

A hard season for ecumenism

By [Laura Everett](#)

March 9, 2015

Among the hearty New Englanders with whom I serve and pastor, there are a few souls who refuse to close church on account of bad weather, ever. The Lord God created shovels and road salt and boots and wool socks as sure signs of the Almighty's intention that we go to church. Some of these pastors hold deep theological convictions that the people of God should gather for worship every Sunday in rain, snow, sleet, or hail. Others are just defiant Yankee curmudgeons who would rather be assigned to eternal damnation than admit defeat by a winter storm.

Whatever the motivation, I love this stubborn streak within the church. For these individuals, bad weather and small numbers are insufficient justification to cancel church.

I work in the ecumenical movement, where many have a sense that we have had a mighty long stretch of bad weather. They see sure signs of institutional demise: councils of churches closing, reduced support from denominations and congregations, increased division over controversial issues, the decline of formation and seminary courses in ecumenism, a stalling out of full-communion agreements and other efforts at structural reconciliation. The weather is bad—and with the denominations that support ecumenical institutions struggling as well, the forecast isn't looking better. It is easy to understand throwing one's hands in the air and staying home.

Yet even in this climate, some have chosen to stop cursing the conditions and change their orientation. "There is no such thing as bad weather," says the old Norwegian saying, "just bad clothing." This is how Pope Benedict XVI ended up with a gift of Nordic woolen gloves from Olav Fykse Tveit, a Lutheran pastor from Norway and the general secretary of the World Council of Churches.

"They say we are experiencing an 'ecumenical winter' right now," explained [Tveit after his audience with the pope in 2010](#).

And I, being Norwegian, ask back, "What is so terrible about winter?" We know that winter can be beautiful, and we know that winter is only one of four seasons. In winter, we have time for reflection, time to think about what we have experienced in the past and what we expect from the future, and, of course, how we can prepare for the future.

I'm less interested in finding the good in a bad season and more interested in what stays constant regardless of weather. In "summer and winter and springtime and harvest," says the old hymn, "thou changest not." In this season, I propose borrowing some of my New England neighbors' defiance. I am staking my life and my vocation on this truth: the church of Christ is one, in season and out, in summer and winter, springtime and harvest. So we cannot fail in our efforts to bring about unity, because the church is already one.

We *can* miss opportunities and fail to make unity manifest. But this bedrock conviction means that church unity is not ours to program, to strategize, to plot and plan. Our job is not to make unity but to make it more visible, to nurture and cultivate. We are invited to live as if the gospel were actually true even now—not just some future prophetic vision of life abundant when the weather clears, but true already, true here and now.

Those seeking to test Jesus came to him asking for signs from heaven. Jesus answered them, "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:3). Or as Bob Dylan sang, "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." For too long, we've been looking for weathermen to diagnose our ecclesial climate, instead of living with the weather, such as it is, with bundled-up confidence in our changeless God.

There's a major cottage industry in folksy New England proverbs about the weather (though most are now created overseas). I'm particularly fond of this truism: "It won't be warm till the snow gets off the mountain, and the snow won't get off the mountain till it gets warm." Likewise, the church won't be one until the weather gets better, and the weather won't get better until the church is one.