



CAYMAN ISLANDS REGIONAL MISSION COUNCIL

WEEKLY UPDATE

Season of Easter

April 4, 2024

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Rooted and Resilient: Re-ignited by the Spirit to Re-connect

Reignite: Resurrection Power Brings Unity

Ms. Amber Bothwell

Please read Acts 4:32-35

As we journey with the theme 'Reignite: Resurrection Power brings Unity,' let us reflect on the concept of **fellowship** found in Acts 4:32-35. "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."

I will attempt to explore this passage in four ways: Fellowship as a **prompt**, a **promise**, a **problem**, and a **pattern**.

Firstly, this passage prompts us to remember that God calls us into a loving fellowship with Godself and with each other. The message of last week's Easter celebrations, and indeed the whole story of Christianity, is that God wants a relationship with us and that we need a relationship with God. In Genesis, God established a special relationship with humankind from the beginning, though our sin means we have struggled to live in unity with God and each other ever since. Jesus' death and resurrection reestablished that relationship, tearing apart the literal and metaphorical veil between God and humanity (Matthew 27:51). The message of Grace is that we are saved, not by good deeds or righteous living, but by a trusting, personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Indeed, one of our great Sacraments is that which we call 'Communion,' a word which literally means a close relationship with someone in which feelings and thoughts are exchanged' (dictionary.cambridge.org),

'an act or instance of sharing' or an 'intimate fellowship or rapport' (merriam-webster.com). Its root is the Latin 'communis' meaning 'common' or 'shared by all'. The origin of the Sacrament was, of course, a very real meal over which Jesus and His disciples shared their ideas and feelings the night before His death. It was an intimate encounter in which they were 'leaning back against' each other (John 13:25), and Judas 'dipped his hand into the bowl with' Jesus (Matthew 26:23). Jesus was fellowshiping with people whom He knew would betray Him, disown Him and abandon Him in just a few hours.

Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus joining in Fellowship with all sorts of people, from the wedding at Cana in John 2 to when He invites His disciples to join Him for breakfast on the beach after the miraculous catch of fish in John 21. Jesus spent much of His ministry eating, drinking, and socializing - so much so, in fact, that He Himself, according to Matthew 11:19b, reports that His critics tried to accuse Him of being 'a glutton and a drunkard'! Moreover, though He, of course, taught in the Temple and Synagogue too, so much of Jesus' ministry seems to have taken place in people's homes, often around a table, and in other equally intimate settings - say a one-to-one chat with a woman at a well (John 4). The believers in Acts 4 followed Jesus' example, recognizing that **fellowship** is integral to our lives as Christians.

Secondly, this passage functions as a promise of even greater **fellowship** to come. By being 'of one heart and one soul' and having 'all things common' (KJV), the early disciples were embodying the very definition of communion. Through Jesus, their relationship with God was restored, and they were thus enabled and encouraged to live in harmony with each other in a way that perfectly complemented the words they preached and helped to draw more people to God. They shared a common identity in Jesus and valued each other as His followers.

This perfect example of Christian unity should clearly be our ultimate standard. 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!' declares David in Psalm 133. Indeed, those first believers presented a united front to a degree that seems almost

unreal. Such heights of generosity, evangelistic zeal, and selflessness are a foretaste of Heaven itself. When we look around at our own imperfect relationships and our sometimes-disjointed congregations, we can take heart that God's promise is still sure that one day, we will be restored to perfect unity with God and with our fellow believers.

Thirdly, and unfortunately, this is also a problem for us as we cannot escape the conviction that if we call ourselves Christians, we really ought to be living like this right now. Yet, let us be honest, fulfilling this mandate of perfect unity is nigh on impossible.

But we must look at this short passage in context because, even for the believers in Acts, this moment of perfect unity was just a moment. The idealistic system of selling land and sharing the proceeds with each other was quickly sullied – only three verses later – by Ananias and Sapphira deciding to keep back some of the profits from the sale of their land, lying about it and being struck dead as punishment (Acts 5:1-10). Shortly after, we find that the system begins to break down on a broader scale because 'the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food' (Acts 6:1b). How quickly does this vision of perfect Fellowship descend into ego, racism, and jealousy! Suddenly, the church of Acts seems a lot more like our own problematic, imperfect church of today.

