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### Mission and Unity

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## *Chapter 17*

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### **MISSION AND UNITY**

PAT GUSTIN

In a world fractured by divisions of all kinds, the church in the twenty-first century faces massive challenges for developing and maintaining unity. This article examines some of the ways the church has traditionally met this challenge and then focuses on the place of cross-cultural mission in aiding the church to meet it.

#### **The Challenge**

As our church moves forward in the twenty-first century, we do so with great optimism and enthusiasm. Our membership has reached over 13 million, scattered somewhat unequally in about 200 countries around the world. With awe we exclaim, "What has God wrought!"

And yet, even in the midst of our joy and rejoicing over what God has done in the past, we have concerns. Many of these concerns were articulated well at the General Conference session in Toronto in the year 2000. The most challenging of these concerns is UNITY. One of the most pressing questions we face today as a church is, How is it possible to maintain unity in an organization this large and this diverse? As Pastor Jan Paulsen stated in his remarks during

the closing Sabbath in Toronto, “. . . our very size—internationally, culturally, and politically—and our ethnic diversity pose a formidable challenge in terms of unity.” Pastor Paulsen has therefore placed unity as one of the top three priorities for the church at this time in history.

Other organizations throughout the world—churches, multinational corporations, and even such organizations as the United Nations—also struggle with the monstrous challenge of developing or maintaining unity against the backdrop of massive differences of all kinds—cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, political, ideological, tribal, and national. These differences are at the basis of the majority of serious armed conflicts tearing the world apart today. Their power to divide and destroy has been tragically demonstrated in recent years. Rwanda, Kosovo, Bosnia, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Indonesia are just a few painful reminders of the destructiveness of disunity in our world today. We live in a global village in which unity is a hazy and distant dream, mocking us in the darkness of our reality. Though we could wish otherwise, the church is not immune to these serious challenges to unity that are all around it.

### **The Goal**

And yet, unrealistic and impossible as attaining this dream may seem in our world today, Scripture leaves no doubt as to the importance of unity, oneness, brotherly love, and harmony. Jesus’ prayer in John 17 focuses on it: “Father, I pray that they can be one” (John 17:11, 21-23).<sup>1</sup> And unity or oneness is a constant theme for the Apostle Paul. “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus” (Romans 15:5). “We who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). “I appeal to you . . . in the name of Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10, 11). “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body . . . whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free . . .” (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13). “Aim for perfection . . . be of one mind, live in peace” (2 Corinthians 13:11). “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). “Make very effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit . . .” (Ephesians 4:3). “Make my joy

complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Philippians 2:2). "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have . . . . And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:12-14). Peter adds, "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another" (1 Peter 3:8, 9). "Above all, love each other deeply . . ." (1 Peter 4:8).

Were these words just "pie in the sky" platitudes? Vague dreams? Hopeful advice? Is unity only a practical matter—an "organizational necessity" to help the church run more smoothly? Or is there a deeper, more fundamental, reason for the urgency we see emphasized in these texts?

I would like to state that unity is neither a vague dream nor just an organizational tool. It is rather the very core and driving force of Christian life—but especially of our Christian witness. The deep motivation for the above admonitions for unity is made abundantly clear in the texts themselves. During the Last Supper, as Jesus admonished the disciples to love one another as He had loved them, He concluded, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). And in John 17 He follows his repeated pleas to "be one" with the words, "then the world will know that you [the Father] sent me . . ." (John 17:21, 23). It is clear that only in our unity can the world see a true demonstration of the power of the gospel. Paul follows his plea for unity in Romans 15:5 with the assurance that when this unity exists, the church will "with one heart and mouth . . . glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." He concludes by urging, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God . . . so that the Gentiles may glorify God . . ." (Romans 15:7, 9).

Though there are obviously many practical, organizational reasons for unity, and many important reasons to maintain a doctrinal unity, the biggest single reason that both Jesus and Paul gave for maintaining unity is neither organizational nor doctrinal. It is the impact it has on our witness. Unity brings glory to God. It demonstrates to the world the power of the gospel to do what we cannot do alone. The unity of the church is the greatest "advertisement" there is for God's power and grace. This demonstration of unity empowers our mission and enables our witness. To the extent that the church reflects the reality that it is the body of Christ, united in love—to that extent, the church's mission will succeed. Unity is foundational to effective witness and mission.

