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One Church, one faith, one Lord

This Friday marks the start of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It is observed annually from the 18th to the 25th January.

About a hundred years ago some Christians saw that their divisions had become too entrenched and were harmful. Between Christians of different traditions there was often ignorance and prejudice, suspicion and even mistrust. Jesus Christ had prayed that his followers would all be one. What image did such evident disunity present to the world?

Thus was born what became known as the ecumenical movement, seeking "that unity of the Church as Christ wills it and by the means he wills", supported by all the main Christian traditions worldwide and symbolised by the Week of Prayer. In the 1950s and 1960s there was a surge of expectation that many separate traditions would unite. Such hopes were largely disappointed. Fervour faded. Emphasis shifted to reconciliation and working together. It was realised that Christians were united by far more than what divided them, and that diversity of practice was not intrinsically bad. Around Petersfield the churches of half a dozen different traditions embody this interdependence as PACT - Petersfield Area Churches Together.

What purpose does the Week of Prayer serve today? In the words of Abbe Paul Couturier in the 1930s, "we must pray not that others may be converted to us, but that we may all be drawn closer to Christ".

This year's theme is "What does God require of us?", words of the prophet Micah 2,700 years ago. His answer was "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God".