



A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission



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Introduction: A Flexible Framework for Local Unity In Mission

Summary of proposals

1. The English Christian landscape is gloriously diverse. Traditional denominations sit alongside experimental and radical ways of being church; the multicultural complexion of English society is reflected in the life of the churches, from congregations made up of those from twenty or thirty nations to those from one, whether black or white; the charismatic and Pentecostal experience counterpoints High Mass and sung evensong; traditional historic partnerships are being joined by collaborative ventures that would have been impossible a decade ago. A new spirit of 'togetherness' in Christ has been born. This paper is about ways of setting that spirit free.
2. Most things that Christians do together need little by way of formal agreement, from creating a local prayer festival to organising the annual Christian Aid collection or responding to humanitarian disasters. But not all co-operation is like that. Sometimes we can see the need for more sustained work together – perhaps to provide care for the homeless, or to welcome another congregation to share our building on an on-going basis, or to share our resources to employ a schools' worker or provide a chaplaincy to the local retail park. All of this may be broadly described as 'Local co-operative working'.

Local Co-operative Working – a definition

3. **Local co-operative working** refers to churches of more than one denomination working together intentionally in unity and mission at local level. They will be driven by a clear missional purpose for doing so – a purpose that has a specific focus and is contextualised within their locality. To fulfil this purpose they will need to agree to co-operate in ways that will affect their core activities as churches - worship, ministry, congregational life, buildings and mission. The work the churches do together will need to draw strength from and be rooted in the relationship between them. But they also will need agreements, which are approved by the appropriate authority of each denomination, to enable co-operation to happen – and those agreements need to be light, enabling and flexible.
4. We have come to the conclusion that the existing framework for Local Ecumenical Partnerships, agreed by the Member Churches of CTE in 1995, is too narrow. The number of partners has increased dramatically in the past decade and more adaptable time limited agreements are now more fitting in many situations; in response to the changing context, new forms of agreement need to be developed. *A Flexible Framework* is intended to be sufficiently broad to include a much wider range of co-operative working than the present framework, and flexible in order to allow a denomination to participate in those forms of co-operative working at a level which its self-understanding and identity allows.
5. In [Section 1](#) we explore these possibilities in terms of answering three fundamental questions about local co-operative working. We suggest that these questions could be used to discern the calling of churches to work co-operatively in their contexts:
 - a. Why do we want to co-operate on a particular piece of work? The question of purpose.
 - b. How do we co-operate with one another? The question of relationship.
 - c. Where might we do it? The question of locality.
6. The question about the form of agreement that they will need to have to enable the work they are called to do together really follows these questions.

Forms of agreement for local co-operative working

7. To begin to address the challenge of making agreements which are light, enabling and flexible, we propose three forms of written agreement should be recognised in order to meet the needs of the rich diversity of local co-operative working: working agreements, partnership agreements, constitutional agreements. We also propose that agreements may be time-limited, renewable or on-going, as appropriate to the context.
 - a. **Working agreement:** A working agreement is a set of agreed guidelines which will suffice in some circumstances to enable churches to get on with a particular piece of work together in response to the missional opportunities they discern in their communities – this would apply to many local mission initiatives for example. A working agreement is especially appropriate when decisions continue to be made by denominational bodies, when the work is limited in time and scope and when few resources are being shared. The working agreement would need to include a description of the work being done and a statement about its purpose. It would also include agreement about leadership of the work and its accountability to the denominational bodies. Agreeing a time limit for the work is especially relevant in this context, in order to incorporate a cycle of reflection into the work to assess its impact and decide whether to renew the commitment or to bring it to an end and respond to a new challenge.
 - b. **Partnership agreement:** A partnership agreement covers more extensive sharing of resources – for example, allowing the sharing of a church building with another congregation (perhaps a parish church and an ethno-linguistic church), or setting up a structure to enable the use of resources from a number of congregations to run a night shelter together, or to allow two separate denominations to consult on important decisions, to worship together and to share ministry. A partnership agreement would not attempt to establish an independent organisation, but would be intended to set out how existing denominational bodies would work in partnership together, including decision making, accountability and resourcing.
 - c. **Constitutional agreement:** In some cases a more formal or even a legal structure is required. This will be the case when a body created needs to register with the Charity Commissioners or appoint trustees to oversee its work. This category will include such entities as existing (or new) LEPs, ecumenical University Chaplaincies, a Christian Counselling service, a jointly run cafe which is also a business and so on. In some cases the need for a constitution may be clear, in others advice may need to be sought about when a Partnership Agreement is sufficient and when a constitution is required.
8. As suggested above we also propose that the possibility of time limited agreements for co-operative working, as well as those which have a long term commitment should be included in the framework. The purpose of particular instances of co-operative working will determine whether it is a project of limited duration, or whether it will need the stability and security of a long term agreement. It is important that the time scale is part of the agreement, and that all parties understand and agree at the beginning whether it is time limited, renewable or on-going. Longer term and permanent agreements may grow out of initial, time limited co-operation.
9. Churches are very different from each other – in style, government, size, formality, legal status and resources. So, any co-operative working will inevitably be asymmetric. Different levels of approval will be needed – for one partner the authority of the local pastor might suffice, but for another it may need the approval of a bishop, synod or equivalent authority. When we co-operate together we need to respect each other's differences and integrity. That will be true of each of these sorts of agreement – each partner will need to process them through their own systems. A corollary of that is that partners will be operating within the rules of their denominations; those differences need to be appreciated and understood by partners.

