

42. Ecumenical Report

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Why bother with ecumenism?

We shouldn't bother with it. Hear me out... I bother my manager to approve my annual leave. I bother my next door neighbours to find out what day I put the bins out. I bother my landlord to fix the leaking tap in my kitchen... Bothering is taking someone from where they want to be and inconveniencing them to somewhere else. That is not what ecumenism is for me. Ecumenism is an opportunity to be joyful and intentional. Ecumenism is something that we should be seeking and creating and growing and rejoicing in... So: why bother with ecumenism? Please don't bother with it, but let's embrace it joyfully together.

Words of Samuel Ebdon, a young adult Methodist from London, addressing the Forum of Churches Together in England (CTE) in March 2025. Samuel articulated the joy and the enrichment of our faith, and of the witness and service we can offer to our communities, that come with a truly ecumenical perspective on – and ecumenical engagement with – the Church's life. He turned the question "Why bother?" on its head, debunking the notion that ecumenism is something to be experienced as a hassle or a burden: rather, done right, it is the very opposite – life-giving, energising, faith-building, and rooting us more profoundly in Christ.¹

2025 has been hailed by the World Council of Churches as an 'ecumenical year'. It is a year in which, unusually, both western and eastern Churches have celebrated Easter at the same time. And it is a year in which many Churches across the world are marking the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in 325, from which (with augmentations by the Council of Constantinople in 381) originated the Nicene Creed – which unites Christians of so many traditions in our understanding of God's Trinitarian nature, to this day.

Ecumenism at national level

CTE Forum 2025

The triennial Churches Together in England (CTE) Forum, which took place in Swanwick over 17-19 March, was an outstanding demonstration of the reality articulated by Samuel Ebdon above. The theme of the Forum was *One but not the Same: Celebrating diversity – Living with difference*. The Forum brought together nearly four hundred representatives from CTE's more than fifty Member Churches and its associated ecumenical organisations, including many Methodists. Its programme included high-quality presentations accompanied by profoundly stimulating artistic reflections on a number of key issues for our churches and communities today, from a truly diverse range of Christian perspectives. These issues included: the call to peace; synodality (walking together) in the life of the churches; the Priesthood of All Believers; Artificial Intelligence and the Church; Racial Justice and reparations; and the significance today of the Council of Nicaea.

The Forum's concluding address was given by Methodist President of Conference, the Revd Helen Cameron (in her capacity, at that time, as one of the six Presidents of CTE), on the theme "The Pursuit of Unity". In Helen's words: "My deep desire is that we might rediscover the joy of Christian Unity, and shed some of the burdens about our disunity in order to embrace more fully the joy of our God-given unity."

Helen's address continued later, "Ecumenism must not become a technical conversation: It's got to begin with the profound love of God in Jesus Christ for each of us and for all the world. So this is my

¹ Samuel's presentation, as a winning contestant in the 2025 CTE Forum's *Theology Slam* competition on the theme "Why bother with ecumenism?", can be viewed in full at www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDgbw-NgFF8

Call to Arms: I am always willing to take part in drafting conversations for statements; but I want us in our ecumenical relationships to be filled with the joy and the hope and the love that Christ gives us through the Holy Spirit. Because that's the holy living to which we are called.

"And we are mistaken if we associate the holiness of God with separateness, with separation: because we know that the Jesus-event is about the exact opposite. It's about God coming to be with us, and to be in the difficult places. And the coming of Jesus casts a new light on everything: you can't look at things in the same way anymore. We are invited to be caught up in the mystery of God's love, and to speak of the beauty and the splendour of God's love, and to show that generous and profligate love of God to those who need it most. And if we can't do that together, we are lost....

"My prayer is that we will abandon separatism, and take up love."²

Churches Together in England

In addition to its triennial Forum, CTE continues as a key strategic partner for the Methodist Church in our engagement ecumenically in England. It provides significant support to us, both in working together with other Churches at national level, and in supporting and resourcing local ecumenical relationships. CTE's current strategic objectives and priorities are as follows:

Objective 1: Support CTE's role of assisting the churches speaking into the world

- Ensure that a variety of Christian voices are reflected on key issues emerging from the churches.
- Develop CTE's reputation as the go-to place for ecumenical information in England.

Objective 2: Develop the work of diversity for CTE and its members

- Develop a new generation of young ecumenists.
- Deepen and broaden the engagement of Member Churches with the 'Living with Diversity Well' ecumenical journey.
- Engage Member Churches with emerging Racial Justice themes.

Objective 3: Provide an environment for members to share their understanding, experience and practice of mission

- Facilitate and enable churches to work effectively together in mission through co-ordinating groups, conferences and other projects.
- Develop partnerships with other mission-focused groups.

