



BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE NATIONAL

A health check for Churches working together in the counties and large cities of England

The Intermediate Bodies

A unique feature of church life in England, hardly paralleled elsewhere in the world, has been the development of a network of *intermediate bodies* – mostly corresponding to counties or large cities – where the churches have developed a pattern of co-operation and shared life which also gives oversight to local ecumenism in its different forms.

These intermediate bodies are an example of the development of shared *episcopate*, the oversight of the whole people of God, reflecting the wider movement towards joint decision-making and mutual accountability.

When Churches Together in England was formed in 1990, it was agreed that the support of Local Ecumenical Partnerships and local Churches Together groups should be done not through the national organisation but through the growing Intermediate Bodies. With the number of Local Ecumenical Partnerships now over 800, and the number of Churches Together groups near 2000, it is clear that oversight is best done through county or city-wide bodies. This has been the agreed structure for over 10 years, with the two Field Officers of Churches Together in England giving support to the Ecumenical Officers who serve the Intermediate Bodies throughout England.

Churches Together in England is developing a process *Together in a Common Life*. Do the Intermediate Bodies reflect a significant growth in the “common life” of the Churches? This is one of many questions that they face, at a period when every meeting and structure needs to be justified rather than simply continued without reflection.

The ten questions overleaf are intended to act as a “health check” for all those who work in the intermediate life of the churches. Some Intermediate Bodies have used the Five Marks of Mission to test their mission focus.

The Five Marks of Mission

(which originated at the 1988 Lambeth Conference)

- 1 Proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom
- 2 Teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers
- 3 Responding to human need by loving service
- 4 Seeking to transform unjust structures of society
- 5 Striving to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustaining and renewing the life of the earth

Is the Intermediate Body a place of growing koinonia – common life?

It is all too easy simply to repeat agendas, to deal with the necessary “housekeeping” of an organisation – but is there a sense of the *Churches* growing together, acting together through the Intermediate Body?

Are the Churches – through their leaders and representatives, sharing their central concerns – mission, ministry, the use of resources – in and through the Intermediate Bodies?

Would there be benefit in spending time away together, getting to know one another, developing trust and confidence, praying together (see the CTE leaflet *Praying Together in a Common Life*)?

Is sufficient time being given for the Intermediate Body to develop deeper strategies? Two hurried meetings of two hours per year is hardly enough for this!

“The Churches in Milton Keynes will embark on a new way of sharing their life together from 1st September 2001. With the encouragement and support of the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Circuit and United Reformed Church District will form a United Area which will work in conjunction with the Anglican Deanery Synod and the Baptist Connection. This body will also merge with the existing Milton Keynes Christian Council and together will perform the appropriate functions of an Anglican deanery, Methodist circuit, Baptist Connection and URC district. The name of the new body will be The Mission Partnership of the Milton Keynes Church Council.... The main work of strategic mission in Milton Keynes and the surrounding district will now be co-ordinated by one body working together rather than by five working separately.”

(Milton Keynes Christian Council)

Can the Intermediate Body be a place of facilitating and encouraging mission rather than maintenance?

The ‘Five Marks of Mission’, see front page, were given strong endorsement at the 1997 CTE Forum, and can be a useful guide to those seeking a stimulating way of understanding mission that has gained wide acceptance. Not all mission issues can be tackled at the county or city-wide level, but the Intermediate Body can be a means of encouragement to others to find ways of carrying out the mission of the Church together.

Would a ‘mapping’ exercise – carried out for example in Norfolk and Dorset, and in chosen parts of Northumberland – be a way of facing the real situation of the Churches in the county?

“‘Lincoln Christians in Mission’ (majoring on projects such as the distribution of the Jesus video) exists alongside another charitable agency which sponsors community development projects, both under the umbrella of Churches Together in Lincoln and District.”

(Churches Together in All Lincolnshire)

Is there sufficient contact between the Intermediate Body and local church life?

Is there opportunity to discuss the joys and problems of local church life generally, as well as ecumenical life in particular? Are there sufficient representatives of **local** church life on the Intermediate Body? Has the Intermediate Body got its ear to the ground?

Could more be done to encourage local Churches Together groups that seem to be stuck in a rut? Could the ecumenical officer or others devise a programme or process for careful reflection, hopefully leading to renewal and movement forward locally?

“We recognise the need to share a little more closely in the life of local Churches Together groups and to act as a facilitator, enabler, and indeed an encourager to their work.”

(Greater Manchester Churches Together)

Is the oversight of Local Ecumenical Partnerships effective?

Ultimately the responsibility for the oversight of LEPs rests with the church leaders. If they are meeting regularly to share this responsibility, what relationship do they have with the Intermediate Body? If this work of oversight is carried out through the meetings of the Intermediate Body, are the church leaders present, or if they are represented by others, are the decisions properly communicated to them?

If the oversight of Local Ecumenical Partnerships has been devolved to denominational ecumenical officers, are they meeting regularly and communicating clearly with the Intermediate Body and the church leaders?

