

Paper I3

Mission Committee

A new framework for
local ecumenism

United Church 2015
Church 2015
Reformed Church 2015
Church 2015



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Mission Committee

A new framework for local ecumenism

Basic Information

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Action required	Advice
Draft resolution(s)	N/A

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	The initial discussion document of the Churches Together in England working group about local ecumenism and about Local Ecumenical Partnerships in particular has been circulated for comments from member churches. This paper includes specific observations for the URC. The aim is to offer comments to feed in to the ecumenical discussion and to identify issues of particular concern for the URC.
Main points	The local ecumenical scene is now being engaged in by new partners not previously engaged. The pattern of Local Ecumenical Partnerships needs to be reviewed especially in relation to Intermediate Bodies. The views of churches are sought.
Previous relevant documents	The full document, of which paper I3 is a summary, can be found at www.cte.org.uk , by putting 'local ecumenism' into the search bar.
Consultation has taken place with...	Faith and Order committee, Mission committee, individuals in networks.

Summary of Impact

Financial	None
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Ecumenical partners especially in LEPs.

A new framework for local ecumenism

Summary of the consultation document

A New Framework for Local Ecumenism was presented to the Enabling Group of Churches Together in England in March 2015. At that meeting the Enabling Group agreed to send the paper, with a covering explanatory note from the General Secretary, to all the member churches and to Intermediate Bodies, asking them to comment on the paper and to respond to the questions appended in Annex 1 of the paper. Responses are requested by the end of October 2015. The working group which has produced this paper will then consider the responses received and report back to the Enabling Group at its meeting in March 2016, making recommendations to Churches Together in England, Intermediate Bodies and member churches, for the reform and renewal of local ecumenical partnerships within the context of local ecumenism as a whole.

1. The cover note from the General Secretary gives some background to this project. The working group consists of national ecumenical officers from the five Churches which have been the principle participants in local ecumenical partnerships, including the Baptist Union, the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the United Reformed Church.
2. The aims of the working group are (paragraphs 1-6):
 - a) To seek greater clarity about the purposes, structures, and language of local ecumenism.
 - b) To develop an enabling framework for a wider range of churches to work together at local level.
3. Part I – *the Principles of Ecumenical Partnership* – sets out our thinking about churches working together in partnership (paragraphs 7-21). Local ecumenism is necessarily diverse and untidy. It is diverse in terms of the forms in which it takes and the motivations which drive it. We offer a dynamic model (paragraphs 7-10) to explore how different expressions of ecumenism, with different degrees of informality and organisation, and a different balance between action of Christian individuals together and action of churches together, interact with and feed off each other.
4. The language of *partnership* and of *covenant* has been used a great deal of local ecumenical working in recent years (explored in paragraphs 11-21). Whereas much joint activity requires little organisation and very light structures, partnerships need to be supported by agreements and structures. It is especially important to keep sight of partnership as active participation and co working. The agreements supporting a partnership express both the 'will' and the 'can': they enable something to happen that otherwise would not happen and they enable something to happen that otherwise could not happen.
5. Partnerships between churches enable them to share actions which are essential to their life as a church: its ministry and worship, the way it makes decisions, its money and buildings, its spiritual and numerical growth. Churches which have been involved

in such partnerships have found that joint actions in these areas require a framework of agreement which enables these actions to take place jointly. As partnerships between new partners develop, different questions may need to be addressed.

6. Partnership and covenanting are not quite the same things. Covenant is used in many different ways, not always with great clarity. It is used particularly to describe a specific form of partnership. However, we think that the concept of local covenanting is too important to apply only to one type of partnership, because it helps our churches to understand local ecumenical working in many contexts. We therefore suggest that it is not used to describe a particular model of partnership but to refer more to the permanent, transformative, spirit led and participatory nature of partnerships.
7. Local covenanting invariably embraces partnership, but not all partnerships will necessarily be established through local covenanting. Particular partnerships between churches do not necessarily have to include agreements on every aspect of church life; they do not have to include all churches, either actually or potentially; they may be entered into for a limited period of time, and they may focus on a specific area of joint work.
8. In Part II (paragraphs 22-52) – *Learning from Experience: reflections on partnership as experienced in Local Ecumenical Partnerships and Fresh Expressions* – we grapple with some of the issues associated with Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) as they have developed over the years, and with some of the challenges presented by the mission shaped focus, especially in church planting and fresh expressions, of many of our churches. Among these issues we highlight (paragraphs 22-25):
 - a) That we are in a quickly changing context with new mission challenges and opportunities for new sorts of mission partnerships between a widening spectrum of churches, whereas the structures of LEPs have evolved to accommodate the needs of the main historic participants.
 - b) That there is a sense of fatigue around the complexities and other difficulties associated with a growing number of LEPs although it is part of the condition of other parts of the Church in this country as well.
 - c) That there is a serious issue about negative perceptions of so called single congregation LEPs within the churches.
9. We pay particular attention to the way partnership may be expressed in LEPs where there is one worshipping community (paragraphs 26-29). We also highlight a fundamental tension between denominational expectations on one hand and post denominationalism on the other, which are expressed most clearly around issues of membership and governance (paragraphs 30-33). Both these are brought into sharp relief in partnerships which have their origin in ecumenical church plants and more recently in ecumenical fresh expressions (paragraphs 34-37). There is further discussion of possible approaches to issues of governance in Annex 2 of the paper (paragraphs A1-A9).
10. The oversight of partnerships between local churches is a key issue (paragraphs 38-47). The role of Sponsoring Bodies is becoming increasingly unsustainable (paragraph 39), and we suggest that the responsibility for oversight of such partnerships lies primarily with the authorities of the participating denominations (paragraph 44). The role of Intermediate Bodies should essentially be that of registration of partnerships (paragraphs 41-43) and co-ordination of oversight and review (paragraphs 44 and 45-46).

