



NEWS ARCHIVE:

Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

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Day of prayer for cancer organized by Holy Spirit parish and McClure United Church



Ecumenical dialogue

Bishop Donald Bolen of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon, Rev. Ron McConnell, chair of the River Bend Presbytery of the United Church of Canada, and Bishop Cindy Halmarson of the Saskatchewan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (l-r) were guest speakers at a Prairie Centre for Ecumenism event Oct. 1 in Saskatoon.

Rev. Amanda Currie of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, before the three church leaders spoke about ecumenical visions and experiences from the perspective of their different Christian traditions.

The workshop was designed to provide "an opportunity to explore three models of the unity of the church," explained Nicholas Jesson, ecumenical officer for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon, who provided a reflection on the scriptural vision of Christian unity and the goals of the ecumenical movement.

Jesson stressed that the visions of Christian unity presented by the three local church leaders were not offered as competing visions or exclusive options, but as an opportunity for reflection and discussion. After the presentations, workshop participants also had a chance to discuss their own experiences and understandings of Christian unity.

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

Three models of Christian unity were presented Oct. 1 at a morning workshop organized by the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism (PCE).

Some 70 representatives from a number of Christian churches in Saskatoon attended the event, which featured presentations by Bishop Donald Bolen of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon, Bishop Cindy Halmarson of the Saskatchewan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and Rev. Ron McConnell, chair of the River Bend Presbytery of the United Church of Canada

The gathering at Wildwood Mennonite Church in southeast Saskatoon began with prayer led by PCE board member

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Bishop Donald Bolen began with a look at the Catholic understanding of Christian unity, which includes unity of faith, unity of order (in terms of priestly ministry and the episcopate, with all bishops in communion with the bishop of Rome) and unity in sacramental life. This vision of full, visible unity is grounded in the scriptures, and in how the Catholic Church understands Christ's call for unity, he said.

“The Catholic Church has an understanding of unity based on an understanding of Church that we believe Christ wills us to be. The Church has many elements: baptism, Eucharist, other sacraments, the scriptures, the creeds, the structure of councils, the structures of gathering together to maintain unity,” Bolen said.

“What we have discovered in our dialogue is that other Christian churches have many of those elements as well.” Quoting John Paul II's encyclical *Et Unum Sint*, he noted that “to the extent that these elements are found in other Christian communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them.”

In such areas “we are already in communion, which is a real communion – not complete, but real,” Bolen said. “And to the extent that we find a real communion, we should be engaging in common witness, common mission, common prayer – even now. So, it is a big vision of unity, but it doesn't mean that we are handicapped at the present, it means that at each moment of time, we have to identify what is appropriate and responsible for us to do; what are the steps open for us to come to unity. There are always steps open to us at each moment.”

He noted that all Christians are called to the work of reconciliation – it is not just the work of the bishops or the pope.

In the Catholic vision, unity is not the same as uniformity, Bolen stressed. “God created a world with immense diversity, he created human beings with an incredible diversity. So we are not seeking uniformity. We are seeking a rich, diverse, wholesome unity, that excludes contradictions on matters of faith, but doesn't exclude complementary emphases, or different gifts of the Holy Spirit developing in different places and in different ways.”

Bolen then provided an overview of dialogues undertaken by the Catholic Church with various denominations since the Second Vatican Council. Over the past 50 years, these international dialogues have come to be seen as a way in which Christian denominations come to understand and receive the gifts being lived in each other's traditions, said Bolen, who worked for several years on such dialogues while serving on the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity in Rome.

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He presented excerpts from the dialogues with a number of different churches to show how different visions of unity are expressed and how these visions affect the goals of each encounter.

For instance, in a preliminary encounter between the World Evangelical Alliance and the Catholic Church, the goal was simply to understand each other better and get rid of misunderstandings. Longer-term dialogues with the Methodist, Lutheran and Anglican communions had more challenging goals, farther along on the spectrum of Christian unity that has as its goal full, visible unity.

“The shape of full visible unity is beyond our capacity to put into words. ‘God will always surprise us’” said Bolen, quoting from one Anglican/Roman Catholic document. “God cannot be fully understood through our human systems and is not limited by our positive or negative predictions for the future. In our ecumenical efforts we should keep in mind that one day we will rub our eyes and be surprised by the new things that God has achieved in his church.”

Bishop Cindy Halmarson then presented an overview of the process by which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada entered into a relationship of full communion, with shared sacraments, and recognition and acceptance of each other’s members and ministry.

