

An evangelical imperative: Christian unity

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

George Lindbeck's thoughtful reflections in this issue on the state of ecumenism set me to ruminating on my own ecumenical experience. It also reminded me that this journal has been ecumenically minded from its inception. For a time it even described itself as an "ecumenical weekly" (and before that as an "undenominational weekly").

My initial exposure to ecumenism occurred in the fall of my first year in seminary when my wife and I were asked to represent the University of Chicago Divinity School at the Church Federation of Chicago's annual meeting. We dressed up in our best clothes, took the train into the Loop, and found our way to the big hotel ballroom, the poshest space we had ever been in. We joined a huge throng of people festively gathered around tables with white tableclothes, centerpieces and more silverware than seemed necessary.

Seated at the head table were some of the most influential city leaders, including Mayor Richard J. Daley, who spoke about how important the Church Federation was to the city. It was a racially diverse gathering, and a speaker from the National Council of Churches talked about the civil rights movement and the critical role the ecumenical churches were playing in it. I was inspired. I thought I had experienced a little bit of God's kingdom on earth.

Ecumenism has been part of my ministry in each congregation I have served. I found the post-Vatican II openness between Protestants and Catholics bracing and exciting. When a Roman Catholic campus pastor at Purdue and I engaged in a dialogue sermon at an ecumenical service, it made the front page of the local newspaper.

When I returned to Chicago 25 years after seminary, I happily accepted a position on the board of that same Church Federation. At one of the first meetings I attended, we voted on a resolution to declare bankruptcy and dissolve the organization. Two

mission units—a broadcast ministry and an anti-hunger program—were spun off, and they continue to do good work. But the disappearance of the Church Federation means there is no citywide organization or event that brings congregations together.

I miss the old structures, though I understand why they ran out of steam. Interfaith issues loomed and, as Lindbeck observes, the old ecumenical movement never did include evangelicals, Pentecostals and Roman Catholics. What I lament most, next to the fact that there is no large, public symbolic gathering of churches, is that the unity we seek seems more and more fragile within our own denominational families.

Christian unity is a gift we are given and which we can graciously receive and practice, or refuse. Unity is at least as important as the peace and purity of the church—something we Presbyterians promise at our ordinations to promote. Paul, in 1 Corinthians, and Jesus, in his prayer that his disciples might be one “so that the world may believe,” understood the evangelical imperative of Christian unity. Part of our witness is that in Jesus Christ we belong together whether we want to or not.