Local Covenanting

10. 'Local Covenanting' is understood "as the process by which Christians of different traditions, with the concurrence and support of their respective authorities, and believing in God's love for them all and in union with Christ and with one another of which baptism is the sacramental sign, solemnly pledge themselves to undertake specific actions to express their existing unity, to work towards full unity and together to serve all God's people in the place where they are." We suggested elsewhere¹ that the notion of 'covenanting' is too important to restrict its use to one category of local co-operative working, as it is in the current categorisation of local ecumenical partnerships. Local co-operative working grows out of relationships between church communities and their leaders; in turn working together strengthens and deepens those relationships. Recognising that not all agreements for local co-operative working within *A Flexible Framework* will necessarily be undergirded by local covenanting, we commend nevertheless this understanding of 'covenanting' in the present context as a helpful way of rooting local co-operative working in a Trinitarian spirituality of Christian unity in mission. This subject is explored more fully in [Section 4](#).

Oversight

11. All working together requires oversight, which is simply 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 or denomination. We suggest the obvious – 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, which itself implies the need for mutual understanding and agreement on how oversight will be exercised.

What do we need to do now?

12. We propose this basic pattern of agreement and oversight for the churches in England as they seek to work together for the coming of Christ's kingdom. We hope it has a simplicity and ease that will commend it to the churches. If that simplicity is to be enacted in the future, the churches need to do three things:
 - a. Be open to the possibilities of *A Flexible Framework*, and be prepared to be bold in grasping mission opportunities.
 - b. Appreciate that *A Flexible Framework* is born of wrestling with the complexity of relationships that we have inherited from the history of Christians working together in England, and be prepared to honour and support existing patterns of co-operation which in some places are deeply embedded.
 - c. Agree the recommendations and the work needed to implement each of them.

¹ *A Flexible Framework for Local Ecumenism*, Churches Together in England (2015) paragraph 20 Download from: www.cte.org.uk/AFlexibleFramework

Terms of reference and the process followed

13. In March 2015, the Enabling Group of Churches Together in England agreed to distribute our consultation paper to Member Churches, intermediate and national ecumenical bodies asking for comments. It is clear from some of the responses that although the working group went well beyond its original brief, there were still areas that respondents would have liked the group to have considered more deeply. One area in particular deserves much more attention than we could give – that of the theology of ecumenical relationship and mission. We thoroughly endorse this, and suggest that CTE initiates a new stream of work to explore our visions of unity in mission, holiness and worship, which is rooted in theological reflection.
14. The consultation paper argued that local ecumenism is an untidy, dynamic movement in which its relational and structural, pioneering and traditional manifestations all exist, and to a great extent interact with each other. Many of the responses remarked that the map of local ecumenism, presented in the consultation paper, was really helpful in getting this point across and could be developed into a useful tool for teaching and discussion. The paper also strongly recognised that much unity in mission has little need of formal structures and agreements between churches.
15. There was near unanimous agreement in the responses around the issues we identified concerning the formal structures of Local Ecumenical Partnerships. Indeed, some responses added further issues that they feel need to be addressed. Alongside this, there is the view that the positive aspects of the current structures should not be lost, and that existing Local Ecumenical Partnerships need to be nurtured and supported or when necessary helped to move into a different form of agreement. The role of church leaders was seen to be crucial in every aspect of local ecumenism.
16. We also note that the ecumenical landscape has been transformed over the last decade through the growing mutual understanding, trust and co-operation between Pentecostal and new churches and the historic denominations. There is a lot yet for the churches to learn from each other and about each other. We are especially encouraged by the Pentecostal and new churches which have engaged in this consultation and hope that as this project develops, more of them will make their own distinctive and valued contributions.



Section 1: Being Built into God's Household²

1. *A Flexible Framework* is intended to include the widest possible range of ways of churches to co-operate with one another in a variety of contexts. We describe the diversity of local co-operative working to demonstrate that there are many more possibilities and opportunities for working together than are commonly acknowledged by churches. We suggest a tool for discernment and development: discerning the what, the how and the why of co-operative working, and lines for further development. As a starting point for drawing our framework, we ask three questions:
 - a. Why do we want to co-operate on a particular piece of work? The question of purpose.
 - b. How do we co-operate with one another? The question of relationship.
 - c. Where might we do it? The question of locality.

