



My journey with LEPs

A CTE 'Features' paper by Revd John Bradley

'Feature' papers are provided as a personal reflection on a topic of ecumenical interest, and available from www.cte.org.uk/features.

John Bradley was on staff at Churches Together in England until his retirement in December 2013, and here reflects on 'Local Ecumenical Partnerships' (LEP)

In 1985 we moved to Great Torrington in NW Devon where I had pastoral charge of the Methodist Church in the town and those in five nearby villages. The villages were in three different Anglican benefices, one of which also had other Methodist congregations in the care of another minister in the circuit. In the ensuing year, there were changes of incumbent in two of the benefices and so I began my ministry there at the same time as my new Anglican colleagues. We all got on well together and decided to work together as much as possible. It occurred to me that the twelve villages in the three benefices had enough Methodist members to warrant the deployment of their own Methodist minister. This led to the idea of an Anglican-Methodist team covering the twelve villages between Great Torrington and Bideford. When one of my Anglican colleagues put the suggestion to the Diocesan Ecumenical Officer, she said "oh, you mean form an LEP." This was the first I had heard of what were then called Local Ecumenical Projects.

The next step was to put the idea to our local Church Councils and PCCs. When I explained it to one village Methodist Church Council they looked blank and said "but they're Church and we're Chapel!" The proposal was ahead of its time in that place but in a neighbouring Circuit something similar was proposed a few years later and was successfully adopted.

The energy behind LEPs had come in response to the failure of the Ten Propositions covenant for unity between the Church of England and the Methodist, Moravian and United Reformed Churches in 1982. I had not lived in England from 1976 to 1984 so had missed out on the debate and the rise and fall of hopes for a visibly united Church in England. All was not lost, though, and, as Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor said, unity 'happens where it happens'. And it was happening locally in many places, most of which were already living the unity envisaged by the Ten Propositions.

In 1990 we moved to another area of rural Devon to the West of Okehampton. Here the Methodist Church not only had good relations with the Church of England but had also for some years integrated its youth work with the local Baptist Churches. When I suggested that this good relation might be strengthened by being recognised as a mission partnership by the two Churches, the Baptist response was cool. They were happy to work with me as they had with my predecessors but were not prepared to 'sign a blank cheque' to work with any minister the Methodist Church might send after me! This was my first experience of the phenomenon enshrined in the saying attributed to Dr Garrett Fitzgerald that this 'was all very well in practice but how does it work out in theory?'

Unexpected changes in my health led to our leaving West Devon and I took the part-time post of County Ecumenical Officer for Devon. Now I found myself as the advocate of LEPs and any other way of making visible locally the unity of the Church. I was, and remain, convinced that there is far more Christian unity in England than appears. What makes our remaining disunity most visible is our

bewildering multiplication of buildings and names. To the un-churched man in the street we appear no more united than local branches of chains of supermarket each competing for their market share.

I found most ministers to be struggling to manage to fulfil their pastoral ministry as well as reach out beyond their committed congregations in mission. Ecumenism could appear to be a good idea but one that would absorb precious time in endless meetings. As CEO, my approach was to ask them to tell me their vision of what they could as Churches do locally together instead of separately. I then tried to work out the technicalities of how they could do it.

In those days LEP Constitutions were deliberately unique and bespoke. At all costs we had to avoid creating a new denomination of 'LEP Churches'! This was good for creativity but a nightmare for getting the approval of the wider councils of the partner Churches. It is essential that each local partnership is recognised by each partner Church in a way commensurate with its polity, whether Congregational, Diocesan or Connexional. Otherwise it can simply be an agreement between the current local church leaders which will be unlikely to survive when the local leadership changes. It is also essential that a LEP is an agreement between whole Churches and not merely between those individuals in them who are ecumenically keen.

Another diverse factor I found as CEO was between those united churches which knew they were LEPs and looked to the county body for support and encouragement and those which did not. Generally it was the new LEPs which had been helped to birth by the county body which kept the CEO in the loop and the longer standing ones which did not. One September the three largest Methodist-URC churches in the county each had a change of minister. In no case was I involved or informed; it probably never occurred to them that I might want to be as they had existed for far longer than the county body.

