Seeking Unity

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Jan 2000

Church unity is so important yet so illusive. In this article I attempt to describe some of the parameters for unity, its continuum and its locus, before coming to the tentative conclusion that networking seems to provide us with the only viable working model available. Having come to this point in my search I then sketch some simple building blocks . In the final analysis, only the Holy Spirit can forge a functionally united global church. Our responsibility is to seek the Lord's will and to be sensitive to His voice. We also need to place ourselves into interlinking relationship networks thereby making all of the church potentially available to all of its parts.

1.   An anecdotal introduction

When I took up a full time role as a church pastor some twelve years ago I cherished some naive beliefs concerning church unity. One Lord, one Spirit, one church. Surely church ministers would want to pray together, fellowship together, bring their people together in joyful celebration? My naiveté was stripped away when, right at the outset I tried to gather a number of local pastors just to pray together. One of them prayed loudly in tongues and another walked out; most of the others just didn't come to the next meeting. Why? I went to see the one who had walked out. He explained that the tongues talking was so loud and long that he was unable to pray and so he saw no point in being there. So off I went to my tongue-talking brother. Well, if he couldn't pray as the Spirit led him then he wasn't prepared to come either. Would he not just modify his praying a little to allow others to express themselves according to their belief and practice? Well OK. Back to the other brother. Would he not make allowance for his more charismatic fellow minister. Well OK. Neither of them came to the next prayer meeting, or the one after that…

But I didn't allow myself to become cynical. Instead I got involved with other ministers in facilitating a fraternal of local church pastors in the segment of the city in which I live and minister. Over the last twelve years we have held quarterly breakfasts, periodic prayer meetings, marches, rallies, youth meetings, combined celebrations and the like. Sadly, over all these years the number and mix of represented churches has not really changed. The Charismatics still predominate, the mainline denominations send underlings along as token displays of unity, the Afrikaans churches look in from time to time and the mega church managers ask for copies of minutes but seldom attend. We have not attempted any form of structural conformity yet the manifest and ostensible tokens of unity are as absent as they were twelve years ago. However, some strong relationships have developed among a small number of us, some churches have worked together to achieve some specific goals and some pulpit exchanges have taken place.

2.   The present disunity of the church

How many disunited 'tribes' are there in the 'nation' of the Christian church? Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. Well, many would say that the Roman Catholic church is the largest pseudo Christian cult system on the face of the earth and that the Eastern Orthodox church is no better, so that leaves the Protestants. Here we have

Reformed, Pentecostal, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and so on. Then there are the charismatic churches either independent or aligned to various movements or pseudo-denominations. Plus, of course, the Word of Faith churches, and then the….. the list of categories and subcategories is almost endless. No sooner could I type the name of the latest 'church' than another would be born! And, what is more, I could divide them all into various segments based on doctrine, practice, ethnicity and so on. Without a doubt the church is DIVIDED. Or are we?

3.   The biblical mandate for unity

Not too many pastors or theologians would argue that Jesus meant something other than unity when He prayed; "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name - the name you gave me - **so that they may be one as we are one.**" (JN 17:11(b)) The New Testament is, of course, full of direct teachings and analogies concerning the integrity, oneness and unity of the church. (1 COR 10:17   12:12-31   EPH 4:4-6 etc.)

But what does 'unity' actually mean? And to whom or what does it apply? Once again there is quite a bit in the New Testament to help us answer those questions, at least in part. Firstly, the exhortations to unity contained in the epistles were not necessarily always addressed to individual local congregations. For instance, when Peter wrote; 'Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.' (1 PET 3:8) he was writing to churches scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 PET 1:1). The exhortation to unity appears to be for all churches. It could also be argued from these passages, although not conclusively, that this unity was to extend beyond the boundaries of each local church to include the relationships between churches. This contention is strengthened by texts such as 1 COR 1:2; 'To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours.' We know that there was no punctuation in the earliest Greek manuscripts and so the corporate meaning of this verse is strengthened when we remove the comma between the words 'holy' and 'together'.[1]

The texts quoted above, plus others, also specify the attitudes which foster and express 'unity'. Words like harmony, sympathy, love, compassion, humility, like-mindedness etc. abound. So we can't really plead ignorance on the ingredients of unity… can we?

