

Unity Pilgrims

What does it mean to practise Christian unity?







What is this booklet about?

This booklet explains the purpose and practice of the Clonard Unity Pilgrims, a group of Catholic Christians who regularly visit services of other Christian denominations. The aim of this booklet is to encourage other followers of Jesus to adopt the practice of visiting other faith communities as part of their communal worship.

The Unity Pilgrims began in the 1990s and were led by Fr Gerry Reynolds CSsR at Clonard Monastery, Belfast. The practice of visiting other faith communities stemmed from Fr Gerry's desire to physically move beyond the boundaries of his own faith community and to sow the seeds of relationship with other people of Christian faith, particularly in Protestant congregations. A key reason for the Unity Pilgrims' practice is to take seriously the words of Jesus when he prayed that his followers would be one.

I pray for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you.
(John 17:20-21)

This resource booklet is one component of a project considering the legacy of Fr Gerry, primarily in inter-church relationships and peace-making. It has been supported by a Queen's University Belfast impact grant, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK). The information here has been compiled from focus groups with Unity Pilgrims and other people who have taken part in visiting communities of faith. Quotations from these groups have been used to more directly communicate their thoughts and experiences.

It was Fr Gerry's vision that groups of people like the Unity Pilgrims could inspire and contribute to unity not only in Belfast, but also in other parts of the world scarred by division.

What is the practice of the Unity Pilgrims?

The Unity Pilgrims' desire is simply to worship God through the practice of visiting other congregations. They seek to develop connection between followers of Jesus across a region that is divided both physically (by peace walls and the division of places into religious and/or political communities) and spiritually (by worshipping in congregations who rarely meet each other). At the heart of their practice is a look forward to the day when all followers of Jesus will be one, in the hope that God, 'in His own way and own time, will grant the gift of full visible communion to all of the Christian churches.' *¹

The Unity Pilgrims' model is based around a 'way of being', demonstrated by the Pilgrims' prayerful actions before, during and after the visits. When they arrive at a Protestant congregation, they spread themselves out, thereby increasing the likelihood of conversation and connection with the people of that church. While it is common practice for the minister or church leaders to be made aware of the Unity Pilgrims' visit ahead of the service, nothing is asked of the host church other than the privilege of being with them in worship.

¹ 'Catholic Unity Pilgrims: Parishioners Enhancing Faith and Church,' 2010, multiple anonymous authors; with a commendation from Noel Treanor, Bishop of Down and Connor.



What is meant by Unity?

The idea of 'unity' recognises that while the church, the body of Jesus, may be divided into denominations (particularly those of Catholic faith, reformed (Protestant) traditions and congregations who do not describe themselves as either) people of Christian faith are still united by their desire to follow the life of Jesus Christ. Unity Pilgrims seek to develop this unity, without any desire for uniformity in worship. They not only accept that there are many differences in tradition and religious practice, but that differences should be embraced and cherished, because they can reveal different aspects of belief, and ultimately how the kingdom of God is understood and expressed in different ways.

Visits to other faith communities are respectful, and without criticism or critique of another tradition's practice. Unity Pilgrims also desire to worship with the congregation they are visiting, and so they do not simply observe what is taking place from a distance.

'We're not asking for uniformity of worship, it's about diversity, God creates diversity and we must respect that, so I feel very enriched by all the services I have gone to. We need to learn to live with difference with a compassionate heart.'

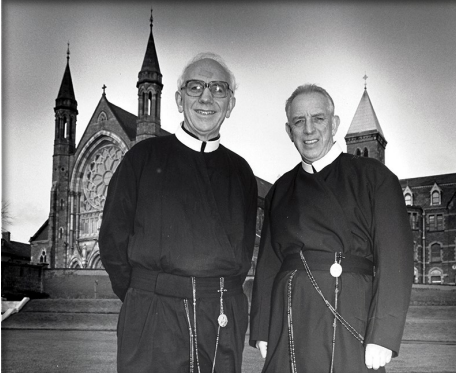
Who was Fr Gerry Reynolds?

