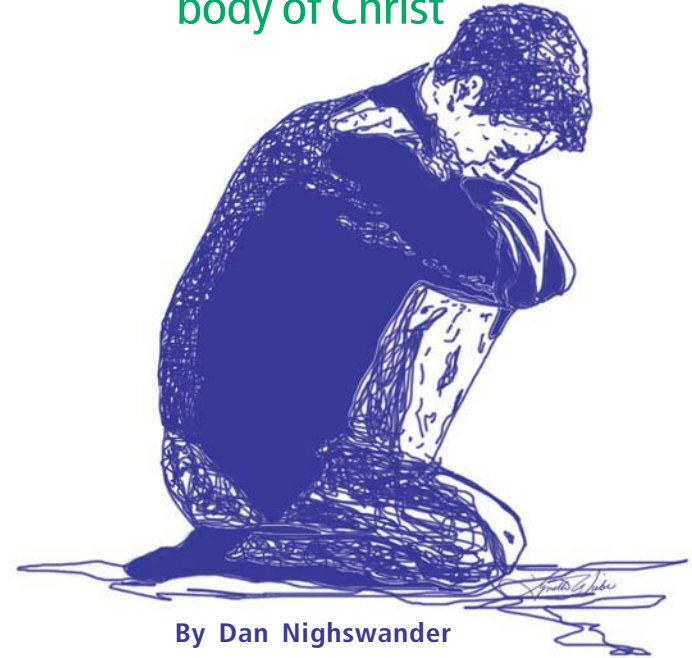


PRAYING

over the broken
body of Christ



By Dan Nighswander



**Mennonite
Church**
Canada

Prayer week materials:
A five-session worship,
prayer and study guide.

Praying over the broken body of Christ

**A five-session worship,
prayer and study guide**

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“Praying over the broken body of Christ” *A five-session worship, prayer and study guide*, is published by the Christian Formation Council, and is designed to serve as a resource for the congregations of Mennonite Church Canada.

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Formation

Foreword

“They will know we are Christians by our love...” we used to sing. This song still rings true. It expresses the passion for unity that we hear in Jesus’ Upper Room prayer for his followers, recorded a few days before his suffering and death: “...that they may be one...so that the world may believe...” (John 17:20-23)

Our world is daily rocked with terrorism, violence and war, and many who deeply hunger for human community characterized by unity and love look longingly to the church. What do they see?

As churches, we carry the mandate to incarnate Jesus’ prayer for unity, not just that we would experience the benefits of such “one-ness” but that our oneness would be invitational and missional.

Here is a study outline that probes the struggle of a divided church towards its destiny to be “one,” as Jesus intended. Dan Nighswander has masterfully described the historical and cultural context so that we might grasp the issues that divided the Corinthian church. He then explores the healing medicine that Paul’s letter brings to the brokenness of that local “body of Christ.”

Pride, cliques, theological disagreement, and sex, were some of the issues that divided that church. Sound familiar? The questions for reflection and discussion are designed to stimulate learning, worship and transformation as you work through these chapters together.

I enthusiastically commend this study guide. I pray that it will challenge us to discover deepening levels of one-ness in Christ and to stimulate us to earnest prayer that God’s Spirit would bless us with the delicate gift of unity.

—*Sven Eriksson*

Denominational Minister
Mennonite Church Canada



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Preface

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:3²)

Every year two calls come to the people and congregations of Mennonite Church Canada for a concentrated time of prayer. Both of these are recommended for January, at the beginning of a new year.¹

From Mennonite Church Canada, following a long-standing tradition of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, there is an invitation to devote extra time to prayer during the first week of the year. The timing is a reminder that if we give the “first fruits” of time—as well as of our money and energy—to God, the blessing we receive will impact the rest of life. The principle is based on Jesus’ words to his disciples: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

The second January call to prayer is the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, usually scheduled for January 18-25. The Canadian Council of Churches, of which Mennonite Church Canada is a member, invites Christians to pray in ecumenical gatherings. Study materials are prepared by international writing groups from churches affiliated with the World Council of Churches.³

The title of this year’s study and prayer guide is intentionally ambiguous. The broken body of Christ over which we pray is of course “my body, which is broken for you” in the Lord’s Supper (11:24, King James Version). But in the imagery of 12:27, “you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” This sociological or corporate body of Christ is also torn apart, and we also pray over that broken body.

In 2005, the theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is “Our Foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:1-23). This scripture and theme are central to our identity as Mennonites, though not exclusively “ours.” Verse 11 of this passage was a favorite of Menno Simons and for many years was used on the letterhead of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. It continues to be used in this way in many of our congregations, and remains a foundational scripture for Mennonites as it is for other Christians.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, with its central concern for the unity of the church, is also the focus of the Prayer Week materials that you hold in your hands. In the hope that many readers / pray-ers who

use this material will also participate in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, this study passes lightly over chapter 3 and draws more attention to other parts of Paul’s letter.

The confluence of several events and needs brings this theme and these scriptures particularly to the fore. In a time of fluidity such as ours it is especially important to hold fast to Jesus Christ as the foundation of the church. The Mennonite World Conference, of which we are a part, is working toward common understandings and deepened relationships of shared mission and mutual support between member bodies around the world. And since the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly delegates in July, 2004 voted to upgrade our former “observer” relationship with Canadian Council of Churches and Evangelical Fellowship of Canada to full membership and affiliation, it is especially appropriate that we participate in prayers for the unity of the church. Furthermore, pressures that threaten unity in some of our congregations and area conferences cause some to flounder in their commitment to the part of the body of Christ that is Mennonite Church Canada.

The main reason to engage in this experience of communal prayer and spiritual reflection, however, is simply because God has invited us to it. My prayer as I write this guide is that you who use it will be drawn into a deeper relationship with God, be built up on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit will be embraced and will embrace each other in the unity and fellowship of the church.

—*Dan Nighswander*

¹ In some congregations the schedule fits better in the season of Lent or at some other season, and the call to prayer is answered at that time.

² All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*, 1989.

³ The study guide is published by Novalis; information is available from the Canadian Council of Churches web site (<http://www.ccc-cce.ca/english/faith/week.htm>).

How to use this study/prayer guide

This publication is intended for use in a group setting to facilitate prayer that honours God and builds up the church. The study and discussion material is designed to inform and provide a context for focused prayer.

The assumed context is a group of people who gather five times for sixty to ninety minutes to grow together in their relationship with God and with each other.¹ Many variations can be imagined. Groups may be

- multi-generational or one age group;
- single gender or mixed;
- from one congregation or several, perhaps from several denominations;
- formed only for this series or long-term small groups or Christian Education classes
- all long-time Christians or a combination of long-time, new believers and non-believers.

Some people will study and pray through this material alone—yet with awareness that others across the church are also using this material to focus their prayer for the world, the church and themselves. And in some churches pastors will use this material to shape a series of sermons and worship experiences.

This year's Prayer Week material looks at most of 1 Corinthians. Participants are encouraged to read through the entire letter in advance, preferably at one sitting, and in preparation for each group meeting to read through the scripture portions for that lesson. Read with the following questions in mind.

- What are the issues being addressed here?
- What do I need to know in order to understand what the scripture is saying?
- What issues in my life or in the church to which I belong (congregation, area conference or denomination—or the church universal) are addressed by this scripture?
- How shall I respond to what God is saying to me through this letter addressed to the Corinthian church?

I hope your study of the scriptures and your response to God's voice in them goes far beyond the limitations of the guide prepared for you. The suggestions for further study (Appendix 5) point to some resources that will help you find answers to your questions about the text. The openness of your spirit to hear God's Spirit will determine the impact of the text on your life.

I pray that you will find yourself drawn into fuller unity with God and with God's people, the church, through this time of study and prayer.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." (1 Corinthians 16:23)

Theme song:

In Jesus, we are brothers and sisters

This song, originating in Indonesia, was introduced to the global family of Anabaptist churches at the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, August 2003. You can hear the International Choir from the 2004 Assembly, sing this by going to the Mennonite Church Canada web site, www.mennonitechurch.ca/resources/prayer/, where it is sung first in Indonesian, then in English. The integrity of this song is demonstrated by the experience of the Mennonite church in Indonesia which experienced a painful schism in 1996, followed in 2000 by a reconciliation that was undoubtedly applauded in heaven every bit as much as in Indonesia and throughout the Mennonite World communion. To recognize the multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-lingual reality of the body of Christ, users, even if they don't understand the words, are encouraged to sing in more than one language.

¹ See Appendix 3, "Suggested structure for study and prayer" for further suggestions for group use.

In Jesus, we are brothers and sisters

In Je - sus we are bro - thers and sis - ters

In Je - sus we are bro - thers and sis - ters

In Je - sus we are bro - thers and sis - ters now and for ev - er

more In Je - sus we are bro - thers and sis - ters.

Indonesian:

Dalam Yesus kita bersaudara (3x)
 sekarang dan selamanya
 Dalam Yesus kita bersaudara

German:

Wo Jesus wirkt, sind wir alle vereint
 Wo Jesus wirkt, wird der Fremde zum Freund
 Wo Jesus wirkt schafft er uns Einigkeit
 Jetzt und für alle Ewigkeit
 Wo Jesus wirkt, sind wir alle vereint

Spanish:

En Jesús somos hermanos (3x)
 En Jesús hoy y siempre
 En Jesús somos hermanos

French:

En Jésus, nous sommes frères et soeurs (3x)
 aujourd'hui et pour toujours
 En Jésus, nous sommes frères et soeurs



Session 1

United in mind and purpose

(1 Corinthians 1-4)

1. How important is unity?

“When it comes to splitting and dividing among religious groups, Christians are the champions; one source indicates that there are as many as 34,000 distinct and separate Christian groups today.” An article by John Longhurst on religious schisms (see Appendix 2,) describes the shameful story of church splits—from the Brethren churches that “broke up at every opportunity” to the congregation that split over whether “hallelujah” should be spelled with or without the initial “H.”

Christians and non-Christians alike use the fractiousness of the church as fodder for jokes, and many use it as evidence of the church’s irrelevance, hypocrisy and impotence.¹ It has been that way from the very beginning, including the first century church in Corinth. The core concern of 1 Corinthians is to overcome divisions between members of the church in order that they might be “united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1:10).

The letter that we know as 1 Corinthians² follows the standard form of a letter in Greek culture of the first century. It started with the name of the writer(s), followed by the recipient(s) and a greeting. In 1 Corinthians we see this in 1:1-3. This is followed by a statement of blessing or thanksgiving—here it’s verses 4-9. At the end of the letter there is a closing, usually with benedictions and greetings—see 16:1(or 19)-23.

Between the opening and closing sections is the main body (or the “heart”) of the letter. In this letter the body consists of a series of arguments to persuade the readers to change their thoughts and actions away from dissention and toward unity. The arguments are introduced by a thesis statement that briefly states the core thesis statement that we find in 1:10, the key verse for this session.

