

UNITY, IDENTITY AND MISSION

REPORT ON CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH 2012-2015

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PREFACE

Our hope is that this report can help people in our churches enter more fully into the reality of the unity we have in Christ, by reading it, discussing it with others and acting on its recommendations.

That unity is a theological reality, the will and the work of the Triune God. In the course of our meetings as the Conversations group, we found ourselves repeatedly wanting to affirm that truth and ground our own work in it.

That unity is also a dynamic, unfolding reality in the life of the church here on earth. For some Christians today, concern to affirm distinctive church identities, or to respond to the imperatives of mission, indicate that the multifaceted task of deepening relationships between churches should be pushed down the list of priorities. We argue that this is a mistake. What we have to say here is informed by testimony to the potential of growth in unity to release new energy for mission and to root our identity more fully in Jesus Christ.

The reality of unity is something we had the privilege of experiencing in the course of our own meetings, in the trust and openness of our discussions and in the confirmation of shared faith and purpose. Neither of our churches is homogenous, both draw on a variety of spiritual and theological streams, and the representatives from each church on the Conversations group reflected that. We are very grateful to all those who participated in this journey together.

We warmly commend the report to our churches for study and discussion.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Between 2013 and early 2016, a group appointed by the Church of England and the United Reformed Church to carry out ‘Conversations’ around specified themes met together. It was an initiative that arose out of the work of a Church of England – United Reformed Church study group on the international dialogue text, *God’s Reign and our Unity*.¹ The study group had met from 2007–2011 and published its conclusions in the report *Healing the Past – Building the Future*.²
2. The current text is the report that those who have been part of the latest ‘Conversations’ now wish to present to the two churches as they finish their work.³ Chapter 1 sets out theological foundations for why they and other churches should remain committed to growth towards unity in the triune God. Chapter 2 considers Cumbria as a case study of positive contemporary developments that are weaving together strands of the ecumenical movement that can sometimes seem to have come unravelled from one another. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 then analyse key issues for growth in unity on the part of the two churches at every level, issues that combine theological, institutional and practical dimensions. The report includes recommendations to both national churches – summarised at the end – while providing discussion material for local groups to use in reflecting on its central themes.⁴
3. The meetings of the Conversations group have been characterised by a real openness to exploring with one another what it might mean for the two churches to grow in the unity that is Christ’s gift and call. Inevitably and rightly, discussion has revisited many familiar – sometimes apparently intractable – themes in ecumenical encounter, but it has not felt burdened by constant fears of reopening old wounds, or treading on much-bruised toes. The currents of pain, mistrust and hostility that still remain in the life of the churches have not needed to be enacted in the dialogue itself, but they have been frankly acknowledged. It is perhaps important at the outset of this report to re-state some of them here, as they are likely to affect the way it is read in a number of cases and also because the report is aimed in part at tackling them.
4. In both churches, there will be those who see little point in seeking to grow in unity with one another because they regard the other church as representing a form of Christianity whose influence they would want to discourage. For some members of the United Reformed Church, for instance, the Church of England remains defined – as it was for generations of Non-Conformity in the past – by perceptions of episcopal authority unlimited by a conciliar structure, a distracting and over-regulated insistence on ‘ceremony’ in public worship, and a relationship to the state that is

¹ *God’s Reign and Our Unity: The Report of the Anglican-Reformed International Commission 1984* (London: SPCK, 1984).

² *Healing the past – Building the future: The report of the Church of England-United Reformed Church joint study group on God’s Reign and Our Unity* (2011), available at http://www.urc.org.uk/what_we_do/ecumenical/docs/healing_the_past_building_the_future.pdf.

³ Appendix 2 sets out in more detail the subjects covered by these meetings and the membership of the group.

⁴ This material, which appears at the end of each chapter, is drawn together in Appendix 1 for ease of reference.

incompatible with the freedom of the church of Jesus Christ. The roots of these perceptions can be traced back to the seventeenth century, and in particular to the way that Presbyterians and Congregationalists (from whom the contemporary United Reformed Church descends) were treated by the Church of England following the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660.⁵

5. There would be some corresponding perceptions of the United Reformed Church within the Church of England, but the shadows of the past are perhaps not so long or deep. The significant difference in scale between the two churches is part of the picture here. The Church of England has far less reason to fear that growth in relations with the United Reformed Church would affect its fundamental character, let alone some form of absorption in which its distinct identity and traditions will be swallowed up.
6. That does not mean, however, that one is bound to find a more positive attitude towards United Reformed Church relations in the Church of England than towards relations with the Church of England in the United Reformed Church, but rather that the kind of negativity encountered is probably going to be different. Some of it would be again bound up with historic questions of theology and polity. The unlikelihood of movement in the United Reformed Church towards accepting the historic episcopate might, for instance, be seen as rendering efforts towards further growth in visible unity more or less futile, given the significance of episcopacy for Anglican ecclesiology. Yet resistance on the part of people in the Church of England to seeking greater unity with the United Reformed Church might be equally if not more likely to be expressed in terms of concern about the rapidity of decline in numbers, clergy and resources there. The Church of England is being called to embrace the Programme for Reform and Renewal announced by the Archbishops in January 2014, whose aim is to promote mission and church growth, and some in the Church of England would not see the United Reformed Church as an obvious partner here. Yet at the same time, the United Reformed Church is looking at the report on *What is the Spirit Saying to the Churches?* in order to celebrate the positive characteristics of United Reformed identity and find there the basis for mission and growth. The two churches share common priorities and common challenges in mission.
7. There is however also a broader narrative running in the Church of England, as well as other churches, that provides the context within which such fears need to be understood. This narrative would be about the importance of 'travelling light', of flexibility and innovation, in order for the church to be effective in mission in a society into which secularization is biting more and more deeply, albeit with consequences that are less predictable than an earlier generation of sociologists had imagined.⁶ The widespread growth of 'new' and Pentecostal churches is part of the changing picture here. The ecumenical movement is depicted as a twentieth-century paradigm that is no longer fit for purpose in this context, making constant demands for investment of time and money in unwieldy institutional structures – local,

⁵ On the history of relations between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church and its predecessor churches, see Section 1 of *Healing the Past – Building the future*, some of which is reproduced in Appendix 3 below.

⁶ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd edition (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

regional, national – and all at the service of the evidently unreachable goal of visible unity between all Christians. Churches focused on mission, it is argued, will be able to identify other churches with the same focus in the same situation and just get on with working together where there are evident benefits from doing so, without needing formal structures, national coordinating bodies – or reports like this one.

8. That broader narrative can be critiqued on a number of levels, and indeed each of the chapters that follows takes issue with it in one way or another. One immediate response to the concerns noted above, however, needs to be registered at the outset, and that is to affirm that the United Reformed Church, like the Church of England, is committed to the work of evangelization in this country. This is not to say, of course, that every member of the clergy and laity in either church is passionately motivated about evangelization, or that all share a common understanding of it. For one church to represent the other, however, as unconcerned about God’s mission, or as having no part to play in God’s mission in this country, is a profound misrepresentation – and indeed an uncharitable, un-Christian one. The premise of the Conversations, and of this report, is that both churches are committed to God’s mission in this place, and that because both share in that one mission in this one place, they simply must seek to *work* together as effectively as possible and to grow in *being* in unity together, because Jesus teaches this is necessary in order for the world to believe and for the Son to glorify the Father.

1. DIVINE AND HUMAN RELATIONS

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17.20–24)

9. These words are perhaps the most familiar passage in the Bible for reflecting on Christian unity. They come towards the end of the great prayer that follows Jesus' parting words to his disciples in John's Gospel. The theme of unity has already appeared earlier in the prayer, in the final part of verse 11, where Jesus is praying for those who are currently his disciples: 'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.' The theme of oneness among believers that is 'as' the oneness of the Father and the Son in the godhead is then developed further in verses 20–24. Here the focus moves out from the disciples gathered around Jesus in the upper room for his final meal to those who will come to faith through their testimony: those who share belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God but do not share the experience of accompanying him in his ministry on earth, or the particular cultural background of the first disciples, or even their common Judaism. Jesus prays for the unity of those who will come from many different nations and many different places, across the ages of history, 'that they may all be one.' He is the one who 'always lives to make intercession' for us (Hebrews 7.14), and therefore his prayer remains; and for all who pray in his name, it remains their prayer also.
10. What does it mean to pray for the oneness of believers to be 'as' the oneness of the Father and the Son? The passage articulates this in terms of mutual indwelling: the complete oneness of the Father and the Son is expressed in the truth that they are each 'in' the other (there is no sentence break between verses 20 and 21 in the Greek). We reflect and participate in that oneness by being 'in' them, according to verse 21, which the parallel treatment of the same themes in verses 22–23 explicates as meaning 'I in them and you in me'. We dwell in the Godhead by receiving Christ the Son of God to dwell in us, the one in whom the Father dwells and on whom his favour rests, and because the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father, if the Son dwells in us then we dwell in them through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christian unity, then, is not primarily about common culture, common views or common agendas, but a theological reality, God's gift to us and therefore something we receive from God. It follows from our identity as those whose lives are hid with Christ in God and in whom Christ dwells by faith. That identity creates a unity of communion between us that participates in the eternal communion of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

11. Christian unity, therefore, needs to be understood in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity. Although the Holy Spirit is not named in John 17, Jesus has had much to say about the Spirit in the teaching he has just given to his disciples in chapters 14 to 16. A central theme here has been that for the sake of the Son, the Father will give the Spirit to keep the disciples united to the Son: he will 'teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you' (14.26); he 'will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (16.14). The disciples will 'know him, because he abides with, and he will be in you' (14.17). All of this needs to be held as essential background for the prayer of chapter 17, whose opening and defining plea is 'glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you' (17.1). It is through the Spirit that the Father will glorify the Son in those who believe in him; it is because the Spirit will be with and in those who believe that the Son can dwell in them for ever and therefore they can dwell forever in the communion of the Trinity.
12. The context for Christ's prayer for Christian unity in John 17.20–24 is the spread of the gospel through space and time via the word and witness of the first disciples. The life of the disciples beyond Jesus' cross and resurrection is the constant horizon for the whole of chapters 14–17. This horizon is taken further in the experience of Pentecost, when the Spirit who rested upon Jesus at his baptism comes among the gathered believers speaking in the languages of many nations. Believers sent out into the world after the resurrection will keep encountering situations where it does not seem that the teaching and example of Jesus provide direct precedents for what to do, and they will miss the direct companionship that they have enjoyed during the years of his ministry on earth. Yet the Spirit will enable believers to keep finding in the Son of God all that they need to fulfil the purposes of God:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16.13–15)

We glimpse particularly clearly in these verses the oneness of Father, Son and Spirit as the eternal and dynamic life in which the church is one.

13. John 17.20–24 makes clear that the unity of believers is inseparable from their witness to the world. Yet this is not a unity like any other: there is a clear danger in assimilating 'Christian unity' to e.g. calls for 'party unity' in the political sphere – pragmatic and ultimately self-serving appeals to put aside (or indeed cover up) difference for the sake of the greater cause. Oneness that is 'as' the oneness of Father, Son and Spirit is not about the elimination of difference: Father, Son and Spirit are in an eternal relation of love, not sameness. Nor is it about oneness solely for the sake of some goal relating to securing power and influence. This oneness is at the heart of reality, the deepest truth about who we are, who God is, and our purpose in God's world. This is not an easy vision to sustain in a culture where the prevailing 'common sense' can seem to be that the life – all life – is fundamentally about the collision of self-seeking individual units, who may at times collaborate rather than compete or fight but do so ultimately for the same reason that they sometimes compete and fight, namely to get what they want.

14. This unity does, however, have its effects – its fruit, to use the imagery of John 15.1–17. It is worth noting that the ‘so that’ connections in the English translation used of John 17.20–24 could be read as meaning either ‘with the consequence being that’ or ‘the intention / purpose being that’. Commentators have argued the toss here, but perhaps it is as well to hold both of these meanings together. Christian unity does have a *purpose* – that the world may ‘believe’ (17.21) and ‘know’ (17.23) that the Father has sent the Son. At the same time, it is not merely a means to some ultimately separate end. Oneness is the truth about who we are, as the community of the Son of God, filled by the Spirit of God. If we live that truth fully, deeply and radically, the world will come to believe and know the one who speaks it, as a *consequence*. Correspondingly, the more the truth of our unity is obscured and fractured, the harder it is for people to see the truth of the gospel. The more transparent our relations within the church are to the oneness we have through Christ in the divine Trinity, the more the gospel can be trusted and known in the world. Fruitfulness in mission is inseparable from unity in Christ.
15. The prayer of Christ continues for the unity of his followers, so that God may be glorified in the world. To pray in the name of Christ is to share in his prayer, and therefore to join in his longing for oneness between Christians that is ‘as’ the oneness of the Trinity, through our dwelling in Christ and his dwelling in us. We cannot pray for something without being willing to strive for it, without offering ourselves to God to be among the instruments that God might use for the kingdom to come and the divine will to be done. To share in Christ’s prayer is therefore to dedicate ourselves to ‘making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4.3).
16. Our ‘every effort’ is called for by the cause of Christian unity: unless we are prepared to do this, we cannot ‘lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called’ (Ephesians 4.1). Those who have become weary and cynical about unity may need to hear that word afresh, and likewise those who are only interested in working with other churches if it is to the advantage of ‘my’ or even ‘our’ church (see paragraphs 6–7 above); corporate selfishness having no higher merit than the individual variety. To become indifferent to the glorious reality of the oneness of the whole church in Christ as an eschatological reality demanding our attention here and now, and to settle instead for the persistence in separation of our own community or institution is to cease being ‘worthy of the calling to which you have been called.’
17. At the same time, ecumenical activists may need to be reminded that this unity is not something that we can create or even augment by personal endeavour: our work is to ‘maintain’ and receive more deeply the unity that has been given in the Holy Spirit, and let it flood the life of our church communities. Prayer leads to action, certainly, but to prayerful action that is always at the service of God’s agency of grace. Therefore we need to be vigilant in resisting in the power of the Spirit everything that obstructs the unity of the Spirit, and attentive also to every opportunity we may be given to enable the truth of who we are in Christ – which is one in Christ – to be made more visible to the world. The rest of this report is about how we might do that together, as the Church of England and the United Reformed Church, in our unique place and time.

