

## A CHURCH WORTHY OF ITS CALLING

VMC Pastoral Consultation

*John 17:20-26; Ephesians 4:1-16*

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to share my heart  
with you my beloved Virginia Conference extended family.  
Clyde gave me 40 minutes,  
twice as long as I usually preach.  
I hope I can keep you awake.  
Even more, I hope I can keep *myself* awake.  
Pray that I might communicate clearly.

There won't time for response or discussion tonight,  
but I *want* your feedback—  
questions, other insights, objections.  
From *anyone*, but especially from my pastoral colleagues here.  
We are on this journey together,  
and I have much to learn from you.  
At least *some* of my content is new thinking for me,  
that deserves to be tested,  
subject to critique, questions, refining.  
So please talk to me afterward, email me,  
or better yet, make an appointment for coffee.  
So here we go . . .

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Unity in the church is a miracle.  
That's not a metaphor.  
Unity in the body of Christ is *literally*,  
a divine act that supercedes natural laws.  
It's a gift of God's grace,  
made possible only *in* Christ,  
as we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit's power.

If you *don't* think church unity is a miracle,  
you probably have a low view of the church.  
I have a high view.  
I think the church shares some characteristics  
with other social organizations,

but it is much more.  
I believe that the church is uniquely called into being by God,  
who conceived of it, created it, and now trusts it,  
to be the agent of God's saving activity in the world.  
The church is, by God's design and will,  
the representative of Christ, the Messiah, in the world today.  
The church is, in *fact*, the body of Christ,  
the real, continuing presence of Christ in the world.  
The church is the closest this world will get to God.

Now if *that* doesn't scare the . . . *whatever* out of you,  
I don't know what *will*.  
Because if you look around at the church,  
and *still* have the nerve to say  
the church is the closest this world will get to God,  
you might think God's in some deep trouble.  
There should be no question in our minds  
about the pervasive and persistent and tragic brokenness  
of the body of Christ in this world.  
Read just a smidgen of church history, and you'll see it.  
It could make you give up on the church  
and walk away from it. And many *do*.

But if you dare to hold a high view of the church, and I do,  
then you don't walk away, you fall to your knees . . . in prayer.  
You pray in thanksgiving and praise to the God  
who specializes in transforming brokenness,  
who took Jesus' broken body and raised it from the dead,  
who breathed the Holy Spirit into Jesus' paralyzed disciples,  
and filled them with the same resurrection power,  
and said, "It ain't over yet!  
I'm with you to the end of the age!"

And you also pray for mercy and healing.  
You pray for our own continuing conversion as a church.  
You pray for our humility and receptivity  
and attentiveness to God's agenda.  
And you pray for the miracle of unity.

If Christian unity wasn't a miracle of God,  
but we could enact it by adopting the right strategy,  
right beliefs,  
or right attitudes,  
then the words of Jesus we heard in John 17  
would not have been a *prayer* for unity,  
they would have been a *teaching* on unity.  
Jesus would *not* have passionately prayed to his Father,  
to make his disciples one,  
he would have given his disciples  
ten practical pointers to achieve unity.  
Jesus knew, unity would *only* come about,  
if God intervened.

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But, I hasten to say,  
unity won't happen *without* our involvement.  
We must participate for God to create unity.  
We must deliberately engage each other  
in sacrificial love and action.

We see that in the *other* text we heard tonight, Ephesians 4,  
where the apostle pleaded with the church  
to work, and to act, toward unity.

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord,  
beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling  
to which you have been called,  
with all humility and gentleness,  
with patience, forbearing one another in love,  
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit  
in the bond of peace.”

It's still the “unity of the Spirit”—still the Spirit's *work*,  
but he begs *us* to live it out  
in a manner worthy of our high calling.  
We are to actively embrace and take on attitudes and behavior  
that *befit* God's work in us.  
We are called to patience, forbearance

(yes, that's a Bible word),  
and humility and gentleness.

