# Let’s Make a Habit of Unity

## Week 5 – Sunday 17 March

#### ‘Let us not neglect our meeting together … but encourage one another.’ (Hebrews 10:25, NLT)

It can be hard to know what ‘unity’ means when we come up against
issues that we don’t agree on. It can be hard to know how to be united
when division or discord eat away at our sense of community. Part of our faithful response to God is to learn how to keep ‘meeting together’ … to keep finding one another, hearing one another, loving one another, no matter what our differences may be.

## Sermon Outline

#### Nehemiah 3:1-32

‘Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section; and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, made repairs next to that. They restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall.’ (v8)

### Introduction:

It was time to build a home. The people of Israel had slowly been returning from exile in Babylon for a few generations, but their capital city, Jerusalem, was still largely a ruin. Nehemiah came back from his service with the King of Persia to get the rebuilding of their beloved home under way.

It was a huge job and it was all hands on deck. This chapter of Nehemiah isn’t the most inspiring read, given it’s mostly a list of names, but it tells a story of unity in action, and it has some inspiring insights for us.

The wall the Israelites were rebuilding was about 4 km (2.5 miles) long, and it was either in ruins or non-existent. But in those days, to establish a vibrant community and to live in safety, you needed a wall, so they set to work. They wanted Jerusalem to become a prosperous, welcoming place which they could call home and which could become a hub of blessing to the land around.

There may not seem to be many similarities between an ancient fortified city and a local church in the 21st century, but we too are working to build communities which are vibrant, safe and welcoming for all – places which become hubs of blessing in our local area – so maybe we can borrow a few tips from Nehemiah’s remarkably united work-force.

### Old story, new story

None of the people rebuilding Jerusalem had ever seen it in its heyday. They’d heard about it, and the old stories certainly fuelled their enthusiasm for the rebuild, but what they built was something new – the beginning of a new story. One bit of the wall even moved to a new place!

Perhaps they argued about how things used to be, and how faithful they should be to the old plans. Perhaps some were particularly attached to one tradition and others to another. Whatever they felt about the old, they chose to work together towards the new.

* Unity is hard to find if we cling to nostalgia. Coming together will mean being prepared to let go of old preferences; celebrating past successes and moving forward.
* The new story is worth embracing. In just half a millennium, Jesus the Messiah will rise, just a short distance from a part of that new Jerusalem wall. The best is yet to come!

### Everyone matters

Nehemiah didn’t have a building firm he could rely on. All he had were the people who lived in and around the ruined city. It may be tempting sometimes to wish we could hire in a bunch of professionals to do the work of mission and discipleship for us, but they don’t exist. We’re all we’ve got.

Yet what a rich resource Nehemiah turned out to have. All sorts of people from all sorts of backgrounds brought all sorts of skills, and they got the job done in miracle-quick time (52 days). That would probably have been unusual for builders even back in the 5th century BC.

* People from different tribes worked together (v7). Are we truly working together, across cultures and languages, tribes and ethnicities?
* People of different professions worked together (v8: there were priests, politicians, military men, merchants, goldsmiths and even a perfumer. Do we value and call on the different professions represented in our congregations?
* Men and women worked together; one builder had the help of his daughters, even though women seldom got involved in such work in those days (v12). Have we completely eradicated any sexism from our corps communities?
* Different generations worked together (if a man worked with his daughters, we can be certain that many men worked with their sons too). Are we working together with our young people?
* Rich and poor alike worked together; civic leaders got involved (vv14-17), and so did one man who is described as having ‘living quarters’, which suggests he had no independent means (v30). Do we truly know that even the poorest, most socially disadvantaged people we welcome, have something unique to offer?
* Some people didn’t want to work together; one set of leaders opted out (v5). What do we do when not everyone wants unity?
* Most of the builders worked on the ground they knew best – the patch by their own home. We all have our own part to play, our own gifts to bring, our own work to do.

### Unity that welcomes

One of the most important jobs for Nehemiah’s builders was the gates. We read Nehemiah’s prayer in chapter one and it includes a lament that the gates have all been burned by fire. There was some wall left, but no gates. In those days, gates were crucial. They kept you safe whilst also allowing you to welcome people in, and Jerusalem needed to be both safe and welcoming.

Unity can be like a wall with no gates – an impenetrable ‘cliqueiness’ which never lets anyone new in. That’s not the unity God wants. God calls us to the unity of love: standing together, working together, looking out for each other, but also building gateways for others to come in and be a part of us.

* Do people know where the ‘gates’ are to our church community? Do they know the way in – both physically and relationally?
* How might someone feel, walking through the ‘gate’ into our church community for the first time?
* What can we do to make sure our ‘gates’ are wide open when they need to be?

