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Partnership between two Christian denominations is possible

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NCR Today

Monday's *NCR* Morning Briefing included two short articles exploring the possibility of building a joint Catholic and Anglican cathedral in Christchurch, New Zealand, after the devastations of February 2011's earthquake. Not surprisingly, some think the idea is impractical. Others see it as an exciting possibility for ecumenical cooperation. I know it is possible, for I grew up attending a Catholic parish that shared a worship space with Anglicans.

My family moved from Chester, England, to Winnipeg, Canada, in 1967. In Chester, we worshipped in a historic old stone church named St. Werburgh's. When we arrived in Winnipeg, our neighborhood parish gathered in a local school gymnasium while awaiting the building of a new church. The brand new parish was called John XXIII (now Blessed John XXIII). The new church was called the Assiniboia Christian Centre and was a collaborative effort between the Catholic John XXIII parish and the Anglican St. Chad's parish.

The Anglican bishop and our own Cardinal George Flahiff laid the cornerstone that read, That They May Be One. The new building was completed in 1968.

The main worship space was stark in its effort to be nondenominational, but each congregation had a side chapel that was decorated more traditionally. The Catholic chapel housed the Stations of the Cross, the tabernacle, some statues and a stained-glass window. Confessionals were discreetly hidden in the walls of the main worship space.

While we sometimes had a "pulpit swap" with the Anglican minister, we seldom worshiped together, except inadvertently on daylight saving time change weekends. Depending on whether the clock was

being turned backward or forward, Catholics could expect a few Anglicans in their pews or vice versa. Today, according to the center's website, "The two parishes co-operate on charitable ventures, raise funds and socialize jointly, use the same Worship Area, and hold some joint non-Eucharistic services (such as Remembrance Day and Good Friday services)."

Sadly, the Assiniboia Christian Centre is in the process of dissolving the partnership between Blessed John XXIII and St. Chad's parishes. The reason is not because of interdenominational issues, but the common issue of an aging and shrinking parish no longer able to sustain its physical building. Both parishes, along with their respective dioceses, are working closely together to come to an agreement where St. Chad's will sell its share of the building and the Catholic parish will become the sole owners.

Following on the heels of Vatican II, the collaboration between Catholics and Anglicans in building the Assiniboia Christian Centre was a sign of hope for increased unity within our Christian family. And it is proof that concrete, ecumenical cooperation is possible. In a time of shrinking parishes and increasing expenses, perhaps it is a model to be studied more closely for our times.

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