

21<sup>st</sup> Century Ecumenism:

The Local Church as a Model for Unity and Diversity in a Fragmented World

by

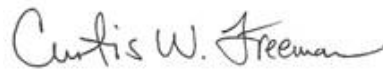
Charla Woodward Belinski, MDiv

Divinity School of

Duke University

Date: March 31, 2023

Approved:



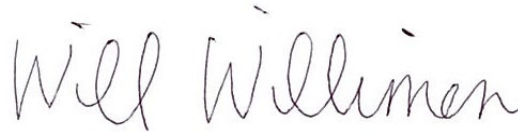
---

Dr. Curtis Freeman, Supervisor



---

Dr. Ken Evers-Hood, Second Reader



---

Dr. Will Willimon, D.Min Program Director

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Ministry in Divinity School  
of Duke University

2023

ABSTRACT

21<sup>st</sup> Century Ecumenism:

The Local Church as a Model for Unity and Diversity in a Fragmented World

by

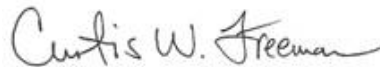
Charla Woodward Belinski, MDiv

Divinity School of

Duke University

Date: March 31, 2023

Approved:



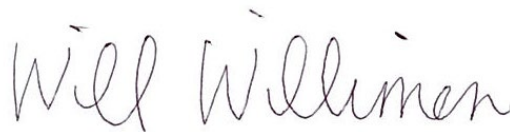
---

Dr. Curtis Freeman Supervisor



---

Dr. Ken Evers-Hood, Second Reader



---

Dr. Will Willimon, D.Min Program Director

An Abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Ministry in Divinity School  
of Duke University

2023

Copyright by  
Charla Woodward Belinski  
2023

## **Abstract**

This thesis introduces readers to the rich tradition of the ecumenical movement and explores how emerging new strategies can benefit congregations as well as facilitate healing in our fractured and divisive world. It argues that the same principles used in ecumenical dialogue can and should be used in the local church. First, the history and significant steps and missteps of the ecumenical movement are briefly examined, before turning to the contemporary strategies of receptive, spiritual and kenotic ecumenism. Then, the paper considers 21<sup>st</sup> century examples of thriving ecumenical ministries, including survey feedback that provides an intimate look at how one church (Snowmass Chapel) has committed itself to unity across various denominations. Finally, a process is provided for effective ecumenical leadership both within, and outside of, the local church context.

Ecumenical work takes courageous leaders who are willing to acknowledge difference without judgement, listen deeply, and be committed to Christian unity in love. The ecumenical movement has made significant strides in the past century and half, yet it has not made a significant move into the local church. This thesis argues that by introducing the concept of ecumenism to local congregations, leaders can initiate change that has far-reaching impacts across all areas of life.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to so many people who carried me through to the finish line. First, to my committee members, Dr. Curtis Freeman, who held the bar high, and Dr. Ken Evers-Hood, who helped me meet that standard with encouragement and grace. To Dr. Will Willimon for your leadership, humor, and grace. To my friend and “sympathetic reader,” Stephen K. Huber, J.D., who generously offered his time to edit, and I unabashedly said yes: every edit was worth it.

Thank you to the Pandemic Cohort 2020: your little zoom faces are seared in my memory and I am in awe of each and every one of you. Special thanks to Jaime McGlothlin, Jeremy Kays, Jeremy ‘Rockstar’ Everett, Tiffani Harris, Dave Carpenter, David Choi, and Glen Shoup: there is zero percent chance I would have had any fun doing this if it weren’t for you. Thank you for making me laugh.

A special thank you to the brilliant, kind, funny, thoughtful and forthcoming people of Snowmass Chapel: I didn’t know I wanted to write about you but it turned out you were the star of the show. Thank you for your love, support and friendship through the years. To the Rev. Dr. Robert de Wetter whose unwavering support and encouragement got me farther than I dreamed I would go. Thank you for helping me get where God intended me to be.

And finally, always and forever, thank you to Team Belinski. My kids, Nick, Ben and Anna Kate – I couldn’t have done it without your cheerful little nudges, inspiration,

hugs and IT support – thank you for thinking what I do is cool. To my mom, Pat Woodward, for instilling the love of church and of (mostly) good grammar in me at a young age. To my siblings, friends and co-workers who have all had less of me as I labored through this, I owe you big time. Last but never ever least, to my number one cheerleader, coach, fan, and partner in all things, Tim: thank you for believing in literally everything I do; nobody is as lucky as me.

# Contents

Abstract .....	iv
Acknowledgments .....	v
Contents.....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Modeling Unity in the Local Church.....	3
The Need for Unity in a Divided World .....	6
The Local Church as a Model for Diversity, Inclusion and Acceptance.....	11
Chapter 1 .....	13
What Is Ecumenism?.....	13
A Brief History of the Ecumenical Movement .....	16
Divisiveness in the United States and Its Impacts on the Church.....	22
Unholy Alliances: An Ecumenism of Hate? .....	27
Chapter 1 Conclusion.....	35
Chapter 2 .....	37
The Ways We Think About Others.....	37
Receptive Ecumenism.....	40
Spiritual Ecumenism.....	44
Kenotic Ecumenism.....	49
Chapter 2 Conclusion.....	51
Chapter 3.....	53

Exploring and Expanding Ecumenical Work in the Local Church .....	53
Snowmass Chapel: An Ecumenical History and Mission .....	58
Ecumenical Practices in the Local Context .....	64
Liturgical Flexibility .....	67
Outward Signs of an Inward Ecumenical Spirit .....	71
Chapter 3 Conclusion.....	76
Chapter 4.....	78
Creating an Ecumenical Vision in the Local Church.....	78
Unity in the Local Context .....	79
Imagination, Curiosity and Courage .....	83
Impacting Relationships, Families, Communities and More .....	87
Come, Let Us Argue It Out .....	96
Chapter 4 Conclusion.....	97
Conclusion .....	99
Appendix A.....	104
Appendix B .....	105
Bibliography .....	145

## Introduction

Come together, right now, over me.  
—The Beatles<sup>1</sup>

We had come together with the church across town in a display of unity and respect though, truth be told, our goal was a bit less altruistic. We, the church leadership of the *other* church, were of the strong opinion that the church across town had harmed and demoralized young people through a series of podcasts discussing homosexuality and the church.

The podcast hosts were sixteen-year-old high school students, no doubt passionate young Christians, and their stated goal was to address some hot topics they and their fellow classmates were grappling with. The subject matter of this particular podcast was beyond the level of the theological maturity and experience of most teenagers, and the outcome was stunningly bad. The podcast went viral, and after a slew of community and school criticisms and hateful online comments from all sides of the topic, the hosts removed it from their website, but not before our church clergy and staff had listened in. We were incensed. “It was reckless,” we said. “Where were the adult mentors to these kids?” we fumed. “How could they represent God’s church in such a harmful way?” we insisted. We had worked together with the church across town on

---

<sup>1</sup> “Come Together,” Paul McCartney and John Lennon, *Abbey Road*, Apple Core label, 1969.

many youth events hoping to portray a solidarity in faith and the visible unity of the church. Now we suddenly felt a strange sense of betrayal, and yes, self-righteousness.

Initially, we tossed around ideas like writing letters to the editor chastising the church across town, placing an ad in the local paper inviting the community to our church, and never again partnering on anything, but we finally settled on the grown-up approach: we invited our brothers in Christ to meet with us and talk.

There we were, in the middle of a pandemic, five leaders from our respective churches arranged six feet apart around a picnic table outdoors in the church courtyard. We made all the right moves: opened in prayer, focused on all the ways we are alike and the importance of our shared beliefs, offered gratitude for each other's ministries, asked questions, listened more than we talked, but there remained an undercurrent of defensiveness, of us versus them. Just as the meeting seemed to be wrapping up with no clear bridge across the theological gap before us, a small crowd approached from up the street.

"Hi, we're in the middle of a staff retreat and we're on scavenger hunt. We have to take a photo of ourselves re-creating a famous scene with total strangers and we wondered if you could help. It will just take two minutes. Do you mind?" They laughed embarrassedly and apologized for interrupting, cajoling us into posing.

"Ok, what's the famous scene?" someone asked.

"The Last Supper." Apropos.

After we had arranged ourselves around the picnic table, chosen who would be Jesus, who the beloved disciple, who Judas with the moneybag, one of their group snapped a photo and our new friends departed. We grew silent as the sound of their laughter faded with each retreating step; the five of us now stared at each other across the table. With a small exhale someone said, “Huh. Did the Holy Spirit just show up in the guise of a scavenger hunt?”

How do you imagine bridging a theological gap so wide? Maybe try arranging yourselves around the table with Jesus.

### ***Modeling Unity in the Local Church***

This thesis examines the ways in which the local church can lead in bold and courageous ways to overcome significant difference among Christians by focusing on matters that unite rather than divide. In doing so, it is my hope that the very act of examination and practice will lead to greater unity in the church, as well as have a positive impact on much of what divides us in this fragmented world. To do so, this thesis will look closely at the ecumenical movement, which has been working toward the unity of all Christians for over one hundred years but has remained largely unfamiliar to anyone in the pews.

We are living in extremely divisive and uncertain times which will require intention and a willingness to come together across difference as a way forward. Many,

including Christian leaders, are asking to whom we should look in order to guide us on this path to unity, unaware of their own rich history of resources and successes available through the ecumenical movement. Ecumenism has remained largely unknown to Christians despite having made noteworthy progress in overcoming significant theological and practical difference across denominations. My goal in this thesis is to show how Christian leaders in the local context might come to embrace a framework of unity, incorporating principles of ecumenism into their local congregations. In doing so, we will see how these principles can also empower congregations and laity to model unity for our country and the world. By way of example we will take a look at local churches that have excelled at blending diverse theological and ecclesial backgrounds, with an emphasis on my own community, Snowmass Chapel in Colorado, which made an intentional shift nearly 50 years ago to be inclusive of all Christian denominations. Snowmass Chapel will serve as a touchpoint throughout this thesis for how the mission and purpose of the church has created an intentionality of oneness that informs its worship, work and witness, and also impacts the broader community. While it is not the intent of this thesis to convert churches to one way of doing and serving its members, it is my hope and intention that Christian leaders will come to see how unifying efforts at the local church level have a profound impact well beyond the church walls.

Chapter 1 provides a broad, but brief, overview of the worldwide ecumenical movement, its history, efficacy, obstacles, and successes, and will look briefly at what ecumenism is and is not. We will also look at some of the headwinds of change we are experiencing in the United States which have had a powerful impact on our ability to unite. Specifically, we'll examine the state of divisiveness and intolerance in the United States across a broad swath of religious, cultural, political, and social issues.

There has been important progress in the ecumenical movement in recent years, and Chapter 2 will break down three of the best tools that are readily available to incorporate into everyday actions: *Receptive Ecumenism*, *Kenotic Ecumenism* and *Spiritual Ecumenism*. These are consistent with Snowmass Chapel's ecumenical mission, and I will provide examples of how these approaches can be brought to life in the daily lives of the local church. These first two chapters are intended to give readers a basic understanding of the massive body of work done over the past century and a half regarding denominational unity, and ground us in why unity matters at the local church level.

Chapter 3 turns to the work of the people. Through congregant surveys at Snowmass Chapel and an overview of the church's doctrine, attitudes and behaviors, the Snowmass Chapel can serve as an example of how ecumenical worship and community can be realized, in even the smallest of ways, and how embracing ecumenical ideals might well lead to better relationships in all manner of modern-day

life: political, social, religious, cultural. It's important for people to maintain ties to their own traditions and denominational unity, so we will briefly look at organizations and people who excel at bridge-building while maintaining an identity around these traditions.

Finally, Chapter 4 will provide Christian leaders practical steps for modeling unity, inclusion and radical acceptance of other. There is an urgent need in society to understand why unity matters, that there is historical reason and precedent for striving toward it, and to having the practical tools necessary to do something about it. In putting ecumenical theory into practice in the local context, church leaders can offer an imaginative way forward for all of humankind, with the church leading the way toward unity, inclusion, acceptance, healing and reconciliation.

### ***The Need for Unity in a Divided World***

In the Gospel of John, Jesus prayed for his disciples, that “all of them would be one, so that that the world may believe” (John 17:21, NRSV).<sup>2</sup> One does not have to look far back into the history of the Christian religion to know that Jesus was naming something he himself likely knew would prove to be one of humanity's greatest challenges. Polarity, disputes, clashes, quarrels, and violence have long hindered God's

---

<sup>2</sup> Unless specifically stated otherwise, all scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

people in both secular and sacred circles. The church has been divided since Jesus handed Peter the keys to the place.

In my seminary days the most popular course was titled “Christianities in Antiquity,” the plurality of it intentional, given that it took over 300 years after the resurrection to gain any kind of consensus about what the religion of Christianity should and should not be. There never was a single Christianity; rather, a variety of Christian groups competed with one another in the early years. There were widespread tensions in Christendom leading up to the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and the development of a common statement of belief did not come easily. The bishops who gathered in Nicaea at Constantine’s behest settled on one of the most challenging points of controversy, the divine nature of the Son, issuing a creed which stated that the Son was generated from the essence of the Father and was hence *homoousios* (the same thing or being or essence) with the Father. The creed also condemned anyone who said otherwise, exiling them and excluding them from the Church.<sup>3</sup> In one decisive action they both united and divided the church.

Settling the matter about the divine nature of the Son, however, generated more tension and even more theological trajectories erupted. The decades following the

---

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 430-35.

Council at Nicaea saw a number of interpretations, some sharing a common commitment to God as three in one (trinitarian), and some not.

I share this specific example of early church disagreement because, unless we plan to break fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, a healthy discussion and analysis of unity in Christ must acknowledge our difference in interpretation and practice, which has existed from the beginning. For two thousand years, followers of Jesus have had disputes and yet have managed to agree on the main thing – the most important thing – and that is Jesus himself. The Reformation in 1517 separated the church again with the advent of Protestantism, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are experiencing further divisions, this time between conservative and liberal branches of the same denomination.<sup>4</sup> The splintering of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church continues.<sup>5</sup>

It is notable that about every 500 years, the church goes through a transformation of sorts, clearing out the attic and holding a rummage sale, as author and religion expert Phyllis Tickle famously put it; and these transformations often result in more division, disagreement, and even disdain. Today there are more than 200 Christian

---

<sup>4</sup> Currently in the U.S., for example, a new theologically conservative branch of Methodism, the Global Methodist Church, is in the process of separating from the United Methodist Church.

<sup>5</sup> The Nicene Creed has among its statements of belief, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” The word catholic here, with a small c, means universal and is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church as we think of it today, but a reference to oneness. The creedal translation here is from *Praying Together*, English Language Liturgical Commission (ELLC) (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

denominations in the United States alone. This re-ordering of the Christian landscape can largely be attributed to a complex mix of religious disagreement and (not surprisingly) political conflicts which have always wrought division. Jesus predicted it would happen:

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12:51-53)

Why would the message of Jesus – the gospel, the good news – bring division?

We know from elsewhere in the Bible that Jesus came bearing *peace*: “Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth,” the angels said when Jesus was born. “Peace I give you, my peace I leave with you,” Jesus said to his disciples. “Peace be with you,” he said to almost everyone, almost everywhere he went. From Isaiah 9 we know that Jesus “will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” Peace; not division.

Yet Simeon, an old man, a devout man of God, who when Mary and Joseph presented the infant Jesus at the temple, took Jesus into his arms, blessed him, and said, “This child is destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel, and to be *a sign that will be opposed* so the inner thoughts of many will be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35, emphasis added). Jesus came to bring peace to all but he would encounter resistance and

opposition. His message of peace would be rejected; he spoke openly about division because he understood what we could not yet: peace comes at a price.

Seeking peace and unity is hard work. The entire message and ministry of Jesus was different, challenging, and counter-cultural. It is still different, challenging, and counter-cultural. But it is in how we handle the tension of that reality that true disciples are made.

In Christian theology, the kingdom of God is governed by a way that is contrary to the way of the world. It is not about ruling by might but by forgiveness, not by fear but by courage, not by power but by humility, not by serving one's self but by serving others. Yet those invested in the present order of their lives will resist God's kingdom because it spells an end to the comfortable status quo. When people feel threatened, there is a tendency to double down on convictions, and align ourselves with people who agree with our way of thinking. The modern world since the Enlightenment has adopted an individualistic attitude that ascribes moral agency to the self alone – justifying and rationalizing personal preference over social order – and this has eroded humanity's ability to understand life together. We silo ourselves into like-minded groups and have

all but lost the ability to tolerate, let alone understand, another's point of view. There is a grave disorder in the arena of civil discourse today.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Local Church as a Model for Diversity, Inclusion and Acceptance***

It will be helpful to start with a question: *What is the unity we seek?*<sup>7</sup> It may seem a simple question easy enough to answer, but as we move through the history of the movement itself and discover some of the underlying issues that divide and vex Americans, it will be important to keep this question in mind. Is the unity we seek one of total conversion to a common practice? Does unity require uniformity or is it open to the various forms of diversity of thought and practice? The answer may help us discern with more accuracy what it means when we sing the hymn, "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

As my colleagues and I gathered around that table to discuss a theological divide between us that summer day, simply the happenstance reminder of the Last Supper, of God-with-us, did not restore it. Yet it was stark reminder in an otherwise tense moment

---

<sup>6</sup> In his classic work, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that this is the most significant issue for Christians of our time. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 23-35.

<sup>7</sup> See the 1961 New Delhi Report, "Unity," *World Council of Churches*, accessed Mar. 22, 2023, [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Unity\\_report\\_ND1961.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Unity_report_ND1961.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Peter Scholtes, "They'll Know we Are Christians By Our Love," The Lorenz Publication, Music: 1966.

to begin to see beyond political and societal concerns and to behave like the disciples we are. *“What is the unity we seek?”* may not be immediately apparent or even answerable, yet it is a question that helps to refocus and reframe the current situation. If 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans are honest with ourselves, we each have responsibility for seeking the answer. Divisions, disunity, and ruptured relationships happen. They happen because we are human beings who often lose our way, but we are continually called to embrace the message of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and courage. We are called to care for people first above all else; to strive for justice and, yes, peace, even in a divided world. This is the story of our Christian faith, the rich narrative in which we exist, remembering our story can help ground us in the unity we seek. It is imperative that Christians not only come together across a multitude of differences, but that they are motivated to model unity for a weary world. Indeed, it is what Christ prayed we would do.

# Chapter 1

## ***What Is Ecumenism?***

That all who are enabled, through grace, to make a profession, and to manifest the reality of it in their tempers and conduct, should consider each other as the precious saints of God, should love each other as brothers and sisters, children of the same family, temples of the same spirit, members of the same body, subjects of the same grace, objects of the same divine love, bought with the same price, and joint heirs of the same inheritance. Whom God has joined together, no one should dare to put asunder.

-Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*<sup>9</sup>

When I was a freshman in high school, my English teacher assigned a research project. Each of us was allowed to pick our own topic, and while I have no recollection at all what my topic was, I have never forgotten what one of my classmates chose: the title of her paper was, “Why Catholics Are Not Christian.” I did not grow up Catholic so I had no dog in the race, as it were, but I remember thinking her thesis was ludicrous and was backed up not by research but personal bias. Even worse, my classmate accidentally misspelled Catholic – “*Cathloic*” – throughout the entire paper. That’s right. Every single page of her research paper asserted with the misguided confidence of a teenager that “*Cathloics*” were not Christian.

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Campbell, “Declaration and Address,” *Disciples of Christ Historical Society*, accessed March 16, 2023, [https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=all\\_foundationaldocuments](https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=all_foundationaldocuments)

It was not just the lack of credible research or a total disregard for spelling that annoyed me, but there was something else. The bald-faced intentionality of divisiveness and exclusion still, decades later, unnerves me. What religious fervor stirred in her that she would spend six weeks trying to build such a case? Who were the adults molding her young mind to think this way? Through the centuries people have been subjected to much worse discrimination and intolerance than a naïve teenager could even imagine, but we are at a critical time in our religious and cultural history, especially in the United States where division across all sectors of life is omnipresent, and a dose of healthy self-examination is required. Why, when Jesus himself called for unity, are Christ's followers so inclined to sow the roots of divisiveness? Why do we choose to belittle the dignity of people on the grounds of difference?

These questions have troubled me through the years, with no satisfying answers. For over a century Christian leaders from diverse denominational bodies have engaged in ecumenical work and much progress has been made. The ecumenical movement has produced powerful practices that can cut across a broad swath of human division including religious, but also political, social, and relational. Despite the progress, ecumenism has largely stayed in the hallowed halls of academia and ecclesia; the trickle-down effect has not been substantial enough in many cases to provide the tools necessary for good, loving, church-going people to know how to embrace their other in

the workplace, neighborhoods, communities, and sometimes even within their own families.

Now more than ever we need tools that help us bridge differences, honor various backgrounds and experiences, and engage in meaningful civil discourse. One way church leaders can help facilitate this is by grounding themselves in the basic principles of the ecumenical movement. There are organized ways of participating in the ecumenism, including membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Council of Churches (NCC); however, some of the most powerful expressions of ecumenism are performed much more informally at the local level. Snowmass Chapel, for example, is not a member of any organized ecumenical body, yet the spirit and principles of its work are largely shared with the WCC and NCC.<sup>10</sup> Having no formal association with an ecumenical body such as these does not exclude the possibility of a local ministry and mission focused on unity. Furthermore, this charge to engage ecumenically does not require denominational bodies to relinquish their own doctrine and traditions, becoming something else entirely. Rather, it is an invitation to learn and to implement the proven practices of ecumenism which have served to bridge seemingly insurmountable challenges cross-denominationally.

---

<sup>10</sup> The World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Council of Churches (NCC) serve hundreds of thousands of member churches who are committed to the unity and witness of God's people, and to bringing about unity justice and peace worldwide.

## ***A Brief History of the Ecumenical Movement***

The fundamental form of divinity is 'we.'  
—Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI<sup>11</sup>

It bears noting right at the outset that almost no one outside the ecumenical movement knows what ecumenism is. What is more, they might be hard pressed to even pronounce it. With all due respect to the saints who have labored toward its success over the past 150 years, it is fair to say it is a movement without much, well, *movement*. At least not in the sense that could be easily understood and applied by the local church and laity. The reason, it seems, is a lack of reception, that is, the work of ecumenism has mostly been done in meeting rooms and on the keyboards of theologians, church bureaucrats, and academicians. As these bright and faithful minds have endeavored to find ways to advance the visible unity of Christians, their efforts have largely stayed at the 30,000-foot level where they could see and ponder both the arc of religious history and the trajectory of the world to come. Meanwhile the world's practitioners of Christianity continue to be rooted on the ground, kneeling in the pews of their respective denominations and theological comfort zones, either oblivious to worldwide efforts to unify them (at best) or certain that their religious others are simply wrong and their very salvation is at risk. Use the word "ecumenical" in almost any setting – secular

---

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism & Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).

or religious – and you will likely receive blank stares and confused looks, even among those who already embody these ideals.