### Conclusion:

In choosing to look at the story of Nehemiah’s builders, we’ve focused a lot on unity as ‘doing things together’, and often that’s the easiest place to begin. It’s sometimes called ‘functional unity’. We may not agree on everything, but we can serve God side by side and focus on what we have in common.

Yet the Bible urges us to go one step further than functional unity. It urges us to love one another – not at arm’s length with a pasted-on smile, but in real, welcoming, loving relationship.

#### ‘Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble’ (1 Peter 3:8)

#### ‘Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.’ (2 Corinthians 13:11)

What if we didn’t just work well together … what if we loved each other!

## Prayer and worship ideas

### The walls of your home

Could you use the walls of the place where you meet to depict the diversity and unity of your congregation? You could give everyone a brick-shaped piece of card and ask them to decorate it in a way that reflects their personality, culture, background, profession etc. Then you could put them up on the walls.

NB. People will probably need time to work on the bricks at home for a week or two.

### Truth-telling

Where there’s disunity, there is often a history of hurt. Journeying through that hurt to a place of healing, forgiveness and togetherness can take many years. But it can help to find a way to speak the truth about our experiences in a way that is safe but also lets us feel heard. Below are some ideas for how you might make space for truth-telling. Some will be more suited to your context than others, so it’s important to make the choice prayerfully, and in consultation with other leaders in the corps.

1. **God hears, God holds**

You need a container large enough to hold many slips of paper, and you also need something that represents a pair of hands. You could create a container which is shaped like a pair of hands, or you could use a box and put an image of praying hands on top of it.

The container needs a postbox-style slit through which people can post their papers.

In a time of prayer, invite people to think about a time when they have experienced the pain of disunity in church (either this one or somewhere else): situations such as conflict, not feeling accepted or included, feeling that their opinions have been devalued etc. Invite them to think about the experience and write how they felt on a slip of paper.

Invite them to bring their slip of paper and post it into the box, as a demonstration of placing the situation in God’s hands, knowing God has heard their heart and holds their pain.

NB. It’s important to reassure people that their slips will not be read by anyone else. This exercise is about knowing we’re heard by God. Make sure the contents of the box are disposed of without anyone looking through them. If safe and convenient, they could be burnt publicly.

**b) We hear, we hold**

This exercise might be done alongside the ‘God hears, God holds’ exercise, or might be something you do as a stand-alone.

In a time of prayer, invite people to think about a time when they have experienced the pain of disunity in church (either this one or somewhere else): situations such as conflict, not feeling accepted or included, feeling that their opinions have been devalued etc. Invite them to write a single sentence on a slip of paper, expressing how the situation made them feel. It is probably best to avoid any proper names.

In an atmosphere of quiet, respectful listening, invite anyone who wants to, to read their sentence aloud, and encourage everyone else to listen carefully. Leave a space of at least 30 seconds between the readings, to give people time to absorb what they’ve heard.

You could also include a response phrase after each sentence is read, inviting people to say together:

‘God hears you and holds you; we hear you and hold you.’

This activity can be immensely exposing for people, even if they’ve chosen to read out their sentence. It may be the first time they’ve ever expressed those feelings out loud. So it’s important to offer people someone they can speak to / pray with after the meeting or later in the week, if at all possible.

**c) Stories of unity**

Truth-telling involves acknowledging the pain of disunity, but also the joy when we grow in love and unity. Have a testimony time, inviting people to share brief stories of times when they experienced the effects of disunity but saw the situation change for the better.

### Brick by brick

A brick in a wall isn’t equally connected to all the other bricks in that wall. It’s connected just to the bricks immediately around it, and they in turn are connected to the bricks further along. The same is true with growing unity. We can all work together on something, but we can’t all be in equally close loving relationship with everyone else. We naturally get closer to some people than others; we find friendships within the congregation; we spend more time with some than with others depending on what areas of corps life we’re involved in.

If unity is more than just working together – if unity is building welcoming, loving relationship with one another – then we might just need to get to know each other better.

Some questions for personal reflection and prayer during the week:

* Who are the bricks around me in the wall? Who has God put near me?
* Who do I know best / feel most comfortable with?
* Have I noticed anyone who seems to be a brick on their own, someone who doesn’t seem to have friends in the corps?
* What could I do this week to strengthen my relationship with someone else in the corps?

### Building in solidarity

We usually think of unity as something to work at within the Body of Christ. But unity also has an outward-looking aspect: standing in solidarity with those who are being excluded or marginalised by society.

Is there anyone in your local community who is on the edge? What might you do to stand with them in solidarity? Could you offer practical help, or do some lobbying of those in power, or simply let them know you’re praying for them as a corps?