

Paper 14

Mission Committee

New Framework for Local Unity in Mission

A response from the United
Reformed Church

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Basic Information

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Action required	Receive and take note
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	The United Reformed Church response to the discussion document from Churches Together in England, 'A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission'. To share the response that has been made from discussion within the church.
Main points	The response affirms the main recommendations that are contained in the report and offers observations from the perspective of the United Reformed Church.
Previous relevant documents	A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission.
Consultation has taken place with...	Mission Council Mission Committee Faith and Order Committee 24 Hour consultation of synod representatives.

Summary of Impact

Financial	None
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Contribution to ecumenical thinking and development.

New Framework for Local Unity in Mission ^[1]

A response from the United Reformed Church

Preamble

1. The document was circulated in the spring of 2016 to and through the synods, including the national synods of Wales and Scotland, with a request for responses. In addition, following a presentation by David Cornick at the meeting of the URC's Mission Council in November 2016 there was group discussion focussing on the most obvious positive aspects of the report, the questions that it raised and the suggestions for action that could be noted. The results of this, along with written responses from two synod discussions, were fed into a consultation held at High Leigh on 1 and 2 February 2017. The consultation included representatives from each of the synods, including seven synod moderators, and the General Secretary along with a number of ecumenical officers and members of the Ecumenical Reference Group. The meeting was joined by a representative of the Methodist Church, the ecumenical partner with which the URC shares the largest number of LEPs (some 300 in total). This draft for a response from the URC distils what emerged as the most important points at the consultation.

General comments, especially on points 1,2 and 3 'encouragement to the churches'^[2]

2. The consultation reflected on the ecumenical 'DNA' of the URC acknowledging its roots in the union of 1972 and was determined to express its continued and strong commitment to Christian Unity and its belief that unity for the sake of the Gospel is still one of its highest priorities and that mission and unity cannot be separated. This is especially true in these increasingly troubled times. The call to unity comes from God and requires us to continue to pursue unity with determination; as one participant put it, 'There is only one church and we need to be able to reveal that to the world.'
3. The document has been very much welcomed across the synods therefore, as offering a fresh and positive response to the changing ecumenical scene within England and in particular emphasising the need for patterns to be light and flexible. These two characteristics are seen to be of high importance. Its value within the different ecumenical landscape of Scotland and Wales is also recognised and welcomed.
4. The search for and growth of ecumenical partnership at local, intermediate and denominational levels ought to be encouraged and supported as strongly as possible. While our structures are expressions of identity and may contain deeply embedded patterns, we also acknowledge that these may at times be obstacles to unity in mission; as such we should be prepared to question, challenge and as necessary change them.

5. This challenge comes to the church at all levels and often extends to denominational leadership in particular, to make ecumenical cooperation the highest priority, recognising that in all our traditions this is not always the case. This is not a time to withdraw into denominational bunkers. This has implications both for the initial training of clergy in ecumenism and for appropriate continuing professional development, especially at times of movement into leadership roles.
6. Conscious of the fact that a good deal of the URC's ecumenical energy is focussed in LEPs, a considerable amount of discussion was focussed there. At the same time we are conscious of the fact that new ecumenical partners are increasingly coming onto the scene, for which we give thanks and recognise that the focus has to move out from the traditional partnerships with which we are familiar and in which we are experienced.
7. Nevertheless, concern was expressed that the document seemed to suggest that LEPs were a thing of the past, 'a failed experiment'. The consultation was keen to express the belief that this was not the case. **This was by far the strongest comment that emerged in response to the document.** LEPs present both the opportunity for creative synergy and a challenge to the churches to continue to pursue unity. In many cases they offer an uncomfortable model of a unity 'already achieved' which the denominations can struggle to respond to. We need to listen to the experience of LEPs, to recognise the gifts and the challenges they offer. In particular, those LEPs that see themselves as United Churches rather than Partnerships will not go away. And when Fresh Expressions, for example, become established as churches new expressions of 'United Churches' may emerge. Should the churches attempt to impose an external pattern of internal partnership on them when they experience something quite different? We recognise, however, the need for these churches to relate to their constituent denominations and at times to make decisions in a manner that is acceptable to them, especially where charity law is concerned. Who or what needs to change?
8. **Responses to the Recommendations^[3]**
 - a) **Visions of Unity.** The Theology and Unity group might have a role in developing this, especially in light of new ecumenical partners. It has already been doing this to some extent but its connection with the local level is tenuous at best. Useful work could be done on what it means to understand unity as an act of obedience to the Triune God. Experience elsewhere might help in this, e.g. Waldensian dialogues with Pentecostals over 10 years, in Italy; Reformed and Methodist interchange of ministers despite having separate churches, in Italy and Netherlands; other members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches; the Church of South India.
 - b) **Oversight.**
 - i. We want to reiterate the belief that LEPs have not run their course. The rationale of the denominations taking responsibility for oversight of existing and new LEPs as well as other expressions of local unity in mission is acknowledged and welcomed. For this to be effective the important element is the strength of relationship between the denominations at the appropriate level. This evoked the observation that both in dealing with problems that may arise and in establishing effective patterns, the key

