

### **Session Five — A church praying and working for unity**

The Church has always been a very diverse community and there have been debates, arguments and divisions since the beginning. You only have to read the New Testament to see that there never was a golden age when perfect peace reigned among and between Christians! However there have been some major divisions in the Church which have caused great pain and damage, not only to the witness of the Church, but to its very life. Near the end of the first millennium the Church separated into East and West (not quite, but almost, equivalent to the churches we would now describe as Orthodox and Roman Catholic). The Reformation period led to further separations among the churches (and there have been more since!) and these divisions have been a great sadness to many over the centuries. The United Reformed Church believes that the Church is one, and that the unity which God gives us should be real and evident among us, there for all to see.

The fragmentation and disunity of the Church is a terrible contradiction of the Gospel of God's reconciling love. We believe that it is God's purpose that the Church should be in visible unity and also that God will's to bring the whole creation into a harmonious and flourishing peace. This is why the 'United' part of our title is also important and significant. We can celebrate that in 1972 (and then in 1981 and 2000), those formerly separated have come into union. The United Reformed Church has, as part of its very reason for being, a giving of itself in prayer and work for the visible unity of the Church.

We recognise that the unity of the Church may not come about in the way we first envisaged (through national institutional union), but we remain committed to seeking ways to deepen and express the unity which Christ is bringing to his Church. So, we are involved in many local unity projects, we are thoroughly committed to dialogue with other Christian traditions and churches, we are always present and active in international and national ecumenical work, and we are committed to finding ways to bridge new divides which cut across even single denominations or local churches (like the so-called evangelical/liberal divide). This strong commitment to unity seems particularly striking in us now, when ecumenism is at something of a low ebb, after the high tide of the 1960s. It may be that we have a particular vocation in this, though it is proving testing to work out how to live it. For the United Reformed Church, prayer for the unity of the church is very much at the heart of what it means for us to be the church. In a world which is finding it hard to know how to live with so much 'difference', a community so committed to building unity and peace has a significant mission.

### **Questions for discussion**

- Where have you experienced disunity between Christians? And where have you seen examples of unity becoming real and visible?
- Some people say that we've spent too much time on ecumenism while forgetting mission. What do you think is the relationship between the two?
- If we are in an 'ecumenical Winter' do you think Spring will come and if so what might it look like?
- If all the churches came together overnight, what contributions would the United Reformed Church bring to it? And what things would we gain from other Christian traditions?
- Is there a difference between work to build unity between Christians and work to build peace between faiths?