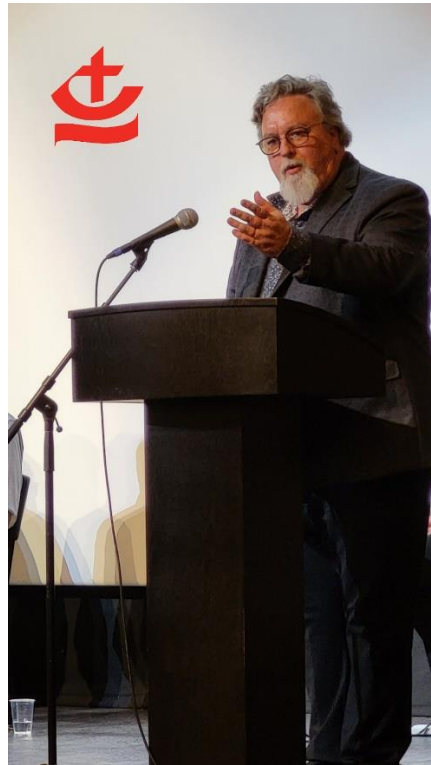




“HELP US, LORD, TO HAVE A LIFE TURNED TOWARDS YOU”

*A Homily from General Secretary Pastor Peter Noteboom
for the 2024 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU)*



Council General Secretary Pastor Peter Noteboom delivering this homily at a Week of Prayer celebration in Hamilton, Ontario (Photo credit: The Canadian Council of Churches, 1/18/2024). Learn more about the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in Canadian context at www.weekofprayer.ca.

Scripture passages

- The theme verse for the 2024 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: “*You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself*” (Luke 10:27), which is part of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
- Romans 14:8-9
- Psalm 103:13-18



“HELP US, LORD, TO HAVE A LIFE TURNED TOWARDS YOU.”¹

Burkina Faso. Bobo-Dioulasso. I remember the thriving market. One in the centre of town with every kind of modern and traditional goods and services. Grains, fruits, vegetables. Buttons, textiles, shoes. Bronze sculptures, wooden masks, indigo dyed country cloth. It was a delight, a feast for the senses,

I was there looking for an answer to my burning question: what must I do to promote life in the villages in Niger where we were working? That question was tied up for me in the answer to our lawyer’s question: what must I do to inherit eternal life? I believed that my work in Niger was one of the way I responded to the question and answer in the story of the Good Samaritan. I wanted to be part of the process of going to the one who had been robbed, bandaging wounds, offering healing, and bringing people to a place of shelter and home.

We learned from Le Centre d'Études et d'Expérimentations Économiques et Sociales pour l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CESAO) about autopromotion communautaire, community self-help.

It was a rich learning experience, a delight, and a feast for my senses too. Here are a few principles I remember from that training:

- Begin with where the community is, not where you are.
- Listen, don’t tell.
- Pose good questions. Don’t impose answers.
- Be patient.
- Think critically along the action – reflection spiral: what do you see? What are the causes of what you see? What are the consequences?
- Share, don’t give.
- Accompany, don’t lead.
- Celebrate with the community when they are ready.
- Self-evaluate.

I still struggle to practice what we learned in Bobo-Dioulasso. Ask my colleague Terry who is hear with us tonight!

I see, that growing Christian unity, here and in The Canadian Council of Churches; loving our neighbours and neighbourhood in Canada and next door, is a similar process:

- Begin. (Show up.)
- Listen, don’t tell.
- Be.
- Share.
- Suffer with, don’t solve.
- Accompany, don’t lead.

¹ This is the opening prayer of Day 1 in the Week of Prayer resource “Eight Days of Prayer: Biblical Reflections and Prayers for the Eight Days” (<https://www.weekofprayer.ca/2024-wpcu-resources>).



- Show mercy.
- Celebrate with.
- Self-Evaluate.