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”
 (1:10)

For Reflection: ³

We can assume from Paul's appeals for agreement and unity that there is disagreement and disunity in the church in Corinth. This is a matter of grave concern for Paul. But is it important enough for him to write one of the longest letters in the New Testament? What is at stake if this problem is not resolved?

On a scale of 1 to 5 (five being high),

a) How important is church unity to you? _____
1 2 3 4 5

b) How important to Paul? _____
1 2 3 4 5

c) How important to God? _____
1 2 3 4 5

d) Why?

2. What breaks unity?

Immediately after the theme verse (1:10), Paul revealed what he knew about the lack of unity among the Corinthian Christians. "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my bothers and sisters" (1:11). What Chloe's people had reported was that church members were divided into camps of followers of various people—Paul, Apollos, Cephas and Christ (1:12). And he roundly criticized them for that (see most of chapters 1-4).

The Christian church continues to be divided into many "parties," some of which are named after founders—Lutherans after Martin Luther, Mennonites after Menno Simons, Amish after Jacob Amman, Hutterites after Jacob Hutter, and many small Mennonite groups after specific leaders. In congregational divisions and disagreements people often rally around particular persons. Church splits, when we have a chance to look back on them, are often about misunderstandings, inadequate or inappropriate communication, personality clashes, power struggles and family or group loyalties. The theological and ethical issues that are named as reasons for divisions are real issues, but it is the non-theological, unspiritual forces that cause broken relationships and disunity.

For Reflection:

a) What is it that breaks unity in your family? In your congregation? In the larger church?

b) In church conflicts, what role do you think is played by (i) personality, (ii) power issues and (iii) beliefs?

3. How do leaders foster unity or disunity?

Throughout the rest of the letter Paul wrote nothing at all about the "Christ party" and almost nothing about the followers of Cephas (3:22; 9:5 and 15:5 name Cephas, but not his followers). Mostly Paul seems to have been concerned about those who followed Apollos (see also 3:4, 5, 6; 4:6; 16:12).

In the very first line of this letter Paul stated his credentials as one with authority to address the church. His qualification was that he had been "called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (1:1). Throughout the letter there is an undertone of defensiveness about his authority. This is especially evident in the first four chapters. Here Paul used every strategy he could summon to strengthen his credibility, from a somewhat amusing attempt to shame the church (4:8-13—in spite of his denial in v. 14, this is clearly an attempt to make them ashamed of their behaviour) to a poignant appeal to his relationship as their spiritual father who must choose whether to be a disciplinarian or a gentle spirit (4:14-20).

This issue of Paul's authority in the church seems to have been what drove the tension we have noted between fans of Paul and fans of Apollos. The discussion in chapter 2 about the merits of communication skills and human wisdom clearly contrasts Paul's style of preaching and leadership with Apollos's style. We can only guess what stories Chloe's people told of Apollos and his followers and what people back home in Corinth were saying about Paul, but obviously it wasn't flattering to either side.

Paul conceded he had not preached in the popular style, “in lofty words or wisdom” (2:1), choosing to draw attention to Jesus rather than his own preaching gifts. He contrasted the human wisdom (that Apollos had?) with spiritual wisdom (2:13), and called his readers “unspiritual” and unready to receive divine truth (2:6-3:3a).

For Reflection:

- a) What kinds of leadership contribute to factionalism? What kind leads to unity?
- b) In an election between Paul and Apollos, who would have won in your church?
- c) Who do you think would win if only God would get to vote?

4. What attitudes prevent unity?

Throughout the letter of 1 Corinthians Paul wrote frequently about the arrogance and boasting of the church. It was boasting about their respective leaders that fostered the factionalism in the church (3:21-22), and arrogance had become their characteristic attitude (4:6-7, 18-19). Very often in this letter Paul wrote that they should be ashamed instead of proud of their behaviour. Indeed, proper shame and humility are what he repeatedly prescribes to counteract their spiritual and social conceit.

Arrogance and boasting are not the initial cause of disunity, but they contribute to it. An offense or disagreement about almost anything can drive a wedge between people. Pride is what prevents people from chipping away the wedge so healing can take place. And when pride is expressed in public statements of superiority it becomes less and less possible to reverse the separation.

The history of the church is littered with examples where pride and boasting of spiritual superiority, combined with putting down other people’s convictions, experiences and values, have led to schism. Until God intervenes, it looks as if the separations between denominations, between congregations and within congregations are permanent. Pride in denominational distinctives, congregational worship styles, ministry programs and many other accomplishments prevents Christians from recognizing the overwhelming commonality that is theirs as a gift from God.

Paul challenged the Corinthians’ pride with a healthy dose of realism. “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ... ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (1:26-31)

For Reflection:

- a) Where is there evidence of true humility in your experience of the church?
- b) Where is there evidence of boasting or arrogance?
- c) What can you do about wrong attitudes in your own life?

5. What is the ground of unity in the church?

Although he invested time and energy in defending his authority, Paul did not claim that the unity of the church depended upon him. Nor was it focused on him. Paul was not the kind of church leader who created a dependency of the congregation on his person and gifts. And he didn't want Apollos to do that either.

Paul recognized that Apollos had made an important contribution to the life of the church. He also claimed that his work had been important—in fact, a little more important than Apollos's work, because he had been there first (3:6, 4:15).

But Paul recognized that neither his foundational work nor Apollos's subsequent ministry were what would hold the church together. He called the quarrelling parties back to the foundation of the church, which preceded in both sequence and importance any of the factions into which they were now divided. "No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid;" he wrote, "that foundation is Jesus Christ" (3:11).

With the current state of the church divided into a multitude of denominations, allegiances, coalitions and factions, how can we find common ground upon which to build together the unity that God intends? It won't be in doctrine, service, institutions, missions, relationships or discipline, but in Jesus Christ.

For Reflection:

a) What does it mean to affirm that Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church?

b) What is it about Jesus that is the foundation: the things he did in his ministry? his teachings? his death and resurrection? the affirmation and earliest creed of the church that Jesus Christ is Lord?

6. How should we pray?

Like the church in Corinth, most congregations can find examples of factionalism in their membership. Certainly there are large and troubling examples in the whole Christian Church. The body of Christ is broken. There are actions we can and must take to reverse the Church's history of and tendency toward schism. One of those actions is to pray fervently, humbly and confidently over this broken body. In our prayer:

- a) we must be honest about the things that separate us;
- b) we must be honest about Christ's desire for unity in the church;
- c) we must be humble about ourselves and our views.

Pray Together: (see also Appendix 3-Suggested Structure for Study and Prayer)

Name the things that separate people in your congregation from one another and things that separate you from other congregations in your region or in the national church. Name those things that separate you from Christians in other denominations or other countries. Some of these things might be convictions and beliefs, some might be church practices, some might be painful memories or fears and some might be prejudices. Acknowledge these aloud to God in prayer.

Confess the attitudes you hold and actions you have done that diminish the unity of the body of Christ. Name also the attitudes and actions of others that you would have to forgive to achieve a sense of unity with them.

Acknowledge God's desire for unity and thank God for the unity you have experienced in Christ with fellow Christians. Name specific examples.

Commit yourself to strive to overcome divisions by giving and receiving expressions and acts of unity.

Pray together the Lord's Prayer (being especially conscious of the "forgive us..." sentence) and conclude by singing the theme song prayerfully.

SESSION 1 FOOTNOTES

¹ See Appendix 1 - The Scandal of Disunity, for further discussion.

² This is not actually the first, but the second letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians—see 5:9. After receiving his first letter, the Corinthians had written to Paul (7:1). The current letter is in part a response to theirs.

³ Throughout this study/prayer guide there are questions for reflection and space to write your thoughts. You will be given a chance to share these in your group, but will not be forced to share anything you don't want to. Your most secret thoughts you may not want to write down, but do let your mind and spirit explore and respond fully and honestly to the questions. Openness before God in these times of prayer will lead to the spiritual growth that you seek.



Session 2

United in the Spirit

(1 Corinthians 12-14)

“God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.” (12:24b-26)¹

1. How can we know who is the most spiritual?

In recent years many people have become attracted to

the idea of “spirituality.” A hunger to connect with reality beyond the scientifically explainable world seems to be sweeping through Western culture. It has become quite popular to explore various ways of seeking God, different “spiritual paths.” “Spirituality” is notoriously difficult to define, and is used to encompass quite different experiences, ideas and behaviours. Without further definition, therefore, the claim to be “spiritual” is without significant meaning. Even within Christianity there is a tendency for each person to infuse it with their own meaning, and instead of fostering understanding the confusion leads to polarization.

We have already noticed that the fragmented Corinthian church was polarized into a number of sub-groups, each of which claimed to have spiritual superiority over the other groups (1:12). When Paul wrote that “I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ,” (3:1—see 2:14-3:4) it was perhaps the harshest criticism he could throw at them. In the opening words of thanksgiving he said that they were “not lacking in any spiritual gift” (1:7), but when he wrote about spiritual gifts he started out by saying “I do not want you to be uninformed” (14:1), implying that they really didn’t know much about it.

Some thirty-five years ago the “charismatic movement” swept through the North American Christian churches, touching most denominations

in one way or another. As in most churches, some Mennonites embraced the movement while others were concerned about the new theology, worship practices, ecumenical connections and spiritual experiences associated with this movement. The charismatic movement continues to impact worship forms and to encourage stronger cooperation with fellow Christians in other denominations. Sadly, many debates about the charismatic movement in the 1970’s and following degenerated to competing claims of spiritual superiority on both sides.

In Corinth and in the charismatic movement the standard which measured spirituality was speaking in tongues—the spiritual gift of unlearned utterance of praise to God. Although there are many spiritual gifts—“utterance of wisdom...utterance of knowledge ... faith... healing... working of miracles... prophecy... discernment of spirits... various kinds of tongues.... interpretation of tongues” (12:8-10; other scripture passages have varying lists)—this particular expression of the Holy Spirit captured people’s imagination as the highest, most desirable, and most superior.

For Reflection:

- a) When do you feel spiritually mature (perhaps even superior to others)?

- b) When do you feel spiritually immature (perhaps even inferior to others)?

- c) What spiritual gift do you most desire?

2. Who needs other people?

The popular emphasis of spirituality is on the individual experience. Indeed many people claim to be spiritual at the expense of participating in a faith community. The complexity of relationships (“church politics”), the likelihood of being embarrassed or challenged by the thoughts and behaviours of others, and a universal tendency to resist accountability all make it attractive to many people to foster a relationship with God without a relationship with the people of God.

In first-century Roman society it was common to use the metaphor of the human body to talk about the social body, whether the city-state or a voluntary organization. Paul too used this image to help the Corinthians to understand what it means to be part of the church.