Bible focus: John 17.20–24

- How might this passage, and its wider context in John's Gospel, help us to understand what is special about the 'oneness' of Jesus' followers?

Questions for discussion

- Where do you experience Christian unity most strongly? How might different Christians answer that question differently? How might we experience Christian unity more deeply?
- List all the churches with a commitment to sharing in Christ's mission in the communities your church serves. In what ways do you currently share with one another in that mission? Could you go further? How far do the people in those communities perceive all the churches as 'one'?

2. ECUMENISM 'OLD' AND 'NEW': A CASE STUDY

The ecumenical landscape

18. It has seemed to many touched by the ecumenical movement over the past century that the divisions between Christian denominations⁷ are a direct denial of the unity for which Christ prayed in John 17.20–24 and a huge obstacle for effective mission. Over the past forty years or so, however, people inside and outside the ecumenical movement have increasingly questioned that assumption. Do our denominations constitute divisions that must be overcome, or differences that are simply part of the proper diversity of the body of Christ? This is a question that we will need to return to in the final chapter of the report.
19. Conversations about ecumenism today sometimes draw a distinction between the 'old' and the 'new'. 'Old' ecumenism, with its roots in the mid-twentieth century, is said to be oriented towards the goal of a structurally united church without separate denominations, and puts energy into initiatives and institutions that can be conceived as steps towards that goal or as anticipations of it: bilateral theological dialogues; regional, national and international ecumenical instruments; Local Ecumenical Partnerships. 'New' ecumenism is claimed to be shaped more by the twenty-first century, and in particular by the acceptance that difference between denominations is here to stay and indeed being rapidly augmented by the growing presence of churches that do not want to define themselves anyway in terms of historic denominations, and therefore do not see the relevance of the agenda of 'old' ecumenism bound up with them. It focuses instead on initiatives at local level that can enable Christians of all kinds to be partners in mission, embracing both evangelism and community action. Where flexible structures can help to build relationships and share resources to enable this, they deserve support, but only as a means to that end. The 'new' ecumenism brings churches together in common action, where the 'old' ecumenism aimed to unite churches in common structures.
20. This way of putting things can be helpful in terms of understanding how the mood has changed in ecumenical relations over the past thirty years, but it cannot really bear too much weight. Since its inception over a hundred years ago, the ecumenical movement has always encompassed different approaches and different emphases, and indeed many of its leading figures have held together the practical and the theological dimensions, the relational and the institutional.⁸ Arguably, what has happened to ecumenism in recent years could more accurately and more worryingly be described as a narrowing of this breadth, the silting up of some of the tributaries that have been vital to its life, and the breaking off of different strands from one another, with each proclaiming to the others that 'I have no need of you' (cf. 1 Cor. 12.21). Local partnerships in 'new' ecumenism may be successful today in part

⁷ The applicability of the term 'denomination' to the Church of England can be contested, on a number of grounds. The term is used here simply as the most convenient short hand in this context, and no judgment is intended on questions regarding the extent of similarity in sociological and ecclesiological profile between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church.

⁸ Keith Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic: Living in More than One Place at Once* (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

because of the hard work done by the 'old' ecumenists of a previous generation, and if that work is not sustained and developed in the present, then they may get rather more difficult in the decades to come. At the same time, ecumenical work at the theological and institutional level that has no relation to Christians actually coming together in discipleship, worship and witness will inevitably wither and die, whatever level of resources may be invested in it.

Local Ecumenical Partnerships

21. An important expression of the search for visible unity in mission by the Church of England and the United Reformed Church has been their commitment to participating in Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs). In 2015, they were involved together in around 90 LEPs, most of which also included one or more other denominations but with some 25 of these being bilateral only. To date no study has been made of these to explore their particular histories and characteristics, but anecdotally it is probably true to say that each has a particular, unique set of local circumstances that has brought it into existence. Although one might say of this of every LEP, it does contrast with the United Reformed Church relationship with the Methodist Church where at local level there has often been an almost natural coming together of congregations that are much more alike in style and ethos to the extent that noticeable differences may be minimal.
22. An examination of the statistics at the time of writing shows that in a good number of situations, the United Reformed Church presence in a LEP (either bi-lateral or multi-lateral) is small to the point of vanishing. There has been a recent case of a bilateral LEP ceasing because of this fact. A conversation with the Diocesan Ecumenical Officer indicated great regret on their part but also accepted the need to be realistic. There was also conversation about how the value of the link could be retained if not in the existence of a formal LEP.
23. Much hinges on the local relationships, which may need the presence of both United Reformed Church and Anglican clergy. This was true at the time of the establishment of the LEP in Harrold and Carlton, near Bedford. Due to United Reformed Church deployment pressures there is at the time of writing only an Anglican priest in post. She has a good knowledge of the United Reformed Church and is ecumenically committed but the membership statistics are currently 129 with 17 United Reformed Church. This indicates a precariousness in the future especially when, eventually, the priest moves on and may be replaced with one less ecumenically experienced. There are some more evenly balanced, such as Winson Green and St Luke's, Cambridge, where both United Reformed Church and Anglican clergy are currently involved. This could reward some study to see what are the strengths and weaknesses. (Lesslie Newbiggin was the minister of Winson Green in the 80s and drove the LEP forward, reinforcing the idea of unique initiatives in establishing the LEPs.)
24. A different situation obtains in LEPs where a United Reformed Church minister serves in effect as a vicar under the Ecumenical Canons, as currently at Barhill. The long vacancy that the United Reformed Church creates when a minister leaves can

threaten such an arrangement as the Church of England may look to its own resources to fill a post. The current work on LEPs more widely within Churches Together in England is beginning to address the questions of how the fragility of worthwhile LEPs due to the unpredictability of relationships can be strengthened more formally and structurally, but there is much to be done.⁹

The Cumbria adventure

25. One place where the distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ ecumenism looks refreshingly irrelevant is Cumbria. A sustained attempt is underway to create an ‘Ecumenical County’ there through committed, structural arrangements for the sake of enabling practical unity in witness and evangelism. It might be argued that this is in fact a return to the roots of the ecumenical movement.¹⁰ Christian leaders in Cumbria do not want to choose between common structures and common action: they want common structures that will release common action, sustaining in every community a Christian presence for mission whose unity will be visible to that community in concrete, practical ways. The Church of England and the United Reformed Church have been key partners in this remarkable initiative – though they are not alone. The Methodist Church is the third member of the group of three churches leading it, with five others also publicly committed to supporting it.¹¹ As elsewhere in England, ‘new’ churches, often related to Pentecostalism and in many cases operating without a national denominational organization, have become a significant part of the Christian presence in Cumbria, and while the focus of this report is on relations between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church, the emerging structures described below are also proving effective for enabling such churches to unite in mission with the historic denominations.
26. Clearly the Conversations Group has been influenced in its focus on Cumbria by having the Bishop of Carlisle as its Anglican Co-Chair. Nonetheless, the group as a whole was deeply impressed by what it heard from Bishop James about what has been happening in Cumbria and also convinced that it deserves very serious attention from both our churches. Cumbria might be considered as a kind of creative laboratory for contemporary ecumenical relations, the results of which need to be allowed time to unfold and not judged or fixed too quickly. At the same time, it also merits some careful discernment and initial evaluation, with the aim of identifying what might be transferable, where there are lessons to be learnt about what to avoid and where there is creative potential that can be drawn on.
27. What, then, has made it possible to pursue the goal of structural *and* missional unity in Cumbria in a way that seems quite remote from the ecumenical situation in many other parts of the country? To begin with, it is important to realise that recent developments rest on a significant history of ecumenical activity in the region. Alongside institutional initiatives by church leaders, a sequence of serious crises also

⁹ Current information about Church of England and United Reformed Church participation in LEPs is available from the United Reformed Church’s National Ecumenical Officer.

¹⁰ ‘The “Faith and Order” movement was born in the context of a missionary concern. The pioneers of the movement... sought unity not as an end in itself but for the sake of mission. Yet it must be acknowledged that this perspective has sometimes been lost’ (*God’s Reign and Our Unity* §17, p. 11).

¹¹ These are: Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, Baptist, Quaker and Church of Scotland.

had a unifying effect: the epidemic of foot and mouth disease in 2001 with its devastating impact on farming in the county; the floods in 2009 that led to some people being unable to return to their homes for up to two years; and the tragic shootings in 2010. Besides responding together to emergencies such as these, Christians found themselves joining together to work for justice in food banks and credit unions. The churches appointed a shared officer for social responsibility and produced an ecumenical environmental policy for Cumbria. Some joint congregations were set up and there was collaboration in creating Fresh Expressions and shared courses for clergy and laity to support that. A county-wide mission in 2008, Walk Cumbria, helped Christians to discover one another and develop local relationships.

28. Besides this varied experience of crossing denominational boundaries in mission and ministry, one other factor needs to be mentioned. The Anglican Diocese of Carlisle and the Methodist District of Cumbria both coincide with the county boundaries, while Cumbria is recognized as a distinct Area within the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church, with a designated Area President as a focus for relationships. This overlapping of ecclesiastical boundaries between the three denominations, and with civic boundaries that reflect a genuine sense of commonality within them, is highly unusual within England but hugely helpful in terms of each church having both structures and leadership that focus on the same places, the same communities and the same people. A great deal has also hinged on the relationship between the Anglican Bishop, the Methodist Chair of District and the United Reformed Church Area President. At the same time, there is a different kind of relationship between oversight and place in the three churches, which has been experienced as complementary rather than contradictory. The United Reformed Church for instance does not have the same commitment to 'a church in every community' as the Church of England.
29. So how did Cumbria begin to build on these promising foundations towards the goal of becoming an 'Ecumenical County'? In 2010, a vision statement for the Anglican Diocese was released, called *Growing Disciples*. It included nine 'stepping stones', of which the fourth was that everything should be done ecumenically. After some discussion it was agreed unanimously by the diocesan synod. Meanwhile, the Methodist District and the United Reformed Church Synod had been in conversation for some time about forming a 'united area' in Cumbria, and the decision was taken to make this a tripartite discussion involving the Anglican Diocese as well. These developments taken together helped prepare the way for a formal Declaration of Intent between the three denominations later that year. The Declaration included joint commitments to mission together, to ministry together (including the joint development of ministry), and to optimizing use of church buildings for the benefit of communities across the county.
30. Ecumenical strategy groups were then set up to look at each of these three related areas. The mission group decided to make evangelism their focus, with a goal of sharing the gospel by 2020 with all who live in Cumbria (around half a million) and all visitors to the county (estimates vary from 16–39 million). The ministry group agreed to develop mission communities, i.e. groupings of churches, working together under a leader who could be from any of the three denominations. The task of the mission community would be to make sure intentional mission was happening in

every church within the grouping, each of which would have its own leader, ordained or lay. The idea was that in due course the leader of the mission community would not have specific responsibility for one particular church, and also that there would be an administrator for each community. Many though not all mission communities would include more than one of the three main denominations. While training would be provided to support this and foster consistency, it soon became clear that there could be no single blueprint for how mission communities would work in practice. All however would be focused on growing disciples, and all would be working ecumenically. Finally, the buildings group decided to begin with an audit of all church buildings. Despite often deep attachments from local communities, it was accepted that some will inevitably need to close. The hope, however, is that many can move to multiple use, with the aim of 50% being used by communities during the week by 2020.

Reflecting on the Story so far

31. Inevitably, progress over the past five years has not been entirely straightforward. There have been occasions where more time has been needed for communication and consultation than was originally expected. Three particular areas, however, might be identified where the Cumbria initiative raises significant questions likely also to be relevant in other contexts where, in different ways, the Church of England and the United Reformed Church seek to join together in mission and ministry, alongside other partners: first, ecclesiology; second, ministry; and third, identity. Understanding the issues here brings together practical and theological dimensions.
32. First, ecclesiology means how we understand the church, in terms of both theology and practice. It comes into sharp focus in Cumbria when it is a question of churches taking decisions together. It can at times appear as though there are some significant differences, for instance, regarding the three 'levels' of church life discussed at paragraphs 39–42 below so far as relative centres of gravity are concerned: the bishop in synod (Anglican); District synod on behalf of Conference (Methodist); or local churches through the Church Meeting (URC). Nor is this merely a transitional issue, as the proposals being taken forward imply a growing need for shared oversight, leadership and decision making, yet without there being an agreed organizational framework to support that.
33. The approach has been to grow into new practices and structures organically, without everything being defined in advance. There is however the potential, already experienced, for apparently simple initiatives to become mired in the exponential complexity arising from needing to synchronise the complex bureaucracy of three quite different institutions. There are also important questions about representation and trust. To give a rough indication of the differences in scale between the three partners, there are around 180 Anglican ministers, 40 Methodist ministers and 7 United Reformed Church ministers in Cumbria. Earlier expectations of equal representation from each denomination on all bodies have gradually yielded to focus on who has the relevant gifting for the task in hand. Committed, long-term partnership in mission needs structures to support it – but what kind? And are such structures in some way expressions of the (united) church, or are they

simply organizational arrangements made by and for the (separate) churches? These issues are explored further in the next chapter.