Fourthly, this passage exposes a pattern to the problem. To begin with, the news of Acts 6:1 is not all bad, as the disappointing report of bias and infighting is preceded by the clause 'in those days when the number of disciples was increasing.' The testimony of the apostles was winning converts! The church was growing! But with greater numbers, it was harder to maintain the effortless unity of vision and camaraderie that marked the initial stages of the church. Their **fellowship** at the outset was so pure and passionate in worship, evangelism, and stewardship that it was in danger of becoming a victim of its own success.

How often have we seen this pattern in our own endeavors as a church? Think of the projects or missions that began with great fervor and passion, all members of the team 'one in heart and mind' and feeling God's Spirit powerfully at work. Gradually, however, we lose our enthusiasm, or divisions arise, or whatever happens to lessen the impact of our witness. The honeymoon period is quickly over.

Looking back at our Easter celebrations last weekend, we are faced with a particularly poignant example of this challenge. No doubt most of our congregations saw increased numbers, with those members who turn up only at Christmas and Easter flooding the pews. The

atmosphere in our churches was likely special, too, with palms, lilies, and beloved songs, with the moving Biblical accounts of Jesus' final days, His sacrifice on the cross, and the triumph of His resurrection. Your Easter weekend experience may have indeed felt like 'All the believers were one in heart and mind. ... With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all.'

The challenge for us now is to sustain this utopian 'mountain top' moment in the weeks after Easter. Will our numbers drop off again, and our enthusiasm wane? How do we ensure that all believers – including the Christmas and Easter members, the youth group, and those with disabilities or illnesses – in such a diverse congregation share a common vision and testimony and that they all feel the power of the Spirit working in their lives? We are also called to ensure in our increasingly complex world that vulnerable members are not only cared for but also perceive and believe that they matter just as much as other members of our **fellowship**.

Thankfully, the apostles also gave us a good example of how to respond as we navigate the tricky realities of being the church when the honeymoon period is over, and the cracks begin to show. This pattern of sustainable **fellowship** begins with prayer to the Source of our **fellowship**. For immediately prior to the description of the unified believers, we read about them praying together (Acts 4:29-31). We return to where we began today: the call to communion, to an intimate **fellowship** with our God that will nurture and guide us in our interactions with each other.

Then, we must continue to be the church, not giving up on the community of believers when faced with challenges. The apostles' response was not to throw up their hands and declare that the church was dying, that their communal living was a failed experiment, or that they needed to return to the good old days. Rather, they reacted by appointing seven men 'full of the Spirit and wisdom' (Acts 6:3) to take on some of the practical but crucial tasks of running the growing community of Christ. They recognized that their **fellowship** needed to evolve so that they could maintain the quality of both their preaching and their caring ministries. They needed to ensure that they established mechanisms to sustain their mission in the longer term after it reached a point where that could not perhaps be done 'naturally.'

We, too, must act like those innovative and determined apostles. For those who are physically able to do so, we must continue to meet together, both when things seem to be going perfectly and when they are not. We will all need to seek strategies to overcome the obstacles created by our own human foibles by exploring new ways of being church together, listening to each other's concerns, and adapting our ministries as needed. The

church is still the church, even as it grows and changes, even when it is imperfect.

The Scripture passage prompts us to seek **fellowship** with God and each other. Its impossibly high standards both remind us of the promise of what can be and challenge us with the problem of what is. It also provides us with a pattern we can follow as we seek greater unity in our mission and witness.

Prayer: Lord, we thank you for the gift of **fellowship** and the promise of a relationship with You. Thank you for the opportunity to join in loving communion with You and with other believers. Like the Christians of two thousand years ago, and with Christians today in our own churches and around the world, we pray that you will grant us a shared vision, a willingness to support each other, and the ability to sustain our unity as we move forward in faith together. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Maundy Thursday Gathering at John Gray Memorial United Church



On March 28, 2024, members of the John Gray Memorial United Church, South Sound United Church, and the Elmslie Memorial United Church came together for a joint Maundy Thursday Tenebrae Service. The event started with a light supper and the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It was followed by readings from the gospels that retold the last week of Jesus' life and the events that led to His crucifixion.



