

# Unity as an Eco-System

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Address to the  
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the Florida United Methodist Church  
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I bring you greetings from the rest of the Church of Christ in Florida. When we look back over the history of Christianity, there have been three models of what Christian unity looks like you. If you will allow a little playfulness with metaphor and analogies, let's look at these models of unity.



The first model is of the maypole. You know what a maypole is; here's a Wikipedia. Used in May Day celebrations, the maypole has ribbons tethered to it that allow the community to dance around together in an orderly way. Now among the Orthodox, the maypole understanding of the one true church is the church that adheres to all the rules that came out of the first seven ecumenical councils. If you order your life and structure your church so that you adhere to those rules – kind of an early book of discipline – then you are church and you can color your expression of that one church according to whatever your local custom desires.

\*[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Maypole\\_in\\_Brentwood,\\_California.J](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Maypole_in_Brentwood,_California.J)

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Alongside the maypole grew up a different model. Let's call it the big box model. It came out of Rome. Here, the notion is that if you're in the box, you're good. If you're not in the box, then you need to get in the box. Now that box has had different shapes and its worked different ways over the years. But the point was to be in the box. The Catholic Church says the maypole is really in the box, to which the Orthodox says "Really? If the maypole is in the box, and our ribbons reach outside of the box, then we don't need the box!"

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Elaborate\\_wood\\_box\\_Tom\\_Tanaka.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Elaborate_wood_box_Tom_Tanaka.JPG)



The third model is the one we're used to as children of the Protestant world. We can call it the model of the encounter, of relationships. Unity in Christ is in the relationships we have with Jesus and the relationships we have with each other because we each have a relationship with Jesus.

\*<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:BriefEncounter-TrainWindow.jpg>



Now these three models have been competing rather hard and heavy over the last 50 -100 years to see which one could convince the others that it's more true. At the end of the day, nobody has convinced anybody. The models are incongruous. A maypole is not a box and neither one is an encounter.



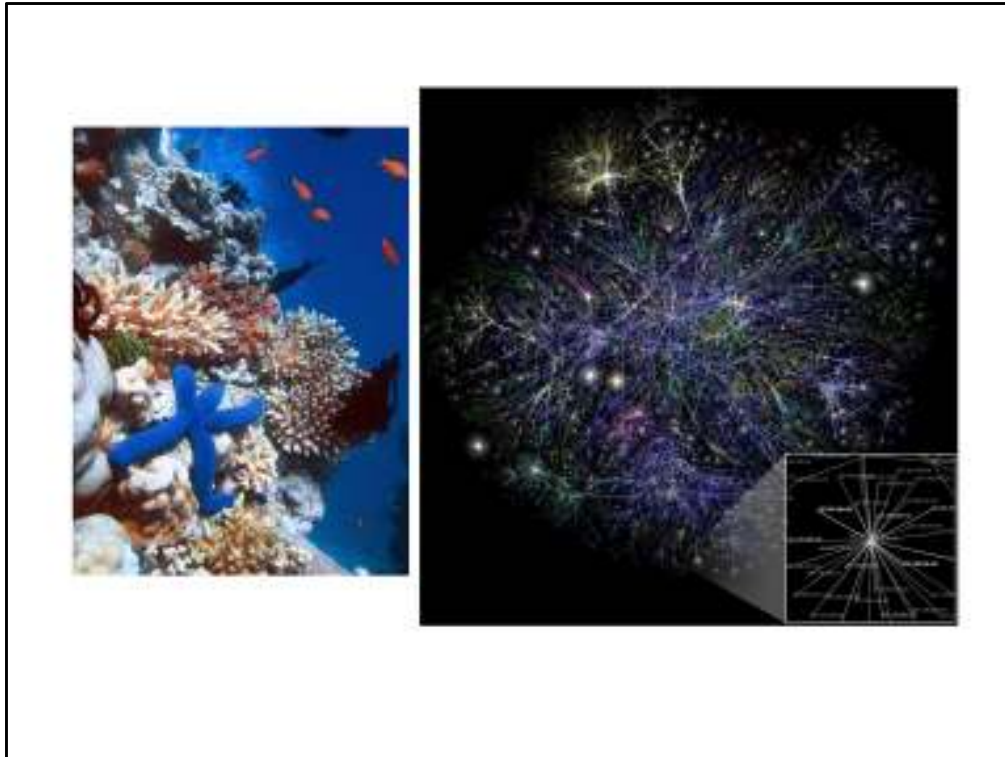
As long as the movement for Christian Unity, the ecumenical movement, makes us choose between some variation of these three models, we will always be frustrated with realizing what Christian unity could actually be in our own time and place. We will be frustrated because the models just don't live in the same universes of feeling, and thought and being.

