

GENERAL SYNOD**The Church of England's Ecumenical Relations: Annual Report for 2015*****A Report from Lambeth Palace and the Council for Christian Unity*****Introduction to Annual Report**

1. The report on the Church of England's ecumenical relations in 2015 presented here originates in the annual gathering of the Ecumenical Lead Bishops at Lambeth Palace each November with the Archbishop of Canterbury, jointly planned with the Council for Christian Unity. Its contents provide rich testimony to the Church of England's continuing commitment to seeking the unity of Christ's Church. That commitment is expressed through activities aimed at sustaining and growing relationships with a very wide range of churches. Some of those involve one other partner church, some more than one, while some relate to the four 'Ecumenical Instruments' we support – Churches Together in England, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.
2. This varied pattern of activity is interwoven with continuing reflection on the unity that the church of Christ is called to express, not just as an eschatological vision or an unattainable ideal, but in our life together here and now. The meeting in November included some important contributions on this theme. There was a general recognition that Christian unity today cannot mean absorption of all the churches into a single organisation. Significant questions remain about how effectively current ecumenical structures and institutions are actually enabling growth in unity. Nonetheless, participants affirmed that there remains much that could and should be done in the search for visible unity in mission to the world, and that the Church of England continues to have a key role and responsibility in addressing that.
3. We would like to stimulate wider reflection on one crucial theme that emerged in the meeting: how work towards expressing more fully the unity that is Christ's gift through the Holy Spirit needs to take different forms in different contexts. There is no single template to be followed. For instance, there is a serious challenge in how the Church of England engages with the growing number of Pentecostal churches (now perhaps constituting around a third of Christians in London, for instance), not all of whom have the kind of national structures that have tended to underpin inherited ways of doing ecumenism. Moreover, the understanding of the church and of its unity that may prevail here can be quite different from the inherited thinking of the 'faith and order' strand within the ecumenical movement and indeed asks some sharp questions of it.
4. There are important opportunities for growth in mutual understanding and partnership in the gospel with Pentecostal churches, as the relevant section of the annual report makes clear, and indeed some real momentum developing. Yet the approach cannot simply follow familiar lines from decades of dialogue with e.g. the Roman Catholic Church or the Methodist Church – relationships which we value very highly and where there is also significant potential. Even to mention these two, however, underlines the diversity of work for growth in visible unity, as the relevant sections of the report again make clear. With the Roman Catholic Church, we want to do as much

as we can together and to learn as much as we can from one another – and there is plenty of scope for more of that, not least with regard to evangelism and evangelization. With the Methodist Church, on the other hand, there is a serious possibility of moving towards a reconciliation of ministries that would bring us into a new level of unity at the formal, structural level that could release new energy and new possibilities for unity in mission at the local level. Trying to move from possibility to reality here will be a major focus for our efforts in the coming year.

5. As well as the map of different ecclesial and theological traditions for those churches with whom we seek to grow in unity, we also need to attend to the different dynamics of relationships at local, national and international levels. At the level of the ‘local’ – for the Church of England, dioceses, deaneries and parishes, as well as chaplaincies, church schools and Fresh Expressions outside the parochial structure – we want to see churches joining together in mission, witness, evangelism and service as they look out to the communities they serve, while also sharing their gifts with one another in worship, prayer and discipleship. Where this gains real momentum, questions will emerge sooner or later about the fit-for-purpose structures that can sustain and embed committed partnership. Theological issues also arise from partnership in mission and sharing church life, and there is a pressing need to develop an ecumenical theology of unity in mission, which grows out of a cycle of learning that is both practical and theological. The national resources allocated to ecumenical work need to provide effective support for the ‘local’ in addressing these questions in their particular context.
6. Part of the task at national level therefore is to foster the kind of relationships with other churches at national level that enable local partnership and growth towards unity to flourish. The annual report provides plenty of reading about the kind of activities that are relevant here. Sometimes the focus will be on formal agreements – as with the Church of Scotland – and sometimes on setting up more informal contacts and conversations from which new initiatives can flow.
7. At the international level, formal dialogues with other churches are the responsibility of the Anglican Communion, while in the area of building relationships the Archbishop of Canterbury has a unique and hugely significant role, as becomes clear in the section of the report this year on relations with the Eastern Orthodox, which includes reflection on the visit of the Ecumenical Patriarch to London in November. The Church of England itself also has a distinctive role, however, perhaps especially with regard to Europe. The word ‘reconciliation’ was used earlier, and this is another strand of the conversation that seems worth underlining in this introduction. The unity of the church matters for mission because it communicates the reconciliation that God has made through the cross of Jesus Christ. The church is called to be a sign and instrument of that reconciliation to the world, and the way that it responds to the fault lines that emerge between and indeed within particular churches is inextricably bound up with its capacity to fulfil that calling.
8. So how does the church witness to reconciliation in contemporary Europe, where tensions are becoming sharper, and questions around what the churches might do or say together in response to e.g. the situation in the Ukraine, the refugee crisis, or the threat of destructive climate change require increasingly urgent consideration? The more churches speak with a common voice across national boundaries into these situations, the greater their chances of a significant impact. If that voice is fragmented,

what they can offer to the nations as a people drawn from every nation is seriously diminished. At the same time, the more such public unanimity is contradicted by the fact of our continuing and unreconciled divisions as churches, the more hollow it will sound.

9. The nature of the Church of England's ecumenical work is therefore varied, and indeed needs to be. There is a continuing need to distinguish the different strands of this work clearly and carefully in a rapidly changing context. At the same time, the challenge is to see how those strands weave together to make visible the unity for which Jesus prayed and in which all things are reconciled in Him. There remains one body, one Spirit and one Lord, and all of what we do is drawn together in seeking to express that one reality, to the glory of the Triune God.

January 2016

The Rt Revd Donald Allister
Bishop of Peterborough
Chair, Council for Christian Unity

The Rt Revd Nigel Stock
Bishop at Lambeth

The full Annual Report can be viewed here:
<https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/work-other-churches/ccu.aspx>