4.   The parameters of church unity

Yes, well all right, the scriptures instruct us to be united, but who is 'us'? What constitutes the church? With whom are we to be united? The most common answer to these questions is that the basis for church unity is a common belief in the truth. Like-mindedness has to do with doctrine. The same 'apostles' teaching' (ACTS 2:42) which prescribed the unity of the Jerusalem church in Acts is still the glue which holds the church of our day together. This, of course, can be understood at two levels, at least.

Firstly, it can mean that belief in the absolute authority of the Bible is the 'ground zero' of church unity. This alone will preclude Protestant evangelicals from seeking unity with the Roman Catholic church. Is this true? Does the Pope not believe in the authority of scripture?

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[1] Most modern translations punctuate this sentence so as to indicate that the letter is to both the Corinthian church and any other Christians elsewhere who might read it. The Amplified Bible, however, punctuates the sentence so as to connect the Corinthian Christians with other believers. 'To the church (assembly) of God which is in Corinth, to those consecrated *and* purified *and* made holy in Christ Jesus, [who are] selected *and* called to be saints (God's people) together with all those who in any place call upon *and* give honour to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:' i.e. the emphasis is on unity with other believers.

Well of course he does - but he also believes in the authority of the church, his church - the authority vested in his predecessors and himself. So the matter is not that simple.
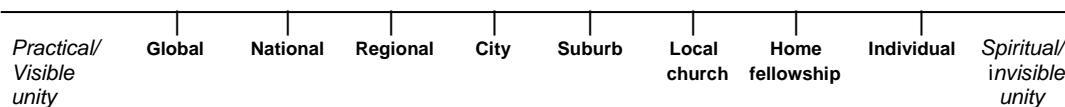
Secondly, the concept of the authority of scripture is only as valid as the philosophy adopted when interpreting said scripture. An Arminian will read the same text as a Calvinist and come to a diametrically different conclusion. And here is a vexing question: When we adhere dogmatically to the interpretations of our particular denomination, to the exclusion of other reasonable interpretations, then are we not claiming for ourselves the same 'papal' infallibility we so abhor in the Roman church?

No. The criteria for defining the parameters of church unity will have to be simpler. Something like ' To the church of God in *Corinth* (here read 'everywhere'), to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with **all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours**.' perhaps? (1 COR 1:2 again)

This simple text contains, I believe, a strong pointer to the basic criteria for church unity. The Greek primary preposition *en* is used in relation to 'Christ Jesus'. It denotes fixed position of rest in place, time or state. Unity with other believers is 'in' Jesus; He is the Grounds of our Christian unity. Another preposition *sun* is used to strengthen this concept of unity. It is translated as 'together with' and denotes 'union': it refers to the connectedness of churches everywhere.

5. The continuum of church unity

So, the issue is not so much whether or not the church is called to unity. Nor is it the fact that such unity is to be expressed in love, humility and so on. The issue is more a matter of the *extent* of our unity and how it should be *maintained*. Consider the following 'unity continuum'.

| *Practical/ Visible unity* | Global | National | Regional | City | Suburb | Local church | Home fellowship | Individual | *Spiritual/ invisible unity* |

