

WHEN THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH IS THE ONLY CHURCH IN AN ENGLISH VILLAGE

1. In a few villages the United Reformed Church is the only place where public worship is regularly offered although it should be remembered that the village will always lie within one, or occasionally two, Church of England parishes. This fact means that hospitality to other churches is less simple for churches other than the Church of England.
2. Within the village there may be Christians of different traditions, some of whom try to combine loyalty to a particular denomination with their desire to worship and witness in their local community. Sometimes a church of another denomination has been closed, sometimes people from another denomination have moved into the village, sometimes those who previously commuted to a church outside the village are prevented from doing so through infirmity or poor public transport.
3. While the local church remains subject to the jurisdiction of the United Reformed Church and has a duty to bear witness to the riches of its traditions, it is able in a variety of ways to make members of other churches feel they belong to the Christian community in that village. This sense of belonging may not be the same as becoming a member of that local church. Some churches do not permit their members to become members of another church and some individuals may feel their sense of denominational identity is such that they are unable or unwilling to make the necessary promises and commitments required by the United Reformed Church.
4. The local church may, nonetheless, seek to recognise and affirm the breadth of religious experience and expression such regular worshippers bring by introducing elements from their traditions into its worship and life. Some of the means to such ecumenical broadening of the life of the local church might be:
 - choice of hymns, tunes, hymn books
 - prayers for the other churches
 - careful use of language which does not exclude
 - offering the use of the church to the other traditions
 - inviting ministers/lay preachers/readers of the other churches to lead worship
 - occasional use of the other churches' liturgies and ways of celebrating communion
 - consultation between those from the other churches in the area who have pastoral oversight about the responsibility for pastoral care in that village, and for Christian initiation and nurture of the Christians there
 - involvement in the life of the wider church through Churches Together groupings
5. The local church may wish to formalise and ensure the continuity of this ecumenically enriched life by agreeing a 'Declaration of Ecumenical Welcome'. Before doing so it should consult with the District Council and then seek advice from the Intermediate Body or its Ecumenical Officer as to which other denominations should be consulted and at what level. The Declaration must be endorsed by the neighbouring churches and care needs to be taken over the real over the real or imagined effect on the congregational strength of these churches so that this is not seen as 'poaching'. A copy of the Declaration should be displayed in the church.

An example of such a Declaration is attached.