It's not in our *own* power.

Verse 7, “each of us was given grace  
according to the measure of Christ's gift.”  
Our capacity to be the church God needs,  
comes as pure gift and grace,  
which we may receive and release for God's purposes.

These gifts—apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, teacher—  
each one bringing a unique dynamic to church life,  
all have the same underlying divine purpose—  
“to equip the saints for the work of ministry,  
for building up the body of Christ,  
until *all* of us come to the unity of the faith  
and of the knowledge of the Son of God,  
to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”  
The spiritual gifts are ours to exercise  
to enhance the unity of the church.  
But they are *still* gifts that come to us *only* by the grace of God.

So Christian unity is a polarity.

It is a *both* a miraculous gift of God's grace,  
and a duty on our part to live into,  
with all the intentionality and discipline  
required for *any* gift we have to steward.

So, can two affirmations that tug against each other—  
unity as miracle and unity as discipline—  
both be true, *simultaneously*?

Yes! like many other biblical polarities—  
grace and works  
mercy and justice  
purity and hospitality.

These are truths in tension,  
and if they are *both* true, we hold on to them both, *vigorously*,  
if we want to discover their deepest truth.

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But there are *other* reasons unity in the church is complicated.

When we talk about unity,  
we're often fuzzy in our definitions.

We use the same word to mean different things,  
and don't always specify which meaning.

Furthermore, in any human relationship, churches included,  
unity is *not* an either/or—

we are never entirely in unity, or *not* in unity.

There's *always* a blend of unity and disunity we *must* navigate,  
to be in healthy relationship.

Let me use my marriage as an example.

Irene is here, and I didn't run this by her, but ask her later.

She'll vouch for it.

Our marriage is *the* most crucial relationship in our lives.

We care deeply about keeping it healthy.

We took vows before God and others,  
and declared we would be one, for life.

So unity, in our marriage, is of utmost importance.

But we *don't* experience complete unity.

We have unity in many things.

And we have disunity in many things.

Our relationship consists of acknowledging that,  
and learning how to navigate that  
in a way that brings out the best in both of us.

We are united in our commitment to practice fidelity,

to be loyal to the other,

to make personal sacrifices, each one for the other,

to be attentive and compassionate toward each other.

We are one in our devotion to our children and grandchildren.

We are one in keeping Christ and the church top priority.

We are one in our love of baseball,

and our support of the Harrisonburg Turks

and the Washington Nationals.

But we have *disunity* in how we feel about the White Sox,  
and the Reds.

Now of course, like any couple,

it's easy to laugh about disunity that's trivial,

like which baseball team to root for,

or how the toilet paper rolls.

But we have some dis-unity on some matters

that come from a deeper place,

from certain convictions or feelings

that one of us have, but not the other.

Like how we think and feel about money.

Like how we communicate with others.

Like our comfort level with order and chaos,

spontaneity and predictability,

or how open our home should be.

Working out our differences, even after 35 wonderful years,  
is a continuing journey.

It's not always easy to know if we get the balance right,  
if the unity/disunity line is in the right place.

Now, in a 35-year marriage that feels rock-solid,

undergirded by public vows and the law,

where nobody's even *thinking* about walking away,

if we find unity challenging sometimes,

how much *more* challenging is it in the church,

a so-called "voluntary organization"

where people move in and out, at *will*,

and where churches actually *market* themselves

to church-shopping Christians.

Every single human social arrangement—including the church—  
is by definition a mix of unity and disunity.

Now I said I have a high view of the church.

There are some ways in which our project

is entirely *different* than other human social projects.

And I'll come back to that.

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But for now,  
let's talk about the multiple layers of unity in the church.  
In our present, perplexing conflict over sexuality—  
especially same-gender attraction and relationships—  
unity is often a point of discussion.

The argument comes up repeatedly, in various forms.  
One side of the argument is:

“Divisions in the church are a sin against God.  
They undermine Jesus' prayer in John 17.  
They destroy our witness to a watching world.  
Diversity is a gift. Let's stay together.”