In a brief survey of congregants at Snowmass Chapel, an inter-denominational congregation that strives to be ecumenical, 60 percent of respondents said they had heard of the ecumenical movement but could not define it, and 40 percent had never heard of it. Eighty-five percent said they were not at all familiar or only somewhat familiar with the concept of ecumenism.<sup>12</sup> This lack of familiarity comes despite Snowmass Chapel’s founding documents in its Book of Discipline, which explicitly calls its members to visible oneness “by which a diversity of persons, gifts and understanding is brought together as a sign of the unity of God’s people.” Snowmass Chapel also calls itself to an openness to God’s continual formation of the “Church ecumenical,” that united as one, we might work more effectively in the world.<sup>13</sup> The irony is that many of the survey respondents, and indeed many churches at large, engage in ecumenical work without calling it such (e.g., inter-denominational clergy groups; community-wide faith-based initiatives aimed at homelessness, poverty, and education; shared youth

---

<sup>12</sup> Survey results are based on local surveys conducted for purposes of defining what makes a church ecumenical, and what draws congregants to such a place of worship. For the study, I interviewed both laity and church leaders at Snowmass Chapel in Snowmass Village, CO. Results from the survey are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, and can be found in Appendix B.

<sup>13</sup> “Book of Discipline,” Snowmass Chapel, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://snowmasschapel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/bookOfDiscipline03152000.pdf>, 12.

ministries; and meaningful relationships that cross denominational boundaries), and without knowing its historical significance.

“Ecumenical” is itself a clumsy word, at best. It is not well defined even among clergy let alone laity, and it is often confused and misunderstood. Newcomers to ecumenical dialogue have been so confused by the vocabulary and terminology in fact – the so-called “ecu-speak” – that it has been described as an ecumenical Tower of Babel.<sup>14</sup> What follows is a brief overview of the origins and rationale for the ecumenical movement, which we will need in order to understand the moral imperative to do the work of unity in the world.

Derived from the ancient Greek word *oikoumenē*, and used in numerous New Testament references to describe “the inhabited world,” the word ecumenism/ecumenical has in modern times come to mean *Christian unity throughout the inhabited world*.<sup>15</sup> Ecumenism has the explicit goal of restoring Christian unity in faith, life, and mission; however, it serves merely as a tool of participating denominations and not as a super-church of its own standing, and it aims to embrace all ecclesial traditions across

---

<sup>14</sup> John T. Ford describes how newcomers to the ecumenical dialogue are often confounded by its efforts and confusing “ecu-speak,” leaving them wondering if it is even relevant in the modern world. John T. Ford, “Oberlin 2007: The Need for an Expanded Methodology?” in *Ecumenical Directions in the United States Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 380-381.

<sup>15</sup> “Ecumenical,” USCCB, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs/ecumenical> (accessed February 3, 2023).

the globe.<sup>16</sup> This is no small task; there are roughly 30,000 Christian denominations worldwide.<sup>17</sup>

It is evident that the world is profoundly affected by the consequences of our divisions, and many Christian churches describe themselves as being in opposition to the other. Over time, the interpretation of scripture and the understanding of shared historical roots has become partisan fodder, and deep theological reflection concerning unity has suffered in the face of dissent. As a result, many Christians lost their ability even to recognize a common belief, and came to see each other as strangers, even enemies.<sup>18</sup>

The modern ecumenical movement began as a perceived necessity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelization movement which recognized that spreading the gospel of Jesus became increasingly difficult amid widespread disagreement and disunity of Jesus's followers. Promoting the visible unity of Christians became a priority and the first half of the twentieth century saw a concerted effort to reconcile differences in interpretation and praxis. The principal instrument of ecumenism is a series of theological dialogues and World Conferences which bring representatives from diverse denominational

---

<sup>16</sup> Ola Tjorhom, "The Early Stages Pre-1910," in *The Oxford Handbook for Ecumenical Studies*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 4.

<sup>17</sup> The number of denominations grows daily which makes it difficult to pin down. Broadly speaking denominations fall into three branches: Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, though within those branches there are thousands of particular ways of being in Christian community.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas FitzGerald, "Preface," *Towards Viable Theological Education: Ecumenical Imperative, Catalyst of Renewal*, ed., John Samuel Pobe (Geneva: WCC Publ., 1997), xii-ix.

bodies together. Rooting their conversations in what they held in common, the partners focused on common ground, and they produced remarkable agreement on previously challenging and divisive issues such as justification, Mariology, the Eucharist, and ordained ministry.<sup>19</sup>

Though these early conversations were largely between Protestant leaders and a handful of Roman Catholic priests acting on their own, by the 1960's the Catholic Church was ready to engage in ways that would impact ecumenical work for decades to come. Vatican officials had been reluctant to participate in world conferences, due in part to a certain wariness of non-Catholics that existed within the institution at the time. Prior to Vatican II, the stance of the Catholic Church was that non-Catholic Christians be returned to the fold of the 'mother' church. That changed for good when Pope Paul VI, following in the footsteps of Pope John XXIII's ecumenical support, made a commitment to Christian unity and the worldwide ecumenical movement in his 1964 Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*.<sup>20</sup> Stating his "urgent wish" that the Catholic Church

---

<sup>19</sup> The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), the Groupe des Dombes, and the World Commission on Faith and Order in its Lima paper on baptism, Eucharist, and ministry (BEM) are among the many achievements of ecumenism that deserve our attention, despite the proliferation of the aforementioned baffling ecu-speak. For the most comprehensive summary of the history of ecumenical dialogues, I recommend *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies* by Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan. An archive of Conference publications can be found on the World Council of Churches website: "Resources," World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources>.

<sup>20</sup> Second Vatican Council, "Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21 November, 1964," Vatican.va, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html) (accessed October 31, 2022).

work with its “separated brethren,” the Pope called the restoration of unity the principal concern of Vatican II. Since then, the Catholic Church has not wavered in its commitment and has been involved in every aspect of the ecumenical movement.<sup>21</sup>

The formation of the World Council of Churches, Paul Couturier’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and the embrace of ecumenism by the Catholic Church converged in the mid-twentieth century to bring a new excitement and hope for the visible unity of Christians. It was an awakening to the idea that to be Christian is to be ecumenical. Yet not everyone agreed. As we have discussed, ecumenism is often seen as the hobby of theologians – again, those steeped in dialogue at the highest levels – rather than as a biblical mandate to us all and some have even viewed ecumenism as a means to a political end, as we will discuss later in this chapter. It is also helpful to ground ourselves in scripture here, viewing ecumenism not as a social justice movement or a denigration of orthodoxy, but an outward expression of Jesus’s command to love and the manifestation of his prayers that “all may be one.”

---

<sup>21</sup> Though the Catholic Church is not a formal member of the WCC, it is a member of the inter-denominational Faith and Order Commission, and part of ongoing discussions with the WCC members, and others.

## ***Divisiveness and Its Impacts on the Local Church***

By our divisions we don't say, "Look at Christ," we say, "Look at us."  
— Archbishop Justin Welby<sup>22</sup>

In his inauguration speech on January 20, 2021, President Joe Biden cited a laundry list of issues facing the United States – the Covid-19 pandemic, economic instability, racial injustice, and outright expressions of hate for different political affiliations. In his speech, Biden argued for unity and that Americans must move past the current so-called uncivil war. "Without unity, there is no peace, only bitterness and fury," he said. "No progress, only exhausting outrage. No nation, only a state of chaos." Unity, he argued, is the path forward.<sup>23</sup>

President Biden's speech echoed what many in the country had been saying for years: something has to change. Yet no one seems to be able to agree on exactly what. How do Americans find a way out from this place of conflict and discontent? Where is the hope of harmony in these fragmented times? In a nation which boasts the world's largest Christian adherents certainly their shared story might hold some meaningful directive. Might the Christian concept of repentance also serve as a foothold for change,

---

<sup>22</sup> Justin Welby, "'Ecumenical Spring': Archbishop Justin's Speech at World Council of Churches 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," The Archbishop of Canterbury, <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/ecumenical-spring-archbishop-justins-speech-world-council-churches-70th-anniversary> (accessed October 31, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Joseph R. Biden, "Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.," The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/> (accessed March 12, 2021)

even among those who are not Christian? If so, then from what, exactly, do we need to repent?

While we have much in this country that unites us, we must begin with the one, singular, monumental impairment to our ability to unite with others, something we have perpetuated all on our own. Despite the urgent calls for solidarity – in politics, in mask-wearing, in opinions about vaccines, in churches and religious communities, in equality and equity for all races, genders and classes – there exists one vexing problem: we exist in a world of individuality.

The history of the United States is so intertwined with the ethos of rugged individualism and a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kind of mentality, that it is difficult to know if we shaped the phrase or the phrase shaped us. Since explorers first stepped a dusty boot on this land, the lure of the frontier – be it land, economic, social or celestial frontiers – has been a uniquely American temptation to push traditional boundaries. Striking out on one's own is lauded as a hero's journey; going it alone is what we do.

"Right," every flag-waving American patriot may say, "so, what is the problem?" Self-sufficiency and independence are essential human qualities; every parent knows the importance of raising resilient children who can survive in challenging circumstances, for example, yet knowing you can handle whatever life throws your way is not the same as choosing "me over we" as a way of life. Americans have learned well

the story of independence and freedom, but have we possibly learned it too well? Can we learn again how to do life together?

Jonathan Haidt, whose research focuses on the intersectionality of religion, politics and morality, argues the reason for the decline is a seismic shift in the way societies determine how to balance the needs of individuals vs. groups:

Most societies have chosen the sociocentric answer, placing the needs of groups and institutions first, and subordinating the needs of individuals. In contrast, the individualistic answer places the individuals at the center, and makes society a servant of the individual. The sociocentric answer dominated most of the ancient world, but the individualistic answer became a powerful rival during the Enlightenment.<sup>24</sup>

When individuals are trained to put themselves above the greater society, then any rule or social practice that limits their personal freedom (i.e., their personal way of thinking and judging) is seen as a threat worthy of being questioned. While acknowledging that there is a danger in swinging the pendulum too far from the communal good, it's helpful to lift up why people are suspicious of hierarchy and institutional systems in the first place. Some of those reasons include subjugation, oppression, discrimination, personal rights, and finding one's own sense of belonging outside traditioned spaces. In other words, it can be a healthy practice to have some empathy about what leads to hyper-individualization.

---

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 17.

Still, one of the headwinds of society we are currently fighting is this individualistic approach that has all but obliterated the sociocentric approach. When personal freedoms and ways of thinking are given such priority, people naturally then gravitate to those who prioritize similarly. This form of tribalism or grouping makes people feel validated and seen which all people long for, but it soon moves societies into a very homogenous way of being in the world. Homogeneity, combined with separation from our other, often results in hostility and rancor rather than empathy.

Bill Bishop observed that in 1976, fewer than 25% of Americans lived in places where the presidential election was a landslide. In other words, they lived next door to, and attended school and worshiped with, people who held different beliefs than theirs. America was ideologically diverse. However, by 2016, 80% of U.S. counties gave either the Republican or the Democratic presidential nominee a landslide victory. That is because most Americans now live near people who think very similarly in terms of political and social beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Add to that algorithms of social media platforms that show us advertising, content and “friends” that suit one’s particular belief systems, and what is left is a people who are so siloed into likeminded groups that they have lost the ability to even see a bridge let alone cross over one.

---

<sup>25</sup> Bill Bishop’s research is well-cited, including in Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (New York, NY: Random House, 2019), 51. See also Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2009).

Humans have a natural tendency to divide themselves this way. On the one hand it leads to a sense of belonging, but on the other, homogeneity is neither biblical nor good for us<sup>26</sup>. By associating with Christians who hail only from our denominational, political, and socio-economic groups, we begin to view those Christians not in our group as “wrong.”<sup>27</sup> Will Willimon is direct in his reproach of what is essentially a self-selected form of tribalism: “Xenophobic, exclusionary fear of the other is more than a matter of preference for people we enjoy hanging out with, or those with whom we feel most comfortable. In deep fear of the other, we separate ourselves from them.”<sup>28</sup> If we do not allow ourselves to know the other, to recognize Christ *the Imago Dei* in them, then can we truly know God at all? Are we outright ignoring the visible unity of “we”? These are questions every faith leader, clergy or lay person, must consider.

Ecumenism offers a way of being in the world that can both honor the roots of our traditions and be open toward others with compassion and empathy. Yet for all their well-intended vision of Christian unity throughout the inhabited world, proponents of the early ecumenical movement could not foresee the unintended

---

<sup>26</sup> There is ample evidence that the early church championed unity in diversity. See, for example, Acts 2 and 10; 1 Cor 1:10, 1 Cor 12:12-27, Gal 3.

<sup>27</sup> For a good explanation of the divisions that continue to plague Christians who see themselves in binary terms of “Right Christian” and “Wrong Christian,” see Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> William H. Willimon, *Fear of the Other; No Fear in Love* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 7.

consequences of promoting peace, understanding, love and tolerance. Plus, their own digressions into issues unwittingly led to misunderstandings and harsh criticism from more conservative Christians. Some have distorted the common ground upon which the early ecumenical dialogues stood and have moved to form what might even be called unholy alliances, using Christian unity as a front for religious influence in the political sphere. As we will see in this next section, deep cultural and moralistic issues are not easily uniting, and are precisely the kinds of issues that throw citizens into a state of chaos. The most noticeable shift in American religion in the past half century is how Americans have become polarized along religious lines.<sup>29</sup> Our work is cut out for us.

### ***Unholy Alliances: An Ecumenism of Hate?***

Modern ecumenism rightly began in mission, but then lapsed into a merger mentality, then defensive bureaucracy, and finally into unrepresentative forms of extreme politicization.

—Thomas C. Oden<sup>30</sup>

To illustrate the growing religious polarization, it is important to understand the distinction between evangelical and ecumenical Protestants that emerged in the 1940's. Fundamentalists felt that mainstream liberals had pushed their agenda of ecumenical

---

<sup>29</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Turning Around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements Are Changing the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Oden, 2006).

cooperation too far, making alliances with non-Protestant, non-Christian and even secular groups. Among the critiques was a belief that the ecumenical Protestants were preoccupied with social evils, and that they promoted a “broader” New Testament message, one that people of diverse cultures and social locations could appreciate. In large part this is true; ecumenical Protestants focused on social activism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, promoting a human rights agenda within the United Nations (UN) in the 1950s, and touting issues at home such as racism, segregation, women’s rights and the Vietnam War. Evangelical Protestants, meanwhile, were focused on collective national pride, the Great Commission<sup>31</sup> and maintaining their political, business, educational, and cultural stronghold.<sup>32</sup>

Evangelicals pushed back hard on the message of diversity and pluralism, rejecting a call to unity that they believed was asking them to accept doctrine with which they disagreed. In no time, they united in their opposition to the ecumenical Protestants and the liberal-social agenda, as they viewed it, enabling the growth of what has since

---

<sup>31</sup> Regarding the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, there was a concerted effort toward unity in the early days of the ecumenical movement to provide a united front in the mission field. What good would it be to send missionaries into non-Christian countries “to make disciples of all nations” as Jesus asked, if there was widespread disagreement about what was being taught?

<sup>32</sup> David A. Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity,” *The Journal of American History* (2011). Hollinger provides an overview on the difference between evangelical and ecumenical Protestant approaches. Regarding the pushback of the evangelical Protestants in general, he writes that it helps to remember that the population of the United States was overwhelmingly white and Protestant until the 1970’s, and Protestantism itself was comprised of politically and theologically liberal ecumenists. See also Hollinger’s book by the similar title: David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

become known as “Evangelical Protestantism.” Just as Bill Bishop’s research suggested, self-selecting themselves into a like-minded group provided a strong sense of belonging: the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was formed in explicit opposition to the ecumenists.<sup>33</sup> By 1960, the NAE expressed alarm that with the election of a Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, the United States would “no longer be recognized as a Protestant nation in the eyes of the world.” This became a clarion call for evangelical Protestants. They doubled down, promoting a robust world Christianity, rather than a compromise with diversity. Protestant pastors who pushed a social agenda were met with lackluster support from their conservative parishioners, and often were accused of outright communism. The Methodist church in particular took the fall in a widely circulated pamphlet, *Is There a Pink Fringe in the Methodist Church?*; the blatant accusation being that the ecumenists’ social movement claimed to be Christian but was a front for spreading socialistic and communistic ideas.<sup>34</sup> That sentiment continues to linger amid new pleas for inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, women’s ordination, abortion rights, and other social concerns about which liberal and conservative-minded Christians disagree.

---

<sup>33</sup> Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire,” 22. I am indebted to David A. Hollinger for his brilliant summary of how, despite laudable intentions, 20<sup>th</sup> century ecumenists inadvertently contributed to the rise of the Religious Right in the United States. Committee for the Preservation of Methodism, “Is There a Pink Fringe in the Methodist Church? If So, What Shall We Do About It?: A Report to Methodists,” Houston, TX: The Committee.

<sup>34</sup> Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire,” 35.

One of the leading ecumenical Protestants of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, William Cantwell Smith, urged Westerners and white people in particular to get on board with the new role diversity played in the rapidly changing (and diversifying) world. In an article he wrote for *Christian Century* magazine in 1960, he argued that white Christians “seem almost incapable of adjusting themselves to a new world” in which they, too, are minorities.<sup>35</sup> Fast-forward a half century and it may come as no surprise that nearly 60 percent of white Evangelical Protestants today say Christians face more discrimination in the U.S. than other religious groups (this comes despite the fact that an overwhelming percentage of Americans identify as Christian). Other white Christians were more in line with all Americans, regardless of denominational or religious affiliation, who say Muslims are most persecuted.<sup>36</sup> This divisive stance is not without motive. There continues to be a very hard line drawn in the sand between certain groups of evangelical and progressive Christians. For example, the Institute on Religion and Democracy is an independent organization that, while its founders purport to be an ecumenical alliance of churches who desire to “reaffirm the church’s biblical and historical teachings,” was

---

<sup>35</sup> Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire,” 21.

<sup>36</sup> Findings from the 2017 poll by Public Religion Research Institute, cited in Emma Green, “White Evangelicals Believe They Face More Discrimination Than Muslims,” *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/perceptions-discrimination-muslims-christians/519135/>.

actually formed to oppose many of the liberal social action stances of the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.<sup>37</sup>

This kind of rigidity illustrates just how far we humans are willing to go when we fear losing the status quo. When familiar landscapes are obliterated it leaves many people scrambling for whatever comforts are nearby, making it all too easy for religious people to double down on convention, breeding fanatical, absolutist, and intolerant predispositions. When we feel something or someone has gotten in the way of our desired outcome or when there is a violation of the way things should be, we get angry.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes that anger is justified (think systemic racism, child abuse, and hate crimes); sometimes it is merely an expression of the fear and anxiety that life as we know it, and believe we are entitled to, is being threatened. When this happens, we look for people to take sides (preferably ours) and band together in anger. Once we view people on “the other side” of a conflict as morally inferior and even dangerous, the conflict starts being framed as good versus evil, and people become more rigid in their positions.<sup>39</sup> Religiosity plus rigidity results in a wounded body of Christ.

---

<sup>37</sup> See variously David E. Anderson, “A Key Labor Union Organization Sharply Criticized the Neo-Conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy,” UPI, June 27, 1984, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/06/27/A-key-labor-union-organization-sharply-criticized-the-neo-conservative/8668457156800/>; Steven D. Martin, “Renewal or Ruin,” documentary, 2007, video, <https://vimeo.com/381786>; and “About,” The Institute on Religion and Democracy, <https://theird.org/about/> (accessed February 20, 2023).

<sup>38</sup> Brown Brené, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (New York: Random House Large Print, 2022), 220.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, *Atlas*, 220.

A startling example of this dynamic comes from an alliance of ultra-conservative Catholics and Evangelicals. The full participation of the Roman Catholic Church in ecumenical efforts after Vatican II has been viewed quite positively, but since the late 1970s, some Catholics have banded together with like-minded conservative Protestants to influence and shape American politics. The influential coalition, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” formed to promote conservative political issues within their religious communities, and which they mistakenly hoped would be a show of ecumenical action. Their 1994 statement was forged in the anti-abortion movement, and they have since bonded over a slew of spin-off cultural war issues, including same-sex marriage.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, the very criticism the fundamentalists had of the liberal ecumenists (that they were too issue-driven) they now find themselves defending.

Critics of the alliance have been swift in their denunciation of so-called pseudo-ecumenical work, saying it is not true ecumenism but a distortion and manipulation of religious values in order to achieve political ends. Miquel de la Torre, whose theological focus is on social ethics in the U.S., takes his condemnation a step further. He denounces any alliance that claims to be advancing unity by pushing Christian values in the public

---

<sup>40</sup> See “Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium: Various,” *First Things*, May 1, 1994, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1994/05/evangelicals-catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium>; and Laurie Goodstein, “The ‘Hypermodern’ Foe; How the Evangelicals and Catholics Joined Forces,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/30/weekinreview/the-nation-the-hypermodern-foe-how-the-evangelicals-and-catholics-joined-forces.html>.

square, but whose objective, he asserts, is only to keep white male power in place. “The political pronouncements of white Christians that ignore the cries of the nation’s least of these are an outward sign of an inward rejection of the gospel.”<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most scathing rebuke comes from within the Catholic community itself. Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa, two insiders at the Vatican and associates of Pope Francis, say the political division within the Catholic Church is deep and weakens the church at the very time when it should be providing leadership to bridge the divides within our society. In a 2017 essay the two took aim at the unlikely accord between ultra-conservatives in the United States, observing that it is a “strange ecumenism attributable to its xenophobic and Islamophobic vision that wants walls and purifying deportations.” Members of this alliance have transformed the word “ecumenism,” Spadaro and Figueroa write, into an “ecumenism of hate.”<sup>42</sup>

Mixing politics and religion is nothing new, of course, but some observers point to the decline in church attendance as being directly correlated to the alliances that rail on citizens to exercise their Christian values at the polls, when those very values they espouse are merely one interpretation of the gospel. They do not speak for all Christian

---

<sup>41</sup> Miguel De La Torre, *Decolonizing Christianity: Becoming Badass Believers* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 12.