In 2001 I joined the staff of Churches Together in England and became Secretary of the Churches Group for Local Unity, the national co-ordinating body to support and encourage local Christian unity in all ways. One task I inherited was to manage the LEP Register, a database of all the LEPs in England. The CTE Consultation on LEPs in 1994 had identified six kinds of LEP: single congregations, covenanted partnerships, shared buildings, mission, chaplaincy and education partnerships. Each of them met the definition of a LEP as 'where there is a formal written agreement affecting the ministry, congregational life, buildings and/or mission projects of more than one denomination: and a recognition of that agreement by the Sponsoring Body, and authorisation by the appropriate denominational authorities.' To the LEP Register I added fields to indicate by postcode the geographical location of each LEP, the local church ID for the Baptist and United Reformed Churches, the Methodist Circuit and the Catholic Diocese. With the help of the CEOs I updated the LEP Register until it numbered nearly 900. Despite a considerable number of local church closures in most of the historic Churches, the number of LEPs was maintained over the twelve years I managed the Register with new LEPs replacing those which had ceased or closed.

The most radical change in LEP Constitutions came as a result of the Charities Act 2006. Churches which had been excepted from charity registration by the Exception Order were now required to register with the Charity Commission if their normal annual income was over £100,000. This included single congregation LEPs which could not use the constitution of one of their partner Churches because they are a partnership of all of them. The home-made constitutions were no longer fit for purpose as they would not be acceptable for charity registration. The Churches decided nationally through CGLU that there would not be two classes of single congregation LEP, one registered and one unregistered, but that all new single congregation LEPs would adopt a nationally agreed constitution, whether they needed charity registration or not, and those with an income over the threshold would change their constitution to the new agreed form.

This was the pattern which had been successfully used for Sharing Agreements under the Sharing of Church Buildings Act 1969. As legal documents they were drafted by those qualified to do so. The

danger in this change was to lose the uniqueness and experimentality of each LEP. Guardians of the ecumenical memory of the outworking of the Nottingham Faith and Order Conference 1964 reminded us that the precursors of LEPs were 'areas of ecumenical experiment' and the creativity must not be lost. In response, LEPs of all kinds were asked to agree an Ecumenical Vision Statement which would express their particular aim to act together instead of separately. For some this was simply a matter of renaming their existing Declaration of Intent which had been part of their previous Constitution but for others it was a cause of deep reflexion on why they were what they were. The intention is that in future LEP reviews should begin with the Ecumenical Vision Statement and see how the present reality measures up to it.

This should have released LEPs from the burden of devising an agreeable constitution so that they could get on with their real mission of living out the Gospel in their community. Unfortunately, a change of mood about LEPs had arisen at the same time amongst Church leaders. By any measurement of church growth, LEPs were not fairing as well as churches of a single denomination. "Clergy don't like LEPs," a senior Anglican bishop told me, "they're too much trouble." Having served in a LEP was not seen as positive on a minister's CV unless they wanted to serve only in LEPs. That which had been intended positively as being collaborative was seen negatively as weakened compromise. This negativity was fuelled by the fact that most new Church leaders had no positive experience of ministry in a LEP or no experience of them at all. In leadership, LEPs only came to their attention when there were problems or when special provisions had to be made for the eccentricities of the other partner Churches. The path to negativity was well paved.

Once I spoke with an Anglican incumbent in East Anglia whose benefice was two villages where the congregations, both more elderly than the average surrounding population, had embraced significant change. In one parish church the congregation had taken a hard look at how they appeared to the rest of the village. They had made serious changes to their ways of worship and other activities in order to look outwards to the needs of their local community. In the other village there was an Anglican-Methodist LEP where the Anglicans and the Methodists expended the same energy to understand each other's funny ways! Although he was ecumenically committed he rightly concluded that such energy, particularly for older people, is finite and that the LEP had used it to look inwards while the other village had looked outward.

Some people assume wrongly that only single congregations are 'real' LEPs. Covenanted partnerships between groups of local churches are also a deeply valid form of local ecumenical commitment. Many were initiated with energy from the Roman Catholic Church, especially following its report *Local Churches in Covenant*. Thirty years later some local covenants existed only in name and were no more than a local Churches Together group. They were particularly vulnerable to changes in clergy. It was noted that the content of a local covenant is less important than the act of covenanting. The Hebrew verb for making a covenant is 'to cut' and any true covenant will be costly. A key question is what more will be done together instead of separately by the covenanted churches than would have happened in a good local Churches Together group. In the language of the Swanwick Declaration, local Churches Together groups show 'co-operation' while local Covenant LEPs embody 'commitment' to a deeper and more costly unity. The cost is seen in what the covenanted churches are disciplined to no longer do separately.

