

## GENERAL SYNOD

### Introduction to Annual Report on Ecumenical Relations

#### Summary

The Annual Report on Ecumenical Relations from the Council for Christian Unity and Lambeth Palace is now available on the Church of England website at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/work-other-christian-churches>. The Introduction is being circulated separately to Synod members to ensure they have information to hand about developments in the Church of England's relationships with other churches in this country and in Continental Europe. It focuses on 2017 as a year of changes and transition and also, as the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, a landmark in church history generally and more specifically in ecumenical relations.

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#### Changing times

1. 2017 was a year of change and transition in a number of ways for ecumenical relations. Sadly, it was marked by the deaths of three people who were serving the cause of Christian unity for the Church of England in different but crucial ways: Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, who was lead bishop for relations with the Oriental Orthodox churches; Bishop John Wraw, who was the co-chair of Methodist Anglican Panel for Unity in Mission; and Francis Bassett, Assistant Secretary for the Council for Christian Unity (CCU) and a long-standing member of staff at Church House. We are saddened by their deaths and our prayers go to all their family and friends.
2. These can seem like confusing times for ecumenism. It is easy to be disheartened by the lack of progress towards unity at national and international level – and by the appearance of fresh fault lines and areas of stress in relationships. Yet as a brief look through the full Annual Report will show, dialogues between Anglicans and other churches of all kinds remain strong and vibrant, tackling a wide range of topics, doctrinal, spiritual, missional and practical. Moreover, the publication in 2017 of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* on proposals for interchangeability of ordained ministries between the Church of England and the Methodist Church shows that there is a deep reservoir of imagination and energy for overcoming historic divisions, and for taking decisive steps towards the visible unity of the church, to which the Church of England and the Anglican Communion remain committed.
3. Nonetheless, the research undertaken by Theos in the course of their review of Churches Together in England brought sharply into focus the lack of consensus among the churches as to the kind of unity to which we are called (report available at <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Reportfiles/CTE-report.pdf>). It also affirmed, however, the strong desire across the churches to hold together unity and mission – that the churches need to meet the challenges of sharing the gospel in our society together, and that our ecumenical relationships and structures need to bear fruit in mission. There is a vital question here as to whether the Church of England can uphold and promote a vision of unity that is being made visible to the world in relationships of

love and trust that hold us together in the one body of Christ and that speak of the transforming reality of reconciliation. At the same time, that vision needs to be earthed in the everyday life of Christian communities. That underlines the importance of the CCU's current research project on missional cooperation that will be taken forward in 2018.

## **A landmark year**

4. 2017 was a major historical landmark for the churches worldwide: the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation – to use the short title, into which all manner of qualifications might be inserted. Although much of the energy and resources for this came originally from Germany, unlike previous Reformation centenaries this was a truly global and ecumenical occasion, as was made clear by the way commemorations began on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 2016 with a joint Catholic – Lutheran commemoration held in Lund in Sweden, where Pope Francis shared in leading prayers with the President and the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation.
5. The paper prepared by the Faith and Order Commission for the debate in February at General Synod on the Reformation Anniversary identified three significant opportunities for the Church of England. These were:
  - strengthening relations with partner churches in Continental Europe, including the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland – EKD) and the Lutheran churches of the Porvoo Communion;
  - deepening reconciliation between churches historically divided by the events of the Reformation, in England and internationally;
  - promoting reflection within the Church of England and in wider society on the continuing significance of the theological themes of the Reformation, with the good news of Jesus Christ being at the centre of that.
6. A wide range of events and initiatives have been valuable in taking those opportunities during 2017. Highlights have included:
  - the Archbishops' statement on the Reformation anniversary, released in January;
  - a Porvoo consultation held in Norway in February on 'Identity, Memory and Hope: the continuing significance of reformations for our churches and societies', in which Church of England representatives participated fully, including giving one of the papers;
  - the General Synod debate in February on the Anniversary of the Reformation, which passed a resolution that gave thanks to God for the blessings of the Reformation, welcomed signs of convergence between the churches on the doctrine of salvation, and commended initiatives to foster mutual understanding and reconciliation during the anniversary year;
  - a day on 'The Reformation Then and Now' in Cambridge on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, organised jointly with the Council for Lutheran Churches, including a seminar for

which the main speaker was Lord Williams of Oystermouth and coinciding with the arrival of the 'Reformation Truck' touring Europe;

- Church of England participation in the Kirchentag in Berlin in May, where the Archbishop of Canterbury was one of the opening speakers and then led a Bible Study;
- the Meissen Commission meeting in Oxford in September, with the theme being the Reformation Jubilee;
- a conference on 'Responding to the Reformation' in October organised by Churches Together in England, again with strong Church of England participation, including two of the plenary speakers;
- the service at Westminster Abbey on 31st October, organised by the Council for Lutheran Churches, at which the Archbishop of Canterbury preached and then made a presentation of the text of the Anglican Consultative Council's resolution regarding the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* to representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church.

## Looking ahead

7. For those who have been closely involved in these and many other events nationally and internationally, there is much to ponder and much on which to build in terms of new levels of understanding and the strengthening of our relationships. The three opportunities mentioned at paragraph 5 above are also, however, abiding challenges for the whole Church of England. Relations with churches in Continental Europe have the potential to contribute to our life in new ways as we move towards Brexit. The wounds of division, violence and mistrust inflicted during the long Reformation in this country of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries run very deep and still await full healing. The hope of the Reformers was that the good news of salvation would be made available to all and that everything in the life of the church would speak of the gospel. That remains a task for every generation, not just the work of one, and a task for which the churches need one another, as globalization and secularization are together making very clear. For the sake of making the gospel known, and the renewal and reform of the church that must always accompany this, we cannot forget that we are 'members one of another' in the one body of Christ (Romans 12.5; cf. Ephesians 4.25).

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Published by the General Synod of the Church of England  
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