<sup>42</sup> Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa, “Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism: A Surprising Ecumenism,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism/>.

denominational bodies and beliefs, whether liberal or conservative. Former mega-church pastor and one-time mega-star of the evangelical church, Rob Bell, parted ways with the church he founded over just such divisiveness. He asserts that this extreme religiosity posing as Christian values reveals a spiritual bankruptcy at the heart of the dominant Christian culture in America.<sup>43</sup> Young people in particular are loathe to be associated with a narrowly-defined and ultra-conservative Christianity and they now comprise one of the largest growing “denominations” in the U.S.: the nones. Nones claim no affiliation with organized religions, and make up nearly one-third of the U.S. population according to recent surveys.<sup>44</sup>

“The leading hypothesis is that much of what we’re observing in the rise of the nones is an allergic reaction to the mix of conservative politics and religion,” said David Campbell, a Notre Dame professor and the coauthor of *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. The result is that many people would say if religion means being affiliated with a particular political party, thanks but no thanks.<sup>45</sup>

One thing is certain: ecumenism involves an outpouring of the Holy Spirit across the face of the church, and a sure way to destroy it is to try and hijack it for partisan

---

<sup>43</sup> David Gardner and Kailyn Brown, “An Evangelical Icon Finds Salvation in West Hollywood,” *Los Angeles Magazine*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/fallen-fundamentalist-rob-bell-venice-beach/?fbclid=IwAR1630dVBRq65Wtkhct437zuRe1ZmLDriWSSiSDGByk89VkZ4K822AMrxN0>.

<sup>44</sup> Ryan P. Burge, “How Many “Nones” Are There? Explaining the Discrepancies in Survey Estimates” *Review of Religious Research*, (2020), 62:173–190 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-020-00400-7>

<sup>45</sup> Gardner and Brown, “An Evangelical Icon.”

purposes. Simply coming together across denominational lines to take aim at a perceived foe is not the work of true ecumenism, and a white male-centered religious dialogue focused on political agendas is not representative of a unified Body of Christ. No American is immune to the political, social and religious blending that occurs, but there is a sweet spot which encourages diversity of opinion and perspective. Snowmass Chapel, for example, is largely a white, affluent community, but one whose political affiliations are evenly split between red and blue parties, and whose people hail from a wide variety of economic standing. On more than one occasion the senior pastor has remarked to the congregation that he wants to be a church where a Republican is sitting next to a Democrat, who is sitting next to a millionaire who is next to a minimum-wage employee, who is next to a gay person sitting next to a straight one, and so on. Its board and committees are likewise representative of these groups. There is an intentionality to creating the unity we seek, even if our congregations are largely homogeneous.

### ***Conclusion***

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, The Most Rev. Michael Curry, called the insurrection of January 6, 2021 in the nation's capital a revelation of deeply dangerous divisions in our nation – some political, some ideological, some racial, and some disguised as religious. Bishop Curry's reflection was a call to repentance by all Christians; a warning that the decline and destruction of America's shared values will

make it hard if not impossible for us to claim the ideal of “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”<sup>46</sup> If we are to claim this ideal, now is the time for Christian leaders to embrace a framework for the unity we seek, which begins with where we live, work and worship daily.

This chapter has described what ecumenism is and why it matters, and how even unity can become surprisingly divisive. Now is the time for a renewed focus toward the unity we seek with the local church modeling the way. In Chapter 2 we will examine three behavioral shifts that have the power to impact ways in which we encounter our ecumenical other, and also offer transformative practices for individuals as well.

---

<sup>46</sup> Office of Public Affairs, “Presiding Bishop Curry Highlights ‘Moment of Peril and Promise’ on One-Year Anniversary of Jan. 6 Attack,” The Episcopal Church, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-curry-highlights-moment-of-peril-and-promise-on-one-year-anniversary-of-jan-6-attack/> (accessed November 1, 2022).

## Chapter 2

### *The Ways We Think About Others*

When you have conflict, focus on reconciliation, not resolution.  
—Rick Warren<sup>47</sup>

In 1985, the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) designed a new temple to be built in Stockholm, Sweden. Plans for the towering new church building created quite a stir in the overwhelmingly Lutheran community, so amid controversy and opposition the Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl, called a news conference. He invited a leading member of the LDS church to join him and proceeded to outline what has become widely known as “Stendahl’s three rules of religious understanding:”

1. When you’re trying to understand another religion, you should ask its adherents not its enemies.
2. Don’t compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for holy envy.<sup>48</sup>

The concept of religious understanding and openness to the other is at the heart of overcoming conflict. This chapter will show that how we receive or learn from one another has become a focal point for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian unity, but can insights from the ecumenical movement also help Christian leaders in the local context develop

---

<sup>47</sup> “Peace with People Follows Peace with God,” Pastor Rick.com, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://pastorrick.com/peace-with-people-follows-peace-with-god/>

<sup>48</sup> The accounts of Krister Stendahl’s speech in Stockholm are widely documented, though no official transcript exists. Stendahl, a New Testament scholar and former dean of Harvard Divinity School, spoke often of these rules for religious understanding and was a proponent of inter-faith understanding, particularly Jewish-Christian dialogue.

pathways to civility, respect, and healing in a religiously and socio-politically divided culture? And if so, can the same practices put forth to bridge theological and ecclesial divides also work to empower people to make lasting changes across a broad swath of human experiences beyond the church walls? Can the same principles of understanding which have fostered meaningful dialogue between the Orthodox Christian Church, Lutherans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Evangelicals, also help us find common ground with the church across town, let alone in politics, society, and culture? I believe the answer is yes, and that in doing so we would also serve as exemplars of good practice to society as a whole. This chapter will look at three behavioral shifts that will not only impact the ways in which we encounter our ecumenical partners, but will offer transformative practices for individuals as well. These are receptive, spiritual and kenotic ecumenism. Despite their very exotic sounding labels, they are everyday tools that can be put to use by local churches and laity to advance the unity we seek, and Snowmass Chapel again offers examples of very simple approaches that have powerful impacts.

At the very basic level, disagreement comes from unresolved conflict. Of course, disagreement is part of what it means to be human, but left unchecked, judgment arises and if no efforts at reconciliation are made, contempt is not far behind. When we experience conflict, our natural human instinct is to pull away from each other and maintain a defensive posture, always at the ready to deflect, disarm or neutralize a

perceived opponent. Yet when it comes to relationships, pulling away is often an ineffective approach.

Americans have fallen into the trap of disunity, and among Christians it is not just normal bickering. There is now a common desire to pummel, shame and ostracize other Christians over disagreements. Amid this turmoil people are sorting themselves into like-minded political tribes, pulling harder on the bamboo finger trap. “If you had told me that people would switch churches because of masks, I would have been like, ‘That’s ridiculous,’” said David Bailey, whose group Arrabon does reconciliation work across a series of divides.<sup>49</sup>

Through forces out of our control (the shift from socio-centric to ego-centric thinking, social media bots, and the unholy alliance of politics and the pulpit to reiterate a few) many Americans believe we are too far down the road of disagreement to gracefully recover and some would argue that we need not bother. The truth is that the culture of divisiveness we are living in is sustained by division and separation. The more we view ourselves as divided and the more contempt we feel for people on the “other side,” the harder it is to salvage unity. Yet this moment of turmoil, pain, and change might just lead to the transformation we desire.

---

<sup>49</sup> David Brooks, “The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/opinion/evangelicalism-division-renewal.html>.

Our unity is salvageable if we start face-to-face with the people and predicaments in our own worlds, initiating the shift from “me” to “we.” The following discussion outlines how receptive, spiritual and kenotic ecumenism can be helpful in local ecumenical projects as a meaningful framework for peacebuilding.

### ***Receptive Ecumenism***

When Stendahl was faced with widespread conflict and contempt aimed at the LDS church, rather than allow the divide to deepen he moved closer. In doing so he created a spaciousness that invited others in. He encouraged dialogue and understanding, however, it was his idea of holy envy that most attracted my attention. Can envy be holy? If by envy we mean, in this context, appreciating elements of another’s traditions and religion, and desiring to enrich our own religious tradition or faith then yes, it can. If we cannot appreciate the best of another’s traditions or if we would rather adhere to outdated, irrelevant praxis rather than enrich our own traditions, then that leads me to wonder: have we turned our own denominational doctrines and practices into idols? When we enter into ecumenical work with the mindset that there is a right and a wrong way to “do church” or with the intention to defend and justify our ideologies and ecclesiology above others’, we are not openly encountering the other, we are attempting to convert them.

Too often when engaging in ecumenical work the instinct is to wonder, 'what does this group need to learn from *us* in order to make progress?' Holy envy allows one to admire someone else's traditions, while at the same time self-assessing our central practices and traditions. This is the heart of receptive ecumenism, a relatively new strategy within the ecumenical movement, which asks, 'what can *we* learn, or *receive*, from others?'

This receiving can happen in a number of ways from experiential to academic, but the most profound way we experience and receive others is in dialogue. In 1995 Pope John Paul II, renewing the Catholic Church's commitment to unity, wrote that ecumenical dialogue is not just the exchanging of ideas, but that it involves a sharing of the whole person; it is an exchange of gifts. For most people it is easier to give a gift rather than to receive one. Receiving a gift can bring great joy, but it also can place one in the position of feeling awkward or even indebted to the gift giver. Receiving a true gift requires a bit of humility, gratitude, and simple presence. This is the posture of Receptive Ecumenism and is echoed in the words of John Paul II as "an exchange of gifts." In this context, however, the Pope's description reads more like fruits of the spirit

than gifts of gadgetry: ecumenical dialogue requires truth, fairness, kindness and understanding.<sup>50</sup>

Jesus modeled well this kind of receptivity/receiving of another. When speaking to the woman at the well, for example, he invited the Samaritan woman to question and debate him – remarkable because Samaritans and Jews were known for their hatred and ire toward one another, and moreover men rarely engaged with women in any kind of dialogue, much less the kind she shared with Jesus, exploring worship, faith, marriage and the Messiah. In another instance, Jesus allowed a woman to anoint his feet with her tears – an unexpected gift to be sure – and he then defended her right to do so against the judgment of the elite religious leaders.<sup>51</sup>

Jesus acknowledged these women. He not only saw them and accepted them, he invited them into relationship with him and sought them out in order to do so. Even though scripture tells us that Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman because he had to travel through Samaria, in truth it would not have been the straightest route from Judea to Galilee, which was his destination. He intentionally went through Samaria. He sought out his religious and cultural other. Jesus was concerned with the flourishing of all people because the reality is that mutual flourishing serves the good of society.

---

<sup>50</sup> "Ut Unum Sint," John Paul II Encyclicals, Vatican, accessed Feb. 20, 2023, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html), 28-29.

<sup>51</sup> See John 4:4-30 and Luke 7:36-39.

When people have the capacity to want those outside their own religious and social circles to flourish, the impacts are far-reaching in society at large.<sup>52</sup> Instead of assuming that one's beliefs are in competition with those of others, long-standing (even dangerous) dynamics can be transformed by shifting the focus toward the other. Ultimately, encountering another is a vulnerable pursuit, one that requires us to fully be seen and to fully see others. Systematic theologian and professor Paul D. Murray, who is considered a pioneer of receptive ecumenism worldwide, writes:

Ecumenical encounter too easily tends to involve 'getting the best tableware out', wanting others to see us and to understand us in the best possible light—in a light, if we are honest, in which we do not even generally see ourselves. In contrast, receptive ecumenism starts from the somewhat different assumption that for all our respective gifts, each of us, each of our communities and traditions, is wounded and in need of healing and continuing conversion. It might be said that receptive ecumenism is an ecumenism of 'wounded hands' rather than of the 'best tableware'. It is about being prepared to show these wounds to each other, knowing that we cannot save ourselves, asking our ecumenical others to minister to us in our need from their gifts.<sup>53</sup>

Receptive ecumenism humbly asks the question, "What can my tradition learn with integrity from other traditions?" Moreover, it allows us to ask the question without insisting, although certainly hoping, that these other traditions are also asking themselves the same question. This is a line of inquiry that can be asked by all people, at

---

<sup>52</sup> Paul D. Murray, ed. *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>53</sup> Paul D. Murray, "Methodology – In Search of a Way," in *The Oxford Handbook for Ecumenical Studies*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 621.

all levels, and in relation to all dimensions of church life. It is not simply a matter for professional ecumenists.<sup>54</sup> And like Jesus's conversation with the woman at the well, it offers a hope-filled exchange.

Ultimately Receptive Ecumenism is a contemporary tool for effective dialogue that Murray hopes will impact life on the ground in the local churches, and will provide a model of good practice for local church communities.<sup>55</sup> Inasmuch as receptive ecumenism provides practical steps to encountering our spiritual and religious other, it begins first with the heart not the head. In other words, it happens only after we have been *compelled* by the spirit to take meaningful action in order to mend relationships.

### ***Spiritual Ecumenism***

Spiritual Ecumenism is that which compels our action, preparing our hearts and minds to be ready for the encounters with others and the rich exchange of gifts. It is spirituality rooted in and committed to the sacred traditions and practices of the Christian faith, and it attends to both real-world as well as personal challenges, and will not let them go unresolved. Spiritual ecumenism, different from a contemporary

---

<sup>54</sup> Paul D. Murry, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> "Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church: A Comparative Research Project in the North East of England," Durham University, <https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/catholic-studies-centre-for-ccs/ReceptiveEcumenismandtheLocalChurchOverview.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2023).

understanding of mere spirituality, is a necessary requirement to encountering other, and should not be separated from the actionable work of Christian reconciliation and unity. In this context it is coexistent.<sup>56</sup>

In the landmark Decree on Ecumenism, priority of place was given to prayer: “Spiritual Ecumenism should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement.” Defined as a “change of heart and holiness of life” as well as “public and private prayer for the unity of Christians,”<sup>57</sup> Spiritual Ecumenism prioritizes first and foremost prayer, calling to mind Jesus’s own prayer for unity on the eve of his death (John 17:21-23).

Early ecumenists were focused on the mission field, believing that being of one mind and one heart was essential in order to truly inhabit Jesus’s Great Commission to go and “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19-20). The task of evangelization was a competitive pursuit among denominations and it exposed a contradiction between the gospel of reconciliation being proclaimed and the multiple divisions within Christianity. This contradiction that was viewed as diminishing the witness of the one church of

---

<sup>56</sup> Samuel Kobia, “Challenges Facing the Ecumenical Movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/challenges-facing-the-ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century> (accessed Feb. 20, 2023).

<sup>57</sup> “Unitatis Redintegratio,” *Vatican*, November 21, 1964, accessed October 31, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html), 8.

Christ and required reconciliation between the divided churches themselves.<sup>58</sup> After all, if Christians were so divided in what they taught, how could they expect their message to hold? This alone drove much of the ecumenical work of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (and it certainly makes one wonder how much they trusted the guidance and efficacy of the Holy Spirit if they feared the gospel message itself was in danger of not taking root).

There is a tension, it seems, between the Great Commission (make disciples of all nations) and the Great Commandment (love God, love your neighbor). The tension is love itself. Without love there is no overcoming difference and diversity; no true advancement toward unity can be made. The command to love precedes the command to teach and nurture disciples; it is the starting place for all things. When churches and Christian communities remember that love is our greatest calling and therefore our great unifying action, then differences that seem insurmountable will be overcome. In his life and work, the Russian Orthodox priest, theologian and scholar Nicholas Afanasiev made a splendid case for the Christian community to gather in divine love first before all else. He writes that we have placed human knowledge above love, and that as a result the good news itself is lost as our love grows cold.<sup>59</sup> Christian churches, must make love

---

<sup>58</sup> Paul D. Murray, "Methodology – In Search of a Way," 615.

<sup>59</sup> Nicolas Afanasiev, "Una Sancta," in *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in our Time: Readings from the Eastern Church*, ed. Michael Plekon (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 28.

the foundation of all things –everything we teach and to which we adhere hangs on love: “all the law and all the prophets” (Matt. 22:40).

This focus on love as divine provision is why many refer to spiritual ecumenism as “the soul of the ecumenical movement.” It views unity as a gift, not commanded but rather earnestly prayed for by Jesus. Our response, therefore, is to earnestly pray ourselves for the unity we desire, to rely fully on the Holy Spirit and not on knowledge alone. Unity requires more than ecclesial diplomacy and academic dialogue, as Cardinal Walter Kasper wrote.<sup>60</sup> In fact, through practices of prayer, contemplation, spiritual direction, and methods of communal witness, spiritual Ecumenism works first to transform the hearts of the individual before moving throughout the broader community to enrich the ways we interact with one another. One of the ways the local church lives this out is by learning and then offering spiritual practices. Centering Prayer is a method of silent prayer that prepares us to experience God’s presence. At Snowmass Chapel (which is just up the road from the Snowmass Monastery where Fr. Thomas Keating founded the practice) Centering Prayer is a communal experience. Sitting in silence with one another – even (especially) on video with people calling in

---

<sup>60</sup> Walter Kasper, “A Short Summary of *A Handbook for Spiritual Ecumenism*,” Churches Together in England, 2006, <https://cte.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/08/A-Handbook-of-Spiritual-Ecumenism-English-and-Welsh-Arc-2006.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2023). German Cardinal Walter Kasper, past president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity from 2001 to 2010, has greatly contributed to contemporary ecumenical work.

from all over the world – is a powerful expression of the unity we seek. Uniting ourselves to Christians through a variety of offerings at the local level, and seeking out one another through fellowship and love, allows us to develop common areas of worship, witness and service with others.

There are certainly self-proclaimed traditionalists, especially in the Orthodox tradition, who are anti-ecumenical based on claims that the ecumenical movement is heresy as it does not promote the “one true church.” These claims are rooted in their belief that ecumenism is a betrayal of Orthodoxy itself. While this thesis takes a broad look at denominational divisions, especially in the U.S., and does not try to summarize or analyze specific rifts within the Christian denominations at large, there is much that has been written on those topics and we have plenty to learn from the renewed efforts at reconciliation between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic church in particular. Many in the middle of today’s ongoing conversations between the two would point to the early Church father, St. Basil the Great, who utilized a kind of spiritual ecumenism himself when helping to overcome a major breakdown in the church during the fourth century. An early defender of the orthodox faith against heresy, St. Basil argued that rather than forcing people to renounce their unorthodox convictions (heresy simply means, after all, holding an opinion that is at odds with what is generally accepted or *orthodox*), all should come together praying and professing the one thing they did agree on: the

Nicene Creed. By living and praying together, he suggested, their union would become deeper over time.<sup>61</sup>

What Afanasiev and St. Basil essentially promote is that if we want real unity, we must first lay down our own biases and assumptions and accept each other *as is*, without first placing demands on one another. Disagreements and divisions will remain, but with a focus on divine love and a hopeful expectation for divine intervention, renewed unity is possible. However, there is yet another underlying effort according to contemporary methods of ecumenism that must happen simultaneous to spiritual and receptive ecumenism, and that is adopting the kenotic self-emptying mind of Christ.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Kenotic Ecumenism***

One of the most common mistakes of ecumenical work is approaching it with the mindset that one needs to save others by bringing them around to one's own denominational doctrine. Yet no one denomination holds a monopoly on God's truth. Kenotic ecumenism begins, in fact, with seeing that Jesus himself regularly mixes with the 'wrong' types of people, people who might otherwise be judged and condemned for

---

<sup>61</sup> John Jillions, "Kenotic Ecumenism" in *The Oxford Handbook for Ecumenical Studies*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 645-660.

<sup>62</sup> A common teaching in Christian theology, *kenosis* means self-emptying. It derives from Philippians 2:7 which states that Jesus "emptied himself" to be born in human form. Paul writes that Christians are called to have the same mind as Christ, therefore emptying ourselves in order to be filled with the Spirit of God. (Philippians 2: 1-7)

their religious practices (or lack thereof), and yet Jesus puts the kingdom of God and the pastoral needs of real people ahead of ideology and rules. At the heart of the Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples that the one who wishes to be great must be the servant of all (Matt. 20:26), and he pictures his community as a very mixed and imperfect assembly: a fishing net full of good and bad fish, a field with wheat and weeds, a flock of sheep and goats. Only at the end will God determine which is which (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43; Matt. 25). For now, ‘let them grow together’ (Matt. 13:30).<sup>63</sup>

Christ’s self-emptying generosity became the pattern for the early church, including the surprising inclusion of the Gentiles. But the process of self-emptying is often painful and awkward. There are deep, identity-shaping convictions, and many Christians believe they are being faithful to God by clinging to them. Kenotic ecumenism is a simple antidote to clinging, one that can be lived out in even the smallest of details within the local church. Take, for example, what I call the “evolution of vestments” at Snowmass Chapel: in my decade serving the Chapel, clergy have moved from full vestments (in keeping with the current pastor’s Episcopal roots); to wearing a clergy collar and stole but full vestments only on Christmas, Holy Week and funerals; to use of stole only. As an inter-denominational chapel that represents and serves multiple Christian traditions, relinquishing the stronghold on denominational vestments was one

---

<sup>63</sup> John Jillions, “Kenotic Ecumenism,” 659.

way of allowing everyone to enter more fully into the liturgy. This evolution required a letting-go of traditioned ways of showing up in the sanctuary, and yet it still maintains a sense of identity and tradition. For some in the congregation, it has made the worship service more accessible; for others it has informalized the service but not to the point of causing people upset.

Kenotic Ecumenism asks all people to let go of those closely held convictions – not abandon, but let go for a time – in order to stand fully in the presence of the other, and “grow together.”

## **Conclusion**

The three strategies of receptive, spiritual and kenotic ecumenism provide tools for engaging with our religious other (and our political, ideological, social, ethnic, and any kind of other you can name). These strategies are not the end all be all, nor do they provide a crystal-clear answer to the question, “what is the unity we seek?” Perhaps what real unity means is to coexist in the midst of diversity; how to avoid the extremes and instead land in a radical center where it is wide enough and spacious enough for all who come to lay down their biases and accept each other *as is*.

Jesus said, referring to heaven, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms” (John 14:2, NIV), but he did not specify who gets which ones. Receptive, spiritual and kenotic ecumenism help us embrace this lack of clarity because, I believe, it focuses us

on the one who had the vision all along. After all, Jesus did not say to Peter, “on this rock *you must* build my church,” but “on this rock *I will* build my church.” Unity prompted and willed by the Holy Spirit will come, in time.<sup>64</sup>

Emerging practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ecumenical movement are focused on how Christians receive or learn from one another. This is a key shift away from ego-centric, individualistic ways of thinking, and proposes three behaviors that intentionally seek to find common ground, inclusion and divine guidance when confronted with challenging issues. Both large and small practices of receptive, spiritual and kenotic ecumenism positively impact the ways in which we encounter our ecumenical other, and there are significant and far-reaching implications for personal transformation as well. Now that we have reviewed a framework for healing and reconciliation provided by ecumenical leaders and thinkers from the top down, we turn our attention to creating actionable steps from the ground up, in the local church.

