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Marks for Ecumenical Engagement – What do we need in the mixing bowl?

Introduction

This paper summarises the research findings collected from a survey taken September 2013-May 2014 with the North East Churches Acting Together (NECAT). Church Leaders, National & County Ecumenical Advisers and 5 Single Congregational Local Ecumenical Partnerships located in the Sponsoring Bodies region & Yorkshire.

The aim was to identify what 'ingredients' contribute to enabling Christians from different traditions to be partners in ministry and mission. It contained 7 questions covering:

- a. The factors which contribute to collaboration in ministry and mission.
- b. The role of mission within ecumenical partnerships.
- c. The relationship between the local situation, denominational & ecumenical structures.
- d. The use and effectiveness of formal agreements in ecumenical partnerships

From the survey responses a list of 'marks' with accompanying characteristics were produced akin to the model developed by Robert Warren in his *Healthy Churches Handbook*. The hope is that these *ecumenical marks* might help churches wishing to work together by providing a matrix against which they can identify the gifts and strengths they can bring to the venture and where they may need more time to grow. Alternatively, it may also help to assess an existing project.

The following summarises the main responses to the survey questions; itemising the areas of agreement of what helps and what hinders partnerships. It also identifies a main area of difference over views between the groups over identity.

Each group was individually assessed for their answers to identify common themes between members. The groups were then compared with one and other to identify common themes and issues. There was a strong coloration between the individual group themes and the collective ones which are itemised below

1. Areas of Agreement – Core Beliefs

- ✓ **The Role of Mission** – Main purpose for getting together. Without a clear vision for the purpose of engagement, the feeling was that the venture would be problematic and unlikely to flourish. Most respondents felt that mission, particularly practical projects which did not already exist in the locality, gave an outward focus to partnerships, stopping them becoming 'inward-looking' i.e. worrying about size of congregation, finances, doctrine etc. Mission is also seen as helping to build relationships between the churches themselves and also with the local community. All groups agreed this was the main purpose of the church in the world.
- ✓ **Proclamation through witness** – Collaboration between churches is seen as the outworking of the Holy Spirit and response to the call of God's people as a whole. Individuals used expressions such as '*kingdom value*'. Especially if partners were motivated by the desire to share the gospel in practical ways. Partnerships were seen as fulfilling Jesus' prayer for unity (John 17:21-23). There was a strong emphasis between *missio dei* & *missio ecclesiae* as being intrinsic to ecumenical engagement.
- ✓ **Building of relationships** – Many respondents felt there needed to be a 'long engagement/co-habitation' period between partners during the early stages before introducing formal agreements. They felt a Declaration of Welcome or Memorandum of Understanding were sufficient tools to give clarity in the early stages of a partnership. Formal legal agreements such as Constitutions, Covenants or Shared Building Arrangements were best introduced when either resources were involved or when the partnership had a proven history of ecumenical life together. Trust, generosity and willingness to be sacrificial towards one another when differences arise were seen as essential qualities for lasting relationships. The ability to be receptive to one another's traditions whilst respecting the inevitable diversity was viewed as the appropriate model of engagement for today rather than the 'unity as one' model of the early ecumenism movement.

2. Hindrances to partnerships ...

- ❖ **Transparency** – Critically people felt no one party should dominate partnerships. Respondents felt it was important that a sense of equality should exist regardless of the proportion of resources contributed. Another factor was that this equality should be reflected in the number of participants involved or between congregations where a small one might feel 'swamped' by a larger congregation. Where money or buildings were involved legal agreement was considered necessary to avoid tensions. Some lamented the SBA has never been revised since its introduction in 1969 while others wondered if it was not time to review the ecumenical instruments including the Anglican Canons B43 & B44.
- ❖ **Structure & systems** – Virtually all respondents felt that LEPS were overburdened with duplicating systems by churches – accounts, statistical returns, time and energy

were lost in maintaining them. There was a strong desire for simplicity and a wish for the various denominations to harmonise their systems.

- ❖ **Formal Agreements** Despite the call for less formality in partnerships most felt that it was important for ground rules to be set as stated above but SBA & Constitutions were viewed as inflexible & outdated. Several noted that CTE updated the Constitution in 2010 because of CC not because of growing diversity of LEPs. Many recommended simpler 'light touch' docs required which could help speed up decision-making processes by Church Leaders.
- ❖ **Sponsoring Bodies & CTE Framework** – Both the NECAT groups and the LEPs acknowledged there was a lack of understanding of one another. Better communication about Sponsoring Bodies role and their activities could help while LEPs could be more pro-active in joining in regional activities were seen as ways of addressing the issue. DEO's, some suggested, could help by providing more training and support to LEP and in keeping Church Leaders informed of the regional ecumenical landscape.