Paul addressed several errors through his use of the body analogy. These are:

- a) That we would be better off if we would all have the same gifts, the same convictions and the same values. Paul wrote, “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body” (12:17-20).
- b) That my gifts, convictions and values are superior to yours. Paul wrote, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this” (12:21-24a).
- c) That your gifts, convictions and values are superior to mine. Paul wrote, “If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body” (12:15-16)

God’s intention and design for those who receive salvation through Jesus Christ is that they belong in connection with each other. And they don’t have the luxury (or arrogant self-determination) of choosing with whom they will associate. “God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose,” Paul writes (12:18), and “God has so arranged the body” (12:24b—emphasis added).

John Wesley is reported to have said that “The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.” Solo Christians are not God’s plan. Neither are uniform Christians. The completeness of the body demands variety, diversity and equality of respect between the members. This is not an unfortunate necessity, but God’s own desire and will.

A church divided into “as many as 34,000 distinct and separate Christian groups” (see Appendix 2) is not God’s desire and will; it is a broken body. But since that is what we have, we must recognize that each of those groups is part of that body together with us. We cannot say that the Ethiopian Orthodox, the Southern Baptists, the Hutterites or the Roman Catholics are our spiritual superiors or inferiors—and we can’t be a complete body without them.

For Reflection:

- a) What makes you uncomfortable to be associated with people in your congregation? In your denomination? In other denominations?
- b) What makes people in any of these circles uncomfortable about being associated with you (individually or as a group)?
- c) Why did God put all these uncomfortable people together in one “body of Christ?”

3. Balancing “rightness” and “relationships”

It seems that there are two polarities that draw Christians in opposite directions. The one pole we might call “rightness” (or “righteousness,” but that seems to have become a pejorative word) and the other “relationships.”

At the extreme end of the “relationships” pole would be a concern to get along with people, to love them unconditionally, to accept and affirm each one. At this pole, doctrine could be sacrificed for the higher value of loving relationships.

At the extreme end of the “rightness” pole would be a concern for correct theology, pure ethics, clear logic and absolute truth. At this pole, relationships could be sacrificed for the higher value of correct doctrine.

Paul was no slouch when it came to correct theology. Repeatedly he corrected the church on one point and another. The section of the letter that we are considering in this session opens with a blunt critique of his readers’ understanding of spiritual gifts: “I do not want you to be uninformed” (12:1). He continued his argument with an appeal to logic (14:2-4), an analogy (14:7-8), scripture (14:21) and other communication tools as ways of instructing them in their understanding of truth and right doctrine. People who argue for the importance of “rightness” find in Paul a model and source of much good teaching.

On the other hand, Paul was also concerned about relationships. He interrupted the flow of his “rightness” argument in chapters 12 and 14 with a “relationship” statement in chapter 13, which culminates in saying that the greatest of the abiding values is love.

It is unfortunate that 1 Corinthians 13 is so often used for wedding ceremonies—it isn’t about marital love—and so seldom in church disputes, which was its intended application. It was to a congregation divided by opposing claims to spiritual superiority that Paul wrote that oratory and tongue-speaking, prophetic gifts, education, outstanding faith and great personal sacrifice are all valueless without love.

And to those who are concerned to know the limits of love (as in “When do we stop dialogue about our disagreements?” or “When do we decide to break fellowship and go our separate ways?”), Paul insists there is no end to love.

Paul did not understand “rightness” and “relationships” to be two poles between which one must choose. Rather, he embraced both, and he urged the Corinthian Christians to develop more and more capacity in both right thinking (14:20) and loving relationships (14:1a).

For Reflection:

Ask one person to read chapter 13, pausing after each sentence. How do these comments about love influence how Christians hold and express disagreements with each other? Record your observations below in writing, then discuss.

4. Who benefits from my spiritual maturity?

The point of individual spirituality (see section 2, above) is to enhance the individual’s relationship with God—in short, for one’s own salvation and spiritual growth. That is also the point of speaking in tongues. Whether practiced in public or in private, a spiritual experience that cannot be understood by or shared with others can only benefit the individual (14:2, 11).

Paul did not condemn personal spiritual growth, in fact he encouraged it. He certainly practiced it himself (14:15, 18) and he didn’t want anyone to disallow it in the church (14:39). If he were present now I’m sure he would be in favour of the spiritual disciplines of meditation, contemplative prayer, walking the prayer labyrinth and other activities that help people draw nearer to God.

He would, however, challenge the common understanding of the purpose of these practices. Even personal spiritual practices or spiritual gifts that are privately practiced are to be used for the benefit of the church, not the individual. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good,” he wrote (12:7—emphasis added). “Since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church” (14:12b). “Let all things be done for building up [the church]” (14:26c).

For Reflection:

a) What spiritual gifts can you contribute to the building up of the church?

b) How can they build up the church beyond your own congregation—across your province or the whole country, interdenominationally or internationally?

Prayer

If there are persons in your circle who practice speaking in tongues, this would be a time to encourage the exercise of that gift in your prayer time along with other prayers. If this is not appropriate in your setting, give special effort to singing the theme song in several unfamiliar languages.

Today's prayer time must include prayer for the building up of the church in all its manifestations. List on chalkboard or flip chart some parts of the church—include specific names of people or churches you know—to pray for in:

- your congregation
- your area conference
- your national church
- neighbouring congregations of other denominations
- churches in other parts of the world

Pray for each of these, naming them as part of the body of Christ and invoking God's blessing upon them and through them. (E.g., "Gracious God, we pray for the part of your body that is called Pour out your spirit upon them and grant them the gift of May we be willing to receive the gift of ... that you have given to the whole body of Christ through them. ...")

As you listen to the scriptures you may feel convicted of an attitude of spiritual inferiority or of spiritual superiority. Confess that, and rely on God's grace to forgive and transform you.

Give thanks for the spiritual gifts of people in your group, identifying both the person and the gift by name. Remember to recognize the less acknowledged, respected, or overlooked gifts as well as those that are easier to honour.

SESSION 2 FOOTNOTES

¹ Memorizing this key verse is good. Those who can handle a bigger (and therefore more rewarding) challenge would do well to memorize all of chapter 13.



Session 3

United in worship

(1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11:2-34; 14:26-40)

"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (10:16-17)

1. Why does worship divide us?

John Longhurst's article (appendix 2) alludes briefly to worship styles as one of the arenas in which Christians (and other religious groups) do battle. Of course "worship wars," as some people characterize them, are far from the only battlegrounds on which Christians have fought, but this class of conflict has produced many casualties in the history of the church.

Since New Testament times the church has quarreled and divided over liturgical issues. The date of celebrating Easter was one significant factor in the division between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman Catholic) churches in the fourth century.

In the sixteenth century Reformation the celebration of the mass was a major conflict, and the division over baptism was a question of worship as well as theology and politics. In the Mennonite experience, differences in worship style were part of the divisions that founded the General Conference and the Mennonite Brethren churches. Virtually every Christian denomination has experienced conflicts over which language to use in worship, which music to sing or play, which version of the Bible to read, whether musical instruments / candles / banners / icons / dance / clerical robes / etc. can be used and how. And in many churches questions about limits to women's leadership and of children's participation have been very divisive.

On the date of writing this, an Internet Google search of "worship wars" found "about 437,000" sites, and a search of "liturgical renewal" found "about 51,500." By the time you read this there will be many more. They represent several poles in the battle and many attempts to

mediate between the opposed sides. There are many publications, many sermons, many congregational meetings that extend the list far beyond these Internet representations of the breadth and depth of this divisive set of issues.

For Reflection:

a) What battles in the “worship wars” have been fought in your congregation(s)?

b) Why does worship create so much division between believers?

2. Communion is a declaration of unity

In the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul addressed several aspects of worship practice. One of those, the practice of communion, gets attention in 10:14-22 and 11:17-34.

To understand the context of his instructions we have to know that the Lord’s Supper that was celebrated in the early church was a shared meal—like a congregational pot-luck, or an “agape meal” as practiced in some churches—during which the symbolic bread was eaten and the symbolic wine was shared. As in all cultures, the sharing of food was intended both to represent and to foster the experience of commonality, the sense of being a family gathered around a table.¹

But it wasn’t working out that way. Paul pointed out that when they came together (to share in the Lord’s Supper—11:17) things really came apart. “When you come together as a church ... there are divisions among you” (11:17). What was supposed to be “the Lord’s Supper” (11:20) in fact turned out to be “your own supper” (11:21).

Sharing the common meal and the symbolic bread and wine should have been a unifying experience for the church. It could be so only if the church recovered the meaning of this Supper, which Paul had taught them when he planted the church and of which he reminded them in this letter.

When Christians partake rightly of the Lord’s Supper they focus on Jesus, not on themselves. It’s about his broken body over which they pray, and his shed blood, a proclamation of his death and an anticipation of his return (11:23-26). Symbolically, in communion church members stand on level ground, each one conscious of the grace by which they are saved through the sacrifice of their common Lord.

In the context of his argument against eating food sacrificed to idols Paul made the same point a little differently. He suggested any sensible person could see that the communion cup of wine is a sharing in the blood of Christ, and the communion bread is a sharing in the body of Christ. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (10:15-17—see the key verses at the top of session 3).

For Reflection:

a) Think about and share in your group some experiences where sharing food with others has represented solidarity. Have you had any experiences where not sharing food has been a cause of alienation and tension?

b) What aspects of your congregation’s communion practice make you feel like a part of the “one body?” Recall and share with your group a time when sharing in communion created or enhanced your sense of belonging together in one body with your fellow worshippers.

c) How does disunity in the body of Christ mock the value of Jesus' death?

3. Respecting fellow worshippers

Especially offensive to Paul in the practice of communion was the disrespect for fellow members of the church that some demonstrated. Some people were coming to the Lord's Supper early, bringing their own food and wine, and getting over-fed and drunk (11:21). Those who had to work late and perhaps were slaves arrived at the last minute or later, while those who had more leisure time and could control their own schedule would arrive early and eat with their friends and peers. Their behaviour showed contempt for the church of God and humiliated those who were not able to bring food to the meal (11:22).

Imagine how hurtful it would be to relationships between church members if at a congregational potluck meal everyone brought their own food and ate separately in front of the others. Excellent cooks would bring elaborate dishes, not to share, but for their own family's enjoyment. Wealthy people would bring fancy take-out prepared foods (and, in the Corinthian case, expensive wine). Those who couldn't cook well enough to impress others might bring a simple sandwich. Visitors and those who have no resources and are most in need of a decent meal (remember that in Corinth some church members were slaves who couldn't bring food from their master's pantry, and others were destitute) might be able only to sit and watch others eat.

Paul wrote very bluntly about this concern, and warned of dire consequences if it were not corrected. "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.... (11:29-30). In this case, what he meant by "the body" is not the physical body of individual Christians (unlike in 6:12-20) nor Jesus' sacrificed body (unlike 10:16 or 11:24), but the sociological body of Christ, which is the church (like 10:17 and especially 12:12-27).

