

Reflection on the *Doing Mission Together* report

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Do the ends shape the means or do the means shape the ends? *Doing Mission Together* through its analysis of 12 medium sized towns in the light of the five marks of mission suggests that ecumenism has moved from the first approach to the second as struggling institutional ecumenism has given way to a more fruitful missional ecumenism which is transforming local communities, reflecting a more complex Christian landscape and releasing energy at ground level. Rather than a theologically agreed idea of organic Christian being the basis for and goal of witness and mission, missional ecumenism begins more modestly with local churches sharing in mission together (the means), and through this process letting the shape of Christian unity (the goal or end) emerge. So instead of working out in advance what ideal unity looks like this approach discovers the emerging character of unity as diverse churches engage in shared mission. Such a pragmatic approach to mission coheres in many ways with the insights of receptive ecumenism which invites churches to be open and to learn from each other in ways that brings them closer together. The character of Christian unity is therefore discovered incrementally as churches travel together on this practical ecumenical journey. Missional ecumenism therefore involves ground level relationships, trust, partnership and sharing which does not depend upon resolving difficult historic differences. Hence it tends to focus on where different Christian groups broadly agree, such as evangelism and social action, rather than on more contentious matters such as doctrine.

So does such missional ecumenism simply sidestep the challenge of Christ's High Priestly prayer in John 17, 'that they may be one' and reduce the first mark of the church to what emerges from a locally brokered set of actions? This is the question which the Report raises. Certainly a new vision of unity understood as living in love in community may be more achievable than institutional unity but ultimately there is no escape from our inherited doctrinal differences which need to be engaged with if unity is to be more than safe pragmatics. In those practices is a hidden theology which needs to be surfaced in order to show how this theology relates to our common Scriptural inheritance and yet diverse histories. Nevertheless though relational, pragmatic and receptive ecumenism may be untidy it has energy and moving this energy into the future is what ensures that unity is not just an idea but an unfolding sustainable reality which may well help us to see what an emerging Christian unity looks like in the 21st century and help us to understand, respect and acknowledge different expressions of Christian community even if the goal of institutional unity continues to elude us.

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