Why do we want to do a particular piece of co-operative work?

2. The purpose of working together needs to be specific, to be rooted in the relationship between the churches involved, and to be contextualised. Archbishop Rowan Williams said that the fundamental purpose of the church is 'finding out what God is doing and joining in'.³ In doing so together we become both an instrument and a fruit of God's mission and a sign of reconciliation. There are different ways of engaging in mission together. We suggest here a number of ways which may help to specify, root and contextualise the purpose of co-operative working in real places.

Making new disciples:

This could include fresh expressions, church planting generally, local evangelism initiatives.

Serving communities:

This could include chaplaincy in all its forms, social action projects and projects delivering pastoral care.

Growing congregations:

This is about local churches agreeing to worship together, share ministry and resources (including buildings), receive each other's gifts and make decisions together. This includes the first three existing categories of Local Ecumenical Partnership⁴, but also other ways of doing these things together, which we discuss further below.

Transforming communities:

This is about the churches building community, healing division, promoting peace and challenging destructive attitudes and actions.

How do co-operating churches relate to each other?

3. Relationships between churches and between the individual Christians who belong to them are the foundation of local co-operative working. Local co-operative working is not just about doing things together; at the deepest level it is about participation with each other in the Holy

² 1 Peter 2:5

³ Archbishop's Presidential Address - General Synod, York, July 2003 - See more at: <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1826/archbishops-presidential-address-general-synod-york-july-2003#sthash.LdJduh3F.dpuf>

⁴ For a list of the current categories see page 15 paragraph 2.

Spirit and the exchange of gifts. We can identify four basic forms of relationship which we have inherited from more than a century of working together in England, and it is right that we identify and honour these ways of co-operating.

Showing hospitality to one another:

Including sharing space, such as buildings, and welcoming members of other churches, and enabling them to participate as fully as the host denomination's rules will allow.

Walking together:

When two or more walk together they share a common destination or goal, but also retain their separate, distinct identities. They put themselves in a relationship where they are in conversation and support and encourage one another, share resources and consult and make decisions together.

Being in communion

In the New Testament, communion is a translation of *koinonia*, which also may be translated as fellowship, participation and sharing. There may be degrees of communion between churches, but this sort of relationship expresses mutuality and the exchange of gifts.

Joining together as one:

There are some relationships between churches which are best described in terms of union. For example, so called single congregation partnerships may actually operate as if they were a union of churches, with no denominational distinctions. In some denominations, this is indeed the expectation for growing or planting churches ecumenically. For other denominations, this approach will not be one they could support.⁵

Where might we do it?

4. The ways of working together we are thinking of all happen 'locally'. The trouble is, 'local' means different things to different churches. To a Baptist, the 'local' church is the members of the chapel on the street corner, to an Anglican it is the diocese, and to an Orthodox a 'national church'. This is helpfully discussed in the Methodist – Anglican report *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* (2012),⁶ which suggested that locality can be based both on geographical neighbourhoods and social networks and that 'locality occurs wherever human beings come together for some common purpose or shared activity'. Localities overlap with one another; they are fluid but not without recognisable patterns' (page 170, paragraph 6.6.1). We suggest here that there are four different sorts of locality in which local co-operative working takes place.

Institutions:

These will include recognisable institutions centred on a building or complex, such as hospitals, prisons, universities; and also including organisations such as statutory organisations like the police, fire service, local government, and corporations.

Sectors:

The churches have been involved in work place ministry and mission for many years in the retail, business, and industrial sectors, and this is broadening out further into the arts, sport, media and voluntary sectors.

⁵ See [Section 3 para 7](#) and [para 8](#) for an exploration of this.

⁶ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*, Church House Publishing: London (2012)

Cultural networks:

These are more dispersed and are to do with people coming together out of some affinity with each other, such as ethnicity, common language, experience, or around a common interest.

Geographical area:

This includes neighbourhoods, a 'catchment area', a cluster of places (e.g. a group of villages), a wider area in a town or city, or a geographical area with natural boundaries.

