

CHAPTER VII

Being church together: On the way to unity

The Rev. Stephen London is an Anglican priest at St. Thomas parish in Sherwood Park Alberta, one of the founding churches involved in the 28-years-strong Strathcona County Ecumenical Mission. Stephen tells us the story of this venerable initiative:

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*The history of the Ecumenical Mission in Strathcona County goes back to about 1989. It began in the imagination of Fr. Thomas Ryan, a Roman Catholic priest and director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism in Montreal Quebec. Fr. Ryan was well acquainted with the traditional parish preaching mission where the members of a congregation would gather for a series of reflections from a guest preacher on a particular theme over the course of several days. But he saw in this the potential to expand on the familiar practice with an ecumenical twist. And so Ryan invited the Rev. Canon William Derby, who was then the Ecumenical Officer for the Anglican Diocese of Montreal, to join him in offering an ecumenical preaching mission.’ This was the first step.*

*After spreading the word about what they had in mind through ecumenical networks across the country, one of the first places to express interest in trying this out was*

*Sherwood Park Alberta, a community of about 98,000 people located in Strathcona County just east of Edmonton. This is how Strathcona Ecumenical Mission was begun. Originally there were four sponsoring churches that partnered to test this experiment out: Anglican, United, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic. Each church took turns hosting services of preaching and prayer and times of fellowship over the course of several days. A diverse group studied the Scriptures together and got to know one another and experience each other's faith in new ways.*

*Now I know we were not the only ones doing this; they've done similar ecumenical missions in lots of other places. But what is unique about Sherwood Park is that we've kept it going year after year. In 2014 it was the 25th anniversary, and we're now at 28 years in a row. Today there are eight different churches involved, with the original Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran and United congregations still leading in the organization every year. I really think it's this longevity and the deep relationships that have grown up along the way that has made it something special. Every year the churches look forward to reconnecting, showing each other hospitality, working together as friends, and praying in common.*

*And this connection isn't just something that is confined to 4-5 days a year; it spills over into lots of other things. The clergy of the churches involved have made it a habit to meet together regularly. The people of the parishes have been able to partner in many different outreach ministries over the years, including caring for the needy in our community, joint sponsorships of Syrian refugees, building houses for the homeless together through Habitat for Humanity, taking part in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process together, and so on. Because we know each other, it has been easier to see these things through. It is as if in this small corner of the world, this small corner of the Church,*

*the dividing lines between churches that sometimes feel so sharply drawn are a little more blurred. As one long time participant has put it, “we almost don’t know how to be churches without one another.” I think that’s true.*

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In 1952, a key ecumenical concept now known as “The Lund Principle” was first expressed at a World Council of Churches meeting in Lund Sweden. It states that churches, even in their divided state, “should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.”



*An ecumenical choir performs at the Strathcona County Ecumenical Mission / Credit: Myrna Weatherby*

In the story above we have one good example of a step being taken in the direction of the Lund Principle between a group of local Christians and their churches. While Christians are not presently able to do absolutely everything together, there is still a great deal that they could be doing together more regularly and more intentionally. To quote *The Church as Communion*: “As separated churches grow towards ecclesial communion it is essential to recognize the profound measure of

communion they already share through participation in spiritual communion with God and through those elements of a visible communion of shared faith and sacramental life they can already recognize in one another” (CC, 47). In other words, churches living in the ecumenical age can take steps that prepare for the further reconciliation and unity they are growing into.

Christians are also called to be ambassadors of reconciliation in today’s divided world. This ministry of reconciliation begins in the person’s inner life, then extends to family, friends, colleagues, Church, and world. Similar to a nation’s ambassadors who need to know about the people (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20), language and culture of the countries to which they are posted, Christians need to learn about the different cultures of neighbouring churches. As the example of the Strathcona Ecumenical Mission shows, this is certainly not merely an intellectual learning; it also requires sharing in one another’s lives and in the spiritual gifts of one another’s churches. When a foundation of this kind of sharing is already in place, often the possibilities that open up for ways of witness and mission together seem greater, more creative, less out of reach.

*How does ecumenical friendship open us up to see greater ecumenical possibilities?*

*What are some of the factors that you think have enabled this ecumenical mission to retain its vitality after 28 years? Why is this not always the case in every place?*

*Is there a next step for these kinds of churches and ecclesial communities that have found themselves uniquely drawn together over many years?*