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Unity is a Gospel imperative

by Thomas Ryan



Karen DeLeon, a member of Grace Cathedral, a nondenominational church in Uniondale, N.Y., prays during an ecumenical prayer service at St. Martha Catholic Church in Uniondale in January 2010. (CNS/Long Island Catholic/Gregory A. Shemitz)

VIEWPOINT

Mainstream Christianity is aging and shrinking. The institutional church is losing much of its impact on society. Divisions in many churches on ethical, social and pastoral issues are creating confusion and estrangement. The ecumenical landscape is undergoing rapid and radical change.

In times of transition, it's wise to stay close to a fundamental ecumenical conviction: Unity belongs to the nature of the church.

The Rev. Michael Kinnamon, outgoing general secretary of the U.S. National Council of Churches, has stressed the need for a common grammar based upon an ecumenical indicative and imperative. The indicative is that since it is God who assembles the one church, unity is not something we have to create. It is a present reality given by God to the church and is presupposed in every effort for unity. The

ecumenical imperative is that Christians must give expression to the essential unity of the church. It must be lived and be made visible.

The work still before us is a consequence of our fundamental communion in Christ, not a prerequisite for it. In other words, it is the recognition of how God has bound us in one body that provides the proper setting for the work we undertake through the ecumenical movement. The interim goal is to allow the unity that already exists among us as God's gift to become more fully manifest in the way we Christians relate to one another, articulate our faith, worship and act in the world.

The future direction is to live consistently with what we are in every way possible. Unless we recognize that our oneness in Christ is itself a central truth of the Gospel, we will not find the stamina to stay engaged for the long haul.

We cannot ignore the fact that the impetus for our unity in faith, life, worship and mission flows from Jesus' own prayer "that we all may be one ... so that the world may believe" (John 17:21). Whether or not the ultimate aim of church union is ever in fact realized, the promotion of Christian unity here and now, far from being a waste of time and energy, is an essential exercise in basic Christianity.

Loving our neighbors and enemies, working with all people of goodwill in the liberation of the world from the forces of evil and oppression, exercising responsible stewardship in regard to our environment, renewing ourselves and our institutions, seeking together with other Christians to live the radical teachings of the Gospel -- these are no mere means to ultimate church union, means to be accepted or rejected according to whether one supports and judges the ultimate aim to be possible or not. These are not optional, but essential expressions of the fundamental spirit and mission of Christianity.

Jan. 18-25 is the international Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I'd hope that it's not the only time of the year we pray for it. Prayer, alone and with others, for personal, communal and ecclesial renewal, for a spirit of repentance regarding our divisions, and for growth in holiness. "The measure of our concern for unity is the degree to which we pray for it," said the delegates to the World Council of Churches' Second Assembly in 1954. "We cannot expect God to give us unity unless we prepare ourselves to receive his gift by costly and purifying prayer. To pray together is to be drawn together."

And when we are drawn together, we learn that we have so much to share with one another: contemplative and charismatic ways of praying, lectio divina, devotional practices, the theology of icons, the tradition of spiritual direction, effective approaches to youth and young adults, the practice of annual retreats and monthly desert days, methods of singing, preaching and sharing the faith. And in the exchange of gifts, what is lacking in each of our traditions finds its needed complement.

If we're honest, we have to admit that we could be doing much more together: common Bible study, shared retreats, joint worship in services of the Word, courses in which we can learn about our common tradition as well as existing differences, team-teaching in theology, cooperation in projects of the conservation of creation and human justice, sharing of resources in the mass media, jointly sponsored adult faith formation programs and social events at the local level like church bazaars and parish picnics.

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Instead of staring in consternation at obstacles to our expression of unity, why don't we focus on our present, given unity and do what is possible today?

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