Using the image of courtship and marriage, Halmarson went through the steps of this move toward Christian unity between the two Canadian churches, which was achieved in 2001, as outlined in the Waterloo Declaration.

The Lutheran vision recognizes Christian unity exists “when the gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel,” she described.

The Anglican/Lutheran dialogue has happened throughout the world and over many decades and centuries, she noted. “There is a long standing desire for us to recognize more fully one another’s ministries and to express the unity in the church, in our relationship with one another.”

The journey toward full communion in Canada involved the two churches getting to know themselves and each other better, and to gradually move toward sharing life, with several steps and stages along the way, Halmarson described. “A study guide was developed and memberships journeyed together, exploring what does it mean to be neighbours? To be brothers and sisters in Christ? And what does it mean to be exploring this full communion relationship?”

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In 1983, the Canadian Lutheran and Anglican dialogue was established, which led to an agreement in 1986 that provided a basis for sharing the Eucharist between the churches, she described. Interim sharing of the Eucharist was approved in 1989.

“We agreed to acknowledge one another as churches where the gospel is preached and taught, and so we began to study with one another, we began to uphold one another in prayer, and then we ‘committed ourselves to share a common life in mission and service, to pray for and with one another, and to share resources.’”

About this time, the Lutheran and Anglican congregations of Rosetown, SK. came together to share in ministry – an example of long standing shared ministry that the two denominations have in Saskatchewan, she said. “Over time they’ve developed their common ways of worship, and service, and witness, and they identify themselves as two communions in one, and live as one congregation.”

After several years of interim Eucharistic sharing and dialogue, the churches agreed to accept one another’s members, recognize their confirmation, permit ordained clergy and pastors to serve in one another’s churches and preside at the sacraments under the approval of the local bishops. Full communion between the two denominations was achieved in 2001.

“Full communion is understood as a relationship between two distinct churches or communions in which each maintains its own autonomy, while recognizing the catholicity and apostolicity of the other, and believing the other to hold the essentials of the Christian faith,” said Halmarson.

“In such a relationship, communicant members of each church would be able freely to communicate at the altar of the other and there would be freedom of ordained ministers to officiate sacramentally in either church. Specifically in our context we understand this to include transferability of members, mutual recognition and interchangeability of ministries; freedom to use each other’s liturgies; freedom to participate in each other’s ordinations and installations of clergy, including bishops; and structures for consultation to express, strengthen and enable our common life, witness, and service to the glory of God and the salvation of the world.”

Right now in Saskatchewan there are some 12 to 15 Lutheran congregations that are in full communion relationships, sharing ministry with the Anglican church, either by the exchange of clergy, or as in Rosetown, living together as one congregation, she said.

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Living this new reality is as challenging as any marriage, she added. “We are always challenged to see that there is another perspective, that there is another dimension to what God is able to do for us, and there is a multiplying of gifts of God,” Halmarson said, describing some of the challenges of adjusting local customs, and determining accountability. “We concentrate on where we share with one another, we recognize the differences, and we celebrate them, and continue to work for the fullness of unity in the church.”

Rev. Ron McConnell, chair of the River Bend Presbytry of the United Church of Canada presented a model of unity known as ‘full world ecumenism’, which understands the ecumenical task as one dimension of the mission of the church to reconcile all things to Christ. It is a new vision, which has come to replace the “organic unity” that characterized the very formation of the United Church of Canada, he said.

McConnell reviewed the history of the United Church’s creation – a new church that formed when Methodists and Congregationalists, and about two-thirds of the country’s Presbyterians joined together to create a new church June 10, 1925.

“That kind of unity reflected a kind of union referred to as organic unity... joining into a new organism,.. living out of a new structure,” he said, noting this model has also been followed in other places in the world.

For a time, this kind of organic unity continued to be pursued, with the Evangelical United Brethren congregations in Canada joining the United Church in 1968, and discussions undertaken with the Anglican Church of Canada. Gradually, the idea of organic unity has waned, McConnell said.

Justice and peace efforts and groups such as Project Ploughshares, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and Kairos became the United Church’s primary ecumenical activities.

In 1997, a new document was released, entitled *Mending the World: an ecumenical vision for healing and reconciliation*. “God, who is absolute love, mercy and justice, yearns for mending of creation, calling us to see the world through God’s tears, and to bend ourselves as church to the task of ‘worrying about what God worries about when God gets up in the morning,’” said McConnell, quoting the document.

The document is rooted in the concept of God’s creation, and maintains that ecumenical concern is best expressed in an understanding of the whole earth and of life in relationship, he described.

In the discussion that followed, participants and presenters together explored a number of understandings and experiences of unity.