The reason I have called the above a continuum is that as one progresses from right to left the more visible unity becomes and the greater the need to find practical methods of implementing it. At the extreme right is the contention that each believer is a cell of the spiritual and invisible 'body of Christ'. Therefore, the extent of the Lord's call for unity is to merely evidence respect and acceptance of all other such 'cells' and to get on with the 'private' business of being a Christian. At the home fellowship level unity becomes a little less abstract and a little more visible. Here the obligation is to accommodate other believers at a relational level. Here the demands are not that great. There is little call to work together and as little demand to conform strictly to doctrine or to 'fall under' particular leadership. At the local church level unity finds one of its most common expressions. Here each believer is expected to be part of a living church organism, an extended household, a reticulated church body. Here the issues of submission, government, ministry, relationship, and doctrinal conformity all come into play. It is quite clear that the scriptures command unity in the local church and, to a certain extent, prescribe the terms and dimensions of that unity. There is a problem though. If a member of the local church doesn't want to be part of the 'unity' of the local church, guess what - he or she simply moves over to another local church in the area. Alternatively, if a number of members simultaneously decide to break unity, they just split off and form another local church. The leaders of the local church hate this but, in the main, are powerless to do anything about it because of the lack of inter-church unity further to the left on the continuum.

The suburban church, in other words one church in any particular suburb, hardly ever exists. Why? Because in the typical modern suburb the population density should typically yield

several hundreds, if not thousands, of believers. Denominationalism alone demands more than one church in a suburb and so before you can say "Schism" there are two, three, four or more churches in even the smallest suburb. It is at this point in the continuum that unity becomes a truly vexing problem. As the leader of a local church, how do I relate to the other church leaders in the area? How should that relationship, whatever it may be, extend to the members of MY church? If I am the leader of a local church that is part of a denomination the problem is even greater, because now I have to make a judgement call as to what determines the prime basis for unity - the church in a geographic area or the ethos, rules and government of my denomination?

The city-wide church concept poses some additional problems. It has long been held by teachers such as Watchman Nee and others that the only biblically valid expression of church life is at this level. The argument is that only one church in any particular city is explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. Therefore, the argument goes, it is only permissible to have one expression of church in any given city. Any different gatherings within the city would merely be cells or congregations of the one church. Consider the typical modern city with its hundred or more different churches and one gets an idea of the complexity, logistical difficulty and interpersonal challenge that this concept constitutes.

6.   **Denominational Unity**

Within themselves denominations practice a high degree of unity at a global, national, regional and city level. There is uniformity of doctrine, values and governmental structure. Common vision, plans and resources are shared and each 'outcropping' of the denomination manifests an almost identical ethos. The problem is, there are dozens and dozens of denominations. Why? Because just as dissenting members of a local church split off and form new local churches, just so dissenting local churches form new denominations. Alternatively, powerfully charismatic leaders decide that they alone have the revealed truth of the ages and proceed to build their own denomination, one local church at a time. Non-denominational churches often have their own pseudo-denominations which they call 'flows' or 'movements'. Like minded local churches flock together for mutual strengthening and fellowship whilst the larger among them plant daughter churches to extend the borders of the 'non-denomination'.

It is easy and popular in charismatic circles to write the denominations off as aiding and abetting the disunity of the wider church. But is local church independence any less threatening to wider church unity? And in what way do some of the modern 'flows' or 'movements' differ from their more traditional denominational counterparts? In reality, denominations and the like do express a meaningful degree of church unity within a narrow doctrinal, ethnic or traditional band, but they tend to hinder it at a broader level.

7.   **Ecumenism**

The ecumenical initiative flows from a concern for 'church' unity. It assumes that if unity is to be achieved it must start with the major denominations. What is the glue which holds a denomination together? Doctrine, ritual, government, ordination, sacraments and the like. So to 'unite' there needs to be conformity in all of these areas. And conformity usually comes at the cost of compromise. How, for instance, will the Roman Catholic church ever be united with the older and more traditional Protestant denominations, let alone the Pentecostal or Baptist denominations? Only if each agrees to accept the lowest common denominator in terms of doctrine, government and so on. Of course the assumption here is that church unity implies 'structural' unity - and in this might be the key to understanding the true nature of church unity.
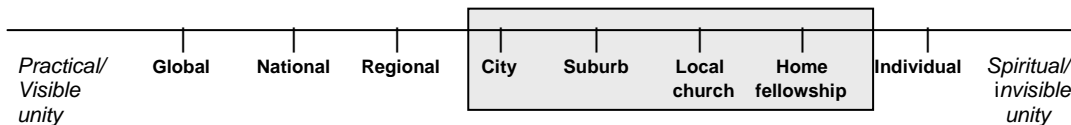
Structural unity, as I define it, requires the imposition of conformity from 'the top down'. Denominations that embody hierarchical forms of church government typify this. The Pope,

