

A personal paper from John Bradley

Newer ways of working together locally

Cardinal Cormac said that Christian unity 'happens where it happens.' It could also be said that it happens how it happens. Since the Nottingham Faith and Order Conference of 1964 initiated Areas of Ecumenical Experiment and the Sharing of Church Buildings Act 1969 enabled more than one Church to use and maintain the same building, there have been hundreds of examples of the kind of visible unity which has proved elusive nationally being achieved locally. This has happened against a background of decline in the historic Churches, many of which are less than half the size they were in the 1960s.

Opposite Requirements

There is, however, a far greater willingness to work together across barriers which previously seemed impenetrable and often a presumption that any new initiative should be made together rather than separately. In the management of local initiatives, there are opposite requirements from the Churches and from the secular authorities. In general, the Churches want minimal structures which are flexible, non-prescriptive and low maintenance. At the same time, secular authorities such as the Charity Commission, the Data Protection Register and the requirements of Public Liability Indemnity Insurance insist on robust constitutions which make it clear where responsibilities lie and are litigation-proof. In between, those with a vision for a local mission initiative are anxious to 'get on with it' and not be distracted by apparently needless bureaucracy.

Local Ecumenical Partnerships

Since 1994, Local Ecumenical Partnerships have been recorded in six different ways. These have never been hard and fast categories and it has been difficult to resist the mistaken impression that only single congregation partnerships are 'real' LEPs. Their greatest strength has been to make clear to both the local community which they serve and the wider constituency of the Churches which have established them that in this place the Churches are not going to allow their differences to divide them. Their greatest weakness is that they have often absorbed rather than released energy through facing inward in managing collaboration rather than facing outward in facilitating mission. Although the ecumenical imperative implies that when Christians are visibly united they will be more effective in mission, the evidence is lacking that this is so in terms of church growth. Against a background of decline, many of the newer Church leaders have come to regard the ecumenical enterprise as an unaffordable luxury.

Recent Examples

Churches and Christian agencies respond together to unique opportunities to engage in their local communities. Recent examples have included the Praise Bus which preceded the Olympic Torch Relay, a community event at Stoke Mandeville on the evening of the opening of the Paralympic games, and the Tax Justice Bus Tour organised by Christian Aid and Church Action on Poverty. The Stoke Mandeville event was organised by the Aylesbury Churches Network with Churches for All and More than Gold. Despite the

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cold wet evening, it was a successful family-friendly event which showed the Christian Church to be united and outward-looking. The Praise Bus was the initiative of a small rural chapel in West Cornwall which became a nationwide event through the support of More than Gold and Hope Together.

Street Pastors

Street Pastors is an initiative which has seen phenomenal growth in the last decade from its origins in the inner city to many towns, rural areas and even beaches. Overcoming initial suspicion, it has won the support of the Police and local Government as it has made a noticeable reduction in street crime, released the Police to attend to matters which are only properly theirs, and demonstrated practical compassion towards people who are vulnerable. It is significant that despite their relative vulnerability, there have been no reported serious cases of injury to a Street Pastor. The Ascension Trust has needed to maintain some national control of the logo and name of Street Pastors and this has led some local groups to devise their own alternative such as 'Street Angels'.

Local and National

The common thread appears to be that these local initiatives have needed the support of a national network in order to have wider significance. Another local action of Christians together is the provision of winter night shelters and this seems not to need any support from a national organisation. Clive Price refers to those in Bradford and Halifax in his book *Unity in Process* and there are many others around the country. It may be, though, that this means a certain degree of reinventing of wheels and that more networking would circulate problems to be avoided and strengths to be embraced. In many parts of the country, churches have joined together to provide food banks or Community Larders for people who are unemployed. Christians Against Poverty has enabled many people to escape from the grip of debt and reach financial stability.