Fr Gerry Reynolds (1935-2015) was a Redemptorist priest who lived and worked at Clonard Monastery in Belfast, from 1983, until his death. Fr Gerry's ministry focussed on bringing people of Christian faith together. What began as personal enthusiasm in the early part of Fr Gerry's life in the Republic of Ireland, took on greater importance when he came to live in Northern Ireland, where divisions between Catholics and Protestants mattered much more. Fr Gerry believed:

'A divided Church has little or nothing to offer towards leading a divided people into the way of peace. In the Northern Ireland conflict, divided churches have cost lives.'

Fr Gerry found ways to promote peace and Christian unity in his work as a priest. His engagement with other people of faith often led to action beyond a church service or meeting.

Along with fellow Redemptorist Fr Alec Reid, Fr Gerry helped facilitate secret peace talks among key political and religious leaders which assisted in bringing the Troubles to an end.



Fr Gerry also contributed to the peace process by developing a passionate, public inter-church ministry. An example of this was his friendship with the Rev Ken Newell and the formation of the Clonard-Fitzroy Fellowship with Fitzroy Presbyterian Church. This provided safe, private spaces for people to encounter each other on a human and spiritual level, as well as organising public events related to Christian unity.

Fr Gerry was also deeply involved with the Cornerstone Community, an inter-church residential community located along the Springfield Road in Belfast. Cornerstone modelled an alternative way of living together in the middle of sectarian violence, rooted in daily, structured prayers for peace. It also made it possible for pairs of one Catholic and one Protestant to visit bereaved and traumatised families in west and north Belfast during the Troubles.

The Unity Pilgrims were formed after Fr Gerry visited with a congregation on the Shankill Road in Belfast in 1994. Over the following weeks, Fr Gerry continued walking through the peace wall to join other Protestant congregations for worship, inviting Catholic members of the Cornerstone Community as well as others who worshipped at Clonard to come with him. In time, the group became known as the Unity Pilgrims.

Because of Fr Gerry's patient relationship-building over previous years, the Unity Pilgrims were warmly received by the Protestant congregations. They were also respectful about how they went about their visits, arranging the date beforehand with the minister. They emphasised that they came in friendship to worship – not to convert others.

Fr Gerry Reynolds' life demonstrated his belief that the unity of Christians was already a reality, even if there were difficulties (such as being able to join together for Eucharist/communion). He often repeated the phrase, 'the walls of separation do not reach to heaven'.

'We see our visits as planting seeds of friendship and prayer.'

Why do some Christians choose to visit other congregations?

There are a variety of reasons as to why people do this, but at heart, there is a recognition that God is present in other faith communities and so they had a desire to practise the unity of all followers of Jesus by being present in other places. Many see this as a key aspect of following Jesus. Mutual understanding stems from this; people want to be open to other expressions of faith, and other ideas and ways of doing things. There is a recognition that experiencing another environment and other practices is something they feel enriched and refreshed by.

‘There is a rightness in it; Christians worshipping together, as they are supposed to, but has been fractured over the two thousand years.’

‘The voice of Christ praying for unity... that prayer came from the gut... when I read those passages in [the gospel of] John about unity, I read them and I feel them... [so] when we go out [to other churches] we pray that as Christ wills it and he sees it, it will come.’

‘Mutual understanding is a huge part of it. It’s about opening your mind to other ways of looking at things, and I’m always open to that.’

Some people had grown up with this interest and had the opportunities to do so. Others responded to an invitation to visit, particularly if it was a specific event or service. Others felt strongly that creating greater meaningful contact between Catholics and Protestants was important, because for some people, there weren’t many aspects of their lives where that happened.

‘Any time we can get people together, who are from different sides of the fence, is important, because there aren’t many parts of our lives where that happens, for some people.’

‘It seemed to me to be a great loss, that I had no way of meeting anybody, outside of being Catholic.’

‘There are divisions [in society] still, and they’re getting worse. The presence of the Unity Pilgrims shows there are ways to heal from the bottom upwards, even if it is only in a very small way.’

It’s part of every Christian’s call because it’s an opportunity to live out unity in a place that’s divided.’