34. Second, the project of an ecumenical county in Cumbria involves ministers from different churches working together in mission, and ultimately congregations from one church being prepared to accept ministry for the sake of mission from those ordained to serve in a different church. How far is that possible when it remains the case that the Church of England in particular places very significant restrictions on what those ordained in other churches – in particular non-episcopal churches like the United Reformed Church – can do in its parishes?
35. Moreover, it is increasingly the case across the historic churches that publicly recognized ministry is sustained by those who are not ordained to a ministry of word and sacraments, especially in rural areas such as Cumbria. Yet the ecologies that have grown up here look in some ways more divergent than the patterns of ordained ministry at local level. How will future mission communities hold together PCCs and Elders' Meetings, churchwardens and Circuit Stewards, Methodist deacons and United Reformed Church Elders? The questions raised here are taken up in chapter 4.
36. Third, there are residual fears about take-over and absorption of the weaker by the stronger, and the flattening of distinctive positions on theology and ministry. Will moves towards unity ultimately come only at the price of a corrosive loss of identity? Identity in this context is certainly in part about denominations and their particular cultures and traditions. It is also however about the texture of local communities, anchored in particular places, with their familiar buildings, long-cherished objects and oral histories passed down through the generations. Might this all get swept away in the wake of investment in alternative, missional and ecumenical structures superimposed on previous patterns of church life?
37. There is also something at stake here about identity and autonomy. The reality of the churches in the countryside is that cooperation between congregations of one sort or another can often be presented as simply essential for survival, whether that is with other congregations in adjacent areas belonging to the same denomination or reaches out to those closer at hand from other denominations. In urban areas where those pressures are not being felt in the same kind of way, and Victorian patterns of a single church building with at least one paid and full-time minister look sustainable, does the Cumbria experiment have anything to offer, or is the identity of churches ultimately best expressed in a kind of practical self-sufficiency? We come back to these challenges in the last main chapter, chapter 5.

Bible focus: 1 Corinthians 12.12–25

- What might Paul's message to all the Christians in Corinth about how they see themselves in relation to one another have to say to us today about relationships between different churches in the same place?

Questions for discussion

- What is the history from living memory of relating to Christians of different traditions in your context? Does it constitute a good foundation for deepening relationships? Is there anything from the past that may create resistance to growing in unity in the present?
- Write down a list of the top three challenges facing your church at the moment. Would any of them be likely to be on a list drawn up by other churches in your context? Why might other churches also be interested in or concerned about the things you have listed? What might they have to offer to your church?
- What might each of the churches in your context need to receive or to give up for the sake of mission to the whole community by the whole church?

3. MAKING DECISIONS TOGETHER

38. The central question for this chapter is: how can our churches make decision and take action together? In order to answer it, we begin by making some brief comments about the processes of discernment, deliberation and decision-making that accompany action in each of our churches, and which reflect in turn something of their distinct 'ecclesiology', their theological understanding of the church. Consideration of those processes also indicates that both churches face some common challenges here. We then come back to the question of what it means to take action together and some of the issues this raises at different levels of church life, taking our point of departure from those identified in the previous chapter as arising from reflection on how the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church are seeking to make Cumbria an 'Ecumenical County'.

Structures and processes

39. Both the Church of England and the United Reformed Church have what we might call connected levels of church life: local, regional and national (noting at the outset that for the Church of England, 'national' means England, whereas for the United Reformed Church it means England, Wales and Scotland). They also relate to international church bodies in the Anglican Communion and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, though consciousness of belonging to a world communion and of the challenges this brings is likely to be stronger for Anglicans in many cases.

40. Some Anglicans would want to make a theological case for speaking of the diocese as the 'local' church, in line with Roman Catholic usage; the term is being used here in a more colloquial sense to speak of the church in a particular village, town or city, without any intention of judging the ecclesiological issues. Although in both cases the situation is not uniform (and indeed becoming less so), the Church of England's ministry is organized primarily through parishes, and that of the United Reformed Church through pastorates. Processes of discernment, deliberation and decision-making will characteristically involve clergy, appointed councils (of ordained and lay) and gatherings of the church community. For the Church of England, this pivots on the Parochial Church Council and on the Annual Parochial Church Meeting. For the United Reformed Church, the key elements are the Elders' Meeting and the Church Meeting.

41. At the regional level, the United Reformed Church has Synods overseeing substantial numbers of Pastorates, while the Church of England has Dioceses – which also have (diocesan) synods. The overlap on terminology says something about common traditions of governance and self-understanding. At each level, individual clergy have significant roles (as Moderators and Bishops do at this regional level), yet they exercise those roles in the context of church 'councils' in which a number of people are involved, and indeed critical decisions (not least those with budgetary implications) need the support of the relevant council. This means that the process of discernment, deliberation and decision-making is shared, focused on gatherings of people appointed together for this task, while particular individuals have responsibilities for presiding over these gatherings and for ensuring they are

presented with clear accounts of the challenges, creative thinking and relevant information they need to do their work. Both our churches can affirm that ‘Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the whole Church is synodal / conciliar, at every level of ecclesial life: local, regional and universal.’¹²

42. At national level, the central decision-making body for the Church of England is the General Synod, and for the United Reformed Church the General Assembly. Members are chosen in a number of ways in each case, including for the Church of England elections to the Houses of Clergy and Laity, and for the United Reformed Church election of representatives of the regional Synods to the General Assembly. In each case, this large, main central body is also complemented by a smaller body that carries significant responsibilities for coordinating the work of the church: the Archbishops’ Council (Church of England) and the Mission Council (United Reformed Church). In the case of matters to do with doctrine, worship or ministry for the Church of England, the House of Bishops seeks to come to a mind and then bring proposals to Synod, while for the United Reformed Church this scrutiny would be done through key national committees e.g. for Ministry and for Faith and Order.
43. The role of councils and synods in the life of the church goes back many centuries and has deep roots in our common history prior to the upheavals of the sixteenth century.¹³ They remain an integral part of the life of the Church of England, as in the United Reformed Church, though they are not straightforwardly identical for both churches in understanding or function. Given lingering perceptions within the United Reformed Church of the unhealthy authority accorded to bishops (as noted in the Introduction at paragraph 4), it is important to underline the extent of commonality here, without exaggerating it either. While the introduction of ‘synods’ as such in the Church of England is a relatively recent phenomenon, predecessor bodies have been in existence since the nineteenth century, and from the time of the Reformation Parliament has exercised a crucial role in its governance.
44. The idea that bishops have unfettered power to impose their will on others will seem strange to most of those who have inside experience of the Church of England as an institution – which is certainly not to say they have no influence at all. At the same time, it is undoubtedly the case that bishops make a significant difference to church polity, not least in that for the Church of England their authority does not derive from synods, even if it is to a considerable extent exercised in and with synods. For Anglicans, ‘Apostolic succession in the episcopal office is a visible and personal way of focusing the apostolicity of the whole Church.’¹⁴ In the United Reformed Church the national gathering is called the General Assembly and is presided over by two co-moderators, each elected for a two year term. In the regions, the United Reformed Church is gathered in Synods, which are

¹² World Council of Churches Commission for Faith and Order, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, 2013), §53.

¹³ Paul Avis, *Beyond the Reformation? Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition* (London: T & T Clark, 2006).

¹⁴ ‘The Porvoo Common Statement’ §46, available at http://www.porvoocommunion.org/porvoo_communion/statement/the-statement-in-english/, accessed 1 February 2016.

representative of all the churches in the region and are presided over by Synod Moderators, who serve full-time for a maximum of twelve years.

Areas of significant difference

45. The correspondences between our two churches in terms of practical organization and the theological emphases they convey are substantial, then, and provide helpful foundations for taking action together. Nonetheless, they are only partial. To begin with, we might come back to the point raised in the previous chapter about the general lack of overlap between boundaries. The match between the Area of Cumbria within the Northwest Synod and the Diocese of Carlisle was noted as being highly significant for the viability of the ecumenical work being undertaken there. Even so, however, the Synod as a whole covers a substantially larger area than the Anglican Diocese, and this would be true throughout the country, in part reflecting the smaller size of the United Reformed Church in terms of members, clergy and budget. Similarly, pastorates would normally cover a wider area than parishes, nor can there be any expectation that the boundaries would neatly line up so that, for instance, the area of a pastorate corresponded to a precise number of parishes. While we have spoken of the church at national level, the 'nation' involved is not in fact the same either, as already noted above: England for the Church of England, and Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) for the United Reformed Church.
46. As well as this lack of 'fit' between boundaries at the three levels of local, regional and national, the relationships between them also differ in significant ways. Dioceses, for instance, have a stronger role than Synods in the United Reformed Church, while more decisions are taken at local level in the United Reformed Church than by individual parishes in the Church of England. We might compare this to the principle of subsidiarity in politics. So on questions around Same Sex Marriage, for instance, a national church response that leaves the matter with local churches to come to a decision as to congruence with Christian doctrine could be said to fit with the United Reformed Church's understanding and practice of authority in the church rather more easily than it does that of the Church of England.
47. Structures of governance, and therefore contexts and culture for making decisions, are not the same either. To start with the most basic observation, on one side we have Priest in Charge, churchwardens, Parochial Church Council and Annual Parish Council Meeting, and on the other Minister, Elders and Church Meeting. What we find in the case of the United Reformed Church directly reflects the distinctive traditions of its two predecessor denominations: the role of ordained Elders working with the minister to 'exercise oversight of the spiritual life of the local church' is a particular feature of Reformed ecclesiology,¹⁵ while the involvement of all church members in discernment and decision making via regular church meetings is a particular feature of Congregationalist church life. Neither has an

¹⁵ The quoted phrase is taken from the United Reformed Church's *Basis of Union* 2.(2), available at http://www.urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/B-Structure-January-2015.pdf.

obvious parallel in Anglicanism.¹⁶ Although one might note the existence of the Annual Parochial Church Meeting within the Church of England, there is no real comparison for the United Reformed Church emphasis on key decisions being taken wherever possible at local church level by all members meeting together for prayerful counsel and seeking to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is an area where the Church of England might be able to learn from greater engagement with the United Reformed Church.

48. The twin concerns in the United Reformed Church for upholding the role of councils and for an ecclesial version of subsidiarity also have a bearing on the differences between Bishops and Moderators at the regional level. Formally speaking, the role of the Moderator outside the meetings of the Synod itself is primarily pastoral and encouraging, rather than being an executive responsibility with decision-making powers. For the Church of England, on the other hand, the diocesan bishop is the chief pastor and chief minister of word and sacrament within the diocese and the focus for unity, as well as having extensive formal responsibilities. In practice, however, the contrast between the kind of work Bishops and Moderators undertake day by day may be less stark than this suggests. Nonetheless, the differences are real and are also reflected to some extent in the public profiles of the two figures, inside and outside the church. The kind of authority attributed to Bishops – by church law and theological understanding as expressed in the rites of ordination, as well as popular perception – gives them a particular kind of access and influence. Of course, they can choose to use that to bring a broader range of voices from regional Christian leaders to public prominence, including Moderators in the case of the United Reformed Church.
49. The importance of the Church Meeting for the United Reformed Church raises another point where there is a difference of emphasis from the Church of England. The processes of discernment, deliberation and decision-making in the United Reformed Church characteristically proceed through seeking consensus, rather than being resolved simply on the basis of a numerical majority. There is no real parallel to this in the formal organization of the Church of England, although at regional and national level in particular within the United Reformed Church there are mechanisms for navigating a way between both approaches on contentious issues where an outcome is nonetheless needed. Seeking consensus has the strongest foundations where it is anchored in the regular practices of Christian community, including sharing in worship and prayer and in word and sacrament, as ideally it should be in the context of the Church Meeting at the local level.

Conciliarity and Discernment

50. This commitment to finding consensus may be helpful in reminding those involved in making decisions in the life of the church that they are not simply in the business of getting items through and winning key votes, but of spiritual discernment: listening for the leading of the Holy Spirit, who cannot be controlled or fathomed by human beings. The Church lives in the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ,

¹⁶ For an attempt to identify an underlying congruence in 'patterns of ministry' between Anglican and Reformed churches, see *God's Reign and our Unity* §§91–96, pp. 58–62.

and church councils and synods are part of this life, not just means of administering it. For both churches, therefore, there is a real challenge in ensuring that in the midst of business, whether drily formal or passionately divisive, those shaping action are attending prayerfully and consistently to God the Holy Spirit, as they place the whole life of the church under the care and the sovereignty of Christ. Concerns have been voiced within the Church of England, for instance, that the Synodical process has become more parliamentary and less consciously focused on seeking the mind of Christ, with a number of steps being taken to try to address this. More time is now given in Synod to bible study and prayer, and a tradition has been established of silent prayer ahead of contentious votes.

51. How to foster the kind of deep theological literacy needed to underpin conciliar practice in the life of the church is a challenge for all. Those with length of experience in church life or knowledge of church history are likely to be well aware that tensions and conflicts are bound to arise from time to time between the various elements within the governance of the churches at each of the three levels of local, regional and national, and indeed between those levels themselves. Remaining attentive to discerning the movement of the Spirit in the midst of struggles that weave together deep convictions about theological truth with battles for recognition and power is not easy, in any age of the church.
52. There is also perhaps a particular challenge for our own age in the preconceptions about leadership, authority and governance that people bring with them from the wider culture. Many will be familiar with the model of the CEO accountable to the board for performance, for instance, in the charitable and statutory as well as commercial sectors. This may easily override the idea of all members coming together under the presidency of their liturgical president to be responsible together for discerning the voice of the Spirit and agreeing on the action called for in response to it.
53. At the same time, the fundamentally ecclesial character of conciliar meetings, including those dealing with very practical and mundane matters, should not be misused either to stifle disagreement or the asking of critical questions. An emphasis on spiritual discernment should not be thought of as a short cut to consensus, not least because theological differences of emphasis within church communities can have an effect on expectations here. How far, for instance, might the church expect to find the Spirit's leading in voices and developments from outside the church itself? Could the Spirit's message be found most readily in following particular moral imperatives, or on the other hand through attentive, prayerful exegesis of Scripture, as the teaching of Calvin and other historic exponents of the Reformed tradition would emphasize? What might be the role here of attentive listening to the common tradition we share from the first millennium of the church's history? Such questions demonstrate the need for careful reflection on pneumatology – the church's doctrine of the Holy Spirit – to inform the way that the church practises discernment as part of deliberation. They also demonstrate the need for a certain maturity and willingness to grow in faith on the part of those who share in the church's councils.
54. Finally, while as observed above tensions between the three levels are nothing new in the churches, in a culture that prizes autonomy there is a tendency to emphasize the relative independence of the local church. This can become problematic when it

is invoked to justify the refusal of local ministers and congregations to work with others and participate in wider structures of accountability and indeed conciliarity. For both churches, the relationship between local, regional and national is constitutive of who we are as the church, such that each level needs and is enriched by the others, rather than the local being the 'real' church that can jettison the rest as mere administrative arrangements when they no longer appear very useful or seem to pull in a different direction.