The costliness of discipline leads me to reflect on the problem of the devaluation of language. I go back to the impact made on me by *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. My personal faith commitment, which I do not hesitate to call my conversion, happened when I was fifteen. Hearing my Christian school friends talk about their relationship to Jesus Christ made me question whether or not I was really a committed Christian myself. Their wise advice was "if you're not sure, make sure" so I prayed a prayer of repentance and faith, committing my life to Christ as my Lord. A few years later I read what I had been told was one of the most influential Bible commentaries of the 20th century: Karl Barth on Romans. I didn't understand much of it but I noticed that when Paul wrote about the law,

Barth wrote about religion. This helped me understand what I had been saved from. I don't think I had committed any particularly original sins, just the usual common or garden varieties, but God had certainly saved me from religion. It was good, Christian, Methodist religion but it was still a bind, the rules with which I had bound myself in an attempt to be acceptable to God. It was all washed away in a flood of grace which I could never achieve, earn or deserve but only gratefully receive. Bonhoeffer taught me that grace is free but not cheap. I learnt of the struggle for costly grace as opposed to cheap grace. Over the years I have struggled against the cheapening of other words by misuse. Covenanting which doesn't cut and is little more than another bit of niceness is one clear example. Another case is local 'Churches Together' groups which operate as, and were sometimes formerly called, Councils of Churches. Over the past twelve years I have lost count of the number of times I have tried to explain the difference. A Council of Churches is a body set up with the approval of the churches, usually consisting of their appointed representatives and having their own programme of activities which they then ask the churches to support. 'Churches Together' is no less than what it says on the label: the churches themselves acting together instead of separately, making decisions together especially when looking outwards to the community which they have a common commission to serve. When I hear complaints that 'we can't get anybody to serve on the Churches Together', an alarm bell rings in my mind to indicate 'council of churches mode'! I cannot avoid the question whether over the past twenty years the language of 'Churches Together' has been devalued by misuse. My natural tendency is to hold to the language and plead for its proper use but as I reach retirement that task is for others.

Another factor, especially in LEPs which resulted from local mergers amongst the Free Churches, is that some were formed in response to decline. Some churches saw their numbers dwindling and, rather than close, looked for a neighbouring church with which they could merge. In this way, their life together could continue without the burden of maintaining their own buildings. Soon after we arrived in Great Torrington, I was approached by the URC minister with a proposal to merge our two congregations. In our town of less than five thousand there was also a large Parish Church with a strong Anglo-Catholic tradition, a modern Roman Catholic Church which drew mainly from the surrounding rural areas, a lively Baptist Church and a traditional Gospel Hall. I could understand why the URC minister thought the town was over-churched. So we set up a working party to devise a union scheme. Soon afterwards the URC minister left and during the vacancy the elders often called on the help of Methodist Local Preachers to conduct their worship. It was clear to me that both the Methodist and URC congregations were strongly attached to their 19th Century buildings. The URC had older foundations having been dissenters in 1662 whose church now bore the name of the minister who was then ejected. In 1985 they had barely digested the URC union of 1972!

But behind their chapel was enough land in the manse garden to build a new place of worship facing towards the expanding end of the town. So our proposal was merging, initially worshipping in the Methodist premises, but with a commitment within five years to sell both chapels and build a new united church in their place. The Methodist people voted in favour by a small majority but the URC members voted against by four to one. I could see that it was a step too far and too soon. The better course – but I was one person who could not suggest it – was that the URC become a part of the Methodist Circuit, calling me as their minister, and let the two Torrington congregations grow together naturally until such time as separate buildings were no longer needed. The main cost would have been some adjustment in service times. Some people told me that the opportunity for union had been missed twenty years before when both congregations were stronger and the two ministers worked closely together.

