

What is our Unity?: A Generous Partnership of Four Congregations

Written by Jim Crowweller & Tim Riley to teach the nature and practice of church unity on the occasion of the planting of Maroubra Bay Church, August 2011

As St John's, Maroubra starts its fourth congregation, and its first off-site congregation, the question of how our 'church unity' is expressed is raised? Any church with multiple congregations asks this question, with varying degrees of idealism & angst. This paper seeks to answer this question without reference to either.

1. What is unity from the scriptures?

Unity may seem a very simple idea, but demands very careful attention to scripture which reveals a variety of 'unities', which if not attended too confuse believers and leave them divided about how to express togetherness.

This is an acute issue as St John's plants a new congregation. So let's learn unity from the scriptures, slowly and carefully.

Unity in Christ

Church unity is a theological idea found in many passages of Scripture such as Rom 12:5, 1 Cor 12:13-14, Gal 3:28. From these texts we learn that the source of our unity is found in our union with Jesus Christ through His Spirit under one Father.

This is a union which transcends time and place and unites a 'church universal'¹ of all believers. It is also a union that in extremely intimate terms within one time and place unites former enemies in one body. In Ephesians 2 both Jew and Gentile are not only united in 'theory' in Christ, but actually changed by the gospel so that they can love one another truly, in history, in practice, in churches.

Unity in Christ is an idea that is as abstract as the ages and as concrete as your neighbour. It is the over-arching framework for unity in the Scriptures.

This unity is seen in two ways - locally in the gathering or congregation (*ekklesia*), and regionally or globally in partnership or fellowship (*koinonia*).

The 'gathering' or 'congregation' - ekklesia

This unity in Christ is seen locally in single gatherings or congregations of people. The New Testament word for church is *ekklesia* – which simply means, gathering. In that sense, church is an action – not a place, or even a scattered group of people. Church happens, when people gather in Christ.

We must understand that the most basic expression of unity in the New Testament is in the gathered congregational unit.

The 'partnership' or 'fellowship' - koinonia

However, while unity is most basically expressed in single congregational units, unity in Christ extends beyond that. The word for this relationship of unity in the New Testament is *koinonia* – which simply means 'partnership' or 'fellowship' or 'sharing'.

Because we share Christ with and fellowship with other believers outside our congregation, we partner them wherever needs demands. This partnership is seen in Philippians 1 & 4, where Paul partners with the very distant Philippians, and in 2 Corinthians 8, where the Corinthians partner with the very distant Jerusalem believers.

In this case, the sheer needs of Paul in his mission, and Jerusalem in its famine demanded an expression of partnership / fellowship / sharing.

The 'household of God' – oikos theou

One other image of unity bears mention. After pointing out the requirements that an elder manage their household in 1 Timothy 3:12, Paul points out the connection to being able to lead 'God's household'.

¹ Sometimes referred to as the 'eternal church', or the 'church triumphant'.

The nature of unity that is pointed up by this phrase is that the church is not a mere organizational unit, but a set of familial relationships where we are to treat older men as fathers, younger as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger as sisters (1 Timothy 5:1). Our unity is not simply being one, but being one with a particular pattern of age-aware and gender-aware relationships.

So we see that unity in the New Testament is not a simple unity. It is a simple spiritual unity in Christ, but expressed with great complexity in local congregational units, and in the relationships between them, and in the age & gendered nature of those relationships.

Let's apply this theology to the practice of St John's.

2. What are the 'unities' of St Johns?

The historical idea of 'the parish' might lead us to believe that St John's is a simple unity. According to this thinking, if it's in Maroubra and operates under the auspice of St John's – it's the one church. This is not biblically true.

There is no concept of a 'parish' in the New Testament.

In most of the New Testament letters there appears to be one church in each town/city (such as in Ephesus, Thessalonica, and Corinth) and most of these churches meet in people's homes (See 1Cor 16:19, Col 4:15). However there appears that in some places, individual churches either identify with a larger group of churches (see references to the churches in Judea Gal 1:22, 1 Thess 2:14) or work as a larger group (see Colossi and Laodicea in Col 4:16). It also appears that in the larger cities such as Rome, there may have been many house churches (see Rom 16:3) that would have received the one letter from Paul (The Epistle to the Romans). But unifying them all is the spiritual reality that in Christ they are all united. However, they are unified and complete in their own congregations (*ekklesias*), and they expressed their partnership (*koinonia*) between congregations in different ways depending on geography and other historical relationships.

So what are we to make of all this?

Parishes with multiple congregations operate in a similar fashion to the combination of local congregations in the New Testament. So we say...

'St John's, Maroubra is to be a generous partnership of four congregations.'

Let's express this in other terms to try and drive home the point – St John's is a fellowship of four churches. A sharing between four gatherings. One 'Church' of four churches. It is a *koinonia* of *ekklesia*'s.

Therefore, **we are aiming for a marriage of both inter-connectedness and independence.** We want to see the right hand of fellowship extended within the separateness of independent gatherings. So let us detail our inter-connected partnership, and our congregational independence.

3. How is the *partnership* expressed at St Johns?

St John's is a partnership that has wonderfully developed and is owing to a variety of shared features. We will outline these shared features below to show the history of the partnership, but also to show the pattern for its future, as God wills.

1. Gospel

Our unity is based in the gospel of Christ, and in the common theological convictions. Critical theological positions will be clarified via the 'ministry papers' on the church website.