Moreover, the world will look us as brand names – Lexus or Yugo; Ford or Dodge. But not the Church of Jesus Christ.





Martin Luther found the church in the Garden of Eden, Genesis 3. The church comes into being when God addresses Adam and Eve, and they realize God is speaking to them **together**. God asks, ""Where are you?" Indeed, it looks like we're hiding behind our brand names.



I want to give you two different images today about how to think about Christian unity. These are not competing images. I think of them as alternatives for expressing a similar kind of understanding. They just use a different set of metaphors to latch onto, depending on whether you are a sci-fi guy or a nature lover.

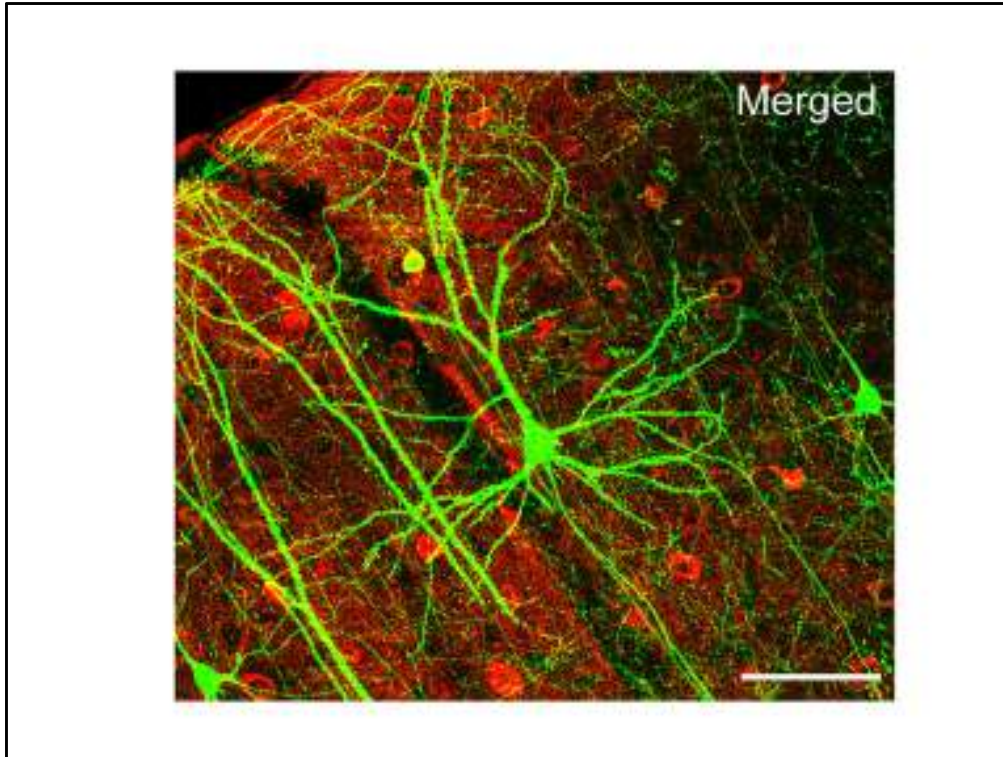
\*[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/76/Blue\\_Linckia\\_Starfish.JPG/450px-Blue\\_Linckia\\_Starfish.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/76/Blue_Linckia_Starfish.JPG/450px-Blue_Linckia_Starfish.JPG)

\*[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d2/Internet\\_map\\_1024.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d2/Internet_map_1024.jpg)



The first image is of the church of Jesus Christ as an eco-system. It's like a garden, a whole area in which you find all kinds of species. The important thing about an eco-system is that the species live in a symbiotic relationship with one another and their environment. They depend upon one another. If you get a bit too much of something on one side, it can throw off the ecology of the eco-system. The ecosystem can go into decline; it can fail. In the 90's, headlines about fraud and abuse greatly hurt attitudes about the Church; those wounds still exist. As we look at our various churches, denominations, communities of faith, we ought to be looking for the ways we provide support for one.

