

Paper 12

Mission committee

Local ecumenical working

United Reformed Church
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Paper I2

Mission Committee Local Ecumenical Working

Basic Information

Contact	The Revd David Tatem david.tatem@urc.org.uk
Action required	Discussion, and resolution
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Mission Council concurs with Recommendation 4b of the New Framework for Local Unity in Mission document:</p> <p>that the denominations involved in specific instances of local co-operative working (including existing local ecumenical partnerships) take responsibility for the oversight of that work;</p> <p>and that if they look to a sponsoring body to facilitate this they should nevertheless continue to hold that responsibility.</p>

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	A change in the understanding of the responsibility for the oversight of Local Ecumenical Partnerships in England.
Main points	Responsibility for the oversight of LEPs should be firmly located with the ecumenical partners involved.
Previous relevant documents	<p>'A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission' (March 2016)</p> <p>'A new framework for local ecumenism: Consultation with Member Churches and Intermediate Bodies' (March 2015)</p>
Consultation has taken place with...	Mission Committee (prior to the publication of the March 2016 document)

Summary of Impact

Financial	Nil	
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Potential alignment and cooperation with ecumenical partners. Potential increased workload within synods, if synods are not already actively carrying these responsibilities.	

Local Ecumenical Working

The Oversight of Local Ecumenical Partnerships Introduction

- A. In the Spring of 2016 Churches Together in England (CTE) issued the document 'A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission' for consultation with the member churches of CTE. This originated from an initial consideration of the life of Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs), 400 of the roughly 900 involving the United Reformed Church with one or more other partner.
- B. The process of considering the whole document will take some while and initial responses to the document are being invited from the denominations in time for the meeting of the CTE Enabling group in February 2017. Over time, there are likely to be various resolutions that will come either to all the denominations for decision or which may be generated by reflection within individual churches. Our own consideration of the document is being pursued in a number of ways including inviting personal reflections. There will be a consultation to look at the document in general and also to begin to anticipate implications for the URC in the future, on February 1st and 2nd at the High Leigh Conference Centre.
- C. Despite the long term nature of this process there is one recommendation of the report which can be considered at an early stage and a concrete response given from the churches, in particular those that have been partners in LEPs. This concerns the oversight of LEPs.
- D. The relevant section of the report document is copied below along with the accompanying recommendation.

From: Section three: Honouring the past and being pastorally responsible for it paras 4-6

Oversight of Local Ecumenical Partnerships

4. We have come to the conclusion that one of the main difficulties around single congregation local ecumenical partnerships is to do with the structures of shared oversight that have developed over the last thirty years (since the proposals in *A Pattern for Local Ecumenism*¹ to establish a Sponsoring Body in each county for the oversight of all Local Ecumenical Partnerships). There are two main issues around this model of shared oversight. The first is that it relies on the Sponsoring Body having sufficient capacity to fulfil the role. A growing number of counties no longer have a functioning intermediate ecumenical body to support a Sponsoring Body and others do not have the resources to serve Local Ecumenical Partnerships. There are some intermediate ecumenical bodies which are well funded and supported, but are now working to a new set of priorities, engaging with the growing diversity

¹ *A Pattern for Local Ecumenism*, Consultative Committee for Local Ecumenical Projects in England, British Council of Churches (1984)

of churches and creating new opportunities for public witness and social engagement, achieved partly by reducing the sponsoring role of the intermediate ecumenical body.

5. The second issue to do with oversight of Local Ecumenical Partnerships is more fundamental. Shared oversight by a Sponsoring Body works as long as denominational authorities are represented on Sponsoring Bodies by the people – leaders or officers – who exercise oversight within their own churches, and take responsibility together for the Local Ecumenical Partnerships. Difficulties arise when denominational authorities have passed responsibility to the Sponsoring Body but have not been adequately represented on it. The effect is that the denominational authorities abdicate the role of oversight and at the same time render the Sponsoring Body ineffective. We suggest that oversight can only be delegated within a denomination, not from the denomination to another body. **The Sponsoring Body is only effective as long as the denominational authorities are fully engaged.**

6. In our paper, we have suggested the obvious – **oversight is the responsibility of the partners to any particular agreement, and it should be shared by them in the most appropriate and sensible way, noting that different partners will have different ways of delivering oversight.** We suggest further that dealing with the difficulties that single congregation partnerships experience will only be possible if the denominational authorities take up this responsibility, in line with what we say in Section 2 about oversight in general.

Recommendation 4 b of the report:

..that the denominations involved in specific instances of local co-operative working (including existing local ecumenical partnerships) take responsibility for the oversight of that work and that if they look to a sponsoring body to facilitate this they should nevertheless continue to hold that responsibility (Section 2:1(a));

Addendum

Section 2 of the New Frameworks Document is more broadly concerned with the question of oversight not simply of LEPs. Nevertheless its suggestions for the practice of oversight may answer some of the questions that can be asked about how taking responsibility for the oversight of LEPs might be put into practice.