---

<sup>64</sup> Michael Root, “Faith and Order in a Postmodern World,” 202.

## Chapter 3

### ***Exploring and Expanding Ecumenical Work in the Local Church***

He said that there would be more information available in the narthex. I leaned over to Matthew and whispered, "The Narthex? Isn't that a Dr. Seuss character that speaks for the trees??"<sup>65</sup>

—Nadia Bolz-Weber

I grew up in the Baptist church until I was ten years old when my parents left the denomination of their youth and started attending the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). There I attended youth group and was baptized in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. In college I attended a non-denominational church near campus and the occasional campus ministry nights; and was confirmed into the Catholic Church when I married into a big Catholic family (with roots in the Ukrainian Orthodox church). At age 49, I enrolled in a Methodist seminary and was later ordained by the congregation of an inter-denominational church (a nod to the Baptist tradition of local church autonomy). While I jokingly refer to myself as a Bapto-Christo-Metho-lic, the truth is I found something to love in every denomination I was a part of; that something is the spirit of God which abides in them all.

We are more alike than we are different, although a Pentecostal entering a Catholic mass for the first time might think otherwise. The strange rhythms of the mass,

---

<sup>65</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner Saint* (Frankline, TN: Worthy Publishing, 2013).

the smell of incense and the silent reverence of the people in a high church tradition might make a low church Pentecostal, accustomed to talking back to the preacher and dancing in the aisles, a little uneasy.<sup>66</sup> Yet what many people do not realize is that Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Evangelical Christian churches all accept and profess the same beliefs through the Apostles Creed, Nicene Creed and similar statements of belief that have been foundational to Christians for over 2,000 years. Even among those denominations that do not recognize the creeds, such as Pentecostals and Unitarians, there is often at least an acknowledgement of those shared beliefs. Still, significant societal factors have caused many Christians to believe that differences far outweigh similarities.

Without doing a deep dive into the doctrinal and practical distinctions among denominations, a passing glance shows that our differences are myriad and they are magnificent. Examples include clerical vestments, choirs dancing in the aisle, veneration of Mary, biblical interpretation, evolutionary biology, the prosperity gospel, complementarianism, LGBTQ+ affirming, arena-style worship services, chanting, praise and worship bands, genuflecting, discernment circles, and divergent practices and theologies around communion. When it comes to each of these practices, tradition runs

---

<sup>66</sup> While high church and low church might at first seem like labels loaded with judgment, high church simply refers to the elements of liturgy and doing church in a way that is more formal and scripted, while low church places less emphasis on ritual and offers more freedom for extemporaneity in both worship and practice.

deep. Christian communities have developed distinct ways of being church—different “operating systems”—that often hinder their ability to effectively communicate, despite having much on which they agree.<sup>67</sup>

Even the language of each denomination can at times feel designed to separate. As I travelled through my own denominational journey I discovered that each one has a kind of native tongue, what many jokingly refer to as “Christianese,”<sup>68</sup> and woe to those who are trying to learn it as a second language. The Christian ritual of communion, for example, which is celebrated across all denominations, has many different names for the bread depending on which steeple you are sitting under: Eucharistic bread, sacramental bread, the Lamb, the host, the wafer, or simply, the bread. A manse, a rectory, clergy house or parsonage are all names for the home owned by the church to house the pastor depending on one’s denomination. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Vigil are common Holy Week activities in most high church traditions, but thanks to my mostly Baptist experience as a youth, I was well into adulthood before I ever attended a Good Friday service or even heard of Maundy Thursday. A Catholic or Lutheran might well know what a narthex is, but try convincing someone in the evangelical church that it is

---

<sup>67</sup> Kristin Colberg, “Ecumenical Ecclesiology in Its New Contexts: Considering the Transformed Relationship between Roman Catholic Ecclesiology and Ecumenism,” *Religions* 9, no. 10 (2018): 291. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel91002912>.

<sup>68</sup> Eugene R. Rogers, Jr., offers an insightful look at how language has shaped both agreements and disagreements in conversations about God. See, Eugene R. Rogers, Jr., *Elements of Christian Thought: A Basic Course in Christianese* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2021).

not simply a lobby. When it comes to the lingo and the behaviors of worship, each has its good reasons for being, and tradition has largely kept them in the lexicon of individual denominations.

It's no surprise that Christians tend to stay in their ecclesial comfort zones; many people enjoy the ease of familiar worship, especially if they have strong theological reasons for doing so. An individual preference for worship-style or a penchant for incense does not negate someone else's faith, any more than my neighbor's preference for enchiladas over turkey on Thanksgiving makes him un-American. The call for Christian unity is not a call to abandon long-held traditions or to forsake familiarity, nor is it a call for uniformity in praxis. It is not even a call to revert to an age-old practice of communal moral order over individualization. Ecumenism is a call to think beyond worldly perspectives and divisions and to receive another's tradition in love. In his book "White Christian America," author Robert Jones takes aim at homogeneity in religious communities, writing that "churches are supposed to be sacred places where social distinctions melt away."<sup>69</sup> Instead, it seems that many churches have turned into social places where sacred distinctiveness is not allowed to flourish. Churches criticize, demonize and even dehumanize other Christians for their difference – this one is too pious, that one too progressive, another too moralistic, another not spiritual enough.

---

<sup>69</sup> Robert Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 163.

Certainly, Christians should be allowed the freedom of personal preference when it comes to preaching, music and other stylistic elements of worship and ecclesiology, and by extension they may find themselves immersed in a church that acts and believes similarly – “birds of a feather, flock together” as the saying goes. However, unity is not achieved at the expense of individuality and there is ample theological evidence that God intended the church to be a blended family.<sup>70</sup> There is a wideness in God’s mercy, as the hymn reminds:

We make God’s love too narrow  
by false limits of our own,  
and we magnify its strictness  
with a zeal God will not own.  
For the love of God is broader  
than the measures of the mind,  
and the heart of the Eternal  
is most wonderfully kind.<sup>71</sup>

Christian leaders need effective and practical ways to rethink diversity and inclusion in the modern world in order to effectively lead congregations toward visible unity which could positively impact society as a whole. They need permission, if you will, to integrate cross-denominationally in worship, in service, and in fellowship without fear of deviating from (or betraying) core Christian beliefs. At the very least,

---

<sup>70</sup> This ideal permeates the New Testament scriptures in passages like Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:6; Gal. 3:28; and so many more.

<sup>71</sup> Frederick William Faber (1862). *There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy*, verses 3 & 4.

Christian leaders might consider examining their own traditions and native language in light of hospitality and welcoming of the other.

This chapter looks closely at some of the rationale for inviting and integrating denominational others into our communities, and what we can learn from institutions, organizations and churches who have already committed themselves to the practices of radical acceptance and inclusion.

### ***Snowmass Chapel: An Ecumenical History and Mission***

Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you're saying.  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>72</sup>

Snowmass Chapel, located in Snowmass Village, Colorado, is one example of an ecumenical church that seeks to include a variety of Christian worship practices within its own context as well as unifying practices in the greater community. In the Fall of 2022, I surveyed participants at Snowmass Chapel exploring identifiable actions and practices that are compatible with the ecumenical movement. I was especially interested in how liturgical and ecclesial practices shaped the worship experience and outreach. Common themes from the surveys, along with a significant body of research

---

<sup>72</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Letters and Social Aims (Volume VIII)*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010).

surrounding ecumenical practices, will help develop a framework for church leaders seeking to further the visible unity across Christian denominations.<sup>73</sup>

Nestled in the resort town of Snowmass Village Colorado, Snowmass Chapel has been serving locals, tourists and second homeowners for more than four decades. While there are a mix of denominational Christian churches eight miles away in nearby Aspen, the Chapel stands as the lone place of worship in Snowmass Village and so, by design, its founders had a strong desire to be a community of Christians from different historical church backgrounds. These founding members designed the Chapel to be explicitly “for ecumenical worship” and to serve “as a Christian movement and not an institution”. In setting forth its forms of governance, worship and discipline, the Chapel is consistent with historic principles of the Christian Church, and specifically within the reform tradition of the mainline Protestant churches.<sup>74</sup> However, within the first few lines of the Chapel’s robust 100-page Book of Discipline (modeled after similar governing articles in the Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist traditions), there is this:

We believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men and women of good character and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all references to “survey,” and “survey respondents” refer to this research, and the results can be found in Appendix B.

<sup>74</sup> “Book of Discipline,” Snowmass Chapel, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://snowmasschapel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/bookOfDiscipline03152000.pdf>, 12.

<sup>75</sup> “Differences of Views,” Book of Discipline, *Snowmass Chapel*, <https://snowmasschapel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/bookOfDiscipline03152000.pdf>, G-1.0305, 4 (accessed February 20, 2023).

Forbearance is an interesting word choice. It can mean patient endurance, self-control or tolerance, all of which could suggest in this context that relationships with our religious other are things to simply tolerate, endure and get through. Forbearance can also mean refraining from the enforcement of something (such as a debt or obligation). While the term was not clearly defined in the Chapel's forty-year-old documents, I think it is appropriate to view it as defined by the latter. A lack of enforcement of long-held traditions – one might say, 'tradition for the sake of tradition' – means that Snowmass Chapel is free to employ several ecclesial practices on any given Sunday. It is likely also a reference to Ephesians 4:2-3; just before the declaration of "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism," (Eph. 4:5) the apostle Paul pleads for Christian unity by "forbearing one another in love" (Eph 4:2, KJV).

Immediately, before any confessional statements, mission or vision, the Snowmass Chapel sets forth an understanding of differing views which are to be not just tolerated, but accepted, with mutual understanding, compassion and grace. It is also clear from the documentation quoted above that the congregation believes it is the duty and responsibility of both Christians and societies to offer such forbearance. In other words, the unifying work must trickle out into everyday lives so that society itself might be transformed. Like many churches committed to unity, the Chapel recognizes the visible unity of Christ is often obscured by divisions, so their foundational statements include a call to seek and maintain communion and community cross-denominationally.

More than simply respecting other traditions, perspectives and backgrounds, a statement such as the one Snowmass Chapel has undergirds the group's entire approach to ministry. It allows people to come together in common worship, and it invites the "nones" (those who claim no church tradition) and the "dones" (those who have left the church) to encounter the divine with fresh eyes. Many modern churchgoers have been so hurt or so disenfranchised by the church that traditional language and symbols can actually create a barrier to divine encounters and therefore to transformation. By not relying solely on one denomination's ecclesiology for the elements of worship, space is created for new pathways to divine encounters.

This is not to say that churches should abandon traditional Christian ritual. In fact, survey respondents overwhelmingly say that the Chapel's use of familiar elements from mainline Protestant traditions (Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran and Methodist liturgies were all cited) was grounding for them. As we will see in the following sections though, even those who noticed a familiar framework from a particular denomination noted a wide range of prayers, biblical translations, music, and a mix of service styles that allowed them to enter in to worship in a new way. Several respondents also noted that frequent use of the lectionary readings offered them a surprising sense of unity with other lectionary-based churches worldwide.

Snowmass Chapel also chose to forego traditional membership, which has long been the established way of creating financial and organizational stability for churches.

Churches rely on members for volunteering, serving on committees, boards, and in worship; in return churches maintain a record of its members' baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and often other sacramental and significant life events. Forty years ago, the Chapel made the decision not to offer formal membership, as a nod to the many people who lived in the area part-time. Most were already members of another church in their home state and, as is usually the case, one cannot be a member of two churches at once. Having categories such as "friends of the church" helps churches get around membership questions and allows congregants to fully participate in the life of the church without formality of membership. Snowmass Chapel's was a practical decision at the time more than an ecumenical one, and over the years that decision has come to embody the church dynamic. Snowmass Chapel has shown that these rights and responsibilities can exist without a formal membership and the community can still thrive. Membership can feel exclusive and create a sense of being on the "inside" for some people, much like belonging to a gym or a country club. Still, as one survey respondent noted, "Our lack of membership, which, while confusing for those who need to belong, permits people to hold onto their own denominational beliefs" and still be in full participation with their church "home."

While it is not unusual to find small resort chapels around the world, their steeples dwarfed by the surrounding mountain peaks or floors smoothed by sand tracked in from nearby beaches, these are often run by small groups of residents as an

outreach to tourists. They may or may not hold Sunday services (if so, often with a rotation of supply clergy) and the weekends are interspersed with destination weddings and events. What distinguishes Snowmass Chapel and its counterparts, however, is a medium to large-sized congregation<sup>76</sup> of full-time and part-time locals, vacationers, and long-time repeat visitors doing life in community, and embracing ecumenical worship and outreach together.

There are many ecumenically-rooted churches and prominent institutions committed to ecumenical worship: United and Uniting Churches in Australia and Canada, the Taize community in France, for example. However, for purposes of this paper, I think it is important to focus on the successes of an inter-denominational church<sup>77</sup> that, despite some challenges, holds itself to a strong ethos of ecumenism. Snowmass Chapel holds that the Senior Pastor, and other ministerial staff must have membership in a historical denomination, but it is open to which branch of Christianity they hail from. This flexibility extends to the worship and outreach of the Chapel, with liturgical practices, homiletics, community engagement, and governance that can serve

---

<sup>76</sup> Medium church size is defined as between 50-300 weekly attendees; large church size is 301-2,000. "Church Sizes," USA Churches, <https://www.usachurches.org/church-sizes.htm> (accessed February 20, 2023).

<sup>77</sup> I prefer to use inter-denominational here rather than non-denominational which is often associated with evangelical churches. Snowmass Chapel is a non-denominational Christian Protestant church that is intentionally inter-denominational by welcoming Christians into its community from the wide range of denominational traditions and incorporating liturgical expressions into its worship from across the denominational spectrum.

as a model for churches and church leaders wishing to explore what ecumenical engagement looks like in the local context.

### ***Ecumenical Practices in the Local Context***

Ecumenism is best served by openly acknowledging the depth of our differences.  
—James Sweeney<sup>78</sup>

Many in the ecumenical movement believe that previously unresolved, long-standing issues within the church, such as women's ordination, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and shared communion, may benefit from a critical self-examination of one's own traditions and practices. This entirely new strategy is one that relies on increased understanding between traditions, and a willingness to examine, grow and change by the movement of the Holy Spirit within our own.<sup>79</sup> This is the strategy discussed in Chapter 2, receptive ecumenism, and with the work now being done at the highest levels of our church bodies, it makes sense that we at the local level consider what benefit there may be for us, too.

Receptive ecumenism asks not, "what does my ecumenical partner need to learn from me," but "what can my tradition learn from my ecumenical partner." Significantly,

---

<sup>78</sup> James Sweeney, "Receptive Ecumenism, Ecclesial Learning, and the 'Tribe'," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Paul D. Murray, "ARCIC III: Recognizing the Need for an Ecumenical Gear-Change," *One in Christ* 45, no. 2 (2011), 208.

this way of framing our interactions is rooted in flexibility and an understanding that other traditions possess quite meaningful practices and structures in their own organizations and cultures. In popular parlance, its effect is the same as, “Tell me more.” People often do.

When it comes to practices that church leaders can employ to advance relationships, this simple act of “tell me more” is powerful; it invites conversation; shows respect; deepens understanding; and builds rapport, to name a few benefits. Leaders in the highest levels of church leadership acknowledge the gift that receptive ecumenism has been in achieving common understanding across diversity, as evidenced by Pope Francis’ address for the 2017 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: “Authentic reconciliation between Christians will only be achieved when we can acknowledge each other’s gifts and learn from one another, with humility and docility, without waiting for the others to learn first.”<sup>80</sup> Yet at the local church level, explicit references to receptive ecumenism are scarce.

Ecumenists have long held that it is at the local level that the development of the common life in Christ is most clearly tested, and yet there is often a lack of intentionality of reaching beyond the church walls to put common life to the test. Put simply,

---

<sup>80</sup> “Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis,” Vatican, January 25, 2017, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170125\\_vespri-conversione-san-paolo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170125_vespri-conversione-san-paolo.html)

Christians ought to seek to “do everything together which conscience did not compel them to do separately.”<sup>81</sup> Yet not many claim this call.

Though it may seem awkward at first, with curiosity and purposeful intent, leaders can start small, often integrating elements of worship and church practices borrowed from other denominations without compromising the integrity of their own traditions. Snowmass Chapel has learned that while it is especially meaningful in an inter-denominational setting, it can also be done periodically as a way of embracing unity and respect for our brothers and sisters in various Christian traditions. For example, introducing Agape Dinner on Maundy Thursday, and creating an outdoor Stations of the Cross during Lent are ways to embrace the traditions of other denominations and include the congregation in deeper reflection and meaning. Our denominations are separate, yes, but they are all local expressions of the one church of Jesus. Because it requires us to revisit and re-engage in our own traditions with fresh eyes, receptive ecumenism trains lay people to look for the best in another’s tradition, and it lays the groundwork for healing and reconciliation to take place.

---

<sup>81</sup> “Unity,” *World Council of Churches*, accessed Mar. 22, 2023, [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Unity\\_report\\_ND1961.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Unity_report_ND1961.pdf)

## ***Liturgical Flexibility***

Our differences can be cause for celebration when we believe the same Spirit that sings through the pipe organ can sing through an electric guitar, a Gregorian chant, or a gospel choir, and that we each hear the Spirit best at a different pitch.  
—Rachel Held Evans<sup>82</sup>

When asked about specific practices at Snowmass Chapel that exhibited mindfulness in receiving or learning from the other, respondents were quick to point to the rich variety of liturgical elements. One person noted:

I come from a Catholic background and I appreciate the liturgical elements that come from the Catholic mass in the Chapel's services. For me, the music is what creates space in the worship for [ecumenical] practices. There are hymns but there is a variety of spiritual and reflective music throughout the service. I guess another element is the service being held outside in summer and in the yurt in the winter. I like that too - it creates an opportunity to worship God outside the traditional walls of a church, which is open-minded and again, creates that welcoming space.

Familiarity of the worship service seems to play an important role here, and considering that the Christian service has followed the same general flow for 2,000 years, a yearning for the familiar rhythm of worship is somewhat expected. It has become something of a generational trait by now. What is also clear in the respondents' replies is that despite that longing for tradition, there is a deep appreciation for flexibility and innovation.

The current senior pastor at Snowmass Chapel, an ordained Episcopal priest within the Diocese of Colorado, would agree that flexibility in worship while remaining

---

<sup>82</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2015).

rooted in Christian teaching is a unifying effort. “Our liturgy is Christ-focused but embraces elements from a variety of Christian denominational traditions,” he noted.<sup>83</sup> Many people who responded to the survey at Snowmass Chapel used the words “traditional” and “familiar” in describing the liturgy, noting things like lectionary readings used each week (which many denominations utilize around the world), but they noted as one person put it, “a wide variety of prayers, bible translations, and music” which augment the service. When asked what cross-denominational practices were evident in worship, nearly half (45 percent) noted the blend of contemporary and traditional hymns, and the unifying effects of drawing from a variety of bible translations during the scripture reading. It is clear that congregants appreciate the familiarity of elements they have grown accustomed to, while at the same time remain open to and appreciative of diversity in worship.

Sermons that seek to include and unite, rather than promoting intolerance, divisiveness and judgment, were also highly valued. It is not unusual to find highly politicized and partisan pulpits in this day and age, and yet when asked what worship practices were in keeping with the strategy of receptive ecumenism, 30 percent of respondents at Snowmass Chapel referenced sermons that are, as one said, “Mindful of the diversity of the congregation [politically, socially, spiritually, and denominationally],

---

<sup>83</sup> Interview with pastor, August 30, 2022.

and promoting cross-over thinking and grace.” Do congregations more homogenous in their makeup necessarily need to bother with issues of unity in diversity then? I would argue they have perhaps even more responsibility to remind their congregations of the rich diversity of practices and differences with our Christian brothers and sisters, and to do so in a spirit that promotes “cross-over thinking” and grace. As communities are becoming increasingly pluralistic ethnically, culturally and religiously, it is important for all people to be open to genuine expressions of spirituality which build up the church because they ultimately stem from God. This is the role and responsibility of church leaders (and ultimately the seminaries and institutions that ordain them).<sup>84</sup>

Baptist theologian and member of the current Baptist-Catholic International Dialogue, Steven R. Harmon, points to two other notable examples of liturgical flexibility that defy Baptist stereotypes. DaySpring Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, describes itself as “a Baptist church in the contemplative tradition,” drawing on the rich heritage of 2,000 years of Christian practice. They lean heavily on the liturgical seasons of the church calendar, recitation of the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, and a regular discipline of silence in worship. Across the globe, the Evangelical Baptist Church of the Republic of Georgia has adopted a fascinating hybrid of Baptist and Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology. By receiving the gifts of the Orthodox tradition and incorporating them

---

<sup>84</sup> Gunnar Stalsett, “A Response by Gunnar Stalsett,” in *Towards Viable Theological Education*, ed. John Pobee (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), 89.

into their Baptist faith and practice, they are forging an innovative path that is grounded in their shared unity in Christ.<sup>85</sup> These churches' intentional strategy of "cross-over thinking" allows room for diversity in order to create the unity we seek.

One area of distinction among denominations that continues to challenge is at the Lord's Table. Interestingly, while Snowmass Chapel has an open communion table, which allows all congregants to participate in the Eucharist regardless of denominational tradition, only twenty percent saw this as a specific strategy that creates more unity. This may be because they are unaware of the points of distinction between, for example, Catholics and Protestants regarding communion, but it may also be the simple gift of grace (and lack of judgment) that human beings naturally afford one another when in the presence of Christ. Perhaps, too, it is a powerful reminder of the scripture declaration that, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Cor 10:17) The one bread is not simply a sign of the one body; the one bread is a source of our unity.

Regardless of how one views communion, however, many of the worship elements mentioned above provide a sense of inclusion and unity. One could begin with small incorporations without surrendering their convictions and denominational

---

<sup>85</sup> Steven R. Harmon, *Baptists, Catholics and the Whole Church* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2021), 78-80.

teachings about communion. Being ecumenical does not mean relinquishing long-held convictions, after all.

