

Church Denominations Can Work Together!

A model



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COVER: Sample of crosses given to Rebecca Locklear. (see page 12)

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Introduction

Some years ago, while staying with friends, I visited a Presbyterian church in Fairfax, Virginia. In his sermon, the pastor spoke of the various Christian denominations and of Christ's desire for Christian unity. After the service I said to him, "I would really like to hear a Part II of your sermon; that is, HOW to get Christians from different denominations to work together."

His reply was certainly realistic. "Look at the history of the church. Christians have never gotten along and they never will."

At that moment I felt a sense of sadness and defeat. For years, I had worked in my own community, encouraging Christian families to acknowledge common ground in Jesus Christ rather than differences, with not much success, and I wondered if I was trying to achieve the impossible.

What I didn't know was that hope was around the corner. I was about to become involved in a lovely community where Christianity not only remains central to community life, but the various Christian churches do, in fact, work together.

Northeast England

For the next year, I lived in the most northern town in England: Berwick-upon-Tweed, which is often shortened to Berwick (BEAR-ick). This community of 10,000 is located at the mouth of the River Tweed as it empties into the North Sea. The town is charming, with stone masonry buildings, red tiled roofs and cobbled streets. Walks along the medieval and Elizabethan walls, which surround the town, provide lovely views of the ocean.

And for you historians, Edward I's decision in favor of John Balliol as the Scottish king was made at Berwick Castle in 1292 and an arm of William Wallace was displayed in Berwick after his execution in 1305.

But what makes this place distinct is a feeling of togetherness and caring. The town center certainly contributes to this feeling. Berwick is a walking town. If you have six errands, you walk downtown and everything is there: the infirmary (medical care), library, police station, chemist (pharmacy), churches, and shops. In contrast, the USA is an automobile society where if you have six errands, you drive to six places. But because folks do walk to town every day, they greet and chat with each other and often stop for tea. Also, this is not a place where people hibernate in their homes watching the tele (T.V.) but rather an active place where evenings are filled with sports practice, band and choir rehearsals, theatre, church speakers, and clubs. All of this contributes to a place that thrives as a close community and also honors Christian heritage.

Christianity in the Community

Christianity is certainly not constrained in Berwick. My first experience of the outward signs of Christianity was when I attended the Civic Service of Remembrance held on 14. November at the Parish Church (Church of England) as a way to honor those who died in war. The service was led by the Church of Scotland minister and the Parish Church vicar. The mayor and sheriff, dressed in period robes, hats, and chains, read the scriptures and the mayor laid a wreath at the altar. After the service, the civic party and clergy along with the Royal British Legion and other organizations, proceeded through the town to the War Memorial for additional ceremony. They were led by the Berwick Pipe Band, beef eaters, town crier, and a person carrying the cross of Jesus. The tribute at the War Memorial included the laying of wreaths by nearly every organization in town, and music by the town band and high school band. The next day, a maroon was let off from Meg's Mount at 11.00 a.m. and schools suspended lessons for two minutes as a mark of respect for the sacrifices made by previous generations. This event, like so many throughout the year, points to tradition that binds lives together.

As we rolled into December, I was surprised how Christianity was a part of public life. The first Sunday in Advent was celebrated by a street procession led by the mayor, sheriff, and other town officials. The mayor then spoke and all schools participated with carols. The Chamber of Trade & Commerce and Civic Society presented a musical program called *Celebration of Christmas*. Students from all schools participated and except for the tune "Jingle Bell Rock," all songs were *bona fide* Christmas carols about Jesus. Berwick County Middle School put on a production of *Holy Joe*, a musical about Christ's birth. (I was delighted to be the pianist for the production.) Other schools used churches for their major Christmas programs. This mix of sacred and secular is not accepted in countries like the USA where only secular holiday musicals are allowed in public schools. I truly was finding Christianity throughout the community.

State Religion and the Vicar

One thing different from the USA is that England has a state religion. Thus, the Church of England's town vicar is important to the well-being of the town. Even today, the vicar seems to be everywhere and his presence is a comfort to people. He opens the annual outdoor Christmas ceremony at the town hall with a message and prayer, says a prayer at the opening of a school medieval festival, gives a message at the outdoor ceremonies honoring the soldiers who fought in World War I and II, and opens the annual Riding of the Bounds. The list of his activities in the town seems endless.

I once asked the Baptist minister in Berwick if he felt a bit shoved aside because the vicar takes center stage, but he said no. "It is because of the vicar

that I am able to get into doors that would otherwise be closed.” One example is that any of the ministers in Berwick are allowed to go into the schools to be the guest speaker at a Friday assembly.