On the face of it,  
it's kind of hard to argue with that statement.

But usually, there's a comeback that goes like this:

“It's natural for people to seek others of like mind,  
to divide into affinity groups for more effective witness.  
We can't make a god out of unity!  
Isn't faithfulness to God's will an even higher good?”

And on the face of it,  
it's kind of hard to argue with that statement.

But do we mean the same thing when we use the word unity?  
I see at least four distinct, but overlapping, kinds of unity.  
I think it would serve us well  
to be more clear and more specific,  
when we use the word unity in church conversation.

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First, there's what we might call kingdom unity,  
the title of the topic Clyde gave me.  
We might also call it spiritual unity.  
This is basically what I had in mind at the start of my message,  
when I spoke of unity as a miracle.

As the body of Christ—local and global—  
we together confess the rule of Christ in the world,  
we declare our common loyalty to the Kingdom of God in Christ,  
we recognize the Holy Spirit's presence

and unifying work among us.

This unity lets us partake of the Lord's Supper together,  
because of that common confession  
of faith and trust in our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Most Christian traditions  
share communion across congregational lines,  
and even across denominational lines.

This is the unity we experienced, for instance,  
at Mennonite World Conference in Harrisburg this summer.  
Our communion service there was, in my experience,  
one of the most powerful in recent memory.  
That communion declared our unity in Christ  
as a global Mennonite family—  
7,000 gathered, representing a million, scattered,  
at one Lord's table,  
as fellow citizens of the kingdom of Christ.  
That unity superceded many *other* ways  
in which we *do NOT* have unity among us.

Kingdom unity is what I experience when I gather  
with my clergy friends in Harrisonburg,  
on an almost weekly basis,  
to study the lectionary texts of the week.  
We are Presbyterian and Episcopal and Lutheran and Catholic  
and Baptist and Methodist and Brethren and Mennonite.  
And we bring all that we are to the table, to study scripture.  
We talk honestly about our particular angle on the text,  
shaped by our different and distinct traditions.  
We listen and learn from each other.  
And we have become friends.  
And we would *all*, every last one of us,  
call each other brothers and sisters in Christ.  
Our spiritual unity, our kingdom unity,  
trumps our theological and ecclesiological *dis*-unity.

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There is a second kind of unity I would call missional unity.  
It's where we are united in our core purpose as a church:

we agree to join together  
in God's saving, redeeming, and reconciling mission.  
We are able to join hands (that is, be in unity)  
around a common cause for the common good,  
even if our motivations differ,  
even if our theological affirmations differ.

We witness this kind of unity every first weekend in October,  
as we gather to raise money at the Relief Sale.  
We witness it in our own congregations,  
as church members who might be at odds  
on certain key convictions,  
can nevertheless work side-by-side in Christian service.  
We certainly have done that many times at Park View.

The most striking example is when we decided to rebuild  
a church building in New Orleans' Ninth Ward,  
that was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.  
It took six weeks of hard labor,  
five different work teams,  
dozens of people on overnight road trips in vans,  
sleeping in a bunk house,  
swinging a hammer and paint brush side-by-side.  
Dozens more contributed funds, prepared food,  
donated supplies, you name it.  
We were absolutely one in our mission.  
And we let *anyone* join us who shared that mission.  
Now, I know our congregation well.  
I knew *all* those workers.  
If our task *hadn't* been to build a church-house,  
but to build a comprehensive theological statement  
we could all agree with,  
we'd have failed miserably.  
If our task required that we had the same understandings  
about God and the church,  
as our brothers and sisters in that black Baptist church,  
we'd have failed miserably.  
At least in this case, theological unity was not required  
in order to have missional unity.

