

Session Four: Participant Material

The Church Universal: Unity in Diversity

Search for Christian Unity

The United Methodist Church affirms itself to be truly the church, but it also acknowledges that is not the whole church. We have things to contribute to a wider common Christian understanding of the church, and we also have things to learn: things to learn about other Christians and churches, and things to learn from them about ourselves. As we undertake to realize a new ecclesial vision for The United Methodist Church, we are committed to do work, as we have in the past, in an ecumenical context.

The search for Christian unity is misunderstood if it is taken to mean only a painstaking process of interchurch diplomacy among experts aimed at reconciling the doctrines and politics of separate denominations. Even less is it an exercise in nostalgia, trying to recover power, place, and prestige in society now long gone.

At its heart, the search for Christian unity is a search for the reality of the church itself. It is a prayerful quest to realize the unity for which Jesus prays as he says, “I ask . . . that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (John 17:20-23).

Mission and unity are inextricably connected. To ask ecumenical questions about Christian unity-in-diversity is to ask missional questions. Indeed, such questions take us to the heart of the matter in our struggle as United Methodists to discern our ecclesiological identity and witness today: How might United Methodists characterize our particular role within the “Church Universal”? What is our niche in the ecclesial ecology? What insights might our deep attention to the ecumenical discussion generate for dealing more constructively and effectively with the vexing issues surrounding “legitimate diversity,” both as they affect our own life and mission in The United Methodist Church and in our ongoing relations with other Christian communities? How might a new vision of the reality of the church help us toward a better ordering of our common life? How might it lead us into more constructive relationships with persons of other religious faiths and traditions, as well as with those who identify with none?

Visible and Invisible

A distinction between the *visible church* and the *invisible church* was common at the time of the Protestant Reformation. As conventionally understood, the visible church was an actual community, a local congregation of professing Christians or a larger body incorporating many local congregations, who hear and affirm the Word rightly preached, partake of the sacraments, and support the church’s ministry. The invisible church was understood to be the totality of persons who are actually saved, or on their way to salvation. This company is invisible in the sense that no one but God knows with certainty who is included in it. It was commonly assumed that with a few exceptions the members of the invisible church, the truly saved, were also professing Christians, members of the visible church; but that the visible church also contains (to use John Calvin’s words) “a very large mixture of hypocrites, who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance.”¹

The perspective of many Christians and of many Christian communities on this matter has shifted in more recent years to allow the possibility that persons who are not explicit members of the church may yet be, in some sense, members of the church, participants in the one *ekklesia* of God, sharers in the communion God offers.

This is not to suggest that all people are, in fact, responding to the love of God in such a way, nor does it imply that those who do so respond are therefore “really Christians” without knowing it. It does, however, imply that God’s *koinonia* may be encountered in other forms and other places.

A lesson we can learn from Wesley is that we need, on the one hand, to exercise a realistically self-critical capacity when it comes to the quality of our own life and witness as Christians and Christian communities, to be alert to the dangers of self-deception and aware of our own permanent need for repentance and renewal; and, on the other hand, to be open to the presence of God in our neighbors, including our non-Christian neighbors, and open to the love of God that may come to us through them.

The Church Community

We might say that, theologically understood, the church is not an association of like-minded individuals serving purposes they may have devised for themselves. Instead, it

is a community established by God, grounded in the very life of God, an aspect of the new creation.

However, to stop there would be an oversimplification. It is correct in what it affirms about the ultimate source of the church's reality and about what truly sustains it as a manifestation of *koinonia*. But it is mistaken in what it implicitly denies. The truth—the theological truth, even—is that the church is indeed *also* a very human community, an association of often all too like-minded individuals, and that it does also serve human purposes quite distinct from, and sometimes counter to, the purposes of God.

Like other religious traditions and communities, Christian churches serve a variety of human needs and purposes, in ways that vary a great deal from one place and time to another. They commonly serve human needs for order, coherence, stability, belief-reinforcement, companionship, ethical guidance, and so forth. They are affected at every point by the typical ways human beings interact with each other in the satisfaction of those needs. They are also put to use in the service of other interests on the part of adherents and outsiders alike, for example, by being made to serve particular political and economic ends. No one acquainted with the history of Christian churches from the earliest centuries onward can fail to acknowledge this complex intertwining of human needs, desires, ambitions, and fears in that history.

Diversity and Conflict

Our understanding of the scope of grace, Christian conferencing, and theological reflection, taken together and enriched by ecumenical wisdom, points toward a way to address our current difficulties over conflict in the church.

Conflict is as complex as it is common. A church without conflict is very likely to be a church that is failing to be the church. Recall that it is God who brings us to the church, or who brings the church to us, creating church in our midst by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are brought together in the first instance by grace, and not because we share the same views, customs, cultural practices, or even moral values. Through our encounters with others in Christian community, we may of course come to share a good deal, gradually. Minds may be changed—perhaps most productively when it is not a case of one party winning an argument over others, but rather of their being led through their experience together to a greater understanding than any of them previously possessed. We may discover or come to agreement on a number of things. But erasing differences is not necessarily the best outcome. Some differ-

ences are part of the good diversity of creation, the diversity that is a gift from God and should be honored as such.

Some differences within the church aid the church in its mission to a diverse world. New technologies give rise to previously unimagined possibilities; new knowledge changes our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live. When the church is confronted with a new situation and is pondering its best response, it is well to have a wide range of experience and perspectives at hand. To understand and respect one another's differences and the ways in which they contribute to the church's fulfillment of its mission do not threaten the unity God intends, but instead enhance it.

At the same time, some of our more serious conflict is generated by differing responses to these developments. There are instances of conflict in which different people have incompatible or opposing judgments on some matter that they take to be vital to the church's own identity and mission, and in which a resolution seems beyond our capability. When a conflict can be resolved through discussion, through a process in which all involved are treated with respect, the whole event can be a powerful witness to the gospel. As the church, we are not called to avoid conflict, nor to banish it, but rather to deal with it redemptively.

Going Further

“Called to be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Inter-religious Relationships” was passed by the 2016 General Conference and will be published in the *2016 Book of Resolutions*. The text can be read at <http://tinyurl.com/UMCNeighbors>.

Please offer us your feedback by completing the survey available at www.umc.org/CFOWonderLovePraise or by answering the response questions provided by your study leader and e-mailing your responses to cfo@umc-cob.org.

Notes

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke, 1962), volume 2, p. 288 (IV, 1, 7)

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