The biggest area of disagreement was over the issue of **Identity**.

There was a clear tension between denominational loyalties for some members of LEPS. While some wanted to be or stated they were living as communal as possible in a partnership & respected each other's traditions some respondents from the LEP group felt it important to retain their own tradition with separate services and membership. Others felt frustrated all had not united as one citing what they saw as the inflexibility of the Anglican Ecumenical Canons and slow progress of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, as the reasons for this.

There was notable difference between the LEPS & other groups. Overall, the LEPS saw less of a need for retaining denominational identity. They saw no problem with taking 'the best bits' of each denomination and using it. One example given was the use of liturgy. More than one LEP group stated they regularly used services with material from one than one church tradition. The other reason given for sitting light to individual church traditions was the belief that we live in a post-denominational time .Some LEP members stated they joined theirs because of its lack of denominational identity. Church Leaders & Ecumenical Advisers saw the loss of identity as an unwitting consequence of the early ecumenical movement's desire for a common life. They expressed an emphasis on the importance to have separate retained denominational identities especially with regard to sacraments but recognised the need to be receptive in other areas.in.

Conclusion

I undertook this research because I wanted to know what were the foundations for ecumenical collaboration today. In a climate where many denominations are experiencing decline in

numbers, reducing clergy and deposing of buildings, there is pressure to adopt the secular business world's strategy being competitive with one another for growth.

What the research shows is that this is not the case. Even in these hard pressed times, I discovered that against significant shifts in theology over mission, unity and the unwitting burden of the well-intended ecumenical instruments introduced since 1964, Christians still value worshipping and working together. Equally important, the BCC's Faith & Order emphasis on it being missional, receptive and kingdom building still holds. Perhaps the greatest difference is the shift from seeing unity as a seamless piece of cloth to one that, like a patchwork quilt, becomes one by embracing the visible difference of each cloth, stitched together by a binding common thread of being servants of the Trinitarian God.

My hope is that by providing these Ecumenical Marks, those wishing to work together and those with the responsibility of overseeing such partnerships, will have a basis upon which to reflect on the various aspects of communal life (some of which may be relevant while others may not depending on the nature of the partnership.) thus avoiding frustration or disappointment at a later stage if things unravel. My own experience as Ecumenical Adviser is that all too often the heady enthusiasm for a partnership in the early stage can result in a rush to formalise the venture before the partners have had time to laid down solid foundations, a clear vision and bridges between communities. Happily, in Durham, new ventures emerging are recognising the value of a 'long engagement'. A practice I understand from ecumenical colleagues is being encouraged elsewhere.

The following Marks will need 'road testing' and I would be interested to hear from groups who may wish to use them in their explorations together. My suggestion would be to first priorities the marks in the order you believe relevant to your situation. Then look at the characteristics and see if you can find evidence of them in your partnership either within one of the groups or collectively. Where you may have little or no evidence is where you will need to decide how best to address it to support your partnership. Where evidence is strong – celebrate!

As for me - will its back to the research. As a simply a list the 8 marks may provide a matrix against which partners can check their collaboration development but they will not be able to help those at the beginning of their partnership identify their vision strategy for collaboration. Further research into creating a 'tool-kit' to help partners do this will be the next stage.

If you would like advice on using the 8 Marks please contact email:
sheelaghaston@yahoo.co.uk .

An online priority exercise is available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/PSKTL82>

8 Marks For Ecumenical Engagement

The partnership:

- 1. Will share a clear, common vision for the purpose of the partnership which will enhance the mission of the Church in the local area to build the kingdom of God.**

Characteristics:

- The vision is based upon a proven local need not met where the 'landscape' has been researched & prayerfully discerned by the parties involved.*
 - Communities can demonstrate in terms of mission priorities how it could be achieved, or better achieved, by ecumenical collaboration.*
 - All the partners have been/are engaged in each stage discernment of the vision and pray together to seek God's will for it.*
 - There is a growing relationship between worship & mission within the life of the partners driving the desire for partnership.*
 - The partnership's activities do not duplicate or impinge upon the life and work of neighbouring churches.*
 - There are clear expectations of what each partner can bring or cannot.*
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- 2. Has its roots in an organic, evolving relationship.**