Good Friday Concert at Elmslie Memorial

On March 29, 2024, the Cayman Islands Male Voice Choir presented a Good Friday Concert at Elmslie Memorial United Church in George Town to celebrate Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary. The Male Voice Choir has been performing for 50 years and comprises members from different denominations and congregations in the Cayman Islands. They frequently participate in the annual Christmas and Easter celebrations at the church. The concert showcased a blend of contemporary and traditional choir music, accompanied by Mr. Denver Bloomfield and Mr. Antonio Sanchez.



WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
EASTER MESSAGE 2024:

JESUS IS NOT HERE, HE IS RISEN!

*Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay
General Secretary World Council of Churches*



As we look around the world today, we see so much of pain, suffering, and death. It seems that we are surrounded by death as we think about the thousands of people dying in the wars, millions dying of starvation and hunger, hundreds of refugees drowning in seas, and many more dying on a daily basis in the experience of ethnic, racial, and gender-based violence. We are becoming accustomed to violence and death as if these are normal experiences in life.

In this time of Lent we are reminded of the brutal and sacrificial suffering death of Jesus Christ. Some of the disciples and many of his followers, including family and

friends, thought it would all end there - with a dead Jesus. When they went to the tomb on that resurrection day that's precisely what they were expecting. They forgot about the promise of Jesus that, on the third day, he will rise again. So you can imagine the profoundly deep question of the angels, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" The question is not intended to say that Jesus is not among the dead; it is an affirmation that Christ is risen, and death is conquered.

The empty tomb is a sign of LIFE in the midst of suffering and death. The message is clear that with the resurrection of Jesus death is conquered. While we face the anguish of senseless and unnecessary deaths in the world today, we are reminded that the suffering servant who died on our behalf not only suffers with us but also brings life to all who believe. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25).

The empty tomb is a sign of HOPE. The gift of eternal life is not a spiritualization and romanticization of death but a promise and hope that the Risen Lord will bring justice and righteousness. Hope is an eschatological gift that tells us that, in spite of our present struggles and sufferings, we are not alone; the Risen Christ is with us restoring hope and joy. Yet, hope is not a passive acceptance of death but the inspiration to honour, respect, and appreciate life, God's gift to us. Hope calls us to resist and oppose unjust systems and authorities that are life-denying and life-depriving because the God of life stands for justice and peace in the world.

The empty tomb is a sign of LOVE. It tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. The Apostle Paul makes this clear when he says this in Romans 8:38-39: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers. Nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Indeed, we are surrounded by death in this world today. In this situation let us be reminded of the Easter message: "Jesus is not here but has risen." In every situation of suffering and death today let us be reminded that the Risen Lord brings us life, hope, and love. May the peace of Christ be with you all. (Source: www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/easter-message-2024)

GLOBAL MISSIONS CONFERENCE

Nations United for Christ

Guest speakers

BISHOP RAPHAEL HAULE
Bishop of Ruvuma Anglican Diocese, Tanzania

MRS. KEITRA VILMA
OM Regional Director Northern Caribbean

10th-14th April 2024 | **Elmslie Memorial United Church**

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10
APRIL

Church-Wide Home Group Study
Lead by Bishop Haule from Tanzania

7:00PM

12
APRIL

Youth Night
Virtually visiting India, Africa, Honduras & Cuba
Short talk with Bishop Haule & Keitra Vilma

8:00 PM

13
APRIL

Breakfast & Workshops
Topic: Mission Strategies & Evangelism
Lead by Bishop Haule & Keitra Vilma

8:00 AM - 12:00 PM

14
APRIL

Sunday Service
Special Missions Sermon by Bishop Haule

10:30AM

14
APRIL

Multi-Country Missions Finale
Closing the Conference with a vibrant night of diverse food, music & fashion with the contribution of 10 different churches

6:30 PM

on Radio Cayman 89.9
every Sunday at 7:45 am

April 7, 2024
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