

## Lessons in Unity from Armenia

Through Week of Prayer & World Day of Prayer we're invited to engage in worship which originates among Christians from another part of the world, in which we will find both familiar and unfamiliar elements. We can rejoice in the familiar: reflects our common Christian faith. We can also rejoice in the unfamiliar: we can grow through the experience – because unity isn't uniformity: unity is only experienced in diversity.

We're also invited to pay attention to voice of Christians living out their faith in circumstances which are often very different from our own. Again, we have something to gain. On the human level it can be an education; at a deeper level, listening to voices of faith from a perspective other than our own can contribute to, deepen or even change our perspective on the faith we hold and share.

This year I had to gain a rapid, and therefore superficial awareness of the Armenian people. Learnt that they are an ancient civilisation and proud to be the first state to adopt Christianity as their official religion, in 301. Subsequently their history has involved domination and oppression from neighbouring empires and states, leading to fragmentation of their homeland, death and displacement of their people and desecration of physical sites. The voice we hear this year is of a deeply-rooted, persecuted eastern Christian people, who lack the prominence in the west of Ukraine or the Palestinians.

Listening to their Bishop speaking about their theme for this week, it's clear that Christian Unity for them means much more than good relationships between different denominations – much as that is something to celebrate and continue to commit to.

- Unity is rooted in God, because God is one (*One Spirit*) and that's what he desires for his Church (*One Body*) and his creation. For the writer to the Ephesians it is an aspect of our maturity in faith, towards which we grow: *until all of us come to the unity of the faith*. It's our destination: if we don't know unity, it's a sign we haven't got there yet!
- It's therefore fundamental: unity should transcend doctrinal affirmation. Or in the words of their 12<sup>th</sup> Patriarch Nerses the Gracious: *unity in essential things; diversity in secondary things; love in everything*.
- It's something reflected in worship of Armenian Apostolic Church: they embrace each other as they sing, *The Church has become one*. Their Bishop says it's *a vital expression of our faith*.
- Unity is also something Armenians experience as a persecuted Church and people: as they come together in the face of a common challenge; and as they receive expressions of solidarity, in pronouncements and prayer, from people like us, who don't share their circumstances, but empathise with their plight. Persecution strengthens and unites the Church
- Unity is something Armenians pray for in the world, as well as in the Church. They pray for a just peace, not just a cessation of hostilities, for themselves, and other oppressed peoples. Living harmoniously in diversity is what God desires for his world: if that's something we embrace and encounter in the Church, as we must if we are to be faithful to God, then we will have something to show and teach a divided and suffering world.