

Unity and Blessing: The Integrity of Our Witness and the Importance of Journeying to Right Relationships

Originally presented by
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How often have you begun to speak on Zoom, only to discover you have muted yourself. Or, you have been muted by the host.

Have you found it difficult to understand others when communicating through a mask? Speech is distorted, and with facial expressions hidden, communication is limited.

Many ministries have been muted or limited by the pandemic. Each has had to find ways to adjust in order to remain effective and fruitful.

We live in a time of uncertainty: the length of the second wave, the release and timing of the distribution of a vaccine, and how widespread will be its uptake – these have become a horizon for many.

There is growing evidence of the mental, emotional and spiritual toll the pandemic is taking on Canadians. While some are coping well, others border on despair – (desolate is a word used to describe 33% of Canadians by Angus Reid).

I want to pause and consider the dynamics of our times, to explore paths forward.

Many are reflecting on the immediate and the longer-term implications for ministry in the pandemic and beyond. What will the new habits formed due to the restrictions portend for many of our ministries? Have some faithful now decided

that physically gathering is not that important? Are they finding new sources for spiritual nurture? Or, are they living off of spiritual reserves?

Some are taking leave from church – will the leave become a retirement? The pandemic is but one of the conditions that challenge us.

In the political sphere, there are some issues that separate us from the mainstream. Euthanasia, a press for commercial surrogacy and the decriminalization of prostitution: these are some examples of issues on which we are offside with the broader society; each of these issues drives to our understanding of the dignity of human person, of how dignity is understood, of how it is honoured and protected.

We live in a country of deep pluralism: moral, philosophical and religious. Freedom of conscience, Respect for the dignity of all, these two commitments are critical to living within a society of deep difference.

However, in Western democracies there is momentum to deepen societal cohesion and justify policies deemed good by political parties and leaders by adding to the foundation of conscience and respect. Nationalism selects some identity as being the defining characteristic for belonging - language, ethnicity, tradition – and thereby excludes some.

In Canada, it is an additional set of values around which our belonging and cohesion is sought; the courts call them Charter values, values by which the Charter is interpreted. Others call them Canadian values, and those who do not affirm them are, well, un-Canadian.

In a society of deep pluralism, this pursuit of conformity excludes those who do not share these values. Or, and this is the challenging part, same words are used but are defined differently - the apparent consensus is not, but it is promulgated none the less. Those who favour wider access to euthanasia, and those who oppose it - they both do so out of a different understanding of human dignity.

Many of the recent political and court interventions we are engaged concern the freedom of persons and organizations, both to fulfill their callings and mandates, and to be able to fully participate in the public square - to participate without fear of retribution or censure.

Will we be able to offer religious instruction, parental guidance, and supportive services to individuals wishing to order their sexual lives in accordance with their faith identity and personal convictions? (this is being challenged in a bill that just passed second reading by a vote of 308-7)

Will medical professionals be able to follow their conscience in providing care to their patients? (The Ontario court of appeal said no and the federal government has thus far refused to guarantee this right of conscience.)

Will religious organizations be able to access grants whether or not they agree with a government's values? (one Christian organization was denied because of their "controversial church doctrines - doctrines common among evangelical organizations.

As a new public conscience is formed, we are increasingly seen as the dissenters, the non-conformist.

There is much we can affirm with many other Canadians. On many issues we model collaboration, and the pursuit of the public good with those with whom we disagree - interfaith initiatives are a good example of this.

I know my core beliefs are heresy to some and utter nonsense to others. But this does not inhibit me from collaborating with others in pursuit of the public good, or engaging in dialogue. This is what the affirmation of conscience and respect afford.

But being non-conformists is not new to us historically; and opportunities for public witness and collaboration abound. These times will test us, and challenge us. Our response to the pandemic or political challenges cannot be disengagement - the tendency to "bubble up."

It requires thoughtful, credible, reasoned participation in the life of our country: an understanding of the context of our ministry, an understanding of what it means to be the church, it requires clarity about the mission of the church in a society of deep difference.

We are deeply aware of a growing hostility or dismissiveness towards those called "evangelical." Believe me, we feel this acutely in our work in Ottawa. We are also deeply aware that our neighbours are searching. In times of uncertainty and change, many are looking for safe harbours: for communities of belonging, for justice and integrity of relationships, for meaning and purpose - when the old is found wanting.

Amidst these challenges, it is important that we pray together, deliberate together, act together.

I want to lift our gaze higher; to a horizon 30 years ahead. 30 years will take us to 2050, to a time when many of us will be in retirement (or beyond); Any aspirations we have will need to be fulfilled by a younger generation. When we consider our various ministries, the

endeavours of our ministries represent, the various aspects and dimensions of faithful witness we undertake: What is our preferred future? What can we collectively desire as evangelicals in Canada? Where do our mandates and purposes converge?

Thinking 30 years ahead, whether or not our respective organizations continue, or whether they continue in their current form; what would we like to be true of evangelical church in Canada?

Our senior staff asked this question several years ago and our conclusions are still compelling. Whether the EFC existed or not, what do we want to be true?

First, the unity of the evangelical church be manifest. That in every community in Canada, the people in our local congregations would be known by their love for one another across denominational lines. We may congregate in different buildings and identify with different groupings, but we are united in our love for God, and for one another, and in our diversity we find strength. Think of John 17.