A quick example. When I was a pastor here in Lakeland, I had a family leave the Episcopal Church and come over to my congregation because they were deeply upset by something that happened to them. It was clear to me that they were really Episcopalians and that they would never become Lutherans. They were just seeking shelter. So we welcomed them. I called the Sister at the parish, and I said, "Sister, we have provided to a heartbroken family from your parish. Perhaps there's something you might be able to do mend their heart." She followed up and met with them. That outreach guided that family back home.



That stat for Christian unity does not appear on any ministry report form.

You see I think that Christian unity is about living in Christ together. We who are church help people find healing wherever it's appropriate.

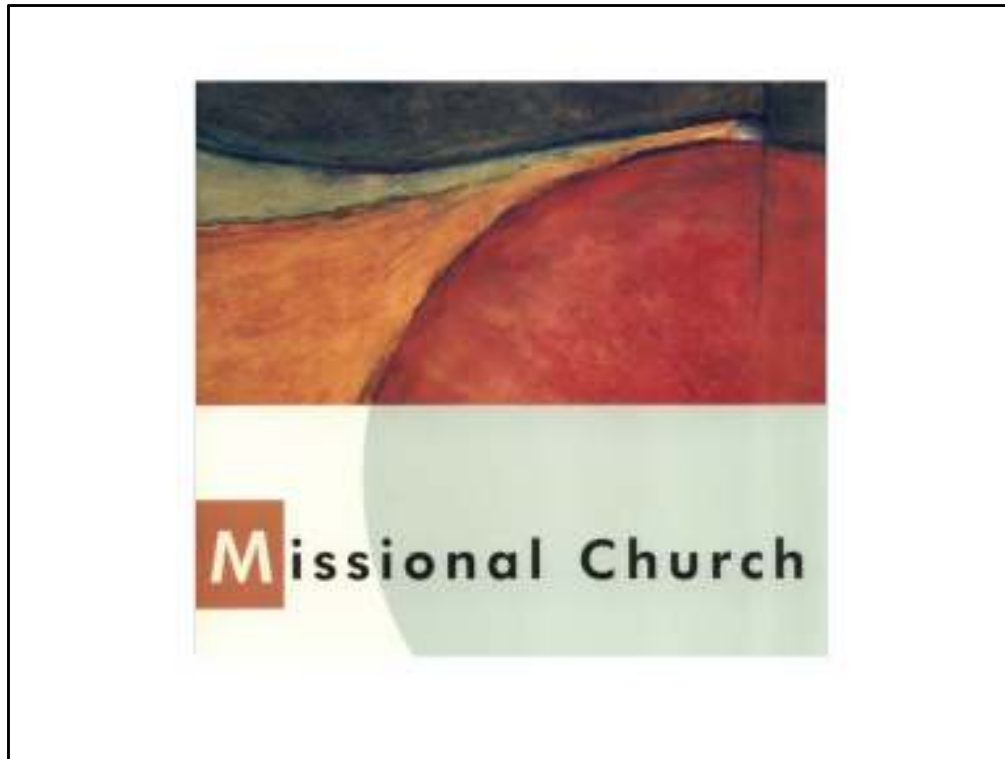
Another way to look at this understanding is as a network. I want you to imagine your brain. We know that our brains are these ganglia, this nexus of neurons and synapses that spider out into networks and they form nodes and they fire spontaneously ten thousand different messages in response to stimuli. The human brain has 100 trillion synapses; it is one of the most amazing features of God's creation. And that's like the church: this network of baptized disciples who, knowing the love of God in Jesus Christ, find ways to make that love real where they are, fire off and connect!



