

Who cares about Christian Unity?

Every year Christians across the world gather in prayer for growth in unity. We do this in a world where corruption, greed and injustice bring about inequality and division. Ours is a united prayer in a fractured world: this is powerful. However, as individual Christians and communities, we are often complicit with injustice, and yet we are called together to form a united witness for justice and to be a means of Christ's healing grace for the brokenness of the world.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2019 has been prepared by Christians from Indonesia. With a population of 265 million, 86% of whom are reckoned to be Muslim, Indonesia is well known as having the largest Muslim population of any country. However, about 10% of Indonesians are Christian from various traditions. In terms of both population and the vast extension of the country Indonesia is the biggest nation in South East Asia. It has more than 17,000 islands, 1,340 different ethnic groups and over 740 local languages and yet is united in its plurality by one national language Bahasa Indonesia.

Tonight, I hope you will join the local churches at St Andrew's, Cobham, at 6.30pm, where these themes will be followed.

Christians coming together at local level is at the heart of Christian Unity. When local congregations agree to meet regularly together to deepen their relationships and do mission together, they often call themselves a Churches Together group. But there are countless other ways, some more informal and some more formal, in which Christians and Churches work together at local level.

Here in Cobham, Stoke D'Abernon and Oxshott we have a Churches Together group that has been in existence for many years and details of its activities can be found on their website which is available as a link from both our church website.

Notable recent achievements of Churches Together are the Food Bank, based in the Methodist church in Cedar Road in Cobham and Messy Church which meets at the United Reformed church in Stoke Road. On a more spiritual level, Churches Together run Lent Study groups every second year and the Good Friday witness in Cobham which is organised annually by our friends at Sacred Heart. There is also a Churches Together stall at the Heritage Day every

September and we get together at Christmastide to sing carols as the lights are turned on in Cobham High Street. We meet once a year, in our various churches, to mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and this year we experienced a very lively and moving service in St Andrew's in Cobham. All churches are represented on the committee that runs Churches Together and I have recently taken on the Chair from Kim Plumpton. I intend to be Chairman for three years and will then hand it on to someone from another of our member churches, hopefully a lay person. But who really cares about Christian Unity? The following quote appears on the national Churches Together website and states quite clearly why we should be interested and care about Christian Unity;

“There are many different Christian churches and denominations, but all have the same basic calling - to worship God, to share the good news about Jesus Christ and to work for the good of all people.

So they often need to work together, as well as co-ordinate the work they each do separately. When they do, they are acting as Churches Together.

But being Churches Together means more than that. It means commitment by each church and denomination to deepen its fellowship with the others and, without losing what makes each interestingly different, to work with them towards a greater visible unity.”

How much do we know about the work of Churches Together at a national or local level?

I strikes me that we are so involved in the life of our own church that we do not really have the time, interest or inclination to be involved in Churches Together. I wrote a paper on the subject many years ago for the Mid- Career clergy course at St Georges House, Windsor, and my findings were that Churches Together attracted committed enthusiasts who were deeply committed to the cause and were striving valiantly to enthuse the other members of their church without a great deal of success.

The greatest problem confronting those of us who are committed to the work of Churches Together is apathy. We all, if we are brutally honest, are sympathetic to the idea of Christian Unity but we just don't care enough about it to get really excited. We care about the Food Bank because we can see it working in the community and we are quite happy to place our contribution in the bin at the

entrance to our churches. We are quite happy to support Messy Church because we hear great things about it and see the colourful sign as we drive along Stoke Road.

Well here is a reason why we should care about Christian Unity. Jesus said in John 17:21

“ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

It is our Christian duty to do all that we can to promote Christian Unity in our churches and in our lives as part of our personal Christian witness. It is our Christian duty to find out more about other branches of the Church. It is in knowledge that we will grow together. It is in understanding that we will grow and be able to see that we have more in common with each other than we have differences. So what is your answer to the question, Who cares about Christian Unity?