Constructing a Framework

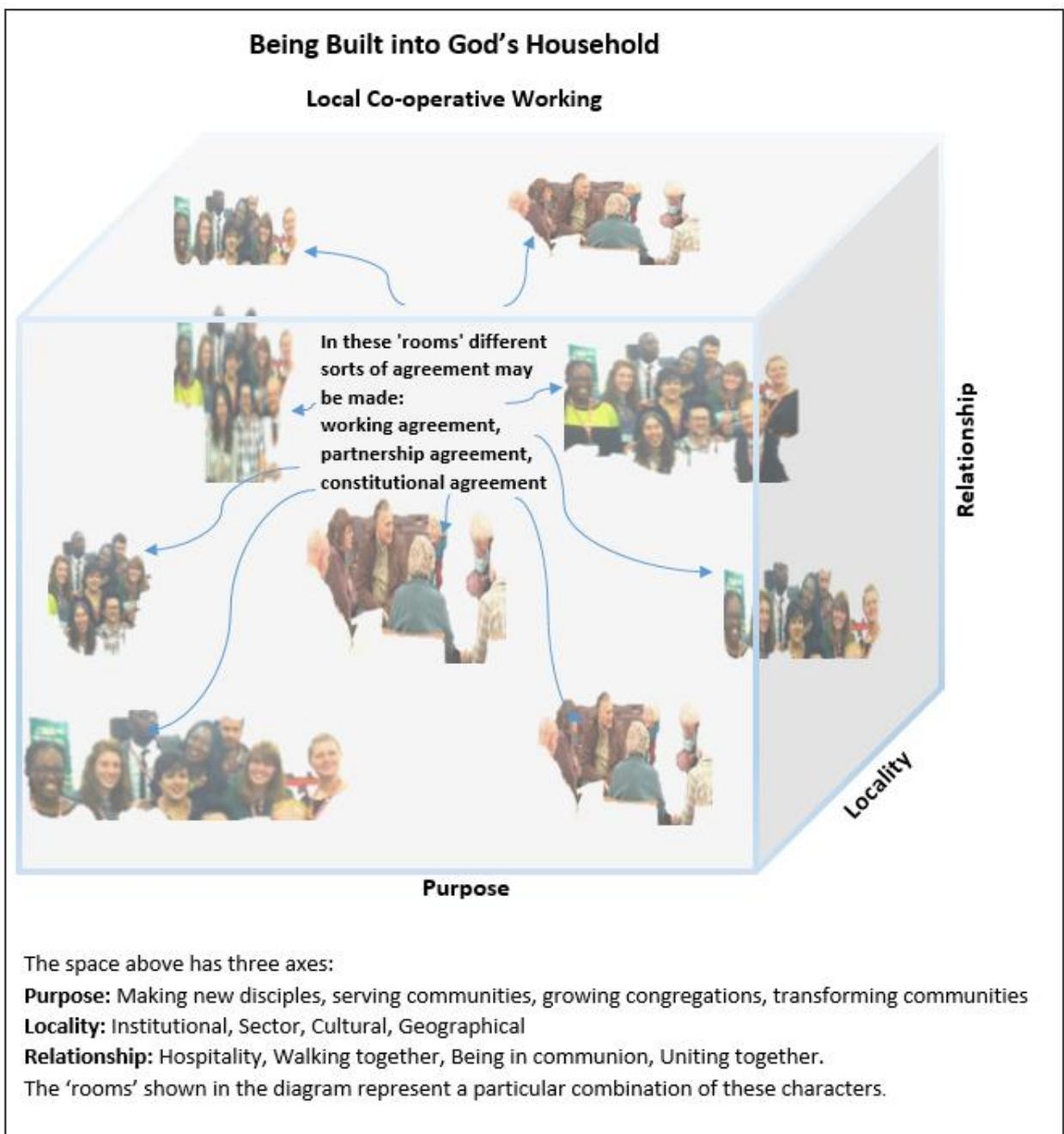
5. A framework can be constructed by combining together the various purposes, the sorts of relationship and the range of localities discussed above. How might these be combined together to construct a framework? A three dimensional plan of a house may help to explain this.

A picture of local co-operative working

6. Some NT writers found it helpful to imagine the church as God's 'building' or 'house / household' (eg Eph 2:19ff; 1 Peter 2:4ff). In Greek the word 'house' belongs to the same group from which we derive both 'economy' and 'ecumenical' – and we can see from that relationship that when they use those words they are talking about the way things are ordered and arranged in God's kingdom. Imagine then God's house. It is a large, multi-occupancy house with three floors, each with a large number of rooms.
7. The ground floor may be occupied by one family who live there permanently. But, they are very hospitable and guests keep coming and going from their part of the house. They have established some ground rules for their guests - 'Everything that's ours is yours' along with some basics for getting along together – wash up after yourselves, take off your shoes in the sitting room, keep the work space tidy.' This floor is a like one church showing hospitality to another – offering them a worship space – and growing relationships of trust and understanding with them.
8. The first floor may be shared by two or more families who share the common eating and living space, but use their own rooms for a variety of activities. There may be agreements about meals – some together, some separate – and about other joint and separate activities, backed up by an agreement about how decisions are to be made by the two families. This is like churches deciding to share their premises or to co-operate in certain aspects of mission, whilst knowing that other activities must remain separate.
9. The second floor may be more complicated – one room is devoted to a group who are exploring what the gospel means for young people, another for a group working with ex-offenders, and a third providing respite for dementia carers. They all need to get along in the flat and have adopted agreements about who uses what and when. This is like churches focusing on distinct pieces of work – working with a particular cultural group in a fresh expression, or seeking to identify and serve particular constituencies in the community.
10. All the occupants of the separate rooms and floors of the house need to relate to each other – occasionally the roof needs repairing and the plumbing fixing – so they all exist in a network of autonomy and varying degrees of co-operation with each other. But they are all clear that they live in the same house – God's house. That defines who they are and what they are doing.

