

2007 Seminary Essay Contest: Ecumenism for the 21st Century

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for Ecumenical Formation.

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Washington, D.C
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Essay Title: *“The Significance of Ecumenical Activity in Congregational Life”*
All parenthetical references are to paragraphs in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*
(Geneva: WCC, 1982)

1. How does Holy Baptism provide a foundation for ecumenical engagement in congregational ministry?

Holy Baptism is the incorporation of individuals into the one Body of Christ. By means of baptizing with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each candidate is knit into one body of the church. All baptized persons are shaped into one body without the labels associated with denomination or local parish membership. Therefore, through baptism we are foundationally connected to the Body of Christ as we are called to be the Body of Christ. More than being connected to one another, we are united to Christ’s death and resurrection. As we are washed clean in the waters of baptism, we are buried with Christ so that we may rise to new life in the Holy Spirit. We are incorporated as one called and equipped to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Baptism is liberation into a new humanity, enlightened by Christ that transcends gender, human tradition, and social status (B2).

Upon the foundation of this new baptismal life ecumenical engagement within congregational ministry may respond. As “baptism is both God’s gift and our human response to that gift” (B8), ecumenical engagement is also God’s gift and a human response. However, undergirding any human response is first and foremost the union that we have in Christ through Holy Baptism. In baptism Christians are united with the Church in every time and place (B6). As a result, our bond with Christ and to each other as formed in the waters of baptism is a fundamental starting point for and discussions or actions that promote ecumenical dialogue and engagement.

2. As a congregational leader, what would you do to promote and live out such an engagement in the life of a congregation?

As a congregational leader discerning a call to Word and Sacrament, the author feels that the most faithful way to begin to promote and live out an ecumenical engagement is to root it in the worship life of the congregation. In times of worship the congregation is united in pointing back to baptism as an initiation into God's Church for God's mission, not our own. It is in this setting that we are most likely to envision God working in, through, and with us; continuing to break down the barriers and divisions that we have erected. In order to promote ecumenical engagement, a parish might consider beginning on a baptismal feast such as the Baptism of Our Lord, Holy Trinity Sunday, All Saint's Day or Pentecost. One of these days would allow focus on baptism in the liturgy with an Affirmation of Baptism liturgy as well as through prayers, hymns and preaching.

In conjunction with introducing ecumenical engagement in worship life, as we are sent out into the world it is important to be made aware of the unity that we do have in Christ as rooted in baptism. If worship inside the church walls is in fact a reflection of what is to happen outside the church walls, then the next step in ecumenical engagement is to shape daily life to point back to the covenant that God made with each Christian in the waters of baptism. In that sense, every day is an opportunity to die and rise with Christ through our union with him and to also die and rise with one another through our unity in community. Putting those words into practice requires guidance from the Holy Spirit, intentionality and strong leadership daily modeling Christian unity.

In our human contradictory way of thinking, one identity that is often found in our parishes is a tendency to define ourselves by who we are not as opposed to who we are, baptized children of God. In other words, in a Lutheran parish one might find a tendency to shy away from practices that are traditionally associated with the Roman Catholic denomination. However, as parish leaders, we often fail to discuss our similarities and discover the true roots of our heritage as rooted in Scripture and Holy Baptism. Because we as Christians are all called to live our lives in response to the covenant that God established in baptism, then sharing our call to serve others and seek justice and peace in the world may be an uncomplicated entry point into ecumenical engagement. One could foresee this looking like combined community service efforts, such as developing ecumenical partner parishes in order to volunteer in soup kitchens, house the homeless, extend pastoral care for the homebound and unite in prayer services for the Church and local needs.

In addition to community outreach partners, another source of ecumenical engagement that is not to be overlooked is parish youth. Often young members of congregations are more adept at overlooking differences and finding similarities than older members are. Utilizing children from multiple denominations of all ages in social events, Bible studies and community service is a way to open the floor for discussion with them about ecumenism rooted in baptism. Even if dialogue concerning ecumenism is not held until high school age and older, engaging in activities that cross denominational lines at an early age sets a foundation and teaches that living out one's baptismal call is to strive for unity, not division.

Overall, the more individuals involved in ecumenism, the better off the church catholic will be. While ecumenical engagement between scholars and theologians is beneficial for research and study of church unity, most parish members are too far removed from academia in their every day lives to be able to relate to the articles and scholarship produced. And that too, is a gift from God. As we are anointed by the Spirit in baptism, we are all given gifts for the up building of the Church and some are called to academia and some are not. To those in the parish that are not, we need to be directed to ways to be ecumenically minded that does not involve research, but is more grounded in worship, education and service associated with the parish.

Finally, it is important to note that the apostolic church has been on the verge of splitting since it began. However, just because we are in good company with our denominational divisions does not excuse the sin of individuality. We are called to be one holy, catholic and apostolic church whose gift is the Holy Spirit continuing to guide us in spite of our divisions. As early as the fifteenth chapter in Acts the church has been on the verge of splitting over an issue close to our identity. Since that time, Christians have given in to the ease of dividing rather than muscling through tough debate and dialogue over the issues that surround us. The more people congregational leaders can have involved in discussions and actions focused on unity, the more opportunities will be had to seek out unity. In support of that effort, we have a firm foundation based on the covenantal promises that God has given to each one of God's children in the waters of baptism. We have all been grafted into the Kingdom of God and bound together. Just as baptism is an in-breaking of the Kingdom on earth, our faith-filled response to baptism in ecumenical engagement is a reflection of the Kingdom as we all actively wait for the day of Christ's glorious return.

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