

Christian Perspectives: Is Christian Unity possible?

By Rev. Stephanie Pellow

Christianity is suffering from a distressingly bad image these days.

The general population tends to see a faith fragmented into many denominations which tend to emphasize different aspects of their beliefs and, hence, seem to be at odds with one another.

On the other side of the coin, only recently have we begun to learn that other major faith groups in the world, which westerners saw as uniform, actually are divided within themselves in a similar way and possibly for similar reasons.

Those who do not adhere to any faith see this as a sign of weakness and use it as an excuse to avoid spiritual expression through organized religious groups.

I think it is interesting that the Christian faith ever came close to unity when we consider its beginnings. In the centuries that followed the life of Jesus, transportation was ponderous. People travelled by ship or small boats on the water, by walking or riding animals or by being pulled by animals in various sorts of carts.

Although Rome had built a remarkable system of roads, they were not roads as we know them today. Travel and communication were slow; a snail's pace compared to today. The vast majority of regular people were born, lived and died within a very small geographical area.

As Jesus' apostles took his story out from Judea, pockets of communities developed in places like Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica and eventually Rome. These are some of the groups we know of because of the letters of Paul preserved in the New Testament.

Communication between these groups was sporadic. No one was overseeing the developing communities although Paul made a good attempt by travelling between them and exchanging letters with them. It is no wonder that the different Christian communities began to develop their own ways of thinking about their faith and somewhat different worship practices.

Possibly much more variation and fragmentation would have taken place at that time were it not for the Roman Empire, which had succeeded in creating a great deal of unification within its borders. About a year before 325 CE, the Emperor Constantine had his head bishops send out invitations to all parts of the empire inviting each area to send one bishop, another clergy person and a non-clergy person to a gathering at Nicaea in Asia Minor.

Many had to travel in excess of three months to reach the council in June of 325. Although the council lasted a whole month, some arrived too late to be part of the vote on a joint statement of faith which later became known as the Nicene Creed.

This expression of faith succeeded in creating an anchor for unity. The church, spread out over a vast area, could refer back to the tenets of that creed and judge whether or not they were straying from the teaching they had received.

Unity was broken in the 11th Century when a dispute arose between the Eastern Church, based in Constantinople, and the Western Church based in Rome. It could not be resolved and both groups continued on separate from one another.

In the larger Western church, unity was challenged in the 16th century in the period we call the Reformation. Reformers like Martin Luther, Calvin, the French Huguenots and some English bishops pushed for reforms within the Church of Rome. The result was the creation of a number of Christian Churches which claimed no affiliation with Rome.

In the 21st century, there are now hundreds of church groups which have splintered from the original Reformation.

It would seem impossible to put them all back into the box, but a surprising amount of conversation over the past fifty years has centered on finding more points of unity. Roman Catholics carry on active dialogue with Lutherans and Anglicans.

Anglicans and Lutherans have been in full communion since the Waterloo Declaration of 2001. The United Church and Anglicans spent several years in dialogue as well. All of this talk goes on with the words from Jesus' prayer to the Father for his disciples foremost in the minds of Christians, "that they may be one as we are one." (John 17: 11)

It is debatable if the Christian Church will ever be in total unity again, but there is a will to walk the same path together and to show unity in the way we care for others. A statement made by Pope Francis to Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, may be the most helpful of all.

He said, "We should behave as if we were one."