And now we have a community of  
very dear sisters and brothers in Christ in New Orleans,  
who don't really *get* us, theologically,  
and to be *honest*, whom *we* don't really get . . . *yet*.  
And I have a dear friend and colleague in ministry there,  
Pastor Walter Jones.  
He grew up poor in the Lower Ninth,  
and has only basic ministry training, *no* degree.  
We've *talked* theology.  
We've *talked* ecclesiology.  
We are miles apart, in almost every way.  
But we have missional unity.  
We support each other by praying for each other,  
in our very different missional contexts.  
We call each other every now and then, by phone,  
to nurture that unity.

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Third, there is something I might call functional unity.  
It's agreeing how we will function together as a social body,  
how we understand our rights and responsibilities,  
our authority,  
our participation in decision-making.  
I struggled with what to call this.  
I might have called it structural unity,  
since it defines how our relationship is structured.  
But "structure" is often associated with complexity.  
And this *can* be very simple and informal.  
I meet with another pastor every week,  
for prayer and spiritual companionship.  
We have functional unity;  
we agree on how we function in that relationship.  
We have nothing in writing,  
but we kind of know what to expect when we meet,  
and we know if one of us is running late,  
or we need to cancel,  
we'll send a text to inform the other.  
We are united in our mutual expectations of how we function.

At the other end of the spectrum, complexity-wise,  
functional unity may need clear structures and due process.  
In our present church-wide conflict over sexuality,  
finding unity in how to function together  
is front-burner agenda.

That's what we're working on in the denomination,  
in conferences and districts,  
and sometimes, in the congregation.

We all agree forbearance is a biblical divine mandate.  
We agree forbearance is needed in *any* human relationship.  
But we still need to figure out  
if we can agree how it functions in a given context.

We have a new landscape in the church today.  
So naturally, we need a new kind of functional unity.  
We can't expect old ways of functioning  
to carry us through any new landscape we encounter.  
I'm an amateur hiker.

I know my way of walking has to adjust  
when I enter new terrain.  
I have adjustable hiking poles.  
I need to make them shorter when I climb a mountain,  
and longer when I descend.  
I have to take off or put on layers, as weather changes.

So part of the work we have to do,  
is to come to a shared understanding  
of how to function in a new environment.  
How much disunity in other areas can we absorb,  
and still maintain a healthy, functional system?  
Where does decision-making authority lie?  
Who is responsible for whom?  
What kind of behavioral contract do we have, so to speak?  
What rules of operation have we agreed on?

Functional unity is certainly not *all-important*,  
but it is not *un-important*.  
And I suggest, it becomes more important,

when other kinds of unity get challenged.  
That's why we must tend carefully to process.  
Sometimes people who push for good process,  
get criticized for just trying to delay things,  
or to avoid the real issue.

Maybe that's true sometimes,  
but I think *most* of the time,  
we just realize that when we lack unity in other key areas,  
we need something solid to stand on while we find our way.  
Functional unity can help create that healthy space,  
for us to do the deeper work of being church,  
and can make space, hopefully,  
for the Spirit to move among us,  
and bring about what we cannot do on our own.

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Finally, there is a more intentional and explicit  
and far more *challenging* kind of unity to work at.  
I'll call it covenantal unity.

It's when we are united  
because we have articulated a particular covenant,  
we have made explicit promises, before God, to each other.  
Remember my example of marriage?

Well, in the church, in a relationship of covenantal unity,  
we declare before God, to others in our particular body,  
our confessional and behavioral commitments.  
We agree how we will support one another in that covenant.  
We agree how we will give account to one another.  
We will want to establish a common understanding  
of what constitutes the breaking of covenant,  
and how we walk with each other when covenant is broken.

Covenantal unity goes to a deeper place, than functional unity.  
And I think we get the two confused sometimes.  
Covenant is more than agreeing  
how to function in an organizational context.  
Covenant is more than establishing a social contract.  
Covenant, at least in *biblical* usage,

is deeply relational,  
and it is God-centered.

God is always the key partner in covenant.

This is what I meant when I said *our* project, the church,  
is different from other human social projects.

