WHILE the Catholic and Lutheran churches have been in official dialogue for over 50 years, the Together In Hope concert at The Basilica of Saint Mary provided a more melodic interchange between members of both churches for one Saturday night. On Saturday, February 9, 2019, 60 singers of both faiths performed the U.S. premiere of So That the World May Believe: A Motet for Unity and Service as well as The Holy Spirit Mass by Norwegian composer Kim André Arnesen.

The choir was welcomed by Fr. John Bauer. Archbishop Bernard Hebda and Bishop Ann Svennungsen of the Minneapolis Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America provided an ecumenical greeting to the audience.

The Together In Hope Project was founded by Gary Aamodt and Celia Ellingson, two Lutherans who have a self-proclaimed “passion for advancing Christian unity and for choral music.” They firmly believe that the latter is great for the former. “I think we live in a very fractured world, especially within the Christian world, we live in a fractured tradition. We’re trying to address that,” explained Aamodt.

Music brings ecumenical dialogue to a different level. “We truly believe that music has the power to move people to a new understanding, an emotional response, to be open to new experiences with others, and ultimately to action,” said Ellingson.

The two commissioned pieces drew inspiration from both faiths. So That the World May Believe is based on passages from Ephesians and 1 Corinthians, interspersed with verses from By Grace God Calls Us Into Life, which was written for the 60th anniversary of the Lutheran World Federation. The piece was dedicated to Pope Francis for his efforts to promote reconciliation between faiths.
The Holy Spirit Mass is based on English translations of Veni Creator Spiritus; Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord; Martin Luther’s hymn; words from Luther’s Small Catechism; and the Ordinary of the Mass. The text also featured passages in Greek and Latin. “The words are all about unity, healing, and reconciliation,” said Ellingson.

While the music’s text drew connections, everyone involved with the project agreed that the connection points went beyond words. “These singers believe what they are singing. What comes through is not just through beautiful melodies, but their conviction,” said Ellingson.

The Basilica’s Director of Music, Teri Larson, was moved by far more than the choir’s music. During the choir’s trip to Rome, she saw a literal coming together of members of both churches. Larson was moved by “watching people interact with each other, learning about each other, dispelling myths, and relationships being built.”

Choir members understood that the music had a multitude of meaning beyond just the notes on the page. “It’s something much more deep than words. You put emotion behind the music. You are trying to convey the words in a way, the ecumenical idea of connection of love,” said choir member Roshan Rajkumar.

The choir members first performed both pieces at the 17th annual Festival Internazionale di Musica e Arte Sacra in Rome on October 31, 2018. The choir came back from the experience feeling inspired. “We were unbelievably impressed with what happened in Rome,” said Ellingson. They left Rome excited to bring the message back to the Twin Cities. “It was so powerful the audience was transformed,” said Aamodt. “To make a choir that’s this powerful, because of how many professional singers are with it.” said Rajkumar. “To get us to be a part of the music, not just sing the notes, but live the piece. It’s a mix of overwhelming awe and mystery, and we’re making sure we do it right.”

The Basilica filled with music and message of reconciliation and unity for one evening, and there is hope that the two churches continue to grow in connection. “We hope that the practice of the church catches up with the theology. We realize for the credibility for the Christian witness in the world we have to come together,” said Aamodt.

The opening notes of the concert featured words from Ephesians 4: “There is one body and one Spirit.” Fortunately, there is also one thing that binds everyone who was involved with Together In Hope: “The music is in their bones,” said Ellingson.

Nick Hansen has been an active volunteer and parish members since 2015.