

Strathcona County Christians 'share what draws us together in Christ'

Rita Sandmaier was raised Catholic in largely Protestant communities across rural Alberta, and she had friends from many different Christian denominations.

But one thing bothered her: everyone kept to their own church.

"We could play together, but we couldn't go into each other's churches, so that kind of impacted me," said Sandmaier. "At one point I thought, 'This just doesn't seem right. Why can't we pray together?'"

Decades later, things have changed.

Sandmaier chaired the 28th annual Ecumenical Mission of Strathcona County, a series of events aimed at helping Christians form bonds with each other. This year eight different congregations participated: three Lutheran, three United, one Anglican, and the Catholic Parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Over the course of the mission's four days, Oct. 15-18, Sandmaier enjoyed a potluck supper at a United church, afternoon tea at an Anglican church, and a Bible study at another United church.

"We get a flavour of how other people pray," said Sandmaier, who attends Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Sherwood Park. "If we didn't have a venue like this, would we get together?"

Disunity among Christians can be upsetting, said Rev. Stephen London, pastor of St. Thomas Anglican Church, which was part of this year's mission.

"To be very simplistic, I love Jesus. I love God. And there's something in all these churches I find very attractive and I would like to be a part of that," London said.

"It really frustrates me, and it breaks my heart to a certain degree, that I can't take Communion with [the Catholic Church] for instance and other churches."

Nevertheless, full ecumenism – or the communion of all Christians – can only be achieved step by step, said Regina Archbishop Donald Bolen, who led this year's mission.

"I think it's a journey. We're always called to do what's possible. It's not for us to say full communion is off the table, because Jesus desires it."

In a speech to mission participants, Bolen relayed a story he heard from a Catholic bishop in France when questioned by a Reformed Christian colleague.

“We used to kill each other. Then we just hated each other. Then we slowly started to talk to each other. Then we recognized each other’s baptisms. Now we have some common prayer. We engage in justice work together. Once in a while, we even witness to our faith together.”

Bolen has experience in the field. He worked with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity at the Vatican for seven years, and he co-chairs international and national dialogue groups between the Catholic Church and Anglicans, Methodists and evangelicals.

Sandmaier credits her own upbringing amid different faith traditions for her own involvement in promoting Christian unity, and she looks forward to the Ecumenical Mission every year.

“To know that we can have different ideas of what it means to embrace our faith but to be able to come together and share what draws us together in Christ, to me it’s just a privilege.”