So keeping in mind this biblical, relational, God-centered  
nature of covenant,

I wonder—are we being a little too loose  
when we so quickly and easily apply the word “covenant”  
to the large institutional church?

Is the biblical concept of “covenant” *really* what we’re dealing with,  
when navigating complex institutional relationships,  
defined by constitutions and bylaws and guidelines?

It’s not settled in my mind,  
but I at least raise the question here for us to consider.

Is not the biblical notion of unity in Christ,  
enacted by the Spirit, governed by covenant,  
*better* suited for our primary local, relational,  
worshiping, missional, and mutually accountable  
expressions of the body of Christ?  
and *less* suited for the large institutions of church,  
with their necessarily complex structures,  
governed by statements and resolutions,  
and constitutions and bylaws,  
voted on according to Roberts’ Rules?

If we say, as we do,  
that the primary unit of the church is the local body,  
where we can more truly and deeply *know* each other,  
and speak into each others’ lives with more integrity and clarity,  
and where we are called to discern God’s activity in our context,  
and be obedient to the Spirit of God and scripture  
as we discern them together,  
and where our covenant with each other as sisters and brothers  
is immediate and tangible,  
and where loving honest mutual accountability is possible,  
then maybe that’s where we should invest our energy

in maintaining “covenantal unity.”

Maybe I’m nitpicking,  
but is it really the best choice of words  
to speak of conferences or agencies or other constitutional bodies  
as being in “covenant with” other constitutional bodies?  
or when they vote to take a somewhat different course,  
to say they have “broken covenant?”  
Wouldn’t it be more accurate, and more useful,  
to speak in terms of a particular body acting in ways  
that stretch our *functional* unity,  
and work at restoring a common understanding  
of how we will function?

Please *hear* me.

I’m *not* suggesting there isn’t a place for institutions and by-laws  
in the larger organized church.  
By all *means*, we need them.  
I’m certainly *not* suggesting we shouldn’t be concerned about  
the agreements we have together as a larger church  
about how we function as institutions,  
and how we work and do mission and even worship together.  
It’s altogether good and appropriate to establish understandings,  
rules of the road, so to speak,  
so that the communities and individuals  
who make up the larger church  
have a way to connect, to belong, to fully participate.

But when we adopt “covenantal” language for constitutional bodies,  
I wonder if we give  
more theological importance to the institution  
than what scripture warrants.  
And I wonder if we unintentionally diminish the importance  
of the locally gathered people of God,  
who *are* in a true covenantal relationship with each other,  
gathered around the Word and the Spirit  
to discern what God is saying in their midst,  
and move out in mission together.

Yes, of *course*, local bodies must do that discerning work  
in conversation with other bodies, and with the larger body.  
*Bring on* the accountability!  
*Bring on* the opportunities to give account to the larger church,  
to tell the story about what God seems to be saying.  
The more we broaden the conversation,  
the more likely we are to uncover our own blind spots.  
That's all an essential part of the picture.  
We need the larger church.

But I guess I'm just wondering out loud  
whether part of the reason we have this much anxiety  
about our apparent "lack of unity" in the broader church,  
is that we've gotten our unities confused.

We are striving for "covenantal unity"  
among institutions better suited for "functional unity."

And meanwhile,  
our local congregations, our *real* covenantal communities,  
are struggling to find the tools to be who they are called to be,  
as contrast communities in a broken world.

As a church, we ought to be concerned about  
our theological and spiritual and moral formation,  
in *all* areas of life, *including* our sexuality.

And on *that* score, we are definitely rowing upstream.  
We're going against the flow of our dominant culture.  
So we *ought* to be struggling with these matters.

But I submit, it is in the context of local, face-to-face relationships  
where "covenantal unity" is operative,  
where we will always be able to do our *best* teaching,  
our *best* spiritual formation,  
our *best* relational evangelism,  
our *best* counter-cultural and prophetic witness to the world,  
*and* our *best* resistance to a society that is losing it way sexually.