‘In Northern Ireland there are big divisions between Catholic and Protestant, quite a lot of people never go near a church. I think it is a duty for those who do go to church... to follow the ways of Christ as an example to those who are bitterly divided by religion, but never go near a church.’



What are the effects of visiting other congregations?

The groups who helped develop this resource commented on a wide variety of effects. Many felt they benefited personally as being present with other followers of Jesus could be a moving experience, often with a sense of ‘rightness’ as people from different traditions experienced unity in worship. There was recognition that engagement with people from another faith community might often be a brief encounter, but it was nevertheless important, in that moment, to express interest in someone else and what they were doing. Many considered it to be important to live in a way that allowed opportunities to experience other people’s perspectives, and that this is central to following the way of Jesus.

‘Just being with other congregations, demonstrated that we were interested in what those folk were doing and being open enough to learn from what was happening in those services and in the wider congregation.

It’s an opportunity to say, we are worshipping God alongside you.’

A visit to another faith community can therefore be about encouragement, as a larger view of the church and what God is doing in the world is experienced. A common effect from this activity was how people felt their faith was strengthened as they engaged in worship with others.

There was a sense of refreshment, and for some, a sense of excitement as they felt they discovered the work of God in other places and through other people; especially so, if the activity was bringing people together in a way that healed divisions in both the church and society. There was a strong belief that God has created people to be diverse, and so activity that recognises and celebrates the diversity of faith is enriching as it teaches us to embrace difference and live compassionately.

‘Coming to a mass and sitting and absorbing the atmosphere.... you have a sense of the peace and presence of the Lord and some of our guys were realising that other people had what we had in our church.’

‘I was very challenged by Fr Gerry and by Clonard being amongst us and I felt we were very enriched by them being with us... the two churches were brought closer together.’

‘Unity Pilgrims go in a spirit of goodwill and in common humanity. What they do and how they do it is pleasing to God. That has sustained me.’

New experiences can also be about challenge, however, on a number of levels. The experience of another community and tradition challenged people’s own prejudices and how they have thought about others – sometimes addressing prejudices not recognised before. Encouragement and strengthening of faith can also be accompanied by an intense sorrow stemming from a realisation of how divided the church of Jesus can be – though this sorrow can also be the beginning of a desire to heal divisions.

A different experience of worship can also help people to consider their own tradition differently. Some people involved in this activity commented on how, when they returned to their own tradition, they were more able to experience it as someone coming from outside it. This prompted them to consider how accessible their tradition was to others, as well as how they took care of visitors and extended a welcome to them. It also helped them to better appreciate the aspects of their tradition they felt were important to them, as well as challenged them adopt other helpful practices.

‘There were challenges to me; challenges to my prejudices, but not necessarily in a Catholic-Protestant way. Some of my prejudices were more about social, theological, ethnic divides. There were services I felt hugely uncomfortable in, they were just not me, but yet I knew I was in the right place, and I was learning from it.’

Unity Pilgrims is about a way of life. When I came to the group, I was very narrow minded... but I was taught to look at life through other people's eyes.'

'Having experienced many different congregations, when I came back to mass, I felt like I was doing that as a Presbyterian, or a Baptist or from the Elim church. I would experience the mass as someone from another church... and think about how I, as a Catholic, encounter others.
It's a very powerful experience.'

In a small number of cases, having an 'open' connection with other local congregations allowed some people to more easily acknowledge and share their own background, if it was in a different tradition. There was a sense that, because of the recognition of the unity shared with other faith communities, people felt more accepted for who they are in a new community they had chosen, and that their background and affiliations were accepted as part of a diverse community.

'We have people from both sides of the community... some attend with us, but also go to mass and [having this link] makes that constituency feel more safe; that they are accepted for who they are and we are not questioning that they follow Jesus based on their Catholic background.'

Although the initial aim of visiting other faith communities was not necessarily to develop long term relationships, in certain circumstances these developed. There was much comment about how relationships warmed between the communities visited and the visitors, beginning with politeness and even wariness, warming to welcome and trust over time. As relationships developed, conversation deepened. More questions were asked, and more experience was shared. Common ground was then created not only for friendships to grow, but also for discussion of issues often considered to be divisive.