"Discerning the body" clearly means rightly understanding your relationship with fellow believers. It means being humble about your place in the church (see again 1:26-31) and honouring others. It means

making sure everyone has enough to eat, and nobody gets carried away to gluttony and drunkenness. It means breaking down the divisions and distinctions of class, status, power, advantage and wealth. It means recognizing that in the presence of Christ we are all on the same level.

For Reflection:

a) Imagine yourself into the story. If you had been a member of the church in Corinth would you have arrived early or late? Would you have eaten your fill or been hungry? Would you have been satisfied or humiliated?

b) Can you think of times when your congregation shared the Lord's Supper without properly "discerning the body" by the definition above?

c) Nothing in Paul's discussion about or our use of the word "communion" restricts its application to the congregation we might attend. Mennonite World Conference, for example, talks about itself as a "world communion," and when the member churches gather in assembly every half dozen years communion is celebrated. Most of our congregations recognize "World Communion Sunday" together with many other denominations around the world in early October. How does it affect our understanding of "discerning the body" when we recognize that we commune with sisters and brothers across the country and around the world? Though we are not in the same room with them, are we well-fed, well-housed, financially secure North Americans "discerning the body" that includes hungry, impoverished, under-educated, sick and imprisoned fellow believers?

4. What about women's role in leading worship?

One of the contentious issues in recent church history has been setting aside the restrictions formerly placed on women's leadership in worship. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Herald Press, 1995), *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* (Herald Press, 1996) and the *Minister's Manual* (Herald Press, 1998) are all clear in representing the conviction that women have an equal role with men in church leadership and are eligible for ordination or commissioning as ministers. Nevertheless, this is still not accepted in some parts of the church. And some other Christian denominations, including some other Mennonite denominations, have not come to the same conviction.

The Corinthian church was apparently also divided over restrictions on women's leadership in worship. Paul addressed this in 11:2-16 and in 14:33b-36 (or only 34-35).

The passage in chapter 14 is a parenthetical statement (as shown in the New Revised Standard Version and some other translations) placed in the middle of a discussion on dignity and order in worship. The commentaries recommended in Appendix 5 will be helpful in understanding why scholars, including evangelical scholars, are mostly convinced that Paul didn't write this paragraph.² Most persuasive is the observation that the assertion that women should be silent is entirely contradictory to the longer passage, 11:2-16, which assumes that women do and should speak, pray (aloud) and prophesy in church (especially vv. 5, 13).

I grew up in a part of the Mennonite church that accepted Paul's teaching in chapter 11 on head coverings for women literally and seriously. A few conservative Christian sects (and also, on other bases, since they don't recognize the New Testament as scripture, conservative Jews and Muslims) continue to insist on women covering their head in worship or even at all times. As I travel across Mennonite Church Canada today, however, I observe that a few, but only a few, people believe that this instruction is binding on women today. The arguments that are advanced on the basis of nature (11:14), "the angels" (v. 10), and the social shame of exposed hair (vv. 5, 6, 13) are not persuasive in our context. For the most part we have decided that this instruction is bounded by a particular time and culture that is not where we live.

For Reflection:

a) Do some parts of the Bible apply to us, while others do not? How do we determine which parts of the Bible apply to whom?

b) Christians live in the world, even if we claim not to be of the world. We are deeply affected by social norms, values and practices. What social conventions, cultural sensitivities, communication tools and styles do or should affect how we worship?

5. Order in Worship

Worship in the Corinthian churches must have been quite chaotic. The impression one gets from Paul's instructions is that people were clamouring to speak at the same time (14:30), people spoke in tongues that others could not understand (14:9), and women in particular were calling out questions—which apparently the men were expected to answer and didn't (14:35, if that is recognized as legitimately part of the letter). And don't forget that there was eating and drinking to the point of drunkenness (11:21)!

While the main point of the argument in chapters 12 through 14 is the legitimacy of speaking in tongues, the conclusion of the matter is that "all things should be done decently and in order" (14:39).

There have been many debates in the church about the proper components and sequence of worship. While some churches are moving in the direction of simplifying worship into music and preaching, others are moving toward a more complex liturgy with multiple scripture readings (often based on the Revised Common Lectionary), formal and informal prayers, congregational participation in readings, confession and assurance of forgiveness, passing the peace, call to worship and benediction, silence, sermon, children's sermon, offering, singing and

sometimes drama, dance, processions and symbolic actions. (Sometimes the order of worship is associated with a particular style of music—the simpler order is often accompanied by contemporary music—but that is not a necessary connection. Contemporary music can also be used in a formal liturgy, and formal hymns in a simply formatted service.)

Paul did not seem to promote a particular order of worship activity. He expected worship to be spontaneous, “charismatic,” and to have participation from the whole congregation. But he was concerned that people’s contributions to worship not be slighted, that a few people should not dominate the whole time, and that everything should be understandable to visitors and members alike (14:26-33). The form and content of worship, he wrote, should not only honour God but also reflect God’s character, which he described as “not of disorder but of peace” (14:33).

As always in this letter, Paul’s concern is for unity to overcome division. Respect for fellow worshippers, inclusion of all and honouring God are the characteristics of worship that he commands.

For Reflection:

a) How can worship be shaped to show respect for the worshippers and for God? What constitutes decency and order in worship?

b) If your congregation has conflicts over worship styles, what changes could you make in your own attitudes or actions to promote unity?

Prayer:

In recognition of the many different ways to worship and pray, this would be a good time to pray in a variety of ways:

- in silence
- in prepared prayers read by a reader or the whole group—the Lord’s Prayer and others
- in your own words, spontaneously
- in song
- in the words of scripture—perhaps a Psalm
- in various postures (standing, kneeling, hands up-raised, prostrate [face to the floor]).

Shape the prayer around the four movements represented by ACTS: Adoration of God; Confession of sin and need; Thanksgiving for what God has done; Supplication or requests on behalf of yourself and others.

It is especially important in this session (see section 3, above, especially the last section of reflection) to include prayers for people beyond your own circle. Include people from other parts of your community, other regions of Canada and other countries around the world in your prayer. Give thought to what might be demanded of you in order for your prayers to be answered.

This session would lend itself to discussion in conjunction with a shared meal, or at least a potluck snack. Where appropriate, some study groups will want to share in communion at the conclusion of this discussion. That may be most suitable following the time of prayer.

SESSION 3 FOOTNOTES

¹ Jerry Buhler, in a sermon to the Mennonite Church Alberta’s annual conference in February 2004, said church potlucks are “second only to the Holy Spirit in their power to unite the church”—listen to the whole sermon, “Blessed are They,” at <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resources/sermons/>.

² Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, pp. 245-249, is especially helpful.



Session 4

United in body

(1 Corinthians 6:12-7:40¹)

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” (6:19-20)

We affirm that we can feel positive about our bodies and our sexuality because we know our Creator.

We affirm that sexual drives are a real part of our lives, but that the satisfaction of those drives is not the chief good in life.

We affirm both the goodness of singleness and the goodness of marriage and family in the Lord.”

In spite of these affirmations, it is a common human experience that sex separates people as strongly as it unites them. Differences between men and women provide an endless source of attraction and an equal measure of frustration. Newspaper reports, books, magazine articles, television programs, movies, internet sites, music, therapy, art and stories told between friends frequently attest to sexual dysfunction, misbehaviour, abuse and confusion. As we pray over the broken body of Christ we also pray over the broken bodies of people who have been damaged by the misuse of God’s “good and beautiful gift” of sexuality.

In addition to the separation that happens between people because of a misuse of sexuality, there is a secondary separation that is brought about by disagreements on sexual morals, values and convictions between people. The current painful rifts in and between congregations and denominations, as Longhurst points out (see Appendix 2), because

1. Why does sex separate people?

Sex is a gift from God. Its purpose is to unite people in a bond of intimacy greater than any other bond humans can experience. A Mennonite statement on human sexuality² says that

“We affirm that sexuality is a good and beautiful gift of God, a gift of identity and a way of being in the world as male and female.

of different convictions, values and pastoral strategies on homosexual ethics are only the latest and most acute in a long history of sexual ethical debates.

For Reflection:

a) What evidence do you see that sex separates people?

b) Besides homosexuality, what aspects of the human sexual experience and ethics do Christians disagree about?

c) In light of the harmful effects of much sexual activity, how can we still justify calling sexuality “a good and beautiful gift from God?”

2. Which is better: singleness or marriage?

One way to deal with the complexity of sexuality is to suppress sexual desire and avoid situations that stimulate sexual longings. That’s the monastic ideal, but it doesn’t respect what we affirm, “that sexuality is a good and beautiful gift of God.” It doesn’t satisfy the biblical directive to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Nor does it enable people to experience the uniting potential of sexual union which is both a good in itself and a metaphor that enables us to understand the unity of the divine trinity (Ephesians 5:25-33).

The church in Corinth had written in their letter to Paul two questions about marriage, singleness and sex (7:1, 25). Paul is often accused of

being anti-sexual because the opening words of this discussion reject sexual contact: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1). But this value is not one that Paul held—we can see that in the way he responded to it. The New Revised Standard Version and other translations put this statement in quotation marks, clearly showing that this is a statement he quoted from the letter they had sent.³³ Most scholars agree that at least the following verses contain quotations from the Corinthians that are challenged by Paul: 6:12 (again in 10:23), 13; 7:1; 8:1, 4 (possibly 5 and following), 8; (and possibly 11:2). Most modern translations have placed quotation marks around these sayings (New Testament Greek did not use quotation marks). It is likely that other statements in this letter are indirect quotations from either the Corinthians or from popular sayings.

Paul wanted to uphold the value of freely-chosen celibacy or abstinence from sexual relations—even in marriage under the right circumstances (7:5)—and at the same time he affirmed the goodness of marital sexual union (7:28). Yet he did not want to impose his own standards on others who may not have been called to or suited for his own calling (7:7). Without offending those with a stricter conscience, he affirmed marriage, including an active sexual relationship (7:2, 5, 9,⁴ 28a, 36, 38a). And, without offending those who enjoyed marital sexual relationships, he affirmed the value of a celibate life (7:8, 26, 28b-35, 38b).

For Reflection:

a) Does your church provide support and affirmation for single people? (Let the single people in your group speak first!)

b) What support do you offer to married people to strengthen their relationships and especially (given the discussion in 1 Corinthians and this session’s discussion) to work out their sexual relationship?

c) How can you affirm the goodness of both singleness and marriage?

3. What about marital sex?

Some of the people to whom Paul was writing had a strict conscience about sexual relationships—some wanted to avoid sex entirely (7:1); some were rigorous about abstaining from sex within marriage (7:5); some thought that they should end their marriage to a non-Christian spouse (7:10-16); some were engaged and unsure whether it would be right to consummate their marriage (7:25-38). And on each of those issues there were people who took the opposite view. It’s a tough line to walk, and Paul did so by distinguishing, as he otherwise never did, between the instructions he had from the Lord and his own reasonable thoughts about the issues (7:10, 12, 25, 40).