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I guess my bottom line is this.

We must re-invest in the primacy  
of the local, covenantal, formational,  
and mutually-accountable community of Christ, on mission.

Yes, let's treasure our bonds with each other in the larger body,  
because we need them.

But we might hold more lightly to  
particular institutional expressions of that body  
and particular agencies and structures that serve  
our *primary* worshiping and discerning communities.

So let me leave us with a few concrete proposals,

1. Pray, and pray again.

If Jesus made the unity of his followers  
a priority in his prayers,  
why shouldn't we who are concerned about unity,  
also fall to our knees regularly for the church,  
to seek God's favor for the grace and gift of unity?

We can aim low, of course, and make prayer unnecessary.

We don't *need* fervent prayer  
if our goal is to agree to disagree,  
or to tolerate each other,  
or even to practice forbearance.

With a little bit of effort,  
and a slight attitude adjustment,  
we can achieve that.

But if our aim is high,  
to become a church of many peoples and many viewpoints,  
who come together in unity of mind and spirit,  
to worship one Lord,  
to love each other sacrificially,  
to engage together in God's mission,  
*that* will be a miracle,  
*that* will be the work of a mighty God,  
and we better keep praying.



2. Stay, and stay longer.

We will not be in a position  
to experience God's miraculous gift of unity,  
unless we remain in relationships  
that are challenging.  
We don't get to unity  
by removing those of us who think differently.  
*That* path leads to churches with a membership of 1.  
There is no path to lasting unity  
apart from continuous hard, and sometimes painful, work.  
It's what I tell young couples wanting a happy marriage.  
It's what I tell a church wanting a long fulfilling life together.

3. Lean, and lean harder.

We must lean in hard toward each other,  
to listen more carefully,  
and speak more honestly.  
This is a corollary to my last point.  
We don't stay, just to stay.  
We stay to struggle together for the deepest truth possible.  
This is the opposite of "agreeing to disagree,"  
which I think is the *enemy* of unity.  
On the really important matters,  
we must engage in the struggle,  
granting dignity and respect to the other, of *course*,  
being honest and transparent with the other, of *course*,  
but always leaning in to listen harder, and speak more clearly.  
And see where the good, righteous struggle takes us.  
Doing so is *not* in our traditional, Mennonite, comfort zone.  
But we better practice it, and get better at it.  
Because our church is changing, rapidly.  
It's a skill we *need* to develop.

4. Go, and go where God is.

The church is much more than a body unto itself.  
It is a movement, sent by God to go into the world,  
to serve God's purposes.  
The moment we lose sight of that reality,  
and start investing all our energy

in analyzing and preserving ourselves and our institutions,  
is the moment we stop being the church God needs.  
It's when unity is no longer worth the struggle.  
But when we embrace our sent-ness,  
unity finds its proper place and purpose.

5. Come to Jesus' table to eat and drink.

The Lord's Supper, communion,  
is the central practice of a church living in unity.  
And it *ought* to be the central practice of any church  
struggling with *dis*-unity,  
and looking for healing.  
Jesus' Table is where we are reminded  
of the source of our unity,  
the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus' Christ.  
It is where the healing power of God is tangibly demonstrated,  
in the life-giving symbol of the bread and cup.  
We should flee to the table *often* for nourishment,  
then extend our welcome to  
any who are prepared to declare Jesus Lord,  
and join us in the journey of mutual transformation,  
and continuing conversion,  
and continued healing.

Although we are not celebrating the Lord's Supper tonight,  
I invite into a prayer for unity,  
where the Lord's Table is at the center of the prayer.

Turn to Hymn 475

*Become to us the living bread by which the Christian life is fed,  
renewed, and greatly comforted. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*Become the never-failing wine, the spring of joy that shall incline  
our hearts to bear the covenant sign. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

*May Christians all with one accord unite around the sacred board  
to praise your holy name, O Lord. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

—Phil Kniss, November 10, 2015