Steps towards shared action and decision making

55. What might it mean, then, for our churches to take action and make decisions together? We suggest four steps here. The first step involves simple communication: letting others know what we are doing in a particular area and asking what they may be doing in relation to it, whether at local, regional or national area. How intentional are we about such communication? How wide is the network of people involved in it – at regional and national level, is it in effect delegated to 'specialist' ecumenists, or is it an integral part of how different teams go about their work?
56. The second step might be around understanding and learning from one another as we face common challenges. We have tried to identify some of these in the chapter so far, but those reading the report will want to do that for their own context. Some parameters here are likely to be universal. All Christians in this country have to grapple with what are at root philosophical issues around leading a life of faith in a predominantly secular culture. All churches have to think about how to set financial priorities for what they will support in response to the huge range of social pressures and issues that surround us. Churches have so much to gain from sharing perceptions, insights and responses to common challenges, including those specific to their particular context, with other churches committed to sharing the same gospel with the same communities. Indeed, they have so much to lose from not bothering to do that.
57. The third step would be to talk to one another about the decisions that each church is contemplating. What are some of the critical decisions you think you need to take, and to what extent might they be mirrored in the relevant part of the other denomination – parish / pastorate, diocese / synod, General Synod / General Assembly? What might you learn not only from the content of the other church's emerging response, but from its way of responding and the attempt to express the character and reality of the church through that?
58. The fourth step is the one that we saw the churches in Cumbria committing themselves to taking: making joint decisions, on the basis of shared discernment and deliberation, with binding implications for the allocation of resources, for the sake of common action in mission. Broadly speaking, this can happen either through a 'mirroring' process, where the normal decision making processes on each side are worked through, careful efforts being made to keep them in tandem, or through setting up new bodies and structures to operate within a broader mandate that has been agreed by the relevant authorities in the two churches.

59. As became clear in hearing about developments in Cumbria, both approaches to joint decision making have their pitfalls. The first can be extremely labour intensive for church leaders and their staff, with the amount of detailed work and careful attention entailed by it creating serious disincentives for future cooperation. On the other hand, the second makes heavy demands on trust and also runs the risk of overlaying existing organizational patterns, thereby also adding to the administrative burdens that frustrate so many clergy and lay people in our churches, unless there is some mechanism for suspending standard denominational practices.

60. These issues involve detailed consideration in each place, but we believe they are actually crucial if working together and taking decisions together is to become a normal part of church life, as it needs to be for the sake of effective witness and mission. The failure of ecumenism in this country to find ways for churches with relatively complex bureaucratic structures – such as the Church of England and the United Reformed Church – to become committed to taking decisions together without compounding bureaucratic processes and becoming mired in bureaucratic problems may be the single most significant factor in the profound disaffection with the ecumenical movement evident among many in positions of senior church leadership today. Some progress down this path is required if initiatives such as the one in Cumbria are going to be sustained in the long term and provide an attractive model for others. We hope that the exercise currently being undertaken by Churches Together in England on reviewing the current framework for Local Ecumenical Partnerships may help to generate some creative thinking to help churches here, but more work will certainly be needed besides this.

61. Our first recommendation, therefore, is:

urgent attention should be given by our churches in consultation with Churches Together in England to the question of identifying and enabling structures that can sustain shared commitment to mission, including sharing of physical resources, ministry resources, financial resources and strategic planning, at local, regional and national levels.

Bible focus: Acts 15

- What might we learn from Luke's account here about how Christians from different contexts and cultures can come together and reach common decisions?

Questions for discussion

- Think of an example of a case where you have struggled with the question of what you should do as a disciple of Jesus Christ – not a question about right or wrong but where there have been two or more things that are all potentially good choices, and you have to choose just one. Where should we look for help and guidance in such cases? And to what extent should the answer be different when we are thinking about churches rather than individuals?
- How would you describe your church's strengths and weaknesses when it comes to making decisions? Start with your local church, but you may want to think also about regional and national levels if you have any experience or knowledge about that. How might it learn from other churches in such a way as to help address its weaknesses?
- To what extent are the four steps listed above (paragraphs 55–58) part of the way your church does things? What makes them difficult, and is there anything you can do about that?

4. SHARING MINISTRIES AND SHARING MINISTERS

Defining ministries

62. Who is a minister? One of the most important movements in the churches over the past fifty years has been a renewed emphasis on the responsibility of all Christians for the life of the church and its witness in the world, and the need for a suitably varied set of formal and informal roles and associated expectations to express that. Both of our churches have been profoundly influenced by these developments.¹⁷ 'All ministries are used by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Church to be this reconciling community for the glory of God and the salvation of humanity (Eph 4:11–13).'¹⁸ The consensus in ecumenical theology in this area would also include an emphasis on all Christian ministry as participation in the ministry of Christ. 'The primary ministry is that of the risen Christ himself, and we are enabled to participate in it by the power of the Spirit.'¹⁹
63. One of the questions that has been raised by this ecumenical convergence, however, concerns the meaning and scope of the term 'minister'. Are all Christians ministers, sharing in various ways in the one ministry of the whole body of Christ? Or does 'minister' in this context designate someone who is given specific responsibilities within the life of the church, perhaps expressed in terms of word and sacraments, or in terms of leadership and authority? Might we think of all Christians as called to discipleship, and some to specific ministries as one dimension of their response to that?
64. Whatever we make of these questions, it remains the case that both our churches entrust particular individuals with roles of significant responsibility, in some cases for life. The Church of England ordains men and women to be bishops, priests and deacons and believes this threefold order of ministry to be an expression of apostolic tradition. It also licenses 'lay' people (not a way of speaking that would be familiar in the United Reformed Church) to various offices, most commonly as Readers. The United Reformed Church ordains some men and women to be Ministers of Word and Sacraments, while also ordaining others to be Elders. In both churches, there is a much wider list of offices and roles that could be made, but the ministry of the ordained will be the main focus in what follows, with some specific comments about Elders.
65. That focus is not intended to undermine the value of the work of the whole people of God. Rather, the particular responsibilities given to clergy in both churches and to

¹⁷ General Synod Board of Education, *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985); Faith and Order Advisory Group, *Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007; United Reformed Church, *Basis of Union* §§19–25, available at http://www.urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/A-Basis-of-Union-January-2015.pdf.

¹⁸ Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission, 'A Statement on the Doctrine of Ministry', 1973, §5; available at http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arcic_ministry.html, accessed 1 February 2016.

¹⁹ *God's Reign and our Unity* §74, p. 47.

Elders in the United Reformed Church mean that they are in a critical place both to enable and to block growth in relations. Of course, that is partly about the attitudes and aptitudes of individuals. It is also, however, about the constraints of church polities. So, for instance, there are specific limits relating to Canon Law on how far a United Reformed Church minister could assist in a local Anglican parish that was experiencing a vacancy between incumbents. There is also an economic dimension here. Much if not most of the money raised by a pastorate or parish is likely to be allocated to supporting the costs of its paid ministry. Congregations may feel that what they pay for should be for their benefit, rather than helping another church: why should we share what is 'ours'? On the other hand, they may also be reluctant to support the costs of paid ministry when the person receiving the income will not be one of 'ours', but clearly identifiable as having a primary allegiance to a different church. Finding positive ways forward on sharing ministries and ministers is therefore likely to be critical to committed, missional ecumenism, as the experience of Cumbria indicates.

Interchangeability of Ministries?

66. Ecumenists sometimes speak of 'interchangeability of ministries' to mean a situation where ordained ministers from one church would be able to take up a post in another church, without being ordained again and while remaining recognized as an ordained minister by their original church. The Church of England has direct experience of this through the Porvoo Communion of Churches within Europe and is currently exploring whether this could become part of the future development of its Covenant relationship with the Methodist Church of Great Britain. The United Reformed Church is a member of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, which also aims to enable such interchangeability of ministries. Anglican ecumenists have in the past tended to want to preserve a distinction between the practice of interchangeability and full communion between churches; Reformed and other Protestant ecumenists have been more likely to see it together with 'table and pulpit fellowship' as actually defining communion between churches.

67. Could the Church of England and the United Reformed Church seek to move towards interchangeability of ministries? There are clearly major challenges here, taking us back to the historically divisive issues referred to in the Introduction (paragraphs 4–6 above).²⁰ For the Church of England, and the Anglican Communion to which it belongs, ordained ministers normally need to be episcopally ordained by a bishop within a church recognized as maintaining the apostolic succession of church and ministry. This means that one condition for interchangeability of ministries with the Church of England is some form of what the Lambeth Quadrilateral, a key document for Anglicans, calls 'the historic episcopate'. On the other hand, all three strands on

²⁰ Issues around episcopacy have been a repeated theme in ecumenical dialogue between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church and its predecessor bodies over the past hundred years; for some of the background here, see Section 1 of *Healing the past – Building the future: The report of the Church of England-United Reformed Church joint study group on God's Reign and Our Unity* (2011), available at

http://www.urc.org.uk/what_we_do/ecumenical/docs/healing_the_past_building_the_future.pdf.

which the United Reformed Church draws – Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Churches of Christ – would strongly resist any implication that the ministry of bishops is necessary for the well-being of the church, while episcopacy has no place within their historic polities. Moreover, the interweaving of memories of mistreatment by the Anglican hierarchy with continuing concerns about the negative effect of bishops on the freedom of the church and the equality of all believers would make many in the United Reformed Church wary of any discussion on this topic. Although the service of Healing of Memories and Mutual Commitment between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church that took place at Westminster Abbey on 7 February 2012 was a very significant event, there is a continuing need for attention to such healing.

68. All that said, it does however need to be noted that the Church of England is currently exploring the development of proposals for reconciliation of ministries with the Methodist Church such as to enable interchangeability of ministries. While the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church are quite different from one another in many ways, there are some parallel issues in moving towards interchangeability of ministries with the Church of England: for the non-episcopal church, how personal episcopacy might be expressed where historic polity has no obvious scope for this; for the episcopal church, how provision might be made for those ordained non-episcopally prior to the reconciliation of ministries and arrangements following from them; and for both churches, whether they can find a sufficiently common understanding of the relationship between apostolicity, the succession of churches and the succession of ordinations.²¹

69. The second recommendation of this report is therefore:

in the light of what occurs between the Church of England and the Methodist Church with regard to interchangeability of ordained ministries within the Covenant relationship, a review should be undertaken regarding understanding of the nature of ordained ministry and potential for progress towards reconciliation and interchangeability of ministries between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church, if appropriate involving other churches also.

Sharing of Ministries

70. In the meantime, even without full interchangeability, a considerable degree of sharing in ministries nonetheless remains possible for our two churches. From the Church of England side, for instance, so long as the permissions set out in Canon B43 are obtained, a minister from the United Reformed Church could contribute to public worship in a Church of England parish by preaching, leading Services of the Word, sharing in presiding at joint services (including joint eucharistic services), taking funerals (with the family's permission), and assisting with baptisms and weddings (though not officiating), either occasionally or on a regular basis. We would want to encourage clergy from both churches to consider carefully how invitations and regular exchanges in these areas could help to build relationships between their

²¹ Cf. 'Ministry' in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* §§34–38; *God's Reign and our Unity* §§88–89, pp. 56–57.

congregations, enriching the lives of both and also building the kind of mutual trust and respect needed to engage in shared initiatives for mission. Here the constraints are very much around culture, habit and attitude rather than rules and regulations. Initiatives supported by Christians from different churches, from food banks and Street Pastors to Alpha Courses and evangelistic events, need to be preached about, prayed for and reflected on as expressions of Christian unity in the public life of the churches, including their liturgy and their teaching ministry.

71. Such interchange and collaboration may bring parishes and pastorates, potentially with other churches as well, to the point of wanting to enter a relationship of more formal commitment that will in turn enable a closer and more integrated kind of sharing in ministry and mission. Here it is worth considering the possibility of entering into some kind of Local Ecumenical Partnership, which then means that in Church of England terms the provisions of Canon B44 apply. Already these can take a variety of forms, although many think only of the 'single congregation' model, and we may hope that the variety and flexibility will further increase after the current review being conducted by Churches Together in England. For an overview of current joint participation by Church of England and United Reformed Church congregations in LEPs, see paragraphs 21–24 above.
72. LEPs are particularly relevant for sharing ministries because they make it possible for an ordained minister from one denomination to serve a congregation from another denomination to a far greater extent than would otherwise be the case, including taking services of all kinds not reserved e.g. to a bishop in the Church of England, and holding pastoral responsibility. Although the differences between the sharing in ministries made possible within an LEP framework and the interchangeability of ministries spoken about earlier may be quite clear theologically and institutionally, in terms of the experience of congregations and communities it may not be so very great. LEPs also allow for various kind of structures for joint decision making about mission and ministry and (crucially) the resources allocated to them.
73. One recent development of LEPs has been the new category of 'Covenant Partnerships in Extended Areas' (CPEAs), which emerged from the work of the Methodist – Anglican Panel on Unity and Mission but has wider application. This creates the possibility of LEP arrangements pertaining across a geographical area where the relevant church bodies agree to that, rather than being worked out anew every time at the 'local' level (i.e. parish and pastorate in our case), with all the attendant bureaucracy. There has been careful consideration in Cumbria of whether the Diocese of Carlisle, the District of Cumbria and the Area of Cumbria could create such a Covenant Partnership across Cumbria as a whole, so that all parishes, pastorates and circuits who wanted to could make use of the opportunities for sharing in ministries that LEPs offer without needing to set up separate partnerships of their own. There has recently been agreement to go ahead with this proposal. It will be important to see how this idea fares, in terms of feasibility, take-up and impact on unity in mission, not least because progress with CPEAs in other parts of the country has not always been straightforward.