11. In a similar way, we might think of the rooms of the house as particular examples of local co-operative working. The diagram below is a more formal representation of this idea. The purpose, relationship and locality form the three axes of the space, and the position of a particular 'room' in the space is defined by the particular purpose, relationship and locality as discussed above. For example:

- a piece of work with the purpose of making new disciples, by churches walking together in a cultural network would take place in one 'room' (this might describe a co-operative fresh expression initiative);
- a piece of work with the purpose of growing a congregation, with one church showing hospitality to another in a neighbourhood would take place in another 'room' (this might be one church befriending and providing worship space for a congregation of a diaspora or migrant community);
- a piece of work with the purpose of serving a community, by churches walking together in an institution would take place in a third room (this would describe a chaplaincy in a hospital, prison or university for example).



12. The existing categories of Local Ecumenical Partnership would take place in just one or two rooms of the house, whereas in reality churches at local level can do, and are doing, so much more together.
13. This is NOT a way of defining categories of local co-operation, it is merely to show the rich diversity of possibilities that churches working together may explore and develop at local level. Each of the examples – each ‘room’ - would need the support of one of the three sorts of agreement set out in our paper above.
14. As with all analogies, this one breaks down when we think in terms of development. In reality, things do not stand still and local co-operative working is no exception. A particular piece of work should not be confined to a static space (one of our ‘rooms’) but be open to change. Each floor of the house is then more like an open plan office and with free movement between the floors. This is actually what happens with local ecumenical partnerships – one may move from a covenant partnership towards forming a single congregation, a shared building may enable a deeper partnership to develop, some single congregations are deciding to move to more of a hospitality model.

What’s new in *A Flexible Framework*?

You may say – this framework is all very well, but what difference would it make? The answer is that we encourage churches to agree to work within *A Flexible Framework* and recognise the new elements which have been introduced into it – elements which have not featured in the current categories of LEP – in order to expand the scope of local co-operative working. These new elements are

- The notion of time limited agreements;
- Recognising working and partnership agreements as a basis for local co-operative working as well as constitutions;
- Affirming the importance of hospitality as an ecumenical relationship;
- Being explicit about the purpose of local co-operative working.

We are **NOT** saying that the ecumenical heritage of the last half century is now superseded but that there is room in the house for new approaches. Elsewhere ([Section 4](#)) we discuss further the theological values around local covenanting and affirm the importance of covenanting as underlying many different forms of local co-operative working. Without this perspective, we *would* be guilty of reducing local unity in mission to the merely practical and activist. But without the possibility of flexibility and adaptability enabled by these new elements, we suggest that an approach which only allowed the deepest relationships to be expressed in agreements would not encourage sufficiently the growth of new relationships.

Newer models of co-operative working

Time Limited Working Agreements and Partnership Agreements

15. We commend the use of time limited partnership agreements particularly for the early stages of co-operative working where significant amount of resources are being committed by churches. Anything more complex at this stage is unnecessary. We give an example in the box on the right of the sort of project that may benefit from this approach.
16. We have said that much local unity in mission occurs already in an informal, relational way – where relationships carry the work and provide whatever structure of consultation and sharing of ideas is necessary. Often, local pieces of work push at the boundaries of what

Example 1: Time limited working agreement:

The deployment of a pioneer minister in a new housing area, supported jointly by two churches – one providing a house and the other the majority of the stipend. There were two main purposes of the project, one was to be a focal point for community development and the other to establish a worshipping community in the new area. On the ground the project was highly successful and received national attention. However, there were structural difficulties which resulted from the lack of a formal agreement between the two co-operating churches. We suggest that, in this case, if a partnership agreement for a limited period of time had been available to establish each church’s ‘ownership’ of the project, as it would be within *A Flexible Framework*, a flexible structure could have been put in place to meet the needs of the project, without having to establish a full blown ‘LEP’ as currently understood.

denominations can allow within their own rules outside the context of a formal agreement. The use of time limited working agreements would offer a flexible, light touch way of enabling such pieces of work to flourish, without tying them down to red tape and bureaucracy. For example, two churches planning to start a café church or do messy church together, or hold jointly a regular midweek Eucharist could, through a simple working agreement, release the potential for sharing worship and ministry within these projects. The commitment would enable church councils and meetings to contribute funds and also help to connect the work to the whole life of the church locally.

