration, with some minor changes, which has forever since been known as the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, which can be found on page 876 in your Book of Common Prayer among the Historical Documents preserved there. Sadly again, no other Christian denominations took up the Anglican Church's offer.

Forty years later in 1908, Father Paul Wattson, a convert from Anglicanism and the cofounder of the Graymoor Franciscan Friars, started the so-called Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

that runs each year from the Confession of St. Peter on January 18<sup>th</sup> to the Conversion of St. Paul on January 25<sup>th</sup>. Indeed, we are today in the midst of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Two years later in 1910, major Protestant denominations and missionary societies from around the world, but predominantly from North America and Northern Europe, meet in Edinburgh, Scotland, for the so-called World Missionary Conference, which is considered by many today as the real start of the modern Ecumenical Movement. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches were not even invited to the event, but the Protestants began a series of conversations about our sad divisions that have moved the church closer and closer towards unity. In 1939, for example, the northern and southern factions of the American Methodist Church, which had split earlier in 1844 over the issue of slavery, came back together to form the United Methodist Church. Note that the American and Southern Baptists also split because of the Civil War, but still remain separated today. In 1920, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, wrote a letter "addressed 'To all the Churches of Christ, wherever they may be', urging closer co-operation among separated Christians, and suggesting a 'League of Churches', parallel to the newly founded League of Nations." In 1937, leaders from mainstream Christian churches thus resolved to establish the World Council of Churches to work for the cause of Christian unity; it today includes most

major traditions of Christianity as full members, including the Assyrian Church of the East, the Old Catholic Church, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the Anglican Communion, the Baptist World Alliance, the Mennonite Churches, the World Methodist Council, the Moravian Church, the Pentecostal Churches and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, as well as almost all jurisdictions of the Eastern Orthodox Church --- the Roman Catholic Church participates as an observer, sending delegates to official gatherings.

After the Second Vatican Council in 1960s, the Roman Catholic Church became more involved in the Ecumenical Movement, and they organized the so-called National Workshop on Christian Unity, which I attended 26 years ago as the Ecumenical Officer for the Diocese of Southern Virginia, and have attended for the last 10 years as the representative of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, joined there by a national network of Ecumenical officers not only for the Romans, but also the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and a new group of non-denominational evangelicals. Little by the little the churches are finally coming together.

In 1988, three of the largest Lutheran Churches in this country, the American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran Church in America (all who had previously been divided mostly by ethnic origin, one

predominantly German, one Swedish, and one Norwegian), came together to form the ELCA (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). Only eleven years later in 1999, the ELCA and the Episcopal Church agreed on a Con'cordat that established what is called "Full Communion" between our two denominations, where we not only recognize each other's legitimacy, but allow complete interaction --- an Episcopal priest can lead an ELCA Lutheran congregation, and vice versa, and that's happening more and more these days. A Lutheran member can join any Episcopal congregation without anything being different than any Episcopalian joining. Full Communion is when two denominations develop a relationship based on a common confessing of the Christian faith and a mutual recognition of Baptism and the sharing of the Lord's Supper. This does not mean the two denominations intend to merge; rather, in reaching agreements, denominations also respect their differences. These denominations worship together, may share a commitment to evangelism together, may witness and provide social services in the world together. But each entity agrees that even with differences, there is nothing that is church-dividing in their teachings or practices.

Meanwhile, in 2009 the ELCA and United Methodist Church established Full Communion. Indeed, the American Lutherans have established Full Communion with not only the Episcopalians and the Methodists, but also with the Presbyterians, the

Congregationalists, the Reformed Church in America and the Moravians. The days of denominational divisions are waning.

The Episcopal Church has Full Communion with not only the Lutherans, but also with the Moravians. And now the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church are considering an agreement of their own for Full Communion to be presented to our General Convention in 2026. Similarly, the worldwide Anglican Church is in Communion with the Old Catholic Church, established in 1870 by separatists after Vatican I, and with the 8 European Lutheran Churches of the Baltic, and with the Moravian Church. So, it shouldn't be surprising that the seven religious congregations in this town now work together as the Washington Council of Congregations. The divisiveness of past ages is slowly fading away.

Indeed, a couple of years ago was the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral, which started the Protestant Reformation. This was the first centennial since the beginning of the modern Ecumenical Movement, and so, the World Lutheran Federation of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church jointly announced a Declaration of Agreement on the nature of the Church, the Ministry, and the Eucharist to celebrate the event; a Declaration which the Anglican Communion and the Worldwide Methodist Church also endorsed.

So, as St. Paul in today's reading from First Corinthians reminds the Church, reminds the Body of Christ, that it does not consist of one member but of many, we must be careful that the foot does not say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' for that would not make it any less a part of the body. . . God has arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. (So remember that) The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you' (though sadly we so often do say and act just like that)! "On the contrary," St. Paul writes, "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body. . . that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

And though we are still a long way away from the re-union of all Christians under one banner of faith, we have reached a point of recognition and tolerance with each other, of declaring the other denominations as "real, but not complete." We are learning

to live with our diversity, rather than to seek out or insist upon uniformity. For none of us are ever complete, without all the others. For despite our discord and disputes as Christians, we are in the end all one body in Christ Jesus Our Lord. Let us never forget that! **Amen.**