These verbs, actions, sound to me like discipleship. Listening, accompanying, self-evaluating, discipling one another. Isn't this what Christ prayed for in the garden with the disciples? That we might become one, that the world might believe? Let's add pray to our list of action verbs.

A story of listening and accompanying from the Council

Let me bring this to life with a recent story from the Council. For the last year a small group of us from The Canadian Council of Churches and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada have been meeting to share what we know, what our questions are, and what we might like to do with one another about the war in Ukraine.

It wasn't easy to begin, to get the right people in the room, but begin we did. After beginning, we listened: stories from Ukraine, stories from Eastern Europe, stories about history, stories about theology, stories about Ukrainians in Canada, stories about forgiveness and reconciliation. Gradually, the story-telling, question asking, critical thinking, and being with one another sparked a desire to act together, to pray together, to prepare to mark the second anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine.

Earlier this week, a draft Canadian pastoral statement to mark that occasion has been circulated for endorsement by Canadian churches in both the Council and the Fellowship networks.

We hope these actions will in turn lead to prayer services like this one, others in congregational services, acts of charity and sharing with Ukrainians who are here in our communities, working for peace for our neighbours on the other side of the globe.

Sometimes success looks different than we expect

Here is another story. The phone rings on a Monday morning: The Prime Minister's Office wonders if The Canadian Council of Churches could help bring together religious leaders in Canada with the Prime Minister to speak about the effect of the Israel Gaza conflict on Canadian faith communities and the phenomenon of discrimination and prejudice against religious communities in Canada, the following week.

For years now, the Council has been listening, accompanying, participating, and from time to time contributing to leading interreligious roundtables in Canada: The Canadian Interfaith Conversation, and interfaith military and prison chaplaincy committees, for example. Because of those relationships, within 24 hours we have representatives from the Canadian Multifaith Federation, the Canadian Interfaith Conversation, and The Canadian Council of Churches on a Microsoft Teams call with Uditia Samuel, Deputy Director of Outreach and Networking for the Prime Minister's Office.

As we work through the details together, identify and invite the religious leaders, we are booking a time, the conflict in Israel and Gaza escalates, and the Government of Canada responds, we lose the Jewish community.



They simply can't be seen in the same room with the Prime Minister. After different attempts to find a creative solution, we run out of time, the holiday season hits, and we have to call it off.

We are not always successful in terms of results when we work for and with unity, but by experiencing and accompanying one another through their hopes and pain and suffering, we deepen our bonds and depth of understanding. Wiser for the next time.

§

In my view, the 200 or so volunteers who attend the 8 or 10 tables of dialogue and action in the Council are all responding to these questions:

- What must we do to inherit eternal life?
- What must we do to promote life in the community and country where we live?
- Who is our neighbour and what does it mean to love them?
- How will mercy and truth meet? Justice and peace kiss? As the Psalms say.

Discipleship in these questions is not optional. Instead, it is an imperative. We must be listening, waiting, sharing our faith journeys, self-evaluating, suffering and celebrating with one another, growing unity, growing Christian unity. Loving one another. Life depends on it.

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One of my mentors, Dr. Jane Vella, who works in the same tradition of community self-help as that school in Burkina Faso put it this way:

The means is dialogue, the end is learning, the purpose is peace.

Help us, Lord, to have a life turned towards you.

This is the title of today's [Bible Study for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#). Whether we are musicians, pastors, gardeners, investors, teachers, mechanics, journalists, coders, bankers, couriers, doctors, lawyers, elected officials – whatever our vocation our calling our work in life – may we be on this journey of love and unity together: listening, waiting, being, praying, sharing, accompanying, suffering with, and self-evaluating. Together.

Prayer

God of life,

You have created us to have life, and life in all its fullness.

May we recognise and see in our brothers and sisters, our neighbours near and far, their and our desire for life today and forever.



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As we follow Jesus' way of listening, accompanying, sharing, waiting, suffering, self-evaluating, may we be with and accompany others to the way, truth, and life.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.