Ecumenical Hospitality

17. There is already available a Declaration of Ecumenical Welcome which commits a local church of one denomination to welcome members of other churches, and to enable them to participate as fully as its own denominations rules will allow, in its life, worship and governance. This arrangement, however, is limited in its application and scope.
18. We propose a stronger model of ecumenical hospitality, which would enable a church of one denomination to provide a 'home' for a group of members of another denomination so that they may continue, and be supported and nurtured as, members of their own denomination, while participating fully in the life, worship and governance of the local church community to which they belong. This arrangement would be appropriate in association with the lead church model for planting a new church in various contexts, and in situations where one community can no longer support two church buildings, where a church of one denomination has only a few members left in that community, and where there is a pastoral need to support a continuing presence of that denomination in the community. We give an example in the box on the right, showing how such hospitality can work.

Example 2: Hospitality

A local church was planted in an area of new housing in the 1980's and early 90's as a result of co-operation between a number of churches of different denominations. By agreement among all the churches involved, in the mid 1990's it was established fully as a local church of one of the denominations. This local church has a commitment towards those of other denominations who are members of the congregation which enables them to participate in the whole of its life: worship, ministry, leadership and governance. The traditions of other churches are affirmed by inviting ministers of these churches to preach and lead worship in their own traditions. These ecumenical commitments are expressed in an agreement which is based on a Declaration of Ecumenical Welcome and signed by church leaders and are safeguarded by an ecumenical support group, including representatives of the partner churches, which meets at least twice a year. This example has all the features we commend in the hospitality model, and demonstrates the value of such a model. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the current minister, this example of co-operative working has been regarded as inferior to 'LEPs'. The added recognition of including this model in *A Flexible Framework* we think would help to promote this approach to an increasing number of situations.

19. We recognise that not all denominations will have provision for members who worship in churches of other denominations to continue as members of their home denomination, and may not have provision for the participation of members of other churches in the governance of the local churches of their denomination. We therefore suggest that churches consider their provisions in these respects, strengthening them where possible.

Enabling (Lead) Church Model

20. In some situations, for example some new housing areas, it has proved difficult in recent years to establish and sustain ecumenical partnerships of churches which are on an equal footing. There are examples where one church has taken a lead in planting a new worshipping community. We want to commend the advantages of one church taking a lead

on behalf of other partner churches to establish a church plant in a new housing area, with the recommendation that some basic ecumenical values and guidelines are followed:

- a. There should be a vision statement specifying the purpose of the arrangement.
- b. That partners consult at an early stage and that agreement is sought about whether one church will take the lead and which one this will be;
- c. That there is agreement between the churches which have an interest in mission in the situation;
- d. That the lead church commits itself to welcoming members of other churches in a way that respects and affirms their own church affiliation;
- e. There should be a commitment to reviewing how well the arrangement is working from time to time.

We give an example in the box on the right which illustrates the working of the 'lead church' model.

Example 3: Enabling (lead) Church

In another new community, planned to include about 4,000 dwellings, two local churches of different denominations have been leading the planning of mission in the area, with the support of other churches as well. The vision is to plant a church in the new community, which will be predominantly of one denomination, but with openness and commitment to other traditions. This commitment will be expressed in a Declaration of Common Purpose and Partnership, which could in time be undergirded by covenanting. The commitment will enable the traditions of the other partner churches to be expressed in the life of the new church plant. The declaration expresses the hope that a new church building will ultimately be built, which under a sharing agreement will enable the partner churches to be full partners in the worship of the planted congregation. This is an example of the enabling (lead) church model.

Dispersed Ecumenical Communities

21. The Anglican Diocese, the Methodist District and an area of the United Reformed Church Synod in Cumbria are in the middle of a process of developing mission communities – clusters of churches of different denominations within an extended geographical area. Something similar has already been established in Retford in Nottinghamshire, where 27 Church of England parishes and six local Methodist churches work as one team. The key to the success of this idea is to establish an ecumenical ministry team which can serve all the church communities of the mission community and for there to be freedom within the area for mission to be focused where it is most effective: for those which are best done in local communities to be initiated at that level, and for the things that are best done across a wider area to be done at that level. The co-ordination of such a mission community needs therefore to be done with a lightness of touch, with the flexibility to encourage initiatives at various levels. We commend the work that has been done in the Methodist Anglican Panel for Unity in Mission on extended partnerships (called Covenanted Partnerships in Extended Areas) and suggest that this model could be extended to include other churches as well.⁷

⁷ For all the documentation on Covenant Partnerships in Extended Areas go to: [Covenant Partnerships in Extended Areas](https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/england/methodists/covenant-partnerships-in-extended-areas.aspx) – <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/england/methodists/covenant-partnerships-in-extended-areas.aspx>



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,⁸ 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,⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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:

⁸ See footnote 2.