### ***Outward Signs of an Inward Ecumenical Spirit***

People are hard to hate close up. Move in.  
—Brené Brown<sup>86</sup>

This chapter is focused on exploring and expanding the ecumenical movement in the local church. As such, we have looked at the model provided by Snowmass Chapel and various practices at play in liturgy and community there, as well as other communities who model the visible unity of Christians in a congregational setting. As has already been mentioned, there are certainly other notable churches and faith-based institutions that embrace the spirit of ecumenism, but for purposes of this paper we are exploring just one medium-sized inter-denominational church whose mission is explicitly ecumenical. So after exploring the outward (liturgical) signs, if you will, of an inward ecumenical spirit, I was curious to know what the respondents would offer when asked how the entire congregation might be involved in creating spaces for dialogue with Christians who think differently, and what it might take to promote unity

---

<sup>86</sup> Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Random House, 2019).

and acceptance amid diversity in our congregations. The very first response seemed to encapsulate what many were thinking:

Oof. This is tough. It's a huge change management task to 1) get people to believe this is of value versus feeding their own spiritual comfort and salvation zone 2) have them elevate unity on a few key beliefs and behaviors above all others 3) go through the discomfort and loss or fear of learning other views. I think it starts with clergy and leadership committing to this concept then having the creativity and perseverance to see it through.

This respondent offered honest insights into the inherent challenges of embracing ecumenism and looked to leadership to forge the way. Other respondents gave direction and ideas for involving the congregation to promote unity. Churches gathering socially with other churches; participating in grassroots endeavors that serve the community; engaging in dialogue that educates and reminds the congregation about its commitment to unifying activities and thought; focusing on people more than on doctrines; avoiding political agendas in all things; and cultivating relationships with our religious and denominational other were all efforts suggested by Snowmass Chapel congregants.

These actions are not fool proof, however, nor do they come easily. Ecumenical work requires us to first acknowledge that it may well be a very complex undertaking, especially when the other is someone, or a group of people, with whom we have been locked in conflict. Prejudices, myths, and biases abound, and overcoming historic reasons for disunity is not easy, to say nothing of past hurts done in the name of religion. When asked how churches involve the entire congregation in learning and in

dialogue with Christians who think differently about theology, liturgy and doctrine, one survey respondent openly shared what may be a common thread in both religious and secular settings:

I struggle with this because if I honestly examine my own heart, I'm not sure I want to dialogue with some sectors of the Christian church right now. I am still struggling to disconnect from the rigid, judgmental faith I grew up with so I have intentionally tried to create space from that perspective.

The response is a stark and poignant reminder that being ecumenical, striving to accept our religious other, is not meant to simply accept whatever position that person or church might hold. There are doctrines and theologies which deserve to be scrutinized. Deep-seated feelings of resentment, anger, exclusion and unworthiness are very challenging, especially when they are the result of what we learn in our places of worship. When one feels frightened and unsafe, it is not instinctual to engage with our other; it is not difficult to understand why some people would want to isolate themselves from the past rather than engage in rigorous listening sessions. One survey respondent offered that being ecumenical is extremely difficult, not so much because of their own views, "but rather the exclusive, divisive, and othering stances that some denominations adhere to." Without taking aim at any one church or denomination, exclusivity, divisiveness and othering could, indeed, be true of many. Another respondent, though, who most recently had been attending an Evangelical church, noted candidly that Snowmass Chapel appears to be one of the most active in reaching out to nearby churches and clergy but, "Sadly, many [conservative evangelical churches]

view Snowmass Chapel as too liberal and non-biblical” because they have both women and gay people in leadership positions.

Many churchgoers might feel similarly if they view unity as having to unilaterally embrace a “progressive and liberal” doctrine and theology. Many misconceptions exist about the ecumenical movement, some of which have been brought about by ecumenical leaders themselves sidetracked by “social issues” which have caused more conservative Christians to push back against what they saw as an attempt to enculturate progressive ideologies (discussed in Chapter 1). The history and practice of the ecumenical movement demonstrate that winning converts to one’s own agenda is not the aim or goal of ecumenical conversation.

Americans seem to have lost the ability to agree to disagree. So committed to individualistic ways of thinking, many people refuse to engage with those whom they view as opponents. It is not realistic, of course, to think that common ground can be found in every situation and it is ok to walk away when needed. Jesus himself said to his disciples as he sent them out, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town” (Matt. 10:14). Still, for those who are ready, healthy, and faithfully mature enough, and feel guided by the Holy Spirit to do so, deep, active listening and receiving of another can lead to mutual understanding, which can ultimately lead to healing and reconciliation.

Listening in the spirit of receptive ecumenism requires openness to a diverse range of voices within the church. Attuning oneself to the diversity within one's own community creates greater possibilities for recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit working in other communities. Simply put, how we listen and who we listen to within our own ecclesial community impacts who we listen to and what we hear outside of it.<sup>87</sup>

One final point as we examine ecumenical instincts versus training: when it comes to bridging the gap between our religious differences, Americans tend to rely on their personal social networks. Consider your best friend or your brother in-law who may fall into the religious nones or dones as discussed earlier, or perhaps who simply profess a theology different from your own. No matter what your religious upbringing tells you about their salvation, it is simply hard for you to imagine God not saving a place for them in heaven. You are not alone. Recent research suggests that more than 80 percent of Mainline Protestants and Catholics, and 100 percent of Mormons, believe that non-Christians can go to heaven. Among Evangelicals and Black Protestants, the number is lower but still ranging from 54 to 62 percent who agree that non-Christians can go to heaven. This is a clear indicator that most Christians have an expansive view of heaven, despite what their religious traditions might teach, and maybe precisely because cultivating deep personal and social relationships makes a difference in who we

---

<sup>87</sup> Kristin Colberg, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology," 7.

believe is “in” or “out.” Perhaps the primary reason that America manages to be both highly religious and highly diverse is that deep down most Americans do not believe people who believe differently are damned. Devotion plus diversity, minus damnation, equals unity.<sup>88</sup>

One of the shifts Christians must make in order to achieve the unity they seek is to extend this instinctual grace we give to our familial, social, and personal circles, to ways of thinking about others that they have never encountered. All people, regardless of religion, find it far too easy to demonize people from afar. Whether it is frivolous gossip or hate speech toward a group of people on the “other” side of an issue, there is almost always room for grace. Where there is grace, there is room for conversation and coming together.

## ***Conclusion***

Through sharing the experience of the congregation of Snowmass Chapel, I have illustrated how the practices of ecumenism might be used in various ways, and in varying degrees, to educate and call Christians to actions that unify. Though the experience at Snowmass Chapel is not unique, it demonstrates that a thriving

---

<sup>88</sup> Robert E. Putnam and Dave E. Campbell, *American Grace, How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 538-541. These survey results are from the 2007 Faith Matters survey by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell and by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, which can be found at <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=380#1>.

community of Christ-followers can be ecumenical without being issue-driven; can be places where social distinctions are replaced by sacred distinctiveness and flourishing; and that inter-denominational practices can be invitational and missional, without abandoning long-held traditions. Chapter 4 focuses on helping churches and church leaders who want to experiment in their local communities, as well as those who are already practicing ecumenism in some way and want to go a little deeper.

## Chapter 4

### ***Creating an Ecumenical Vision in the Local Church***

Although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?

—John Wesley<sup>89</sup>

In the early days of Christianity, followers of Jesus were focused on creating a community of believers that was diverse and far-reaching. Community and doing life together is foundational to the Christian journey. Yet in the modern world, humanity's ability to understand life together is being undermined by placing personal preference and individualization above the good of society and social order. Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that this may well prove to be the most significant issue for Christians of our time.<sup>90</sup> Because of our rich history of doing life in community, the world may indeed be looking to Christians to help turn the tide of uncivil discourse.

Demonstrating the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17:21 will take courageous leadership. Partly to the detriment of the ecumenical movement, the work of unity has

---

<sup>89</sup> John Wesley, 'Catholic Spirit.' The sermon first appeared in Wesley's *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 3 vols (London, 1750), 3: 181–7, and later as a separate publication, *Catholick Spirit: A Sermon on 2 Kings x. 15* (London, 1755).

<sup>90</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 137.

increasingly become the task of professionals. That the ecumenical movement is largely unknown by local church leaders indicates it may have become too clerical and too dependent on ordained leadership at the highest levels, which leaves out a significant force for change: the local church.<sup>91</sup>

### ***Unity in the Local Context***

We want our coffee in the lobby, we watch our worship on a screen. We got a Rockstar preacher who won't wake us from our dreams. We want our blessings in our pocket, we keep our missions overseas; but for the hurting in our cities would we even cross the street? We want to see the heart set free and the tyrants kneel; the walls fall down and our land be healed. But church if we want to see a change in the world out there, it's got to start right here; it's got to start right now.

—Casting Crowns<sup>92</sup>

It is time for ecumenism to make an intentional move into the pews by asking how insights from the movement can be applied in the local context to help Christians develop viable pathways to civility, respect, and reconciliation in Christian traditions. Ecumenism is a resource available to us which can help unify Christians across denominations, and can in turn bring about healing in personal relationships, communities, political structures, and more. More than simply offering a plea for

---

<sup>91</sup> Samuel Kobia, "Challenges Facing the Ecumenical Movement in the 21st Century."

<sup>92</sup> Bernie Herms, Mark Hall, Matthew West and Seth Mosley, "Start Right Here", Capitol CMG Publishing, 2018.

tolerance to Christian communities, it is time for ecumenism to be a requirement of contemporary spiritual and religious life. It is here that the church has the ability to permeate the fabric of society in meaningful ways by modeling the unity we seek.

One of the reasons ecumenists often give for their work is that a more united church will bear better witness to the world than a divided church will. I certainly agree with that motivation, but perhaps a new kind of ecumenical vision is warranted. If civil discourse is the most significant challenge for Christians today and, as Alasdair MacIntyre asserts, the world is looking to the Christian community as exemplars for doing life together, then finding ways to accomplish this is missional work indeed. I am convinced that the body of Christ is called to work toward unity despite difference. In addition, I also strongly believe the local church is called to help its members navigate the most challenging and complex issues of its day. Contemporary ecumenism has given us a framework to do both by embracing first the call to “be one, as we are one” (John 17:22), and second by equipping congregations with practical ways to bring about civility, respect and healing in their own communities and relationships. This is the mission field.

Almost all commentators on postmodernity note one of its most prominent characteristics is a near “radical plurality” or heterogeneity. Plurality and unity have been themes in Christianity since Paul’s writing about the diversity of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, in which Paul seems to say plurality serves unity; it does not destroy it.

Despite the many good and worthy reasons to seek unity, there is wide consensus among professional ecumenists that visible unity of the church does not mean one church, nor does it mean simply sharing a visible oneness without organizational cooperation. In short, there is no strategic set of achievable action steps for how churches in North America, let alone the world, might become more unified.<sup>93</sup> Rather, it is something that requires experimentation, practice and imagination at the local church level, where we are charged with manifesting the oneness of the people of God.<sup>94</sup> It is here where I believe the ecumenical movement can make the greatest difference.

This paper has broadly and frequently used receptive ecumenism as a contemporary strategy for churches and individuals to draw from in finding common ground. The strategy have proved valuable at the highest levels (between, for example, denominational bodies worldwide), but more work is needed to translate it into our local church contexts. Many lay people who have some knowledge of the ecumenical movement nevertheless find themselves asking: But what can I change? This is the most compelling question because in it lies the hopeful assertion of personal power and a sense of agency to bring about real and lasting change; people just want to know how to contribute.

---

<sup>93</sup> Michael Root, "Faith and Order in a Postmodern World," 201.

<sup>94</sup> Oliver S. Tomkins, ed., "The Third World Conference on Faith and Order," 15-25 August 1952 (London, SCM, 1953), 16.

The most valuable thing Christians might take away is the basic principle of receptive ecumenism, which is that of attending to one's own religious and denominational shortcomings by receiving with integrity from the other. This involves a commitment to critical, but constructive, discernment in one's own community or tradition first, as well as that of others. It also requires critical, but constructive discernment of oneself, which is the rich inner work of spiritual ecumenism. Such a comprehensive review can lay the foundation for fruitful growth, reparative healing, and greater Christian and human flourishing.<sup>95</sup> In these critical-constructive interactions, the hope embodied is that new ways of growing together might become possible, even where apparently insurmountable obstacles presently exist. If this ideal is possible across the chasm of denominational and religious divisions, imagine what might be possible in one's everyday relationships by applying the same principles. The simple question, "What can I change?" has massive implications for Christian unity and society as a whole. What follows are some practical ways for clergy and laity to attend to Christian unity and help transform relationships.

---

<sup>95</sup> Gregory A. Ryan, "The Reception of Receptive Ecumenism," *Brill*, April 15, 2021, [https://brill.com/view/journals/ecso/17/1/article-p7\\_7.xml?language=en](https://brill.com/view/journals/ecso/17/1/article-p7_7.xml?language=en).

## ***Imagination, Curiosity and Courage***

We all stand to benefit when our purpose is to promote the flourishing in our own lives, in our relationships and institutions, in our communities and in the world at large.

—L. Gregory Jones<sup>96</sup>

If unity is an answer to Jesus's own prayer in John 17, then we can rightly trust that it will come about in God's time. Insofar as Jesus modeled for us his prayer that we would all be one, the simple and easiest way to be ecumenical is to pray for our ecumenical others. Recall as talked about in Chapter 2, this is not a prayer of conversion but for transformation of the heart – theirs and ours. Adding prayers for local churches and leaders, and for the unity of God's church worldwide, is a powerful reminder of the commitment to "bear with one another in love... maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3). Lastly, prayer for ourselves individually, in keeping with the spiritual ecumenism defined in Chapter 2, allows first and foremost the Holy Spirit to transform us.

Next, hold onto long-held church traditions when they matter. The Christian church has, in fact, a long history of unitedness. From the earliest days of the Jesus followers to the Great Schism of 1054 there was a more united church, and Catholics, Orthodox and Protestant Christians of all stripes have this oneness as their common

---

<sup>96</sup> Gregory L. Jones and Andrew P. Hogue, *Navigating the Future, Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021).

heritage. It includes the shared canon of scripture, the early creeds, the writings of the early church, and the patterns and practices of ancient Christian worship.<sup>97</sup> Recognizing this shared history can increase a sense of connectedness to Christians worshipping across the globe, or across town.

Another practical step that can increase understanding and lead to positive change among denominations is to discover more about each other. Be curious. Recall that receptive ecumenism holds that in learning about others, being open to receiving what they have to teach us, we open up pathways to mutual understanding and intent. Encourage inter-church dialogue; invite churches to join together in common bible study; participate in inter-faith clergy gatherings; gather together with other churches in mission and service work. Increasing understanding also requires one to refrain from criticizing or deriding denominational others, and to have the courage to talk about others in a way that they would be comfortable with. Enliven preaching, bible studies, and everyday conversations by enlightening people about different traditions and the many ways Christ's followers show up in the world. It is certain that not every person who walks through the doors of our churches hails from the same denomination, background or experience, so learning about others and speaking about the body of Christ in love can be healing all by itself.

---

<sup>97</sup> Steven R. Harmon's short book, *Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity*, has a wealth of ideas for putting ecumenism into everyday practice. Steven R. Harmon, *Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity*, (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2010), 62.

Finally, many of the practices outlined in the previous chapter offer simple steps for designing worship cross-denominationally. Music, scripture and sermon topics are great places to begin, as is the worship space itself. In addition, church leaders who do not normally offer such things might consider an Ash Wednesday Service, Agape Dinner on Maundy Thursday, a regular outdoor worship service, or reciting the creeds at certain times in the church year. Meditating on scripture in the practice of *lectio divina*, labyrinths, and praying the rosary can all be very enriching “new” practices to congregants, especially with some instruction.

Innovation is not without risk, however, and very few people enjoy surprises when it comes to changes to the liturgy or sanctuary; a surprise new element – even a small one – can be a distraction to worship for many. Still, to disregard practices on the grounds of difference is to miss out on the beauty of diversity upon which the church was built.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, public theologian and Lutheran (ELCA) minister, has often said that being steeped in the orthodoxy of the church allows her to innovate. That is, within the guardrails of the message of the gospel and the rich traditions of her own denominational community, there is ample opportunity for flexibility and creativity. She has notably taken some heat for her approach, but one particular example is worth noting here. When Bolz-Weber’s Denver-based congregation decided to transform the baptismal font into a chocolate fountain to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, it raised

a few eyebrows from those outside her congregation. Bolz-Weber's response to the criticism was swift and theologically sound:

Having buried the Alleluia on Transfiguration Sunday and entered into the 40 days of Lent (remembering our mortality and sin)...as a community we walk through the paschal mystery of the Three Days. We gather to remember the night our Lord was betrayed unto death and yet washed the feet of those whom he loved, and having Friday experienced the death of God on the cross on which hung the savior of the whole world, we gather on Holy Saturday to tell one another the great salvation history of God and God's people. We finally finally finally enter the church singing Alleluia and baptize the catechumens as a celebration of the great and glorious resurrection of Jesus. For us there is no better symbol of Easter – nothing says "He is risen" like a chocolate fountain in the baptismal font. It is a celebration of pure joy and not one we would ever suggest is right for all churches but for us it is life.<sup>98</sup>

One can imagine a first-time visitor to Bolz-Weber's church that Easter may have been surprised, even shocked by the innovation, but while I advocate for tradition when it is uniting us in our common heritage, perhaps our churches could benefit from loosening the grip on tradition solely for the sake of tradition. After all, how many people might have come to believe that day, as on the day of Pentecost in ancient times, and subsequently baptized in that very font (sans chocolate, of course)? How many walked the journey of that particular Holy Week and palpably experienced, perhaps for the first time, the reality of death and the joy of resurrection in Jesus? How many more

---

<sup>98</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Apparently HFASS Is an Example of the Horrible Things That Go Wrong When Women Become Pastors," *Patheos*, February 13, 2012, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/02/apparently-hfass-is-an-example-of-the-horrible-things-than-go-wrong-when-women-become-pastors/>.

might be reached when we are faithful to the gospel but not tied to ecclesiological constraint? As Bolz-Weber herself noted, a chocolate fountain in the baptismal font may not be right for all churches, but as Christians called to the visible unity of Christ, our immediate response to another's theological imagination ought to be one of grace, not condemnation. "O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek...to be understood as to understand," the words of the prayer of St. Francis beckon. Seek first to understand.

If church leaders and followers of Christ in general can recognize vibrant ministry in one another's communities, can we also acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit there empowering this ministry? If this is the case, can we think in new ways about the ministers that lead this ministry? Can we then see a new way of entering into difficult doctrinal questions and issues together?<sup>99</sup> If the answer is even a tentative yes, then I would hold that this is a valuable and transferable skill whose application in all areas of life will result in meaningful and lasting change.

### ***Impacting Relationships, Families, Communities and More***

Let what we do in here fill the streets out there."  
— "Madly," lyrics by Steve Fee<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Kristin Colberg, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology," 6.

<sup>100</sup> Steve Fee, "Madly," Sixsteps Songs, Capitol CMG, 2002.

We have faced extremely challenging times in our society over the past decade, times that have strained even our most important relationships. One of the most glaring and difficult divisions we see in the U.S. in modern times is within the political system, rife with vitriol and anger aimed at perceived opponents (“angertainment” as it has been called). We are bombarded with what most Americans would call an unhealthy culture of contempt<sup>101</sup> exemplified by heckling in the Senate chambers, dehumanizing language aimed at the other, and what some consider to be an unholy misappropriation of God and country. In 2022, for example, one Georgia candidate for the gubernatorial race had as her campaign slogan, “Jesus Guns and Babies,” an uncomfortable mingling of theology and politics, and a clear nod to Christian nationalism.<sup>102</sup> In another instance, a Colorado congresswoman who identifies as Christian took on the gun control lobbyists by asserting to an audience of conservative Christians that “Jesus didn’t have enough AR-15 rifles to keep his government from killing him,”<sup>103</sup> a complete departure from the traditional Christian belief that Jesus willingly died for the salvation of humankind, and

---

<sup>101</sup> Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf and Aidan Connaughton, “Diversity and Division in Advanced Economies,” *Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project* (Pew Research Center, March 22, 2022), last modified March 22, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/10/13/diversity-and-division-in-advanced-economies/>.

<sup>102</sup> Noah Berlatsky, “Georgia candidate’s ‘Jesus Guns Babies’ tagline is a Christian nationalist parody — but it’s real,” *NBC News*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/georgias-kandiss-taylors-jesus-guns-babies-sign-clear-christian-nation-rcna30331>.

<sup>103</sup> Chloe Folmar, “Boebert: Jesus Didn’t Have Enough Ar-15s to ‘Keep His Government from Killing Him,’” *The Hill*, June 17, 2022, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/3528049-boebert-jesus-didnt-have-enough-ar-15s-to-keep-his-government-from-killing-him/>.

dissuaded his followers from using violence.<sup>104</sup> So egregious are the behaviors of some elected officials, and their arguments so filled with a lack of context or respect (often shouting their messages at audiences in what seems like an attempt to carry more authority and confidence), that one might wonder how unity can ever be achieved, let alone by any one individual.

I use the example of political divisions in the U.S. because it is such an obvious illustration of the need for reconciliation work that might lead to more effective and productive work on behalf of all citizens. One might also consider smaller fissures that are at risk of breaking apart, such as family ties, work or school-based relationships, and anyplace where disagreement has become gridlock. To illustrate how the strategies of ecumenism have helped to affect positive change in both religious and secular settings, I offer a few examples from diverse situations that might serve as inspiration that teaching and modeling ecumenism in the local church can impact unity across many sectors of life.

When a group of students at a large university hosted what they hoped would be a fun comedy night event broadcast across the entire campus, it turned into a racially offensive experience that caused severe upset and grief across every part of campus. The outcry was fast and furious, including in the handling of the backlash. There was so

---

<sup>104</sup> See the Gospel of Luke 22:42; the Gospel of John 18:10-11, 18:36; the Gospel of Matthew 5:38, 26:52-54; Ezekiel 45:9, Isaiah 60:18, among many other scripture passages.

much tension and conflict on campus that the dean of the university chapel was called by the chancellor and the cabinet officers to help create an initial response. They quickly agreed to hold a meeting at the chapel, open to anyone who wanted to attend in order to allow people to speak and to be heard. The chapel had long been viewed as the “keeper of the questions,” and “a nerve exposed to pain,” according to the dean. In his view, that meant being a place where pain was not shoved aside but rather acknowledged in an effort to facilitate mutual understanding.