or Archbishop has a number of international and national leaders reporting in to him; they, in turn, have a number of regional and city minions; and so on down the organisational pyramid to the local Priest. Some charismatic, Word of Faith and Present Truth groups have the same thing, only they call their chiefs 'Apostles' and 'Prophets', their regional leaders 'Bishops' and their congregational leaders 'Pastors'.

If denominationalism and ecumenism are not the answer to the problem of church unity then what is?

8. The locus of church unity

The second verse of first Corinthians points not only to the grounds of Church unity but also to the locus of that unity. The letter is addressed to the *ekklesia* of God. This word is used in the New Testament exclusively to describe the gathered body of believers in a particular location. Consider again the continuum already presented.

| Practical/ Visible unity | Global | National | Regional | City | Suburb | Local church | Home fellowship | Individual | Spiritual/ invisible unity |

The shaded area demarcates the expressions of church which can reasonably be said to be prescribed by locality. In today's church there are leaders and theologians who see any one of these four expressions as the 'true' biblical expression of corporate Christian life. There is the house church movement and its later iteration, the cell church. The idea here is that the gathering of about a dozen people best represents the church. These home cells then come together for congregational meetings but the locus of church life is the cell. Whilst it is true that some early church groups met in homes[2] the detailed descriptions of gathered church life given in the New Testament rather favour the idea that larger congregations were more the norm.[3] The suburban church is really just a smaller version of the city church[4]. Watchman Nee, and several others over the centuries, taught that the only legitimate expression of corporate Christian life is when the various congregations within a city all form one church. One leadership, one ethos, one set of values but one or more gatherings. But here is the problem with the city church concept - it requires structured unity and conformity. In a sense it is like a denomination limited to the boundaries of one city.

Church unity further to the left on the continuum requires increasing degrees of structure and conformity. When the whole thing is worked through logically from local church, through city, region and nation to global expression, guess what? We have something indistinguishable from a traditional denomination.

My understanding is that the start of finding a resolution to the problem of church unity is to accept a premise that, on the surface, seems to negate the very concept itself - that the local church is the locus, the place to start, the focus of God's attentions and, in the final analysis, the most biblical expression of corporate Christian life. Why an apparent contradiction to the concept of unity? Because the land abounds with individual churches, unrelated and individualistic. Surely this is the very essence of disunity? Yes, but I contend that disunity is not the product of structures, number of churches and the like, but of sinful attitudes, particularly of the leaders.

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[2] Phil 2
[3] 1 COR 12 and 14 etc.
[4] The suburban church is usually considered when the city is too large to practically allow for the structuring and operations of one city-wide church.

9.   **Church unity from above, not below**

Theology hits problems the minute it starts from 'below' rather than from 'above'. Starting with man in an attempt to work back up to God invariably leads to secularism, humanism and, at best, agnosticism. I believe that we hit the same problems when we view the church as an essentially human institution rather than as a divinely birthed, supernaturally ordered spiritual household. Seeking church unity 'from below' leads to structural unity. Seeking unity 'from above'[5] allows us to conceive of a unity wrought by the Holy Spirit; a unity which He orchestrates in ways other than conformity and hierarchical leadership.

'Networking' and 'partnering' are buzz words in parts of the church today. They express the twin concepts of churches communicating with each other in some sort of loose relationship (network) whilst working closely, from time to time, with one or more churches in the network (partnering). I am excited by these concepts because they provide us with a framework for practising 'unity from above'. If Jesus truly is head of the church, and the Holy Spirit truly empowers the church, then what is my prime responsibility as a church leader? Is it not to submit myself to the headship of the Lord? To listen to the voice of the Spirit? To responsively study the Word of God? And from that basis, to open myself to relationship and co-operation with other local church leaders?