Section 2: Oversight

1. All the different ways of working together co-operatively that require some form of agreement between the participating churches and the approval of denominational authorities need oversight. Oversight, as we have already said in our paper, is the expression of pastoral care by the wider church or denomination for its members and the way in which the local is connected to the wider church. We suggest the following principles of oversight for local co-operative working:

- a) Oversight is the responsibility of the partners to any particular agreement, and it should be shared amongst them in the most appropriate and sensible way, again noting that different partners will have different ways of delivering it.

- b) The agreement supporting local ecumenical working should be approved solely by the denominational authorities involved.
- c) The denominational authorities should be responsible for recording the agreement. We think there is some merit in having a system of registration of such agreements but recognise that the current system for registering Local Ecumenical Partnerships may not be appropriate. Further work is needed to establish a system which is robust, useful and manageable.
- d) The denominational authorities should be responsible for reviewing the agreement, especially if it is time limited.

Making oversight work

2. We suggest the following questions need to be addressed by those responsible for oversight to ensure it is carried out effectively:

- a) First, who makes sure the denominations fulfil their responsibilities of oversight?
- b) Second, how will senior leaders ensure that they have access to knowledge and understanding of ecumenical working?
- c) Third, who can be called on when things go wrong to act as arbitrator, facilitator and reconciler?
- d) Fourth, where is the bank of ecumenical expertise held which can be drawn upon in the development of local co-operative working? We believe that local co-operative working needs to be seen in developmental terms – new opportunities and issues present themselves at different stages of the life cycles of working together, which require sensitive and confident guidance in order to make sure that supportive and enabling rather than obstructive structures are developed.
- e) Fifth, there is also a particular question about how the process would work where many denominations may be involved.

3. The network of denominational ecumenical officers and county ecumenical officers is an important resource for addressing these questions. The network itself is supported nationally by the national ecumenical officers and by Churches Together in England, but relies totally on the denominational authorities at local and intermediate level for resourcing. As local co-operative working branches out into new areas, as we are suggesting, the need for this network will intensify.

Making appointments

4. Whatever the nature of co-operative working, the nurturing of relationships locally is essential, and key to that is making appointments of ministers who are willing and able to work collaboratively. Agreements alone do not guarantee continuity between appointments. So making decisions about deployment of ministry and making appointments are probably the most important things that those who exercise oversight actually do. Making good appointments is indicative of the denominational authorities working well together.

Review

5. **Formally reviewing** co-operative work concerns the longer term direction of the agreement and the work that flows from that. We recognise that reviewing local co-operative working is an important means of helping it to develop and to ensure it keeps its agreements

up to date. But as we noted in the consultation paper,² reviews have sometimes been rather cumbersome and difficult to staff. Although it is important to minimise the amount of bureaucracy associated with local co-operative working, it is also important to ensure that problems do not build up over time because the basic agreement on which the work is based is no longer fit for purpose.

6. We are aware that a variety of approaches to reviewing co-operative working (including local ecumenical partnerships) are developing on the ground. In one city,³ the denominations have taken full responsibility and there is a sense in which the denominational ecumenical officers have watching brief over the local ecumenical partnerships. Formal reviews are usually triggered when there is a change of leadership and involve key people from the denominations which participate in the partnerships under review.

7. If a more formal process for reviewing local co-operative working is needed, rather than relying on officers having a watching brief, we suggest a triage system for reviews, as used in another area,⁴ may be helpful.

- a) **Stage 1:** Initial self-review undertaken by the local participant churches, using a pro-forma (a number are now available).
- b) **Stage 2:** In the light of stage 1, the local churches may request a follow up conversation, or participating denominational authorities may insist that one is necessary, with a reviewer appointed by the participating denominations;
- c) **Stage 3:** If further follow up is needed (e.g. problems are revealed, a new appointment needs to be made, the work is at a crucial stage of development), then the third, more thorough, stage of review may be set in place, or a period of accompanying may be recommended.

8. Another approach which may help participating denominations provide the support for co-operative working is to make use of the normal annual cycle of reporting. Many local churches (and indeed chaplaincies and many other ways of working), must produce alongside their annual accounts, **an annual report** for their denominational authorities, and if they are registered charities for the Charity Commission. We suggest that when an Annual Report is required for a particular example of local co-operative working (for example, because it is a registered charity or it is an activity of local churches and should therefore feature in the local church's own Annual Report) it gives an opportunity for reviewing it as part of this annual cycle, and could include:

- a) checking that agreements, policies and authorisations of the local co-operative work are in place;
- b) reflecting on its ministry and mission in the previous year;
- c) looking ahead to its priorities for mission and formation in the year to come.

9. This annual check and reflection on its work would help to develop the work being done, and alert those involved, and the denominational authorities, to any issues or challenges that have arisen, or any major changes that need to be made.

² The full document can be downloaded from <http://www.cte.org.uk/Group/Group.aspx?ID=257506>

³ Birmingham

⁴ The North East