

Theology Student Essay Contest
Pray Without Ceasing
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As Christians gather to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we are invited to remember our humble beginnings, our century of cooperation, and our future of great promise. As we acknowledge God's call to heal divisions, promote dialogues, and celebrate the unity that already exists as members of the Body of Christ, we gather as an outward sign of this interconnection each year for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. But on this centennial celebration we are reminded that as Christians we are called to "pray without ceasing" throughout this ecumenical journey, and that the activities that take place across the planet during these eight days are only the beginning of our call to serve one another through prayer. As we work towards greater ecumenical partnership in the century ahead, our unity together must begin with prayer that transcends human divisions.

As the Statement of Origins of the National Workshop on Christian Unity explains, the workshop and other ecumenical gatherings exist in order to be a "resource and balance between national planning and local responsibilities, general ecumenical discussions, and particular interchurch conversations, and regional leadership efforts and local realities" (National Workshop, n.d.). The National Workshop and other ecumenical bodies work together at the national and denominational level to celebrate our unity in Christ, but also to search for "ways to overcome the [human] divisions that remain" between Christians (National Workshop, n.d.). While the actions of the diverse ecumenical bodies have done much at the national level to bring denominations together, this next century of celebrating the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity serves as a reminder that all Christians, local congregations, and church leaders are called to remember the concerns and thanksgivings of our brothers and sisters in faith across this country and planet. With neighborhood churches sharing street corners, town squares, and sometimes even parking lots, the diversity of our Christian family has always been apparent. In order

though that we make the vision “that they all may be one” (John 17:21) a tangible reality, more must be done in our local churches to encourage education, participation, and prayer concerning the blessings and challenges experienced by faith communities across town and around the world. This cooperation is not an optional aspect of God’s Mission for Christians. While prayerful dialogue with ecumenical neighbors will not eliminate all theological and social disagreements, nor is its purpose an attempt to build one “mega-denomination” or larger church hierarchy, it is an essential component of Jesus’ message of how the diverse body of Christ is to carry out God’s Mission on the Earth. As Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches (USA) explains, “Unity is not synonymous with agreement ... [but instead] we understand that we have deep disagreements and try to address them. This is a consequence of being in Christ” (as cited in Veteran, Nov. 2007).

Prayer is a powerful force in our world today, a God given means to communicate our concerns and thanksgivings to the Divine. When the Church is able to set aside its differences, and look beyond denominational, international, and cultural barriers, the ultimate reality of the Church united becomes apparent and great things happen. The Acts of the Apostles discusses how the first Christian community gathered together in the midst of outside turmoil and “all devoted themselves with one accord in prayer.” (Acts 1:14) Samuel Broomfield Reeves Jr., author of Congregation-to-Congregation Relationship, discusses how vital prayer was in the partnership of two churches in Monrovia, Liberia and Grand Rapids, USA. While his experiences speak about churches that have dedicated themselves to ministry together, his perspective shows how mutual prayers offered up for other members of the Body of Christ can be a constant blessing for all involved. Reeves explains that “there is no telling how much both congregations and their ministry opportunities can be changed and blessed as a result of the ...

prayers of members of each church” (2004, p. 91). When congregations find time in their corporate and private worship to pray for both the Church Universal and individual denominations and congregations, God makes the seemingly “impossible a reality” (p. 91). Through prayer, members of the Body of Christ are drawn closer together, better attuned to the influence of the Divine in their lives, and more able to hear the call of God to set aside the divisiveness of the past and prepare for the present and forthcoming Kingdom of God; A realm where today’s minor theological differences will be insignificant in the presence of the Divine.

As acknowledged, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, much has been accomplished through Christian dialogue at the denominational and international level, but the real test for Christian Unity will be if the next one hundred years will include our local congregations united in unceasing prayer- both celebrating the diversity of the Body of Christ and lifting up the concerns and blessings of sister denominations. Selecting a time during “corporate worship when you can pray for each other regularly” is a great place to begin Reeves acknowledges, but Kinnamon further challenges congregations and individuals to strive for a greater interconnection through prayer (Reeves, 2004, p. 91). At a speech given to a gathering of Churches Uniting in Christ Kinnamon asked our local churches to reflect on our current state of ecumenical relations and if we truly are allowing the Holy Spirit to work within our prayers to bring about change.

Kinnamon explains:

The real test of ... [the ecumenical movement] is whether attitudes begin to change. When the local CME congregation protests racial profile, do the other ... churches in the community see it as their issue, when the leader in the UMC dies, do the rest of us mourn the loss as our own? When the local Episcopal Church confirms a group of young people, do the other churches in the neighborhood celebrate the event and pray for those young people by name? When the Presbyterian Church struggles with questions of human sexuality, do the other churches pray and struggle with them? When the UCC starts a new congregation in a growing part of our community do we celebrate and support this witness for our common

Lord or do we wonder why “we” did not get the property first? (Kinnamon, Jan. 2002)

When we begin to see prayer as a constant action of the Christian lifestyle and acknowledge the importance of praying for one another at all times, we will begin to grow in a deeper level of commitment and understanding for one another, as Christ intended.

When we gather in prayer privately in our homes or corporately in our congregations, we lend our voices in the never-ending chorus of believers around this world and in the world hereafter. Through incorporating prayer for one another into our common prayers we learn to put our differences aside and thus opening our ears and eyes to the concerns and thanksgivings that surround us. When we learn to “pray without ceasing” for our local and global brothers and sisters in faith, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit we are able to build the world that Christ proclaimed through our celebration of our membership in the Body of Christ and acknowledgment of the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Prayer of Unity

Heavenly Creator, we come to you today as your living Body, the Church Universal. Through your son Jesus Christ, the Spirit moves within us to both celebrate and proclaim your Kingdom on Earth. While we acknowledge that we have not always acted as parts of the same body, we gather together today in prayer to reflect on our past disagreements, our present challenges, and our promise of eternity together with you. Unity is not something we seek to discover, but something that we endeavor to celebrate around your table of great hospitality. Help us to be outward signs of this unity through our interactions with our neighbors in faith until the day when we will all be united with you in eternal glory. **Amen**

The denomination in which I am seeking ordination, the United Church of Christ, considers itself dedicated to ecumenical endeavors that celebrate the unity of the Body of Christ. Having emerged as a church union of denominations from four distinct traditions and histories, the UCC continues to strive to be “United and Uniting” in both its inter and intra-denominational activities. We are all parts of the same Church Universal, and this prayer serves not only as a reflection on this belief, but also to suggest the possibility of further outward celebration of our eternal unity. Through my experience witnessing diverse forms of Christianity abroad and locally, I know that what separates us is minor compared to the unity we have in Christ.

References

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