Reading a book on Messy Church made me reflect on what has gone wrong with LEPs and what the way forward might be. As I read about the general welcome to Messy Church by the bishops while they are mostly cool about LEPs, I wonder if there is an element of the passing of a generation. In the centenary year of Benjamin Britten I recalled that Britten loved the music of Mozart but couldn't bear that of Elgar! Is part of the trouble with LEPs that they arose in the 1980s and now look passé thirty

years later? I was surprised that there was no mention in the book of how Messy Churches cope with the tedious problems which have absorbed so much energy in LEPs over the past decade: structures and constitutions. While the Churches, especially locally, want minimal structures which are light and flexible, secular authorities such as the Charity Commission, Data Protection Registrar, safeguarding and insurers insist on clarity and protection from litigation. In LEPs the ecumenical visionaries dream of what might happen when things go right while the lawyers prepare for the worst when they go wrong. Perhaps Messy Churches have not yet had to grapple with agreeing a constitution which is suitable for becoming a registered charity but they must have had to agree on their procedures for safeguarding and, especially if they are meeting on secular premises, on how they are described in their insurance policy. Messy Church and other kinds of Fresh Expression will face a crisis when they are no longer new. This is the dilemma of LEPs now. Lucy Moore writes that 'the qualities of Messy Church are universal Christian ones – love of Jesus, love of the Bible, love of worship, love of creativity, love of family life – rather than specifically denominational ones, and its 'flavour' is one of cooperation and generosity.' She goes on to wonder 'what we will do if a group from a less central movement, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormons, asks to use [our] logo.' This latter is the question of the limits to reconcilable diversity. It is not so much a problem for LEPs, which are partnerships between specific Churches, but it can be for local Churches Together groups. They struggle with applications from a church which has a position on some ethical issues which is significantly different from the rest, one which has come about through schism in another local church, or one whose orthodoxy has been denied by the wider councils of another Church. To be avoided at all costs is the reaction from an existing member church that 'if they join, we will leave!'

By avoiding ecumenical dialogue, Messy Church has kept looking outwards to the needs and interests of non-churched people. Critics of the ecumenical movement say that the search for visible unity makes the Churches inward-looking. If this is true, it is because the doctrinal differences between the Churches which have proved so intractable are largely incomprehensible to non-churched people. From the 1950s two major national initiatives have overcome barriers and nurtured good relationships. The annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity's united services meant that lay people went to worship in neighbouring church buildings for the first time. The annual Christian Aid Week collecting meant that teams of lay people laid aside their denominational differences and served together in a common cause. Those growing relationships fed into local Councils of Churches and, after 1987, into local Churches Together groups. The people who worshipped in other local places were 'no longer strangers but pilgrims' and their places of worship were less strange also.

Whither LEPs? For some church leaders they are an irritating anomaly which they secretly hope may, with suitable neglect, wither on the vine. I have seen evidence of this in an Anglican-Methodist single congregation at the end of the long and fruitful ministry of a Methodist minister. It was the Anglican 'turn' but his successor was appointed and installed by the Diocese without consultation with the Methodist Church and with no recognition of the existence of the LEP. Nationally the Church of England has decided not to enter into any new LEPs unless there are strong mission reasons for doing so. The sub-text is that the C of E is not going to prop up any more lame ducks. Those with an entrepreneurial approach to mission are more likely to casserole lame ducks than prop them up!

There are many single congregations which are so long established that nobody can remember a time when there was not an ecumenical partnership. Moving to another town and being asked which denomination you are is as bizarre as being welcomed by your new neighbours and asked which football team you support! The question becomes acute when people who have grown up in a LEP sense a vocation to ordained ministry and have to decide which of their partner Churches they are going to pursue it with as there is no ecumenical ordination. It can be as painful as asking the children of divorcing parents to choose which parent they want to live with. Many single congregations regard themselves as post-denominational and object when they are reminded that legally they are still partnerships of the denominations which made them. This has come to the fore in two situations, both which seem bureaucratic and retrograde to many. The first is when statistics of

church attendance are required. The Churches' statisticians require the congregation to be divided into denominations – which is precisely the way in which they are heartily striving to be undivided! I'm sure there is much fiction and guesstimate happening to span this gulf! The second arose as a consequence of the agreed Model Governing Document for single congregation LEPs which made their constitution suitable for charity registration. I had not realised the importance of the legal difference between a PCC of the Church of England, which is an incorporated body, and an Ecumenical Church Council of a LEP which is unincorporated. Incorporated and unincorporated bodies are as incongruent as oil and water! The legal solution was a Memorandum of Understanding between the PCC and the ECC but this was greeted with howls of dismay in some single congregations for whom its language evoked what they had thought they had left behind years ago!

