

SABBATICAL STUDY

THE LOCAL CHURCH WORKING RIGHT?

**Summary Findings of a Sabbatical Study on
Ecumenical Working between Congregations of
different Denominations around England.
February – April 2016.**

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Introduction

Between February and April 2016 I was privileged to have the opportunity for sabbatical leave from my post as Methodist Minister in the East Solent and Downs Methodist Circuit. In that post I live in Haslemere and have pastoral charge of Methodist churches in Haslemere, Liphook, and Lindford. I am also chaplain to St Francis Community Church, Headley Down, an independent, non-denominational congregation with strong ties to local Methodist and Anglican congregations.

I am deeply grateful to the Stewards and Lay Leadership in those places for making this period of release from the weekly round of services, preparation, pastoral care and meetings possible. It is testament to the model of 'church' that this is so easily and regularly possible in the Methodist Church where vacancies between ministers are relatively rare.

My background is ecumenical. I was very involved in the ecumenical student society associated with the Chaplaincy while I was a student at Southampton University in the 1980s. While training for Anglican ordained ministry at Ripon College, Cuddesdon near Oxford, I did my final year church placement at the Ecumenical Church of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes. Throughout my ministry I have been involved in whatever ecumenical groupings have been available whether formal Churches Together groups or relatively unconstituted gatherings of ministers.

I was ordained as an Anglican in 1990 and served parishes in Bedfordshire and Surrey before putting my ministry where my ecumenical mouth had been for some years and moving to a Methodist post in 2010 Authorised to Serve by Conference. I came into Full Connexion with the British Methodist Connexion in 2013. I had never had a sabbatical as an Anglican. Had I been a Methodist from my ordination I would have been having a third Sabbatical. I am therefore trebly indebted to the Methodist Church for allowing me this time so early in Methodist Ministry.

For some years I have identified my passion as wanting to see the local church working right. That is not confined to the internal relationships of a congregation or the constituent parts of any one congregation's activity. The local church is not confined to one congregation unless that is all there is locally. In my visits and conversations I have spoken about 'churches of different denominations' in order to keep terminology simple and understood by most people. In this paper I shall try to refer to 'congregations' rather than 'churches'. I hope it will be clear if there are exceptions but I intend the phrase 'local church' - in the singular - to mean the manifestation of God's people in that place in all their different facets and denominations.

In the Creed we affirm that “We believe in one ... Church.” A summary of my enquiry during this Sabbatical Study would be to see to what extent the Church is, or is becoming, One in various locations in spite of different denominational manifestations.

My process was to email Ecumenical Officers gleaned from Methodist District websites to enquire about ‘shining examples’ of local ecumenical working. I was most interested in places where there was not a Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP) unless there were also other congregations working with them. From the Ecumenical Officers’ responses I set up a manageable number of visits. I have also had the opportunity to meet gatherings of Ecumenical Officers who gave me an insight into ecumenical working from their perspective. I am grateful to those Officers as well as the ministers and lay people who have given their time and effort to meeting me and responding to emails. You know who you are! I told everyone that if I wrote anything I would send it to those who had been helpful. I hope this has reached you! I will also send it to others who may be interested nationally. If you feel it would be helpful to share with anyone in your own network please do so. I simply ask that I be acknowledged when you do.

I went into this study with a theory which I was careful not to give in advance as a framework to those I met if I could help it though I did send it to Ecumenical Officers when I was seeking guidance for places to visit.

That theory was that where there was successful, or well regarded ecumenical working in a local town, village, city or area there were likely to be three elements in place:

1. a **Ministers’ Meeting** or gathering of some kind;
2. a **Meeting for Lay Members** of the different congregations which may be a Churches Together Forum or a less structured format;
3. and at least one but probably several **‘Projects’** that the congregations are involved in together.

I was also interested in the extent to which good ecumenical working was dependent on the relationships between particular ministers. I was aware that parts two and three of the theory might come together in that the place where members of congregations meet might be the planning group for the projects. This has proved to be the case.

