

# WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2016

*Called to proclaim the mighty acts of God*



The Canadian Council of Churches  
47 Queen's Park Crescent East Toronto, ON M5S 2C3  
416-972-9494 | 1-866-822-7645 | FAX: 416-927-0405  
admin@councilofchurches.ca | www.councilofchurches.ca

8 Days of Prayer  
BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS



## DAY 8 | *Hearts burning for unity*

Is 52:7-9 | Ps 30 | Col 1:27-29 | Lk 24:13-36

### COMMENTARY

*Different churches in Latvia have been able to work together in evangelization through the use of the Alpha Course, developed in the Anglican Church of Holy Trinity, Brompton, London. Latvians who have come to faith through this programme remain open to learning and being enriched by the gifts of other Christian communities. This experience inspired the following reflections.*

- The disappointed disciples who leave Jerusalem for Emmaus have lost their hope that Jesus was the Messiah, and walk away from their community. It is a journey of separation and isolation.
- By contrast, they return to Jerusalem full of hope with a Gospel message on their lips. It is this resurrection message that drives them back into the heart of the community and into a communion of fellowship.
- So often Christians try to evangelize with a competitive spirit, hoping to fill their own churches. Ambition overrides the desire for others to hear the life-giving message of the Gospel. True evangelism is a journey from Emmaus to Jerusalem, a journey from isolation into unity.

### QUESTIONS

- What are the disappointments that isolate us from others?
- What are the gifts (initiatives, methods, and programmes) that we can receive from other Christian communities?

### PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you have made our hearts burn within us, and have sent us back upon the road towards our brothers and sisters, with the Gospel message on our lips. Help us to see that hope and obedience to your commands always lead to the greater unity of your people. Amen.

## DAY 1 | *Let the stone be rolled away*

Ezek 37:12-14 | Ps 71:18b -23 | Rom 8:15-21 | Mt 28:1-10

### COMMENTARY

*Today's reflections are prepared by the Catholic Youth Centre of the Archdiocese of Riga, and spring from their experience of organising an Ecumenical Way of the Cross: a very influential annual ecumenical event in the life of Latvia. This experience prompts reflection on what the passion and resurrection mean in the Latvian context, and what are God's mighty acts that baptized Christians are called to proclaim.*

- Latvia's Soviet history continues to cast a shadow over the people of this nation. There is still much grief and pain; wounds inflicted which are difficult to forgive. All of this is like the large stone which covered the mouth of Jesus' tomb. Wounds such as these imprison us in a spiritual grave.
- But if, in our suffering, our pain is united to his pain, then the story does not end here, locked in our graves. The earthquake of the Lord's resurrection is the earth-shaking event that opens our graves and frees us from the pain and bitterness that hold us in isolation from one another.
- This is the mighty act of God: God's love, which shakes the earth, which rolls away the stones, which frees us, and calls us out into the morning of a new day. Here, at this new dawn, we are re-united with our brothers and sisters who have been imprisoned and who are hurting. And like Mary Magdalene we must "go quickly" from this great moment of joy to tell others what God has done.

### QUESTIONS

- What are the events and the situations of our lives and the circumstances that make us lock ourselves in the grave – in sadness, grief, worries, anxiety and despair? What keeps us from accepting the promise and joy of the resurrection of Christ?
- How ready are we to share the experience of God with those whom we meet?

### PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you have loved us from the beginning, and you have shown the depth of your love in dying for us on the cross and thereby sharing our sufferings and wounds. At this moment, we lay all the obstacles that separate us from your love at the foot of your cross. Roll back the stones which imprison us. Awaken us to your resurrection morning. There may we meet the brothers and sisters from whom we are separated. Amen.

## DAY 2 | *Called to be messengers of joy*

Is 61:1-4 | Ps 133 | Phil 2:1-5 | Jn 15:9-12

### COMMENTARY

*In the Soviet era a Christian presence through public media was impossible in Latvia. After independence, Latvian State Radio began broadcasting Christian programmes with a focus on unity and mission, providing a forum for leaders from diverse churches to encounter one another. This public witness of mutual respect, love and joy contributed to the spirit of Latvian ecumenical life. The experience of the creators of Christian programming at the Latvian State Radio inspired this reflection.*

- The joy of the Gospel calls Christians to live the prophecy of Isaiah: “The spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has appointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.” We long for Good News to mend our broken hearts and to release us from all that binds us and makes us captive.
- When we are saddened by our own suffering, we may lack the vigour to proclaim the joy that comes from Jesus. Nevertheless, even when we feel unable to give anything to anyone, by bearing witness to the little that we have, Jesus multiplies it in us and in the people around us.
- In the Gospel Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” and “love one another as I have loved you.” It is in this way that we discover his joy in us, so that our joy may be complete. This mutual love and mutual joy is at the heart of our prayer for unity. As the psalmist says, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”

### QUESTIONS

- What smothers joy in the world and in the churches?
- What can we receive from other Christians so that Jesus’ joy may be in us, making us witnesses of the Good News?

