

**GENERAL SYNOD****ANNUAL REPORT ON CHURCH OF ENGLAND'S ECUMENICAL RELATIONS 2016:  
COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY & LAMBETH PALACE****INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT**

The cause of Christian unity continues to be vital to the church as it seeks to serve the mission of God. 2016 was a landmark year for Anglican – Roman Catholic relations across the world. It also saw significant progress being made in a number of key relationships for the Church of England in this country. At the same time, the process of renewing the framework for partnerships between local churches, including those aspects of ecclesiastical law that have a direct bearing on what parishes can and cannot do, has been moving forwards. This brief introduction to the Annual Report on Ecumenical Relations for 2016 from the Council for Christian Unity and Lambeth Palace highlights these three areas. For fuller details on the activities mentioned here and for information about the many other areas in which we are involved, please see the full report on the Church of England website, at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches.aspx>.

**A Landmark in Anglican – Roman Catholic Relations**

2016 marked fifty years since the visit of Archbishop Ramsey to meet Pope Paul VI in Rome, an encounter that set a new direction in Anglican – Roman Catholic relations, and from which flows much that we now take for granted. The visit set in motion the process of initiating formal theological dialogue, leading to the work of the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission, whose work continues today. The visit also led to the establishment of the Anglican Centre in Rome, which, 50 years on, is a vital hub enabling hospitality and study for Anglicans in Rome and a focus for maintaining regular communication with the Vatican.



Events in October to mark this anniversary included a meeting between the Archbishop of Canterbury and Pope Francis in Rome. In 1966, Pope Paul VI gave the then Archbishop an episcopal ring. The symbolism of this gift was immensely powerful. Without being legal

or formally defined, it expressed a solemn recognition of office and ministry. In 2016 a similarly symbolic exchange of gifts took place. Pope Francis gave Archbishop Justin a replica of the crozier head once carried by Gregory the Great, who sent Augustine of Canterbury to be the first Archbishop of Canterbury in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Archbishop Justin gave Pope Francis in return a Coventry Cross of Nails, in recognition of the Pope's global ministry of reconciliation.

While Archbishop Justin was in Rome, 'pairs' of Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops from across the world had also assembled. These pairs of bishops have been appointed to promote and support the work of the International Anglican – Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission. They had begun their pilgrimage in Canterbury and had arrived in Rome to be commissioned for this work by the Pope and the Archbishop. Among them was a pair from England, the Bishop of Truro and the Bishop of Plymouth, who shared in the pilgrimage together. The presence of the Bishop of Truro, Anglican Co-Chair for the English Anglican – Roman Catholic Committee, helped to link what happened in Rome to the on-going task of sustaining and growing relations between Anglicans and Catholics in this country. The Common Declaration from Archbishop Justin and Pope Francis at the conclusion of the visit highlighted the vital need to come together in witness, service and the proclamation of the gospel.

In this country, the English Anglican – Roman Catholic Committee has been reflecting on a research exercise aimed at establishing the extent of cooperation between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in joint activities. The picture that is emerging is very encouraging, though also inevitably to some extent patchy. The Committee reaches the end of its current Quinquennium in 2017, and one of its remaining tasks will be to help the two churches identify areas of priority for growth in their unity in mission in the next Quinquennium, to guide the process of appointing a new Committee.

## **Progress in Key Relationships**

Fifty years ago there were great hopes that new horizons in the spiritual, personal and theological relationships between divided churches would precipitate profound transformations in their institutional relationships, leading before too long to a truly and visibly united church. Such hopes were always fragile, and in this country they received a heavy blow when proposals for unity between the Church of England and the **Methodist Church** were defeated in the recently formed General Synod in 1972. While the kind of institutional unity sought then is not on the agenda now, work has been continuing this year to discern whether the time might be right to enter into a new level of communion between our churches that would enable the excellent joint mission and witness that is already being done by our churches to be even more effective. A key element of this would be that presbyters from the Methodist Church would be enabled to serve as ordained ministers in the Church of England and priests from the Church of England to serve as presbyters in the Methodist Church.

Discussion of what would be a historic step towards Christian unity in this country takes place in the context of the Covenant between our two churches that was signed in 2003. The Joint Covenant Advocacy and Monitoring Group, established in 2015 to oversee and promote the Covenant relationship, has begun the process of recruiting a national network of 'Covenant Champions'. The network will help to increase awareness of the possibilities for partnership in mission and ministry that exist under the Covenant. A particular example

of this would be the inauguration in the Diocese of Carlisle of a Covenant Partnership in Extended Area across the diocese (and therefore across the county of Cumbria), to enable a new level of sharing in ministry and resources for the sake of common mission.

The Covenant Partnership in Extended Area in Cumbria includes the **United Reformed Church** as a founding partner alongside the Diocese of Carlisle and the Methodist Church. The report on a four-year process of formal conversations between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church was published in July, in time for it to be considered at the United Reformed Church's General Assembly. Containing resources for study groups, it has now been issued as an e-book through the support of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, available for download at <https://ctbi.org.uk/category/resources/publications/reports/>. In 2017, the Council for Christian Unity and the United Reformed Church will set up a Contact Group responsible for taking forward the report's key recommendations, as set out in its final chapter.