Churches Together in Berwick-upon-Tweed and District

The Northumbrian County Council explains the Churches Together program in 2022:

Churches Together in Berwick-upon-Tweed and District looks to bring together churches...for mutual support, ministry, and mission while taking opportunities to raise the profile and benefits of Christian life.

The congregations that belong to Churches Together include the Church of England, Church of Scotland, Baptist, Methodist, Salvation Army, the Benefice, Waypoint Church, and Roman Catholic.

The Mission Statement used when I lived in the town includes finding unity in acknowledging God’s revelation in Christ, confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior according to Scripture and, in obedience to God’s will and in the power of the Holy Spirit, devoting themselves –

- To seek a deepening of commitment to Christ and to one another.
- To be a visible sign by their commitment of each other of obedience to our Lord’s Prayer “that they all may be one, that the world my believe.” (John 17:21)
- To enable the churches to worship, pray, and reflect together – each sharing with others the treasures of its traditions.
- To encourage the Churches to develop growing and changing relationships in living and sharing the Gospel.
- To encourage the Churches to respond to the needs of the local community, the nation, and the world.

Today, in 2022, the above mission statement has been streamlined:

- Unity: to promote understanding and cooperation between the different Christian churches in the area.
- Learning: to provide a forum where the churches can share their insights and expertise and develop their spiritual lives together.
- Mission: to present a united witness to the community.

The unity of Christians and impact they make in the town seems to be widespread as they really work toward the realization of this mission statement.

What do Churches Do Together?

Some people wonder if there are meaningful activities and discussions or if “just” food is gathered for the poor. After all, denominations are often set apart due to theological and social issues. Here are some activities I was involved in.

- For New Year’s Eve, members from all churches met at the Church of England at 4.00 p.m. for song and prayer. Then they walked the Elizabethan walls around the town, returning to the Church of Scotland for soup and bread. Berwick’s Member of Parliament (MP) who was a Methodist lay preacher, was the speaker. There was also a joint midnight service held at the Church of England.
- In January, a week of prayer for Christian unity was held along with with shared services at the Catholic Church with various speakers.
- As previously mentioned, one member of the clergy team goes into the schools as the guest speaker at the Friday assembly. Ministers can’t preach conversion but they are visible and approachable because of this outreach.
- Throughout Lent, each church hosted a Lenten Bible study class that was held at 2.00 p.m. on Thursdays. Also during Lent, Wednesday lunches were held at the Methodist Church with speakers from different denominations. Holy Week services were coordinated.
- Weekly study groups were open to all.
- There was a Songs of Praise evening open to the community that was so popular, it was repeated later in the year.
- A Pentecostal gathering included all denominations.
- Open worship services were held on the town hall steps at 4.00 p.m. on the last Sunday of June, July, and August. Each service was hosted by two churches (e.g., Baptist and Catholic). Lots of folks stopped shopping and gathered around. These 20-minute services included praise songs and hymns (guitar, keyboard, sax, violin, drums), scripture reading, and a brief message. Once, when I was there, those gathered were mocked by motorcyclists who tried to disrupt events, but the mini-service continued. God’s message prevailed.
- There was a joint youth group.
- The churches cooperated in the work with troubled youth. (There is much shared vision and concerns about young people.)
- Each church put together a highly interesting visual history of their particular church which was displayed in one of the main town building for a year.

Overall, the understanding and respect for each other and bonds that developed between Christians was encouraging.

Jumping in time to 2022, what is happening today?

- In the spring, Churches Together took charge of collecting donated items for Ukrainian refugees, with a huge response from the community.
- During Easter, a film was shown, there was a labyrinth and witness walk, and the joint lighting of the Easter fire.
- Churches Together is also are creating “warm hubs” for the winter since fuel/electricity is so expensive that many can’t afford to heat their homes. Each church will open their doors one day a week, inviting people to come where it will be warm. They will offer tea, coffee, and snacks. This works well since it only falls on one denomination to be open and staffed an extra day each week.

Why Does “Churches Together” Work?

1) The ministers of all congregations are instrumental in making a program like this work. That is really the bottom line. But alongside the leadership, church members and attendees in Berwick follow the Philippians 4 premise that there is unity in diversity and can agree in confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior. They want partnership in Christ and that in turn, provides more opportunities to witness. The Baptist minister I spoke with when I lived there remarked that “the focus is to reach people, not to have a Baptist enclave.” It’s all about mindset.

2) What about secondary theological and social issues that tend to divide Christians to an extent where people from one denomination can’t interact with those in other denominations? Berwick sets an interesting example. It seems that people are able to listen to, understand, and respect differing viewpoints that are discussed in various activity groups without endangering unity.

