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LE CONSEIL CANADIEN DES ÉGLISES  
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## Growing Up Together

**A Sermon for the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Canadian Council of Churches**

**by the Rev. Amanda Currie**

**September 26, 2019**

**Yorkminster Park Baptist Church, Toronto**

**Ephesians 4:1-7, 13-16; John 17:11-21**

I am deeply honoured to be here tonight and to preach in this church at this celebration. A week ago I was in Hungary and Romania on a Moderator's visit to the Reformed Churches there that are partners in mission with our Presbyterian Church in Canada. While in Budapest, we met a Korean pastor who is serving the one Korean-language congregation in the Reformed Church of Hungary. After a few minutes of getting to know each other, he felt comfortable enough to express his surprise at meeting the Canadian Presbyterian Moderator and discovering that the Moderator looked like this!

He said, "In Korea, our moderators are usually old men." "Yes, I understand. In Canada that is often the case too." And then the Hungarian Church's ecumenical officer chimed in, noting that before our visit he had looked at the pictures of past moderators on our church's website. He said, "It looks like the church went in a different direction this time."

Well, I'm still kind of shocked that I am the Moderator this year. But I would like to think that the main reason for my election was unrelated to my gender or my age. I think perhaps that I was chosen for this moment in our church's history because people could see that I would bring a focus on the unity of the church at a time when we really needed that.

You may have heard that my denomination is struggling with unity right now, and some of your churches are facing similar issues. We are divided about biblical interpretation and theology, and we're

trying to figure out if we can live together with our differences and diversities of belief and practice on certain issues.

What I did was to take what I have learned about Christian unity from my experience in the broad ecumenical movement and tried to apply it to the situation within the denomination. After all, if we can cooperate with, and pray with, and work with, and dialogue with the wide spectrum of Christians and Churches that make up the Canadian Council of Churches, we should be able to hold together the diversity of perspectives that we currently have within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

So, the biblical focus for my preaching this year is going to be Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians. You may remember that 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians was a letter written to a congregation in ecumenical crisis. Given our denomination's ongoing discussions and debate, I believe that a deep reflection on the conflict-ridden church at Corinth is very appropriate for us right now.

But tonight is not about a crisis of division and disunity. Tonight is a celebration – a celebration of relationship, of growing unity, of collaboration, cooperation, dialogue, and glimpses of the fullness of unity that we have experienced through the Canadian Council of Churches.

The passages chosen for tonight's service are the same ones that were proclaimed at the inaugural worship service of the CCC back in 1944, which was held right here in this church.

Unlike his letter to the Corinthians, in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he's not addressing a big problem, bringing up their quarrels, or challenging their divisions. Instead, Paul is simply encouraging the Christian community in a way of life already well begun. How appropriate for this celebration of 75 years of ministry together as the Canadian Council of Churches!

Consulting a good commentary alerted me to the fact that Paul's letter to the Ephesians uses some of the forms of the Hellenistic philosophers. These ancient moralists held that people should be reminded of what they know so that they will act accordingly. So, the issues addressed do not necessarily reflect actual vices of the readers or things that they are doing wrong. But these are reminders, meant to encourage and to keep the church on the right track.

The image in the text that struck me was the One Body, with all its parts, growing up together into Christ who is the head. Of course, Paul uses that image a few times in his letters – to the conflicted Corinthians, to the Romans, and to the Ephesians too.

But I notice a couple of extra details that are added in the body metaphor offered to the Ephesians. First, there is the suggestion that the body is still growing, developing, and becoming what it is meant to one day be. When we come to “the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God” we will come “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Although in other places in Scripture, being “child-like” is a good quality, remaining as children, or perhaps we might say being “child-ish” is not recommended here. Paul encourages the church that “speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

The Council began in 1944 with tremendous enthusiasm as ten Christian churches sought to work together to fulfill their call to mission, service, religious education, and evangelism. Together, their professed adherents represented more than 45% of the Canadian population at that time. Soon after, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church joined, and then more denominations as the Council continued to grow.

The 26 member denominations today represent Anglican, Evangelical, Free Church, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic traditions, including about 85% of Christians in Canada. Staff is drawn from all traditions.

In the ecumenical spirit, unity does not mean uniformity, but rather an affection for diversity. It means that we are united in Christ, we experience Community with each other as we pray, dialogue, and witness together, and we learn to receive and offer the Compassion of Christ to each other, and together, to the world that God so loves.

As we mark the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Canadian Council of Churches, we acknowledge that we do not yet manifest the full and visible unity of the one Body of Christ. But, as members of the Body, we are connected to each other. We have been growing up together for three quarters of a century, and we trust that Jesus’ prayer for us will be fulfilled and we will be one as the Holy Trinity is One. We will keep

on growing up together, continually learning, developing, and maturing – growing up together into the full stature of Christ whose body we inhabit.

Over the years, that growing up together has involved lots of theological dialogue, study, and reflection among the Christian traditions that has helped us to grow as churches and in closer relationship with each other. We've produced documents, statements, and resources on theological and pastoral topics including Baptism, Marriage, Theological Anthropology, Suffering, Salvation, and Religious Pluralism. We've gathered Christians together in prayer, and provided resources to help them to pray together in their own contexts. We've engaged in and supported ecumenical dialogue, and assisted the churches in participating in interfaith conversations as well.