A different situation is where the partners in a single congregation are of unequal size. Those of the smaller partner will expect that something of their distinctive ethos will be reflected in the life of the united church. If the ordained ministry is provided by the larger partner there will often be provision for a minister from the smaller partner to be an occasional visiting leader of worship. New confirmed members will normally become members of both partner Churches but the time may come when all the original members of the smaller Church have died or moved away. How is this single congregation still a LEP? In some cases it is decided that it is not and the partnership is dissolved. If there has been a Sharing Agreement covering the premises of the partner Churches, that document will contain procedures in the event of dissolution. But the question remains whether the LEP was an organic union or merely an organisational or pragmatic one. If the union is organic, that is, 'living', it continues to exist as long as the church does. George Lings writes of the DNA of Messy Church and I feel the same can be said of LEPs. As living, organic, partnerships they carry the ecclesial genes of each of the partner Churches. Pursuing the analogy of LEPs as marriage, the new corporate person is not only the married couple but also the children who share the DNA of them both. As a Methodist, I hold this to be true of the three partner Churches which entered into the Connexional Union of 1932. Our Methodist DNA is not only Wesleyan but also Primitive and of those previously joined in the United Methodist Church. Isaiah (51:1) calls 'Listen to me, all who follow after the right, who seek the Lord: consider the rock from which you were hewn, the quarry from which you were cut.' Organic unions will respect all their origins without being constrained by them in responding to new needs and opportunities.

Another significant difference which impinges on LEPs is the different ways in which Churches allocate and appoint ordained ministers. A bishop in a rural diocese once explained to me the problem of an LEP where the appointment of ordained ministers theoretically alternated between the Church of England and the Methodist or United Reformed Churches but in practice was always Anglican. The reason was that although the entire population of the parish warranted the deployment of a full-time Anglican priest, the small number of regular worshipping members did not warrant the deployment or scoping of a Free Church minister. While all the historic Churches are struggling to deploy an inadequate number of ordained ministers, this will not be resolved easily.

One significant recent development is ecumenical covenants covering a larger area. Cumbria was innovative in this, followed by West Yorkshire and recently by Cornwall. The thrust for these has come from the Church of England and the Methodist Church in the framework of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant but other Churches are also fully engaged. This should facilitate greater consultation on deployment of ordained ministers and on regional mission initiatives but it does not address the visible disunity of the Church locally as previously noted.

'And shall we then for ever live at this poor dying rate?' Possibly not. During my pastoral ministry in rural Methodist Circuits it seemed as if God had a secret supply of 70-year-olds. A group of them formed the active core leadership of their village chapel and research showed the pattern had been much the same for decades. As some passed on to Glory, others seemed to pop up and fill their places. We explained this as those who had been active in the life of the Church in their younger life,

dropping out in their middle years due to the pressure of work and family life, and then, in retirement, finding their way back to the worshipping community. The difference now is that there is hardly anyone popping up because they never were part of the worshipping Church. They don't see Back to Church Sunday as for them because they were never there in the first place.

Much hinges on developments at the national level. I have little doubt that if the votes on the Ten Propositions of 1982 were taken again today they would be passed by sufficient majorities in all four Churches. A major rallying point of opposition in the Church of England then was the ordination of women. Now that the Church of England has a large number of women priests and soon will have women bishops, that issue is no longer decisive or divisive. If the four Churches were to merge nationally a large proportion of single congregation LEPs would no longer need any special designation because the rest of their partner Churches would have caught up with them. The original ecumenical visionaries who saw LEPs as proleptic of the Coming Great Church would smile because at last their cry "come on in; the water's lovely!" had been heard!

So is the task one of re-branding? Some years ago the local churches in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, a covenanted LEP, agreed to rename each of their churches as 'The Church in Abingdon ()' with the denominational name in brackets. This was good as long as it was true. The proverbial 'man in the street' would see visible unity in the 'outward appearance' of the Church but it would be an empty promise if he ventured inside and found something less 'in the heart'. Unless this step is taken with utmost seriousness and is a costly one and not a cheap one it will soon become another debased currency. To return once more to the analogy of marriage, a couple contemplating marriage should not ask themselves 'can I possibly live the rest of my life with this person?' but 'can I possibly live without them?' The hardest local churches to engage in ecumenical relations are those of any kind which are so large and 'successful' that they appear not to need anyone else.