Because of the intensity of the emotions flaring on campus, the dean paid close attention to the atmosphere of the space itself. A candle was placed in the center aisle, not in a ritualistic way but as a sign of welcome and calm, and he dimmed the lights in an effort to, in his words, “bring down the energy.” Administrators were invited to sit in the front row where they could be seen by the students and the community, and where they could fully attend to what was being said by members of the community. Lastly, the dean invited anyone else who wanted to speak to do so, provided they signed in before speaking. The chancellor spoke briefly, followed by the dean who acknowledged the pain in the room, and knowing that the most important people in the room who needed to be heard were those who were hurt the most, he simply asked two things of

the crowd before taking his seat for the night: he asked them to listen in ways that encouraged people to speak and to speak in ways that encouraged others to listen.<sup>105</sup>

Fifteen hundred people attended that night and the crowd stayed for over four hours. It was the beginning of the healing, the dean said. Notice he did not say that they all left healed and reconciled. It was the beginning of the healing. Creating intentional space for people to come together across disagreement and pain provides the possibility for healing and transformation. Transformative work comes not from clergy or administrators, not politicians or activists; responsibility for doing the real work of healing and reconciliation rests with the community. Leaders help set the stage for their communities to do the work.

Seminarians and ordained clergy alike need tools to equip their people to become better listeners to the various theologies among us and be open to genuine expressions of spirituality which build up the church.<sup>106</sup> When people are equipped to be better listeners and to resolve conflict in healthy ways, this builds up families, communities and societies. What is taught and learned in our churches ought to inform everyday lives if it is to be relevant to people. For more on this, I point to two examples in rather different contexts that are equipping people at a micro-level to address deep

---

<sup>105</sup> Personal conversation with the dean, Jan. 15, 2023. The names of the dean and the university are intentionally omitted here.

<sup>106</sup> Gunnar Stalsett, "A Response," 89.

divisions. One, a Christian-based organization focused on healing racial divides in local churches, and the other a secular grassroots movement whose aim is to bring about change through simple human connectedness.

Arrabon is an organization working with Christian communities to pursue racial reconciliation and healing. With attention to the Greek definition of reconciliation – exchange – leaders strive to exchange anger with peace, according to Arrabon’s Luke Bobo. “We can’t have unity without reconciliation, otherwise we are just tolerating in order to keep the peace,” he argues. He likens reconciliation to a journey of true change – metamorphosis – which Paul describes in the letter to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed [*metamorphousthe*] by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Healing from the wounds of contempt and intentional divisiveness will require a new understanding of both self and others; deep, reflective personal work (kenotic and spiritual ecumenism) is necessary first in order to bring about transformation. Humans are limited by old patterns of behavior and thought, and what is required is an “epistemological rupture,” says Bobo, so that new patterns might emerge.<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Arrabon Chief Program Officer Luke Bobo, Aug. 11, 2022.

Weave: The Social Fabric Project at the Aspen Institute, bases its work on the belief that healthy relationships transform lives and communities, and ultimately have the ability to mend deep divisions in the U.S. *New York Times* columnist and author David Brooks founded Weave, in response to what he viewed as a demonstrated lack of trust Americans have in each other and their rising isolation and loss of community. He writes, “We do what humans do when we feel vulnerable and alone: we revert to tribe. It’s friend/enemy, us/them, build walls, hatred, erect barriers.”<sup>108</sup> Brooks believes the antidote to our time of division and fragmentation is taking time to show up for others, building connections in communities and “weaving a rich social fabric” in schools, communities, neighborhoods and homes, which Weave strives to do by equipping and encouraging individuals to start by connecting with the diversity of people and places in their own communities.<sup>109</sup>

Both of these organizational missions, as well as the example of spiritual leadership at the university level, are committed to changing the way Americans think about others, from an “us vs. them” mentality, to “we.” What is striking is that they

---

<sup>108</sup> “About Us,” *Weave*, last modified August 1, 2022, <https://weareweavers.org/about/>.

<sup>109</sup> David Brooks, “The Lies Our Culture Tells Us About What Matters -- and a Better Way to Live,” TED Talk, June 5, 2019, video, [https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_brooks\\_the\\_lies\\_our\\_culture\\_tells\\_us\\_about\\_what\\_matters\\_and\\_a\\_better\\_way\\_to\\_live?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_brooks_the_lies_our_culture_tells_us_about_what_matters_and_a_better_way_to_live?language=en).

prioritize the positive actions of the community as a whole – be they local congregations, schools, or neighborhoods – which comports well with the contemporary ecumenical ideal of addressing divisions through rich inter-personal, human interaction. They serve as an encouragement for clergy, and Christian leaders in general, to pick up the cause of societal healing by leading with the principles of ecumenism in their own local context. Leaders are essential to helping their communities transform old patterns of thought and behavior, and yet there is not a reliance on top-down leadership. When it comes to transforming communities, there is a liturgical flow at work: it is ultimately the work of the people.

Americans have grown all too accustomed to conflict, so that even with an internal moral compass that desires something better, we have simply lost the ability to disagree well. Instead, we lean on gritting our teeth, tolerating other points of views by avoiding them altogether. There are stories of people who have blocked relatives on social media because the content they post is antithetical to their own position; people who make up elaborate ways to avoid certain family members at the Thanksgiving table because they know the conversation will turn heated; and some families have a list of topics they agree never to discuss because they know it will lead to conflict.

Agreeing to avoid conflict sounds admirable and even peaceful, especially when it is done in the hope of preserving the relationship. But ignoring, avoiding and judging those we disagree with does not resolve issues, it only causes them to fester.

Relationship expert John Gottman lumps these kinds of behaviors into what he calls The Four Horsemen, after the four horsemen of the apocalypse, an interesting reference to the end times (Rev. 6:1-7). Essentially Gottman warns there are four things which will undoubtedly usher in the end times of a relationship:

*Criticism* – Criticism is not the same as complaint. Criticism goes after a person’s character or personality. It blames, ridicules, dismisses and nitpicks.

*Contempt* – Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the other person/group. It demeans the other. It takes the moral high ground and has an air of superiority even while it is tearing another down.

*Defensiveness* – Defensiveness might sound like defending oneself, but it can also sound a lot like whining and complaining, and it almost always escalates the conflict rather than calming it.

*Stonewalling* – When all of this is going on in a relationship, eventually one partner tunes out. Stonewalling is also known as the silent treatment, and it communicates to the other person, “I couldn’t care less about this. I couldn’t care less about YOU.”<sup>110</sup>

The Four Horsemen can be subtle and shrewd, or they can be obvious and hate-filled, but regardless of how they show up, Gottman writes, these are behaviors that cause division and eventually rupture relationships. Christian leaders who wish to bring the work of unity from the pews to the public square might begin not with the intention of avoiding all conflict, but with attention to modeling a new way. Receptive, kenotic and spiritual ecumenism (the three key modern strategies of the ecumenical movement discussed in Chapter 2) are the antidote to the Four Horsemen. Local leaders need to be

---

<sup>110</sup> John Gottman, *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Harmony Books, 1995), 32-38.

equipped in helping the church identify and acknowledge behaviors that are not reconciling, but rather have the potential to rupture human relationships and systems.

Calls for unity and civility often assume the absence of disagreement, but with no framework for productive discourse, people often resort to ignoring one another. Yet, when we ignore or decline to speak up as an attempt to tolerate the other, we give up discourse to the most divisive group who often are the loudest, and most polarized voices.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, when we ignore and refuse to speak up, we silently give permission for those voices to continue. Americans would do well to argue more, not less, and do it better.

### ***Come, Let Us Argue It Out***

Don't raise your voice, improve your argument.

-- Desmond Tutu<sup>112</sup>

Like all prophets, the prophet Isaiah was called to awaken the consciousness of the people; to speak the word of the Lord to people about future consequences for their behavior. Isaiah condemns the political, social and religious structures in ancient Israel and what he saw as hypocrisy – God’s people caring more about religiosity and the

---

<sup>111</sup> The Better Arguments Project, *Aspen Institute*, webinar participant, February 24, 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Desmond Tutu, “The Second Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, Johannesburg, South Africa, 23 November 2004,” Nelson Mandela, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/the-second-nelson-mandela-annual-lecture-address>

offering of sacrifices at the temple than about people in need (Is. 1:11-15). God, through Isaiah, calls the Israelites a sinful nation (Isa. 1:4); and he says your hands are stained with the blood of murder and violence (Isa. 1:15). He speaks out vigorously against corrupt leaders (Isa. 1:23). He reminds God's people of their obligation and responsibility to care for the least of these (Isa. 1:16-17). He offered a blistering condemnation of the ugliness, the divisiveness, the greed and self-centeredness of humankind, but then Isaiah offers the remedy, and it includes a remarkable act of mercy and grace.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out. If you are willing to do as I ask, our relationship will be restored. (Isa. 1:16-18)

Being ecumenical, striving to accept others whose expression and experience of the faith differs from ours, is not meant to simply accept whatever position a church might hold; sometimes we have to argue it out.

## ***Conclusion***

There is a great deal of openness and flexibility as to how the ecumenism might actually be practiced at the local level. It should be adapted and developed in relation to specific circumstances and situations, both within and outside the walls of a church. The practices of ecumenism, especially those of receptive ecumenism, are, in the words of

one of its greatest proponents Paul D. Murray, like a “virtuous virus that can evolve and adapt” to varied situations and relationships.<sup>113</sup> There is every reason to believe that Christians of all denominational stripes can learn how to incorporate these practices in both religious and non-religious settings with significant and positive results.

The world may well be looking to Christians to resolve the deep wounds of our fragmentation; whether with hopeful anticipation or a dose of skepticism is a topic of debate. May our churches have the courage and curiosity to model unity for a weary world by creating an ecumenical vision within and among our churches, while holding on to our own traditions and faith with understanding and grace. By putting ecumenical theory into practice within the local church context, leaders can offer a viable and effective way forward toward the unity we seek.

---

<sup>113</sup> Paul D. Murray, “Methodology – In Search of a Way,” 627.

## Conclusion

There is much in this world that divides us, cutting across a broad swath of religious, cultural, political, and social issues. This thesis has argued for the empowerment of the local church to act against this fragmentation by leading people to understand and practice promising new strategies from the ecumenical movement. For over a century, ecumenical leaders from various Christian denominations have gathered to discuss the importance of overcoming difference but those conversations have too long been confined to the ranks of theologians, professional ecumenists, and church bureaucrats. The practice of bringing about unity requires participation of all people at all levels of church life.<sup>114</sup>

In Chapter 1 we discussed the history of the ecumenical movement, its efficacy, obstacles, and successes. There have been some significant misunderstandings about what it means to be ecumenical, some of which have led to an outright refusal to participate in its cause, and some which have deepened the religious polarization of politics in the United States. At the same time, Western societal behavior has shifted away from a sociocentric way of being, which was concerned with the well-being of societies over that of individuals. Instead, personal freedoms and individualistic ways of

---

<sup>114</sup> Paul D. Murray, "Methodology – In Search of a Way," 626.

thinking are given such priority of place in the modern world that people naturally gravitate to those who think similarly. This homogenous way of being has greatly influenced the state of divisiveness and intolerance in the United States.

This thesis calls on Christians and Christian leaders to consider, “*What is the unity we seek?*” and it offers a way forward from division and uncivil discourse. Perhaps the most significant call to action is that any effort toward Christian unity should be grounded in Jesus’s prayer for unity. (John 17:21) The early church was notable for its radical inclusion of Gentiles, and there exists a wealth of scriptural emphasis on unity in the New Testament. My hope is that clergy and church leaders will gain an awareness of what ecumenism is and why it matters, and that by grounding their work in the very unity Jesus prayed for they will lead congregations to a better understanding as well so that they might learn to act together with other Christians insofar as it is possible.

There is a strong case for all Christians to examine and repent from behaviors that may contribute to divisiveness. Equipping leaders with this awareness and with effective tools will give the local church the ability to lead congregants toward reconciliation and fullness.

Chapter 2’s focus is on three modern strategies that are readily available: *Receptive Ecumenism, Spiritual Ecumenism and Kenotic Ecumenism*. Receptive ecumenism offers a more hope-filled exchange of ideas and perspectives by asking, “What can I learn from you?” It sets the stage for deeper listening and understanding, and it can be

incorporated into everyday actions both within and outside of the church context.

Spiritual ecumenism sets the stage for that deep work by centering and grounding the self in prayer, preparing hearts and minds to be ready for the rich exchange of gifts with the other. Kenotic ecumenism requires us to lay down our own biases and assumptions, and accept the other as is. It models itself on the self-emptying generosity of Christ, which allows us to let go of closely held convictions, if only temporarily, in order to grow together with another.

Any ability to grow together is impaired, however, by clinging to traditional ways of doing things simply for the sake of tradition. Christians are called to turn away from worldly divisions and receive each other in love, yet churches are often seen as homogenous groups that criticize, demonize and dehumanize other Christians. If the local church did nothing more than model the strategies of receptive, spiritual and kenotic ecumenism, the impact would be immeasurable. What we do in the church must make its way into the world, and these strategies, practiced in all areas of life, have the ability for profound and lasting positive change.

Chapter 3 explored one church, Snowmass Chapel, which is a blend of inter-denominational worship, innovation, and tradition; it exhibits the practices of ecumenism in various ways and to varying degrees. Survey respondents described how being ecumenical is effective and helpful in receiving others and how it extends to other areas of everyday life. One Snowmass Chapel respondent held that “cross-over thinking

and grace” allows people from many different church backgrounds to experience the comfort and familiarity of worship. It is exactly this kind of openness to others that will have a positive influence on the broader society, helping to mend relationships in the home, in our workplaces and schools, across political divisions, and yes, helping even Christ-followers to bear with one another more graciously in love (Col. 3:13).

Achieving the unity we seek will take courageous and imaginative leadership. It requires us to focus on communities as a whole rather than siloing ourselves into like-minded groups. It requires creativity and curiosity. Most importantly it requires vision.

Chapter 4 offered practical steps toward an ecumenical vision, modeling unity, inclusion and radical acceptance of other. There is an urgent need in our society today to understand why unity matters, that there is historical reason and precedent for striving toward it, and to having the practical tools necessary to do something about it. In putting ecumenical theory into practice in the local context, church leaders can offer an imaginative way forward for all of humankind, with the church leading the way toward unity, inclusion, acceptance, healing and reconciliation.

The current age has left us with bitterness and division. Millions are looking for a way out, a potential answer that will heal this fragmented world. Ecumenism has worked hard to heal significant divisions in the church, and there is so much to learn. Just as the focus of ecumenical work has shifted and broadened over time from Mainline Protestant churches to include Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic, and now

Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, now is the time for even greater inclusion by bringing the work to the boots on the ground – the local congregations. It is time for ecumenism to make an intentional move into the pews, by asking how insights from the movement can be applied in the local context and in doing so help to bring about healing to relationships, communities, politics and more. More than simply offering a plea for tolerance to Christian communities, it is time for ecumenism to be a requirement of contemporary spiritual and religious life, permeating the fabric of society in meaningful ways by modeling the unity we seek.

Thomas FitzGerald, former Executive Director of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, said about the effects and promise of ecumenical work in the local context:

Among those who are open to the Spirit and have a willingness to respond, we have seen a deeper commitment to pastoral care leading to affirmation of human dignity, renewed appreciation of the centrality of worship, and re-evaluation of missionary perspectives. And in many places this renewal and reconciliation have had a profound influence upon the wider society. The church is truly seen as a sign of God's reconciliation and an agent of peace.<sup>115</sup>

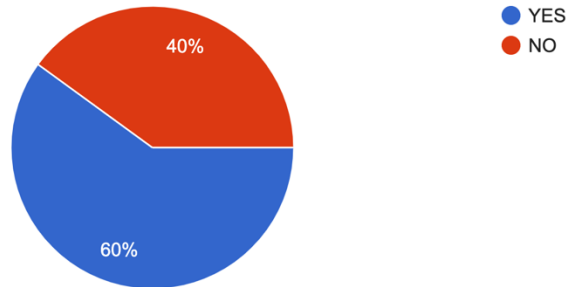
It is time for churches to engage as agents of peace in the wider society, leading the way toward unity, inclusion, acceptance, and healing.

---

<sup>115</sup> Thomas FitzGerald, "Preface," in *Towards Viable Theological Education: Ecumenical Imperative, Catalyst Of Renewal*. (Geneva: WCC Publ., 1997), viii.

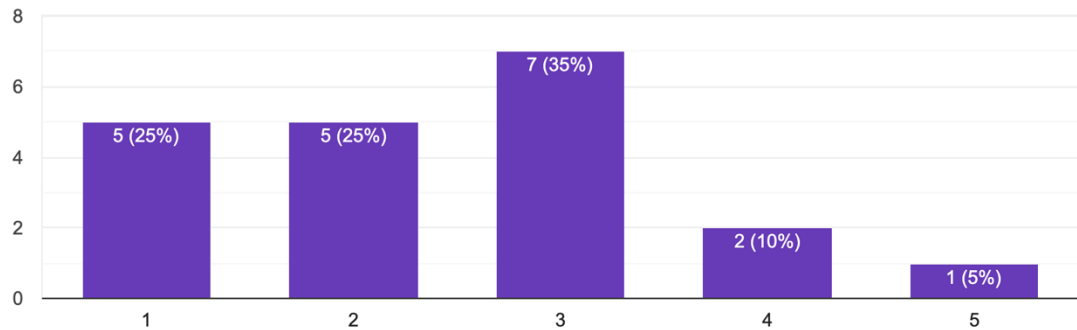
## Appendix A

The word ecumenical comes from the Greek word oikoumene which means “the inhabited world.”  
The ecumenical movement is a movement whose go.... Have you heard of the ecumenical movement?  
20 responses



**Figure 1: Pie graph showing percentage of Snowmass Chapel congregants who have heard of the ecumenical movement.**

On a scale of 1-5 how familiar are you with ecumenism? (1= not at all, 5 = very familiar)  
20 responses



**Figure 2: Bar graph showing how familiar Snowmass Chapel congregants are with ecumenism.**

## **Appendix B**

### ***Snowmass Chapel Congregant Survey: Summary of Responses***

*Section I Intro:* A common concern of ecumenical work is to pursue activities which help to build relationships with other churches and promote cooperation in witness and mission. Activities might include acts of common prayer, scripture sharing and common faith formation, pulpit exchanges and clergy groups, acts of common witness (e.g. public partnership with other churches for special church or liturgical work), the sharing of resources (e.g. joint clergy and personnel), acts of common mission and social action (e.g. working together on homelessness, food banks, youth and education, etc.).

**1. Reflecting on the description above, how have you seen Snowmass Chapel building relationships with other churches and promoting cooperation?**

**Please be as specific as possible.**

Yes. It appears to me to be the most active in the valley to reaching out to other churches and their clergy in these areas. It is particularly a reliable source for support in mercy activities. Sadly, many of the churches and members in the valley view Snowmass Chapel as too liberal and non-biblical. I believe many of their actions to create closer relationships with other churches in the valley are rejected for these reasons.

Working together with other community organizations, homelessness, food banks, youth activities/education, winter clothing drives, community dinners, recreational outings, youth & adult skiing/hiking/fishing/camping, including community organizations for the challenged worship services, music education and opportunities young & adult.

Snowmass Chapel builds relationships with other churches through the holiday basket giving. The chapel also will invite youth from other churches in our community to participate on all sorts of trips. I have also seen leaders from Snowmass Chapel lead ceremonies with leaders from other places of worship. I'm sure there are other ways that the chapel cooperates with other churches, but I don't know specifically.

Yes - I'm aware that the Chapel is involved in many community outreach programs, based in things from charity to interfaith relationship-building to faith-based discipleship. Our pastors take part in a regular luncheon meeting with [interfaith] pastors. I am part of a prayer group that is organized through Snowmass Chapel, but open to all and we have regular non-Chapel participants. The prayer form is from the Benedictine Monastery which is also very open to people of all faiths. From time to time we have a guest pastor lead the worship, and I'm aware that our pastors have visited other churches as guest preachers as well. The Chapel regularly participates in caring for the homeless, offering support for people (and their families)

with emotional/mental health needs, community organizing, projects, sponsoring family health seminars, just to scratch the surface. These programs are available and open to both members and non-members alike.

The pastors have guest preached at other churches. Other ministers have preached at Snowmass Chapel. The chapel works with crisis care, youth care and homelessness issues. It is mentioned in the bulletin and newsletter as well. In the past, the chapel was used by the Catholic Church for winter Masses. The summer program for kids included everyone. Services held [on-mountain] in Snowmass Village. Ministers co-officiate at funerals with clergy from other churches. The Christmas party with Santa and Mrs. Claus includes all of Snowmass Village. Potluck dinners during the week serve anyone who comes.

Pastors meets with many [inter-faith] clergy in our area.

Snowmass Chapel is located in a very small village within a relatively small, rural valley. While I am not personally aware of a lot of specific relationships with other churches I do know that the Snowmass Village is very involved with many organization (some churches, some not) that serve people in need -- including food, homelessness, mental health, drug abuse and the provision of extensive counseling services, both by the clergy and by volunteers through the Stephen Ministry Program, to those in need regardless of whether they actually attend the Snowmass Chapel. Re:

work with specific other churches, I am aware of the work that the Snowmass clergy did [with another church] around gay/lesbian issues that arose at the local high school. The pastors reached out to them and met to try to understand their views, which were less "inclusive" and accepting than what is taught and practiced at the Chapel. I know that the pastors also frequently meet with the pastors/rabbis of other local churches/synagogues. The Chapel contributes both time and money to a diverse local organizations that serve people in need: The Aspen Homeless Shelter, veterans (through music therapy), people dealing with grief, the deaf, youth in general and people who were the victims of tragedies such as the local fires.

I have only been a part of the chapel family for a short time, but I recall learning about partnerships the Chapel has with churches in [other parts of the country

The chapel's grounds are used for different denominational church services- e.g. Catholic mass and Spanish-language church services. Young Life youth program promoted despite possible theological/ideological differences. Different styles of prayer used, e.g. prayers of the people, moments of silence, closing prayers, and open out loud prayers. Music is diverse-contemporary worship, traditional hymns, Christian classical works etc. Clergy join other clergy in our valley for meetings. Outreach with other churches and non-profits for local issues.

Snowmass Chapel includes and involves members of other churches and denominations in programs. In addition, the chapel welcomes anyone interested in community, without requiring adherence to a set of beliefs.

By meeting with other church leadership. By hosting and welcoming other clergy at Snowmass chapel.

Ecumenical work has been prevalent in Aspen/Snowmass for decades including: guest preaching; the Christmas wish baskets, and the labyrinth.

No. I'm sure SMC does ecumenical work; however, the activities I've witnessed are SMC oriented.

