



***Daring to Dialogue and Pray Together***

***The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 was celebrated from January 18 to 25. This year, the global theme, "Do good, seek justice" (Isaiah 1:17), was proposed by Christians from the Minnesota Council of Churches. For Jean Balcaen, of Saint-Joachim Catholic Parish in La Broquerie, and Terry Gudmundson, pastor of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Steinbach, nothing could be more appropriate.***

***Interview by Daniel Bahuaud, Communications Coordinator for the Archdiocese of St. Boniface***



*Jean Balcaen*

"Christian unity is extremely important," says Jean Balcaen. When I was a boy in La Broquerie, 98% of the people from large French-speaking families were believers and practicing Catholics. In 2023, we are in daily contact with people of different Christian denominations, of other religions or with those who are uncertain about spiritual life. The world is complex, and within that complexity, we must recognize that everyone wants to go to heaven - Lutherans, Anglicans, Mennonites and others. All are thirsty for the same Lord. Not just Catholics!"

"That's why I enjoy interfaith meetings between different types of Christians. I first attended them in Winnipeg, when I was part of a small Christian community at St. Boniface Cathedral Parish," he continues. We used to go every year to the old John XIII/St. Chad hybrid Catholic-Anglican church. We even invited the Anglican

priest to give us a presentation in the basement of the cathedral. That's when I first realized that we had a lot in common, despite our differences."



*Fr. Serge Buissé of Saint-Joachim RC Parish in La Broquerie, Reverend Melissa Frankland and Pastor Terry Gudmundson of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Steinbach during the January 25, 2023, prayer service.*

Hence Jean Balcaen's desire, ten years ago, to organize an interfaith meeting in his area. "I was active in the Southeast RHA, and I had a Lutheran colleague, George Sawatsky. As the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity approached, I told him about it. He didn't even know it existed! But he mentioned it to his pastor, who warmly welcomed the suggestion of a meeting. Since then, Saint-Joachim Parish and St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Steinbach have met annually to pray, sing hymns, read Gospel passages and, most importantly, dialogue. We alternate from year to year between Saint-Joachim Parish and St. Paul's to meet."

This year, the interfaith worship service was held on January 25 at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Steinbach. Before the pandemic, about 175 people attended the meetings fairly regularly. This year, a shade over one hundred people braved the January cold to attend the event.

Pastor Terry Gudmundson was thrilled to be able to continue the tradition. "Like Jean, I come from a homogeneous religious background. As a boy in Riverton, everyone was Icelandic and Lutheran. We all knew that the Good Lord spoke Icelandic! That's a good-natured little joke, but it says something about how isolated we can be from other Christians. When Catholics and Protestants meet, I believe we come to understand the Gospel better. Christ invites us to love all our neighbours, not just those with whom we agree. He also invites us to recognize that the Church, the body of Christ, is vast. This allows us to see beyond our own denomination."



*Pastor Terry Gudmundsson of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Steinbach*



*Fr. Serge Buissé of Saint-Joachim RC Parish in La Broquerie*

Terry Gudmundson was pleased to welcome Father Serge Buissé to St. Paul's Church on January 25th. "The new pastor of Saint-Joachim Parish shared with us a reflection on unity. Our meeting was also be an opportunity to pray together in an atmosphere of mutual

respect. I love it when we recite the Lord's Prayer together, each in his or her native language. It's a divine cacophony of English, French, German, Ukrainian, Icelandic and other languages."



During the service, the congregation had the opportunity to express their faith in Jesus through a symbolic penitential gesture suggested by the Minnesota Council of Churches. Jean Balcaen explains, "It was a matter of bringing a small stone, representing our shortcomings – our hearts of stone, so to speak – and then placing it in a font filled with holy water. Christ washes us of our sins and invites us to become the living stones with which to build the Kingdom of God. Through this unifying gesture, all could participate without dwelling on what still divides us."



The meeting was also an opportunity to share a light snack and talk frankly about the real differences between Christian traditions. Terry Gudmundson elaborates: "The key is education, beginning with the Gospel principle of welcoming all. Jesus



welcomed Zacchaeus, the publican. He dared to reach out to the Samaritan woman at the well. We should imitate him. It means listening and learning about the other person's story, without trying to convert them. And it means not settling for superficial discussions. We Canadians tend to be too polite, talking only about hockey or the weather!"

"Dialogue is not always easy. Some Christians, often those with a more fundamentalist perspective, tend to approach others with suspicion. Fortunately, the really rigid people are fewer and fewer. Many churches have



made a lot of progress in this regard. In 1999, the Catholic Church and the World Federation of Lutherans signed the Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith. This important document shows that there is agreement on how we are saved by Christ. That's very encouraging. Still, fundamentalism continues to have some influence. I know it leaves a bad taste in the mouth of many Christians, as well as those people of good will who would be more interested in joining a Christian church if there wasn't a spirit of division."

Jean Balcaen sees the situation the same way. "We *are* different. We must not fool ourselves. That means we have to educate ourselves, talk to each other and overcome our ignorance. It's important to maintain a dialogue and continue our meetings, with an open mind. In our Catholic parishes, it takes an awareness and

committed people; lay persons and clergy alike to initiate and nourish the dialogue. Saint-Joachim and St. Paul's have established a fine tradition. The theme for 2023 – “Do good, seek justice” – is full of promise. So, who knows? What if both our churches started a charitable project together?"