3) On a practical basis, the churches share their facilities and part of that means that they share the load. One church does not have to put on an entire event. For example song and prayer is at one church while soup and bread is provided at a another church. (The churches are within walking distance.)

Back in the USA

I returned to the USA knowing I had changed but the people I normally worked with, ah...hadn’t. There was still bickering over a vast array of issues, from music to baptism. For example, homeschoolers who were not of a specific denomination were shunned by other Christian homeschoolers to an extent where those shunned finally put their kids in the public schools. What one homeschool parent told me was it was easier for Christians to interact with non-Christians than with Christians from other denominations.

But I did come back with hope in my heart, thinking that Christians should be strong in their own beliefs and yet be able to walk alongside other Christians whose beliefs may be slightly or even significantly different.

Other Countries

- 1) As the years have gone by, I've reflected on growing up as a military brat – attending services at a military chapel where church services were either Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. What was the motivation behind Protestant unity? Was it just that we all were set adrift in a foreign country?
- 2) I've now lived in two other countries where, because there were so few Christians, those from various denominations (e.g., Baptist, Greek Orthodox, Mennonite, Lutheran, Presbyterian) worshipped together and served the Lord by helping the blind, digging water wells, or teaching local women new skills.
- 3) There have been times when I've experienced Catholic priests who led services at Protestant churches and Protestants who attended Catholic churches. I travelled to sing at a Catholic event where later, the priest asked a Baptist pastor on the spot, to serve communion to his Catholic parishioners “like you would do at your church” and the pastor graciously did just that. Once, I was horrifically sick while hiking, came down off a mountain lying on the back of a donkey, and was transported to a medical facility where a Catholic priest (probably the only Christian in the area) came to see me, assuring me it was not my time to die.

In serving the Lord, I've experienced love from all *kinds* of Christians, making me acutely aware of Christian unity.

How Can Working Together Possibly be Successful?

How can we, in the USA, adopt a *working together* attitude? If we want children and adults to have a sense of morality, to know right from wrong and to tell the truth, to understand the the importance of trust, responsibility, and respect, to adhere to a work ethic, and to live in community as Christ-followers, shouldn't we as Christians band together?

But wait. According to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, due to the influence and impact of social media starting in the 2010s, society has become hopelessly fractured.¹

- People are angry and label each other as the oppressor or the oppressed.
- Social issues like gender ideology curriculum in schools have either Christians accepting it or Christians horrified by how adults are harming children.
- Gun violence is so commonplace, people expect to be shot at - at any time, anywhere.
- Outrage-inducing content on social media is at an all-time high.
- Freedom of speech is an ongoing issue. Many adults are afraid to speak or write on issues because they could be (and have been) fired from their jobs. Language is changing so formerly common words can only be spoken in the confines of the home or again, you can be (and people have been) fired.

- Children have no free time to play and are required to be supervised at all times. How does that affect how they mature and gain social skills?
- Some people may want control over their bodies on the abortion issue but it's impossible to even get your teeth cleaned without being forced to get unnecessary and harmful x-rays. Freedom is limited without choices.
- Somewhere along the line people have lost simple civility. I had a recent experience where a group of male missionaries questioned why I didn't debate a theological point with others. I explained that I understood and accepted both sides of the issue and continue to learn more about it. (I didn't come out and say that although it was an issue for them, it wasn't for me.) They proceeded to slam me for my view. It seems important to civilly discuss.

These are just a few issues. Christians are cut off from each other. What can possibly hold Christians together today?

Searching for Answers

1) One answer from a USA pastor is to just preach the Bible as Jesus taught with no reference to today. Well, that is a thought, but is it what Jesus would do?

2) Another approach is to have civil presentations about social issues as they relate to Christians. A person shares a side and backs it with facts and another shares the opposite so there is an understanding of positions. Civil questions could include – “What makes you think that way? Would you be willing to ___? Tell me more about that.” But would this work?

3) Today, a person from Berwick stated that the group there is strong because church goers are committed to doing what can be done to help people in the area. Could that be a start in getting Christians to interact in the USA?

4) A minister in Berwick just shared that the monthly prayer meetings with ministers from ALL the churches is instrumental in getting them to know each other well, and that helps with relationships between the denominations. Issues at that level seem to be sorted amicably.

What does the Bible instruct? The emphasis falls on oneness of faith. Ephesians 4:2-5 is a remarkable passage that speaks of unity and one Lord, one faith. Ephesians 11: 11-16 encourages people to find unity in the faith which ultimately builds Christians together in love. And Philippians 2:2-3, 4:2 stresses being like-minded, valuing others above yourself. Unity has a good works and spiritual feel to it, but are these just words?