Is the programme of *reviewing* LEPs properly sustained, and are the reviews followed through and acted upon?

Is the Intermediate Body representative of the whole range of church life in its area?

Are there representatives not just from the mainstream churches but ethnic minority churches, and the 'new' and community churches; and is there contact with other religious and 'para-church' movements? There are twenty-two members of Churches Together in England; some of these may have a presence in the county but not yet be represented on the Intermediate Body.

If there are large numbers of 'ethnic' churches in the area, has there been discussion of the CTE leaflet *Sharers, Guests or Tenants?*, arguing for better practice in the sharing of buildings?

"With the appointment of a new ecumenical officer in 1999 came also the appointment of several new denominational officers... It is a delight to report that we are in full agreement about working together and so we have agreed to do a systematic visitation as a team to all of the LEPs in our area."

(Churches Together in Cheshire)

"In Birmingham, where the Black-led Churches make up a fair proportion of the 650+ churches in the city, it remains a matter of frustration that it has been hard to involve these churches in the wider ecumenical life. Plans are in mind for the Council for Black-led Churches to become a 'Body in Association' with Birmingham Churches Together, and we hope that this will be a positive 'marker' for future progress."

(Birmingham Churches Together)

Is the Intermediate Body communicating its concerns and news effectively?

Most now publish a regular bulletin or newsletter – is this full of essential news and articles, or filled up with information that is also available elsewhere? Is the presentation as clear and effective as finances will allow? Could other expertise be brought in to improve its presentation, working alongside the County Ecumenical Officer?

Is there good contact with those responsible for the considerable religious output of local radio?

*"A recent failure has been the **Together** newspaper, distributed through all the churches....*

We did not have the finance to produce a sufficiently attractive newspaper; there was insufficient commitment from the various churches themselves. This disappointment is part of a wider problem of how to help local churches and constituent denominations relate to each other. This difficulty is compounded by the lack of common ecclesial boundaries."

(A county body in the West of England)

Is the Intermediate Body in touch with what is happening in the growth of regionalism?

England is now divided into eight regions (plus London) which are growing in influence and power. The churches are responding to this development, and have appointed regional officers. Some church leaders are asking whether ecumenical life is better co-ordinated from the regions rather than the counties.

Certainly an increasing number of social and political issues are being dealt with regionally, and the Intermediate Bodies need to be aware of this. But many feel that for the effective oversight of local ecumenism the regions are too large, and the county structure is still necessary.

(See the *Pilgrim Post* supplement *Regionalisation*, May 2001, available free from the CTE London office with an sae.)

Is there awareness of the growing importance of inter-faith issues, and how can this be dealt with effectively?

In many counties and cities with a large multi-racial population, there are communities of many faiths, and the inter-faith issues are crucial. Without duplicating the organisations that deal effectively with these issues, can the Intermediate Body be sensitive to the issues that this raises for the Churches?

Intermediate Bodies have begun to appoint Inter-Faith Advisers, as in Lancashire.

(For advice and resources on inter-faith issues, contact the Secretary of the Churches' Commission for Inter-Faith Relations, Revd Michael Ippgrave, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3NZ, tel 020 7898 1477.)

Are effective and well-supported Forums being organised?

Many counties report that the county-wide Forums that they have organised have not been well attended, which is discouraging. On the other hand some have looked hard at the programme and speakers for their Forum, and found new patterns. For example in North West London 200 attended a day congress on *London in Need – What would Jesus do?* It combined the ecumenical forum with the Anglican lay pastoral congress.

Granted the wide range of issues in which s/he needs to be involved, is the County Ecumenical Officer (CEO) being given enough hours to carry out the job effectively, or is there an element of exploitation, with more hours being worked than are being paid for? Are expectations realistic?

There are a few full-time CEOs. Most of the counties still manage on a "part-time" or "spare-time" appointment; but the more the above questions are followed through, and common life is being developed, the more work falls on the shoulders of the CEO. Can this be shared effectively with the denominational ecumenical officers? Can more resources be found to enable more full-time appointments, or more hours per week in part-time appointments?

North East Christian Churches Together, matching the area of the planned North East Assembly, has come into being in 2001, replacing the county bodies or church leaders meetings for Northumberland, County Durham, Tyne & Wear and Cleveland.

"The opportunity for cooperation with people of other faiths is a notable feature ... The Black Country Consortium responded to the church's request for a seat by offering one on condition that it could be demonstrated that the representative would speak for 'all Faiths'. The challenge has been taken up and presently the Bishop of Wolverhampton meets regularly with a multi-faith support group."

(Black Country Churches Engaged)

"For some years ... the attendance at our annual Assembly had been declining to a worrying extent, leaving us feeling that we were scratching where people were not itching; so we have re-vamped it... and held a Forum which was sufficiently successful that people want another next year."

(Essex Churches Consultative Council)

"We have come a long way but where do we go from here? Finance worries us and we wish to pay our County Ecumenical Officer a fair rate for the job which is being done."

(A county body in East Anglia)