

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND

A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission

A brief introduction

1. Churches of all traditions are faced with immense challenges to serve and transform communities, to make new disciples and to grow in holiness and worship within our nation today. The task is too great for one church to do on its own – it is a task for the whole people of God, called to work together in the power and unity of the Holy Spirit. To proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom of God with integrity, the churches must be seen to be living it. Unity speaks to a divided world.
2. Good ecumenical working is based on relationships and trust and can often be informal and spontaneous. At times, however, something more formal is required – but, even then, it is important that structure should follow need and that agreements should be light, enabling and flexible. Ecumenical co-operation can bring added value and benefits to all partners, by
 - a. deepening our discernment of what God is calling us to do;
 - b. enabling the sharing of gifts to equip us for the task;
 - c. enabling the sharing of resources to multiply the work.
3. The document *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission* commended by the CTE Enabling Group has been developed in response to the changing Christian context and is intended to raise the level of mutual understanding between the member churches of CTE and to facilitate the participation of the wider membership.

A Flexible Framework in brief

4. *A Flexible Framework* refers to **local co-operative working**, which means churches of more than one denomination working together intentionally at local level, with a clear missional purpose – a purpose that has a specific focus and is contextualised within a particular locality. To fulfil this purpose they often 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 that churches do together needs to draw strength from and be rooted in the relationship between them. They also often 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.
5. *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. There are four questions on which the framework is constructed.

a. What are the churches involved called to do together and for what purpose?

This could include: making new disciples; serving communities; growing congregations; transforming communities.

b. How will they relate with one another as they work together?

This could include: showing hospitality to one another; walking together; being in communion; joining together as one.

c. What is the context or locality in which they are called?

This could include: institutions; sectors; cultural networks; geographical areas.

d. What sort of agreement and authorisation are needed to do this work?



6. In the original paper, the image of a house with many interconnected rooms is offered as a way of presenting *A Flexible Framework*. An alternative picture has emerged, that of a climbing frame, which provides a stable open structure in which children can play freely and safely. This describes perfectly what *A Flexible Framework* is meant to achieve.

Forms of agreement for ecumenical co-operation

7. *A Flexible Framework* provides three forms of written agreement to meet the needs of the rich diversity of ecumenical co-operation: working agreements, partnership agreements and constitutional agreements.
- 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 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. The possibility of time limited agreements for ecumenical co-operation, as well as those which have a long term commitment are both possible within the framework.

Oversight

9. All the different pathways of ecumenical co-operation that require a form of agreement between the participating churches and the approval of denominational authorities need oversight. Increasingly the model of oversight for local ecumenical partnerships provided by the system of sponsoring bodies has become problematical. In some areas, sponsoring

bodies no longer exist, and oversight is exercised by the denominations which are directly involved in particular local ecumenical partnerships. This is a pattern which is gaining ground. In the light of this the flexible framework suggests the following principles of oversight for ecumenical co-operation:

- 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.
- d. The denominational authorities should be responsible for deciding whether a review is needed and for commissioning the review.

Finally...

10. At its meeting on 11 and 12 March 2016, the Enabling Group of Churches Together in England (CTE) commended A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission, to the member churches for detailed consideration. We present the ideas and proposals for refreshing the framework in which churches work together. We encourage the member churches of CTE to:
 - a. be open to the possibilities of the new framework, and be prepared to be bold in grasping mission opportunities;
 - b. encourage local churches to draw on the resources and expertise of Bodies in Association of CTE for local ecumenical work;
 - c. 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;
 - d. agree the following recommendations and authorise the work needed to implement them:
 - i. that they initiate through CTE a key stream of work to explore our visions of unity in mission, holiness and worship;
 - ii. 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);
 - iii. that agreements supporting local co-operative working should be approved solely by denominational authorities (Section 2.1.b);
 - iv. that CTE staff working with County Ecumenical Officers work out a new system of registering/listing agreements (Section 2.1.c);
 - v. 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);
 - vi. 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.