

By Edmund Laldin
ANGLICAN VOICES

FOR ALL OF YOU ARE ONE IN CHRIST JESUS!



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The title of this reflection is the latter part of Galatians 3:28. This line summarises the essence of the Christian faith and relates to the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17:21. It says, “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.” St. Paul, through this simple yet profound line, impresses upon the community that their unity and identity exists because of their membership in the body of Christ. This reality had overcome any obvious differences of age, gender, ethnicity and/or status in their society. St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 further develops on this concept of unity by using the example of the human body. Every part of the body is unique, distinct and interdependent on the others with a primary role to ensure that the body functions and lives in the best possible manner. Thus, the members of the body of Christ are unique and are commissioned to offer their best to the glory of God through their interdependence on one another.

Unfortunately, unity of the body of Christ has been understood and practiced in a hierarchal and oppressive manner over the years: hierarchal, because power and authority have been vested in the dominant culture; oppressive, because of the dominance and suppression of different viewpoints and cultural practices by the dominant culture. The criteria of the dominant culture can vary, from ethnic background to theology or liturgical practice and preference. Labels such as evangelical, conservative, liberal, high or low church are examples of various dominant cultures within the church in general and the Anglican Church of Canada in particular. Furthermore, Caucasian Canadians continue to hold religious, doctrinal, spiritual and liturgical authority at all levels of the church. Thankfully, in most cases, the body of Christ learned to live with their differences and to unite itself.

Missionary movements brought the gospel and the message of salvation through Jesus Christ to all parts of the world. In the Indian subcontinent, missionaries developed education and health-care systems along with the conversion of the masses and establishment of churches. Missionaries primarily evangelized to the downtrodden, poor and untouchables in the subcontinent. Although conversion to Christianity assured the love of God through Jesus's own sacrifice and resurrection among the converts, it did not change



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their status in society. They were and continue to be untouchable. Missionaries and their institutions were the only people and places which offered love, acceptance and hope to them. This acceptance and restoration of dignity and integrity perpetuated enormous respect for the Europeans and especially missionaries. Missionaries not only made them members of the body of Christ and heirs of the kingdom of God, but also accepted them with open arms—this was the reality and gift to pretty much every one of them. As a young child (five years old or so), I remember going with Miss Audrey and Miss Sharon to the slums of Karachi, Pakistan. The highlight of the trip was having either some candy or ice cream towards the end of our journey. Incidentally, I do not remember any activities in different locales. Being in a car, and having a place of honour during those meetings (and a treat), made me the happiest child in the world. Miss Audrey and Miss Sharon, and by extension every European missionary, represented goodness and love of God to me.

The majority of new Anglican Canadians from the global South, regardless of their country of origin, have been struggling to find a spiritual home in the Anglican churches. For Canadians of Pakistani and Punjabi heritage, Anglican churches have been disappointing at many levels. Obvious reasons for these feelings can be discrimination, racism, interpretation of the

holy scriptures, marriage equality, music, liturgy or attitudes towards their customs and traditions. All of the above have exacerbated the angst, disappointment and isolation and consequently a departure from neighbourhood churches. However, I believe these reasons are symptoms of a much deeper and underlying issue: the expectations from and the image of the Anglican church community. One of the main reasons for Pakistani Christians to emigrate to Canada is to have their dignity and integrity affirmed and restored at various levels of the society and culture. Pursuit of material and physical goods, the best education for their children and affinity to fellow Christians are the ways to earn acceptance and respect in their new homeland. Canada in many ways resembles the missionary institutions and missionaries of their ancestors' time; an oasis in the desert where there is shelter, food and comfort because of the will of and blessings from God. They can appreciate and rationalize discrimination outside of the church walls, but find it difficult and crushing to face the same in their churches. This results in isolation, spiritual and religious crises and rejection.

Moreover, it mimics the society and circumstances of their homeland. Furthermore, this profound disappointment changes their image of Caucasian persons—Caucasian Anglicans are supposed to restore dignity and integrity regardless of differences of opinions and practice of faith. Instead they have changed from the ways of their ancestors and become an instrument of societal prejudice and discrimination. Evangelical and free-standing churches and

denominations, because of the baptism of the believer, provide spiritual shelter, immediate acceptance and a sense of belonging. On a side note, new Canadians from Pentecostal and Roman Catholic churches, according to research, join their denominations and stay because of the universal primacy (Roman Catholic) and the baptism of the believer.

Personally, I have and continue to struggle at times with my place in the Anglican Church of Canada because of discriminatory and racial incidents. All of those incidents chip away the image of Caucasians. However, because of a chaplain at my seminary and two professors, I dealt with this disfigured image and arrived at a conclusion that I may not belong to them, but they belong to me. This was a gift and learning from the seminary. As a priest, I have tried to engender the spirit of belonging through my words and actions among all congregants. It is done through my utmost respect for diverse theological opinions and their personal theology, as well as open dialogue and appealing to the passages from 1 Corinthians, Galatians and the prayer of Jesus. It is time for the Anglican Church of Canada to appreciate, respect and accept new Canadians with a resolve to nurture and challenge their faith while preserving their integrity, dignity and cultures. ■

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