Characteristics:

- Communities have experienced a 'long engagement' where they have been coming together for social events, worship, and teaching or community activities in the past*
 - Communities/partners trust one another and want to work towards common objectives.*
 - Leaders & key officers from each partner are trusted and respected by all.*
 - Communities/Partners are able to exercise a measure of grace towards those who may find the idea of ecumenical partnership difficult to come to terms with or want to retain their denominational identity...*
 - All promote opportunities/activities for coming together through notice sheets, adverts and on-line communication*
 - Communities recognise that the original vision is a springboard not a mattress for its life & work.*
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3. Is owned by the local church community.

Characteristics:

- *Communities regularly worship, pray and learn together using patterns of worship which either accommodate each partner's tradition or are inclusive of all.*
 - *The partnership & its activities are prayed for regularly in services, small groups and at meetings both local and regionally.*
 - *The desire for the vision energizes individuals and grows closer personal contacts.*
 - *Communities are willing to understand one another's theology, structures & history in order to share a common life together.*
 - *Motivation for partnership is driven by desire to serve and witness – not failing numbers, money or buildings.*
 - *Communities seek to use the gifts of individual members through participation in sub-groups for specific areas of the partnership life.*
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4. Seeks ways to respect and be enriched by each other's traditions in its worship, service and personal relationships.

Characteristics:

- *Consensus over worship styles & content which aim to bring out the best of each tradition.*
 - *Willingness by congregations to learn from each other, let go of some traditions & yet maintain some sense of identity.*
 - *Appreciation of diversity as well as unity – aims are to celebrate the 'best' of each tradition and not to water them down or ignore them.*
 - *Willingness to engage in a receptive dialogue with one another over the deeper issues that divide them.*
 - *Each partner is able to be robust & equally involved in the partnership.*
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5. Seeks to harmonise and share its resources, finances and management systems to the benefit of the common life shared together.

Characteristics:

- *Partners adopt the most appropriate practical working agreement for its situation.*
 - *Partners avoid complexity – keep systems & agreements simple: joint councils, common purse/accounts. Combined Electoral Roll/Memberships Register.*
 - *Partners ensure that formal structures & obligations are understood & agreed by all.*
 - *Partners can work out problems quickly to avoid them festering. They use formal agreements as points of reference rather than rights.*
 - *Partners recognise the need for legal formalities where necessary and enter into them in the spirit of generosity and equality.*
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6. Is affirmed by and able to engage fruitfully with denominational Church Leaders, Sponsoring Bodies & Ecumenical Advisers over issues concerning its life and work.

Characteristics:

- *Partners undertake careful preparation & planning at local and higher level for the partnership formal engagement*
 - *Communities know who, where & how to access advice, training or information within their own denomination and the wider ecumenical structures.*
 - *Partnership ensures it is affiliated to & received communication from national, regional and denominational organisations supporting ecumenical engagement.*
 - *Decision-making is undertaken with minimum delay and in harmony by Church Leaders & Sponsoring Bodies to avoid disruption to the common life of the partnership.*
 - *The desire by Church Leaders & Sponsoring Bodies to foster unity reflects the local partnership situation.*
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7. Views changes positively - incorporates new partners, develops new leaders and patterns for working collaboratively together or, if required, accepts the need to celebrate the ending of the life of the partnership.

Characteristics:

- *Communities identify ways to 'hand-over' tasks & roles to new members/generations.*
 - *Communities/partners participate in regular review to monitor the effectiveness of the partnership and show how it helps the church to do what it does better than if there was no partnership.*
 - *Partnership can adapt systems and structures to accommodate new partners if needs to.*
 - *Partnership places Missio Dei before its own needs.*
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8. Leaders are ecumenically minded.

- *Appointment of ordained and lay personnel by one denomination is done in consultation with and support of the other partners.*
 - *Leaders see the possibilities in their situation and lead people to them but does not impose ideas on others.*
 - *Leaders are willing to support diversity within the partnership where compatibility or union is not possible.*
 - *Leaders are realistic about the difficulties & challenges of collaborative ministry and work creatively to address them where possible.*
 - *Individuals are able to negotiate & affirm each member of the team ministry's role within the life of the partnership according to each person's gifts and availability.*
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