

GROWING *Together*

12th Series

TOWARDS FULL COMMUNION

What does it mean to be united in Christ? In John 17, Jesus prays for unity. Paul refers often to the one Body and one Lord. Beyond this, we have little scriptural guidance in describing the details of Christian unity. The churches in our century have spent considerable energy attempting to move towards unity. The challenge has been to describe what Christian unity really means. There are a number of models.

SOME MODELS ...

The Eastern Orthodox churches use a model of unity in which each church remains independent. At the same time, each recognizes the apostolic character of the others, and accepts the Patriarch of Constantinople as a figure of respect and the first among equals. The United Church of Canada began in 1925 as a form of “Organic Unity” in which several denominations came together to form one church. This process of union is ongoing as additional congregations join the United Church. “United” or “Uniting” churches are also found in Australia, North and South India, the United States, and other parts of the world.

COVENANT COMMUNION

One model of unity which has been developed through extensive dialogue and some trial is known as “covenant communion.” In this model the churches agree on general matters, including the exchange of ministers and participation in each others’ Communion services. Unity is achieved by the recognition of a common heritage and by doctrinal consensus, which is formalized in a covenant. This covenant respects and protects the diversity of each church, and consists of a legal and spiritual agreement among the participating churches.

A distinctive feature of this model is that the covenanting churches continue to exist and to function independently. However, at the same time, each church agrees to accept the following elements of their life together:

- ◆ acceptance of the faith expressed in the historic Creeds.
- ◆ mutual acknowledgment of each others’ baptism.
- ◆ mutual recognition of each others’ ministry, including the ministry normally exercised by a bishop.
- ◆ mutual recognition of each other as true churches.
- ◆ an open invitation to receive Communion in each others’ churches.
- ◆ participation together in works of mission and service.
- ◆ concern for the inclusion of all and the rejection of all forms of discrimination.

The “covenant communion” model of Christian unity has been developed through 35 years of study and dialogue by the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). COCU is an ecumenical organization made up of nine of the larger mainline Protestant churches in the United States. Many other churches including the Roman Catholic participate as observers and advisors.

The ability of COCU to develop a covenant agreement in which the churches recognize each others’ baptisms, ministry, Eucharist, and life in Christ is based on ecumenical advances achieved through dialogue world-wide. These ecumenical advances affect the relationship among all churches around the world.

In Canada, the Anglican and Evangelical Lutheran churches are preparing to enter into a similar agreement which they call “Full Communion.” This agreement takes effect in the year 2001. These churches are now beginning to consider the processes of making this agreement fruitful while allowing the continued independence of each church. Study of the agreement has also begun within other Canadian churches in the interests of future unity.

GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five monthly Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ’s faithful.



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