11. In the final section of Part II (paragraphs 48-52) we ask whether the formal definition of Local Ecumenical Partnership needs to be revised (paragraph 48-49), and whether the term Local Ecumenical Partnership itself needs to be refreshed (paragraph 50). We also suggest that categorising LEPs into six categories hides the potential and actual variety of forms of partnership that exist (51-52). We suggest that rather than think exclusively in terms of *categories* of partnership, understanding the variety of partnerships in terms of their *characteristics* may help to express the variety that is already on the ground and may suggest other potential forms of partnership.

The Local Ecumenism Working Group

4 June 2015

A URC perspective

Notes to assist consideration in a URC context

- A1. The full report and the summary paper are the result of two years work by the small group described in the report of which I have been a part. It has been an interesting and challenging piece of work that is only partly complete. The primary purpose, at this stage, is to attempt to achieve a common perspective on the best way forward for local ecumenism, primarily in England as it is a CTE exercise but which will have applications in Wales and Scotland too.

Some observations

- A2. One of the significant differences between ourselves and the Methodists in particular is that in our polity an LEP formed from scratch becomes a URC congregation whereas others require a pre-existing church. In that sense it is not a partnership of distinct congregations but of denominations.
- A3. This connects with a serious issue that the report recognises but does not address. There are a significant number of churches that call themselves and perceive themselves to be United Churches and reject the idea that they are anymore a partnership of separate entities. For many of them they feel that they have achieved what the leaderships are still struggling to achieve. Technically we only recognise this concept in Union Churches (with the Baptists) which are united congregations in membership of more than one denomination. In practice we are happy to see this in cases where other denominations are not. This is probably because we recognise LEPs as congregations of the URC even when we have no members in them. This in itself raises questions about membership understanding and processes. What does it mean to say we have x number of URC members in an LEP if as in some cases that focus is arrived at by a simple arithmetical calculation and in other cases left to the decision of individuals which can then lead to the zero figure.
- A4. One of the original purposes of the oversight of Intermediate Bodies (IBs) was to 'learn from' LEPs and single congregational ones in particular. The reality is that this is random and largely unplanned and in too many cases the 'learning' is just how difficult LEPs can be. The suggestion that the denominations involved take responsibility for the 'technical' oversight and review of LEPs could release the IBs to engage more effectively in this learning, providing that is properly acknowledged. At the same time the denominations should, I believe, recognise the opportunity to also learn through, for example, engaging in programmes of receptive ecumenism.

- A5. The lack of the centralisation of registration and record keeping in the URC makes it difficult to gain an overview which presents a challenge to the URC to do something to redress the relative isolation of the synods in the holding and sharing of information even if not moving to a central registration system for LEPs.

Questions we might usefully answer or need to face.

- A6. What is our understanding of the difference between partnership and covenant? Do we recognise any significant difference between a single congregation which is technically a partnership and one which is a Union Church?
- A7. How much value do we place on eldership as a gift to the wider church and how do we 'maintain' that gift in situations where the local church may feel that in order to be able to properly work with ecumenical partners we have to reduce eldership simply to being a member of a church council or leadership group?
- A8. What do we do about LEPs in which we no longer have any members? This question has just been raised specifically in two instances in England and in Wales but it connects directly with a variety of factors including the identity that we bring into LEPs and how we have seen our identity diminish. Do we need a distinctly different category of engagement where we do not recognise them as congregations of the URC but something else in which we nevertheless have an interest or a stake?
- A9. In relation to new projects, such as Fresh Expressions, how do we establish proper channels by which individuals can come into membership of and have sense of belonging to the URC assuming that we see this as important? If we do not, then are there other questions that need to be asked?

Summary of comments from discussions to date:

Faith and Order Committee

- A10. a) Can we learn to be content with messiness (i.e. not be constantly trying to fit everything into neat structures)?
- b) Should we be prepared to accept the 'Lead Church' model (where one denomination runs the church as one of its own but acknowledges and respects the broad ecumenical makeup of the congregation)?
- c) Can we focus on letting things go (that perhaps our tradition says is important) in order to be creative?
- d) But we need to identify the first order things that we bring/offer. Significantly, that may be our participatory form of decision making and discussion in Church Meeting (and other places) and the role of eldership (which is often watered down or dropped completely in LEPs).
- e) We should make a clear statement about our continued commitment to organic unity.
- f) Can we challenge our ecumenical partners more vocally e.g. to accept the possibility of the union church model of LEP rather than the partnership model?

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- A11. a) The experience on the ground in many single congregational LEPs is that they experience themselves as United Churches rather than partnerships and do not wish to be told by another level of authority that they cannot be. The URC should affirm this. It also needs to be recognised that there are often individuals in LEPs so do not wish to declare any particular denominational allegiance beyond Christian.
- b) Both for existing LEPs, and for new ones coming into existence, especially with new partners or coming out of Fresh Expressions, simpler models that do not, for example, demand the multiple submission of statistics need to be found. The financing of LEPs also needs to be much more straightforward.
- c) It was recognised that, in most cases, the issues we face are to do with our relationship with Methodist polity.
- d) Eldership is important but how do we make it work in LEPs without losing it or it becoming invisible in a place where the concept of eldership is valued and incorporated but then later lost perhaps because ordination of elders is an ecumenical problem?

