

FIVE STEPS
TO LIVING
CHRISTIAN UNITY



Steps

About the **5** Steps Series

The books in the **5** Steps Series are useful for anyone seeking bridge-building solutions to current issues. The **5** Steps series presents positive approaches for engaging with the problems that open up gaps and divisions in family, school, church, and society. Each volume presents five short chapters (or “steps”) on a single topic. Each chapter includes a relevant “excerpt” from a prominent writer, “insights” from the author, and an “example” to consider. The “example” is a real-life story that illustrates how each step can be applied in daily life.

FIVE STEPS TO LIVING CHRISTIAN UNITY

Insights and Examples

Callan Slipper



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Introduction

PROGRESS HAS BEEN REMARKABLE in the work for Christian unity. Much has changed since the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910 when it began in earnest, at first among Protestants. Indeed the tendency among some to feel a sense of failure is actually a mark of the opposite: so much has been achieved that it has become difficult to see what to do next. Most of the headline-grabbing and exciting things have been done: people pray together, attend one another's services, are gradually learning from one another and there is a sense of growing fellowship at all levels. But full unity, bringing Christians into a single, visible community, has not been reached and does not look as close as it did in the heady, ground-breaking days.

A key question that arises out of this new situation is one that has been and, in fact, is always valid. What kind of unity are we seeking?

It would be wrong to decry the work of doctrinal reconciliation, the attempt to set up cooperative, uniting or united structures, or the effort that goes into committees, reports, resolutions and all the (sometimes exhausting and dull) background work supporting the growth of Christian unity. But if unity is only about doctrine and organization it is, perhaps, in some ways almost a waste of time. It only goes a short distance in building God's reign. This is absolutely not to say that doctrine and organization are of no consequence. Indeed, they are essential to how full, visible unity can be lived out and demonstrated. But they are to serve unity, not be its substance.

The unity Jesus prayed for the night before he died was something immense. It was nothing less than the life of God shared among human beings. The Fourth Gospel shows Jesus praying: "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one" (Jn 17:22-23). Not only is this the kind of thing that would capture the attention of a troubled and weary world, responding to some of the deepest human longings, but it has the most amazing implications. It means that in Christian unity God, effectively and really, is present and active. Here and now God works upon, through and with those who

are united. Unity makes God a direct actor in human history.

The struggle to reunite the divided church, therefore, is more than an add-on to the serious work of being a Christian. It is central to establishing the rule of God. For relationships of unity between people are where God is found. Worship, especially the sacraments (however they are theologized for the majority who have them), personal prayer in the heart's silence, the Bible all appear as doors onto God, doors wide open for God to come through and be with people. But they are all in places or times set aside specifically for this. Relationships of unity, on the other hand, are where God comes at any time and everywhere into the world. God is no longer separated, sometimes seemingly almost locked away. The Holy is not restricted to the sacred — either moments or places. Building genuine relationships of unity, within the churches and among the churches, is then both the end that must be sought and the very thing that must be done to achieve that end. Without this everything else is diminished, because a church where God dwells through genuine unity, in the variety of its peoples and expressions and understandings and ways of doing things, is a church where everything is touched with gold, the gold of the living, effective presence of God.

It is not easy. The five steps offered here, along with real-life stories from Christians of various

churches that follow each step, are an attempt to explore and inspire something of this life of unity. They are presented as an organic whole, with the underlying logic linking them suggested in the title to each step, and they go from strengthening our motivation to seeing how, practically, unity can be lived. Each step also has a motto that attempts to encapsulate its meaning and may help in remembering it. All of them come out of real life, both my own and shared, since I write from within the experience of Chiara Lubich's spirituality of unity, which is both a personal discovery and a venture lived with other members of the Focolare Movement. What is put forward would hope to speak to anyone enquiring more deeply into their spiritual journey; it is most emphatically not intended only for ecumenical specialists — the enthusiasts for Christian unity who, in reality, deserve our thanks for their hard work in something so essential though not always acknowledged as such. Ecumenism, the search for Christian unity, indeed, only really makes sense if everyone is involved. It reaches out to all or it is not real unity. An ecumenism of the people, for all the people, therefore is unavoidable if what is sought is the Christian unity where God, truly, acts in and through Christ's Body on earth.

Steps

Step 1

**See the Need:
Why Bother?**

Mutual Love among Churches

The only genuine Christian reconciler will be the one who knows how to love others with the very charity of God, which brings Christ to light in each person, which goes out to all (Jesus died for the whole human race), which always takes the initiative; that charity which makes us love each person as ourselves, which makes us one with our brothers and sisters, in suffering, in joy...

And the Churches too should love with this love.

“That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 17:26), Jesus prayed. And we instead are always ready to forget his testament, to scandalize the world with our divisions, a world we should be winning for him.

Over the centuries every Church, in some way, has turned rigid through waves of indifference and misunderstanding, if not of mutual hatred. What is needed in each Church is a supplement of love. Indeed, the Christian world needs to be overwhelmed by a torrent of love.

Love, therefore, mutual love among Christians, mutual love among Churches. That love which leads to putting everything in common, each a gift to the others, so that we can foresee the future Church with one truth, one truth alone, but expressed in different ways, seen from different perspectives, made beautiful by the variety of interpretations.

Chiara Lubich¹