



Prairie Centre for Ecumenism

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Across Difference: Giving Shape to an Ecumenical Church

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The future of Christianity is ecumenical. We are moving into and already seeing new forms of Christian community taking shape across traditional denominational identities. And for many who continue to inhabit those identities, the question of what it means to be Christian is being asked and answered in ways that do not take up the denominational categories of earlier generations.

These post-denominational realities are the result of ecumenical changes as much as changing cultural assumptions. As ecumenical friendships grow between neighbors and coworkers and within extended families - and as local parishes and congregations share more programs - the walls that once divided are coming down.

Such a reality is a blessing and a curse: with the erasure of denominational identities and, indeed, boundaries, we are also witnessing a loss of Christian memory and, with it, the unique content that gives shape to authentic Christian witness. Further, the friendly relations across denominations can sometimes cause people to move too quickly and thoughtlessly across differences that still exist and matter. Feelings are hurt and noses get out of joint.

Living in this ecumenical Church and, particularly, exercising leadership is not easy. It requires knowledge of others - their history, theology, and practice. It requires the formation of an ecumenical sensitivity, open to the welcoming call of the Spirit who is healing the wounds of Christ's body and yet aware of the places where the pain of division remains. Most of all it requires a genuine change of heart.

It is too easy to remain stuck in the ecclesial options that most forcefully present themselves: either shore up one's denominational identity by turning ever more inward and away from one's fellow Christians in the building across the street, or cut ties with all traditional identity and follow the way of fads and fancy. To find oneself converted to ecumenism - to be shaped and formed by an ecumenical spirituality - is to learn how to be at home in one's own tradition with such grace and comfort that the tradition becomes a gift to others, who are in turn welcomed as gifts themselves. To be shaped ecumenically is to learn to live across differences that enrich and, one day, will contribute to the richness of an entirely healed body of Christ.

For 30 years the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism in Saskatoon has been living in this ecumenical Church. Over those years it has called Christians together in common worship, education, and witness. Recently it has taken steps to become even more

intentional in shaping an ecumenical Church. With the launch of its new Program in Ecumenical Studies and Formation, the centre has taken the initiative of developing a three-year certificate program in ecumenical education. Our goal is to shape people to lead ecumenical ministries and participate ever more fully in them. We seek to engage Christians whose hearts and minds are open to the healing work of unity and to give them the resources they need to navigate the waters of 21st-century ecumenical life. As a result, the program is aimed at future ecumenical officers and congregational representatives; clergy and those who find themselves carrying out ministry in an ecumenical context such as chaplaincy; and especially all of those who live within ecumenical realities and wish to participate more intentionally in them.

Within this community we are committed to shaping a basic theological awareness of what it means to be the Church together, to examine with care the biblical and historical issues that both inspire and challenge the work of Christian unity, and to explore in worship and study the spiritual resources of our traditions that lead us across differences to the God who calls us to be one people. Thanks to many people across various denominations, we in Saskatoon have been living in the ecumenical Church in an explicit way for some time. As a result, we are gifted with numerous teachers and scholars who contribute to this program. We also seek to widen the conversation through partnership with the Canadian Council of Churches and other ecumenical scholars in Canada and the United States who will participate in our program each year.

We are convinced that this is the time and the place to give shape to an ecumenical Church. As our program launched last June - and will be held every summer in the last week of June - we welcomed 27 participants into our first class. What struck me the most as we all moved through our days of worship, study, and fellowship was the openness and joy we experienced in each other's company. As we prayed together, sang, and listened to God's word, we gave shape to the body of Christ in its wholeness. In that place we lived as Christ would have us live: entirely ourselves in the particularity that makes us able to be gifts to each other across difference.