Second; that we are known for our love for our neighbours. While we may be understood to hold old, or odd, beliefs, While we at times seem out of step with new societal imaginations, We are known for how we cared for the family down the street, those without homes and experiencing poverty, or for a brother in law, or for a colleague at work.

We are thoughtful, kind, generous and forgiving; always seeking to increase in understanding and wisdom, and are creative and effective in care and compassion. But we are also more. We are concerned about justice; about how government's treat vulnerable persons, and we show up to plea the cause of the marginalized and for the freedom to care. We are communities of belonging where all are encouraged to express their gifts and to contribute. And, we are always talking about Jesus and spending a lot of time singing and praying.)

Expressing our **unity** in Christ, seeking the **blessing** of our communities – all as an expression of our love for God who first loved us, and offered forgiveness and redemption through the death and resurrection of His son, and draws us together by the work of the Spirit. Announcing the coming of the Kingdom in word and deed. Living out the presence of the Kingdom coming with persuasion, authenticity and hope, especially in times of uncertainty and significant suffering. If this is a good aspiration, if this is a valid dream; how do we press towards this horizon? I see expressions of unity and blessing almost daily, we are living this out; Yet can it be more pronounced? How do we foster it, nurture it, contribute to it? Can it be what we are known for?

These two underlay the EFC's end: To Unite Evangelicals to Bless Canada in the name of Jesus – **unity and blessing**.

What initiatives, conversations, collaborative projects, strategies can we pursue to manifest our unity of purpose, to express our love of God and for our neighbour?

Unity requires us to strive for healthy and right relationships. The issue of racism has come to the forefront in these past months. In Canada the strained relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples have persisted. I know many are wanting to engage, and wanting to do so in a healthy, respectful and principled way.

Providentially there has been a working group of indigenous and non-indigenous persons who recently proposed to the EFC a series of recommendations, recommendations that map out a path towards right relationships. This is a critical journey we must travel, and it is integral to the call to reconciliation, and manifesting unity in Christ.

The pandemic is prompting fresh conversations, and renewing others, about ecclesiology. As the gathering function of congregational life has been muted, and as some have taken

leave, what are we learning about the responses of those we serve; what can we learn from one another?

Unity is also expressed in robust and focused conversations where we learn from one another, seeking to understand our times and what it means to be the church in Canada in 2020. Consider the pandemic and what it might teach us, or correct us, about being the church. What issues or themes ought we to be exploring together?

Our unity is grounded in our common beliefs and their expression and contextualization – our praxis. Yet there is evidence of theological fuzziness and drift and on a range of issues. The consensus we once knew is fragmenting. Perhaps in part due to the lack of good teaching, Perhaps in part due to the the press of culture

Is it time for a fresh and contextual expression of doctrines like the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ, or for a more robust theology of the human person and human sexuality?

These three, the pursuit of right relationships, striving together to understand our context and being the church, and exploring the doctrines and expression of faith around which we gather – these are some pursuits that will foster relationships, interlinkages, common purpose and bolster fellowship – they are expressions of **unity**.

A few thoughts about **Blessing**: As an expression of our love for God, we are called to serve in love and seek the blessing of our communities. This mission means we need to better understand the context within which we serve.

Our EFC Board chair Bill Fietje, has worked both in Canada and in Asia and sees the understanding and expression of spirituality amongst Canadians as becoming increasingly similar to what he experienced in Asia.

It is vital that we hone our understanding of the dynamics and shifting self-understandings of those to whom we are called to minister. And these conversations must be intergenerational and intercultural, and draw on the wisdom and insight of the breadth of evangelicalism. We need to understand our context.

We also need to find fresh ways to speak into our context. Our polling from last year indicates that, of those who did not attend church when they were 12, only 4% now attend. How successful are we in reaching those with no exposure to church when they were young?

In 1987 we established a task force on evangelism, leading to a congress in 1990. This birthed Vision 2000, later Vision Canada and then the National Evangelism Partnership which concluded in 2007. Is it time for another conversation about evangelism and mission, including the issue of being the church in contemporary Canada?

We also affirm the call of the church to be at the forefront in demonstrating hospitality, of caring, of demonstrating the dignity of all, of pursuing reconciliation. Both in word and deed, making Christ known.

We have launched initiatives on caring for children and youth (Adoption Sunday), on palliative care and on human trafficking and pornography. Several years ago the call came from the floor of Presidents Day for a renewed effort for settling refugees. 14 denominations affirmed a call to participate in a Refugee Resettlement Initiative. From what we were able to deduce, denominations representing about 4% of the population settled about 19% of the refugees coming largely from Syria. We are now releasing a manual titled *Welcome the Stranger: A Canadian Church Guide to Welcoming Refugees*.

What else can we do together? How equipped and willing are our churches to become communities of belonging – for refugees, for people experiencing poverty, those experiencing disability. What of seniors who have proven to be so very vulnerable in the face of a pandemic? The journey to healthy - right relationships entails advocacy for justice as well as reconciliation. I invite you into a conversation about how we can expand our reach.

Unity and Blessing - May we manifest the unity we know in Christ to a watching world, And may we strive to be a credible witness in our love for our neighbour.