

## The Community of the Faithful

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### The Church's One Foundation

**H**ow do you feel when Acts 2:42-47 comes around in the lectionary? I usually feel guilty. There is something of a gap between the early church described here and the faith communities I have served and experienced. To be honest, I am frightened of the level of intensity and commitment that was called out of those early believers. I tell myself that things were different then, and that's true. In those early days, many of the faithful believed that Jesus' return was imminent. Our modern Western culture of individualism and autonomy was either nonexistent or only present in its most nascent form. Of course they could hold all things in common in ways that we cannot today. Still, there is a dynamism and energy in this passage that I long to see translated into our own time and into our own communities and denominations, and which I never feel I've done enough to cultivate.

What clues can the early church's chief architect, the apostle Paul, offer about building up this kind of unity in the church today? Paul reminds his readers, in 1 Corinthians 3, that the church has one foundation. On the one hand, this statement follows a rhetorical form present throughout the epistles. But form does not preclude function, or its usefulness to us today. Why do the epistle writers, Paul among them, lay out this foundation time and again in their correspondences with early churches? Was it because they thought the churches to whom they wrote were unaware of the basics of the faith? Perhaps. Or perhaps they recognized what plenty of consultants

### Lectionary Loop

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A,  
Acts 2:42-47

today who get paid the big bucks know about how important it is for leaders to continually remind the organization of its core values—in this case, the value of a single beginning point, a foundation of unity.

### **In Essentials, Unity**

How is unity as a core value being articulated consistently, creatively, and carefully in the Christian community today? Most of us are familiar with the words of St. Augustine of Hippo: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity.” But how many of us on a regular and sustained basis invite that diversity *and* unity into worship?

I know of a worshiping community that presents readings from each different Gospel from a different part of the worship space. The reader walks to that spot to the sound of a special chant written to remind the congregation that they are about to hear a particular voice from a particular part of the worldwide community of faith. It’s an audible, visible reinforcement that within the one gospel whole there are four distinct voices (representing myriad others).

As another example, in the church where I currently serve, the worship leader introduces a time of announcements about upcoming events in the life of the congregation by first restating the three-part congregational mission statement: to be a sanctuary for travelers, to be a reconciling community, to be a caring congregation. Then the leader says, “And here is how we hope to be living out those commitments . . .” The congregation then hears the week’s announcements in a way that helps them connect what is happening in the life of the congregation to what the congregation knows to be its unifying principles. This practice also provides a weekly critique and review of the community’s life, which is very effective in helping the congregation stay on track with its commitments in a unified manner.

### **Unity Is as Unity Does**

What can we say that will be of practical assistance in our work for unity in our denominational structures and across denominations? Perhaps the first and most

### **Study Bible**

The “Excursus: Proof from Scripture” in the *NISB*, 1960, raises important questions about how Christian communities use scripture to divide or unite the body of Christ.

surprising thing is that we already are united. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul does not speak of the need to create unity where none exists, but rather he speaks of the need to live into the reality of the unity that Christ has created as the founder and foundation of the church.

In 1 Cor 12:12, Paul writes that the church is one body. This is not a future hope but a present reality. That we so often live as if we are not part of the one community of faith does nothing to shift this one great fact: We are one body, one community. We are united. Siblings can live as if they have no sisters and brothers. They can even deny the existence of family members. They can change their names, and invoke all manner of legal processes. But a DNA test will conclusively prove that siblings they are and evermore shall be. Next time you have occasion to be at a denominational gathering or a gathering of leaders from the other denominations in your area, how might the encounter open up if you think of these colleagues in terms of your shared “DNA” in the body of Christ?

Just because something is true does not make the living out of that truth easy. For example, the process of forming the World Council of Churches as an expression of unity stretched from 1919 until 1950. But we shouldn't let ourselves be daunted by the complexities either. One of the great joys of knowing that we are of the same community regardless of appearances and statements to the contrary is that we can relax. We do not hold the church together by the force of our personalities, our academic prowess, our pastoral care programs, our theology, or our doctrine. The church is already one community. If and when we relax into that certainty, it gives us time and energy to see the signs of unity emerging around us. And it gives us the freedom to find unity in unexpected ways. I know of one pastor who had been to many denominational and ecumenical meetings over the years and found them to be fine for doing business but not so fine for building community. He decided, upon moving to a new city and a new church, to learn to bake cakes. He took a cake to each of his ministerial colleagues—just

## Study Bible

The word *study* describing and defining the four characteristics of the “idyllic life of the first Christian communities” in Acts 2:42-47 demonstrates the breadth of the notion of unity, encompassing both the spiritual and material aspects of life together (*NISB*, 1961). There is a challenge to First World Christian communities in this breadth as we consider the wide disparity of resources within denominations, let alone between them. By contrast, 1 Cor 12:12 is purely focused on spiritual unity. What are the values behind the virtues and how do we pull these down into practical, material terms? (*NISB*, 2028).

## Reflections

Discuss possible implications for church unity in the following quote from Lesslie Newbigin: “It is the announcement of a fact. It is not the launching of a program. It is not the promulgation of a new doctrine. It is not a call to moral or religious reformation. It is, strictly speaking, a news-flash. Something has happened. There is a new fact to be reckoned with. The kingdom, the reign of God, has come near.”

## Sources

Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987), 1; W. A. Visser't Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

cakes, not information about his particular church or his understanding of particular doctrines or polities. It seems to me that he understood something of the truth of unity and that by sharing in this way he came as close as ever to the vision and vibrancy of the community-shared purpose described in Acts.

### Teaching Tips

Invite the group to explore St. Augustine of Hippo's famous statement: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity." What are the essentials in this congregation, in this denomination, in the church as a whole? What does diversity look like? How does charity affect the tension between unity and diversity?

### Teaching Tips

Some of the great old hymns of the church are rich expressions of our shared values and core theology. Invite the group to sing "The Church's One Foundation" in its entirety, then sing each verse separately, pausing between the verses for reflection and discussion. What is the church's one foundation? What expressions of unity does the hymn suggest?

### Reflections

What are key symbols of unity in the life of your congregation? For example, how does the liturgy of communion function as a unifying symbol?