### PRAYER

God of love, look upon our willingness to serve you despite our spiritual poverty and limited abilities. Fulfil the deepest longings of our hearts with your presence. Fill our broken hearts with your healing love so that we may love as you have loved us. Grant us the gift of unity so that we may serve you with joy and share your love with all. This we ask in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## DAY 7 | *Hospitality for prayer*

Is 62:6-7 | Ps 100 | 1 Pet 4:7b-10 | Jn 4:4-14

### COMMENTARY

*The experience of praying together on each of the eight days of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has helped Christians in the small town of Madona to come together in friendship. A particular fruit of this has been the opening of an ecumenical prayer chapel in the centre of town, complete with elements from Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Here the Christians of Madona join in continuous round-the-clock prayer. This experience forms the background of the following reflections.*

- As long as God’s people are divided, and Christians are estranged from one another, we are like Jesus in Samaria, strangers in a foreign land, without safety, without refreshment, and without a place of rest.
- The people of Israel longed for a place of safety where they could worship the Lord. Isaiah tells us of God’s mighty act: he posted sentinels on the walls of Jerusalem so that his people could worship him in safety day and night.
- In the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity our churches and chapels become places of safety, rest and refreshment for people to join in prayer. The challenge from this week is to create more places and protected times of prayer, because as we pray together, we become one people.

### QUESTIONS

- How can we promote mutual hospitality among parishes and congregations in our locality?
- Is there a place in our neighbourhood where Christians from different traditions can gather in prayer? If not, how can we help to create such a place?

### PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you asked your apostles to stay awake with you and to pray with you. May we offer the world protected times and spaces in which to find refreshment and peace, so that praying together with other Christians we may come to know you more deeply. Amen.

## DAY 6 | *Listen to this dream*

Gen 37:5-8 | Ps 126 | Rom 12:9-13 | Jn 21:25

### COMMENTARY

*Christian disunity hurts. Churches suffer from their inability to be united as one family at the Lord's Table; they suffer from rivalry and from histories of combativeness. One individual response to disunity emerged in 2005 in the form of an ecumenical journal: Kas Mus Vieno? ("What unites us?"). The experience of producing the journal inspired this reflection.*

- Joseph has a dream, which is a message from God. However, when Joseph shares his dream with his brothers, they react with anger and violence because the dream implies that they must bow down before him. Ultimately famine drives the brothers to Egypt and they do bow before Joseph, but rather than the abasement and dishonour they fear, it is a moment of reconciliation and grace.
- Jesus, like Joseph, unfolds to us a vision, a message about the life of his Father's kingdom. It is a vision of unity. But like Joseph's brothers, we are often upset, angered and fearful of the vision and what it seems to imply. It demands that we submit and bow to the will of God. We fear it because we fear what we might lose. But the vision is not about loss. Rather, it is about regaining brothers and sisters we had lost, the reuniting of a family.
- We have written many ecumenical texts, but the vision of Christian unity is not captured in agreed statements alone, important though these are. The unity God desires for us, the vision he puts before us, far exceeds anything we can express in words or contain in books. The vision must take flesh in our lives and in the prayer and mission that we share with our brothers and sisters. Most of all it is realised in the love we show for one another.

### QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to place our own dreams for Christian unity at the feet of Christ?
- In what ways does God's vision of unity call the churches to renewal and change today?