Many people are surprised to discover that on matters of sexual activity within marriage Paul was considerably less reserved than some of the Christians at Corinth. He did not believe that sex was only for procreation and he did not believe that marital sex was a duty to be endured or a repulsive act (7:5). Whereas some of the Corinthians were obsessed with sexual restraint, he was concerned about the harm that such restraint might cause to the health of marriages.

It may also be a surprise that Paul wrote equally of the wife’s conjugal rights and the husband’s (7:3-4). Within the social context of his time, Paul was remarkably equalitarian in his understanding of marital relations. He was concerned that both spouses should treat the other with respect, honour, consideration and dignity.

For Reflection:

The Saskatoon/Purdue statement referred to above states that “We... understand the Bible to teach the sanctity of the marriage covenant and that any violation of this covenant, including spouse abuse, is sin.” What would you call a violation of the marriage covenant?

4. Is sex outside of marriage OK—as long as there are no “victims?”

Most people agree that any sexual activity that victimizes another person is wrong. That’s why it’s wrong to sexualize relationships with children, or to exploit vulnerable people for sexual gratification. That’s why ministers, doctors, teachers and other professionals in positions of authority are not allowed to have sexual relations with—not even to date and marry—those over whom they have power.

The flip side of that consensus is the widely-held assumption that if “nobody gets hurt” any sexual activity is OK. So there is a lot of discussion about what defines “consensual” sex, and that becomes the criterion for legal and moral approval or disapproval. According to this understanding, marital infidelity is wrong because it victimizes the spouse. On the other hand, these voices might argue, if the spouse consents to or doesn’t know about the extra-marital relations then there is no problem. And of course many hold that if a person is not married there is no commitment to fidelity, hence the only limits to sexual activity are that both parties give informed consent to it.

Some of the Corinthians had a similar attitude. They argued that “there’s no law against it,” and since “sex organs were made for sex and vice versa” (6:12-13—implied), gratification of sexual desire is assumed and appropriate. Their statements were probably also intended to argue that Christian faith and commitment was about saving souls, not bodies (6:13), and that Christian freedom meant that they were not bound to rigid laws and rules (6:12). Some of the people who argued this may have been among those who argued against marriage or marital sex; others may have been in favour of any kind of sex.

Some of the Christian men in Corinth were visiting prostitutes. What could be the harm of that? There were no victims and “everybody” was doing it.⁵

Paul countered their arguments, saying that while everything may be legal, that doesn’t mean everything is beneficial. Christians’ bodies, including their sexual organs, are “members of Christ” (6:15). So the question of fidelity is not in the first place faithfulness to one’s spouse or marital vows but loyalty to Christ (6:15-17). The standard of belonging to Christ thus judges not only consorting with prostitutes, but all kinds of sexual promiscuity, use of pornography and other non-marital sexual activity. The Christian’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and intended to honour God in all its actions, including sex.

Notice that Paul also accepts and endorses the view of sexual intercourse that is set forth in the story of creation and reiterated by Jesus: in sexual union “the two become one flesh” (6:16; see also Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5). There is no room in such an understanding for “casual” sex. All sexual relations must be judged against the conviction that we who are “united to the Lord [have become] one spirit with him” (6:17).

For Reflection:

a) What are your sexual temptations? (You may not want to share this with others in your group, nor even write it down lest others read it. But you do need to think about it.)

b) What sexual behaviours are appropriate for bodies that belong to Christ and are temples of the Holy Spirit?

5. How can Christians be “united in body?”

In light of the divisiveness that often characterizes sexual relations and sexual ethics, how can we still “affirm that sexuality is a good and beautiful gift of God, a gift of identity and a way of being in the world as male and female?” Clearly the destructive potential of sexuality is not the whole of our experience. Sexual intimacy can and does unite two people into “one flesh.” And the goodness of being female and male together can and does strengthen churches and represent the unity of the trinity.

Paul used “body” in two different ways in 1 Corinthians. There is a physical body (as in 6:12 – 7:40) and a sociological or spiritual body, the church (as in 12:12-27). It is not an exaggeration to say that Paul’s concern for proper use of the physical body (sexual ethics) was primarily because of his over-riding concern for the spiritual body (relationships within the church).

Why did Paul try so hard to affirm all sides in the debate about sex, marriage and singleness in chapter 7? It is because the over-riding concern he had was for the unity of the church. His discussions about consorting with prostitutes and about marriage must be read as arguments and case studies in support of the thesis statement, the call “that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1:10).

In summary, Paul argued that in right sexual relationships we a) understand that our bodies belong in the first place to Christ; b) enjoy sexual intimacy within marriage—or willingly foregoing sexual intimacy; and c) know that all people other than one’s spouse are not potential sexual partners. When people live by these convictions, sexuality can contribute to the unity of the spiritual body, instead of destroying it.

For Reflection:

a) How can Christians counteract the divisive potential of sexuality and sexual behaviour in our relationships with brothers and sisters in faith?

b) How can human sexuality—our “way of being in the world as male and female”—contribute to the unity of the body of Christ?

Prayer of Confession

(Except for the last paragraph, this is taken from the confession section of the Saskatoon/Purdue “Statement on Human Sexuality.” Read the following paragraphs in unison with substantial pauses between paragraphs for silent reflection.)

Creator God, we recognize that you have made us as you wanted us to be: whole and good and with freedom of will. We have used our freedom sometimes for good, but sometimes against your will.

We confess that our sexual attitudes and practices too often fall far short of the biblical standards. No one can boast of perfection in this area.

We confess that sexism lingers among us, damaging the self-esteem of women and hindering their full contribution to personal relationships and to the church, and denying men a true understanding of themselves.

We repent of our wrong view of the body which keeps us from speaking openly and honestly about our bodies, including our sexual nature.

We repent of our judgmental attitudes and our slowness to forgive each other when we fail, a sign of lack of compassion.

We confess our fear and repent of our rejection of those of us with a different sexual orientation and of our lack of compassion for their struggle to find a place in society and in the church.

We repent of our permissiveness which too often leads to premarital and extramarital sexual relationships.

We repent of our failure to maintain healthy and growing marriages.

Forgive our failures, we pray. Erase our shame and our guilt. Grace us with an uneasy conscience when we excuse ourselves, and grant us strength of resolve to conform more fully to your will.

Assurance of Forgiveness

(to be spoken by the pastor or discussion leader):

Hear the comforting words given to us in the Scriptures. If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Theme Song:

In singing the theme song at the end of this session, consider the significance of thinking of each other as siblings. How does that affect sexual attitudes and actions between church members?

SESSION 4 FOOTNOTES

¹ Some readers may note the omission of chapter 5 or 6:9-11 in consideration of sexual issues. I recommend reading the commentaries on these important passages, especially Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*—see Suggested Readings.

² Passed in 1986 at Saskatoon by the General Conference Mennonite Church and in 1987 at Purdue by the Mennonite Church. These two churches, together with Conference of Mennonites in Canada, were the predecessors of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. The statement is available on the Internet at www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/statements/ssm/resolution86.htm.

⁴ Some people feel that it is a weak concession for Paul to write that “it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” It is important to remember that he was opposing folks who believed the opposite: that it is better to be aflame with passion than to have sexual relations within marriage.

⁵ There was every bit as much sexual freedom in 1st century Corinth as in 21st century Canada. A port city that served ports on both sides of the narrow Corinthian isthmus, it well earned the reputation that sailors on leave have in every part of the world. Its reputation for promiscuity was legendary. It was said that there were 1000 prostitutes working in Corinth, and that men had complete sexual license in that city. The Greek work “Corinthianize” was coined to denote illicit sexual relations.



Session 5

United in hope

(1 Corinthians 15)

“Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”
(15:51-53)

1. For this life or the next?

For some Christians the focus of salvation seems to be entirely on getting to heaven and enjoying the rewards of being in God’s presence there. For others the focus is on this life: the rewards of salvation are to be experienced now. Of course almost all Christians know that there is truth in both positions; salvation is experienced now as a foretaste of the full expression of abundant life in heaven.

But what do we know about life beyond mortality? As the song says, “There are more questions than answers.” Recently a man I had hired to work on our chimney asked me “Where do you think people go when they die?” and then quickly offered his own answer. “They go someplace and wait for the resurrection,” he said. “Otherwise, what’s the point of a resurrection if people go straight to heaven when they die?”

Where do we go when we die? When and how will the end of time come? What is the connection between the after-death experience and the Biblical promise of resurrection? What will the final judgment be like? There are a few hints toward answers in the Bible and human experience, but most of the answers are speculative.

For Reflection:

Do you think of salvation as primarily a “here and now” or a “by and by” reality?

2. Spiritual or physical?

The questions the Christians in Corinth had were more about resurrection than about Christ’s return. They were especially puzzled about and even embarrassed by the idea of a bodily resurrection. Many people today feel the same. The idea of a spiritual life after death is attractive, perhaps the idea of a soul that merges into a cosmic whole, or that is re-incarnated into another body or life form, but not the idea of a resurrected corpse. In the twenty-first century, just as in the first, lots of people in the church are uncomfortable with physicality and can’t imagine “messing up” the heavenly experience by having bodies present.

In recent years it has become popular for people to distance themselves from “any organized religion” but to claim to be “spiritual” (or, usually, “very spiritual”). The Corinthians, while presumably continuing as active members of the church, were also proud of being “very spiritual.” Paul wasn’t impressed. He had challenged them earlier in this letter on their claim to spiritual superiority. Now he insisted that rather than gloating over their spirituality they should own their physicality.

Richard Hays has written that the fundamental problem in the Corinthian church was that Christians were denying the reality of a bodily resurrection, denying “that what we do with these bodies is of ultimate significance in God’s eyes.”

He goes on to say, “These are sobering observations for a Christian church that all too often denies the resurrection in one way or another. On the one hand, we are confronted by individually self-designed versions of Christianity in which Jesus is seen not as the crucified and risen one but only as a great moral teacher; in such pallid facsimiles of Christianity, the resurrection, if it is preached at all, is understood only as a symbol for human potential or enlightened self-understanding. On the other hand, we find forms of otherworldly pietism that dream warmly of ‘going to heaven’ but ignore the resurrection of the

body—and thereby ignore the challenge of the gospel to the world we inhabit: such pietism falls unwittingly into the heresy that Justin Martyr decried as a ‘godless, impious’ betrayal of the faith. It would not be difficult to document the various moral failings that follow from each of these errors.” (*First Corinthians*, p. 278)

For Reflection:

a) Do you think of yourself as primarily a physical or a spiritual being?

b) What implications does that have for your understanding of the resurrection?

c) What would you identify as “the various moral failings that follow from” the errors identified in the paragraph above?

3. How important is the resurrection?

In chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians we find the only discussion in the whole letter of an issue raised initially as a question of understanding (doctrine) rather than behaviour (ethics). Placed as it is at the end of the letter body, this chapter is rightly understood as the crown in Paul’s argument that originated with the thesis statement of 1:10. In his purpose of uniting the church, Paul’s case studies and ethical instructions build up to this theological climax.