⁹ Birmingham

¹⁰ The North East

- a. checking that agreements, policies and authorisations of the local co-operative work are in place;
 - b. reflecting on its ministry and mission of 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.



Section 3: Honouring the past and being pastorally responsible for it

1. There are in England over 900 Local Ecumenical Partnerships. In some denominations these Partnerships are of considerable numerical importance – for example, a third of United Reformed Churches are LEPs, and some 10% of Methodist churches.
2. Since 1995 the churches have recognised six categories of Local Ecumenical Partnership; by following the links to the CTE website, you can read more about each category.

Category 1: [Single Congregation Partnerships](#)

Category 2: [Congregations in Covenanted Partnerships](#)

Category 3: [Shared Building Partnerships](#)

Category 4: [Chaplaincy Partnerships](#)

Category 5: [Mission Partnerships](#)

Category 6: [Education Partnerships](#)

3. As we said in the previous discussion, all of these categories are included in *A Flexible Framework*. However, on its own it does not address the issues faced especially by single congregation local ecumenical partnerships. What our framework can help to do is to clarify the sources of tension and confusion around them, especially that not all single congregation ecumenical partnerships are *single* congregations (they may be multi-congregational, as for example the ecumenical team ministries in Milton Keynes) and not all of them see themselves as *partnerships* but see themselves as being joined together as one (see paragraphs 7 and 8 below).

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*¹¹ 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 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.**

¹¹ *A Pattern for Local Ecumenism*, Consultative Committee for Local Ecumenical Projects in England, British Council of Churches (1984)

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.

Two fundamental issues of single congregation local ecumenical partnerships: Partnership and Governance

7. Some of the difficulties encountered by single congregation local ecumenical partnerships are due to confusion over whether they are congregations joined together as one or are partnerships of churches. There are churches which would naturally see the oneness of the congregation as primary, and reflect that in terms of membership and governance. The sense of being a local *ecumenical* partnership is maintained by drawing from the different participating traditions and by maintaining multiple connections with the denominational bodies. Where all the participating churches are able to work with this understanding, reasonably simple structures of decision making and governance can be applied. The main issues will be around maintaining and nurturing the distinctive traditions of the participating churches and the multiple connections with denominational authorities. When these are not maintained and nurtured, the local ecumenical partnership will have increasingly the appearance of an independent church. Regarding membership, the primary body to which those attending worship will belong is the local ecumenical partnership as one community. Denominational membership will be seen as secondary to that. This is what is currently reflected in the Model Governing Document for a Single Congregation Local Ecumenical Partnership.
8. For other churches, however, this understanding does not sit very well with their ecclesiology and polity. For them, partnership needs to be expressed at the local congregational level, and not only at the level of denominational oversight. There are various ways in which partnership can be expressed, including how membership and belonging are defined, and through the denominational bodies which still need to exist at the local level. Different churches define membership and belonging in different ways. It makes sense for an individual associated with a single congregation local ecumenical partnership to be a member (however defined) of one (or some or all if appropriate) of the local participating churches (a member of the local Methodist Church, on the church electoral roll of the parish etc.)¹² and through that denominational belonging qualify for membership of the charitable association or organisation which governs the single congregation local ecumenical partnership. Some single congregation local ecumenical partnerships have always operated like this, and they would be helped and affirmed if this approach were more clearly articulated. Others have drifted into the ‘joined together’ model and re-establishing the sense of partnership within the life of these congregations is not without its challenges. However, where the distinctiveness of the participating churches has been restored at local level it has contributed to its revival and growth. To achieve this requires participating churches and denominations to be actively engaged through deployment of ministry and effective oversight. Where a church or denomination is no longer in a position to engage actively in these ways, the question needs to be asked as to whether the single congregation partnership model is still appropriate, and assist that church to work towards a different model. We believe that the hospitality model would be one way of doing this.

¹² The current Model Governing Document for a single congregation LEP states (Schedule, paras 10 and 11):

10) *Those received into membership of the LEP by joint confirmation in consequence become members of all the Participating Denominations, as well as members of the LEP.*

11) *Those received into membership of the LEP by transfer and extension of membership in consequence become members of all the Participating Denominations which have received them, as well as members of the LEP.*

9. The current CTE Model Governing Document is based on an unincorporated membership charitable association model. In some circumstances an incorporated charitable model would be more appropriate, especially if the local church is an employer or is managing a loan or property. We therefore suggest that Charitable Incorporated Organisation¹³ models should be considered for use in these circumstances. Regarding the continued existence of denominational bodies in congregational partnerships, the current CTE charitable model adds another membership based organisation to the situation, as well as the participating churches themselves. We suggest that a single governance structure should be as simple and straightforward as possible, with clear lines about how it is to relate to the denominational bodies.



