

2015 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity  
January 25, 2015  
Nashua Area Interfaith Council  
Christ the King Lutheran Church  
Broad Street, Nashua, NH

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity began in 1908 as the Octave of Christian Unity and focused on prayer for church unity as an initiative of a Roman Catholic priest, Father Paul Watson, cofounder of the Graymoor Franciscan Friars. He conceived of the week beginning on the Feast of the Confession of Peter, the Protestant variant of the ancient feast of the Chair of St. Peter on January 18, and concluding with the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul on January 25. Pope Pius X endorsed the concept and a successor Pope Benedict the XV encouraged its observance throughout the entire Roman Catholic Church. In the 1920s Protestant leaders proposed an annual week of prayer for Christian unity just before Pentecost which is the traditional event commemorated of the establishment of the Church. In 1935 another Roman Catholic priest, Abbe Paul Couturier of Lyons, France proposed naming the observance the “Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity”, a proposal officially accepted by the Roman Catholic Church in 1966. In 1941 the Protestant Faith and Order Conference changed the Protestant date for observing the week of unity prayer to the period between the Feasts of Sts. Peter and Paul, January 18 and 25. In 1948, with the founding of the World Council of Churches by 147 member churches the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity became increasingly recognized by different churches throughout the world.

The World Council of Churches represents 332 Orthodox, Anglican and other Protestant denominations with a total membership of about 400 million Christians. There are serious

internal tensions within the group. Christian Orthodox churches are distressed at some of the trans-traditional positions within the World Council of Churches. Chief among these are the eligibility of women for ordination, acceptance of gays and lesbians for ordination, and acceptance of committed homosexual relationships as equivalent to heterosexual. The historical roots of the World Council of Churches are to be found in the Protestant student and lay movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the meetings of the Protestant Missionary Societies in 1888, 1900 and the decisive 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference which gave rise to the modern ecumenical movement. The Edinburgh missionaries knew from firsthand experience that the scandalous divisions of the churches were a grave hindrance to the Church's mission: the credibility of the Church's mission of reconciliation and healing was contradicted by Christian disunity. It was an Anglican, Bishop Charles Brent of the Episcopal Church in the USA, who recognized that the unity of the Church would only be brought about if there was firm agreement in faith. He determined to bring together bishops, Church leaders, and theologians to begin the task of studying the division of the Churches. It took from 1910 to 1927 to set up and prepare the First World Conference on Faith and Order which was held in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1927. 70 commissions in 40 countries worked to prepare the meeting with Protestants, Orthodox and Anglicans participating. Topics included: the call for unity; the nature of the Church; the common confession of the faith; the ministry and the sacraments. These topics have been central to the agenda of the continuing Faith and Order Commission within the World Council of Churches ever since. In the midst of this a 1920 Encyclical from the Eastern Orthodox Synod of Constantinople suggested a "fellowship of churches" similar to the churches met and voted in 1937 at the Faith and Order Conference in Edinburgh and in 1938 in

Utrecht, Netherlands to found a World Council of Churches but its establishment was delayed following the outbreak of World War II. Finally in 1948 the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches took place in Amsterdam. There were 147 member churches. Assemblies are held every six to eight years. The 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly took place at Busan, Republic of Korea in 2013 with a membership of 345 churches.

In 1941 the Faith and Order Conference changed the date for observing the week of unity prayer to the dates observed by Catholics, January 18 to 25<sup>th</sup> which is the week between the Feasts of Sts. Peter and Paul. In 1958 the French Catholic group Unite Chretienne and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches began co-operative preparation of materials for the Week of Prayer. In 1968 the first official use of materials prepared jointly by the Faith and Order Commission and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Promoting of Christian Unity representing the entire Roman Catholic Church took place.

The Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the World Council of Churches, nor are the Southern Baptist Convention and Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. But they are members of the Faith and Order Commission. The 120 member Faith and Order Commission is today the most comprehensive forum for faith and order debate that exists. Representatives from Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific are now present in more just proportions. What began as an elite, Western, male, largely clerical academic group has become a worldwide community of women and men, lay and ordained, young and not so young according to theologian Mary Tanner, a past Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission. The gradual widening of the

community affects the formation of the agenda and the approach to the work, reflecting in texts which at best reflect the concerns of the wide group.

The entry of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II, led to the most significant and intensifying effects on the work of the Faith and Order Movement. It led to a proliferation of bilateral dialogues on faith and order issues. The Roman Catholics began to talk to the Methodists, the Orthodox, the Anglicans, the Disciples of Christ, the Lutherans, the Reformed, the Oriental Orthodox. Every church it seemed in the 70s and the 80s was talking to every other church in a complex network of theological dialogue. These gave rise to ecumenical consensus, convergences and differences articulated in a whole series of published Reports and Agreed Statements on a world level which led to confessional intercommunion agreements such as between the Lutheran and Episcopal Churches. Twelve of the 120 Commissioners are Roman Catholics. Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria is one of several Vice-Moderators of Faith and Order. The 1982 Faith and Order Commission Lima Report text, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" showed many convergences and agreements on those three issues over which Christians have been divided for centuries and was referred to the churches for review and consideration. Two hundred churches responded. A consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification which split the Christian Church in the West in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was formally acknowledged by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation through an Official Common Statement in 1999 and joined by the World Methodist Council in the Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue beginning with *The Gospel and the Church* (1972) and more

explicitly in the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic document *Justification by Faith* (1983), as well as the report of the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on *Unity Church and Justification* (1993), and the German document *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* (1994).