The Chapel in its history opened its doors to other churches to conduct worship services, for example, St. Mary Catholic Church, The Church of God and Prophecy, and the Aspen Jewish Congregation. Welcome guest ministers to conduct weddings and funerals. The Chapel in the past participated in Young Life to offer options to teens to connect. The two Pastors have traveled to other churches to conduct services when asked. The Chapel has hosted the Fund for Interfaith Understanding Symposium.

I am most familiar with the Chapel's work with a valleywide clergy gathering that has met monthly for well over seven years now and for being a founding member of Mountain Voices Project [community organizing]. Snowmass Chapel is clearly a leading partner in supporting ecumenism and doing so with a generous spirit with its financial and human resources.

To me, Snowmass Chapel, as a melding of interdenominational attendees, is by that very nature 'internally' ecumenical - blending diverse worship styles, biblical resources and scriptural interpretations, and welcoming congregants that may be actively affiliated with other churches (i.e. seasonal members, visitors). Upon occasion the Chapel invites pastors of different denominations to lead worship and preach. Going beyond Chapel doors, I see ecumenism in the Chapel opening up bible & book studies to all interested parties, regardless of denomination or location, providing worship & community space for other local Christian churches and collaborating with them on valley-wide programs like Holiday Baskets and the Mountain Voices Project. Also, SC's Outreach Committee seeks to financially support other Christian ministries and their efforts.

*Section II Intro:* There are several practical approaches to unity, including: receptive, kenotic and spiritual ecumenism. The following 5 questions relate specifically to these three approaches.

2. **“Receptive ecumenism” encourages Christians to move away from trying to convert other Christians to our denominational beliefs and practices, and instead ask what we can learn – or *receive* -- from the Other. Keeping in mind that Snowmass Chapel is an inter-denominational church, what practices can you point to that are specifically mindful of receiving or learning from the other?**

Inviting folks from other churches to their reading groups and bible studies and treating them respectfully for their views. Being very mindful in preaching of the diversity that exists within the congregation and promoting "crossover" thinking and grace in sermons.

Translating scripture through personal, family stories, including faith traditions of different cultures, Hispanic, Black/African, Native American, Asian, Hindu. Translating scripture through World and U.S history. Education through music and how music through 'the ages' inspires Unity, especially through harmonic melodies, rhythms.

The basic tradition of the Sunday worship is similar to an Episcopalian mass.

Small Groups, Bible study groups, book study groups and Centering Prayer group: providing a container where we each can reflect and share our histories with

others, and listen to the unique histories of our 'neighbors'. I believe the small groups of Snowmass Chapel are particularly diverse, not bound by the need to be a regular attendee of the Chapel. I think this network of people who participate in these gatherings really grew over the pandemic, when the boundary of physical proximity to the group meeting place was removed.

Communion is open to all believers versus having to believe one certain way.

I'm not sure? Learning and working with other parishes.

The pastoral staff reaches out to other churches to understand their beliefs, sometimes very different from our own.

Guest speakers, guest musicians, Women's Bible Study that has a diverse group of church backgrounds.

The Snowmass Chapel is so welcoming! There are various ministries that serve our community and the Chapel asks for nothing in return. The Chapel welcomes these community members into a safe space, and/or serves them through support, and does not require membership or project any sort of expectation. I think they meet you where you are, which promotes a very accepting environment.

Attitudes of staff seem receptive and understanding of different denominations. Open communion and welcoming all to the lord's table. Different versions of the Bible used for readings. Different biblical interpretations presented. Also, the use of thematic preaching seems unifying.

Services, staff and church-goers are LGBTQ inclusive, church leaders offer book study [in addition to] bible study, other groups meet on church property, and church leaders support the work of community members who involved in non-church networks (Veterans Aid, food banks, etc.) to better serve and connect to the local community.

Bible studies. Inter-denominational panel discussions in the past.

All I see at SMC is common worship in a "non-denominational" way. To me the focus is on God and Jesus, not a particular branch viz Methodist, Lutheran, Evangelical, etc.

Our lack of membership, which, while confusing for those that need to belong, permits people to hold onto their own denominational beliefs and still be a part of the Chapel. We also have a varied leadership team with varied denominational foundations.

I've never sensed that the Chapel was in any way geared to convert anyone. It is clearly a non-judgmental and welcoming space which incorporates practices from many traditions.

Small group studies that enable participants to hear different perspectives. seasonal rituals like the Easter agape dinner or hanging of the greens that bring different people together. the encouraging of personal connections, and offering opportunities to do so like the much-loved post-service coffee klatch, newcomers meetings, group activities. The welcome & other videos from the wide range of attendees speaking about what is important to them, or what the Chapel means to them. Personal testimonies (like motivations for stewardship) that have been shared by congregants in worship services and other communal activities over the years.

I believe that we must listen to one another. James 1:19

- 3. "Receptive ecumenism" seeks to enrich and deepen faith through learning across traditions. Considering things like liturgy, physical space, hymns, prayers, language, and others, in what ways do you see Snowmass Chapel engaging in cross-denominational (or inter-religious) practices?**

The liturgy is broad, traditional, and consistent. It seems mainly drawn from the Anglican tradition where liturgy was used to unite Catholics and Protestants and it

still works. Physical space, decor, and music has traditional roots but modern presentation. Music deliberately blends traditional hymns with worship and somewhat secular tunes and classical. Prayers are purposeful in encouraging grace and unity. I find the unity rewarding, but for some it may be eating mashed potatoes and missing spicy Thai.

Recreation activities, hiking, fishing, skiing, camping.

Basic Sunday worship as well as traditions around the holidays are similar to other places of worship.

Communion invitation: "All are welcome at this, our Lord's table". We have shared the physical Chapel space with other denominations and faiths. Our worship music selection is broad - a mix of traditional hymns, modern/contemporary music, instrumental music, folk music; offers opportunity to experience God through many different cultural and generational traditions. Certainly, the scripture is engaged with by using various versions of the Bible for Scripture reading. Hearing the Word read by members of the congregation makes it more alive and relatable; and then often the sermon talks about the original language and how that would have been heard by the people of the time. The 3-4 part-series interfaith online women's gathering that we did last year led by several Christian and Jewish leaders was so wonderful. A real 'boots

on the ground' way to engage intentionally with women of different faith backgrounds.

Worship service has the same order every Sunday but prayers come from varied sources, music also comes from many sources, musicians are varied in their music selections, Creeds and Doctrines [from the shared Christian history].

Summer camps that include all children no matter their religion.

The Snowmass Chapel frequently opens its spaces (chapel, yurt, grounds) to other organizations for the overall good of the community. What I value is that the Chapel staff's first thought when asked for something is "Yes" -- not looking for reasons not to do it.

Incorporation of prayers, readings from other traditions. I would enjoy celebrations of Jewish traditions to learn from them and build bonds with the local Jewish community.

I come from a Catholic background and I appreciate the liturgical elements that come from the Catholic mass in the Chapel's services. For me, the music is what creates space in the worship for inter-religious practices. There are hymns but there is a variety of spiritual and reflective music throughout the service. I guess another

element is the 10:30 service being held outside in summer and in the yurt in the winter. I like that too - it creates an opportunity to worship God outside the traditional walls of a church, which is open-minded and again, creates that welcoming space.

Sermons relate cultural and social issues from ancient times and people to modern times and people. Hymns and prayers have modern lyrics that are people/family and love-oriented, not just Glory to God. Church space is available to non-religious groups who meet to create community. I appreciate that sermons remind us that Jesus was a Jew, countering any nuance of anti-Semitism. During the pandemic, our associate pastor hosted an online series of discussions with a panel of inter-denominational women leaders.

I know in the past the chapel has opened the sanctuary to Catholic Mass and Hispanic worship services.

Not sure because I'm not certain of what the other religious practices/beliefs are. I just know that SMC is very welcoming and doesn't question/limit my viewpoints.

The liturgical pattern of our services is familiar to people from Mainline Protestant churches, including the Lord's prayer. The call for communion that all are

"welcome at the Lord's table, is a key statement on the unconditional welcome the Chapel embodies. We also use various translations of Bible readings and a mixture of hymns to make our worship services welcoming, but not asking for a conversion to partake.

I'm a Catholic, and the liturgy feels familiar and accessible, while incorporating more inclusive practices, particularly for women in leadership.

Snowmass Chapel's encouragement of 'come as you are' means that each person can feel comfortable showing and sharing their true self with others, and this includes worship preference. While the order of service is fairly consistent, the elements within show a wide range of prayers, bibles, and music, and a mix of service styles (traditional in sanctuary, relaxed in the yurt, the mountain services, etc.) are regularly offered. My worship is rooted in the rituals of Roman Catholicism and I feel that the Chapel does an excellent job of combining the sacred with the contemporary. I also believe that many of the Chapel's activities mentioned for question #1 are relevant here too.

Inviting musicians to share their music on Sunday mornings

- 4. "Kenotic ecumenism" is the idea that we "empty ourselves" as Christ did in order to meet people where they are, looking not at our own self-interest but to the interests of others. It can be easy to accept difference in others when**

**we see something of beauty in their practice, but this was not the way Christ operated. He regularly mixed with people who were viewed as anything but beautiful and who had little in common with the majority. In your experience, is there anything in Snowmass Chapel's overall culture that either demonstrates or teaches "kenotic ecumenism" (i.e., meeting people where they are)? Have you seen this done well in other church settings? If so, where and what?**

I think this is a function of ministry leaders and staff. I have found that these folks are probably on the "liberal" side (love as expressed in inclusiveness and mercy?) versus the "conservative side" (love as not avoiding "difficult" biblical "truths" and fearing judgement). Yet there remains a very strong purpose of loving and including the "conservative" without needing to correct.

I have practiced 'kenotic ecumenism' through expanding and exploring my own faith and beliefs from being part of SMC. I am mostly aware of opportunities, a chance (a gift) to 'love thy neighbor' in Snowmass Village community and neighborhood. Including versus excluding. Helping, lending a hand, versus excluding and judging. I have seen and experienced 'kenotic ecumenism done well, at yoga retreats and team sports.

Definitely! Snowmass Chapel welcomes all people, no matter where they live or what they might have done. There is also outreach for those in need from all types of struggles.

Our church leaders are intentional about welcoming diverse perspectives that are often divisive in the world: political, gender, cultural, racial, physical ability, etc; framing the mix as healthy vs. one perspective right and the other wrong. Differences are celebrated rather than trying to mold everyone into the same shape. Diverse issues are acknowledged formally during worship services, like Veterans Day, Gay Ski Week, foreign wars, and prayers to come alongside people of all faiths who are suffering from evil (shootings in synagogues, mosques, churches, schools, festivals, shopping malls...these awful things aren't watered down, swept under the rug, or one form made more important than the others, but rather all equally acknowledged and held up). Prayers always separate the evil behavior from the person.

Kids learning something from adults and adults learning something from kids. Such as: writing a letter to grandparents, knitting/painting, telling a story. Then adults could learn how to use a phone to take photos, use the computer to play games. Play board or card games (teams could be a young person and an older person). Could even teach the young people to be greeters at church.

Steven Ministry program where trained participants meet with people who are struggling

I value the Chapel's inclusive policy immensely. In fact, it is one very important reason that I became very involved with it. I was brought up in a very "exclusive" church where it seemed that they looked for every reason to exclude people. Heaven was meant only for people of that particular religion and synod (a small and lonely place). You even had to "register" for communion prior to taking on Sunday. The Chapel not only receives, but welcomes, people from all backgrounds, beliefs and ways of living. They offer communion to everyone regardless of where they have been in their lives. It is a warm, receiving and sharing culture that I value greatly and have never seen to that extent in another church.

I feel that Snowmass Chapel sincerely welcomes everyone to worship. The invitation to take communion is open to all. I have not seen any judgment from the staff at the Chapel. They have created a safe space that welcomes all and encourages people to nurture their faith journey.

Yes, I totally feel that way. The leadership at the chapel welcomes everyone. This question reminded me of what is said at communion, when the presider says, "all are welcome at this, our Lord's table." I love that aspect of the service since I came from a church background where this was not the case. I think meeting people where they are shows respect for the individual and does not guilt them into feeling a certain way or an obligation. I don't know if I can comment if this has been done well

in other church settings in my experience. The chapel really is special when it comes to this.

Youth program attracts different types of kids. I think kids/teens are evidence of not always enjoying mingling with people different than themselves. Not sure if these differences are religious in nature, yet similar idea, possibly. My own kids struggle in these settings. Also, not sure someone who may be ultra conservative or ultra liberal politically/religiously would mix well at the chapel. Those who hold very strong beliefs or values, would obviously not like the idea that their way is not the only way. I do think preaching love over ideologies is really key, but not the way many Christians practice.

Church leaders are very engaged in hosting gatherings such as workshops to groups outside the church, ladies lunches and outings, book discussion groups (a nice change from bible study), and similar events. Bringing musicians and music from different traditions and backgrounds helps build a sense of common ground/common concerns and purpose. On a side note but maybe relevant, the chapel bulletin adapted well to meet people who felt isolated during the pandemic. Funny memes and cartoons about social distancing were especially relatable - meeting people where they are.

Our chapel has done very well and welcomed many people with disabilities including Challenge Aspen summer camps on the chapel property. Our outreach committee addresses mission work, assisting homeless, and so many other needs.

SMC's leadership is one of warm, welcome, to everyone, setting a tone of love and beauty in Christ's name, the opposite of judgmental.

This is a tricky question; the staff is very good at meeting people where they are. Routinely people come to us with their struggles, and we walk along beside and assist where we can. I need to be more confident in our congregational greeters, while well-intentioned, may not meet people where they are. I have not seen it done any better.

I don't have enough experience to answer this fully, as well as some of the next questions. I have found the Chapel's community to be friendly and welcoming.

SC's mantra is love God and love people without exception, without reservations. To me, that acceptance says kenotic ecumenism is in SC's DNA. Prior to attending SC I was a member of [a church] that is like a larger version of Snowmass Chapel. They actively partnered with international churches & church schools, local street-based missions, food banks, and other local churches to offer a really wide range of volunteer and service opportunities, and had a membership that was more

active in hands-on volunteering & service. would love to find a way to inspire more hands-on volunteers at the Chapel.

To me, Snowmass Chapel is extremely welcoming and inclusive.

5. **“Kenotic ecumenism” can mean a wide variety of religious, political and social beliefs coming together in one church home, which can sometimes cause conflict. How have you seen Snowmass Chapel’s leadership and/or congregation members handle this conflict effectively and/or ineffectively? Please give examples if you can, but please do NOT use any identifying information out of respect.**

So far in my experience this has been done very effectively. From what I can tell, there is a very, very broad range of beliefs and politics in the congregation - but it doesn't seem to become the defining issues.

SMC leadership and congressional members express differences and likes, through effective civil conversations. With respect, open minds, open mindsets to different perspectives. Which facilitates growth and education.

Certainly, I've seen people with very different political backgrounds come together in a beautiful way at our church. Honestly - I think it's wonderful that I

know both pastors and their families quite well, and I don't know what political party you affiliate with!! The pandemic certainly brought out a lot of trigger points between varying schools of thought - communion was a hot topic, gathering, masks, etc., but it seemed to be handled with great respect even when frustrations ran high. I think perhaps something that is not done well at our church, that is done well at some other churches, is outreach to the significant Latino population in our valley. This is a challenge, in that not many at our church speak Spanish. I suppose this is not a huge issue because many Latinos are Catholic (and I think it's the Catholic Churches that do the best job with reaching out to this community), but aside from a few specific people, I don't really see many of this population at our church even though they are a huge part of our community.

There are times when political examples or point of view is mentioned in a sermon. There are other times when leadership makes an extra effort to disavow any political stance or point of view. Being able to stay neutral politically or socially is a challenge. Using examples that are politically or socially charged derails the message.

The pastors are not "political" in their sermons and are clear that is inappropriate. They often say correctly that the congregation is made up of diverse people across all dimensions. This is important in setting a tone of equity and clarity that politics is not the realm of the church. That being said, certain social values, such

as inclusion are with the realm of the church. It is a fine line and Snowmass Chapel does it extremely well.

A story related to a video that another local church group posted against the gay community. The Chapel met with the other church to discuss.

I don't have too much experience with this one, other than I recall discussing this at the welcome dinner. Leadership mentioned that all are welcome at the chapel and no one is turned away due to their political, religious, or social beliefs. I don't know if I can provide any examples on this one as I have not experienced conflict at the chapel surrounding these issues.

A most current and more vocal issue is the LGBTQ. More education and communication needs to be shared [about potentially divisive issues]. These topics have been silenced for the majority of people.

The leadership does a great job of appearing to be neutral in their personal beliefs and keeping the focus on love and faith and goodwill.

Some come from a position of the way it used to be, which just is the way it used to be for them (their denominational history). This nostalgia can damage personal growth and put up barriers to newcomers seeking the love and hospitality

Jesus calls us to provide. The leadership will make themselves available to listen to someone's stories, understand their fears, and share the Chapel's perspective.

From the pulpit, I hear SC's leadership address division and encourage unity regularly. I have seen differences of opinion but happily I have not personally seen or experienced serious schism or conflict at the Chapel.

6. **“Spiritual ecumenism” is the prayerful practice of opening our hearts and minds to see what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches today, including our own. Have you seen this kind of discernment at Snowmass Chapel? If so, please explain and cite examples if you are able.**

I believe the prayers, sermons, and music reflect this belief. I hear it - but not always sure I feel it. While welcomed, I'm not sure how receptive many are in the congregation to "experiencing" the presence of the Holy spirit in a corporate setting. Might be a bit too out there?

SMC opens minds and hearts through youth programs(many), book club, music direction, women's groups, mental health work [and having a ministry mindset in all administrative and other work]. These and many more are living examples how together WE can open minds and hearts.

Yes - the leaders at Snowmass Chapel always show evidence from the outside world to showcase the reading for that week. There is often a video, song, story or photographs to make these types of connections.

Centering Prayer. This is exactly what it's all about, and I love that Snowmass Chapel embraces it with a small group. This is also the goal of the Meditation walk [on the Chapel grounds]. Open to all who come upon our grounds, and that is broad when you think of all the non-faith-based groups that use our grounds.

Seems like the leadership of the Chapel attempt to discern the path Snowmass Chapel should follow. In years past, more was heard about the leadership studying or working to develop the path. Silent time after the prayer during worship so people can reflect provides the space for discernment.

No. I don't spend that much time at the chapel. There are many sitting spaces by the river for contemplation. I think the Holy Spirit is in nature.

In general, the Snowmass Chapel, led by its pastoral staff, is constantly reminding people to be open and accepting.

Yes, I think this is present when we have silent prayer, recited prayer, worship through music, and prayers of the people. I believe the Holy Spirit is mentioned during the service as well.

I'm not sure. Use of contemplative prayer may be an example.

If the Holy Spirit is guiding churches to serve people and build community and welcome otherness, Snowmass Chapel is doing a good job. Church staff is representative of unity and diversity, as much as it can be. Kids programs, summer

camp, family-and community- oriented activities are an integral part of 'work' in the Snowmass Chapel.

In these last two years, our society and our chapel are learning more and more about mental health. Our congregation continues to learn about the depression and suicides that challenge our community.

The teachings of SMC reflect God and Jesus and thus the Holy Spirit too.

Yes, the world is constantly loudly making a point; taking the time to listen quietly to the voice inside is imperative. We are asked at the end of every service to do this – “As you cross this bridge and go out into the world, know that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ goes with you...” (the benediction).

I hear prayers of discernment at every service ("Open our lips and speak through them, may our hearts burn with love...", etc.). Leadership keeps spiritual discernment top-of-mind in all planning and decision-making.

I believe that's what occurred when it was decided that the 10:30AM service would continue throughout the Winter of 2022.

**7. A real risk in working toward unity through ecumenical work is that it becomes a special interest group within the church that involves only a few people. In your view, how can churches involve the entire congregation in learning and in dialogue with Christians who think differently about theology, liturgy and doctrine?**

Ooof. This is tough. I've been in so many churches, tried in leadership to promote this, and don't have a really good example of it turning out well. It's a huge change management task to 1) get people to believe this is of value versus feeding their own spiritual comfort and salvation zone 2) have them elevate unity on a few key beliefs and behaviors above all others 3) go through the discomfort and loss of fear of learning other views. I think it starts with clergy and leadership committing to this concept above all others then having the creativity and perseverance to see it through.

Providing, inviting all offering opportunities to 'know one another" through social activities.

Have a social gathering with people from other churches, or hold discussion groups.

Probably best done by example and by intention. Meaning leaders of the church meet with leaders of other churches. Intentionally create ways to meet each other via different programs, like the women's meeting last Spring, but also like you do with [local community organizing groups] to solve community issues. Many

perspectives broaden the idea base for solving problems, and when held in an open-minded and accepting way, it sets the stage for good things to grow.

Book or Bible study groups. Seems like a couple of years ago there was sharing with other youth group from churches [nearby].

Open communication and transparency. Welcome all to learn more.

Through the sermons and other informational outlets such as the newsletter people can learn about the latest thinking as well as local ways they can become involved with people outside of the Chapel helping others in the valley, whether Christians or not. Focusing on relationships rather than specific theology or doctrine (and differences therein) is very important. We are more the same than we are different.

I struggle with this because if I honestly examine my own heart, I'm not sure I want to dialogue with some sectors of the Christian church right now. I am still struggling to disconnect from the rigid, judgmental Fundamentalism I grew up with so I have intentionally tried to create space from that perspective. That said, I always find value in learning something from others with another perspective. The only tactical suggestion would be to have evenings that are devoted to bringing in representatives from different churches to discuss Biblical interpretations.

I think talking about it at the church service and making the congregation aware of this dialogue is important. In other words, educating the congregation and then seeking out feedback in ways that work for the congregation. Some people may need to be approached after the service and have discussions that way, while others may have an interest in working in a group. Or maybe forming small groups of people within the congregation would be effective for some of the initial discussions. Surveys may also be a tool used to involve a wider range of the congregation.

Maybe allowing others to pick their own prayers, liturgy, version of scripture etc. when volunteering to read?

Avoid any semblance of a political agenda as part of the church doctrine. The best practices of a church are less about theology and more about community, human beings trying to be good neighbors who are kind, compassionate, and generous with their time, talents and money.

I believe we need to continue to build a strong middle and high school program. We need to give these students confirmation in a firm foundation that will guide them when they leave home for school and work. This should include the chapel community giving support by attending their events.

Seems that SMC should just be itself, believe in what it does and stand "tall" for that regardless of whomever SMC, or its congregants, are interacting with. Part of this is the inherent "respect" that each congregant needs to reflect in his or her actions and words.