He introduced this by saying it is “of first importance” and reminding them that this had been fundamental to his teaching when he was with them (15:3). In words that sound like a confessional statement, he summarized:

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
He was buried. He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

Then he piled up names of people who were witnesses to the resurrection (15:5-8), concluding with himself (and digressing briefly to argue that he is a legitimate apostle and witness to the resurrection—15:9-11). Although there are occasional references to his previous teaching throughout this letter (e.g., 11:23), this is the one time that he asserted and underscored with a three-fold emphasis, the “terms” of the gospel he had preached, “which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved...” (15:1-2).

The rest of the chapter consists of arguments that the hope of a literal, physical resurrection is essential to Christian faith.

- a) Christ’s resurrection necessarily implies our resurrection (15:12-19).
- b) Resurrection is the culmination of God’s plan, the end of what began at creation (15:20-28).
- c) There is no point in being baptized on behalf of the dead if there is no resurrection (15:29-30 – I know of no satisfactory explanation of this practice in the first century, but Paul apparently thought his covenant would be persuasive).
- d) Without the hope of resurrection there is no basis for Christian morality (15:30-34).
- e) After addressing a different but related question of the nature of resurrection bodies, he returned to re-state the foundational theological and moral essence of the resurrection hope (15:58).

For Reflection:

How important to your understanding of God, humanity, salvation and history is the belief in a literal resurrection of Christ and of humankind?

4. Explaining every little detail

The desire to understand all the details of what lies beyond the present life has led to a lot of speculation, most of it unfruitful. Some of it has been about when these things will take place—questions about the sequence and timing of events around Christ’s return have pre-occupied many Christians through the ages.¹

The specific question some of the Corinthians were asking was “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” (15:35). Paul addressed this question, though he said it is a foolish one (15:36). He described the resurrection body as “heavenly” (15:40, 48), “spiritual” (15:44), “imperishable” (15:50-54) and “immortal” (15:54). In each of these he defined the resurrection body as the opposite of the present body, summarized by the statement that “we will all be changed” (15:51; re-iterated in v. 52). Perhaps the best part of his answer is the simple assertion that this is all a mystery (15:51).

There are many things beyond the parameters of this life that we do not have the privilege of knowing in the present. They include the “day and hour” (Matthew 24:36) of Christ’s return and the resurrection, what happens between the time of our death and the resurrection, and the details of the final judgment. After all our speculation we must honestly say in the end that they are all part of the mystery that God has not yet revealed to us.

For Reflection:

- a) What are the mysteries about death, resurrection, final judgment for you?
 - b) How do you feel about spiritual mysteries? Do you...
 - i. Welcome them as evidence that God’s thoughts exceed our understanding?
 - ii. View them as a challenge that must be solved?
 - iii. Feel annoyed that God would keep this knowledge from us?
 - iv. Ignore the things you can’t understand and concentrate on what you can?
 - v. Enjoy playing in your imagination with the mysteries, without having to reach complete explanation of them?

5. How does hope unite us?

Paul opened the body of this letter by urging the unity of the church. He concluded it with this strong statement about our ultimate destiny. Instructions to “be united in the same mind and the same purpose” can be frustrating and doomed to failure unless they are grounded in a positive purpose and value that go beyond the pressures that draw us apart and fragment relationships. The goal that supercedes the conflicts within the church is the resurrection.

The final article in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* starts out with this affirmation:

“We place our hope in the reign of God and in its fulfillment in the day when Christ our ascended Lord will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. He will gather his church, already living under the reign of God according to the pattern of God’s future. We believe in God’s final victory, in the end of this present age of struggle between good and evil, in the resurrection of the dead, and in the appearance of a new heaven and a new earth. There the people of God will reign with Christ in justice, righteousness, and peace.”

In the resurrection, the body of Christ will be one. The things that have divided us in this life will fall away in importance to their rightful place. That includes all the “perishable” and “earthly” issues of status, power and pride, the rivalries, defensiveness and personal gratification that drive Christians apart from each other.

As we anticipate the resurrection, we begin now to live into that reality. In light of that final goal and hope, we choose now to set aside those things that divide us from one another and are united in mind and purpose by this fundamental affirmation of our faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20b)

For Reflection:

a) What is the goal toward which human life and all creation is moving?

b) What is the goal toward which your own life is moving?

c) How does that goal inform our relationships now with brothers and sisters in the church?

Prayer

In this prayer time it will be important to recall that we are mortal, and will die like those who have gone before us. Name some of the people who have preceded us in death and await with us the resurrection. Pray their names with remembrance and gratitude. Perhaps it will be a helpful reminder of them to provide small candles for group members to light as they name the persons whose life and death they want to recall.

Death is not our final destiny. We look forward to the resurrection—for ourselves and for those who have gone before us. Pray in hopeful anticipation for that great day.

The resurrection will precede the judgment. “At Christ’s glorious coming again for judgment, the dead will come out of their graves—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”² Pray for people whom you know who appear destined for a “resurrection of condemnation.”

In this final session of this series, pull together the themes of all five times of prayer and return to the theme that was set out in session one, repeating the parts of those prayers that were especially meaningful for your group.

Read together

(or have one person read) this prayer from the *Prayer Book for Earnest Christians*.³

O eternal, merciful God! You are a God of peace, love and unity, not of conflict and division. With this unity you view the world in your righteous judgment, knowing it has forsaken you. You alone can establish and maintain unity in a world which in its own wisdom has fallen away from you, especially in those things which relate to your divine truth and the salvation of souls. You let the world divide and splinter into pieces, so that with the false wisdom of disunity which can only lead to disgrace, the world might again turn to you, O Lover of unity!

We are poor sinners whom you have graciously endowed with the ability to understand all this. So we pray and implore you through the Holy Spirit to dispel all confusion. Unify what is divided and make it whole. Also give us the means to seek your unique, eternal truth, which leads to divine unity.

Thus may we turn away from every division and become of one mind, will, conscience, spirit, and understanding, aligned according to Jesus Christ, our Lord. May we then praise and glorify you, the heavenly Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, with steadfast unity and with one voice, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, in the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Theme Song

In singing the theme song today, notice that (in the English version) it reminds us that “we are brothers and sisters now and forevermore.” The unity of the church, which starts now in our lives, goes with us and with all our (living and dead) sisters and brothers in Christ into eternity.

SESSION 5 FOOTNOTES

¹ The sixteenth century was one of the times in history when people anticipated the soon return of Christ. This conviction had a profound affect on Anabaptist theology. In the first half of the 20th century some Mennonites, along with many other evangelical Christians, devoted a lot of energy to interpreting a “premillennial, dispensationalist” understanding of the sequence of events at the return of Christ. See “apocalypticism” and related links at Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (www.mhsc.ca) or *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1990) pp. 28-30 for details.

The continuing popularity of end-times fiction and of “prophecy conferences” and apocalyptic (end-times) preachers on radio and television is another expression of the desire to know and interpret sequence and timing.

² *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, quoting John 5:29.

³ Translated and edited by Leonard Gross; Waterloo: Herald Press, 1997. This collection of prayers, first published in 1708 and continuously since then, is a traditional book of prayers used by many Mennonites and Amish in Europe and North America, under the German title, *Die ernsthafte Christenpflicht*.

Appendix 1

The scandal of disunity

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:4-9).

This paragraph of thanksgiving introduces the letter that Paul, with the assistance of Sosthenes, wrote to “the church of God that is in Corinth” (1:1-2a). Although the rest of the letter consists of correction, reproof and instruction, here at the outset Paul names some of the gifts with which the Corinthian church, by God’s grace, has been blessed. And will be blessed. These are the foundations upon which the rest of the letter is based: the faithfulness and grace of God, the fellowship of Jesus Christ, the limitless spiritual gifts that God has granted, and the call of God. And all this is directed “to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1:2b).

Unless we are to read this opening as ironic, in light of what follows, or cynically assume that Paul is “softening up” his readers before hitting them with all the criticism in the rest of the letter, we need to take seriously the significance of this introduction. Even in a church that is susceptible to quarrelling and ignorance there is much to be commended. And that is “...by grace...and...not of your own doing, it is a gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

So there are two realities in tension with each other in 1 Corinthians. One is the reality of the divine ideal, and in good moments the experience of church members, which is expressed in 1:1-9. The other is the reality of the demonic parody, and much of the time the experience of

church members, which is addressed in 1:10-16:24. In almost two millennia since this letter was written both of those realities have continued in tension with each other in the church.

While John Longhurst’s article, reprinted in Appendix 2, rightly concedes that division and disunity is inevitable in the church—indeed in all religious groups and other organizations where people come together around shared beliefs and practices—that reality does not obscure the fact that disunity between Christians is a spiritual and social scandal.

The spiritual scandal of disunity in the church is that it violates God’s intention for God’s people. Throughout the scriptures it is clear that God’s intention is to draw people (indeed all creation—Ephesians 1:9-10) into unity with each other and above all unity with God. The vehicle that God has chosen and through which God has worked since the time of Christ is the Church.

The letter to the Ephesians describes what God has created in the Church, using the image of “the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Ephesians 2:19b-22).

In light of what God has created, therefore, the letter goes on to exhort members of the church to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called...making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:1-6).

In 2 Corinthians Paul wrote that: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19a). The work of God is to “reconcile us to himself through Christ” (v. 18)—an initiative toward unity between humanity and God. Individuals who are reconciled toward God in Christ are thereby reconciled toward each other, and “there is a new creation” (v. 17).

This is God’s initiative and work. But the result of it is that we, God’s people, have received a mandate for a “ministry of reconciliation” (vv. 18-21). What we call the “missional understanding of the church” is essentially this, that we have been the recipients of the reconciling

action of God, and we recognize that we are therefore commissioned to a ministry of calling other people to reconciliation with God and with each other. The Mennonite Church's vision statement says that "God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world." Helping alienated and broken people to become one unbroken body of Christ is our mandate and purpose.

This is God's intention, the eternal plan by which God will eventually bring into reality the unity of all things. Any shortfall on our part, any resistance to this vision is a scandal, a stumbling block placed in the way of God's desire and purpose.

The social scandal of disunity in the church is that it diminishes the effectiveness of the church's witness and the spiritual growth of its members. The harm done to church members by schisms in the church or equally by legalistic attempts to impose uniformity, the hollow shell of unity, is well documented in experience and in literature. So also is the harm to the church's reputation and the deplorable waste of resources—time, energy, skills, people, money—wrought by in-fighting and division. Surely the forces of evil take courage and benefit from the impairment to the gospel witness that this creates.

The gospel of John, which, together with the letters of 1, 2 and 3 John, is replete with appeals for unity and love between Christians, reports a lengthy prayer prayed by Jesus just prior to his arrest, abuse and death. In it, Jesus prays for the church of the future in these words.

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:20-23).