Perhaps we all need to reflect on history where civilizations were destroyed and peoples and nations fell apart because they couldn't work together. It also may be time to take seriously the Romans 12:2 verse: Do not be conformed to this world. What suggestions do you have to connect Christians and build a strong or stronger, interactive community where you live?

“At the end of the day”

Protestant churches do splinter and go their separate ways, but now more than ever, with society seeming to crumble around us, it's crucial that overarching Christian unity be a focus for every church.

Why is a solid front to Christianity important? I recently interviewed a Berwick resident on this issue. This was the reply:

What impression do we give as Christians if we're at each other's throats? Who on earth would want to learn about loving our neighbors or try coming to church?

Living in Berwick-upon-Tweed, England showed me a place that embraces Christian unity in a caring community. They are an example of how well ministers and parishioners respect each other and get along even with theological and social differences and how they direct this *coming together*. Their Christian unity is alive and growing. Now, how can we, as a broad Christian community, be an example of God's love? There is hope for all of us.

SOURCES

Berwick Churches Together: <http://www.berwickchurches.uk/news/>

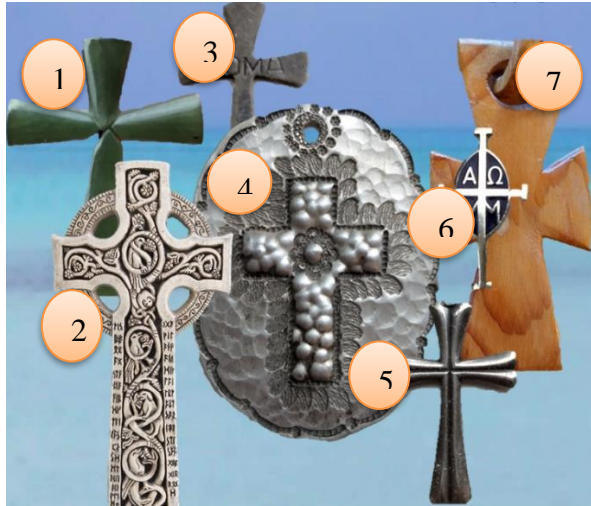
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Residents of Berwick-upon-Tweed who wish to remain anonymous.

SPECIAL THANKS to the following ministers for their insights: David Adam, Lou Felo, Alan Hughes, Joe Lannon, Malcolm Peacock, Allison Meikle, Karen Smith.

CROSSES (cover)



Some of Rebecca Locklear's crosses

- 1) Cross from Italy as a gift
- 2) Celtic cross from England as a gift
- 3) Cross from Italy as a gift
- 4) Cross made in aluminum by friend Virginia Carmen
- 5) Cross from Italy as a gift
- 6) Millennial cross from Durham Cathedral, England
- 7) Coptic Cross made by Islamic friend in N. Africa

You Lord are in this place. Your Presence
fills it, your Presence is peace.

~Rev. David Adam

REBECCA LOCKLEAR is a writer, pianist, choral director, Director of Music for large churches, and multiple-subject PS-12 teacher. She considers herself non-denominational.



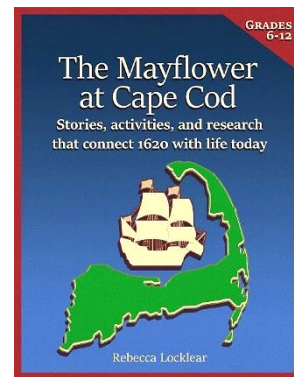
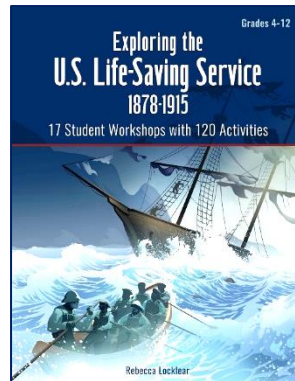
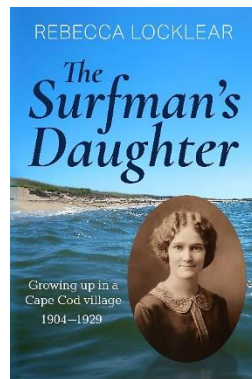
Besides writing and teaching, Rebecca enjoys connecting with people from various cultures, most likely stemming from living and performing as a teen in Germany. She has taught students from over 30 nationalities while teaching overseas in Europe and North Africa. Prior to the 2020 pandemic, Rebecca also frequently gave teacher-training workshops.

Though from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Rebecca calls Oregon home, where she regularly hikes the nearby trails with her family.

Visit www.rebeccalocklear.com to see all of her materials.
Be sure to sign up for her email list!

Though writing mainly in the field of history,
Rebecca also writes in other fields.

These books include references to Christianity.



Here are some great general resources for parents and teachers.

