



Is the day of the denomination over?

In September I attended an interdenominational conference in Calgary which addressed the question in the title.

One doesn't have to be an expert to see that the walls that have long separated Christians are coming down at a tremendous pace! The Christian media, interdenominational cooperation, para-church ministries and probably most of all the Holy Spirit, have all contributed to the process.

We are discovering true, devoted followers of Christ in all kinds of unexpected settings. This is one of the very pleasant realities of our time. As we are marginalized by our secular culture, Christians are finding one another!

From a Scriptural viewpoint, only applause seems appropriate. No denominations are found there and none are anticipated. 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. Eph. 4:4 .

The Brethren have always been rather smug about such questions. They have enjoyed the best of both worlds in a strange sort of way. They have always rejected denominationalism as a great evil, believed strongly in the oneness of the body of Christ, and practiced a very strong strand of sectarianism at the same time.

Our present day of tumbling denominational walls raises some very difficult issues. What about the beliefs that divided us in the past? Do they no longer matter? In our enjoyment of unity will we suppress all questions related to what we believe? How far will we go in joining with others, and on what basis will such unity stand?

We are living at a time when there is relatively little interest in detailed discussion of theological truth or of anything that might threaten to divide us. That's good! On the other hand, it's not all good because the most solid relationships of all are based on a wonderful and scary mix of transparency, vigorous debate, love, truth, acceptance and

commitment. This is true in marriages, among Christians and among churches of different stripes.

I say, let's celebrate the crumbling of the walls, enjoy our brothers and sisters and engage in dialogue with them that leads to enduring and solid relationships to the glory of God.

But what about the conference?

Dr. George Bullard the key presenter there, put it this way: "Congregational expectations of service are increasing at a fast pace. The pace is so fast that congregations pursue strategic alliances and partnerships with groups outside their denomination. They network with various groups of willing congregations without regard to denominational labels."

To congregations the role, identity, and necessity for denominations have become fuzzy. What has been thought of as denominational distinctives is no longer distinctive. A generic Protestant congregation is arising where doctrines are fuzzy, worship styles are fuzzy, and membership in a particular denomination is fuzzy.

Congregations will increasingly focus on "denomination-lite" This occurs when they want a general relationship with a denomination family, but not the regulation they have experienced, nor the programs and meetings they were expected to attend. Congregations have discovered that effective congregational ministry and denominational regulations and meets are incompatible activities.

Key points..

- Churches are not interested in fulfilling the vision of their denomination they have their own.
- Denominations, associations or fellowships that help their congregations be successful with their mission will survive.
- Relational denominations or

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associations are surviving while organizational ones are fading.

- 20th century churches established clear denominational conformity. 21st century, churches want consistency, a core ideology, non-negotiable values and a strong external sense of mission.
- People value two things over all else: friendship and the opportunity to grow spiritually.

But the denominational idea seems to be here to stay in one form or another, since new churches that are springing up without ties to denominations or associating links – start

them. There is something natural about churches linking together in ways that give them collective strength through ties to helpful relational and spiritual leaders.

All of this applies to us in a very real way. Wouldn't it be great if we could –

1. Be free to enjoy the wonder of oneness with all God's people?
2. Do it in a way that is open, honest and vigorous about love and truth?
3. Establish relational caring networks of leaders that assisted our congregations in becoming all they could be under God?