*This is the full text of the Revd Dr David Cornick’s presentation to Mission Council on 20 October 2017*

*(Paper I2: Local Ecumenical working)*

**New framework for local unity in mission**

Why do we need a new framework for local mission in unity? Isn’t the old one good enough?

Let me first of all seek the indulgence of a church in three nations. I represent only one National Instrument, the English one, and all I can speak about with confidence is England. I am aware that things are different in Scotland and Wales. That is one of the many concessions we have to make to each other when we talk ecumenically.

The old framework for local ecumenism pre-dates CTE by a quarter of a century. It was born in the heady days of the mid 1960s, in the wake of the British Council of Churches Faith and Order Conference of 1964 which challenged the British Churches to unite by Easter 1980. In its excitement, the Conference asked the churches to designate ‘…areas of ecumenical experiment, at the request of local congregations or in new towns and housing areas. In such areas there should be experiment in ecumenical group ministries, in sharing buildings and equipment and in the development of mission.’ They began as areas of ecumenical experiment, proliferated after the passing of the Sharing of Church Buildings Act of 1969, became Local Ecumenical Projects in 1973, and later Local Ecumenical Partnerships. The partners tended to be the big four – the Anglicans, Methodists, URC and Baptists. It is a model of ecumenical participation which meant and means a great deal to the URC. We committed ourselves entirely to the vision, which is why nearly a third of our congregations are LEPs. Our commitment to that ecumenical model was such that (until the Baptist Union for example) we refused for decades to church plant unless we did so ecumenically.

The first thing that needs to be said is that we deeply value those existing LEPs which have made such a significant contribution to mission and witness, but the curve of LEP formation has been declining sharply over the last decade. In a sense they were perfectly suited to their time, focussed on local mission, a visible challenge to the denominations to get their ecumenical act together. I remember at ordinand from one multi-denominational LEP demanding to known why she couldn’t be ecumenically ordained to one ecumenical church.

Alas, the churches did not get their act together. 1980 came and went, the English denominations moved no closer together, and the 900 or so LEPs became not so much a harbinger of the future as a reminder of the past when ecumenism was largely a lop-sided conversation between the Church of England and the Free Churches. By 1990 things had changed completely as the post Vatican II Catholic Church in England and Wales committed itself to the ecumenical journey. The British Council of Churches was replaced by a new set of Instruments to accommodate that and to respond to the growing number of black led migrant churches.

Since 1990 we have seen a broadening of the ecumenical conversation. When CTE came into being it had 16 members. Now it has 45 and rising. We need a new framework because Christian England is changing. Our experience simply mirrors what is happening. Let me risk a brief thumb-nail summary.

Globalisation has brought the world church to the High Streets of our towns and cities, and in some cases our villages. African, Asian, Caribbean and Middle Eastern Churches, from the Coptic Orthodox to the black Pentecostal Redeemed Christian Church of God, are now part of the English Christian family. Walk down Peckham High Street on a Sunday morning and it’s a bit like downtown Accra – churches in every other shopfront.

Some of the charismatic and community churches which were founded in the 1960s and 1970s almost in protest at the hidebound nature of traditional historic Christianity, have grown to ecumenical maturity, and they now want to share in mission together. It’s a different experience to ours, but we need to listen to it. As one of their leaders told me, ‘In community churches we don’t have a career structure. We stay put. I’ve been in Puddletown thirty years now and I’m the longest established minister, and that alters your perspective.’ It makes you more open to your fellow churches, but it also sensitises you to the needs of your community. Gerald Coates’s Pioneer network, now under the leadership of one of our Presidents, Billy Kennedy, is a prime example of how a new community network can create a deep and important missional relationships with an historic denomination – Methodism.

Recent studies suggest that since the 1980s there has been simultaneous growth and decline within English Christianity. With many caveats, the broad brush picture offered by these researchers is of the gentle and polite decline of historic Christianity, and the growth of migrant and new churches. Obviously there are exceptions, but the picture rings true. The growth tends to be metropolitan and to follow the A1 corridor.

The growth of the new and migrant churches, most of whom have an evangelical theology and spirituality, has co-incided with the ascendancy of evangelicalism as the default theological mode of many historic churches, which has eased relationships on the ground and at leadership level.