Having visited over a period of years ... that has built up over time to where our community now feels a real kindred spirit to Clonard, which is very special... There is a joint walking together.'

'The atmosphere changed, from a coolness and wonderment about why we were there, to an acceptance and then a warmth. People went out of their way to make us welcome.'

Finally, there was also some discussion of the effect of this practice on the wider church, as well as wider society. It was recognised that the Unity Pilgrims were always small in number, as were similar groups in other places.

There was, however, a sense that the activity of a few, prompted thought in others, and that the very presence of these groups demonstrated there were ways to heal divisions, even if it is only in a small way.

“Sometimes you wondered what you were going to such lengths for; then you realised it was something you needed to do, because the society around can be so divided and there’s such a lack of trust.”



What preparation work is needed for a visit to another faith community?

While the act of attending another place of worship is, in itself, very simple, to attend from the intention that you are seeking more than just being there, requires different stages of preparation.

Firstly, it will be helpful to be clear in your own mind about your reasons for visiting. It might be useful to look back at previous sections in this booklet that examine the reasons for and the effects of visiting other communities, and to consider what is most relevant in your context. It is also helpful to do this with a group of others, even if the group is very small. This is, after all, an activity to bring the body of Jesus closer together.

Secondly, choose carefully where your first visit(s) are going to be. Is your group prepared, at least to begin with, to visit a community with completely different traditions? Would it be easier to start with another local church that has more similarities to your own? There is no right answer here, visiting somewhere very different is not something to be avoided, but the initial capacity of your group should be taken into consideration.

Out of courtesy, it is important to ask the leader (minister, priest, pastor or otherwise) of the community you are intending to visit, if the nature and timing of the visit is suitable. This might make your visit sound more official or formal than you think it is, however, giving a leader prior notice of your visit allows them the opportunity to think about whether or not they want to welcome you during the service, and if they do, how they want to do that. Depending on the size of the congregation you are visiting, the alternative might be to leave the leader of another church community wondering all through the service, why there is suddenly a new group of people present!

Spiritual preparation is important. How will your group pray and direct their thoughts towards what will happen at the service? The experience of the Unity Pilgrims is that while there were many moments of connection with other people at a service, these encounters were prepared for by prayer and preparation during the week. The next two sections offer suggestions for prayer and reflection that might be helpful to you.

There are also practical considerations, for example, arranging what time you are going to arrive at a place of worship, and where you are going to sit. It is the practice of the Unity Pilgrims not to sit together, but to spread out so that conversation can take place with a larger number of people, and in small groups. If there are only two or three of you, then this might not be your practice, but it is important to think about how you can be a non-threatening presence. It will also be helpful to think in advance about what you might say to someone near you after the service has finished, or, in some cases, during the hum of conversation before the service starts. How will you explain why you are visiting?

Finally, if the denomination or faith community is not known to you, it might be helpful to find out something about their practice before you attend. This isn't necessary, nor should it become a massive research task, but a little knowledge of traditions different from your own, the symbolism in the building or the aspects of the service, and basic beliefs of a denomination might make parts of the visit a little more accessible to you.



What part does prayer have?

The Unity Pilgrims consider prayer to be at the very centre of all their activity. They meet for prayer midweek, before a visit to another faith community at the weekend, and they also meet for prayer before they travel to another place of worship. They often continue to pray for followers of Jesus they have met and the communities they have visited.

Included below are some prayers that have been helpful to the Unity Pilgrims. The section after includes texts from Scripture that may also be helpful places to lead into prayer and reflection.

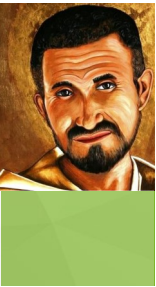
Fr Gerry was inspired by the work of Fr Paul Couturier (1881-1953), a strong believer in the power of praying for Christian unity; and Brother Charles of Jesus (Blessed Charles de Foucauld, 1858-1916), who was martyred when living as a hermit in the Algerian Sahara. Fr Gerry and the Unity Pilgrims regularly used these prayers of these men and were inspired by their example.

