

GENERAL SYNOD

The Church of England's Ecumenical Relationships: Annual Report 2019

Summary

The 2019 annual report on the Church of England's ecumenical relations from the Council for Christian Unity and Lambeth Palace is now available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/work-other-christian-churches/council-christian-unity>. Members of General Synod are encouraged to read the full report, the introduction to which is reproduced below.

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1. Among the fresh challenges and points of rejoicing that face the churches year by year, one thing from the last twelve months stands out as particularly significant. It is a piece of empirical research. Now, it may be possible to ask how a report can be exciting. The answer in this case is that the Council for Christian Unity's *Doing Mission Together: How Partnership Promotes Gospel Growth* (DMT) explores the link between unity, so crucial for the Church's flourishing, and mission, so vital for our world in constant need of transformation.¹
 2. DMT focuses upon one key aspect of unity, namely, the cooperation of churches as they reach out to the communities they serve. This is what it means by 'missional ecumenism', more closely defined by using the Five Marks of Mission² as the lens through which to look at how churches of different denominations work together. Given that rural areas and large cities have already received much attention, DMT asks its questions in the context of medium-sized towns. There were some surprising results. For instance, while there is a high level of activity relating to the third mark of mission, responding to human need by loving service, there is also a great deal of collaboration among the churches on the first mark of mission, proclaiming the gospel and, what is more, very often the Church of England is in the lead role for this..
 3. Especially interesting are the things that were found 'significant for enabling positive experiences of doing mission together.'³ These were:

¹ Alice Costar, Jeremy Worthen, Callan Slipper, Amelia Sutcliffe, *Doing Mission Together: How Partnership Promotes Gospel Growth. A study of missional ecumenism involving Church of England parishes and other denominations in English towns*, Council for Christian Unity, 2019, available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/work-other-christian-churches/our-news/doing-mission-together-how-partnership-promotes-gospel>.

² The Five Marks of Mission:

- 1) To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom;
- 2) To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
- 3) To respond to human need by loving service;
- 4) To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation;
- 5) To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Quoted in *Doing Mission Together*, p. 14.

³ *Doing Mission Together*, p. 2.

1) **a common calling to serve the local community**, meaning a focus together on a specific community with attentiveness to its distinctive history, identity and current needs;

2) **a concern for the good use of resources**, meaning both an awareness of the limitations of venues, finances, staff time and volunteer capacity leading churches to consider how to avoid duplication and, significantly in the light of the need to learn from one another, a concern to let each church bring its particular gifts to bear upon the common task;

3) **a care for building relationships**, meaning a deliberate and intentional focus upon building mutual trust and understanding, and especially among church leaders, whether this was done via formal structures or ways that were purposely kept informal;

4) **a commitment to sharing in prayer and worship**, meaning regular joint services and informal prayer meetings as well as a living spiritual unity, that is, the grounding of human relationships in the primary dimension of Christians in communion in Christ.

4. There is much here to inspire practice, and that could contribute to church growth, in all of its dimensions. Doing mission together across denominational divides also brings its challenges, however. At the moment, one of the areas where churches are most struggling to come to agreement is sexual ethics, which has become, as others have said, a new ecumenical frontier. New fault lines have emerged between Christians, as has recently become apparent within Churches Together in England (CTE) as it seeks to hold together churches with divergent approaches to the ethics of same-sex relationships.
5. The question is not just about the ethical positions themselves but about how to proceed amid such deep disagreement. While all of course agree that love, and even relationship, should be maintained, there are contrasting views about how this love can be shown. On the one side some think we can act in this area according to different views without that needing to affect church relationships, but for others such difference in practice bring consequences for how we can relate.
6. Sadly, persons can easily be hurt in the turmoil. CTE, the instrument of churches working together in England has now, almost inevitably, found itself in the midst of this challenge. For what causes tension within the churches also causes tension between them. This new ecumenical frontier is set to be an important part of the ecumenical agenda for some time to come. There is much to be done.
7. The work has already begun, however. For instance, understandably, and very helpfully, in the next round of the third phase of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III), Anglicans and Roman Catholics will look at how ethical decisions are made. The first phase of ARCIC III has prepared for this by producing a valuable document, *Walking Together on the Way*, looking more broadly at how decisions are made within the two traditions and, at the beginning of the year, the 'Joint Bishops' Meeting' of the two churches began to study this document with one another. For Anglicans and Roman Catholics questions about decision-making are especially acute since it is precisely here that they are most

divided. But ARCIC III is significant also for the methodology it has adopted: Receptive Ecumenism, a discipline found useful in several other conversations. What is significant is that its method of seeking to learn from the other while being aware of the needs and limitations experienced within one's own tradition also seems set to be a vital part of the ecumenical agenda in the future.

8. Questions of ethics, decision-making, and the way in which Christians can best talk to one another across their differences are all about how the Christian body can achieve full health; they are a question of the body of Christ's flourishing. This has enormous value. But it also has direct implications for mission. The reason is, at least, threefold. First, a healthy Christianity is fit for purpose in witnessing to Christ: divisions diminish the beauty of the Church and a lessened spiritual life makes Christians less able to respond effectively to others. Second, the same issues that challenge the Church challenge the rest of society and so resolving them for themselves gives Christians an experience to share. And third, a flourishing Church would have something that others might want, a foretaste of what humanity could be. It is a matter, you could say, of being the change you want to see.
9. Coping with contrast in a creative way is the calling of Christians with our gospel of reconciliation. As we learn to do this, opening ourselves in the power of the Spirit to Jesus' transforming work on the cross, our response to the challenges we face will have repercussions for our witness in the world. God is at work both for the flourishing of Christ's body and, through us as his body's hands and feet, for the flourishing of all humankind.

The Rt Revd Tim Thornton, Bishop at Lambeth
January 2020

The Rt Revd Dr Martin Warner, Chair, Council for Christian Unity
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