The signing of the Covenant with the Methodist Church in 2003 was the last time the Church of England had established a formal agreement with another church until 2016. Strong support for the report *Growth in Communion, Partnership in Mission* by the General Synod in February and the **Church of Scotland's** General Assembly in May secured approval for the 'Columba Declaration' proposed in its final chapter. The seriousness with which both churches took the mutual acknowledgements and commitments in the Declaration was indicated by the presence of the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland at the General Synod and of the Archbishop of Canterbury at the General Assembly for the two debates, with both giving well-received speeches. Concern for proper communication with the Scottish Episcopal Church in the context of this new chapter in the long history of our two churches was an important reminder of the inseparability of ecumenical relationships from relationships within the Anglican Communion.

So far, we have focused on progress in long-standing relationships, stretching back over centuries (given that the United Reformed Church continues the history of Presbyterians and Congregationalists in this country). Christianity in England has changed rapidly in recent decades, however, and the growth of **Pentecostal churches** has been a remarkable phenomenon. Careful work has been going on for some time to foster good communication, mutual understanding and cooperation in witness and service. The

Archbishop of Canterbury has contributed to this in a significant way by making time to meet with key leaders at both national and international level – the nature of much Pentecostalism meaning that there are often powerful connections across national boundaries.

2016 saw the first meetings of a newly established Steering Group for Anglican Pentecostal relations. Further information can be found in the relevant section of the report, but for the first time we have a point of regular meeting for consultation, for promoting cooperation and for initiating work in particular areas. In coming to this stage, we have learnt the value of grounding all our 'business' around Christian unity in fellowship and shared prayer, and in a common commitment to making the gospel known in the world today in tangible ways.

Finally, there were a number of significant opportunities to strengthen ties with **Orthodox churches**. Following the visit of the Oecumenical Patriarch to London last year, the Archbishop of Canterbury was invited to accompany His All Holiness on his annual pilgrimage to Cappadocia in 2016. His Holiness Irinej, Patriarch of Serbia, visited England at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury in October 2016. The Patriarch and his delegation were able to share the extraordinary story of the revival of the Church in Serbia since the fall of communism, and the visit helped to renew what has been a warm and fruitful relationship between our two churches. Later the same month, the Russian Patriarch, His Holiness Kirill, and his delegation came to London to celebrate 300 years of the presence of Russian Orthodoxy here. In his meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury, both were able to affirm the Church's calling to be an agent of reconciliation.



### **Renewing the framework for local church partnerships**

It was mentioned earlier that the surge in hopes for Christian unity fifty years ago was bound up with the expectation that experiences of sharing in worship, prayer and mission together with careful work towards doctrinal agreement would pave the way for a coming together of the churches as institutions, so that we could be visibly one and act as one body in the world. Repeated frustrations have resulted in talk of 'institutional unity' becoming suspect in the eyes of many. The formal structures of ecumenism inherited from the closing decades of the twentieth century have themselves become institutionalised and

need to be refreshed. This is not to say that ecumenical co-operation does not need to be supported by appropriate agreements and structures. Attempts to grow in unity that refuse to deal with churches as communities and organisations will inevitably remain partial, if not indeed superficial, and over dependent on the enthusiasms of particular individuals.

At local level, these issues become sharply focused. Informal cooperation between churches serving a particular community is relatively straightforward and indeed in many places deeply embedded. Yet moving towards more formal agreement for sharing resources, including ministry, for the sake of common mission can be very challenging. There is not just one simple reason for that, but a vital strand in the on-going work of the Council for Christian Unity is to work with other churches to see whether that process of moving from informal to formal cooperation can be made simpler and more flexible.

Reviewing the current legislation in the Church of England in the context of the focus on simplification within the Renewal and Reform programme is one part of that. The Ecumenical Relations Measure and the 'Ecumenical Canons' (B 43 and B 44) provide the legal framework for partnership and unity at local level. That framework strikes a balance between flexibility in provision for cooperation and consistency in the Church of England's self-understanding. However, the current legislation was written in the light of ecumenical church life in England a generation ago. The ecumenical context has changed in significant ways in recent decades, as already noted, and both the Ecumenical Relations Measure and Ecumenical Canons require updating to serve the present needs of the Church of England. One important story there has been the rise of churches without national denominational structures, which in urban areas in particular may be key partners for Church of England parishes. Adapting to that will require emendation of the Ecumenical Relations Measure, to which the Ecumenical Canons refer.

The challenges here need relevant work from each of the churches involved, but they require a coordinated response as well. The publication of *A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission* by Churches Together in England has been the catalyst for discussion across its highly diverse membership of a fresh approach to local cooperation. Critically, it sets out a wide range of options for how churches can work together, in the light of what it is they want to achieve and the extent of the sharing of resources and coordination of priorities to which they feel able to commit. This kind of flexibility in what 'institutional' unity looks like at the local level is likely to be crucial for the cause of Christian unity in the coming decades, and may also provide some useful models for national and international relationships in due course.

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*All photographs taken from Archbishop of Canterbury's website.*