I don't know how to make this work. I would say the simplest way to start is with social activities and small groups. When we did small groups, it was an excellent beginning to bring people of diverse backgrounds together to discuss the meaning and points of the sermon from the previous week. However, by its very name, "small groups," it can defeat the purpose. Also, having lay leaders of these groups perhaps limited true ecumenical work.

Ongoing cultivation of personal relationships among members goes a long way. I have found that the Chapel's leaders will extend themselves also in an interfaith way and appreciate non-Christian traditions.

Focus on the commonalities, and differences become less important. Regarding involving the entire congregation in learning and dialogue, I recommend a little market research! perhaps tackle that question head-on in a service or a newsletter poll and get a sense of the kinds of different tactics that would work within the congregation? Will need different strokes for different folks.

Keep the lines of communication open! Invite the congregation as a whole to attend leadership meetings when appropriate.

- 8. We see many divisions in our culture today -- political, social, religious. What practices would you like to see Snowmass Chapel introduce (or continue) in order to promote more unity and acceptance amid diversity?**

Encouraging get-togethers and sharing. Providing education of just how all these Christian traditions and theology beliefs have "evolved" in very human - not spiritual or biblical terms. Emphasizing areas of agreement which is often mercy ministries. Continue to model and promote these values in clergy and staff behavior.

Many young people have much, but not much love. Provide, teach interactive life coaching activities, that teach 'teamwork and fun' inclusive for all.

Maybe offer more service trips to places around the world

Continue to operate in an affirming approach. Continue to welcome diversity as an opportunity, not a problem. Perhaps we could look into the idea of opportunities to learn more about other world religions - seeking to understand others, as we continue to deepen our own faith?

Continue services on the mountain during the winter. Continue dinners for everyone in Snowmass Village. Think there were special times for mothers with children [from throughout the community] to come to the Chapel. An opportunity to work on parenting or have something on Friday or Saturday night for kids while the parents have a couple of hours to do something. As there are more "aging" adults it might be nice to offer during the restorative yoga or something to bring them to the chapel during the day.

Build something the community needs together. Community garden. Try community Christmas caroling in the employee housing areas.

I think the Chapel does an excellent job of this. I think we need to remain a pillar organization that practices and promotes unity and acceptance amid diversity. I think we need to relish our diversity (and think we do) and continue to model it for the community (which I also think we do). I don't think we need to "preach it" per se. I think what people say can mean more than what people hear.

Create a space where politics are off the table for discussion. Let us get to know new people in an environment that doesn't include those topics so we see how much we have in common. We are going to be together in heaven so we better get along on earth!

Guest speakers? Book suggestions? Podcast ideas? Service trip?

Maybe have different pastors come to preach a few times a year with different backgrounds. Maybe a group study on unity. Somehow use the diversified gifts and different beliefs of each individual to the benefit of the whole. Encourage humility.

Small group gatherings that meet for a series of 3 or 6 weeks can go a long way to promote unity and acceptance. In another church, I participated in a group that met to share God-moments - stories we shared to observe how God showed up in the midst of a hard time. God was given another name, aka the Great Surprise. Anyone who couldn't relate to God could think of "God showing up" in a new way and the more this happened, the stories became funnier and more memorable.

SMC's mantra of "Love God, Love People" comes through clear in the sermons, and the diversity of the people who work at SMC.

I think the Chapel has to continue to say and live by our actions, the words of Matthew's Gospel. Someone said it is hard to hate up close, and by our very presence together, we are mending even small tears.

Perhaps work through community organizing and other outreach for getting to know communities of different income levels and ethnicities.

With the loving attitude of church leadership and staff, and those messages reinforced in our worship services (in both prayers, sermons, pre-communion announcement, etc. ), I feel that SC already does an excellent job of promoting unity, acceptance and diversity. One additional idea would be to identify local churches & worship services to 'exchange' congregants with in both hosting and visiting. We have guest musicians, why not guest Christians? (Not that they would have to perform!) Or arrange a field trip for congregants to see how other churches worship & think?

**9. Do you believe we could make progress as a society (in relationships, politics, culture, religion) by practicing ecumenism as it is described above? Please explain.**

Yes, yes and yes. I think the vast majority of humans see the trends of polarization on all levels as evil and destructive - but don't seem to have the tools to battle it. They don't see institutions in any leadership areas - government, religion, medicine, music - battling it.

It's my belief practicing ecumenism begins with family. Sometimes, as we all know and have experienced life's ups and downs. This might mean calling to action, 'struggle love'. Such as having to make do with less to make it through tough times. Less is more. Reaching out and supporting brothers and sisters, neighbors and co-workers. Friends and enemies. Sometimes it's as simple as sharing a smile with a

passerby, a stranger. It's about practicing 'WE rather than ME'. Poetically speaking, just where is this 'musical piece of humanity' going? Shall WE compose discord versus harmony? Or shall in this piece of music, the discord lead us back to harmony?

Similar to the ebb and flows of dynamic tides in the seas.

Yes! Anything can help in today's acrimonious world.

Gosh, yes. I think an open-minded faith-based approach is a powerful way to change the world for the better.

Think we have to try. Jesus showed us the way.

Yes! I love this. I think this open-minded approach of collective learning will bring people like me in. I don't like it when religions feel their way is the only way. It's not kind to think that way. Jerseys would never have been that way.

Yes. I think as a society/world we need to stop all of the current divisiveness and look at what a wondrous country and world we have. Indeed we are all different and the goal is not to make us the same; it is to value and respect others and to be valued and respected in return.

Yes. But it will have to happen in small circles first and be a grass roots effort. The media is stoking the fire of divisiveness and without intention it won't happen.

Yes, of course I believe we could make progress. To become more unified, we need to understand our differences. To understand differences, we need to talk about them and become educated on the what's and the why's and come to a place where we respect those differences.

Yes, in theory. I haven't put much thought into it before today in terms of ecumenism. I'm curious how individual's/groups' values can be maintained in such a wide-open space. Is unity more important than an individual's values? Or, is conflict, while upsetting, unavoidable? Most likely, the more unified groups will be made up of those who aren't polarized and convicted strongly in one direction. From what I know of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, they are not "one way" but would still love all of the ideological folks out there.

Yes, I believe we can all find something to relate to in another....even the despots leading nations into war and impoverishing the nation and their people. I love the story at the end of the book *White Fragility*, when Robin D'Angelo needs a repairman for her boiler and the guy who shows up is wearing a MAGA hat. She immediately makes a judgment about him, and assumes he does the same about her

as a black woman. She mentions losing her mother and the repairman had recently lost his mother, and they meet as equals in their shared grief.

I believe that listening instead of making judgements without all the facts is instrumental in healing our country. We are all at different stages of our faith journey. We need to love and encourage with joyful noise instead of criticism.

To me, there's no resolution of relationship, political or cultural divides that will occur at any Church, nor should there be. I'm there to worship God and Jesus and share that journey with those who want the same. The attempt to resolve the other issues is out of place and likely only interferes with the enjoyment of unity at SMC.

Absolutely, when we spend time together and hear each other's stories, we can find our commonality. Once we understand we are more alike than different, we can put our fears aside and build on the common.

Day to day practices of relating to others and find ways to talk or work on common projects.

If I understand ecumenism as a Christian concept then what I first and foremost believe to make progress in society is to build every Christian denomination and that can be done both individually and collectively. what I think we might be able and indeed are trying to do now is activate Christians to a deeper level of actively living their beliefs.

Yes. I believe that Snowmass Chapel's willingness to be an open door, community-friendly hub radiates [throughout the broader community].

**10. What drew you to Snowmass Chapel, and what specific elements of the service continue to draw you in?**

Personal relationships with clergy. Personal friends. Comfort with service, liturgy, message.

The fact that the Chapel is built on an old Colorado Western Slope Homestead Ranch. Anderson Ranch, Snowmass Village CO. Sunday services are the same services I experienced with my family [as a child]. Sermons of stories, interpretations of scripture, each service has continuity of theme, sermon, music, inclusive greetings. The [scripture readings] of the Bible are very relevant to current times and events. History repeats itself.

Non denomination, non-judging, interesting, relevant, humorous and welcoming.

The fact that Snowmass Chapel is an affirming Christian family. I didn't know the word 'affirming' before I came to Snowmass Chapel, but I did know that THAT was what I was looking for, as honoring the basic Divine nature in every person.

It was the only worship service in Snowmass Village. I continue to come because of the ministers and the people.

The ministers. The more welcoming and laidback vibe. Casual.

The friendliness, the culture, the inclusiveness, the music, the elegant simplicity, and the recognition of the beauty of nature and how important that is in our lives.

The energy and environment of acceptance and grace. I love the few minutes of centering prayer [every week before worship begins]. And of course the messages are great!

I was drawn to the Snowmass Chapel due to its inclusive and welcoming nature. The main aspect that kept us coming back was the church service itself, with an interest in the liturgical elements of the service. We also appreciate having a female associate pastor, the outreach to our community, and the opportunities for our children.

Women in leadership, inclusive, outreach programs and youth program.

The staff, it's not just male. I like having a woman as pastor, I like the warmth and inclusiveness of congregation and staff. I recently went to Mass at the Catholic Church and while it more progressive than it was in my youth, they still use [exclusively] altar boys! That said, there were several homeless people attending Mass, and one man smelled bad. Nobody made a fuss, they were welcome to Mass and welcomed to coffee afterward.

Familiar music, friendly and welcoming people, activities such as potluck dinners, Bible studies, and fundraising events for the chapel.

Came because it was close to home, and stayed because of pastors.

My husband and I were seeking a church home with a liturgical service and an outward focus on service to others. Finding a church that made you feel better when you left, as well as provoking deeper conversations about the topic, was essential to us. We liked the diversity of the music, the friendliest of the people, and the pastors.

The clergy have been incredibly open and accessible to someone like myself, clearly an outsider to the area. That was my first step to getting to know the Chapel.

Firstly, the intimacy and simplicity of the worship space, I feel God there. Then, the stimulating preaching. Finally, the wonderful, loving people (both staff and fellow congregants). I look forward each week to hearing God's word read aloud, the sermons, and traditional hymns, as well as seeing friends and others.

Our neighbor shared elements from a very moving sermon she'd heard and when we felt it was time to find a new church, I remembered the sweet story my neighbor had told me and so we decided to visit Snowmass Chapel. We've not been anywhere else.

**11. On a scale of 1 -10, in your personal experience, how easy or difficult is it to be ecumenical? Please explain.**

If ten is easy then 0. It has taken me years and many church experiences in very diverse congregations. Making a fool of myself by being overly judgmental and not open to learning in all. Realizing how hard this is to do and how far I still need to go. I'm also finding that right wing politics, and "evangelical" churches terribly discouraging. I was a republican, I was an "evangelical", but now I feel betrayed and hurt by both. Finding my way to a better "rock" and strength for understanding so I can go back to those I have left is a real challenge. That's on a personal level - and if I can't do it personally it's tough to promote outwardly. I think I gave the challenges

institutionally above. But my faith is centered on these values, and that God has an answer He desperately wants for His children. Time to seek, trust, and persevere.

Thanks for the opportunity to share.

Ten. Truly, it's a gift to wake each day and explore, invite, contribute, include, learn, practice, share, whatever each day's adventure brings. Are you ready for adventure?

5 - life is busy - it is hard to put church first with kids, work, and other obligations.

Quite simple, but not easy. Meaning on the surface we are called to love our neighbor, but in reality that involves a constant intention to be aware of our differences, and respect others for where they are while we love them for who they are (that's a 9/10 on the difficulty scale, because we're wired to rally together with those most like us and fear those that are different.....a curious thing). I noticed the horses in the pasture behind our house the other day - there are about 10 beige ones, and 10 black ones. The beige ones were all huddled together, and the black ones were all together in a different area. It struck me that animals do that naturally, and as humans we do too. But humans have a unique God-given ability to use our brain to move beyond that, and he is pretty specific that he intended us to use our brains to do just that. I think without our prefrontal cortex leading us, we will be like the horses

and naturally separate ourselves. But God calls us to honor ourselves while we honor others, and look for the things that connect us to the bigger plan.

Depends on the day. In an unknown setting, it feels risky so I would say 2. If I feel like it is a safe environment it is easier so an 8. If I stop and remember what Jesus expects, it is easier so an 8.

10 easy. Just be open hearted and love.

10 for me -- it's easy. But for many it's a struggle -- and I respect that. I think it's important to recognize just how difficult it is for some people and organizations to change or be accepting. We must be aware it can feel like a threat, not an invitation.

Assuming 1 is easy and 10 is difficult; I'd say an 8. It's easy to do on the surface but harder to do in relationships. I attended an event and politics came up and the person I was talking to had very different politics than I do and I found myself pulling away and moving to another small group to talk to. She's my sister in Christ and I judged her. I'm not proud of that. It is really hard.

7 - I enjoy learning about different viewpoints, beliefs, thoughts. While some may bring me out of my comfort zone, it is important to learn about differences so I can better understand the world around me. I like to remind myself of that when I

have discomfort, because when we learn from others that are different than us, that is when we grow and produce positive change.

6. I appreciate others' differences until they they're too different because I can't truly relate at that point.

As much as I think of myself as non-judgmental, being inclusive of all is difficult and can be painful. I would score a 5 because it's hard for me to be compassionate toward intolerance, and hard to be close to the indigent. I was recently in downtown Denver and the homelessness was devastating to see. I pushed myself to say hello and look people in the eye as we waited to cross the street. Still, I couldn't wait to get out of there; I felt helpless and hopeless.

Because we are all at different stages in our faith journey, we need to love and not judge others so quickly. We haven't walked in their shoes. We are not perfect. Jesus came into our lives to fill the gap to perfect whatever number we choose on the scale.

Difficult given today's political divide. Sadly politics divides people deeply in today's environment, and therefore the only way to genuinely and happily co-exist is to form relationships based on something other than politics, or at least focus on that other common ground, which of course for SMC is God and Jesus.

I would say a 7. I struggle with the big picture anger and exclusiveness, but [I have learned] to be ecumenical.

8

As I'm not 100% confident in my interpretation of ecumenism I'll say 9.3. I strive to be loving, curious and accepting of whomever I meet. I love to learn and gain wisdom and the only way to do so is to expose oneself to as much as possible, then use our God-given filter to prioritize. I give the Chapel 9.8 for its ecumenical efforts to date.

6 - In theory, it should be fairly easy because of all the examples that surround us and with the Bible as our guide. The Snowmass Chapel does a nearly perfect job being ecumenical.

## Bibliography

- Abraham, William J. "Method in Ecumenism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan, 630-643. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Afanasiev, Nicolas. "Una Sancta." In *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in our Time: Readings from the Eastern Church*, edited by Michael Plekon, 3-30. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.
- Aoanan, Melanio L. "#WCC70: Educating Pastors for Ecumenical Leadership for the 21st Century." World Council of Churches. <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc70-educating-pastors-for-ecumenical-leadership-for-the-21st-century>.
- Aspen Institute. "Weave: The Social Fabric Project." Aspen Institute. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative/> (accessed May 15, 2022).
- Augustine, Jonathan C. *Called to Reconciliation: How the Church Can Model Justice, Diversity, and Inclusion*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022.
- Ayres, Lewis. *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Berlatsky, Noah. "Georgia candidate's 'Jesus Guns Babies' tagline is a Christian nationalist parody — but it's real." *NBC News*, May 24, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/georgias-kandiss-taylors-jesus-guns-babies-sign-clear-christian-nation-rcna30331>.
- Bishop, Bill. *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2009.
- Brooks, Arthur C. *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from Our Culture of Contempt*. New York, NY: Broadside Books, 2019.
- Brooks, David. "The Lies Our Culture Tells Us About What Matters -- and a Better Way to Live." TED Talk. [https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_brooks\\_the\\_lies\\_our\\_culture\\_tells\\_us\\_about\\_what\\_matters\\_and\\_a\\_better\\_way\\_to\\_live?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_brooks_the_lies_our_culture_tells_us_about_what_matters_and_a_better_way_to_live?language=en).

- Brown, Brené. *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. New York: Random House Large Print, 2022.
- Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*. New York, NY: Random House, 2019.
- Burge, Ryan P. "How Many "Nones" Are There? Explaining the Discrepancies in Survey Estimates." *Review of Religious Research*. (2020). 62:173–190  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-020-00400-7>
- Cleveland, Christena. *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.
- Colberg, Kristin. "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in Its New Contexts: Considering the Transformed Relationship between Roman Catholic Ecclesiology and Ecumenism." *Religions* 9, no. 10 (2018): 291. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9100291>.
- De La Torre, Miguel. *Decolonizing Christianity: Becoming Badass Believers*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021.
- Disciples of Christ Historical Society. "A Brief History of the Stone-Campbell Tradition." Disciples History. <https://www.discipleshistory.org/history/brief-history-stone-campbell-tradition> (accessed December 1, 2022).
- Figuerola, Marcelo, and Antonio Spadaro. "Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism: A Surprising Ecumenism." *La Civiltà Cattolica*, August 3, 2017. <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism/>.
- FitzGerald, Thomas. "Preface," *Towards Viable Theological Education: Ecumenical Imperative, Catalyst of Renewal*. Edited by John Samuel Pobee, xii-ix. Geneva: WCC Publ., 1997.
- Folmar, Chloe. "Boebert: Jesus Didn't Have Enough Ar-15s to 'Keep His Government from Killing Him.'" *The Hill*, June 17, 2022. <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/3528049-boebert-jesus-didnt-have-enough-ar-15s-to-keep-his-government-from-killing-him/>.
- Ford, John T. "Oberlin 2007: The Need for an Expanded Methodology?" In *Ecumenical Directions in the United States Today Ecumenical Directions in the United States*

*Today*, edited by Antonios Kireopoulos and Juliana Mecera, 380-381. New York: Paulist Press, 2012.

Francis. "Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis." Vatican.va.  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170125\\_vespri-conversione-san-paolo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170125_vespri-conversione-san-paolo.html) (Accessed February 20, 2023).

Francis. "Opening of the Synodal Path." Vatican.va.  
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html> (Accessed February 20, 2023).

Gardner, David, and Kailyn Brown. "An Evangelical Icon Finds Salvation in West Hollywood." *Los Angeles Magazine*, December 15, 2021.  
<https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/fallen-fundamentalist-rob-bell-venice-beach/?fbclid=IwAR1630dVBRq65Wtkhct437zuRe1ZmLDriWSSiSDGBYk89VkZ4K822AMrxN0>.

Greig, James. *For the Conversion of the Churches*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1993.

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.

Harmon, Steven R. *Baptists, Catholics, and the Whole Church*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2021.

Harmon, Steven R. *Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.

Hollinger, David A. "After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity." *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (2011): 21-48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41509048>.

Jillions, John. "Kenotic Ecumenism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan, 645-662. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

John Paul II. "Ut Unum Sint." Vatican.va.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html), 28-29. (Accessed February 20, 2023).

Jones, Robert Patrick. *The End of White Christian America*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

Kireopoulos, Antonios, and Juliana Mecera. *Ecumenical Directions in the United States Today*. New York: Paulist Press, 2012.

Kobia, Samuel. "Challenges Facing the Ecumenical Movement in the 21st Century." World Council of Churches. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/challenges-facing-the-ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century> (accessed Feb. 1, 2023).

Kruger, Stephen A. "An Ecumenism of Hate." *Crux*, August 2, 2017. <https://cruxnow.com/commentary/2017/08/vatican-article-ecumenism-hate-u-s-long-overdue>.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Murray, Paul D. "Methodology - In Search of a Way." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan, 614-628. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Murray, Paul D., ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Office of Public Affairs. "Presiding Bishop Curry Highlights 'Moment of Peril and Promise' on One-Year Anniversary of Jan. 6 Attack." The Episcopal Church. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-curry-highlights-moment-of-peril-and-promise-on-one-year-anniversary-of-jan-6-attack/> (accessed November 1, 2022).

Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Ratzinger, Joseph. *Church, Ecumenism & Politics*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987.

- "Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church: A Comparative Research Project in the North East of England." Durham University and the Centre for Catholic Studies. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/catholic-studies-centre-for-ccs/ReceptiveEcumenismandtheLocalChurchOverview.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2022).
- Root, Michael. "Morals." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan, 327-337. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Ryan, Gregory A. "The Reception of Receptive Ecumenism." *Brill*, April 15, 2021. [https://brill.com/view/journals/ecso/17/1/article-p7\\_7.xml?language=en](https://brill.com/view/journals/ecso/17/1/article-p7_7.xml?language=en).
- Second Vatican Council. "Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21 November, 1964." Vatican.va. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html) (accessed October 31, 2022).
- Silver, Laura, Janell Fetterolf, and Aidan Connaughton. "Diversity and Division in Advanced Economies." *Global Attitudes Project*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/10/13/diversity-and-division-in-advanced-economies/> (accessed January 20, 2023).
- Snowmass Chapel. "Book of Discipline." <https://snowmasschapel.org/about/book-of-discipline/> (accessed Dec. 1, 2022).
- Stalsett, Gunnar. In *Towards Viable Theological Education: Ecumenical Imperative, Catalyst of Renewal*, edited by John Pobee, 86-93. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997.
- Tickle, Phyllis, and Danielle Shroyer. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012.
- Tjorhom, Ola. "The Early Stages Pre-1910." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan, 4-13. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Various. "Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium." *First Things*, May 1, 1994. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1994/05/evangelicals-catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium>.

Weber, Nadia Bolz. "Apparently HFASS Is an Example of the Horrible Things That Go Wrong When Women Become Pastors," *Patheos*, February 13, 2012. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/02/apparently-hfass-is-an-example-of-the-horrible-things-than-go-wrong-when-women-become-pastors/>.

Welby, Justin. "'Ecumenical Spring': Archbishop Justin's Speech at World Council of Churches 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary." Speech, February 16, 2018. The Archbishop of Canterbury. <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/ecumenical-spring-archbishop-justins-speech-world-council-churches-70th-anniversary> (accessed October 31, 2022).

Willimon, William H. *Fear of the Other; No Fear in Love*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017.

World Council of Churches. "History." World Council of Churches. <https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/history> (accessed March 26, 2022).

## **Biography**

Rev. Charla Belinski serves as Associate Pastor at Snowmass Chapel in Snowmass Village, Colorado. She received a BA from University of Denver in Mass Communications, and worked as a writer/producer in broadcast news, then as a parent educator and freelance writer, before enrolling in seminary.

She earned her Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree from Iliff School of Theology and was ordained at Snowmass Chapel in 2017.

Charla has three grown children and lives with her husband in Colorado.