Sharing the Challenges of Ministry

74. Some readers may be wondering at this point whether the obstacles to sharing ministries between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church are really being taken seriously enough. After all, even to focus only on ordained ministry, is it not rather significant that Anglicans hold to the threefold order of bishops, presbyters / priests and deacons, which the Reformed and other Protestants have historically rejected? That is certainly an important question, although in practice both churches operate with broad distinctions between 'local' and 'trans-local' ministers that are not completely unrelated (so the comments in the previous chapter about Moderators and Bishops), while the understanding of the diaconate on the part of many Anglicans is thin at best. The United Reformed Church emphasises the priesthood of all believers, shared by the whole people of God, out of which some are called to be Ministers of Word and Sacraments. The Church of England by contrast uses the language of ministerial priesthood alongside an affirmation of the priestly ministry of the whole people of God, though it is not a language with which all in the Church of England necessarily feel comfortable and is in any case interpreted in quite different ways. There is a substantial body of ecumenical reflection on this whole subject, much of it pivoting on a seminal convergence document from the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.²² Perhaps the most important point for local churches however is the considerable overlap between the work and self-understanding of ministers of word and sacraments serving in pastorates in the United Reformed Church and of priests serving in parishes in the Church of England.
75. Cultural and practical differences between such ministries within the two churches are perhaps also becoming less significant. One of the United Reformed Church ministers who came to speak to us noted that for many if not most of the people among whom she ministered, her denominational affinity was of no interest and they were as likely to refer to her as the 'vicar' as the 'minister'. A secularising culture is sweeping away many of the historic landmarks of denominational identity, and trying to hold onto them hardly looks like a priority for churches seeking to witness to Christ within it. In the 19th century and for much of the earlier part of the 20th, the self-understanding of the predecessor bodies of the United Reformed Church had been defined in terms of as non-conformity and the refusal of establishment. More recently, however, its churches have tended to become more focused on involvement in the local community, in some cases embracing a civic role as part of that.
76. Patterns of ministry in both churches have also been seriously affected by decline in the number of regular worshippers, and by the fact that this has not been matched by a corresponding level of decline in the number of church buildings and centres for worship. It is now normal in both churches for paid clergy to have responsibility for more than one local church. Along with that development has gone the critique of the idea of the ordained minister as the lone provider of ministry and the advocacy

²² World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982); text available at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>. See also *God's Reign and our Unity*, chapter IV, 'Ministry in the Church'.

of more collaborative approaches. The tightly woven matrix of face to face relationships that seemed to define the work of the pastor in previous generations and gave clergy a sense of worth in their own eyes and value in the sight of others looks very remote from the contemporary clerical world of websites, ministry teams, mission action plans and constant shuttling between geographical centres. Stipendiary clergy who thought they were ordained to be pastor teachers with a single local church find themselves expected by the wider church to be leaders in mission, entrepreneurs, collaborators and animators while in reality needing to spend more than half their time on administrative tasks – and the expectations of congregations may be divergent again. In the face of the huge challenges this brings for clergy from all churches, positive, supportive relationships between ministers seeking to serve the same local community, fostering partnership in prayer, discipleship and action, are surely a priority to be respected by all concerned.

Elders and Deacons

77. In the face of common challenges and parallel responses, one of the enduring differences in church life between our two churches remains the place of the ministry of Elders in the United Reformed Church, which, as we noted in the previous chapter, has no obvious parallel in the Church of England or indeed elsewhere outside the Reformed family of churches. Ordained by local ministers by the laying on of hands, Elders share with Ministers of Word and Sacraments in the pastoral care and spiritual leadership of the whole church. Their functions are not to be confused with the kind of duties that might in the Church of England be exercised by a churchwarden, such as care of the building, although recent charities legislation has meant that Elders in fact have taken on the role as trustees of the local building.
78. It should also be said, however, that Eldership is not a static institution within the United Reformed Church. Recent calls to explore forms of local leadership and even local ordained ministry of word and sacraments in the United Reformed Church have led to moves to renew the ministry of Eldership, including discussion of the procedures used for authorising lay presidency at services of Holy Communion in cases of pastoral necessity. To come back to a point made earlier, with the breadth of ministries potentially accommodated by the term 'diaconate' increasingly seen as a positive feature of it,²³ might it be possible for the Reformed tradition to see its practice of Eldership as belonging within this varied, open-ended family, and therefore even to share training and development with those called deacons in other churches, such as the Church of England and the Methodist Church? At the same time, there is also a well-established ministry within the United Reformed Church of Church Related Community Workers, and there has been some discussion of how this too might relate to diaconal ministry. There is certainly scope, therefore, for further discussion between the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church about diaconal ministry and the diaconate. The fact that the ministry of Eldership is emphasized corporately rather than individually at the

²³ Contrast, perhaps, the comment on §31 of 'Ministry' in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*: 'In many churches there is today considerable uncertainty about the need, the rationale, the status and the function of deacons.'

local level in the Reformed tradition might be seen as a difference to be offered positively to others rather than a barrier of separation.

79. In the light of these comments, our third recommendation is:

a process should be set up for exploration of the relationship between Elders and Church Related Community Workers in the United Reformed Church on the one hand, and deacons in the Church of England and elsewhere on the other.

80. 'Recognition of ministries' tends to serve as a technical term in formal ecumenical relations, as an act that somehow formalises one church's validation of the ministries offered by another. Perhaps however the focus needs to shift towards the primary task of recognising the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the churches, both within and beyond our characteristic structures. Ephesians 4.11–12 suggests that those who exercise the particular ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor / shepherd and teacher are gifts of God to the church. That means they are not simply jobs that need to be done and may be configured and reconfigured however we see fit. Christ calls, sends and equips with the charisms that are needed, through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Sharing of ministries between churches depends for its fruitfulness on a recognition of ministries that involves seeing them as gifts of God to the whole church of Christ and therefore to each particular church, gifts whose efficacy flows from the activity of the Spirit. Here again, it is spiritual discernment, discernment in and of the Spirit of God, that needs to accompany growth in our relationships and in our common action for mission.

Bible focus: Ephesians 4.1-16

- What might we learn from this passage about the relationship between unity on the one hand and particular forms of ministry and service on the other?

Questions for discussion

- How would you summarise what it is that is distinctive about ordained ministers – what (if anything) makes them different? Do you think the answer would be the same in other denominations?
- This section has commented on some of the shared ‘challenges’ for ministry, but what might be some of the shared ‘possibilities’ for ministry in your church context? How might they be developed, and what can be done well together with other churches?
- Is it possible to imagine the United Reformed Church finding a way to receive the ministry of bishops within its distinctive pattern of life? What would have to change to make that possible? Is it possible to imagine the Church of England finding a way to receive the office of Elders within its distinctive pattern of life, and what would have to change to make that possible?

5. UNITY, MEMORY AND IDENTITY

The Future of Denominations

81. The ecumenical movement has made tremendous progress over the past hundred years. Christians cross denominational boundaries today at every level of the church with a freedom that would have been hard to imagine for many of our predecessors. Nonetheless, churches remain separated from one another and we do not see the oneness of believers for which Christ prayed expressed in a way that gives compelling witness to the gospel. The legacy of mistrust from the past plays its part, along with fears about the future that can turn institutions inward and leave them feeling that time spent in building relations that do not immediately benefit 'us' is precious time wasted.
82. The changing face of contemporary society places other strains on the commitment to ecumenism besides the effects of anxiety about survival. At local level at least, denominational markers seem to be becoming less and less significant, particularly for many among the under 30s, perhaps reflecting a longer-term shift that can be traced back to the post-war period. People join a local church for all kinds of reasons, with denominational affiliation perhaps a long way down the list if consciously present at all. Christians may expect to belong to churches from a number of different denominations through a lifetime of discipleship, without anyone thinking this is somehow odd or disloyal. Moreover, urban Christianity in particular is increasingly dominated by churches that eschew any kind of allegiance to the confessional families of pre-twentieth century Christianity. Some may belong to Pentecostal associations with a more recognizably denominational character; some may have their roots in the restorationist movements of the 1970s and 80s which explicitly rejected existing models of church; some may be local groupings, loose national networks or large, independent churches exercising a great variety of ministries without apparent external support or association.
83. Clear evidence and analysis is not easy to establish here, though there is plenty of anecdote. If there is any truth in the picture of an emerging post-denominational church culture, however, we should not be surprised that old estrangements may become less and less potent, even if they have endured for centuries hitherto. Indeed, we are witnessing a flourishing of local ecumenism in many places as disciples of Jesus Christ come together from across many different churches to support common initiatives of witness, service and mission. The barriers of mutual suspicion and mistrust may never have been lower.
84. Yet in a context where there is no guarantee of an enduring niche for any national denomination in every community, there are also new dangers for ecumenical relations: competition between churches for profile and contacts; a corporate individualism in which each church focuses on building up its own resources; and a multiplicity that feels fragmented at best and contradictory at worst to the people with whom we are all trying to share the gospel. As ever, with these new dangers go new opportunities. When our denomination's church closes in a particular locality,

do we look to re-plant a new one, amalgamate the congregation with one of ours nearby, or ask about the opportunities for partnership with another denomination that already has a thriving presence in that place? In some ways we are actually returning to the origins of the modern ecumenical movement and the impetus it received from the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, when the presenting issues were about how churches could come together on the mission field overseas, and how far the legacy of denominational differences could be shed in sharing the gospel with those who had never heard it, and who should not on the face of it need to be inducted into the vicissitudes of church history in order to receive it. That field, however, is now very much on our door step.

Change, Identity and Conversion

85. What is happening in Cumbria is an encouraging reminder that there are great opportunities for the churches in the midst of the current situation. As was flagged up at the end of chapter 2, however, one of the critical issues in how churches respond to the very serious challenges here is their sense of identity. How far is this bound up with the ‘tribal markers’ of our denomination, and how far do they intersect in turn with the particularities of local history and tradition which are bound to be lost in the introduction of new, ‘ecumenical’ structures geared towards attracting those who have no knowledge of or interest in what has given our church its character, its identity, carefully built up and preserved over decades if not centuries?
86. Perhaps the most significant analysis of the question of identity in ecumenism occurs in a report originally published in French in 1990 by the Groupe des Dombes, a gathering of French-speaking Roman Catholic and (mostly Swiss) Reformed clergy and theologians that has been meeting since the middle of the last century. The report was called *For the Conversion of the Churches*,²⁴ and it makes three points that continue to merit reflection. First, it distinguishes between ‘Christian’ (in the sense of who we are in Christ), ‘ecclesial’ and ‘confessional’ identities.²⁵ These identities are inseparable from one another, in that we cannot be in Christ without being in the church and we cannot be in the church without, in the current context, aligning ourselves in relation to the dominant ‘confessions’ of global Christianity. Nonetheless, they are not the *same*, and identifying them completely with one another is mistaken and dangerous for the life of faith. Our identity in Christ is eternal and wholly good. Our identity in our confession – or denomination, to use the more familiar though not precisely equivalent term in the English context – is ultimately transient and compounded of elements that are positive, neutral and negative. We therefore need to be ready to do the continual work of discernment that is needed here, while also accepting that the idea of simply jettisoning any kind of confessional identity is ultimately an unhelpful illusion.
87. Second, identity for the Christian is inseparable from conversion, in the sense of turning ever more deeply and completely towards God and union with God in Christ.

²⁴ Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1993); original French text in Groupe des Dombes, *Communion et Conversion Des Églises: Édition Intégrale Des Documents Publiés de 1956 à 2005* (Montrouge Cedex: Bayard, 2014), pp. 233–338.

²⁵ Groupe des Dombes, *Conversion of the Churches*, pp. 19–25.

'Christian identity is conversion to God.'²⁶ It is, therefore, about change and transformation, not stasis and preservation, but equally it is not about just any kind of change or seeking change for its own sake. What makes us who we are is that we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another, even as we also recognize more acutely our sins and failures as persons, as the church and as confessions / denominations. If we try to hold onto something other than the journey of conversion in Christ as our identity, we will ultimately lose ourselves – Jesus told plenty of parables relevant to that. We also know, however, that life in the church and as members of particular confessions within the church is how we follow that journey. So we value the identities we find there, but as identities that lead us towards conversion, the way to life. The work of discernment, therefore, needs to focus around understanding what in the particular historical and cultural configuration of our confessional identity is congruent with this calling to conversion, what may be more or less neutral with regard to it and what may be pulling us in a different direction.²⁷ Here again, discernment needs to be spiritual in the theological sense of being determined by attention to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, in the person and the community.

88. Third, as our identity is found in conversion to Christ, so truly growing more deeply into that identity will inevitably bring us closer to others who are on the same journey and share the same identity. The idea, therefore, that our identity may be threatened by greater unity with other churches and other Christians is always fundamentally a mistake. That is not to say that schemes and plans to promote such unity do not also need to be evaluated for their congruence with the call to conversion, of persons, churches and confessions / denominations. Plans for relations between denominations belong to the same 'mixed' dimension as denominations themselves and therefore require the same work of spiritual discernment, as to what is congruent, what is neutral and what is distracting regarding our primary identity found in conversion to Christ. That is not the same though as saying that my identity is threatened by coming closer to others who share it. How could it? Conversion to Christ also means conversion to the neighbour, conversion to the brother and sister in the family of the church. If we find our concern for identity leading us to become more remote from one another, therefore, it would be a reasonably sure sign that we have located our identity somewhere else than in Christ, and we need to think again – that is, repent, be converted.
89. In a post-denominational culture, confessional identities may be becoming thinner, or perhaps more local and more transitory, but that does not make them any the less powerful. The challenge remains to value them without absolutizing and fixing them, by linking them to transformation. If that is right, then to the question, 'How can I be sure about the future of my denomination and what it will look like?' the only answer is: you cannot and you need not. Denominations matter as concrete church contexts within which we live the vocation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church to be converted wholly to Christ. The challenge is to follow that vocation faithfully and trust that wherever it leads will be the path of life, knowing that it will

²⁶ Groupe des Dombes, *Conversion of the Churches*, p. 2.