### PRAYER

God of wisdom, grant us humility to hear your voice, to receive your call, and to share your dream for the unity of the Church. Help us to be awake to the pain of disunity. Where division has left us with hearts of stone, may the fire of your Holy Spirit inflame our hearts and inspire us with the vision of being one in Christ, as he is one with you, so that the world may believe that you have sent him. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

## DAY 3 | *The witness of fellowship*

Jer 31:10-13 | Ps 122 | 1 Jn 4:16b-21 | Jn 17:20-23

### COMMENTARY

*For over a decade Chemin Neuf, an international Catholic community with an ecumenical vocation, has been present in Latvia, with both Catholic and Lutheran members. Together they experience the joy that comes from fellowship in Christ, as well as the pain of disunity. As a sign of this division, they place an empty paten and chalice (a Eucharistic plate and cup) on the altar during evening prayer. Their experience inspired this reflection.*

- Division among Christians is an obstacle to evangelization. The world cannot believe that we are Jesus' disciples while our love for one another is incomplete. We feel the pain of this division when we cannot receive together the body and blood of Christ at the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity.
- The source of our joy is our common life in Christ. To live our life of fellowship every day is to welcome, love, serve, pray and witness with Christians from diverse traditions. It is the pearl of great value given to us by the Holy Spirit.
- The night before his death, Jesus prayed for unity and love amongst us. Today we raise our hands and pray with Jesus for Christian unity. We pray for the bishops, ministers and members of all churches. We pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us all on this path of unity.

### QUESTIONS

- How do we regard Christians of other churches, and are we prepared to ask forgiveness for prejudice towards them?
- What can each of us do to decrease division among Christians?

### PRAYER

Lord Jesus, who prayed that we might all be one, we pray to you for the unity of Christians according to your will. May your Spirit enable us to experience the suffering caused by division, to see our sin and to hope beyond all hope. Amen.

## DAY 4 | *A priestly people called to proclaim the Gospel*

Gen 17:1-8 | Ps 145:8-12 | Rom 10:14-15 | Mt 13:3-9

### COMMENTARY

*These reflections were inspired by the producers of the Sunday morning Christian programme Vertikale. The challenge of maintaining this Christian voice on Latvian national television has taught them that it is only when we learn to recognise other Christians as brothers and sisters that we can dare take God's Word into the public space.*

- In today's world more than ever, words flood into our homes: no longer just from our conversations, but from television, radio, and now from social media. These words have the power to build up and to knock down. Much of this ocean of words seems meaningless: diversion rather than nourishment.
- One could drown in such an ocean where there is no meaning to grasp. But we have heard a saving Word; it has been thrown to us as a lifeline. It calls us into communion, and draws us into unity with others who have heard it too. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people.
- More than this, we are a priestly people. United with others who have received his Word, our words are no longer mere drops lost in the ocean. Now we have a powerful Word to speak. United we can speak it powerfully: Yeshua – God saves.

### QUESTIONS

- What personal ambitions, competitive spirits, false assumptions about other Christians, and resentments obscure our proclamation of the Gospel?
- Who hears a life-giving word from us?

### PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you said that everyone will know that we are your disciples if there is love among us. Strengthened by your grace, may we work tirelessly for the visible unity of your Church, so that the Good News that we are called to proclaim will be seen in all our words and deeds. Amen.

## DAY 5 | *The fellowship of the apostles*

Isa 56:6-8 | Ps 24 | Acts 2:37-42 | Jn 13:34-35

### COMMENTARY

*The fellowship of Christian leaders shapes the visible expression of ecumenical life in Latvia. They gather regularly at Gaizins, Latvia's highest hill, and other locations, for a 40-hour period of prayer and simple fellowship around shared meals. For the duration of these meetings they are supported in non-stop prayer and worship by the faithful. These encounters renew the leaders as fellow-workers in Christ. The experience of the founder of the Gaizins house of prayer inspired this reflection.*

- Jesus' commandment to love one another is not theoretical. Our communion of love with one another becomes concrete when we gather together intentionally as Christ's disciples, to share fellowship and prayer in the power of the Spirit.
- The more that Christians, especially their leaders, encounter Christ together in humility and patience, the more prejudice diminishes, the more we discover Christ in one another, and the more we become authentic witnesses to the kingdom of God.
- At times ecumenism can seem very complicated. Yet joyful fellowship, a shared meal and common prayer and praise are ways of apostolic simplicity. In these we obey the commandment to love one another, and proclaim our Amen to Christ's prayer for unity.

### QUESTIONS

- What is our experience of encountering one another as brothers and sisters in Christ through Christian fellowship, shared meals and common prayer?
- What are our expectations of bishops and other church leaders on the path towards the visible unity of the Church? How can we support and encourage them?

### PRAYER

Faithful God, may you give to all Christians, and especially to those entrusted with leadership in your Church, the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that with the eyes of our hearts we may see the hope to which you have called us: one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above and through all and in all. Amen.