

Faith, feathers and flocks



Highland Views

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Columnist

This cold morning, after a brief flurry of snowflakes, there was a flurry of activity at the bird feeder. At one point I observed four species of birds eating their breakfast of seeds at the same time.

I watched as a finch nudged a titmouse away and then the titmouse sent a chickadee back to the bushes, before a nuthatch zipped in to scatter them all. Soon a woodpecker found an opening and the cardinals awaited their turn.

I may not be a person of faith any longer, but I'm still a person of imagination, of ideals and dreams. So I had another of my "What If?" moments after observing the feathery congregation just before attending a service, which I do from time to time.

Sitting in a warm and welcoming country church service, I was happy to be seated in a pew-with-a-view.

While the hymns were sung, prayers were said and sermon was preached, I could listen with my ears but see with my eyes out the only window that wasn't "stained" by a biblical scene. These were pretty, but not as pretty as the scene outside, across the grass, where a pleasant little tree stood silent in the morning breeze.

Beyond the tree, a stone's throw, was another church, of another denomination. I smiled, wondering what the folks were doing in their sanctuary right then; I mused about their music, curious why they couldn't join us, or why we couldn't join them to "do a service" together.

Standing outside after the service I gazed across the peaceful valley and noticed another church across the road, then another a block or so away. Someone said there was a Mennonite church a short drive in one direction and several other churches nearby, the other way.

Ever since seminary days, while attending a Catholic mass held in a local school, while joining a synagogue one Friday a month held in the seminary chapel, all the while studying for Protestant ordination — ever since those days, I've been asking "What ifs."

Given that a town or countryside is dotted with congregations, each with a unique name (de-nomination), each claiming a special identity, handing on traditions while hanging on to an exceptional relationship with God, as they understand "God."

Given that they have the same general view of the divine but the nuances of their theologies and creeds are a little different.

Some words seem strange to the others, though the essential meaning is the same; polity (governance)

may not be identical but the intent of "unity" may be similar.

Understanding the purpose and power of tradition and identity, we can respect the meaning of the rich history behind and beneath each group. No doubt it is primarily that history which keeps separate congregations separated.

This leads to my central What Ifs:

What if some of the pews or chairs in those sanctuaries are empty each week and membership is dwindling, so several churches with elderly folks chose to join with younger families for services?

What if one building needs a new walkway or roof, another needs a new furnace, another needs a paint job or other repairs and neighboring congregations have skilled members who could assist one another?

What if several congregations are struggling to pay pastors or other staff, so they coordinated their leadership, sharing pulpits and costs?

What if a local family needed assistance and it didn't matter if they belonged to this or that congregation (or to any congregation), so resources were pooled to help?

What if a "common space" was created or agreed upon — maybe with a shared sanctuary — that would be open to any participating denominations? As one person imagined, it would be like sharing a "central fire" as some Native tribes do.

Then, what if the Christian churches, with this innovative model of a collaborative "commons," invited neighbors from other traditions, welcoming Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, humanists and others? Even secular people need a sense of "community" and could bring fresh viewpoints, as well as skills, into the "holy mix."

As long as the "central fire/space" was well-maintained and managed, built on a firm foundation of hospitality and respect, community programs, classes and "spiritual activities" could enjoy a space where costs would be shared.

There are places where this kind of "ecumenical spirit" is thriving, congregations volunteering side by side, forming or funding nonprofits, exchanging pulpits. That's fine and good. But think about it — wouldn't it feel encouraging, revitalizing, to see such a new model of shared sanctuary and cooperative "neighboring"?

What's the point of all these What Ifs? What ifs can lead to Why nots.

Birds of ... a variety of feathers, may be the flock of the future.

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