10.   **The Internet model for church unity**

What I am suggesting is that is that church unity, in the sense of reticulation at least, is the Holy Spirits responsibility. Our responsibility, then, would be to ensure that we are (a) responsive to His direction, and (b) in touch with other churches. The first is a matter of spiritual receptivity and obedience but the second requires some sort of infrastructure. I have already stated that I think that the denominational hierarchical infrastructure is too narrow to provide a real degree of unity across the Church. What I envisage, therefore, is some sort of network.

The Internet provides a crude two dimensional model of the sort of network I have in mind. Here is a representation of the Internet infrastructure for the North America
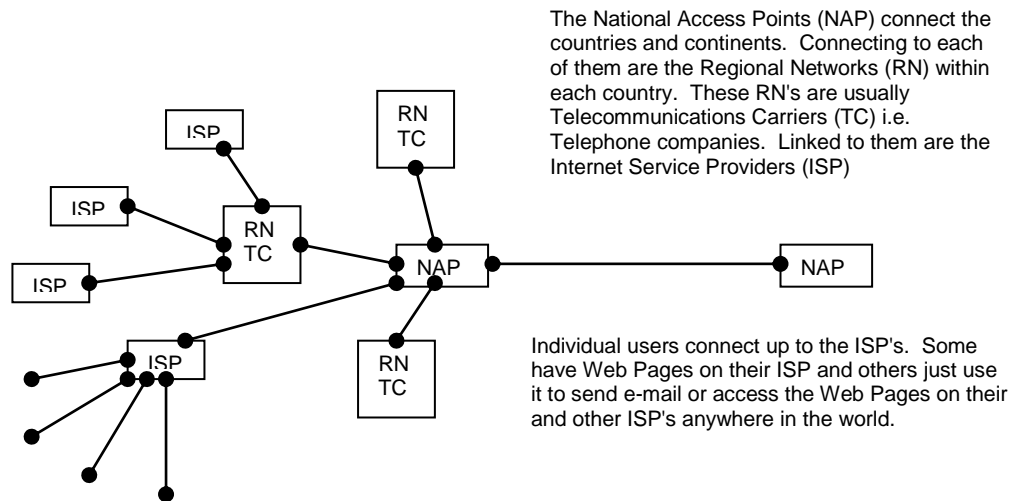

The connected dots suspended above the map represent the commercial backbone of the Internet in the USA. The vertical lines show how the various Service Providers etc. connect onto this backbone.

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[5] In MT 16:18 Jesus says that He will build his church.

The following is a simple two dimensional diagram showing how the network infrastructure connects.

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The National Access Points (NAP) connect the countries and continents. Connecting to each of them are the Regional Networks (RN) within each country. These RN's are usually Telecommunications Carriers (TC) i.e. Telephone companies. Linked to them are the Internet Service Providers (ISP)

ISP
RN TC
ISP
RN TC
ISP
ISP
NAP
NAP
ISP
RN TC

Individual users connect up to the ISP's. Some have Web Pages on their ISP and others just use it to send e-mail or access the Web Pages on their and other ISP's anywhere in the world.

Now, think of the ISP as a local church. The Web Pages on the ISP would equate to the home cells and ministry divisions of the local church. Each church member is like an internet subscriber with his computer and modem. The local churches are linked into a Regional or National network. The Regional Networks would be such things as Ministers Fraternals and the like. The National Networks would be denominations, flows and movements. Now, if every church is part of some sort of network, and every network is connected in to at least one national network, then the potential exists for every church to be directly or indirectly assessable to every other church.

In terms of this model I, as a church leader have a clear responsibility to make sure that I am connected to at least one network at a suburban, city, regional or national level. And if I am involved in the facilitation of any such network then I have the responsibility of ensuring that it is connected to other networks.

