

Enduring Principles Series

Unity in DiversityBy **Don H. Compier**

God relishes diversity! That came to my mind as I stood in front of a giant tank in the California Academy of Sciences. My daughter, Nancy, loved to visit the tropical fish with me. The wonderful colors, shapes, and sizes amazed us.

And this was only one animal! Nature sure seems to demonstrate that our Creator meant to populate our world with lots and lots of varied creatures.

We humans genetically are one of the least-diverse species. The differences between our races are minuscule. We have the capacity, however, to develop splendid variations from one culture to the next. Our holidays, art forms, clothing styles, languages, folktales, architecture, and approaches to the sacred present a splendid kaleidoscope. We have every reason to believe God delights in cultural pluralism as well.

I love the Book of Acts. Luke presents a delightful set of stories about how the church learned to embrace people from what the Book of Revelation calls “every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9 NRSV). From the beginning Jesus seeks to implant a global vision, promising disciples they will preach good news to the ends of the earth.

On the day of Pentecost, pilgrims gathered from far-flung lands and heard the gospel in their own tongue. No one has to shed cultural skin to receive God’s Spirit. We are incorporated into Christ’s body as we are, wonderfully knitted together. As Luke’s story unfolds, we see one cultural barrier after another tumble.

First Greek-speaking Jews receive their rightful place, then Samaritans considered to be of mixed heritage, then an Ethiopian eunuch, and finally all the non-Jewish people of the Roman Empire.

Jesus personally calls Paul to lead this great missionary expansion. In chapter 15 a major conference at Jerusalem shows great cultural sensitivity by admitting Gentiles to full fellowship without undergoing the Jewish rite of circumcision.

As the first history of the Christian church, Acts seems to indicate strongly that achieving unity in diversity is what the church is all about!

Living this reality in our congregational lives requires a fundamental shift in attitude. Strident voices in contemporary culture see cultural pluralism as a problem, even a threat. According to this “logic,” cultural exchange is a zero-sum game in which accepting insights and practices from others somehow dilutes one’s own identity.

But history teaches us that every national tradition is a constantly changing hybrid. By adopting helpful resources from other peoples, human cultures find better ways to adapt to their environment. Think of the adoption of Arabic numerals in the West, for instance. And passages such as I Corinthians 12 describe diversity as gifts of the Spirit.

What will we miss if we don’t embrace varied people? We are all more aware now of the delicious contributions made to our diet by various traditions—Thai, Chinese, Ethiopian, Turkish, Mexican, Italian, French, etc. And food is just the tip of the iceberg!

True appreciation comes when we realize that each culture holds important spiritual lessons to share. Reflecting on the growing religious pluralism of modern culture, a recent Episcopalian draft suggests that each faith tradition is a sacrament of God’s loving presence, freely offered to everyone. If we gratefully accept and unwrap the presents so graciously offered, our individual and congregational lives will be greatly enriched.

I am blessed to live in a home where we use three languages: English, Spanish, and Dutch. We try to honor each tradition. For instance, our Christmas celebration stretches over an entire month.

In the Netherlands we receive presents December 5, the feast day of the generous lover of children, St. Nicholas. Then we move into the Mexican posada celebrations, parties remembering how Joseph and Mary sought room in the inn.

With much of the world, we solemnly give thanks for the arrival of the Christ child on the evening of December 24. Finally, we unwrap more gifts on the feast of the Epiphany, January 6. In Spanish-speaking countries this is the day children expect deliveries from the same three kings who visited the infant Jesus.



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For Further Reflection, Discussion, and Discernment

Unity in Diversity

- Community of Christ is a diverse, international family of disciples, seekers, and congregations.
- Local and worldwide ministries are interdependent and important to the church’s mission.
- The church embraces diversity and unity through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- We seek agreement or common consent in important matters. If we cannot achieve agreement, we commit to ongoing dialogue and lovingly uphold our common faith in Jesus Christ and the mission of the church.
- We confess that our lack of agreement on certain matters is hurtful to some of God’s beloved children and creation.

About this Series

The Enduring Principles are at the heart of how we express ourselves. When they become the descriptors of our behaviors—rather than mere ideals—we truly will become the Community of Christ that God is calling us to be. Follow the Commentary Series, August 2009 to April 2010, in the Herald and e-Herald, online and by e-mail.

Over the years my spouse, Yolanda Santos, has taught me so much about the ancient, spiritual practices of Mexico. I have come to a much deeper appreciation of our connectedness to the earth and all creatures. I now understand more about our insoluble bond with our ancestors.

Yola has taught me the importance of using material objects like candles to focus my conversations with God. Thanks to Yola's generosity in sharing her culture, my life is so much fuller and more interesting.

I am passionate about congregational diversity mostly because I hope many can receive the type of blessings showered on my life. I pray that people throughout the church will develop a receptive attitude that will allow them gratefully and joyously to receive great gifts from many cultures.

I am convinced that cross-cultural sharing is God's dream for all humans. God yearns to bless us as we bless each other in and through our diversity.

In recent decades God's Spirit actively has moved in Community of Christ. Established in more than fifty lands, it really is a world church now! Who would have thought that in less than half a century this movement, largely concentrated in the US and a few other Western nations, would change so completely?

Now the majority of active members live in the so-called Third World. Evidence strongly suggests more members now speak French than English.

The emerging global church indeed has received many blessings. Each World Conference is colorful and exciting. It is thrilling to see all the flags displayed, to hear so many languages, to see striking differences in dress.

The international hymn festival is a highlight of the week. The new hymnal, now in preparation, will feature sacred songs from many lands and styles.

Thanks to the Internet, people anywhere can lift prayer concerns that elicit support from sisters and brothers around the globe. Each testimony, each lesson learned from engaged mission, enriches the whole body.

The Extended World Leadership Council brings together leaders from every corner of our planet. As a result church leaders benefit from a much broader spectrum of counsel and deliberation.

As never before, people representing many cultures talk about vital issues. As they do, trust increases. When people feel free to share honestly, painful differences also become clear. Divisions in the church mirror disagreements in the world as a whole. Faithful members of the church disagree about how to interpret scripture, and sometimes even about what should be in the canon.

Some question long-held traditions, such as rebaptism for admission to church membership. Various cultures hold divergent views on the role of women in church. Members feel varying degrees of comfort about discussions of human sexuality. While some cultures now give same-sex and heterosexual couples equal rights, others vehemently oppose what they consider sinful cohabitation.

Matters considered sacred arouse fervent passions. Both sides of a debate feel certain they represent God's will. If we are not careful, such disagreements could tear the World Church apart and lessen intercultural sharing.

Because God clearly cherishes diversity, we safely can infer that God isn't interested in a church where we agree on every issue! I once heard a leading theologian insist that church is meant to be a school where we have to learn to live with people not like us, who don't agree with us on matters we consider vital.

Throughout the history of the Christian church, its theologians have insisted on the corporate nature of discipleship. We aren't called to achieve individual salvation. We are tasked with the difficult but ultimately rewarding work of building true community.

"Unity in diversity" is a good definition of community. God's own love in creating a world that is not God suggests that to grow in charity means maturing in our capacity to work for the well-being of those different from us. After all, Jesus asked us to pray even for our enemies.

This Enduring Principle calls on the church to listen patiently to one another and to grow in mutual understanding. Disciples must seek common consent, not legislative victories. When we fail to reach consensus on cherished principles, we lament the pain many feel.

In this way, being in community fulfills each Christian's call to bear the cross patiently. Whatever happens, we must not let go of each other! For we are one body in one Spirit, with "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:4-6 NRSV).

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