This is a very different ecumenical world, with many more possible partners. A lot of the new partners come from overseas. They have grown up with a different theological DNA to that of the indigenous English churches, and they understand unity differently. Unity is to be found in a common faith, sometimes a common baptism, and that is a license to undertake mission together. That in turn finds common cause with the agendas of the main stream churches who experience their decline as a call to mission at all costs. And so the ecumenical agenda has shifted, away from matters which is used to loom large, like the reconciliation of ministries, the Petrine ministry and Eucharistic fellowship. For myself I think the pendulum will swing, because if we do mission successfully together, we will want to do yet more together and that in turn will bring us back to the old ecumenical agenda with its perennially difficult questions about bishops, authority, ordination and so on. But for the foreseeable future, mission is at the top of the churches’ agenda.

We need a new framework for this new ecumenical era. It needs to be fleet of foot, able to cope with a rapidly shifting environment. It needs to be permission giving rather than box ticking and it has to be mission focused. It needs to be able to cope with the short-term and time-limited as well as with the long-term and permanent.

We’ve struggled with images to express this, but in the end we have used two which we hoped might help. The first was of a multi-occupied house with different activities going on in each room and flat. The second is of a climbing frame which allows adventure and play and experiment, with a safe underlying structure. We want to encourage new tenants, and new climbers and players.

The structure is simple. We suggest three levels of agreement – working agreements, partnership agreements, and constitutional agreements. Working agreements are what you might need to do a specific piece of mission together – perhaps a joint Pentecost celebration and BBQ outreach event. Once the piece of work is finished you tear it up. Then there is partnership agreement – perhaps allowing another congregation to worship in your premises, or the use of five local churches as a rotating Night Shelter. The third level is a constitutional agreement. This would kick in when you want to share a building or a piece of ministry – perhaps creating a university chaplaincy, or bringing together a Methodist and United Reformed Church in one building, or an outreach café run by two churches with a common business plan. When local churches do things like this, the legal officers of the wider denominations are properly interested, both to safeguard their own interests and to ensure that things are done properly and with due order. Which is a kingdom value. Jesus wasn’t in favour of people building towers without due diligence (Lk 14:28).

In other words, what we are putting into words is that a whole raft of ecumenical co-operation and activity can happen with the minimum of regulation. Of course we hope and pray that what we do together will lead us to grow into Christ and as we do so grow closer to each other. The end result may even be a single congregation LEP, but it is more likely not to be.

You will see from the paper that we are engaged in a period of reflection and discussion around these proposals, and that there are areas where much more work is needed. One of those is to explore theologically the diverse understandings of mission, holiness and worship which exist amongst our members. Another is to work on what kind of legal framework would best suit the creation of a single governance structure. It is already clear, for example, that whilst a Charitable Incorporated Organisation model would suit the Baptist Union and the Church of England, it is unlikely to satisfy the URC or the Methodists. We are not lawyers, and in the end I think we’ll shut the lawyers in a room and not let them out until they’ve sorted that one!

I want to end though, with one resolution, which we hope will command wide assent, and that is that the participating churches in any specific piece of local co-operative working should take responsibility for that piece of work and provide oversight. This is a change from the present system which places that responsibility on a county Sponsoring Body. Over the years two problems have emerged. The first is that many county bodies no longer have a functioning ecumenical Intermediate Body or they simply do not have the resources to do this. The second is like unto it. When denominational church leaders distance themselves from a Sponsoring Body (and their busy diaries compound this), the effect is an abdication of oversight to a body on which they are not represented, and in many cases difficulties and tensions arise. Our proposal is therefore that oversight of co-operative work resides in the participating denominations, and that it can only be delegated within a denomination. The partners have to decide which is the best way to deliver that. In some places that may still be the Sponsoring Body, but only if it is working properly and all the participating denominational authorities are actively engaged in it.

Our hope is that this new framework will provide a light touch which will enable far more diverse and creative sharing in mission and witness for the new ecumenical era in which we live, and we look forward to the ongoing conversation with our member churches as they respond to the call of Christ to live out the kingdom in Mrs May’s England.

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