**Reflections on the Ecumenical Plunge by Rev. Matt Bridges (FUMC-Lovington)**

When I boarded my first flight, which was at 4:35 am Lubbock Time, to get to Geneva on July 17th, I didn’t know what to expect from the two weeks ahead of me. I knew I was part of a great opportunity to expand my skills and knowledge of effective ecumenical dialogue, but did I really know how that was going to happen or whom it was going to happen with? Nope. Not really much at all. I knew I would be in Switzerland and France, and I had read a couple of books to help prepare me in some ways of what to expect, but I purposefully did not do a lot of research because I was excited to let the weeks and lessons unfold. I am glad I approached this experience this way.

  Those two weeks have changed me and helped articulate better the ways we seek unity as followers of Christ, the church. The trip overall helped me feel hope again in areas where I feel hope for our unity waning.

The trip itself was split up into two ways, much like discourse on ecumenism is split up: faith and order, and life and works.

**I. Faith and Order**

The first week was spent touring different global organizations, both secular and non-secular, and either gleaning knowledge through tours and guides, or being treated to wonderful lectures from authorities of various aspects of ecumenical dialogue. This would definitely fall into the category of studying ecumenism in a “faith and order” way as we looked for the ways that our theology comes together, remains apart, and how we can seek unity anyway. For example, touring the United Nations and understanding the big picture of that type of conversation and diplomacy was great, especially because that branch of the United Nations is focused on more humanitarian efforts from a largely secular perspective. These tours were followed up by group discussion and pondering how we as Christians seeking unity for all of God’s creation actively take part, where we are passive, and even where we might be a detriment to those unifying efforts.

In other locations we visited, the tours were coupled with guest lectures and my hand cramping from how much I was writing (cue seminary nostalgia….but only a little!). At the World Council of Churches, I was honored to be a part of a series of mini-lectures from different heads of the departments who shared with us the “how and why” of their particular part in the World Council of Churches. For example, a fascinating and utterly crucial department is obviously the communications department. They are tasked with drafting, revising, consulting, and moderating worldwide discussion as it relates to both interdenominational and interfaith relations. The complexity is incredible in the work that goes into translation, hospitality, understanding and teaching norms along socio-cultural-religious lines. I found this particular lecture standing out for me and thinking about the impact this kind of consideration for our communication could have on a more local level.

**II. Life and Works: A Community Called Taize.**

  With a head a little fuller of some of the macro understanding of ecumenism, we set our sights on Taize, a monastery in Northeastern France, established in the 1930’s-40’s. Before Taize, when I thought of a monastery, it was mainly in the most basic and stereotypical of ways. I viewed them as all following some form of the same recipe: quaint, humble, quiet, faithful, passive, worshipful, prayerful, disciplined, and perhaps a need to be satisfied being hungry. I experienced all of these characteristics, but I didn’t experience them at once, and certainly not all the time.

  I experienced all of these characteristics, but it was in the context of being among 3,200 and 3,500 people from at least 51 countries (I lost count at 51). Worship was a mix of a cacophony of languages and voices all forming into one voice whether we were singing songs, or praying and reading Scripture in our native tongues. It was also an incredible time of silence. I’ve never experienced anything like thousands of people sitting, kneeling, and standing together in the same room, and accomplishing a sacred silence. And though the silence was between eight and ten minutes each time, it sometimes felt like an eternity, sometimes felt like a second. No matter what, each time was a true Kairos “moment.”

I definitely experienced the life and works components of ecumenism because we had to seek unity in everything to make our lives work in that environment. Our unity, or even just a curiosity, in Christ, truly transcended the social/cultural barriers in our daily lives at Taize. We laughed over and supported the different ways our faith in God is made manifest in a wide variety of contexts. We held each other in high regard as a child of God who could contribute life-giving skills to building the Kingdom of God.

**III. So what?**

  This is a question I asked myself throughout the trip. So what? I went to Taize and had an amazing experience. So what now? I wanted to, and accomplished, bringing home new big-picture ways, and small-picture ways to seek out unity throughout the Body of Christ not only for my local context, for my context within the New Mexico Annual Conference. What I have gained from this first trip is a new hope for unity among God’s people, even in the midst of our struggles and strife.  I have seen that the Body of Christ can in fact work together to build the kingdom of God and that’s definitely a waning and often mocked message in America. It is too often met with cynicism in too many of our current contexts of ministry in our Annual Conferences.

So, “So What?” I want to be available any time and any place this hope of unity is sought out within the conference. My ultimate goal, which was built up by this trip but sparked long before, is I want to be an advocate to help bring people together for life-changing, kingdom-building, reasons. I want to help in the messy negotiations of ecumenism in the Conference and beyond, whether the tasks are interdenominational, or interfaith. I want to help foster discussion that brings people together in unity as God’s children where faith and order come into play, or where life and works comes into play. I look forward to sharing more with you about this trip I have been on as a representative of the New Mexico Annual Conference, but also how we can put ecumenism into practice in our conference in new ways.

**Reflections on the Ecumenical Plunge by Pastor Josh Stueve (FUMC-Alpine/Marfa)**

As a young pastor seeking to navigate pastoral ministry in the local church, I found this immersion experience to be highly significant. Near the end of our trip, I was struck by the powerful statement that unity makes during divisive times such as these. This realization has led me to believe the church should be a prophetic voice for unity today.

I valued this trip as both ecumenical and international. The ‘plunge’ gave space for me to experience global Christianity and to witness the fruit of leaders in the ecumenical movement. A meaningful moment for me took place at the World Council of Churches while meeting with various staff and lecturers. After introductions, I realized there were Christians from various traditions coming from North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa all gathered in a classroom in Geneva to dialogue on the role of ecumenism in worship, mission, and evangelism. As the center of the church shifts to the global south, tradition and culture will impact how we all do church. I caught a glimpse of this taking place at the World Council and I feel more unified because of it.

Perhaps the most beneficial part of this trip was exploring ecumenism alongside other young leaders within our tradition. Traveling, living, eating, worshipping, studying, standing in lines, and walking together gave this group ample time to question, talk, and process the stories we heard and ministry we saw. In my first year of ministry I often felt disconnected from our connection. In west Texas, I am physically far from other United Methodist clergy and am one of the few under 40 years old. This trip gave me a chance to connect with other leaders with similar backgrounds from around the United States (including two others from my Jurisdiction). At Taize, we spent a lot of time exploring the community and discussing what ecumenism looks like in our contexts. As a group, we discovered deeply intentional signs of unity spread all over the Taize community and shared how we can bring the same intentionality back to our congregations, Annual Conferences, and denomination.

This trip has inspired me to make greater efforts of Christian unity in west Texas. I have scheduled a meeting with my bishop, Earl Bledsoe, for early fall. Also, I have met with others clergy in my local context. We have begun dreaming about how we can *better* worship, be in community, and advocate for justice *together*. Specifically, we have pinpointed both ecumenical dialogues at our local university student ministry centers and a week’s worth of worship and mission during the week of prayer for Christian unity. I believe this plunge has equipped me to lead in this work, offered a grounding for me to advocate for unity, and helped me to understand how to build bridges instead of walls.