It was quickly apparent that the theory was broadly correct so I structure this report around a number of key factors. **Relationships** are vitally important both between ministers and between members of congregations. **Mission** was talked about everywhere I went. The purpose of coming together is to work together for the furtherance of God’s Kingdom. There are many different phrases for that and most were probably used! Everywhere I went there

was some sort of **Structure**. This probably just points out the obvious fact that the Church in any form is an organisation and/or an institution and so has structures. The structures I found were many and varied.

After the Appendices I have attached a section on **Ecumenical Ministry**. This was not part of the original idea for my Sabbatical investigations but came up in a number of conversations because of my own background. I seek to explore how ordained ministry and denominational appointments, recognition of calling and ordination are affected by what has been called in some circles a post-denominational age for mission and church going. Inevitably this raises the issue of the extent to which ministry can be interchangeable between denominations.

For those who complained in my presence about the length of some of the documents that come from ecumenical bodies, you may want to skip to the **Conclusion** which I hope is a brief (less than the preferred two sides of A4!) summary of my findings on best practise ecumenical working. However, if you have the patience and stamina as well as time and have read this far there are only 5 pages before that!

In **Appendices**, I list the many different kinds of 'projects' that I came across and the places I visited. It is not my intention specifically to identify any of the projects. I have not had anyone's permission to do so and I don't want to be blamed for unsolicited contact made to already busy people. I also don't want to risk missing anyone out. You may recognise your project but I hope it is not easily identified by people further afield. However, a little bit of 'digging' by anyone with a tendency towards investigative journalism would soon uncover most. I list the places I visited in a second Appendix. Some have many projects, some have few; all have more than one. There are few if any projects in common to all places but many similar projects in several places.

Relationships

Relationships between ministers in the places I visited are all very good. They are usually expressed in a ministers' meeting of some sort. These meetings range from a Prayer Breakfast to lunches for mutual sharing, support and prayer to a whole morning's Prayer Meeting. Frequency also varies. Most are monthly, some less often but not less than quarterly.

Some relationships were established by the present ministers who were appointed at more or less the same time. Some are relationships that have been developed by building on those established by predecessors. In a few cases continued relationships have suffered after one minister left. In rather more instances a minister leaving has proved helpful to the establishment of better relationships with a successor where they had been difficult.

Relationships between members of congregations also take different forms. Some are structured through Churches Together Forums or Mission Communities or United Areas; sometimes these relationships develop through the mission projects the congregations are involved in. Often there are existing friendships or relationships between people who happen to be members of different congregations.

Good relationships are vitally important to the working together of congregations of different denominations in an area. The first group I met used 'Relationships' as the first and last word in terms of ingredients for successful ecumenical working. If it is the first and last word there are others in between but relationships have recurred as a vital ingredient in every place I've visited.

However, on their own, good relationships between Ministers and between Christians of all flavours in an area do not amount to a reputation for good ecumenical working. It sounds obvious, but for that reputation there has to be some working.

Mission

The second word in good ecumenical working that has been universally used in the places I've visited is Mission. Good relationships, though an essential ingredient, in themselves don't make for good ecumenical working. There has to be some working – the congregations have to come together for a purpose.

I've been in ordained ministry since 1990 and I don't remember a time when ministers and congregations have not been busy. Several of those I heard from told me that ministers in their area are too busy for committees or frustrated with meetings and their ministers, congregations and buildings are working to capacity.

There is no space for ecumenism – or a working towards unity – just for the sake of being one. It has been my experience of places that I was pointed towards as 'shining examples' of united working that their purpose in unity is covered by the word Mission. In the words of the title of a Grove booklet, Unity is now Mission-shaped.¹

A summary may be that congregations in an area seek to be united in order 'that the world may believe' (John 17:20-23). There are many other stages and factors between that unity and the growing belief of others and 'the world' may be confined to a very localised part. The spread of belief, in an intellectual sense, is not the primary purpose of the joint activities of most groups of congregations. Their working together is more to demonstrate the ways of God and God's Kingdom and that their communities would see God's ways are good and right and support the poor, the vulnerable and the powerless.