Jesus understood that in order to convince the world that he was sent from God and that God loves the world (see also John 3:16), it is necessary that those who believe should be one, not only in purpose, but also in relationship, confession and action. Unity must be visible in order to be seen.

The lack of unity between those who claim the name of Christ is a scandal, a cause of stumbling, to those who might otherwise be open to hearing and receiving the gospel.

The temptation that besets Christians on the road toward unity, both those who embrace and those who fear it, is sentimentalism and superficiality toward the goal. "Christian unity is neither human togetherness nor institutional self-preservation. It is a new life together, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, with apostolic form and content." (*In One Body through the Cross*, pp. 29-30)

Two expressions that are sometimes used by Christians demonstrate the superficial view that is often taken of Christian unity.

The first is an expression sometimes used by Christians to express their anxiety about unity in the church. They frame their resistance as a defense against "descending" to the level of "the lowest common denominator." The expression is often used to indicate a lowering of quality to find common ground for many people. But the expression is not helpful for understanding the divine mandate for finding unity within Christ's body. On the other hand, it does convey a concern that "higher" values and convictions might be abandoned in the search to define unity that is only founded on "lower" values and beliefs. In reality, as John Longhurst has amply demonstrated (see Appendix 2), the "lower" values—personal priorities, aesthetic preferences, human power struggles, family feuds, personality clashes, regional and national loyalties and their ilk divide churches rather than being a common ground for unity.

Christians discussing God's intention for unity in the body of Christ should rather speak of seeking the "highest common denominator," for it is the "highest" (or most important core) values and convictions that unify us. These are the essence of our common faith, divinely revealed and universally accepted by followers of Christ. They are expressed in the earliest creeds of the church, in particular the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. The very highest "common denominators" are held by all "denominations" of Christ's body. Smaller configurations—like Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Evangelicalism, Roman Catholicism—hold additional "common denominators," and still smaller configurations—like "Mennonites" or "Mennonite Church Canada" or your own congregation—hold more and more "common denominators." Let us always seek, affirm, celebrate and bear witness to the highest of these.

The second misleading expression is intended to describe a kind of unity that is attractive to many, perhaps because of its superficiality. That is, to speak of the church as a group of "like-minded" persons. When used of the church, it means a theologically (and usually also socially, racially economically and otherwise) homogeneous group of people who choose to come together in a voluntary organization with shared values, world view and religious practice.

In fact, the idea of a voluntary organization of like-minded people is a parody of God's intention for the church. The true unity of the body of Christ is effected not by human will, but by God's sovereign initiative to bring together whom He wills for His purposes, not for ours. While we believe that each person must voluntarily decide to join and remain in this body that God has created,¹ it is not our choice with whom to affiliate. Indeed, the eschatological (end time) vision of both the Old and New Testaments is for the bringing together of differently-minded persons who do not share language, race, culture or experience (Isaiah 2; Revelation 5:9-10; 14:6), but only the fact that they are saved by their common faith in Jesus Christ. "Through the work of the Holy Spirit, divisions between nations, races, classes, and genders are being healed as persons from every human grouping are reconciled and united in the church (Acts 11:1-18; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Gal. 3:26-28)" (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 9, "The Church"). It is this mystery of God's action that we recognize as the experience and goal of unity in the church.

God's intention for unity encompasses the whole of Christianity, the "communion of saints" through history and across the full spectrum of its local and denominational expressions. The full breadth and depth of this vision are far greater than we can understand or imagine. But the specific experiences of our own circumstances are accessible to us, and for these we are responsible. So while we think globally about God's desire for unity in the church, we act out those thoughts locally.

All Christians are responsible for striving toward the goal in our relationships with the other Christians in whose midst God has placed us. In the first place that applies to the sisters and brothers in our own congregation. It also applies to those who gather in other congregations in proximity to us, whatever their denomination, worship style or doctrinal peculiarities. And it applies to those with whom we are affiliated by common geography, collective history and shared experience.

In spite of the responsibility we carry, the good news, the gospel message for the church is that the unity God desires is a work that God will carry out. Obligated as we are to work toward it, we cannot make it happen. But we can be confident that it will come to pass, because God has purposed it, and God is faithful. He will bring it to pass. And by His grace we will be gathered up into the unity that God alone can and will bring about. So be it.

¹ The doctrine of voluntary membership, a contribution of Anabaptist theology to the Christian church and based on a close reading of the New Testament, is not held by the vast majority of Christian churches. See Article 8, "Salvation," in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1995).

Appendix 2

Week of prayer

a time for unity among Christians: Schisms happen in all religions, and will probably never go away¹

By John Longhurst²

DURING the Christmas holidays I found myself reminiscing with an old friend about the "war." Not the Second World War — we're not old enough for that — or any other conflict since that time. Our "war" was a church split that tore our congregation apart over 13 years ago.

Like a real war, this one also had casualties. To this day, some people still experience pain at the thought of the harsh things that were said and done, and the longtime friendships that were broken.

Ultimately, the conflict was resolved when a group of people left our church to start a new congregation. Today, both churches are thriving, although many would probably wish there had been a better way to achieve this happy result.

Our experience was not unique. Lots of churches have split. But very little is said about them — it's an unfortunate part of church life that we'd just as soon not admit, or talk about.

Church splits can result from disagreements over many things: doctrine, music, style of leadership, biblical interpretation, building expansion — you name it.

One big issue that is dividing some congregations and entire denominations today is homosexuality; those who are against letting gays serve as clergy or blessing same-sex unions say they would rather leave their churches to start new ones than accept something that goes against their core beliefs.

But not all splits are over big issues. A church in Colorado split over the spelling of a Jewish praise word: One side wanted "hallelujah" on a banner, and the other wanted "alleluia." The argument became so acrimonious that the church split into two separate congregations.

Splits aren't unique to Christianity. Sikhism is viewed by some as a split from Hinduism. Islam has two major factions that date back to a

seventh century disagreement between Shiites and Sunnis over the issue of who should have succeeded Mohammed. As well, the Ahmadiyyas, who prefer to call themselves “Muslims of the Amadiyya sect,” regard themselves as a reform movement within Islam, and some Muslims view the Baha’i faith as a breakaway sect.

Judaism also has its divisions, with at least three major movements: Reform, Conservative and Orthodox, although some include a fourth, called the Reconstructionist movement. The movements are divided between those that are more traditional in their practices and those that are more liberal.

Of course, it’s not just religions that divide, as the nasty battle between the Reform/Alliance and the Progressive Conservative parties revealed. As with religious groups, this battle featured arguments over doctrine, interpretation and leadership, and caused lots of casualties. Now the two are trying to reconcile, although they are finding that putting things back together is a lot harder than taking them apart.

But when it comes to splitting and dividing among religious groups, Christians are the champions; one source indicates that there are as many as 34,000 distinct and separate Christian groups today. Many of the reasons for the divisions were important, and have added to the richness of the church.

But not all. As American humourist Garrison Keillor notes in the book *Lake Wobegon Days*, the Brethren church he grew up in traced its beginnings to the first group of brothers who left the Anglicans in 1865 “to worship on the basis of correct principles.” Unfortunately, he continues, “once free of the worldly Anglicans, these firebrands turned their guns on each other, arguing over points that, to any outsider, would have seemed very minor indeed but which to them were crucial to the Faith.”

Adds Keillor: “Once having tasted the pleasure of being correct and defending true doctrine, they kept right on and broke up at every opportunity, so that by the time I came along, there were dozens of tiny Brethren groups, none of which was speaking to any of the others.”

Church splits will probably never go away. Once a year, however, Christians around the world are invited to put aside their differences and join in the annual ecumenical Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Apostle Paul, writing to the quarrelling Christians in the city of Corinth, appealed to them to “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 Cor. 1:10). Unfortunately, those early believers found it hard to heed Paul’s words — he had to write about the subject again — and so have subsequent generations of Christians. But maybe for one week each year that hope can be realized.

APPENDIX 2 FOOTNOTES

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² John Longhurst is the communications director for Mennonite Economic Development Associates. He also writes a regular column on faith issues for the Winnipeg Free Press.

Appendix 3

Suggested structure for study and prayer

1. Distribute prayer guides in advance and encourage people to read at least the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians in preparation.
2. Set up the meeting room in a welcoming arrangement—good, but not glaring lighting, comfortable seating, perhaps quiet worship music playing as people arrive and a visual focus—cloth with candle, open Bible, other appropriate symbols. If the group is large (more than a dozen) or if they don’t know each other well, divide into groups of four for sharing and prayer. A good arrangement would be around tables. Encourage people to sit with people they know less well: they will benefit most by hearing new voices and new ideas.

3. Start with whatever gathering rituals are expected – serving coffee, singing a hymn,¹ offering a prayer of openness to God’s voice, distributing pencils and books, etc. Session 3 would especially lend itself to discussion over (or after or before) a shared meal, or at least dessert and coffee.
4. Encourage everyone to memorize the key scripture for each lesson. If there is time, you can work at it in the meeting. You could write the verse on a chalk board or white board. Read it twice together, then erase several key words (start with the important words, not the articles and conjunctions) and read it again. When this is comfortable, erase more words and continue until you are doing the whole verse from memory. It may work best to start this at the beginning of the session and intersperse subsequent stages throughout, rather than doing it all at once.
5. Allow time for people to read—either silently or aloud—the commentary section by section as you proceed. The leader or a class member might add to it, and there may be questions that need discussion. If possible, have at least one of the recommended commentaries available to look for answers about the biblical text. But make sure you allocate most of the time for reflection and discussion on the reflections, and reserve adequate time for prayer.
6. Allow time for people to write their thoughts and prayers in the spaces provided as you get to the “reflection” points.
7. Give people an opportunity to share what they have written—but don’t force any sharing for which people are not ready.
8. Allow sufficient time for prayer. See the suggestions in each lesson for prayer. If you sit in table groups, pray in that setting. There will probably be some people present who are uncomfortable praying out loud (That’s great: you want people like that to be participating in this study!), so make sure the instructions allow people to pray in silence.

9. Pray together the Lord’s Prayer (printed below in both traditional and contemporary versions in the hope that your prayer group will include people who don’t know this by heart).

Traditional

Our Father who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name.
 Thy Kingdom come,
 Thy will be done
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 Forgive us our debts,
 as we forgive our debtors.
 Lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil,
 for Thine is the kingdom,
 the power and the glory
 for ever and ever.
 Amen.

Contemporary

Our Father in heaven
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as in heaven
 Give us today our daily bread.
 Forgive us our sins
 As we forgive those who sin against us.
 Save us from the time of trial
 And deliver us from evil.
 For the kingdom, the power, and the
 glory are yours
 now and forever.
 Amen.

10. Conclude with prayerful singing of the theme song, “In Jesus, we are brothers and sisters.” If it is comfortable in your setting, stand in a circle, join hands and look one another in the eye as you sing. If it is appropriate for your group, especially as you get to know the song in later sessions, sing as you walk around and greet each other with a handshake or embrace. This is a song that should be sung repeatedly—five minutes is not too long—to allow it to sink into your soul as well as your brain.