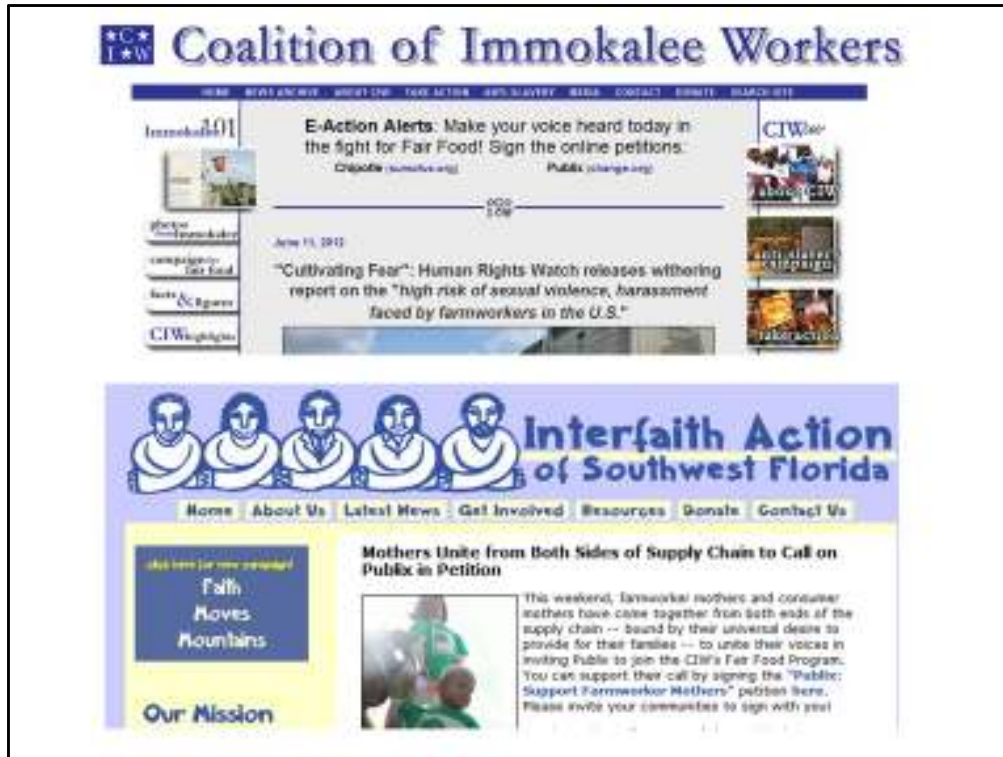
Now either one of these images helps us to get away from the notion that everybody else has to agree with us, or we have to give up the teachings of our church in order to be united with other Christians. These two images, the ecosystem and the network of nodes assume that you have a specificity, that you have a locality, that you have a particular understanding from which you operate that connects back to the whole and makes for integrity in creation – for the well-being for all. As the Book of Discipline puts it, “This community is the church, which the Spirit has brought into existence for the healing of the nations.”\*

This is how the Florida Council of Churches has been operating over the last several years. We are looking for those places that emerge out of the life of Floridians that cry for the gospel of God in Jesus Christ and we network together to invoke the healing power of the Holy Spirit.

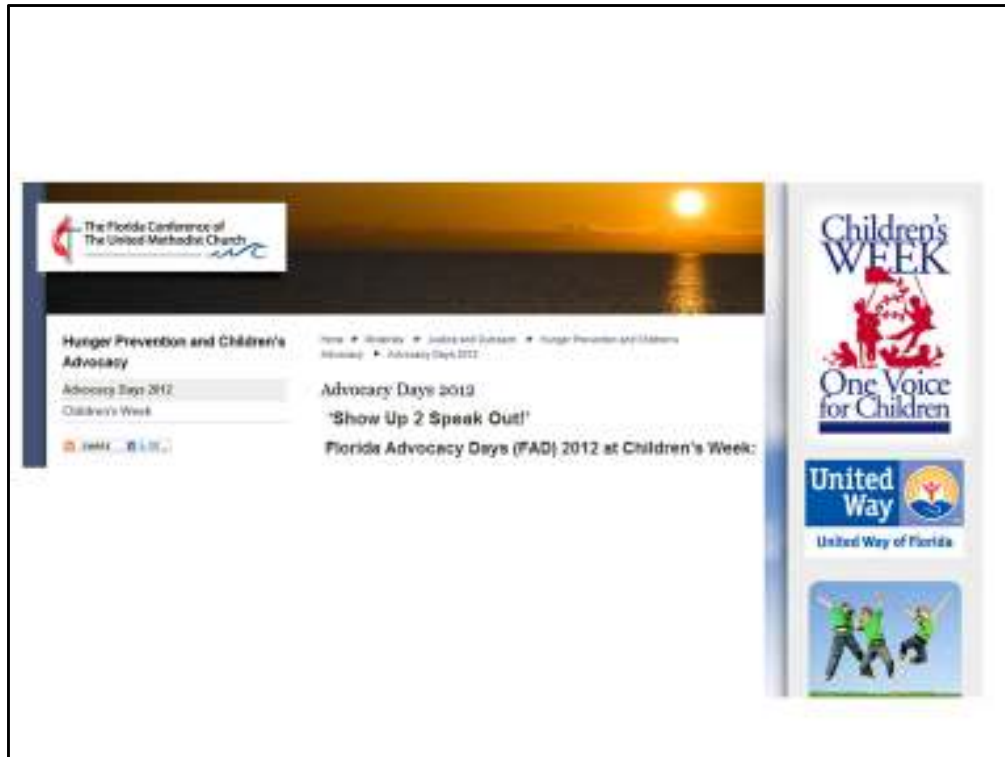
\*BOD, 2008, p. 101.