So it seems to me that the future of LEPs, or any other such designation that might replace them, hinges on their being organic and not merely organisational. One of the diversities that single congregations embrace is in the ecclesiology of the local church. For the Free Churches it is generally clear who are the members of each local congregation. For those with a congregational polity the local church consists of those who have covenanted together to be a company of Christian disciples meeting in a particular place. Methodism began differently as a religious society but, after the death of the Wesleys, evolved into a Church. For the Church of England this concept is alien. The defining community of each Parish Church is the entire population of the parish and not only those who are regular worshippers. Confusion has often arisen in LEPs when the parish Electoral Roll has been mistaken as a church membership roll by those from the Free Churches. Archbishop William Temple famously said that the Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members. Those from the Free Churches who engage ecumenically will agree and will certainly want to avoid any suggestion that a local church is a kind of mutual benefit club to which a person pays their subscription and expects a service in return.

Another confusing use of the word membership is in relation to membership of a charity. This arises when a local church becomes a registered charity. People can become members of a charity by the agreement of the other members but becoming a member of the Church is by baptism and confirmation which is quite different! Some of the Free Churches have made provision for extended membership whereby, particularly but not exclusively in a LEP, a confirmed member of one denomination can also be recognised as a member of another denomination. There is some correlation with the Church of England's provision for baptised members of other Trinitarian Churches who habitually attend Anglican worship to declare themselves to be members of the Church of England. Yet this is not church membership as understood in the Free Churches as this would require Episcopal confirmation.

How is a local church 'local'? When Anglicans and Catholics say that the local church is the diocese, most Free Church people, and possibly a few Anglicans, look surprised and exclaim "but that isn't

local!" I want to suggest that a local church is those who see each other when they gather for worship. There will be extensions to this such as those who are unable to come together for various reasons but I think it is the right place to start. When Charles Wesley married Sarah Gwynne he wrote a hymn for their wedding which includes the words 'why hast thou cast our lot in the same age and place and why together brought to see each other's face?' As well as for weddings, it is often sung as a hymn of Christian fellowship. At a time when some people rarely see the faces of other people because their eyes are fixed on tweeting their virtual friends, we need to affirm the essential value of real relationships! Most local churches are a motley bunch; you might indeed wonder why God has brought these particular people together here and now. The same could be said of the twelve Disciples of Christ. But when we gather for worship with those with whom we 'see each other's face', these are not mere acquaintances, fellow patrons of this particular outlet of Church Inc., or 'church friends'. They are each brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we are organically related as members of the same body of Christ.

Currently our culture encourages us each to be consumers, picking and choosing whatever suits us at this moment. It discourages loyalty and commitment because these can mean doing things which don't currently suit us. Floating Christians who pick and dip wherever it suits them are not going to be fruitful because that requires 'abiding in the vine'.

One of the precious fruits of charismatic renewal was a rediscovery of the giftedness of each and every Christian, not just the ordained or other recognised leaders. We should not have forgotten that 'each one of us has received a grace-gift according to the measure of the giving of Christ'. There are no ungifted Christians, only those who have not yet discovered their gifts. When the Methodist Church gave a general welcome to the charismatic movement, I recalled some more lines of Charles Wesley: 'The gift which He on one bestows we all delight to prove; the grace through every vessel flows in streams of purest love'. That bestowing and flowing most generally occurs in the gathering of the local congregation and where that congregation is an ecumenical partnership there will be an even greater diversity of gifts which are brought into unity.

Paul's use of the analogy of the members of the Church being like the organs of a human body, all different and yet working together to make for healthy growth, is to emphasise unity in diversity. Because there is a diversity of gifts there is a wealthy diversity of ministry. As a Methodist minister in pastoral charge of many congregations, some quite small, I always tried to resist the pressure to find people willing to do jobs. Instead I tried to encourage discernment of each one's unique gifts and then sought to find the right ministries in which they could exercise them. In practice, I found that it was often others who recognised a person's gifts rather than the person themselves.

Pressing Paul's body language a little further, I want to suggest that the body of Christ also needs connective tissue which joins the diverse members together. Anyone who has sprained an ankle or wrist knows how important it is that bones and muscles, each with their different roles, are securely bound together. Paul calls this the 'bonds of peace' which make fast the unity which the Spirit gives. This is not the peace which the world gives such as Acts of Uniformity which order people to worship in a particular place or pay a fine. Neither is it the peace of indifference when nobody really cares much anyway nor the peace of the open market where various providers compete for their market share. The peace which Jesus gives is shalom of right relationships when we love one another as he loves us. All congregations are called to be local bodies of transforming love but LEPs embrace the greater challenge of overcoming those differences which once bitterly divided our Churches.

Revd John R Bradley, Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity 2014