

Unity Today and Unity Tomorrow

Rev. Joel Ortego-Dopico

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

First of all, I want to thank our God for this great opportunity to be here together as one and to bring you greetings and love from all your sisters and brothers in Cuba. I bring you the love of Christians in Cuba and the love of our entire nation. Yes, I am coming from the island of Cuba just 90 miles from USA—so close, but at the same time so far.

Secondly, I bring you greetings on behalf of the Cuban Council of Churches, an institution founded in 1941. We had been serving among our people, our region, and our world, and witnessing to the love, mercy and justice of God in bad times and in good times. Since its founding, the Council has proclaimed unity for the service of our people and nation through the search for love, justice and peace among all peoples and nations, which are the most

evident evangelical signs of the reign of God among us. Today, the Council is the leading institution of the Cuban ecumenical movement, composed of 51 churches and Christian institutions—Protestants, Reformed, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Episcopal and Orthodox—as well as Jews, Yogas, and centers for studies, information and community services, and theological seminaries. Our slogan is “United to Serve, Together to Serve.”

We praise God for the Disciples of Christ in the United States and Canada, the United Church of Christ, your Common Global Ministries, and for all of your history and witness in this nation and throughout the world—especially your love for Cuba and your courage to stand with the Cuban church and with the Cuban people.

Unity is our dream for today and tomorrow.

In the year 1624 John Donne wrote a poem that became very well known, thanks to the novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, by Ernest Hemingway:

*Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises?
but who takes off his eye from a comet when that
breaks out?*

*Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any
occasion rings?*

*but who can remove it from that bell which is
passing a piece of himself out of this world?*

*No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is
a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a
clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a
manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any
man's death diminishes me, because I am involved
in mankind, and therefore never send to know for
whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

The unity we seek today comes from the eschatological idea of the presence of God's Kingdom among us. As stated in Revelation 7:9, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

Today is a time for unity. But, we need to be very careful that the unity we seek will not just be a unity that makes us feel temporarily comfortable or happy

because we are together; or because we are living on the same planet; or because we are living in the same country; or because we are Cubans or Latinos; or because we are Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, or Pentecostals.

As a Cuban Church leader, God gave me the privilege and opportunity to be a Cuban living in the country that been an active witness to some of the most interest developments regarding unity and reconciliation:

- In the response of the world to stop the Ebola epidemic in 2014, Cuban doctors were serving in our region among many peoples from different nations in working together in unity to fight against this horrible disaster and to save many lives.
- I had the privilege to be at the dedication of both embassies (the Cuban Embassy in Washington, D.C., and the United States Embassy in Havana) in the summer of 2015; this was a first significant and just step in realizing the dream to end more than half a century of conflicts between our nations.
- On February 12, 2016, for first time in history after the division of the Church in 1054, Patriarch Kirill of the Orthodox Church and Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church came together in Cuba, and they had a conversation for two hours and signed a joint statement. That fraternal meeting took place in Cuba as the crossroads of North and South, East and West. In one of the most dramatic events in the history in the Church since 1054,

it was from this island that a symbol of the hopes of a “new world” was expressed in words addressed to all the peoples of Latin America and of other continents. In that encounter it was said, “if Cuba continues like this, it will become the capital of unity for the world.”

- On Monday evening, September 16, 2016, Colombia’s government and the country’s largest rebel movement signed a historic peace accord ending a half-century of combat that caused more than 220,000 deaths and made 8 million homeless. Cuba was the place that four years the conversation and dialogue of peace took place. And, Cuba was one of the observers of the signing and one of the guarantors of that accord.

We know that all of these are fragile steps and expressions of unity, reconciliation and healing—but, they bring hope to us.

What exactly does unity mean? Why is unity important? And what does it mean to be one in our world context today?

When unity happens, it creates something that is unique, something that is extremely valuable—for we are united not just in order to *be* together, but also in order to *do* together. Why are we called as Christians to be united?

First, unity requires understanding the appropriate way to approach division knowing that there can be both good and bad unity, as well good and bad

divisions. The greatest challenges of today to our unity are fundamentalism, consumerism, the theology of prosperity which are found not just in North America, but also in Africa, Latin America, and, of course, Central America and the Caribbean. Also, the economic and political models in our world today are unsustainable not just for the so called Third World countries, but also for the countries in the First and Second Worlds.

Second, authentic unity must bridge different cultures and different ideas and ideologies. We live in a world of so many cultures, but it is still one world. Unity is not uniformity but will only happen as it embraces the wonderfully richness of our differences and diversity.

I heard somebody say a few days ago that “the Western culture will win.” But God did not create any specific culture! God is not the creator of the United States, or the creator of Europe, or the creator of China, or the creator of Cuba, or creator of any church or denomination in particular—or even the creator of the Church. God is the creator of the world and all of the universe, and this world and this universe are something that has been united in God, despite our divisions. Unity is not about being equal; it is about being connected.

Third, unity comes from the way we communicate each other. And language is at the center of this communication. Every word, every gesture, and every expression is important. Words mean a great deal and are important to our work for unity. This

also includes the way we communicate with God—and the way we listen to God.