So let me offer some examples of how we try to do that. A few years ago we gathered together the denominational leaders and some of their executive staff for a seminar on transformational leadership in the church. It was a powerful day and everyone committed to doing missional research and more conversation together. The problem, however, is that the council lacked the resources to fund further missional work together. But we know that the mission field is ready for harvest, and if we're going to reach Floridians, we must do it in concert with one another, not in competition with each other. The church is not a brand name.



A second way that we have been this kind of network involves farmworker issues. Recently farmworkers have seen great success. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has signed labor agreements with ninety percent of tomato farmers in Florida, with the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, and a number of restaurants and wholesale food suppliers. The Council has walked with them throughout that journey. We've been there when they needed extra support. When they went to Governor Crist about labor conditions in Florida fields and the slavery that still exists in pockets in Florida, we were there. We met with the governor and underlined the necessity for justice in Florida's fields. Now that campaign is going to grocery stores. We want to change the understanding of the situation with grocery store owners. We also really want you shoppers to look at what you're willing to spend for fair food - to know that the food that we buy has been produced under fair conditions not under unjust conditions. Can we see this as a matter of the integrity of our own faith?



For the last few years, Council church leaders have met in Tallahassee during the Methodist Florida Advocacy Days and Children's Week. We've brought faith leaders to join with you to raise Christian voices on behalf of children and the poor. From food stamps to immigration justice to prison reform, the Council has walked with the Conference. Our state badly needs economic reform and things like the upcoming Amendment 3 on the November ballot could make matters worse. If the Church does not speak up for the poor, who will?





One more example of our eco-system networking. In the past year we all had our attention turned to Sanford because of the killing of Trayvon Martin. Florida church leaders rallied very quickly at the request of one of them to produce and publish a statement on the web. That statement was picked up by Faith in Public Life, the National Council of Churches, Churches Uniting In Christ, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Disciples, the UCC and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. They all called for justice and addressing racial profiling. Over two hundred and fifty pastors co-signed our statement on line. So we helped to bring healing in a national conversation. We want to continue working to move forward. We're developing a proposal that would go into neighborhoods, and for the sake of brevity, look for black, brown and white churches that would like to come together and spend a series of evening story sharing. We need to learn each other's stories and put aside stereotypes and mythologies. We really must begin to know the neighbors around us.



The Florida Council of Churches is very much about Christian unity, uniting in Christ in a way that can speak both to state leaders in Tallahassee and to congregations in your neighborhood about how we might live well together in the name of Jesus Christ.

As Dean of the College of Judicatory Leaders, Bishop Whitaker has provided invaluable leadership. We hope this legacy of the Florida United Methodist Conference .

If there's any way that I can help you with that conversation, please call me.

Bishop we wish you and your wife every happiness in your retirement. The Council will miss you greatly!

Thank you for your time and attention. May the Spirit of God fall powerfully upon your Annual Conference.

\* There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

(Ephesians 4:4-6)