The early Christian church was a living example of a unity that crossed cultural, language, social, and ethnic barriers. Slaves, wealthy merchants, those

from Caesar's palace, soldiers, laborers, Jews and Gentiles, men and women all worshiped together at a time when society was splintered by classes and castes. The first-century church was countercultural by the love and unity it exemplified, and those looking on are purported to have exclaimed, "How the Christians love each other!" Their unity was indeed the greatest witness to the power of the risen Christ.

Our ability to glorify God, to bring praise to Him, and to be a viable witness to the "gentiles" (nonbelievers) today is still dependent upon this God-given unity.

### The Methods to Attain Unity

But with all the inherent differences among us, and the incredible pressures surrounding us, how can unity be achieved? Over the last few years I have heard many suggestions about how this unity can be maintained in the church. Undoubtedly each of these is important and has some validity. Here are some of the suggestions.

- Our shared beliefs—doctrines and biblical truth we hold in common (e.g., the Sabbath, Second Coming, prophecy, etc.)
- Our standards—practices of religion that we share (e.g., modesty, temperate living, chaste behavior, etc.)
- Church structure—organization and administrative practices
- Church programs—e.g., Pathfinders, Sabbath Schools, women's ministries programs, etc.
- The Sabbath School lesson
- The Spirit of Prophecy
- The Church Manual
- Our financial structure that makes us all interdependent
- Theological education
- Worship—music, worship styles, etc.

Some of the above items focus on doctrinal unity, which is obviously important. Others emphasize the ability to organize and administer ourselves effectively on a global basis. I have no question that each of these is important and is valuable in helping to maintain unity. But to these I would like to suggest an additional one: *mission*. Mission (our effective witness in all its forms—but especially mission that reaches across cultural barriers) is not only the biggest *reason* for maintaining unity; it also is a major *method* for maintaining unity.

The greatest threat to unity today is not doctrinal differences, specific practices of Adventism that vary from place to place, or even differences in how the church operates in different locations. Throughout the centuries, starting with the early Christian church, converts have been able to worship God in ways that were quite diverse from other believers. The real challenge to unity and harmony is the inherent human tendency to exclusiveness and ethnocentrism. These inevitably lead to nationalism, racism, and elitism and result in distrust, prejudice, and division in all its forms. It is possible to study the same Sabbath School lesson and use the same church manual and at least on the surface share the same beliefs and practices, and yet because of prejudices, exclusiveness, and ethnocentrism not have true Christian unity. Instead, we could be divided by ignorance, distrust, and suspicion. There are several ways that mission brings unity.

### **The Cure**

By staying focused on the primary mission of the whole church (taking the gospel to *all* the world), we find unity of purpose and action that ties us together in a very practical and deeply meaningful way, despite cultural differences. When church members share a common, overarching commitment to mission, reaching out to others—across the street or across the globe—their personal, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences become much less important. Minor matters (the color of carpet in the church, the interpretation of minor doctrinal points, the specific order of worship, hair or dress styles, etc.) cease to be issues of importance. Mission unites people at a deep level that allows for an underlying unity that does not require some kind of outer uniformity. Singing the same hymns in churches around the world, studying the exact same Sabbath School lessons, building churches that look alike, etc., may *feel* like unity but in fact may not be true unity at all. The unity of Jesus and Paul was of a very different nature. Their vision of unity was based not on externals, but on deep commitment to our mission and witness.

As we interact with and learn to understand and respect people of different cultures without a spirit of superiority and judgment, we build bridges of tolerance and acceptance. We come to realize that the things that unite us are greater than those that divide us. Our differences cease to be of paramount importance. By widespread intermingling, we avoid the danger of splitting

into “regional Adventist churches” driven by nationalism or ethnic pride or prejudice.