2. Ministry Plan & Overseeing Governance

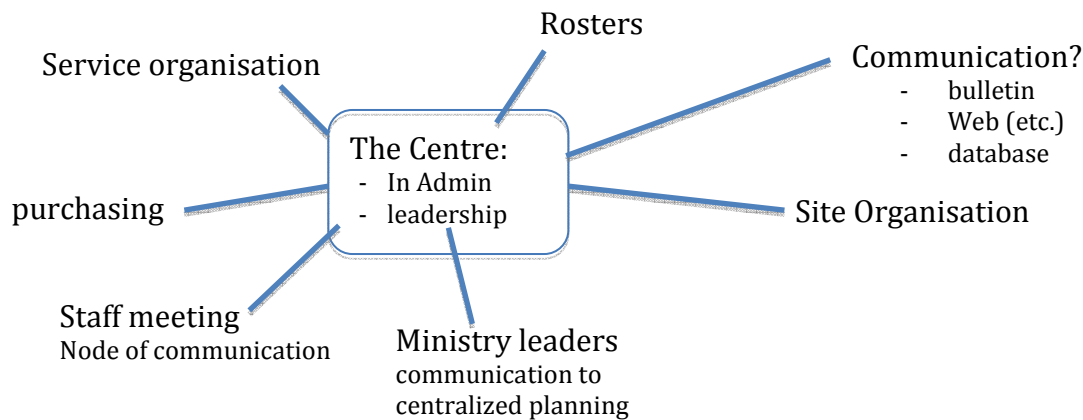
Our unity is seen in the St John's Ministry Plan that speaks of one leadership team (staff and Parish Council) with four congregations sharing finances and governance.

3. Staff

St John's unity is seen in a single staff team that works together across a range of ministries guided by the gospel of our Lord and by the Ministry Plan.

4. Centralised Administration

St John's unity is seen through a centralized administration. One administrator streamlines a number of processes that link all four congregations together. This is diagrammed below as a template for a complex administrative centre. This template will need to shape features of admin, and the job description of the administrator at the next job review.



5. Style

Our unity is seen in a particular style of both appearance and manner.

Appearance: local, people-oriented, uncluttered, fresh, irreverent, laid-back.

(eg. the website, event publications)

Manner: preaching-centric, small-group promoting, clarity with depth, polished.

(eg. our liturgy, preaching)

6. Shared Ministries

Our unity is seen in the way we serve together. People from different congregations serve each other in various ways. We want to be clear about what ministries will be promoted as cross-congregational expressions of our partnership.

- Prayer meetings – we need to clarify these in style and regularity and leadership.
- KAOS (Sunday School) – dependant on key decisions about future kids ministries at MBC.
- Roast (youth Group)
- A few select bible study groups where mature eldership is required among young believers.
- Christmas & Easter – this means MBC will NOT run Good Friday services or Easter Sunday, or Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services.
- Bi-annual Weekend Away – this will demand the setting up of a cross-congregational team.
- Prayer for each congregation by each congregation (rostered prayers of fellowship)
- There is an open question regarding kids club participation – is this a mission of the whole, or merely of some parts?

7. Congregational Transitions

Our unity is seen also in the encouragement that people can move between congregations of St John's without the idea that you are 'leaving your church'. That is, people move from KAOS into Roast as they grew up. They move from Roast into 6pm or MBC as they graduate. They move from 6pm or MBC into 10am church if their kids are Sunday School aged. And some move from 10am to 8.30am when their kids have moved on! This natural progression shows our unity.

8. Personal Relationships

There are close relational connections across all congregations. It is accurate to describe us as 'one church' at this less theological, and more colloquial level. This will never mean that everybody knows everybody, but there is potential to know others from other congregations through shared history, vision and ministry.

9. Help Ministry

One philosophy of pastoral care is common among all congregations. It's principles are stated in The ministry paper entitled 'why we don't believe in pastoral care'.

10. Ministry Partners

Our final expression of unity comes through our joint consensus concerning who we are prayerfully and financially supporting in the work of the gospel outside of our St John's ministries (currently CMS - the Bennetts, Hornes, Broxholmes; Anglicare - Stuart Admason & Colin Sheehan; ICM – Harry & Julie Turner).

4. How is the congregational independence expressed at St Johns?

We must affirm biblically that each congregation is its own church. This demands a degree of self-governing ownership and independent congregational life. How is this expressed?

1. Pastoral Leadership

While we have staff who will all appear at various times at all congregations, each congregation is expected to honour and appreciate the direct leadership of its pastor. In our situation – 8.30 & 10 to Jim Crowther, and 6pm & MBC to Tim Riley. Likewise, Roast should look to the Youth Co-ordinator, and KAOS to Joel Horscroft-Smith.

2. Congregational Governance

Each congregation is encouraged to be led by a congregational team which will take responsibility for the spiritual health of the congregation alongside the pastor.

3. Stylistic Distinctives

While all congregations should express the common appearance and manner set out above (in '5. Style'), each will embody this style with its own distinctives.

4. Help Ministry

The common principle of the Help Ministry ought to be clear at all services (help first yourself, get your home group to help if the need is greater, then ask the church if the need is still too great), but we need to develop a pastoral care organizer at each service now.

5. Organisational Chart

This chart will be imported in late 2011

6. Questions for Small Group Discussions

1. Read page 1 – put up the headings 'ekklesia' & 'koinonia' and see if you can summarise as a group these concepts of unity.
2. What do you think are the strengths of the phrase 'a generous partnership of four congregations'?
3. Do you feel the same way if we put it as 'a fellowship of four churches'?
4. Could people be nervous about the idea of 'independent' congregations? Are there good reasons to be nervous?
5. What protects us against possible negative aspects of independence?
6. Do you think there are important features of 'inter-connectedness' that have been missed in this article?
7. Please pray for each of the congregations & for our united mission in Maroubra.