Mission is a big word and I don't propose to give a treatise on its meaning here. Suffice it to say that I use it to cover the whole purpose of the Church so it can be said to include worship and evangelism as well as feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, proclaiming good news to the poor, empowering the powerless, giving a voice to the voiceless ... and so on ... Later I will list the many and varied ways in which groups of congregations and Christians in different places around the country interpret Mission in their context. None of them is exhaustive but in this context mission is probably best defined by the practical projects that are included rather than theoretical definitions.

In a few places a project could have been done by one congregation but it has been done ecumenically in order to promote a closer unity. Projects where closer unity is the sole purpose are few and far between. The lasting effect of an ecumenical Lent Course undertaken for the

¹ Colin Marsh & Jm Currin, *Mission-Shaped Unity*, Grove Evangelism series Ev103

learning and growth of Christians in the area may be a growth of relationships between them and greater unity. Doing it ecumenically brings congregations closer to together and perhaps enables a smaller congregation to take part where it would not be viable on its own.

The same might also be said of united worship. Few places do as much united worship as was my experience when I was first ordained. The primary purpose of united worship in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is likely to be to bring congregations closer together. But even there, as with most other united worship, if you scratch the surface you'll find an outward looking (mission) subtext. It might be a focus on the Church in a different part of the world; it might be an opportunity for prayer for the persecuted church; it might be an opportunity to learn more about a Christian organisation or charity and their work locally or further afield. The other most common united acts of worship are the Women's World day of Prayer and a Good Friday Walk of Witness.

In many places there is very little united worship but there is almost always some opportunity for ministers and/or members of congregations to pray together. It is from a realisation that we all worship the God who calls all his people to take part in his mission that we come together in realising that we are all engaged in God's one mission.

In every place I visited there are 'projects' of one sort or another which expresses that mission locally. There is no one size fits all. Different projects are appropriate in different places but all have an outward-looking community-focussed emphasis primarily working to meet the needs of the poor, disadvantaged or vulnerable. This is typified by the prevalence of Foodbanks, Street Pastors, Debt/Money Advice and schemes for the elderly or the young.

Structure

The other theme that was commonly discussed in all my visits was the form and structure of ecumenical working. Early on I was told that ministers don't have time for committees but I also visited places where ministers were on local ecumenical committees and took their turns in chairing those committees. In other places some ministers were spending large amounts of time getting right the structures and processes of Mission Communities or Churches Together groups.

In some places there is a monthly Ministers' Meeting at lunchtime for two hours, a monthly Churches Together Forum with an Executive Committee and periodic group or subcommittee meetings to run the various ongoing projects. In other places the only formal ecumenical group is a Ministers' Meeting, perhaps just an hour early in the day and in some places Ministers' Meetings are only quarterly.

Where the Ministers' meeting is the only structured ecumenical gathering there is still a system of meetings between members of congregations who are responsible for organising an event or project. There is a mix between places that have a formal Churches Together structure and places which are much more informal – not to say *ad hoc*. This variance does not seem to depend on the nature of the projects. There are Foodbanks and Street Pastors, Lent Courses and young peoples' work (just to name a range) that are organised through Churches Together groups and places where similar programmes are run without that structure.

With or without formal structures, it is also noticeable that projects don't have to have all congregations represented on their steering groups. In many places a project has been the initiative of one or two congregations with others invited to take part. Even when all or most of the other congregations do take part it may not be necessary for them all to be part of the steering group or subcommittee.

Conclusions

My initial hypothesis has proved broadly correct from the anecdotal and somewhat random contacts I made. In every place I visited where ecumenical working was reputed to be good there was a Ministers' Meeting of some sort, gatherings of members of the different congregations and projects that the congregations ran together. The key to the good working of the projects is the good relationships between Christians of different denominations.

But it works both ways round. The good relationships would not be pursued by busy people and congregations just for their own sake. The relationships and the unity of the Church are pursued because the Church cannot properly be said to be the Church if it is not engaged in Mission.