element is the quality of relationship between all those that are involved especially people in key roles. Examples of places where these relationships are good and places where they are not good and the corresponding impact on the local situation, were shared.

- ii. Connected with this is the need for denominations to be accountable to one another in continuing to carry out what they agree. This can only work well when relationships are strong at all levels. Good relationships and clear communication are essential to maintaining partnerships, whether formal or informal. It will be important to establish some way of firmly embedding this mutual accountability.
- iii. This is a crucial area of focus and in association with 7 above illustrates the need for the careful appointment of personnel in the denominations in situations where ecumenical working is particularly common.
- iiii. The URC's own Local Mission and Ministry Review process (LMMR) has been used ecumenically in a few places and could be offered as one possible approach to developing effective review procedures, noting that 'one size may not fit all'.

c) Approval of agreements.

The use of the word 'solely' was queried. Whilst it is important for denominational authorities to approve agreements, the work will also be in the context of local ecumenical 'communities' (local churches, and in some cases maybe trusts, agencies or other organisations) so it would also be important to have their approval albeit perhaps less formally. There needs to be a way of effectively communicating agreement between all the partners involved.

d) Registering / listing of agreements.

- i) It was recognised that an effective listing of agreements, especially constitutional agreements, is important. The system needs to be suitable for areas without CEOs. Nevertheless the centralising of information is important for reference purposes. A properly effective way of achieving this needs to be found.
- ii) A plea was also made for centralised collection of statistics rather than the duplication of requests from different denominations for effectively the same information. An attempt had been made in the past which only lasted one year.
- iii) Recommendation 4d refers to Section 2:1(c) of the document. That paragraph is about the denominational authorities being responsible for recording the agreements they have made, and needing an appropriate system of registration to enable them to carry out their regular responsibilities for oversight (pastoral care, and connection of the local to the wider church). The details in the lists held by different denominations need to be compatible, rather than each one working out its own system. Therefore, we would support recommendation 4d with the intention that CTE staff and CEOs with their experience help the denominational authorities to work out together a system of registering/listing all the agreements for working together locally that need denominational approval and oversight.

e) Use of Charitable Incorporated Organisation models.

The URC is advised at the moment that the use of CIOs is not appropriate for its polity and the Mission Committee will revisit this to check whether this is indeed the case. There is a desperate need for simple documents that can be understood

and easily applied. Clarity is needed especially on how structures are to work, on finance and on membership. The present Model Governing Document has been welcomed and used in various LEPs in which the URC is involved.

f) Guidance on agreements.

It was noted that the document does not contain detailed guidance and that this was not within its remit so we support the recommendation wholeheartedly. Once again the plea is for agreement to be as simple and as accessible as possible for people in the local situations.

[1] The CTE document “A New Framework for local Unity in Mission” with Preface dated 31 March 2016 is available in ‘full final amended’ version, dated 16 09 06, (pp. iii + 20) from this page of the CTE website: A brief version (pp. 3) is also available there.

[2] Points 1, 2, and 3 are those so numbered in Section 5 of the full document, p.20. The Preface of the full document, and the brief version, number the recommendations differently.

[3] The following subheadings, labelled **a)-f)** in bold, refer to the recommendations a)-f) of point 4 on p.20 of the full document ‘A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission’ dated 16 09 16.