Over the past century alone, it has been noted that around 400 languages have gone extinct—one every three months—and most linguists estimate that 50% of the world's remaining 6,500 languages will be gone by the end of this century (some put that figure as high as 90%!). Today, the top ten languages in the world are used by about half of the world's population. The question is: Can language diversity be preserved, or are we on a path to becoming a monolingual species? Because different languages provide distinct pathways of thought and frameworks for solving problems and expressing one's culture and meaning. Martin Heidegger once wrote, "Language is the House of Being. In its home human beings dwell. ... the widely and rapidly devastation of language not only undermines aesthetic and moral responsibility in every use of language; it arises from a threat to the essence of humanity."

Many of the words and concepts we use today should be evaluated in the context of different languages, cultures and histories represented in the diversity of different countries and regions. We should explore the meaning of basic words and concepts we use in our dialogue as churches, and nations, and peoples; for example, democracy and freedom; human rights; men and women; black and white; rich and poor.

Unity is built upon dialogue. The languages we use to talk, to think and to speak about unity will determine the outcome of our efforts to be one.

Fourth, unity must rise up from the margins and peripheries and move to the center. We are living in a world that knows inequality, poverty, slavery, human trafficking, stateless people, illnesses, war, racism and exclusion. As Christians and as churches, we are called to follow Jesus—the One who went out among persons on the margins and periphery of his society and witnessed to a unity built from those margins to the whole of society and the world that is welcoming and inclusive, where all are recognized as equal children of God.

Fifth, the whole of the New Testament witness proclaims a message of unity and reconciliation in building true community and fellowship. The entire story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is about God's offer of forgiveness and healing, of unity and oneness among all peoples. Let us remember these words from scripture:

Mark 9:38-41 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward."

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Acts 2:42-46 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

I Corinthians 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

When we see that there is not unity among churches, we say the ecumenical movement is in crisis. But what is in crisis is not the ecumenism itself but the churches because they do not truly understand or carry out the mission of the church set forth in scripture.

To be ecumenical is to be an inclusive church; to be an open church; to be a transforming church; to preach and to expand the gospel (the good news) of Jesus Christ. To be united is not an option; it is God's commandment to his people; that is, a church is not a building, but a community or people that follow Jesus in tearing down the walls of division and in building up bridges of unity and love. Unity will only come from love—it is the only way.

Sixth, unity is the result of the Spirit working within and among us. We are living in a world that is experiencing brokenness and hostility. Many times people ask me how is it possible to be a Christian in a communist country? I answer with another question. How is it possible to be a Christian in a capitalist and consumer-oriented society? To build unity and to build Christianity is much more than the limitation of our societies—because, at the end of the day, we belong to God.

The question is thus a deeper question. How are we to be disciples of Christ today in bringing unity with God and among His people and in God's world? You see, unity goes beyond the ideologies and politics, beyond both time and history. Unity is the foundation of life as we acknowledge and affirm that we are living in the same home and are dependent upon the same Spirit.

To build unity and oneness, we must live out God's will and God's essence. There is no unity

- without worship,
- without love,
- without forgiveness,
- without reconciliation and dialogue,
- without hope,
- without justice,
- without the Spirit who makes us one.

My last world is for Cuba and the United States.

I know that I am under a very difficult ethical dilemma as I speak tonight. I am a Cuban, so I think it would be almost unethical if I do not take advantage of this opportunity to advocate my own country on behalf of my people. I cannot leave tonight without giving you the perspective of the Cuban church regarding my country's situation. Before I do that, let me say, God loves the United States of America. I must also say, God loves the beautiful Island of Cuba.

We must work to remove the embargo! Not just because it is not moral; not just because it is unethical; not just because it is illegal; not just because the United Nations has voted a resolution for many years in which all nations except Israel and US vote in favor of removing the embargo; but because I deeply believe that is not the Will of God.

We belong to Jesus. We belong to Christ. We belong to his church, a movement begun by fishermen which become the very first community of sharing in history. We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord. And we believe in the God who calls us to be united and who makes us one.



Reverend Joel Ortega Dopico is President of the Cuban Council of Churches and Pastor of the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba. Originally from Cardenas, Matanzas, Cuba, he studied at the Protestant Theological Seminary of Cuba at Matanzas, graduating in 1997 with a Bachelor's degree, and in 2002 with a Master's degree.

Reverend Ortega Dopico is active in the ACT Alliance and through ACT and the Cuban Council, has worked extensively on humanitarian emergency actions in Cuba, Haiti, the Caribbean Region, as well as Central and Latin America. In 2016, sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, he participated in the first United Nations World Humanitarian Summit, in Istanbul, Turkey.

Reverend Ortega Dopico participated in the visits of Pope Francis and of President Obama to Cuba. He was invited and present at the historic opening of the Cuban Embassy in Washington D.C., and the U.S. Embassy in Havana. The Cuban Council of Churches plays an important role in mutual understanding and normalization between Cuba and U.S. He receives visits of U.S. senators in his office in Havana and has visited Senate offices in Washington D.C. He works closely with churches and people in the U.S. around the move toward normal relations between the churches and people in both countries.