Fr Paul Couturier's prayer for the unity of Christ's disciples in his body, the church:



Lord Jesus,
who on the eve of your death,
prayed that all your disciples might be one,
as you in the Father and the Father in you,
make us feel intense sorrow over the infidelity of our disunity.
Give us the honesty to recognise,
and the courage to reject,
whatever indifference towards one another,
or mutual distrust,
or even enmity,
lie hidden within us.
Enable us to meet one another in you.
And let your prayer for the unity of Christians,
be ever in our hearts and on our lips,
unity such as you desire and by the means that you will.
Make us find the way that leads to unity in you,
who are perfect charity,
through being obedient to the Spirit of love and truth.
Amen.

Brother Charles of Jesus' Prayer of Abandonment:



Father, I abandon myself into your hands;
Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do I thank you;
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
And in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you,
With all the love of my heart,
For I love you, Lord,
And so need to give myself,
To surrender myself into your hands,
Without reserve,
And with boundless confidence,
For you are my Father.

Other prayers used by the Unity Pilgrims:

God our Father,
Thank you for calling us together.
Thank you for the gift of faith in Jesus your Son.
Thank you for our Christian heritage.
Give us a deeper sense of who we are,
A deeper sense of the church,
A deeper sense of your mission.
Open our ears and our hearts to the voice of the Spirit,
So that we may build up your kingdom on earth.
We ask this through your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ,
We, whom you chose to be your followers,
Have, through the ages, been unfaithful to your call.
We have separated from one another,
Engaged in combat against one another,
And have been slow to repent.
Forgive our sinfulness and lack of contrition.
Help us to walk the path of true friendship and dialogue,
So that we may be reunited in the bonds of truth and love.
Amen.

God our Father,
You are the eternal shepherd who never leaves His flock untended.
You watch over us and protect us always.
You founded your church to stand firm forever,
As a sign on earth of your holiness
And as a living gospel so that all people might hear.
Give us wisdom to discern your will for the church,
Strength to carry it out,
And courage to go where you lead us.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.

Norbert of Xanten (St Norbert 1075-1174) believed Christian community should be about living together with a shared value system and beliefs. The first sentence of his community's rule said, 'Be of one mind and heart in God'. One of his prayers reads:



Blessed are you whose conscience is in peace.
You do not ignore your faults, your weaknesses or your omissions.
But you are trusting.
If your heart condemns you, you know that God
is more tender than your heart.

Blessed are you who radiate peace.
The violence of your neighbour dies at your feet.
You dispel aggression, you break up hostility,
And those around you discover the taste of kind brotherhood.

Blessed are you, the peaceful, builders of peace between
groups, social classes, nations and continents.
Wherever there is mistrust, division, incomprehension,
Your arbitration brings mutual respect,
union and friendly co-existence.

Blessed are you who live in the peace of your God.
Your faith is victorious over anguish.
And the Lord is, as he declared he would be,
no longer a master, but a friend.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
the world belongs to their calm kindness.



What parts of Scripture are helpful to reflect on?

Some texts have been included below, that are helpful when considering the wider expression of the church. Questions for reflection have also been included.

‘My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.’

John 17:20-21

For reflection: When Jesus is praying ‘that all of them may be one’, what is he praying for? How might that be expressed in a global church divided not only by geography, but by different denominations and traditions?

‘A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’

John 13:34-35

For reflection: In the context of other Christian communities who have different approaches to worship, what does it mean to love one another?

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. And so the body is not made up of one part but of

many... But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.'

1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 24-26

For reflection: As with any extract, it is worth reading the full text in the context of the overall letter. What do you think it means to have 'many parts' to the body of Christ, but 'that there should be no division' in the body? What would this mean in practical terms, in your context? It might also be helpful to look at 1 Corinthians 1, included below.

'I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.'

1 Corinthians 1:10

'Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.'

John 14:23

For reflection: A core belief of the Unity Pilgrims is that 'the Word lived and shared together has the power to guide, reconcile and transform.' In what ways has the Bible led to the separation of followers of Jesus? In what ways might it lead followers of Jesus towards greater unity?

