

Martin
Francis

An interview with Joe Abbey-Colborne, Pastor of Parkdale Neighbourhood Church

In this series we have looked at the Scriptural basis for churches working together, and heard about the 'Richmond Hill Mayor's Prayer Breakfast' which brings many local churches together to pray for their town. This article explores an ecumenical worship event called 'Spectrum', which takes place at Parkdale Neighbourhood Church in Toronto.

Pastor Joe explained: "Parkdale Baptist Church started in the 1880's, but dwindled as folk moved to the suburbs, finally closing its doors in the 1970's. The remnant formed 'Parkdale Neighbourhood Church'.

Though once prosperous, Parkdale now has much poverty, with the highest number of IV drug users outside Vancouver's lower-east side, and the greatest number of psychiatric outpatients in Canada.

At PNC we invite people to come just as they are and to bring what they have – it's not a ministry to the neighbourhood, it's a ministry WITH the neighbourhood; the people set the agenda. We have Sunday worship, a drop-in centre, a food bank, community prayer, an 'open-mike' night and events like the "feast" which takes place in the darkest depths of February (when we really NEED it). Thirty people are involved setting up, washing dishes, bringing food or providing music; the people who come share what they have, they ARE the feast, the Body of Christ.

We wanted to know what people felt about Sunday-morning worship, what they wanted from it. So we began a series of 'worship exploration events' – a night of Psalms, a night of singing, or Taizé, or contemplative art – asking what The Lord required of us from worship. This led to 'Spirit Fusion', a multi-denominational worship event at Belfair United church with a team drawn from churches all over the GTA. Sometimes ecumenical events can be unsatisfying with too much emphasis on trying not to offend anyone, and minimizing differences between denominations to 'fit in.' The problem is you can end up with a kind of 'Christian beige.' We tend to worship with people who worship just like us and never go off 'auto-pilot'. We expect God to be happy with OUR style of worship, but run a mile to avoid being exposed to the way others do it.

At 'Spectrum' we asked

'what would happen if we put Jesus first, everything else in second place and NOT check our differences at the door? Now we celebrate our differences, even the ones that challenge us or make us uncomfortable. Every event is different. When the Anglicans planned the communion at the first event they wanted to 'dumb it down,' make it 'more accessible', but we said 'no, bring the robes and the incense, just go for it'. That section was very different from the rest of the service, which featured poetry, story telling, a craft workshop and full-on gospel music. Someone said 'if you're not offended, you're just not taking this thing seriously'. The answer to that is to rely instead on Grace, and in so doing you'll become unoffendable. For me that's the heart of the Gospel – learning to love people who are different than you, who see things differently, or even worship differently."

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