

One in the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. (Acts 2 : 42 – 47)

Introduction to the theme for the year 2011

The church in Jerusalem, yesterday, today, tomorrow

Two thousand years ago, the first disciples of Christ gathered in Jerusalem experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and were joined together in unity as the body of Christ. In that event, Christians of every time and place see their origin as a community of the faithful, called together to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Although that earliest Jerusalem church experienced difficulties, both externally and internally, its members persevered in faithfulness and fellowship, in breaking bread and prayers.

It is not difficult to see how the situation of the first Christians in the Holy City mirrors that of the church in Jerusalem today. The current community experiences many of the joys and sorrows of the early church; its injustice and inequality, and its divisions, but also its faithful perseverance, and recognition of a wider unity among Christians.

The churches in Jerusalem today offer us a vision of what it means to strive for unity, even amid great problems. They show us that the call to unity can be more than mere words, and indeed that it can point us toward a future where we anticipate and help build the heavenly Jerusalem.

Realism is required to make reality of such a vision. The responsibility for our divisions lies with us; they are the results of our own actions. We need to change our prayer, asking God to change us so that we may actively work for unity. We are ready enough to pray for unity, but that can become a substitute for action to bring it about. Is it possible that we ourselves are blocking the Holy Spirit because we are the obstacles to unity; that our own *hubris* prevents unity?

The call for unity this year comes to churches all over the world from Jerusalem, the mother church. Mindful of its own divisions and its own need to do more for the unity of the Body of Christ, the churches in Jerusalem calls all Christians to rediscover the values that bound together the early Christian community in Jerusalem, when they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. This is the challenge before us. The Christians of Jerusalem call upon their brothers and sisters to make this week of prayer an occasion for a renewed commitment to work for a genuine ecumenism, grounded in the experience of the early Church.

Four elements of unity

The 2011 prayers for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity have been prepared by Christians in Jerusalem, who chose as a theme Acts 2:42, '*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*' This theme is a call back to the origins of the first church in Jerusalem; it is a call for inspiration and renewal, a return to the essentials of the faith; it is a call to remember the time when the church was still one. Within this theme four elements are presented which were marks of the early Christian community, and which are essential to the life of the Christian Community wherever it exists. Firstly, the Word was passed on by the apostles. Secondly, fellowship (*koinonia*) was an important mark of the early believers whenever they met together. A third mark of the early Church was the celebration of the Eucharist (the 'breaking of the bread'), remembering the New

Covenant which Jesus has enacted in his suffering, death and resurrection. The fourth aspect is the offering of constant prayer. These four elements are the pillars of the life of the church, and of its unity.

The Christian Community in the Holy Land wishes to give prominence to these basic essentials as it raises its prayers to God for the unity and vitality of the church throughout the world. The Christians of Jerusalem invite their sisters and brothers around the world to join them in prayer as they struggle for justice, peace and prosperity for all people of the land.

The themes of the eight days

There is a journey of faith that can be discerned in the themes of the eight days. From its first beginnings in the upper room, the early Christian community experiences the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, enabling it to grow in faith and unity, in prayer and in action, so that it truly becomes a community of the Resurrection, united with Christ in his victory over all that divides us from each other and from him. The church in Jerusalem then itself becomes a beacon of hope, a foretaste of the heavenly Jerusalem, called to reconcile not just our churches but all peoples. This journey is guided by the Holy Spirit, who brings the early Christians to the knowledge of the truth about Jesus Christ, and who fills the early Church with signs and wonders, to the amazement of many. As they continue their journey, the Christians of Jerusalem gather with devotion to listen to the Word of God set forth in the apostles' teaching, and come together in fellowship to celebrate their faith in sacrament and prayer. Filled with the power and hope of the Resurrection, the community celebrates its certain victory over sin and death, so that it has the courage and vision to be itself a tool of reconciliation, inspiring and challenging all people to overcome the divisions and injustice that oppress them.

Day 1 sets forth the background to the mother church of Jerusalem, making clear its continuity with the church throughout the world today. It reminds us of the courage of the early church as it boldly witnessed to the truth, just as we today need to work for justice in Jerusalem, and in the rest of the world.

Day 2 recalls that the first community united at Pentecost contained within itself many diverse origins, just as the church in Jerusalem today represents a rich diversity of Christian traditions. Our challenge today is to achieve greater visible unity in ways that embrace our differences and traditions.

Day 3 looks at the first essential element of unity; the Word of God delivered through the teaching of the apostles. The church in Jerusalem reminds us that, whatever our divisions, these teachings urge us to devote ourselves in love to each other, and in faithfulness to the one body which is the church.

Day 4 emphasises Sharing as the second expression of unity. Just as the early Christians held all things in common, the Church in Jerusalem calls upon all brothers and sisters in the church to share goods and burdens with glad and generous hearts, so that nobody stays in need.

Day 5 expresses the third element of unity; the Breaking of the Bread, which joins us in hope. Our unity goes beyond Holy Communion; it must include a right attitude towards ethical living, the human person and the whole community. The Jerusalem church urges Christians to unite in "the breaking of bread" today, because a divided church cannot speak out with authority on issues of Justice and Peace.

Day 6 presents the fourth mark of unity; with the church in Jerusalem, we draw strength from spending time in prayer. Specifically, the Lord's Prayer calls all of us in Jerusalem and throughout the world, the weak and the mighty, to work together for justice, peace and unity that God's Kingdom may come.

Day 7 takes us beyond the four elements of unity, as the Jerusalem church joyfully proclaims the Resurrection even while it bears the pain of the Cross. The Resurrection of Jesus is for Christians in Jerusalem today hope and strength that enables them to remain constant in their witness, working for freedom and peace in the City of Peace.

Day 8 concludes the journey with a call from the Jerusalem churches to the wider service of reconciliation. Even if Christians achieve unity among themselves, their work is not done, for they need to reconcile themselves with others. In the Jerusalem context this means Palestinian and Israeli; in other communities, Christians are challenged to seek justice and reconciliation in their own context.

The theme of each day has therefore been chosen not only to recall for us of the history of the early church, but also to bring to mind the experiences of Christians in Jerusalem today, and to invite us all to reflect upon how we may bring that experience into the lives of our local Christian communities. During this journey of eight days, the Christians of Jerusalem invite us to proclaim and bear witness that Unity - in its fullest sense of faithfulness to the Apostles' teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers - will enable us together to overcome evil, not just in Jerusalem, but throughout the world.

The preparation of the material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2011

The initial work leading to the publication of this booklet was done by a group of Christian leaders from Jerusalem. They gathered at the invitation of the World Council of Churches. Their work was facilitated by the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre. We want to thank in particular those who have contributed:

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Global resources for the Week of prayer for Christian Unity 2011

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