

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 2023
1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Christians - A people united in our difference: a powerful message for the world

We find ourselves right in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

This it has felt poignant for the Church of England.

Following developments of the church's latest effort to talk about our differing views on LGBTQ+ issues - the Bishops of the Church of England made some declarations about the church's position on the question of equal marriage in church. Stronger or not attachment to the CofE.

People are angry and hurt. Conservatives and Liberals are threatening to leave the Church of England, because they can't bear to stay any longer in a church where there are others with whom they disagree so fundamentally. Whether it's because they are horrified that it will now be possible for gay people who have been civilly married to have their relationship blessed in church, or because they are horrified that gay people are still not permitted to be married in church, there are a lot of people who are ready to jump ship and find a church where there are more people who feel the same way they do.

It could feel as if there was a distinct lack of unity in the Church of England this week.

Unity is one of those things that seems to be deeply prized, but what's it really about? We tend to think that if there is disagreement there cannot be unity. Social media makes it easy to feel united with lots of people. The way in which we select our news by scrolling to the one thing we want to read allows us to surround ourselves with like-minded people.

It's very easy to shut yourself off from the people you don't agree with. There's a danger of thinking that consensus is synonymous with unity.

Is that the kind of unity what Jesus is getting at when he prays that all shall be one? If it is, in times of disagreement in the church, it feels that if we cannot present a common front we are somehow damaging our brand and obstructing our ability to share the love of God.

Within the early church debates raged over everything from the application of the Mosaic law, to whether Christians should eat food offered to idols, to how to handle the influx of widows in the church, circumcision, religious festivals, finances, missions, and theology. It's a topic that St Paul addressed many times. In the letter to the Corinthians he encourages the people of Corinth, to be 'united in the same mind and the same purpose'.

Perhaps we're missing the point of what unity is all about. This week is an opportunity for the church to model what it actually means to be united. **Unity**, not some monochrome *uniformity* where difference must be left at the door; but unity where we are united in our diversity in service of a common purpose.

Taken in isolation, you might think that Paul's comment means that members of the Church of England need to think the same way about gay marriage in the Church.

But when Paul talks about unity in his letters, he often uses the image of the Body. This is our clue to a deeper, more honest kind of unity.

The body is not one uniform structure. It's no accident that Paul chooses to talk about unity by using images of the body. As Paul reminds us, we need the different parts of the body in order to function properly. In calling for the unity represented by a body working together Paul is acknowledging the diversity within that body. ¹

In our reading tonight, aware of the disagreements amongst the body, Paul encourages his audience to aim for the same mind and purpose.

What is it to have the same mind? I think it's about attitude, about the framework we build for debates and disagreements. If you take a step back from a specific disagreement, what is our approach to debating our differences? Can we be of the same mind about the bigger picture in which our disagreements are set?

In the words we hear at the start of the service we are invited to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And to love our neighbour as ourselves. Can Christians be of the same mind that that is who they try to be?

And what is our common purpose? Surely to share the good news of God's love with all of God's creation.

Sharing a message of love doesn't mean you have to agree with, or be like, everyone in the community. Loving our fellow Christians means we're called to love each other as brothers and sisters united in our baptism and adoption into the body of Christ.

Being united is not necessarily easier than uniformity. When there is real difference of opinion, it can be very very hard. But it is what Jesus asks us to try to do. And it is so much more true to human nature than aspiring to uniformity.

We are different. We think and feel differently about everything. Christian or not. We know that our understanding of God and the world is shaped by scripture, but also context, tradition, reason and the whisperings of the Holy Spirit.

Unity is more about *disagreeing* well in way that reflects our common purpose: to operate out of love.

I feel that is part of what we can strive to model here at M&Ms. We are a church that is diverse in every way – including church denominations: Catholics, Protestants, Baptists,

¹ I am grateful to the late theologian Rachel Held Evans for inspiring me in this direction for this sermon. I can no longer find the blogpost where she wrote about unity and diversity, but it was central to shaping my thoughts for this sermon.

Anglicans, Quakers, Presbyterians, Free church; differences of conservative and liberal within those denominations.

Lots of diversity and significant difference of opinion.

We have talked and prayed about this in the Church council. We identified our desire to be a place of welcome to all people. We wrestled with what it means to be different and yet united. In the case of the debates in the CofE this week – what it means to make those who long for same sex marriage in church feel as welcome as those who cannot accept that this is in keeping with the teachings of the Christian faith.

We recognised that this is quite precious: at M&Ms we find ourselves praying and singing and receiving the Sacrament every week with people with whom we may well disagree on some stuff.

For the council that helped us be clear that we don't agree, but we seek to love. It's quite something to strive for.

I believe that is a huge gift – to us, to the church and to the world.

Speaking at the World Council of Churches, Rowan Williams said that the responsibility of Christians who receive the gift of unity, lies in “seeking a life in which no one is without the other.” How, in our diversity, do we try to make everyone feel they belong?²

We are compelled to ask who is not here yet? Who are we excluding when we forget what it means to be united rather than uniform? At times the questions and answer can be painful.

But, importantly, pain can lead to growth. Pain is part of living. The theologian Rachel Held Evans suggested that more than just acknowledging the pain that difference can bring, we might recognise that we need these differences to be animated, to be alive, to mature. Maybe, she writes, friction isn't a sign of decay, but of growth.

I think that's what we see at M&Ms. We *are* growing. Individuals are growing in their love for God and their desire to draw closer to God and to one another. As a church we are growing in confidence and in our sense of who God is calling us to be in Leuven. Some of that growth stems from recognising the value that our differences bring to our mission and our ministry.

Far from being a barrier to our sharing the good news of the gospel, our diversity could be a great asset. Could make us more accessible to a broken world.

It's not like everybody out there has their views on assisted dying, monogamous relationships, ethical spending and homosexuality all sorted. Or that they find it easy to accept that they disagree with their uncle or sister on questions of society and politics. They too struggle with difference. We're the same in that regard whether or not we are Christians.

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/unity-is-gods-gift-to-the-church-says-archbishop-of-canterbury>

Imagine the witness we can be if we admit that's how we are? *We* can model what it means to grapple with really hard questions with honesty and love, rather than brush them under the carpet or retreat into silos of like-minded people.

People talk a lot about church decline and irrelevance in Europe, but the world does watch what the churches get up to. The papers this week have been full of the hopelessness of the Church of England that can't get its act together on same sex marriage. There's a large part of me that sympathises with that frustration.

But there's an equally large part of me that believes that the way the church is honest about difference is deeply important for the world. What a witness we can be if we show honest determination to talk about our disagreements walking together united in our purpose to love. That's the kind of unity I long for.