APPENDIX 3 FOOTNOTES

¹If you use a hymnal, check the topical index and scripture index after you have read through the study material for that lesson. Singing together is a good way of promoting a sense of unity. So is reading together. You may want to read a portion of the scripture lesson together—note that *Hymnal: A Worship Book* has excerpts from 1 Cor 12 (lesson 2) and 15 (lesson 5). You might find other readings that lend themselves to the topic of the lesson.

Appendix 4

As you go home from here

Thoughts to ponder and suggested responses to the topic of Christian Unity for life on the home front.

By Elsie Rempel

The thoughts and responses that this prayer and study guide can stimulate have major implications for the growth of unity in our congregations and the broader church. They also have implications for our homes; those places where we can and do reflect God and God's purposes to each other on a daily basis through all the mundane realities of our lives. In the *Opening Doors Key Resource Binder*, developed by the General Conference's Commission of Education in 1999, the second Guiding Belief of this important faith nurture initiative states:

“Our congregations need households of faith, however unique, to become accountable for nurturing faith in all their members in intentional ways every day of the week. This means a strong commitment to be together for worship, prayer, Bible reading, study and service. This means reexamining priorities and making lifestyle choices that may well be countercultural. It means challenging the congregation to provide support and resources that will help faith-filled homes find and fulfill the unique ministries for which God has called them.”

We hope that this prayer week material can provide some of this much needed support, by modeling and training participants in ways that can also strengthen faith and unity in the home. Accept and honour your homes as the centres of faith formation that they are or can become. Gather as households to reflect on these topics. Ponder and respond to their potential blessing for your lives as households of faith. The Search Institute, in its study on the impact of Christian education on youth, discovered that one of the three things that had the greatest impact on young people's faith maturity was talking with a parent about faith. ¹ May God bless your family journey of nurturing faith.

Session 1 – United in Mind and Purpose (1 Corinthians 1-4)

Thoughts to Ponder:

- What does it mean for the people in your home to be united in the same mind and purpose?
- What comments or actions have encouraged unity in your home this week?
- What attitudes and realities might be blocking unity in your home?

Possible Responses:

- Use the unity scale on page 8 with each person in your home and discuss your differences and similarities.
- Make a list of common goals for your home.
- Name and respect the things that separate you in your home.
- Watch each other for signs of being of one mind and purpose. Give each other unity points at supper or bedtime.

Session 2 – United in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12-14)

Thoughts to Ponder:

- When do you feel close or far away for God and God's purposes for your life?
- What spiritual gifts do you observe in each other?
- What spiritual gifts do you most desire?
- How are the differences between you and God's gift to you in your home?

Possible Responses:

- Read 1 Corinthians 13 and reflect together on how it can help you with arguments in your home.
- Name and give thanks for the spiritual gifts you observe in each other.
- As you reflect on your individual gifts, you may feel convicted of attitudes of spiritual inferiority or spiritual superiority. Confess that, and rely on God's grace to forgive and transform your family relationships so that you accept, support and encourage each other.

Session 3 – United in worship (1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11; 14:26-40)

Thoughts to Ponder:

- What aspects of your congregation's communion practice make the different members of your home feel like part of the "one body"?
- How can we recognize both believers' baptism and children's intuitive faith in our communion practice?
- What difference would your congregation eating a substantial meal together for communion make to the different members of your home?
- How does the way you eat together in your home compare to the problems that the Corinthian church had with being fair about food?

Possible Responses:

- Have a discussion about what it means to be fair about food in your home.
- Try out a different form of prayer listed on page 22 for each of the next meals you eat together. Which type would you like to add to your home worship practices?
- Make a meal together, like pizza, where everyone can contribute to the process.

Session 4 – United in body (1 Corinthians 6:12-7:40)

Thoughts to Ponder:

- Are you able to speak openly and honestly about your bodies with the different people in your home?
- How does being male and female contribute to the unity of your home?
- How can you speak openly, honestly, and respectfully, between the generations, about sexual temptations and faithfulness?

Possible Responses:

- Have a discussion on as many of this session's topics as possible and appropriate with the more mature people in your home.
- Pray the prayer on page 28 with as many members of your home as appropriate.
- Encourage everyone in your family to respect and care for their bodies as the temples of the Holy Spirit.

Session 5 – United in hope (1 Corinthians 15)

Thoughts to Ponder:

- How do you think about those family members who have died? Do you believe in a resurrection of their bodies?
- What goals are your lives moving toward?
- What mysteries about death, resurrection and final judgment are important for your family to talk about?
- How does the hope of resurrection strengthen the relationships in your home and extended family?

Possible Responses:

- Use the questions on page 32 to guide a conversation in your home about death, resurrection and final judgment.
- Take a nature walk and then discuss how the people in your home can help creation move toward its promised renewal.
- Sing the theme song as a prayer that helps you accept each other as members of God's spiritual family.
- Read these picture books to help you talk about death and heaven. Both are available on loan from the Resource Centre.

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, ill. Finney, Kathryn Kunz.

For Heaven's Sake, Woodstock, Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999.

Douglas Wood, ill. Lynch, P.J. *Grandad's Prayers of the Earth*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Candlewick Press, 1999.

Appendix 5

Resources

Suggestions for further study

Resources on 1 Corinthians

Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching); Louisville: John Knox, 1997.

Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A socio-rhetorical commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995.

Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament); Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987.

Related Study Guides

*Teresa Moser, *An Odd Body: Church, Witness and Culture in 1 and 2 Corinthians*; Good Ground Bible Study; Waterloo: Faith and Life, 2000.

*Bruce Fisk, *First Corinthians*; Interpretation Bible Study; Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000.

Resources on Church Unity

Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed's, *In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton proposal for Christian unity*; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003.

*C. Norman Kraus, *The Community of the Spirit: How the Church is in the World*; Waterloo: Herald Press, 1993.

Other Resources

*Bernie Neufeld, ed., *Music in Worship: A Mennonite perspective*; Waterloo: Herald Press, 1998 (for session 3).

*Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*; Waterloo: Herald Press, 1997 (for session 3).

*Thomas Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship*; Alban Institute, 2001 (for session 3).

**Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*; Waterloo, Herald Press, 1995.

*David Boshart, *Sex and Faith: celebrating God's gifts*; Closer Than a Brother—Men's Series; Waterloo: Faith & Life Resources, 2003. (for session 4)

*Helmut Harder, *Understanding the Faith from a Mennonite Perspective: a study guide*; CMBC and Faith & Life Press 1997.

*Carol Penner, (ed.) Pathway C, *The Road to Emmaus; Second Mile: A Peace Journey for Congregations*, Faith and Life Resources, 2004.

*“*Power and Leadership*,” *Vision: a Journal for Church and Theology*, Vol 5, No 2, Fall 2004 (Canadian Mennonite University & Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary).

APPENDIX 5 FOOTNOTES

*Marked items are available for borrowing from the Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd, Winnipeg Manitoba, R3P 0M4; phone; toll-free 1 866 888-6785; in Winnipeg 204-888-6781 Ext. 152; Fax: 204-831-5675; Email: resources@mennonitechurch.ca; Internet: <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/Home>



Prayer Week 2005

Response form:

Praying Over the Broken Body of Christ

Christian Formation ministries of Mennonite Church Canada would like to hear about your experience with this material, and collect inspiration from the wider church for future Prayer Week materials. Please take a moment to respond to the questions in this survey.

Clip and return the following survey to:

Dave Bergen

Executive Secretary, MC Canada Formation
600 Shaftesbury Blvd.
Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4

T: 204-888-6781

F: 204-831-5675

E: office@mennonitechurch.ca

W: www.mennonitechurch.ca

You can also complete this questionnaire at
www.mennonitechurch.ca/resources/prayer/survey

1. How did you use this material (*please circle the letters that apply best*):

- a) In personal reflection and nurture
- b) In a group use setting (Bible study, prayer meetings, adult ed)
- c) In sermon development
- d) Other (please describe) _____

2. How helpful was this material in promoting conversation about, and encouraging a deeper understanding of the call to oneness in Christ?

(*please circle the letter that best fits your experience*):

- a) Not at all helpful
- b) Somewhat helpful
- c) As helpful as expected
- d) More helpful than expected
- e) Other (please describe) _____

3. How understandable was the material

(*please circle the letter that best fits your experience*):

- a) Not easily understandable
- b) Somewhat understandable
- c) Reasonably understandable
- d) Very understandable
- e) Other (please describe) _____

4. If you answered a) in #1 above, how well did this material work for personal reflection and nurture

(*please circle the letter that best fits your experience*):

- a) Not well at all
- b) Reasonably well
- c) As well as expected
- d) Exceptionally well

Explain your answer:

5. If you answered b) in #1 above, how well did this material work in a group setting (*circle the letter of the response that best fits your experience*):

- a) Not well at all
- b) Reasonably well
- c) As well as expected
- d) Exceptionally well

Explain your answer:

6. What themes would you like Prayer Week materials to explore in the future?

7. Will you use Prayer Week material again next year?

- a) Yes b) No c) Explain your answer:

8. In what form did you use this material:

- a) Pre-printed booklets from the MC Canada Resource Centre
b) A downloadable version from the internet
c) Photocopied
d) Unknown

9. My congregation's name is: _____

Province _____/City_____

10. I am:

- a) 18- 25 years old b)26-35 years old c)36-50 years old
d) 51 - 60 years old e) 65 years or older

11. I am: a) Male b) Female

12. I am a:

- a) Occasional attender b) Regular attender c) New member
d) Long term member e) Other

13. I participate in my congregation in the following ways:

- a) Lay leader b) Committee member c) Pastor
d) Leadership Council

From the introduction:

Here is a study outline that probes the struggle of a divided church towards its destiny to be “one,” as Jesus intended. Dan Nighswander has masterfully described the historical and cultural context so that we might grasp the issues that divided the Corinthian church. He then explores the healing medicine that Paul’s letter brings to the brokenness of that local “body of Christ.”

As churches, we carry the mandate to incarnate Jesus’ prayer for unity, not just that we would experience the benefits of such “oneness” but that our oneness would be invitational and missional. – Sven Eriksson

About the author:

Dan Nighswander has served as the General Secretary for Mennonite Church Canada since September 1999. Prior to that he served the church as an area conference youth minister (Mennonite Conference of Ontario), pastor in two congregations (Cassel Mennonite Church and Waterloo North Mennonite Church) and Denominational Minister (Conference of Mennonites in Canada). For ten years he was an adjunct lecturer in New Testament at Conrad Grebel University College and Wilfrid Laurier University. He holds degrees from McMaster University, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Wilfrid Laurier University and Toronto School of Theology. His doctoral dissertation was on “Paul’s Use of Shame as a Sanction in 1 Corinthians.” Dan is married to Yvonne Snider-Nighswander, attends Home St. Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, and is the father of two daughters and two sons-in-law.



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