¹³ For an explanation of the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) model, go to: [Charity types: how to choose a structure \(CC22a\) - Detailed guidance - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-types-how-to-choose-a-structure) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-types-how-to-choose-a-structure>). The Foundation CIO model does not have a wider membership, but in this example its trustees may be appointed by the denominational bodies of the participating churches.

Section 4: Covenant and Partnership

1. Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*) (2013) is addressed to all Christians and in it he speaks specifically about ecumenical dialogue and says:

"If we concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness." (Para 245).

2. The Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales issued a paper thirty years previously (in 1983) called **Local Churches in Covenant**. Its aim was to encourage local Christians to work for unity among themselves and to engage in mission to the places where they lived.
3. Viewing ecumenism as a journey through the five Cs – from competition, through co-existence, to co-operation and then commitment and communion, the paper saw covenanting as the pledge and the sealing of a **commitment** to doing things ecumenically at local level. Covenanting flows from commitment. Today, it may be helpful for us to see partnership (which may be temporary and provisional) as relating to the ecumenical stage of co-operation and covenanting as relating to the ecumenical stage of commitment (which is ongoing and permanent).
4. Covenanting is viewed as Christians pledging themselves to God and to each other in a solemn act of worship. Unity is recognised as God's gift to the church. *"The process begins with God, and our covenanting to work together is part of our response to the covenant he first made with us."* (p 5)
5. The paper uses the word 'covenanting' rather than 'covenant' in order to stress that it is the process of making a covenant that is significant and not just its content. *"In speaking of covenanting in the Old Testament and the New, we mean the process by which God commits himself to the loving care of his people and they in turn commit themselves to serve him faithfully."*
6. A contract is a legal agreement. A covenant is a personal commitment. By covenanting, Christians express the gift of the very real unity that they already have and commit themselves to the task of working for the full unity we still seek.

"So 'covenanting' in our present context may be defined as the process by which Christians of different traditions, believing in God's love for them all and in the union with Christ and with one another of which baptism is the sacramental sign, solemnly pledge themselves to undertake specific actions to express their existing unity, to work towards full unity and together to serve all God's people in the place where they are. This they do with the concurrence and support of their respective authorities." (p 8)
7. *"Covenanting makes co-operation between Christians both visible and permanent."* (p 9) It is important that where an ecumenical commitment has been sealed by a covenant that this spirit is passed on to the succeeding generations so that others may enjoy the fruit and continue to water what others have sown.
8. Although the emphasis in the paper is on the local church, it is stressed that the interrelationship of church leaders and congregations is a key factor. *"Without the leaders a covenant would have no authority; without the congregations' activities it would have no substance."* (p 9)

9. Local congregations are not pledging themselves to unite but to give the fullest expression possible to Christian unity while their churches are still separated. The basic principle is the Lund principle *“that Christians in their separation should do everything together except what conscience forces them to do apart.”* This includes Prayer, Study and Action, Mission and Evangelism and Sharing of Resources.

“A covenant should not be regarded simply as the beginning of a process, though it is that. It is also the end of a long and careful process of co-operation, of growth in trust, of the formation of a team, and of the careful working out of a plan.” (p 10).



Section 5: Recommendations to the Churches

We present the ideas and proposals in this report for refreshing the framework in which churches work together. We encourage the Member Churches of CTE to:

1. be open to the possibilities of *A Flexible Framework*, and be prepared to be bold in grasping mission opportunities;
2. encourage local churches to draw on the resources and expertise of Bodies in Association of CTE for local ecumenical work;
3. appreciate that this new framework is born of wrestling with the complexity of relationships that we have inherited from the history of Churches and Christians working together in England, and be prepared to honour and support those patterns of co-operation which in some places are deeply embedded;
4. agree the following recommendations and authorise the work needed to implement them
 - a. that they initiate through CTE a key stream of work to explore our visions of unity in mission, holiness and worship;
 - b. 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](#));
 - c. that agreements supporting local co-operative working should be approved solely by denominational authorities ([Section 2.1.b](#));
 - d. that CTE staff working with County Ecumenical Officers work out a new system of registering/listing agreements ([Section 2.1.c](#));
 - e. that the Member Churches consider the use of Charitable Incorporated Organisation models for local co-operative working when a single governance structure is required ([Section 3.9](#));
 - f. that the appropriate officers and specialists within CTE's Member Churches take responsibility for issuing guidance for the churches collectively and for their own denominations about the three sorts of Agreement (Working Agreement, Partnership Agreement and Constitutional Agreement) which we have identified.

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