

WHY LEPs?

Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) are not merely convenient organisational structures. The shared life of an LEP can be a powerful statement of the nature and purpose of Christ's Church. Many LEPs are communities which draw Christians into an ever closer fellowship in which they support one another along their journeys of repentance, renewal and mission.

WHY THE CHURCH?

God calls people to become his children, sharers in his divine life. Most Christians understand that the grace which God gives to help us to respond to his call comes in part through visible signs, 'sacraments'. Although we commonly speak of the sacrament of Baptism or the sacrament of the Eucharist, the word 'sacrament' can also be used of other signs of God's will for our salvation. The sacramental principle - that visible signs disclose God's saving work - is a part of Christian theology which has as its most basic root the Incarnation, in which God is made visible in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Church, then can be seen as the "visible sacrament" of the unity of all who, in faith, look towards Jesus, the author of salvation and the principle of unity and peace. Although suffering from the disputes and divisions of past centuries, it is the one Church, as established by God in Jesus Christ,

which exists here and now on this earth. Pope Paul VI described the Church as "the visible plan of God's love for humanity," because God desires "that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit."

Seen from this point of view, then, the Church is a

- o **visible** (is experienced here on earth)
- o **sacrament** (a sign used by God for our salvation)
- o **of unity** (shows God's will that we be one with him and each other)

A REAL, THOUGH IMPERFECT, COMMUNION

While the Church is a sacrament of unity, we live in an age when Christians are disunited. For decades churches and Christian communities have worked alongside one another to end the scandal of disunity, playing a full part in the ecumenical movement. It understands the goal of that movement as being visible unity in which there will be full communion among all Christians.

Even in the present situation of Christian disunity there is a real, though imperfect, communion already existing among Christians. We share with each other the practice of prayer and worship, reverence for the Bible as a rule of faith and of life, and belief in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

At the national level Christian leaders have entered into a covenant "to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another in the Church, which is his body; and to fulfil their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world". (*Foundational Document of Churches Together in England*) Many church leaders, through county ecumenical bodies, are members of one or more covenants with regional Christian leaders within their dioceses.

At the local level, Christian churches make visible their communion with each other in a variety of ways. Some are members of Churches Together groups; others enter into the more formal covenant of a Local Ecumenical Partnerships.

LEPs: VISIBLE SIGNS OF COMMUNION

I ask ... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (*John 17: 20-21*)

The participation of churches in an LEP is a clear sign of the close fellowship which it enjoys with its partners. The shared life of an LEP can be a powerful sign of local communion: both an eloquent statement to the wider community of the extent to which these Christians from different traditions are united in faith, and the means through which God brings his people in this locality into closer unity.

Disunity is an impediment to mission; it undermines the Church's mission to call humankind to become one People of God. Conversely, a growth in communion strengthens mission. When it is widely known that the different churches in a town or district work and worship together, they are more likely to be listened to because they live what they preach.

The journey towards Christian unity is one of repentance and renewal. The Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council wrote, "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart". (*Unitatis red-integratio* n.7) The commitments made in an LEP covenant provide opportunities for repentance and renewal to take place. As Christians join together in a spiritual ecumenism of worship, prayer, study, and service in the community, so together they are confronted by the demands of the Gospel. From whatever tradition each has come, they enter into a deepening dialogue with one another, and so acquire the confidence to be open to each other about their failures to follow Christ as faithfully as they should. Out of that shared repentance comes the will to support one another along the path of renewal, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:2-3)

Churches Together in England is the national ecumenical instrument for England.

Its Presidents are the Archbishops of Canterbury and Westminster, the Moderator of the Free Churches and a fourth President chosen by the Orthodox, Lutheran, Religious Society of Friends and Black Majority Churches.

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The website lists the member Churches of Churches Together in England and the Ecumenical Officers for each county who are able to offer contact with the LEPs and Churches Together groups in their county.

The Churches Group for Local Unity is the national body which encourages local churches to develop ways to make visible the unity they have been given and address the issues which continue to divide them. The Secretary is Revd John R Bradley (john.bradley@cte.org.uk)

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Why Local Ecumenical Partnerships?

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (*Ephesians 4:1-6*)