Disunity is caused at two levels; (a) when a church, through its leadership, is independent of any form of network or is insensitive and disobedient to the Holy Spirit; (b) when a network is independent of any other network.

11. **Some building blocks of a united church**

Here are some construction units which could help us find a functional and biblical unity:

11.1   An acceptance of the divine origin and maintenance of the church: The church is the creation of the Lord God Almighty. Jesus is its head, the Holy Spirit is its sustainer, the Bible is its charter and manual and we are its members. The church is not primarily a human organisation, it is a supernatural organism. Church unity will not therefore depend on human structures, charismatic leaders or doctrinal compromises; it will depend on our relationship to the Lord Jesus, our dependence on the Holy Spirit and our submission to the authority of scripture.

11.2   A recognition of the disastrously fragmented state of the church: Any approach to church unity which starts with the ideal and tries to impose this on the reality of a fractured church is doomed to failure. To seek to dismantle denominations from the top down can lead only to apostate compromise or to the creation of yet more denominations or pseudo-denominations. The place to start is where disunity is the most marked, between local churches within a geographic area. This is where the church interfaces with the 'world' and where the vast majority of Christians find practical expression of their faith.

11.3   Acceptance of the concept of networked unity and commitment to network maintenance: The church is not an institution, it is a divinely initiated household where relationship takes precedent over religion. As the Godhead epitomises unity so the church is to manifest it. Networks express relationship rather than structure and offer us the best model for functional, yet inspired, unity. Each church leader needs to be part of a network and needs to ensure that whatever networks he is part of are, in their turn, part of other networks.

11.4   Promotion of the principle of mutual edification: The Spirit of God says "build each other up" (1 THES 5:11) but the spirit of man says, "What's in it for me?" These two realities need to come together in what some call a 'win - win' scenario. We need to provide something for each other which is of value to each of us yet biblical in scope. Things such as:
11.4.1 *Fellowship opportunities*:   Local church leaders are often insecure and lonely. Ministers fraternal's, breakfasts and conferences can be of great mutual benefit. Equally importantly, these suburban or city fraternals form an important network. For some ministers this is the only network to which they have access.
11.4.2 *Outreach event*s: Unity is often best situated within the context of outreach. Local churches, particularly small ones, often have difficulty mustering the resources needed to effectively impact a community. Remove the threat of 'poaching', ensure that the efforts are reciprocal and the ground is fertile for unity. These outreach partnering activities often flow out of the relationships forged within the fraternal, movement or denominational networks.
11.4.3 *Raising leaders*: Local churches often can't adequately educate and train the next generation of leaders. This is where para church organisations and institutions have had to step in. Two or more local churches could work together (partnering again) to create a facility whereby leaders can be trained within the secure environments of their own local congregations.
11.4.4 *Social upliftment*:   Once again, local churches often do not have the individual resources to fulfil the biblical mandate of caring for the poor and needy - but together with other churches they can.
11.4.5 *Youth:* Youth need large numbers to form the social contacts they need. Small local churches are often unable to muster enough young people to meet this need. But two or more could if they worked together. Historically, youth organisations have been raised up to do what local churches could do if they are prepared to network and partner.

12.   **The search pauses**

For twelve years now I have been seeking unity with other churches and church leaders. My understanding has been limited and my efforts not always well directed. Structural attempts to achieve unity have always seemed to me to be flawed and tainted, no saturated, with human ego. Sometimes I have been deeply disappointed; at other times temporarily elated. All the while, though, time has been slipping by and all the while the concept of networking has been taking hold of both the world and the church. A lot of what I have been involved with in seeking church unity has involved forms of networking, sometimes formal but mostly informal. Many, if not most, of the church leaders with whom I speak are in some form of network. Is it possible then that the church is not as disunited as it at first appears?

I feel a rightness about my conclusions regarding the networked nature of church unity and I am committed to practising and propagating the simple elements of network maintenance. For me the search for any other expressions or models of unity pauses as I practice what I have thus far found.