Making New Christians

All these are fine examples of 'Kingdom of Heaven' initiatives, making different parts of the oikoumene more like that which God wills, but, apart from the last named, they do not have the specific intention of leading people to Christian faith. They may have aspects of pre-evangelism, showing the Christian Church to be 'a good thing' rather than irrelevant to contemporary problems, but this may lead to no more than regarding the Church like the local dentist: glad it's there if we need it but hope we don't need it! In terms of the Five Marks of Mission¹, these initiatives focus mainly on the 3rd and may relate to the 4th and 5th but not to the 1st and 2nd. The lives of many people

¹ 1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

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have been significantly improved by them but if they have heard the Good News of the Kingdom proclaimed and, as new believers, been taught, nurtured and baptised, that is coincidental and not intentional. In terms of Church Growth, these initiatives cannot be sustained over time without the addition of those who have been so transformed by the Gospel that they will in turn want to transform the lives of others. A Church in decline cannot afford this.

Reflection

In terms of ecumenical progress they will, like all such initiatives which cross boundaries, foster relations which will lead to better understanding of the common faith of all Christians and the points where differences are significant between some Churches. The time comes to take a step back from activity in order to reflect on why we do what we do, what we believe God is doing through this, and what that speaks to our relations as Churches Together. This reflection, even without any academic rigour, is not only doing theology but doing the best kind of theology.

Church Plants

A significant number of LEPs have begun as new church plants rather than through a merger of existing congregations. This has, in particular, been in response to the Government's plans to create a large number of new communities, mainly on brown field sites. Major initiatives such as Milton Keynes have been responded to by the Churches with partnership rather than separate projects. However, after thirty years these LEP church plants are not yet self-sustaining, relying still on subsidy from the historic Churches, and the view now is that even working together the Churches do not have the resources to respond to the proposed extension of the town.

New Wineskins

Chaplaincies, such as the Town Centre Chaplaincy in Bedford, bring together a wide diversity of local churches which, although they may disagree on many points of doctrine and practice, can work well together in response to human need. 'Ecumenism is breaking out all over the place and we can't control it' says Andrew Gale of Bedfordshire Ecumenical Committee. 'The wineskins of CT groups cannot contain the new wine of the Unity of the Spirit.' This is especially the case when a local Churches Together group behaves as if it was a Council of Churches with a life and programme of its own rather than a catalyst for the churches themselves to work together instead of separately.

Fresh Expressions

A major development, following on from the report *Mission-Shaped Church*, has been Fresh Expressions. As deliberate initiatives of 'Church for the un-churched', FX have sought to avoid cultural aspects of the historic Church which are alien to newcomers. Although there is clear accountability and authorisation from the sponsoring Churches², pioneers have wide latitude to respond appropriately to mission opportunities. Bishop's Mission Orders allow

² Currently the Church of England, Methodist and United Reformed Churches

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the Church of England to authorise initiatives across parochial boundaries but it is not clear to what extent there is consultation with ecumenical partners or consideration of the plans of other Churches. The fruit of FX may be new ecclesial communities which are part of the wider sponsoring Church though with looser structures and of significant cultural distinction. In the next generation when Fresh Expressions are no longer fresh, it may be that cultural distinctives will become a greater cause of visible disunity than doctrinal ones. FX pioneers are aware of this challenge.

Revive Rugby

I was about to complete this paper when I was sent an account of an initiative which both embodies the strengths and addresses the weaknesses of what I have described elsewhere. It would be invidious to try to summarise what is happening in Rugby and better to append that paper to this. The major points are that the churches have affirmed their diversity while demonstrating their unity, that their missional activities both address human need and communicate the Christian message such that people can be transformed by it, and that the ecumenical engagement has been by both Church leaders and by lay people. It is a pattern which can be commended elsewhere.

John Bradley, received by the Churches Group for Local Unity, 18 October 2012

Questions for discussion

1. If two local churches in decline decide to merge, what more is needed to avoid merely postponing their eventual failure?
2. What kind of partnership structure can be a support without being a burden, releasing energy without absorbing it, satisfying legal requirements without being legalistic?
3. What agreement do different Churches need to reach locally to enable them to act together instead of separately to
 - a. proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom and
 - b. teach, baptise and nurture new believers?
4. How does the success of initiatives where different Churches work together to meet human need challenge the rest of those Churches' life which remains separated?

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