²⁷ Groupe des Dombes, *Conversion of the Churches*, pp. 25–29.

always lead us deeper into the unity for which Christ prayed and whose visibility is essential to our witness to him in the world.

90. That still leaves, in this case too, the task of spiritual discernment. While of course taking account of pressing resource questions and of opportunities for practical action, churches at every level evaluating opportunities for working together more closely need to be asking: how far is the resistance to this a resistance to deeper conversion, and how far is it a concern to protect the space for such conversion? How far is enthusiasm for it bound up with a desire for deeper conversion, and how far with the attraction of a project that could be distracting from the painful challenges of that? We might, of course, want to engage in such discernment together as the best way to answer those questions.

Worship, Identity and Unity

91. Worship celebrates, enacts and communicates profound theological convictions about who we are before God and who God is for us. Worship is at the heart of the life of the church, and therefore coming together in worship has unique power to express and renew the unity of the church and to kindle in us the prayer of Christ that all may be one. Worship shapes Christian identity, and patterns of worship have had a critical role in defining and maintaining the differences between Christian traditions.
92. It is also important to recognise some of the distinctive things we share in worship. For instance, worship in both the Church of England and the United Reformed Church is deeply shaped by the reading and preaching of the Scriptures. This shared Reformed inheritance has, if anything, been strengthened by the widespread adoption in Sunday worship in both churches of the Revised Common Lectionary from contemporary Roman Catholicism. At the same time, while across our churches the principal dimensions of regular public worship would be common, the way they are expressed and the relative emphasis given to them might vary from one context to another. One way to summarise those dimensions would be as praise, word, intercession and sacraments. Different practices around the eucharist in particular – frequency of celebration, the physical elements that are used and the ritual and symbolic actions – can be experienced as sharply distinguishing the worshipping life of different communities, even though the structure and texts of the liturgical rites may be substantially similar.
93. If the Cumbria project goes forward, increasing numbers of Christians from the Church of England and the United Reformed Church will be experiencing worship with one another, in one another's buildings and led by one another's ministers. Yet sharing in worship may also bring sharply into focus some of our differences, including those that cluster around more or less articulated identities, and provoke real anxieties about the perceived cost of growing in unity. Worship fulfils some of the anthropological functions of ritual, and the associated dynamics go very deep and are not necessarily easy for participants to articulate.

94. As this issue has emerged clearly through these Conversations without being part of the group's original remit, our fourth and final recommendation is:

attention should be given to studying the scope for receptive ecumenism between our two churches in the area of worship, looking both at theology and practice, and the opportunities and challenges of worshipping together.

Bible focus: Philippians 3.3–16

- What might Christians today 'boast' in today in terms of their religious traditions and inheritance? How do we know the difference between the kind of boasting Paul wants to discourage and the right way to value (take pride in?) the particular gifts of our own church, our own denomination?

Questions for discussion

- How would you explain why you belong to the particular church and denomination of which you are currently a member? To what extent was it a conscious choice? If you moved to a different place, would you definitely stick with the same denomination?
- What are the things that help to give your church community its particular identity (history, people, objects, values, building....)? How might they connect to our identity in Christ – who we are in him?
- What would you say is distinctive about the pattern of worship in your church community? How does it combine the different 'dimensions' of worship, e.g. praise, word (including preaching), intercession and sacraments (including the celebration of the eucharist), and what is their relative importance in the pattern as a whole?

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

95. Four main recommendations have emerged from the preceding chapters: one about structures for ecumenical partnership, two about ministry and oversight, and one about worship. From these, a fifth and final recommendation is made regarding how these might best be addressed.
96. With regard to structures for ecumenical partnership, we recommended that **(1) urgent attention should be given by our churches in consultation with Churches Together in England to the question of identifying and enabling structures that can sustain shared commitment to mission, including sharing of physical resources, ministry resources, financial resources and strategic planning, at local, regional and national levels.** There are significant opportunities here in the Simplification work stream of the Church of England's Programme for Reform and Renewal, as well as in the review being undertaken by Churches Together in England of Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs). While there is undoubtedly significant scope for development with LEPs, some form of LEP will not always be the right model for churches wanting to share together in common mission, so thinking also needs to extend beyond this.
97. Moreover, the Cumbria model described in chapter 2 shows how a real commitment to unity at regional level can release opportunities and energy for sharing in mission at local level. The conversation about local unity, therefore, has to attend to regional and national dimensions, particularly where the churches involved – like the Church of England and the United Reformed Church – also have regional and national structures. The right shared structures at regional and national levels should have the effect of lifting from local churches the burden of needing constantly to reinvent the ecumenical wheel. It may be that expertise in organizational development needs to be brought into fresh dialogue here with the accumulated experience of those deeply involved in ecumenism for many years.
98. With regard to ministry and oversight, we recommended, first, that **(2) in the light of what occurs between the Church of England and the Methodist Church with regard to interchangeability of ordained ministries within the Covenant relationship, a review should be undertaken regarding understanding of the nature of ordained ministry and potential for progress towards reconciliation and interchangeability of ministries between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church, if appropriate involving other churches also.** There is no naïve assumption here that proposals developed for the specific relationship between the Methodist Church and the Church of England can simply be adapted to include the United Reformed Church. The point is rather that such proposals are likely to hinge on (a) a 'reimagining' and 're-receiving' of the historic episcopate to fit the history and culture of a church shaped – in part – by the nonconformist traditions of English Christianity, and (b) a commitment by the Church of England to authorising licensed ministry – for a limited period of time – from those previously ordained outside the historic episcopate. Both of these would constitute very significant developments that could allow long-standing and divisive issues, associated with events in 1660–62 that scarred relationships profoundly, to be approached in fresh perspective.

99. The second recommendation around ministry and oversight was that **(3) a process should be set up for exploration of the relationship between Elders and Church Related Community workers in the United Reformed Church on the one hand, and deacons in the Church of England and elsewhere on the other.** Study of this relationship could have real benefits for both churches in clarifying their self-understanding and evaluating current developments in their own lives, as well as opening up new areas for receptive ecumenism. Eldership and the diaconate are both areas where the polities of the two churches appear to have no obvious 'match': could they have parallels that have not yet been explored, and, if so, might there provide a way for imagining how the office of Elder in the reformed tradition more generally might be received in LEPs and even, ultimately, in the context of a future relationship of visible unity in the Church of England?
100. In the final chapter, with regard to worship, we recommended that **(4) attention should be given to studying the scope for receptive ecumenism between our two churches in the area of worship, looking both at theology and practice, and the opportunities and challenges of worshipping together.** By 'worshipping together' we mean to include the experience of ministers from one church leading worship in the other, as well as joint congregations in the context of LEPs and churches who might share worship together from time to time. For any church, ways of worshipping are a crucial part of identity – Christian, ecclesial and denominational – so that growing in our ability to be one in worship is a critical dimension of growing in our ability to be one so that the world may believe. Worship of one God, in the name of one Lord, confessing one faith and one hope in the power of the one Spirit, is where the ecumenical journey begins and ends.
101. Finally, we believe that serious thought needs to be given to establishing a suitable body that can monitor the implementation of these recommendations, coordinate different initiatives and have responsibility for continuing to seek growth in relations between our two churches, identifying both challenges and opportunities. It would coordinate work done by others rather than aiming to fulfil major tasks by itself. It would not need to meet frequently or have a large membership, and would report to the appropriate church body, i.e. at the time of writing for the Church of England the Council for Christian Unity and for the United Reformed Church the Faith and Order Committee. We therefore recommend that **(5) a steering group be set up for Church of England – United Reformed Church Relations that can monitor the implementation of the report's first four recommendations, coordinate different areas of activity and promote further growth in unity in mission.**

APPENDIX 1: MATERIAL FROM THE REPORT FOR DISCUSSION IN LOCAL GROUPS

Chapter 1

Bible focus: John 17.20–24

- How might this passage, and its wider context in John's Gospel, help us to understand what is special about the 'oneness' of Jesus' followers?

Questions for discussion

- Where do you experience Christian unity most strongly? How might different Christians answer that question differently? How might we experience Christian unity more deeply?
- List all the churches with a commitment to sharing in Christ's mission in the communities your church serves. In what ways do you currently share with one another in that mission? Could you go further? How far do the people in those communities perceive all the churches as 'one'?

Chapter 2

Bible focus: 1 Corinthians 12.12–25

- What might Paul's message to all the Christians in Corinth about how they see themselves in relation to one another have to say to us today about relationships between different churches in the same place?

Questions for discussion

- What is the history from living memory of relating to Christians of different traditions in your context? Does it constitute a good foundation for deepening relationships? Is there anything from the past that may create resistance to growing in unity in the present?
- Write down a list of the top three challenges facing your church at the moment. Would any of them be likely to be on a list drawn up by other churches in your context? Why might other churches also be interested in or concerned about the things you have listed? What might they have to offer to your church?
- What might each of the churches in your context need to receive or to give up for the sake of mission to the whole community by the whole church?

Chapter 3

Bible focus: Acts 15

- What might we learn from Luke's account here about how Christians from different contexts and cultures can come together and reach common decisions?

Questions for discussion

- Think of an example of a case where you have struggled with the question of what you should do as a disciple of Jesus Christ – not a question about right or wrong but where there have been two or more things that are all potentially good choices, and you have to choose just one. Where should we look for help and guidance in such cases? And to what extent should the answer be different when we are thinking about churches rather than individuals?
- How would you describe your church's strengths and weaknesses when it comes to making decisions? Start with your local church, but you may want to think also about regional and national levels if you have any experience or knowledge about that. How might it learn from other churches in such a way as to help address its weaknesses?
- To what extent are the four steps listed above (paragraphs 55-58) part of the way your church does things? What makes them difficult, and is there anything you can do about that?

Chapter 4

Bible focus: Ephesians 4.1–16

- What might we learn from this passage about the relationship between unity on the one hand and particular forms of ministry and service on the other?

Questions for discussion

- How would you summarise what it is that is distinctive about ordained ministers – what (if anything) makes them different? Do you think the answer would be the same in other denominations?
- This section has commented on some of the shared 'challenges' for ministry, but what might be some of the shared 'possibilities' for ministry in your church context? How might they be developed, and what can be done well together with other churches?
- Is it possible to imagine the United Reformed Church finding a way to receive the ministry of bishops within its distinctive pattern of life? What would have to change to make that possible? Is it possible to imagine the Church of England finding a way to receive the office of Elders within its distinctive pattern of life, and what would have to change to make that possible?

Chapter 5

Bible focus: Philippians 3.3–16

- What might Christians today 'boast' in today in terms of their religious traditions and inheritance? How do we know the difference between the kind of boasting Paul wants to discourage and the right way to value (take pride in?) the particular gifts of our own church, our own denomination?

Questions for discussion

- How would you explain why you belong to the particular church and denomination of which you are currently a member? To what extent was it a conscious choice? If you moved to a different place, would you definitely stick with the same denomination?
- What are the things that help to give your church community its particular identity (history, people, objects, values, building....)? How might they connect to our identity in Christ – who we are in him?
- What would you say is distinctive about the pattern of worship in your church community? How does it combine the different 'dimensions' of worship, e.g. praise, word (including preaching), intercession and sacraments (including the celebration of the eucharist), and what is their relative importance in the pattern as a whole?

APPENDIX 2: ACCOUNT OF CURRENT CONVERSATIONS

In 2011, similar motions were passed by the General Assembly and the General Synod regarding relations between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church endorsing the recommendations that had been presented in *Healing the Past, Building the Future: Report of a Church of England – United Reformed Church Study Group*. They were summarised in paragraph 144 of the report as follows:

a. The joint Church of England-United Reformed Church Study Group on God's Reign and Our Unity therefore recommends to the Council for Christian Unity of the Church of England and the Mission Council of the United Reformed Church that the necessary steps should be taken by both churches in order to bring about a joint event in 2012, marking both the 350th anniversary of the Great Ejection of 1662 and the 40th anniversary of the inauguration of the United Reformed Church, which would involve a public declaration of their penitence for the divisions of the past, and their mutual recognition of each other in the present as churches belonging to the one Church of Jesus Christ

b It also recommends that, building on this service, further work should be undertaken on the range of topics for continuing study identified in 143 (d) above, namely, the reconciliation of memories, the structures of Church government, the forms of lay and ordained ministry, relations between Church and state, the relationship between Baptism and Church membership, the development of doctrine and practice in the Church and how this is related to the constancy and originality of God, the nature of discernment in our two churches and the exploration of the spiritualities of the Anglican and Reformed traditions.

The recommendation contained in section (a) was fulfilled through the service of Healing of Memories and Mutual Commitment between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church which took place at Westminster Abbey on 7 February 2012. The recommendations contained in section (b) have been fulfilled through the work of the Conversations group presenting the current report, which first met in 2013.

The members of the Conversations group have been:

Church of England

The Rt Revd James Newcome (Co-Chair)

Dr Martin Davie (Secretary; succeeded by the Revd Canon Dr Jeremy Worthen in 2014)

The Revd Dr James Hawkey

The Revd Canon Rebecca Swyer

United Reformed Church

The Revd Nicola Furley-Smith (Co-Chair)

The Revd Tim Meadows

The Revd Julian Templeton

The Revd Elizabeth Welch

Methodist Church

The Revd Dr Keith Davies.