'As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.'

Ephesians 4:1-6

For reflection: How do I perceive God to be 'Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all'? In what ways am I aware of other Christian communities and of the communion of faith between us all?

'When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning round, Jesus saw them following and asked, 'What do you want?' They said, 'Rabbi' (which means 'Teacher'), 'where are you staying?' 'Come,' he replied, 'and you will see.'

John 1:37-39

For reflection: How is Jesus calling me today? What is Jesus calling me to 'come and see'?

Having read through several of these passages of Scripture, it might also be helpful to reflect on some more general questions. For example, while we may not be responsible for the disunity we have inherited in the body of Jesus, are we responsible for maintaining it? What are we as a church, and I as an individual, passing on to future generations? In what ways is Jesus, through His Holy Spirit, calling us to overcome indifference and mistrust? How open am I to God surprising me, challenging me and perhaps unsettling me with what He is doing in other places and with other people?



What should I be thinking about during a visit to another place of worship?

Depending on our previous experience of other faith communities, a visit to somewhere new and very different can be disorientating. New songs, different versions of the Bible, standing/sitting/kneeling, the decoration of the building can, at least at first, cause our mind to wander, and perhaps to feel disengaged from what is happening. It might be helpful to keep the following ideas and questions in mind.

Firstly, there is no shame in being distracted by and wondering about different practices. Curiosity is a natural part of our humanity; we have a natural desire to want to understand what is happening around us.

Secondly, it is important however, that our minds don't dwell on every question we have, so that we become observers and not active participants in worship. In moments when it feels more difficult to understand what is happening or why something is taking place, it might be helpful to try to consider what is trying to be communicated? Every aspect of a church service is intended to lead us beyond the action itself (songs, readings, prayers, talks) to a connection with God, so it might be helpful to ask, where is this part of the service trying to lead me?

It is also important to focus on what you have in common with the people around you. Fr Gerry and the Unity Pilgrims often thought of the idea of the 'invisible monastery', that they were from Clonard Monastery, but beyond that, they were also part of a larger body of people that was not present between fixed walls, but were united by a way of being. It might be helpful to ask, how is the Holy Spirit working here? What am I being drawn towards?

What reaction should I expect?

It's very difficult to know how other people in your faith community will receive this idea, that very much depends on where you worship and who you worship with. The experience of others, however, would suggest there is often a challenge in trying to get other people involved, depending on the energy and interest of the church leadership and the general culture of the community.

It is worth thinking about where this type of activity fits within the broader church programme. It would be unreasonable to think everyone will be interested, the experience of the Unity Pilgrims is that their group has attracted people who feel this work is important; they've responded to a calling of sorts. People of faith respond to all sorts of callings, whether that's a commitment to children's or youth work, to running an environmental group or a group that raises money for projects in the developing world. The number of interested, and then committed people, who want to visit other communities, is unlikely to be very big, so don't be disheartened if the group is small; the engagement of a few can still affect the perceptions of the rest of the community. Accept that people are often stretched in many directions, and prayerfully seek those who feel a calling.



How might I encourage people to take part?

Certain aspects can make it more likely that people will take part. Inviting people to visit for a particular service (at Christmas or Easter, Pentecost or Harvest; Fr Gerry began with a Remembrance Day service) might be a good place to start. A service with a specific type of music can also be of particular interest.

Experience has also shown that gathering a group together is more likely if the blanket invitation (in a bulletin or announcement) is backed by personal invitation, when questions can be asked and there can be discussion of what might happen. For many people, this will be a new activity for them, and so they will need clarity about what is being asked of them, as well as encouragement and reassurance.

Sharing your own or others' stories about visiting other communities might also be useful, because it helps people to understand that it is a very simple practice, but that benefits might come from it. Your approach can also be flexible, however, it doesn't have to be weekly or even monthly, it can be whatever is possible for the people who are interested.

As mentioned earlier, prayer was always a critical part of the Unity Pilgrims' practice and should be a core element of any similar activity. Prayer centres us as followers of Jesus, under his Lordship, and puts the activity being planned into perspective. The visit of another faith community is not the focus, it's about joining with other people in worship, and demonstrating how divisions between can be broken down.