A final factor in the success of local ecumenical working is the nature of local. Too wide or diverse an area creates difficulties in terms of relationships and the focus of the projects. A wide area can have its benefits in terms of the pool of personnel, infrastructure, buildings and financial resources. A balance needs to be struck so that the resources of the Church can be effectively used for the benefit of the communities the Church is placed to serve. Mission is delivered locally but the local church may need to support of the wider church. Working ecumenically may widen the possible sources of that support and may also bring the sources of support available from the wider church nearer to the local.

It has been encouraging to see the huge variety of projects and the widespread work of the church ecumenically around the country. Places where there is more of a struggle can take heart. There are things that can be done if your places would not be described as good. Similarly there is always more that can be done even if your place could be described as a shining example.

Relationships are the first key. Sometimes they just happen due to a coincidence of appointment, but they can be intentionally worked upon. If ministers set up periodic meetings for lunch and prayer and committed themselves to one another's support they might be surprised how much would grow.

It seems to me from my enquiries that if ecumenical relationships concentrated on an outward-looking, community-focussed mission in their locality they would soon find a project designed to extend the work of the kingdom. It is said that many people over estimate what can be achieved in a year and underestimate what can be achieved in five years. I think most groups

would be surprised at how far they could get in five years even if there is very little happening at the moment.

The building of good relationships focussed on projects that build the Kingdom of God locally very quickly starts to look like Mission-shaped unity.

David Muskett
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Appendix 1 – Projects

- Alpha
- Alternatives pregnancy advice
- Book Ministry through a shop and/or vans
- Breakfast scheme for the homeless and vulnerable
- Cafe in a community centre
- Care for the elderly Trust
- Carol services
- Chaplaincy in schools
- Chaplaincy to people at work
- Children’s work
- Christian Aid
- Christian Police Association
- Christians Against Poverty
- Christmas leaflet
- Church Leaders’ Prayer Meeting
- City Centre Chaplaincy
- Civic Prayer Meeting
- Coffee mornings
- Community Action event / week
- Community Money Advice
- Computer courses
- Costa Healing Rooms
- County Show chaplaincy
- Craft work group
- Dementia Awareness
- Domestic Violence Awareness
- Easter services
- Education group
- Estate chaplaincy facilitated through a motorhome
- Events for schools in churches
- Faith Audit done with the council
- Foodbank
- Good Friday Walk of Witness
- Healing on the Streets
- Holiday clubs

- Housing for Young People
- Involvement in local Day Centre including 15 minute weekly Quiet Time
- Joint Services
- Lent Groups / Courses
- Live Nativity in a redundant shop
- Lunch Club
- Lunch time cafe style service in a school on an estate where there is no church building
- Men's meetings
- Messy Church
- Ministry at local university
- Ministry of Sport
- Ministry to prostitutes
- Mutual exchange of Notices
- Night Shelter
- Partnership with other groups for Youth Work
- Pastoral team training
- Peace & Reconciliation Ministries
- Police Chaplaincy
- Prayer for individuals – shared “prayer chain”
- Prayer (Healing) on the Streets
- Prayer – various schemes from prayer meeting to 24 hours prayer to 24/7 Prayer
- Prison Chaplaincy
- Project combining mission locally and globally and the presence locally of people from around the globe
- Relationships with local councils – Town, City, Borough etc
- Remembrance Sunday alternated leadership
- “Retreat” House / House of Prayer
- Romance Academy
- School assemblies
- Schools Team
- Street Pastors
- Street Wardens
- Tea time social and practical advice for the elderly
- Town Centre Chaplaincy
- Uniformed groups
- Weekly prayer services
- Women's meetings

- Work with Ex-Offenders: housing, employment ...
- Women's World Day of Prayer
- Youth Work

This long list covers the a huge range of projects including social action, evangelistic and outreach initiatives, relationships with other bodies and projects based on worship focussed on the churches.