Putting our faith into action for justice and peace has long been a priority, and the CCC addressed topics like strengthening public health care in Canada, HIV and AIDS, economic globalization, human rights, and just peacemaking. We've been involved in the development of a number of ecumenical social justice coalitions over the years, and we are proud to have Project Ploughshares (begun initially by the Mennonites and the Society of Friends) continuing as an operating division of the CCC.

Speaking out together on issues of importance in our society and to governments has been one of the great benefits of our ecumenical relationship – historical issues included acid rain, peace and disarmament, and African relief programs. More recently, we've made statements on religious freedom, universal access to palliative care, and climate justice. We have also spoken out many times against intolerance, hatred, and violence.

The Canadian Council of Churches has assisted the churches in navigating the complex and ever-changing realities of the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As notions of mission have changed, and as we have begun to recognize the deep problems associated with our colonial history in Canada, we have walked together through disorientation, regret, and confession of our churches' participation in the Residential School System and other mis-guided mission projects.

Together, we have begun to take steps towards healing and reconciliation between the churches and our Indigenous neighbours. And we are still learning - working through new understandings of mission, developing intercultural ministries, and new relationships with Indigenous peoples in Canada.

We have prayed for each other, comforted each other, and assisted each other through struggles. We've exchanged resources and developed others together for evangelism, Christian education, and pastoral care.

In time, we adopted the forum model for our decision-making as commissions and Council, where all voices hold equal weight. This process brings member churches into encounter with one another, promoting understanding among us.

At 75 years old, the Canadian Council of Churches has lived a good lifetime together as a Body, but we still have some growing up together to do... until we experience the fullness of unity, until we reach the full stature of Christ.

The other detail that is added in the Ephesians version of the Body of Christ metaphor is the mention of the ligaments. Whereas 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians talks about feet and hands, ears and eyes and noses, the ligaments that bind all the other body parts together are only mentioned in Ephesians.

I wonder if you've ever done that exercise in a Bible study or retreat where you think about the human body with its many parts and compare it to the Body of Christ with many members. And then you ask yourself, what part am I? Am I a mouth because I am a preacher? Am I a strong back because I help to carry the burdens of others? Am I an ear because I am a compassionate listener?

Well, some of you may want to identify your gifts and your role in the church with various parts of the Body. But I would like to suggest that all of you who are here tonight may be called to be the ligaments, connecting the other parts and assisting them to function smoothly and in a coordinated fashion.

If you decided that the best thing to do on a Thursday evening in September was to attend the birthday celebration of the Canadian Council of Churches, you're likely pretty committed to ecumenism. And you are the members of Christ's body, together with others from across the country who will join us for the live stream event next month, whose commitment to Christian unity will connect all the other body parts, joining church to church, and promoting our growth together into the one church of unity and peace that Jesus is calling us to become.

Paul begins tonight's passage by begging – pleading with the Ephesian Christians to live a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called. Have you thought about ecumenism as a calling? Have you thought about yourself as called to be a ligament – embracing the ministry of unity as an essential part of the work of the church?

When I was in Hungary last week, I met a young woman in ministry who called herself an “ecumaniac.” She was serving in the ecumenical office of the Reformed Church of Hungary, but it quickly became apparent that it was not just a job for her, but a calling.

Dia grew up in an interchurch family with a mother in the Reformed Church and a father in the Greek Catholic Church. The convention where she lives is for the children of such a mixed marriage to follow the denomination of the parent of the same gender, so she was baptized and raised in the Reformed Church of her mother.

Through her father and brother though, she was also familiar with and connected to the Greek Catholic Church. So connected, in fact, that when she was confirmed as a teenager in the Reformed Church, she felt very deeply the scandal of the divided church. As she professed her faith and embraced her belonging in the Body of Christ, she knew that she was not in communion with half her own family. She felt simultaneously the joy of belonging and the pain of separation.

But rather than despair at the broken church or accept its state as normal, Dia responded to a call to become a ligament, binding the diverse parts of the Body together in love. Her daily work contributes to the growing connections between the churches in Hungary and churches from different parts of the world. She was also elected in 2017 as an Executive Committee member of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

And in her time off, she serves as an elder at the St. Columba Scottish Mission Church in Budapest – a congregation that celebrates diversity, welcomes people from many cultures and traditions, and has a long history of reaching out to people on the margins with the love of Christ.

You might deduce that I've had a similar calling to become a ligament. My call to pastoral ministry and the preaching life came first, but it was soon followed by a call to marriage. Not only to marriage in a general sense, but a call to marry a particular person who just happened to be a Roman Catholic and an ecumenist.

It didn't make sense for either of us to switch churches. We never even considered that, actually. Because our ministry callings were both rooted in our Christian traditions. Instead, we embraced another calling, or perhaps just a new layer within our already existing callings – to become ministers of unity, ligaments binding our churches together through our love and commitment to each other and to both our communities of faith.

Some of us were pushed along the journey to an ecumenical calling by things like marrying a person of another church tradition, but any of us can be called to ecumenism when we open our hearts to love our siblings in Christ across diversity and difference.

And then we have some work to do. Ecumenism is hard work that Paul says takes humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, and making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

If you have been involved in the work of the CCC Governing Board or one of its commissions, or if you've represented your church on a dialogue, or been a part of a local shared ministry, or lived in an interchurch family, then you know that ecumenism takes time, resources, and commitment to study, dialogue, and listen. It takes determination to keep looking for consensus, to keep doing together whatever we can, and to keep the relationships growing deeper so that our work together can expand.

Let this anniversary serve as a reminder of your calling, and an encouragement to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. Embrace your role as a ligament, and do the work of connecting "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."