The first two meetings held in 2013 set the agenda for the conversations and looked at the spiritualities of the Church of England and the United Reformed Church. Then followed a series of meetings following a more or less common format: two presentations by invited speakers on a common subject, one from the Church of England and the United Reformed Church, with plenty of time for reflection and discussion by the group. So the group had sessions on:

- 'How Discernment Takes Place' (the Revd Canon Dr Paul Avis & the Revd Professor Alan Sell)
- 'Structures of Church Government' (the Rt Revd Dr John Hind and Dr Augur Pearce)
- 'Forms of Lay and Ordained Ministry' (the Ven. Julian Hubbard and the Revd Ruth Whitehead)
- 'How Spirituality Shapes Polity' (the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Hill and the Revd Dr David Cornick).

The group has also been concerned to be attentive to wider developments in ecumenical relations and in the lives of the two churches. For instance, at a meeting in 2015 it compared the report on *The Future of the Church* that has been the focus for much discussion within the URC and the Programme of Reform and Renewal that is unfolding in the Church of England.

As the meetings progressed, the group agreed that it wanted its work to make a contribution to partnership in the gospel at local level between our two churches, through identifying and addressing some of the issues that may make it difficult to move forward. It wanted to hold together 'faith and order' on the one hand with 'local ecumenism' on the other and enable the questions arising from each to speak to the other. There emerged a strong desire to pursue a form of practical theology in conversations and in the report, as critical for overcoming an unhelpful separation here.

At a residential meeting at the Kairos Centre in South West London, which was a particularly rich experience in terms of sharing together in worship, prayer and hospitality as well as theological conversation, the decision was taken to focus on Bishop James' experience in Cumbria. There was much to encourage those working for unity in the Cumbria story, while it also helped to frame a number of significant questions about Church of England – United Reformed Church relations. This was a pivotal moment in terms of joining together the questions discussed in earlier meeting with the practical concerns of group members, most of whom exercising roles that engaged directly with the church's pastoral and missionary task.

APPENDIX 3: OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

TEXT FROM SECTION 1 OF *HEALING THE PAST – BUILDING THE FUTURE*

1. During the period of the Civil War and the Commonwealth a series of Acts of Parliament abolished episcopacy, the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Thirty Nine Articles* and the traditional liturgical calendar from the life of the Church in England. Those who remained loyal to the Church of England as it had been before the Civil War looked for the day when all these changes could be reversed and those clergy who had lost their livings because of their loyalty to the bishops and the king could have their livings restored.
2. Their opportunity came with the failure of the Commonwealth and the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 and their sense of bitterness over what had happened in the preceding years meant that they were not inclined to compromise with those who thought differently from them. The result was that when the Savoy Conference of 1661 failed to achieve agreement on the revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* between those representing the newly restored bishops and those representing a Presbyterian approach to church polity, those clergy who were unwilling to promise to use only the rites and ceremonies of the Prayer Book or to receive episcopal ordination were given a choice of either conforming or being deprived of their livings on St Bartholomew's day, 24 August 1662. Many of those who felt they could not conform held to an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in worship which set them against a restriction to prescribed forms. Freedom of worship, an antipathy to prelacy and a rejection of Establishment were all theological issues involved in the early history of Dissent which continue to be alive today.¹
3. Nearly two thousand clergy were deprived and this 'Great Ejection' led to a division within English Christianity that has remained unhealed to this day. Many of these clergy formed their own separate 'nonconformist' or 'dissenting' churches² and in the course of time some of these churches, or churches descended from them, became the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Union.
4. Over the next two and a half centuries the Church of England and the churches in the Congregationalist and Presbyterian traditions maintained a separate existence, working and witnessing for Christ, sometimes in opposition and sometimes in co-operation, against the background of inter alia, the growth of deism, the Evangelical Revival, the rise of Methodism, the Oxford Movement and the Missionary Societies and the social and intellectual challenges of the Victorian era. During this time Congregationalism increased greatly as a result of the Evangelical Revival, whilst Presbyterianism moved in the direction of Unitarianism but was revived in Southern England and spiced up and enhanced in the North of England by migration from Scotland.
5. By the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, although the Church of England remained the established church, Congregationalists and Presbyterians, along with the members of the other Protestant Free Churches, had come to play a very important part in the religious, cultural and political life of England. The civic penalties which had been imposed on dissenters after the restoration had largely been abolished and in cities like Birmingham the Free Churches played a dominant role

in civic life. In the latter half of the nineteenth century it was said that the affairs of Birmingham were decided in the vestry of Carr's Lane Congregational Chapel whose minister, R. W. Dale, played a leading part in the political as well as the religious life of the city. There were continuing tensions between the Church of England and the Free Churches over issues such as tithes and the role of the Church of England in the education system, but overall relations between them were improving. However, the divisions between the churches remained.³

The Lambeth Appeal of 1920

6. The beginnings of modern attempts to heal the divisions between Anglicans, Congregationalists and Presbyterians resulting from the Civil War, the Great Ejection and the history that then followed go back to 1920. In that year the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops issued 'An Appeal to all Christian People.' This appeal declared that 'the time has come...for all separated groups of Christians to agree in forgetting the things which are behind and reaching out to the goal of a reunited Catholic Church'⁴ and further stated that:

The vision which rises before us is that of a Church, genuinely Catholic, loyal to all Truth, and gathering into its fellowship all who 'profess and call themselves Christians', within whose visible unity all the treasures of faith and order, bequeathed as a heritage of the past to the present, shall be possessed in common and made serviceable to the whole Body of Christ.⁵

7. The appeal also suggested that a visibly united Church would need to involve the 'whole hearted acceptance' of the Holy Scriptures, the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion and what it described as:

A ministry acknowledged by every part of the church as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit, but also the commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body.⁶

8. The report then went on to contend that the episcopate 'is the one means of providing such a ministry' and that:

...we eagerly look forward to the day when through its acceptance in a united Church we may all share in that grace which is pledged to the members of the whole body in the apostolic rite of laying-on of hands, and in the joy and fellowship of a Eucharist in which as one Family we may together, without any doubtfulness of mind, offer to the one Lord our worship and service.⁷

9. Perhaps conscious that this stress on the significance of the episcopate would look to the other churches like a simple call for them to accept bishops and episcopal ordination, the appeal noted that 'the truly equitable approach to union is by the way of mutual deference to each other's consciences.'⁸ To this end it emphasised that no one should be seen as repudiating his past ministry and proposed that while ministers who were not episcopally ordained would 'accept a commission through episcopal ordination,' Anglican bishops would also accept from the authorities of other churches

'a form of commission or recognition which would commend our ministry to their congregations, as having its place in the one family life.'⁹

The 1938 Outline Reunion Scheme

10. In response to this appeal and its further endorsement by the Lambeth Conference of 1930 there were a series of conversations between representatives of the Church of England and representatives of the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches, including the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Union, that eventually resulted in the publication in 1938 of the *Outline of a Reunion Scheme for the Church of England and the Free Churches in England*.

11. This *Outline* proposed the coming together of the Church of England and the Evangelical Free Churches belonging to the Federal Council in a single united church along the lines set out in the 1920 appeal. Under this re-union scheme the existing ministers of the re-uniting churches would have retained their status in the new church without re-ordination and all presbyters, whether episcopally ordained or not, would have been able to celebrate Holy Communion in all churches, subject to the provisions of a pledge that no-one would have to accept ministry against their conscience. All existing Church of England bishops would have become bishops of the new united church and presbyters from the former Free Churches would have been consecrated as bishops through the laying on of hands by a combination of three Church of England bishops and those ministers who would formerly have administered ordination in the Free Churches.¹⁰

12. The Convocations of Canterbury and York in the Church of England commended the report for the 'careful attention' of those in the Church of England in 1938¹¹ and in 1941 the response of the Free Church Federal Council noted the hesitations about a number of aspects of the proposed re-union scheme from the Free Churches, hesitations that included, but were not limited to, the proposal that the re-united church should be episcopal in nature.¹²

13. There does not seem, however, to have been any attempt from either side to try to take forward work on the outline scheme or to think how it might be turned into reality, and the scheme was quietly shelved. The most plausible explanation for this is that the Second World War radically changed the focus to simple survival, local hospitality to the bombed out and displaced, and the effort to maintain contact with and support for continental Christian brothers and sisters. Significantly the two inter-Church matters which are referred to at length in the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of England from the war years are United Presbyterian-Congregational Churches and the process leading to the formation of the British Council of Churches.

Archbishop Fisher's 1946 Sermon and the Free Church Response

14. After the Second World War, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, re-opened the issue of the steps that would be needed to move towards a re-united church in England in a sermon entitled 'A Step Forward in Church Relations.' This sermon was preached before the University of Cambridge on 3 November 1946. It suggested that as a step towards unity the Free Churches might adopt episcopacy into their own systems of ministry prior to re-union with the Church of England.¹³ The sermon led to conversations between representatives of the Archbishop of Canterbury and

representatives of the English Free Churches which resulted in the 1950 report *Church Relations in England*. This report surveyed the implications of the Archbishop's sermon and what would be involved in putting its suggestions into practice.

15. The report did not propose a re-union scheme along the lines suggested in 1938. It suggested instead that there should be negotiations for the establishment of intercommunion between individual Free Churches and the Church of England. It also suggested that there were six points that would need to be involved in the establishment of intercommunion. (1) Assurances with respect to doctrinal standards leading to a declaration that both churches maintained the apostolic faith and proclaimed the apostolic gospel. (2) The acceptance of the historic episcopate by the Free Church involved and a resolution of the status of the ministers of the Free church who had not been episcopally ordained. (3) Admission to Holy Communion by the Church of England of communicant members of the Free Church and the authorization of communicant members of the Church of England to receive Holy Communion from the ministers of the Free Church. (4) The hope by the Church of England that episcopal confirmation would come to be generally used in the Free Church. (5) The maintenance by the Free Church of its existing relationships with non-episcopal churches. (6) The acceptance by both churches that intercommunion 'ought not to be regarded as being more than a temporary stage on the road to full unity.'¹⁴

Anglican-Presbyterian Conversations 1954-1966

16. The 1950 report did not lead to negotiations for intercommunion between the Church of England and either the Presbyterian Church of England or the Congregational Union. However, from 1954-1957 the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of England were involved in quadrilateral conversations involving the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church that eventually resulted in the 1957 report *Relations between Anglican and Presbyterian Churches*.¹⁵ This report proposed a 'new approach toward unity through mutual adaptation' that would eventually lead to unity between Anglicans and Presbyterians in England and Scotland.

17. This approach would have meant that in the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church of England:

Bishops, chosen by each Presbytery, from its own membership or otherwise, would initially be consecrated by prayer with the laying on of hands by Bishops from one or more of the Episcopal churches and by the Presbytery acting through appointed representatives. Thus consecrated each Bishop would be within the apostolic succession as acknowledged by Anglicans on the one hand and as required by Presbyterians on the other. He would be the President of the Presbytery and would act as its principal minister in every ordination, and in the consecration of other Bishops. He would exercise pastoral oversight over his fellow-ministers in the Presbytery, and act as its spokesman to the community...The Presbytery would still retain its full and essential place in the life and government of the Church, except that a permanent Bishop-in-Presbytery would take the place of the changing Moderator. The General Assembly would retain its full existing authority in doctrine, administration, legislation, and judicature.¹⁶

Conversely, in the Church of England and the Scottish Episcopal Church:

Lay persons would be solemnly “set apart” for some measure of pastoral responsibility towards their fellow-Christians, in an office akin to the Presbyterian eldership. Lay people would be given appropriate participation in the government of the Church at all levels: parochial, diocesan, provincial, and national.¹⁷

18. The report recognised that other ‘fundamental modifications’ to the life of the churches involved would also be required, but it stated that these would come about ‘as the Churches grow in spiritual fellowship together’.

19. There was strong criticism of the 1957 report within the Church of Scotland. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the conversations should continue and that they should address four questions that reflected the concerns expressed by the Church of Scotland. These questions were:

(a)...the meaning of unity as distinct from uniformity in Church order; (b) the meaning of “validity” as applied to ministerial orders; (c) the doctrine of Holy Communion; and (d) the meaning of “the Apostolic Succession” as related to all these matters.¹⁸

20. In 1962 the conversations between the four churches resumed, this time with observers from the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church in Wales and the Presbyterian Church of Wales. The agenda for the conversations was provided by the four questions identified by the Church of Scotland plus three additional issues suggested by the Church of England that were seen as arising out of, and relevant to, the discussion of the four previous questions. These issues were: the Church as Royal Priesthood, the Place of the Laity in the Church, and the Relations between Church, State and Society.

21. The conversations, which lasted from 1962-66, took place in four regional groups made up of representatives from each of the four participating churches. Each panel considered the first six topics on the agenda, with a special group being convened to consider the topic of the relations between Church, state and society. Two general conferences of members of all the regional groups were also held.

22. The report of the conversations was published in 1966 as *The Anglican-Presbyterian Conversations*.¹⁹ It covered the seven topics on the agenda of the conversations, but it also contained a proposal for bilateral conversations between the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church and between the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of England with the aim of creating united churches in Scotland and England that would be in full communion with each other.

23. After the publication of the report, bilateral conversations continued in Scotland between the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church until 1974, but continuing concerns about episcopacy in the Church of Scotland meant they did not ultimately prove fruitful in terms of producing a union between the two churches. In England, meanwhile, the Church of England focussed on an ultimately unsuccessful scheme for unity with the Methodist Church while the Presbyterian Church of England

focussed on the discussions with the Congregational Union that led to the formation of the United Reformed Church in 1972.²⁰

24. Underlying this formation was a stream of work which had been picked up after the Second World War in response to the petition of the Presbyterian Layman's Conference of 1943 to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of England asking for it to re-commence conversations with the Congregational Union. Choosing the path of closer co-operation, a Joint Advisory Council was established in 1951. Against a wider background of deepening ecumenical relations, on which the impact of the pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council should not be underestimated, the Joint Committee of the Congregationalists and Presbyterians met for the first time on New Year's Day 1964. Both churches voted in favour of the Union Scheme in 1971, the United Reformed Church Bill was passed in June 1972, and the new Church came into being on the 5th of October in that year. At the time the formation of the United Reformed Church was seen more widely as a first step to wider unity in England, as shown by the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster at the inaugural service in Westminster Abbey.