In 2012 the World Council of Church's Faith and Order Commission published the fruits of the most current theological dialogues its document: *The Church, Towards a Common Vision* stemming from Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and churches' response to it. The document is rooted in the nature and mission of the Church as seen in the convergences and it is offered to the churches for their study and official response and has two distinct and deeply interrelated objectives: The first is renewal. The second is theological agreement on the Church. Its Preface states: As a multilateral ecumenical text, the Church cannot be identified exclusively with any one ecclesiological tradition. In the long process from 1993 to 2012, the theological expressions and ecclesial experiences of many churches have been brought together in such a way that the churches reading this text may find themselves challenged to live more fully the ecclesial life; others may find in it aspects of ecclesial life and understanding which have been neglected or forgotten; others may find themselves strengthened and affirmed. As Christians experience life-long growth into Christ, they will find themselves drawing closer to one another, and living into the biblical image of the one body: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." The document, *The Church, Towards a Common Vision* has four chapters: 1) God's Mission and the Unity of the Church; 2) The Church of the Triune God; 3) The Church: Growing in Communion; 4) The

Church: In and for the World. I commend it to you and to your church for envisioning. I have mentioned that the Roman Catholic Church, while it is not a member of the World Council of Churches, is a significant participant in its Faith and Order Commission and thus indirectly participates in the life of the World Council of Churches. One of the bishop leaders at the Second Vatican Council was New Hampshire's own Bishop Ernest Primeau, Ordinary of the Diocese of Manchester. Upon his return from the Second Vatican Council he led the Roman Catholic Diocese of Manchester into full membership in the New Hampshire Council of Churches. I would like to propose that the varied Non-denominational Christian, independent Protestant, Evangelical, Salvation Army, Christian Science, Latter Day Saints, Baptist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran, Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christian churches of Greater Nashua enter upon a joint study of "The Church, Towards a Common Vision" in a disciplined way and offer the fruit of such study to the New Hampshire Council of Churches which includes the Roman Catholic Diocese of Manchester. We are after all the Gate City of New Hampshire, why not be the gate through which a new ecumenical energy can flow through New Hampshire and beyond.

The theme for the 2015 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity comes from the gospel of John: "Jesus said to her: 'Give me to drink.'" It was proposed by a group of Brazilian Christians called together by the National Council of Churches of Brazil (CONIC). The biblical gesture of offering water to whoever arrives, as a way of welcoming and sharing, is something that is repeated in all regions of Brazil. The proposed study and meditation on the story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at the well represents an ecumenical dialogical encounter par excellence. It

can help us and our communities to realize the dialogical dimensions of life in Christ which we call the Kingdom of God which encompasses the whole world as this example from the Church in Brazil reminds us. We are invited this afternoon to respond to this invitation to dialogue by forming dyads or triads and sharing moments or events which have been living spiritual water for our own selves and in this way take an initial step towards implementing *The Church, Towards a Common Vision* here in our own community.

Following our sharing together of our personal experiences of the living water of God's grace in our lives we will commemorate our own baptisms through a shared pouring of water.

The World Council of Churches document on "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" (1982), the fruit of many years of study and reflection by the participating Churches demonstrated a growing convergence amongst the Churches of their understanding of baptism which may be summarized as follows: "Through Baptism with water in the name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Christians are united with Christ and with each other in the Church of every time and place. Baptism is the introduction to and celebration of new life in Christ and of participation in his baptism, which we recently commemorated, life, death and resurrection (cf. Matt. 3:13-17; Rom. 6:3-5). It is "the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5) incorporating believers into the body of Christ and enabling them to share in the kingdom of God and the life of the world to come (cf. Eph. 2:6). Baptism involves confession of sin, conversion of heart, pardoning, cleansing and sanctification; it consecrates the believer as a member of "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9). Baptism is thus a basic bond of unity. Some churches see the gift of the Holy Spirit as given in a special way

through chrismation or confirmation, which is considered by them as one of the sacraments of initiation. The general agreement about baptism has led some who are involved in the ecumenical movement to call for the mutual recognition of baptism.” For varying degrees of convergence between Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed such as the United Church of Christ and Roman Catholics you may consult “Harvesting the Fruits”, pgs. 164 to 168, by Cardinal Walter Kasper who served as the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Continuum Publishing Group, 2009.

So, my sisters and brothers in Christ let us now enter into the next step in our lives of discipleship by sharing with one another moments of grace and commemorating our common baptism and what that represents. May God’s blessings continue to sustain and guide us.

Amen.

#### Reading List

World Council of Churches History: [www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us/wcc-history](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us/wcc-history)  
World Council of Churches Documents: What is Faith and Order? (Mary Tanner):  
[www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/xii-essay](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/xii-essay)  
Faith and Order and the Multilateral Dialogue on the Church Mons. John A. Radano, Receive one another, as Christ received you. Taken from: L’Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English, 23 February 2005, page 11; [www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/CATWCC04.HTM](http://www.ewtn.com/library/Theology/CATWCC04.HTM)  
Harvesting the Fruits, Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue, Cardinal Walter Kasper, 2009, Continuum International Publishing Group  
Growth in Agreement, Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, Ecumenical Documents II, edited by Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, Paulist Press, World Council of Churches, 1984

William J. Manseau, D.Min, D.D.  
The Emmaus Institute, Inc.  
154 Broad Street, Suite 1539  
Nashua, NH 03063  
[wmmanseau@yahoo.com](mailto:wmmanseau@yahoo.com)