Perhaps the greatest blessing of all from this mingling together is the development of trust. As a colleague of mine frequently states, “Trust is the glue that holds groups together.” And trust can only grow as we come to know each other and learn that in spite of our differences we share a common humanity and a common spiritual identity, commitment, and goals. We thus learn that those who are very different from us are, in fact, still trustworthy. To have true unity based on trust, however, we must have opportunities to know and interact with each other.

### **The Added Blessing**

There is an additional benefit to this type of unity and intermingling. We need each other to understand God’s Word fully. Not only do we enhance unity by focusing on the needs of the whole world, but we gain wider and deeper spiritual knowledge and understandings as we encounter insights into Scripture and theology from a different perspective. Each of us is in danger of seeing only a part of the picture of what God is trying to reveal to the world. Without intending to, we each read Scripture through our own cultural lenses and biases—understanding some things well, totally missing others. We inevitably have theological “blind spots” because of our own cultural perspective and limitations. To get the full picture of what God wants to communicate to the world, we need to hear from each other. We need the insights and wisdom that those from cultures and worldviews very different from our own have to offer. This blending and mingling of our spiritual strengths will contribute to unity in a powerful way and will be a significant factor in keeping us together, as well as giving us a greater breadth of understanding of truth, if we are willing to listen and learn from each other.

In the mid-1880s Ellen White wrote the following in regard to the work in Europe, where many cultural differences had been encountered: “There is no person, no nation, that is perfect in every habit and thought. One must learn of another. Therefore God wants the different nationalities to mingle together, to be one in judgment, one in purpose. Then the union that there is in Christ will be exemplified” (*Historical Sketches* 1886:137). One in purpose and judgment—that is true unity.

### **The Pressing Question—Unity or Uniformity?**

As we face the need for and the challenge of developing unity, we inevitably will encounter the temptation to focus on uniformity as a means of reaching unity. Without a doubt, unity is essential for our church, but uniformity is not only unrealistic but even unhealthy. They are definitely not the same. The underlying unity of basic beliefs and standards does not require uniformity in every aspect of religious thought and practice. Intermingling with each other across cultural barriers in mission helps clarify the difference. As we personally encounter others whose lives represent areas of similarity in both religious practice and belief, and also areas of considerable diversity, we experience the difference.

Paul and the early church obviously struggled with this issue (see Acts 15) as Jews, Romans, Greeks, proselytes, slaves, and others came into the church with different views about worship and the Christian life. But Paul and the early church leaders did not expect or require a uniformity of practice among all of the churches they established. This is evident from the fact that Jewish Christians retained much of their Jewishness and continued to practice many aspects of Judaism as a part of their Christian worship, and yet Gentile Christians obviously did not. They were not expected to commit cultural suicide to become Christians. There was unity in their belief in Christ as the Messiah, their hope in His return, their commitment to living a transformed life, and, above all, their commitment to sharing the good news with others. Unity, yes. Uniformity, no.

In the book *Perspectives* (1992), Ralph Winter amplifies this.

I have personally come to believe that unity does not have to require uniformity, and I believe that there must be such a thing as healthy diversity in human society *and in the Christian world church* [italics his]. I see the world church as the gathering together of a great symphony orchestra where we don't make every new person coming in play a violin in order to fit in with the rest. We invite the people to come in to play the same score—the Word of God—but to play their own instruments, and in this way there will issue forth a heavenly sound that will grow in the splendor and glory of God as each new instrument is added. (Winter 1992:171)

Fellowship. Understanding. Sharing. Respect. Trust. These are the building blocks needed to keep the church united. And each of these is a natural byproduct of mission, rightly done. As we focus on reaching the unreached, whether near or far, we will find ourselves naturally drawn together, despite

our differences. Therefore, as we move forward in the twenty-first century, our commitment to mission, to sending missionaries “from everywhere to everywhere,” to reaching the unreached, must be renewed with power. This is no time to turn back! This is no time to give any credence to the myth that “the day of mission and missionaries is over.” And by doing this, we will not only be fulfilling the Great Commission of Jesus, but we will be taking a huge step in preserving the unity of our church and thus giving the most powerful witness of all to the world. We will be working together to answer Jesus’ prayer: “I pray that they can be one . . . . Then the world will know that you sent me” (John 17:21).

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

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