

Archbishop Stephen writes in this month's [New Directions](#) magazine, reflecting that the bonds we have in Christ, and with one another through our baptism fixes us together as the body of Christ. The article follows in full...

We live in a culture and inherit a history where disagreement usually leads to division, division to conflict, and conflict to schism. I'm sure I will be called naive, but I dream of a better story.

On the night before Jesus died, he didn't say to his disciples that they would be known as his followers by their agreement with one another, but by their love.

The history of the church has, sadly, been a history of disagreement. And often this has led to conflict and separation. However, in the last century, and through the birth and influence of the ecumenical movement, we have seen the tide slowly beginning to turn. At the heart of this has been the recovery of baptismal identity and the recognition of a common baptism. This has allowed us to make space for one another with disagreements and not in spite of them.

I wonder whether we need to apply the same ecumenical theology to some of our own internal disagreements as members of the Church of England and the worldwide Anglican Communion.

I long for us to share a common table, to break one bread, and to share the common cup. The Eucharist is right at the heart of my own spirituality, and my own understanding of what it means to be the Church. I find it viscerally painful to be at a Roman Catholic celebration of the Eucharist and not be able to receive Communion and I've learned to endure the same pain within the Church of England itself. We have lived now for many years with impaired communion. In my new role as Primate of the Northern Province, I recently presided from the chair at the ordination of the new Bishop of Beverley. But other bishops presided at the consecration and the Eucharist itself. With my high doctrine of church order and Eucharist, I found this difficult. If you examine it too closely, it doesn't always make a lot of theological sense. But it works pastorally. It holds us together. And provided we choose to inhabit this slightly muddled, ecclesial structure with generosity and grace, we offer the world a better story, one where disagreement no longer leads to division, but to mutual flourishing, and one which is marked by the love that Jesus asks of us as the surest sign of our discipleship. And at this service, I was particularly impressed, by the gracious generosity of the many female bishops in attendance.

Such a way of living with profound disagreement, absolutely requires two things. The first, is that we do not have separate jurisdictions. We are still the one Church of England, but providing pastoral, and, where necessary, sacramental space for those who are unable to conscientiously inhabit some of our more recent developments in faith and order. So, in the consecration I just referred to, although I had no part in the sacramental ministry of the service, the new bishop still pledged 'due reverence and obedience' to me in my office, as Archbishop of York and Metropolitan.

The second is baptism. Despite the ongoing pain I experience in our impaired communion, I have come to see that water is thicker than blood, and that the bonds we have in Christ, and with one another through our baptism fixes us together as the body of Christ in ways that simply do not permit us the luxury of saying, as it were the eye to the hand, I don't need you. Of course, we live in our tribes, societies, groupings and even denominations. It has ever been thus. And these things can provide many benefits. But baptism is deeper and more binding and cannot be undone. Therefore, I dream for the Church of England a better and more beautiful story where, even with the challenge of our current disagreements, we learn to inhabit a space where, although from time to time, we will be sitting at separate tables, we are still in the same room, recognising the image of the same Christ in one another, delighting in each other's well-being and flourishing and refusing to give in to the pull of human history and human culture that would drive us apart.

We think our current disagreements are about sex and gender and sexuality. I rather suspect they are also about power. And I am deeply sorry for the times I may have mis-used mine. But I am also determined to try and faithfully follow the one who, for love of fallen, muddled, and broken humanity laid aside his majesty, emptied himself of all but love, and showed us a better way. It is into his dying and rising that we are baptised and it is this that makes us the Church. There is so much more we long to reveal about our unity and identity in Christ. But there must never be less.

Let us then strive to inhabit one Church of England, a Church of England where there is room for conscientious disagreement, and where we welcome those with whom we disagree because they may turn out to be the unexpected angels in whom Christ will be present to us, and show us in his gentle doggedness where we have got things wrong.

Thank you, New Directions for the opportunity to briefly expand my thoughts on a throwaway line from a very short speech in Synod that water is thicker than blood. Baptism cannot be undone. Let it therefore be the cord that holds us together even when the spaces between us seem large and unbridgeable.

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