'The opportunity needs to be created, but that's not enough... the bottom line is it required direct person to person encouragement to offer to go with someone. It's probably a step too far for most people to hear an announcement [and decide to go.]'

'It's a change from a normal routine, but if there was a really keen, dedicated coordinator and there wasn't an expectation to be going somewhere every week, or even every month...'

'It was a busy church, and we had a real difficulty getting people to join the group. There was a lack of bodies who were willing to step forward and take part.'

'We talk about our theology being connectional... but we are still congregational in mindset. Breaking that mindset to think more broadly in any shape or form, will likely be a minority sport!'

‘Don’t underestimate the power of prayer in the whole process. Jesus wants his disciples to be together... prayer is about how we can express that as a congregation. But there is also praying for discernment as individuals before you go out... For the Unity Pilgrims there was always a lot of prayer behind the scenes, but their prayers were heard and things happened because of that... It’s a big thing to go, not as an observer, but to be present and to pray your way through that.’

What else should I expect?

Who knows what might happen when you connect with other people through the worship of God in other places? Ephesians chapter 2 speaks of how people are joined together, and God is present by his Holy Spirit – so who knows what that might lead to? The experience of the Unity Pilgrims suggest a couple of aspects to bear in mind.

Firstly, one single visit to another faith community will only accomplish so much. The Unity Pilgrims’ experience was that it took several visits to a congregation before meaningful relationships grew. Any church considering this initiative might consider only visiting a small number of nearby congregations more than once in the year to begin with, before broadening out their approach. Relationships usually take time to develop, and may eventually result in a reciprocated visit, or other meaningful engagement (though it was never the Unity Pilgrims’ approach to expect this).

‘The initial Shankill response was a cautious welcome. But by being present several times over the years at their Sunday worship, the Catholic Unity Pilgrims have built up a relationship of trust and acceptance with those congregations. The Shankill people have come to see that the pilgrims have no agenda other than responding to the prayer of Jesus, ‘Father, may they all be one.’

Fr Gerry Reynolds



Secondly, faith communities are different for a reason. There are disagreements in belief and practice between them and not every division can be easily smoothed over. This is likely to mean there will be some uncomfortable moments when some or all of your group is uncertain or confused about what is happening in the service. In the experience of Fr Gerry and the Unity Pilgrims, this happened most frequently around the celebration of communion or the Eucharist. This booklet is not the place to discuss those differences, however, it might be something your group wants to discuss before a visit. It is not unlikely that there will be a mixture of thoughts within your group, but it might be helpful to come to an agreement about how the group will act together during your visit (even if individuals would act differently if they were visiting alone). Division over the celebration of Eucharist has never been resolved between Catholic and Protestant churches, nevertheless the experience of others suggests that while this problem has to be accepted, the practice of other traditions can become more comfortable over time.

It is worth closing with a phrase, often repeated by Fr Gerry. He believed that the visits of the Unity Pilgrims were about building relationships as a result of following the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit. Whatever happened should not be forced, but prayerfully, followers of Jesus should 'let it all unfold.' As the Holy Spirit guides you and calls you, and opens up new perspectives and new experiences, it is then worth asking, where have you come from? What is unfolding? And what are you being called towards?

Where can I find out more?

To learn more about Clonard's peace ministry, you can follow Clonard on Twitter (@ClonardMBelfast) and on Facebook, as well as Clonard's Peace Ministry (separately) on Facebook.

You can read more about the life of Fr Gerry Reynolds in Gladys Ganiel's book, 'Unity Pilgrim: The Life of Fr Gerry Reynolds C.Ss.R.', and the life of Fr Alec Reid in Martin McKeever's book 'One Man, One God: The Peace Ministry of Fr Alec Reid C.Ss.R.' The friendship between Fr Gerry and Rev Ken Newell is also recorded in Ronald Wells' book 'Friendship Towards Peace'.

If you have used this resource and/or visited another faith community, we would love to hear about your experiences. If you have a story you would like to share, please contact Gladys Ganiel at g.ganiel@qub.ac.uk