Appendix 2 – Places Visited

- Cornwall
- Cumbria
- Didcot
- Dalton in Furness
- Eden Valley
- Hanborough
- Hackney
- Luton
- Penzance
- Peterborough
- Sedburgh
- Stamford
- Stoke on Trent
- Towcester
- Truro
- Wadebridge
- Witney

Additional Section on Ecumenical Ministry

During one visit I met another visitor to that area who had come from China. I had just asked around to see how many different denominations were represented at our gathering. The Chinese visitor described her country as in a “post-denominational age” – there are no denominations.

It is a phrase I have used here with for some time a different meaning. I believe we are in a post-denominational age in this country when people look for a congregation to join. If they have moved they may first try the place with the same denominational label that they used to attend but that is the extent of denominational loyalty. More important factors in the choice of a place of worship are style of worship and teaching or theology and an affinity with the people they find there. Joining a congregation is not so much about whether that congregation is friendly but more whether the ‘joiner’ feels they can make friends.

Hearing from ministers and leaders of local congregations of different denominations and from Ecumenical Officers in the past three months I am also aware that we are becoming increasingly post-denominational in terms of mission. In many places the significant mission projects and activities are undertaken by Christians from a variety of denominational traditions and those with no denominational affiliation. As at least one place described it, the theological differences disappear in the face of combined activity in the service of the Kingdom in the local community.

The Declarations of Intent in Cumbria and Cornwall seem to look for the illusive middle way between the “organic union” of the 1960s-70s and some kind of friendly separateness. There is an attempt in most places to put an end to rivalry. Where ecumenical working is described as ‘best practise’ the attempt is to go beyond co-operation. It seems from my enquiries that what the Church in many local areas is looking for is a way to be seen as the Church (singular and united) in all the ways it relates to the community whilst retaining separate and varied worship. That works for as long as ministry can be sustained by a variety of denominations. When this is no longer the case the default is that everyone reverts to whatever is left unless they travel.

Many of the differences over theology have disappeared for those engaged together in the mission of God’s Kingdom. Truly to be the Church in a place the differences over ministry also need to disappear when seen from inside as well as from outside the church. Effectively that means interchangeable ministries.

Clearly for some people with some theologies of ordination there are some difficulties with this but there are places in Cumbria and Cornwall where it is not only the case but it seems you have to opt out if you don't like it rather than opt in if you want it. That not only enables greater coverage for services but means that the Church can be more local rather than having ministers travel great distances in order to cover services of their particular denomination.

It raises some questions for me. As an Anglican priest in Full Connexion with the British Methodist Conference I am some kind of hybrid. (Is that an Anglodist or a Methlican?) My authorisation and permissions to officiate are complicated and seemingly dependent on the opinions of different bishops.

If Interchangeable Ministry can be done in Cumbria and Cornwall, why can it not be done everywhere?

It seems to me that we have a mutual recognition of ministries. There are very few who would claim that a minister of any denomination or independent congregation is not a Christian Minister. Differences are over the way that ministry is discerned, recognised, authorised and commissioned. In many respects the sticking point is Episcopal ordination. There is a helpful symbolism in the idea of the laying on of hands going back to the apostles to give an authority to the recognition of a ministry by the whole church. In practical terms the greater benefit to the local church receiving a minister is that his/her ministry has been recognised and authorised by the church more widely than the local congregation – that is nationally and/or globally.

And personally: If a Methodist Minister, for instance, can have blanket permission to officiate in Anglican churches across a whole county (with only a few exceptions) why can't a Methodist Minister (with an Anglican ordination) be given a geographically qualified Permission to Officiate in another part of the country at the invitation of the relevant Incumbent(s)?

If two areas of the country can make this amount of progress it should be an urgent part of conversations at a national level for Churches Together as well as in bi-lateral conversations, especially the Anglican-Methodist Covenant to agree some level of Interchangeable Ministry. It has been done in the name of Mission and the formation of Mission Communities in Cumbria. It seems to me that Cumbria is not the only part of the country that would be well-served by a greater unity for the sake of the Church's Mission. In the past the Church has often changed out of necessity or pragmatism. It should not have to become a pragmatic necessity for the continuation of God's Mission in England for this to be addressed.

David Muskett
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