



Call to Unity: E-Journal

Resourcing the Church for Ecumenical Ministry

Number 1

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

27th Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity

The Rev. Dr. Prince Dibeela

Prince Dibeela serves as the General Secretary of the United Congregational Church of South Africa. This lecture was presented on July 15, 2013 at International Dinner Celebration of the Global and Ecumenical Church during the 2013 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The dinner was co-sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity and the Division of Overseas Ministries of the Disciples of Christ.

Lord, teach us to pray

The theme of this General Assembly is based on the plea of the disciples Teach us to pray. And it is interesting that the theme of the tenth Assembly of the WCC is itself a prayer, God of life; lead us to justice and peace. Both these themes reflect the fact that life is under threat. We live in an ecological crisis, an economic crisis and all forms of despicable oppressions that vandalize and mutilate the face of God in creation.

Prayer is a gift of the faith community with which we must engage the forces of evil. It is a category of speech that enables us to engage at a different level. As people of faith we may differ on many doctrinal matters in our varied traditions, catholic, orthodox, protestant, Pentecostal and Indigenous churches, however we are connected around the notion of prayer. And for that reason this is something we must cherish which is a binder in our search for authentic ecumenism. We may not be able to have communion together, or all ordain women, or be all open and affirming or have common liturgical practices but we all can pray together. That is why we must cherish this gift to the faith communities and let it be our source of prophetic activism in a world torn with grief and hopelessness.

The WCC theme offers us a prayer which is God of life; lead us to justice and peace. This prayer is an invitation for us to turn to the God of life. Sometimes, in our busy-ness doing church, we forget the love and mercy of God. The Church itself becomes an idol. We become so caught up with the tasks, the events, the obligations to the institution and not know the mercy and love of God. This prayer is an invitation for us to meet the living and liberating God at the margins and the periphery. The God of life who can and will lead us to justice and peace is at the borders where God's people are separated by walls (in Palestine, Mexico and other places), among the dalits in India, among the rural poor in sub-Saharan Africa, among the undocumented

migrants who are being used as political pawns in a hostile and racist culture. This is what makes our prayer life authentic, when there is coalescence between our words of prayer and our active solidarity with those on the margins.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray they got more than what they bargained for. He offered them words that are subversive. In the midst of thievery, greed, corruption, excessive opulence the poor are able to cry to the God of life “Give us this day our daily bread.” They are able to claim their share of the resources of the earth and the goodness of God. Prayer enables us to claim what is ours, to have the freedom and poetic license to engage with life-denying forces. Radical prayer is when we are able to engage with the powers and principalities that the writer of Ephesians speaks about.

Prayer as solidarity is a gift to the praying community. It is that which binds us together. We have tended to reduce solidarity in our relationships to money and external things. However, solidarity is a vocation that must be expressed through genuine relationship bonds. It is not charity or sympathy but it is that which defines our common humanity. True solidarity is our affirmation and embracing of the God that is in each one of us. It is in the actions that enable us to touch each other’s lives and touch the lives of those that are on the margins.

So my friends, I am convinced that the ecumenical movement ought to be a global community of prayer. The models of ecumenism as expressed through big institutions that are located in the cities of the North can no longer work for younger people, for people in the margins and especially for people of the South. We need new and creative expressions of our oneness which will add dynamism to the struggle for justice and peace. The ecumenical movement has to be a community that is anchored on prayer as protest against oppression, as affirmation of the struggles of the poor, prayer as a way of reaching out to one another.

I believe that the ecumenical movement ought to be a community of solidarity with the kind of energy and oomph, and organizational imagination as we saw in the occupation movement. Can you imagine the Church, the ecumenical movement occupying Wall Street and other stock exchange buildings across the world and cleansing them through prayer from the worship of mammon? We can use that opportunity to remind them of the words of old:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods but me” (Ex. 20:2-3).

Can you imagine us occupying, at once and across the world, the Israeli embassies and praying for the liberation of the Palestinians and for peace in the Middle East? We can use that moment of prayer to remind them of the words of their and our scripture;

“Oh house of Jacob,
Come; let us walk in the light of the Lord
For you have forsaken the ways of your people
Oh house of Jacob” (Is. 2: 5-6a)

Can you imagine us, the ecumenical movement, occupying the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund at their offices throughout the world and praying for a new financial and economic system that is life-giving? We can use that moment to remind them of the one who says: "I have come that they may have life and have it in its fullness."

We too can occupy the premises of those who poison the land and the environment. We can pray for those who steal, kill and destroy in the name of profit; I am referring to Monsanto, Coca-Cola, Nike and Shell. We can remind them of the words of Jesus;

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-22).

Can you imagine us surrounding Guantanamo Bay and other places of state sponsored brutality and saying to our Christian friends at Capitol Hill and Congress? We can tell them of the dream of the prophets;

"They shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore."

A couple of weeks ago we were at the border in San Diego. We shared in the Eucharist with sisters and brothers from Mexico. But because we had a challenge of visas we had to share in the communion across the wall. Through the thick, tall and uninviting wall of segregation we shared the meal, the prayers and the peace. There were a lot of emotions, pain, shame and sadness. During the intercessory prayers the ministers invited us to stretch and lift our hands to the sky, above the wall, and as we did that he said "look, God's love is infinite, nothing can separate us from God's love," and at that moment of prayer of protest I knew, as I know now, that the walls of separation will crumble.

Lord, teach us how to pray.