

A personal paper from John Bradley

## 10 Reasons why we are Better Together Locally

The ecumenical vision concerns both the visible unity of the Church and the 'whole inhabited earth' [oikoumene] which is our concern because it is God's concern. Invisible 'spiritual' unity is not enough because it needs to be incarnate. Although we now have instant world-wide news, some people, even some Christians, are more insular, only interested in what impacts them personally. The ecumenical vision challenges both of these attitudes.

**These are my 10 reasons why we are better together in the local context:**

**1) It is what Jesus prayed for (John 17.20f)**, not only for his first disciples but also for us. The unity in diversity of the Church makes visible that of the Holy Trinity. We are different but when we are one, not divided, we show, we make visible that the persons of the Trinity are 'in' each other. When we are divided, we don't.

*'It is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me. May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.'*

We are not just to be 'one that world may believe (anything)' but in such a way that we are evidence of the incarnation. The world may believe all kinds of untrue things about us, such as that we are (mostly) nice and harmless! Visible unity in reconciled diversity of the Church shows that the Father dwells in the Son and the Son in the Father.

*He has made known to us his secret purpose, in accordance with the plan which he determined beforehand in Christ, to be put into effect when the time was ripe: namely, that the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ.*

God's plan for the fullness of time does not just concern us, our locality, our nation or even our world. It is to unite the universe in Christ

(Ephesians 1.9f)! The vision is that big.

**2) it makes fast the Spirit's gift of unity with bonds of peace (Ephesians 4.3).**

This is as binding a command on all Christians as the Great Commission of

*Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples; baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

**Matthew 28.19.** We are exhorted to 'spare no effort' – not 'make no effort'! – yet at the same time unity is the Spirit's gift, not something we can achieve. The Acts of Uniformity, notably that of 1662, did not create unity; they only

provoked non-conformity! Parliament didn't achieve its aim 350 years ago. The aim today is neither uniformity nor a takeover of the smaller by the larger but harmony. We don't see uniformity in the natural world around us but there is unity in diversity; neither is it the monotony of a single voice but the harmony of different voices listening to each other. 'Bonds of peace' are the 'connective tissue' of the Body of Christ, enabling the different parts to work together and strengthen the whole.

*Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives.*

1 | This paper is available from [www.cte.org.uk/features](http://www.cte.org.uk/features).

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### 3) It is a better use of limited resources than acting separately

In the new communities which are being built today the needs are so great that no Church can meet them alone; we need each other. With the pressures on developers to get the maximum return for their investment, today we have a struggle to get any location in a new housing area for a Christian church.

### 4) It is more credible in offering a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5.18)

Would you buy hair restorer from a bald man? Who is going to believe that we have a ministry of reconciliation if we are not reconciled to each other? Our differences are deep and have led to conflict. We are not forgetting the past martyrs or pretending our differences don't matter, otherwise we would be a grey mush which would satisfy nobody and not be worth joining. It's about holding our differences in conversation instead of conflict. Ecumenical partnership witnesses to costly reconciliation. When we covenant together we make a costly 'cut' of those things we are no longer going to do separately. This costly reconciliation is a witness for people coming to faith – see how they love one another! There are issues where Christians have legitimate differences but they can hold them without division.

*All this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has enlisted us in this ministry of reconciliation.*

### 5) It is more acceptable to civic authorities and developers

If developers allocate land to one Church, what will the others want? There are huge commercial pressures to minimise community space. Developers want the maximum return for their investment by building houses. Some suggest just one space for all 'faiths' but that can cause problems. It can work in some chaplaincies but is difficult when building settled communities. Would they offer just one space for all the political social clubs so that it was the Conservative Club on one day, the Labour Club on another etc.?

### 6) It is accessible to a wider range of people

More people can see a LEP as 'their' church than one of a single denomination. Are our divisions today more cultural than doctrinal? More people are kept from worshipping together by differences such as musical taste than by theological divergence. LEPs try to engage everyone.

### 7) It can draw on the resources of the whole Church

Experience, people, finance, liturgy, theology – we are stronger by using them all!

### 8) It shows what can be done locally even if it is not yet done nationally

'Unity happens where it happens' said Cardinal Cormac and it happens in thousands of localities today. 1982 was a watershed: the failure of the 10 Propositions (when the Church of England, Methodist, Moravian and United Reformed Churches nearly voted for a national merger) changed the focus from national to local Christian unity. LEPs show that what couldn't be achieved nationally can happen locally

### 9) When the church looks outward, there is only one local community to serve

We unite when we look outwards. Christian Aid Week was often the first time Christians of different churches had worked together in their locality or even set foot in each other's churches. Ecumenical commitments grew from those new relationships. Street Pastors, winter night shelters and chaplaincies show that we can work together when we look outwards to the needs of others rather than inward to our own internal issues.

### 10) It can be a local instance of organic unity

This is not organisational unity which some doubt ever will or even should happen. It is the unity of an organism, a living being, where different parts feel the joys and sorrows of all (1 Corinthians 12.26).

*If one part suffers, all suffer together; if one flourishes, all rejoice together.*