25. Congregational churches had to vote on whether or not to be part of the United Reformed Church, whilst Presbyterian churches automatically became part of the new church unless they specifically voted not to be. This was because at this critical moment the decisive discernment of the mind of Christ was deemed to be in the individual Congregationalist Church Meetings and in the Presbyterian General Assembly. These very different ecclesiologies were reconciled more by reference to the experience of tradition rather than seeing tradition as a fixed yardstick against which all change had to be measured. Experience, leading to conviction, had taught Congregationalists that the Holy Spirit was present and did guide the people of Christ when with prayer they gathered under the Word in local fellowship in a Church Meeting. In that Meeting the togetherness of all Church members in seeking to discern God's will was an expression of Catholicity. Experience, leading to conviction, had taught Presbyterians that the Holy Spirit was present and did guide the people of Christ when with prayer their representatives gathered under the Word in General Assembly. From all this experience was developed a conciliar church in which there is dispersed authority. That means that the authority to discern the mind of Christ is dispersed between the various councils of the church, depending on the nature of the matter to be determined. As part of its journey, the Congregational Union of England and Wales became prior to the formation of the United Reformed Church the Congregational Church in England and Wales, emphasising the acknowledgement of mutual interdependence and the conciliar nature of the whole church.

26. After the initial union of 1972 the United Reformed Church has expanded twice. In 1981 a union took place between the United Reformed Church and the Re-formed Association of the Churches of Christ and in 2000 a union took place with the Congregational Union of Scotland.

27. It should be admitted that there has been a price to pay for the unions described in the previous three paragraphs. At each union there have been those who have felt unable on grounds of good conscience to join in. In 1972 Presbyterian congregations in Berwick-upon-Tweed and the Channel Islands joined the Church of Scotland and significant numbers of Congregational churches found homes in the Congregational

Federation and the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches or asserted thorough going Independency. Following the unions in 1981 and 2000 there remains a Fellowship of Churches of Christ and there are continuing Congregational churches in Scotland.

Covenanting for Unity

28. From 1978-1980 the Church of England and the United Reformed Church were involved alongside the Churches of Christ, the Methodist Church and the Moravian Church in the development of the multilateral *Covenanting for Unity* proposals. These proposals were intended to enable the churches concerned 'to demonstrate their unity, and thus to share more effectively in the one mission of Christ in the world.'²¹ The proposals involved these churches entering into a covenant with each other on the basis of which they would:

...be able to acknowledge one another as true Churches within the One Church of Christ, and to recognise and accept one another's sacraments, membership and ministries.²²

29. Issues about the mutual recognition of ministry had been one of the reasons why previous proposals for moving towards unity had come to nothing and in order to address this problem the intention was that the covenant would provide:

...an unambiguous way in which the ministries of all our churches may be incorporated in a new relationship within the historic ministry of the catholic Church to their mutual enrichment. Consecration to the historic episcopate by episcopal ordination and the joint ordination of presbyters according to a Common Ordinal will become the practice of all our Churches from the point of Covenant onwards, and this intention is sealed by the ordination of bishops and presbyters in the Covenant Service itself.²³

30. The *Covenanting for Unity* proposals eventually came to nothing after they narrowly failed to achieve the necessary two thirds majority in the House of Clergy of the Church of England's General Synod in 1982. As in the case of the previous Anglican-Methodist unity scheme, the major reason for the failure of the Covenant proposals in the Church of England was a fear amongst a number of those on the Church of England's Catholic wing that the proposals would undermine the Church of England's Catholic character by leading to the acceptance of ministers who had not been episcopally ordained.

31. Although the failures of the Anglican-Methodist scheme and the Covenanting for Unity proposals were major setbacks for the Church of England's ecumenical endeavours, the Church of England persisted in seeking to move towards unity with other churches and the result has been a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements from 1988 onwards with the Evangelical Church in Germany, the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches, the Moravian Church in Great Britain, the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches and the Methodist Church in Great Britain.

32. Although the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church had voted in favour of the Covenanting for Unity proposals by 434 to 196, the matter caused some division

and might have led to resignations and secessions had it gone forward. Some held that bishops were not in themselves foreign to the Reformed tradition, nor did they have to conform to the then current Church of England pattern, and that unity was an over-riding imperative, not only for its own sake but also for the sake of mission. Others argued that hierarchy of any sort was foreign to the United Reformed Church and its uniting traditions, that the same was true of any authority given to individuals rather than councils, and that principle should not be sacrificed for the sake of unity. In truth, a sizeable minority was deeply relieved when the proposal faltered elsewhere.

33. In the years that followed the failure of the Covenant proposals commitment to unity between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church was given expression through an emphasis on local ecumenism and a burgeoning number of Local Ecumenical Projects, renamed Local Ecumenical Partnerships from 1994.

34. A Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP) is a relationship between two or more denominations at the local level which affects their ministry, congregational life, buildings and/or mission projects. It involves a formal written agreement, is recognised by the 'sponsoring body' (Churches Together in a county or other local area) and is authorised by the appropriate denominational authorities. Six types of LEP are now recognised by Churches Together in England – shared building agreements, covenanted partnerships, single congregation partnerships, chaplaincy partnerships, mission partnerships and education partnerships. There are currently 308 LEPs in which the United Reformed Church and the Church of England are partners. They cover all six types of LEP. Seventy seven of them are bilateral and two hundred and thirty one of them involve at least one other denomination.

35. In addition to the development of LEPs, Regional and County ecumenical bodies were developed to give oversight to LEPs and ecumenical work more generally in the counties and regions. These bodies have also provided a meeting point for church leaders across different traditions.

The Church of England-United Reformed Church informal conversations 1995-1997

36. From 1995-1997 informal conversations took place between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church.²⁴ They arose out of a common desire to explore the implications of respective European commitments for the United Kingdom ecumenical scene, issues raised by Local Ecumenical Partnerships, a sense of unfinished business around the *God's Reign and Our Unity* report, and a desire to reconcile memories relating to 1662. The report of these conversations is divided in eight sections.

37. The first section describes how the two churches fit into the growing network of ecumenical relationships in Europe and around the world and concludes that:

The Church of England and the United Reformed Church are challenged now to bring this growing experience of unity at a local, national, European and international level together with the theological convergence expressed in the theological dialogues, in order to discuss what next steps our churches might take officially on the way to visible unity.²⁵

38. The second describes the practical and theological issues raised by the involvement of the Church of England and the United Reformed Church in two hundred and twelve Local Ecumenical Partnerships.

39. The third looks at the 1984 Anglican-Reformed report *God's Reign and Our Unity* and its reception by the two churches. It notes that the report 'clearly sets before our two churches questions that should be explored together.'

40. The fourth explains the need for the reconciliation of memories between the two churches in order to overcome the memory of the Great Ejection of 1662 and subsequent tensions between the two traditions.

41. The fifth considers the issue of 'Apostolicity, Continuity and *Episkopé*' with reference to the Church of England, the United Reformed Church and developing patterns of ecumenical oversight.

42. The sixth contains reflections from a United Reformed Church and a Church of England perspective on the issue of the relationship between 'Church and Nation.'

43. The seventh summarises the discussions that have taken place between the two sides and declares:

In the light of all this we could see the promise of formulating together a common statement of our understanding of the nature and purpose of the Church, our existing agreements in faith and what sort of diversity would belong to a visibly united Church. This common statement could form the basis on which a declaration might be made, entailing the mutual recognition of each other as churches belonging to the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God. From this might follow commitments to take further steps to visible unity.

The formulation of such a common statement would help Anglicans and reformed in this country to contribute to the pilgrimage to the visible unity of all Christians. While it would be appropriate to work on a common statement in a bilateral conversation close contact should be kept and cross representation ensured, with any bilateral formal conversations either church is engaged in or may enter.²⁶

44. The eighth recommends to the Ecumenical Committee of the United Reformed Church and the Council for Christian Unity of the Church of England 'that informal conversations be continued to explore the formulation of a common statement.'

Conversations on the Way to Unity

45. The recommendations in section 8 of the 1997 report were never acted upon because by then the Church of England had decided to focus its ecumenical efforts on the formal conversations about closer unity with the Methodist Church that had already been proposed in the 1996 Anglican-Methodist report *Commitment to Mission and Unity* and that led to the *Anglican-Methodist Covenant* of 2001.

46. Although the United Reformed Church would have liked to have been part of these formal conversations, the Church of England and the Methodist Church decided this would not be appropriate because there was a specific agenda between the two churches which they felt could best be dealt with bilaterally. They agreed instead to include the United Reformed Church in informal tri-lateral conversations running alongside the formal Anglican-Methodist conversations. *Conversations on the Way to Unity*²⁷ is the report of these informal trilateral conversations.

47. This report covers the topics of conciliarity, eldership, the goal of visible unity and membership and sets out the responses of those involved in the conversations to the Church of England report *Bishops in Communion* and to the Methodist reports *Called to Love and Praise* and *Episkope and Episcopacy*.

48. The report notes three areas of convergence. All three churches shared a common commitment to the full visible unity of the Church and recognised that they were facing the same urgent missionary situation. All three churches were 'conciliar' and connexional' but in different ways. All three churches 'were able to identify with the various pastoral and ecclesiological principles for local church leadership which had emerged from the discussion on eldership.'

49. The report also notes five areas requiring further work:

(i). More work is needed to examine together how far the different ways in which personal *episkope* relates to apostolicity are contingent and how far they are a matter of theological principle.

(ii). More work is needed on the place of ordination and authorisation [in relation to] ...eldership and the many forms of lay leadership in the three churches.

(iii). More work is needed on a shared understanding of the nature of the Church. More work is also needed on the different understandings of the path to full visible unity.

(iv). Further work is needed on the ways in which personal episcopate is officially understood and actually practised in the three churches. Because the Methodist and United Reformed Churches are committed to Christian unity in three nations, it would be useful to include the episcopal churches in Scotland and Wales in this work.

(v). More work is needed on the question of the relationship of baptism to membership, and membership to the ministry of the whole people of God.²⁸

50. The report concludes by declaring that all three churches believe that 'the calling of the Church to be one is a gospel imperative' and by recommending that further work should be undertaken on the outstanding ecclesiological issues noted and that the three churches should explore together 'what further steps would be necessary to make an English covenantal relationship between them.' That work was taken forward into the first Joint Implementation Commission of the Anglican – Methodist Covenant. However the members of that body found that the sheer volume of Faith and Order matters which they had to cover necessitated giving priority to consolidation of the Covenant

itself. As a result, the recommendation for further tri-partite work has never been followed up.²⁹

Endnotes

¹ It should be noted, however, that, although opposition to Establishment became an important part of the Dissenting tradition, not all those who were ejected in 1662 were opposed in principle to Establishment. The Presbyterians and at least some of the Independents, such as John Owen, wanted the establishment of their own polity; they were not against Establishment as such. The anti-establishment strand within Dissent came mainly from the Separatists of the 16th century who fed into the Baptists and thus eventually into the broad Dissenting tradition. The issues that led to the ejection of 1662 were concerned with episcopacy and the Prayer Book rather than the issue of Establishment.

² For details about the ministers who were deprived in 1662 see A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. It was estimated by Richard Baxter that some 1,800 ministers who had been deprived continued to act as ministers of religion of some kind.

³ The combination of increasingly cordial personal relations in the context of continuing division is encapsulated in the account of the relationship between Dale and the first Bishop of Birmingham, Charles Gore, in the biography of the latter. 'Dr Dale noticed one day that a friend betrayed some surprise on hearing that Gore was about to be his guest. 'Oh,' he replied, 'I very much like entertaining him. We are very good friends. 'You see, he knows I am wrong, and I know he is wrong; so we get on very well together.' (G. L. Prestige, *The Life of Charles Gore*, London: William Heinemann, 1935, p. 142.).

⁴ G. Bell (ed.), *Documents on Christian Unity*, Oxford: OUP, 1930, p.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

¹⁰ Details in G. Bell (ed.), *Documents on Christian Unity 3rd series 1930-1948*, Oxford: OUP, 1948, pp. 71-101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.101-102.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.102-119.

¹³ G. Bell (ed.), *Documents on Christian Unity 4th series 1948-1957*, Oxford: OUP, 1958, pp.46-50.

¹⁴ For these points see *Ibid.*, pp.58-60.

¹⁵ *Relations between Anglican and Presbyterian Churches*, London: SPCK, 1957.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.16.

¹⁸ *General Assembly Reports*, p. 77.

¹⁹ *The Anglican-Presbyterian Conversations*, Edinburgh & London: The St Andrew Press/SPCK, 1966.

²⁰ The United Reformed Church has subsequently also been joined by the Churches of Christ and the Scottish Congregational Union.

²¹ *Towards Visible Unity: Proposals for a Covenant*, London: Churches' Council for Covenanting, 1980 p.10.

²² *Ibid.*, p.9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.9.

²⁴ *Report of the Church of England United Reformed Church informal conversations 1995-1997*, CCU/FO/97/9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.13-14

²⁷ *Conversations on the Way to Unity*, London: URC, 2001.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.23-24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.24. The Anglican Co-Chairman of the talks, Bishop Colin Buchanan added a 'personal proposal' as an alternative to the proposal for further tri-partite conversations in the main report. He proposed that United Reformed Church be asked to give a response to the report of the Anglican-Methodist conversations on the same timetable as the other two churches so that if it accepted the report the United Reformed Church would be able to join with them 'to pursue the next practical steps' in the implementation of the report (*Ibid* p.26). Like the recommendations of the main report, this proposal was not followed up.