Objective 4: Find ways to support intermediate and local ecumenism³

- Continue to support quality training, the sharing of good practice and resources to support intermediate and local ecumenism.
- Deepen the relationship between CTE, its Member Churches and intermediate and local ecumenism.
- Increase the diversity of Member Churches engaged in intermediate ecumenism.
- Develop intermediate ecumenism in areas where it is not currently functioning.

Objective 5: Create more opportunities for churches to do theology together

- Prioritise CTE's engagement in ecumenical bi-lateral conversations and other opportunities for ecumenical dialogue.
- Encourage ecumenical theological publications and conversations.

² Much more information about the 2025 CTE Forum, including a link to video recordings of Helen Cameron's full address and all of the keynote contributions to the event, can be found at <https://cte.org.uk/about/about-cte/forum/2025-forum/>

³ The term 'intermediate ecumenism' means ecumenism at regional or county level, for example through county-scale Churches Together groups, and the work of ecumenically-appointed County Ecumenical Officers.

- Maximise the opportunity of Member Churches celebrating 1700 years of the Council of Nicaea.

Objective 6: Find ways to extend CTE's role in relationship building

- Support CTE Presidency Groups to deepen ecumenical relationships.⁴
- Collaborate with other ecumenical instruments and networks.
- Maximise opportunities to build ecumenical relationships with CTE Members and other movements.

The Methodist Church is represented on CTE's Enabling Group by the Revd Dr David Chapman and by the Connexional Ecumenical Officer, the Revd Steven Cooper, who was also appointed this year as a Trustee of CTE. The Churches Group for Evangelisation, coordinated by CTE, is chaired by our own Director of Evangelism and Growth, Trey Hall.⁵

The Free Churches Group

The Free Churches Group (FCG) now encompasses 29 denominations in England and Wales, including two new member churches in the past year: the Redeemed Christian Church of God, and Vineyard Churches UK & Ireland. The FCG continues to support its member churches in seeking to promote faithful Christian witness in the public square; in particular through enabling routes into chaplaincy – in prisons, healthcare, education and the military – for smaller churches which historically have not had easy access to serving society in this way.

For the past three years, until March 2025, the Moderator of the Free Churches Group (and thereby one of the six Presidents of CTE) has been the out-going President of the Conference, the Revd Helen Cameron. On Palm Sunday, Helen handed on this mantle for the next three years, to the Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson of the United Reformed Church.⁶

Cytûn: Churches Together in Wales

Cytûn's work is wide-ranging in facilitating opportunities for connection between the Churches in Wales, and has a particular focus on supporting churches in engaging, together, with public policy issues. In July 2024, Cytûn welcomed a new General Secretary, Dr Cynan Llwyd who is leading this work energetically. The Methodist Church plays a significant role in Cytûn, with its Board of Trustees being chaired by Methodist District Chair, the Revd Jennie Hurd.⁷

The Covenanted Churches in Wales

The Commission of Covenanted Churches in Wales, of which the Methodist Church is a partner Church, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.⁸ The Commission is chaired by a Methodist, Ms Miriam Moules. Proposals for how we might achieve full visible unity in Wales have been put forward on a 'now or never' basis, with the Commission adopting a 'sunset clause' for the Covenant of 2028 for these proposals to make progress. These proposals include papers on 'supplemental ordination and commissioning', that would enable a new relationship of unity between the Covenant's five partner Churches. The draft proposals constitute a four-pronged approach that includes:

- Shared decision making for mission and service;
- Shared oversight and leadership;
- Shared understanding of ordination;

⁴ CTE's Member Churches are grouped into six groups, from each of which is designated a CTE President. These six Presidency Groups are: the Church of England; the Roman Catholic Church; the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches; the 'Fourth Presidency Group'—comprising Lutheran churches, Quakers, and the Church of Scotland (Presbytery of England); the Orthodox Churches; and the Free Churches Group (of which the Methodist Church is a member).

⁵ More information about CTE and its work is available at <https://cte.org.uk/>

⁶ More information about the Free Churches Group can be found at www.freechurches.org.uk

⁷ More information about Cytûn is available at www.cytun.co.uk

⁸ The Covenanted Churches in Wales are: the Covenanted Baptist churches, the Presbyterian Church of Wales, the United Reformed Church, the Methodist Church, and the Church in Wales (Anglican).

- A joint commission to develop shared patterns of worship.

The proposals are not yet finalised, and will in due course have to come to the Conference and governing bodies of the other four partner Churches. So far discussions have been fruitful, and the author of the paper on 'supplemental ordination and commissioning' is in liaison with Methodist colleagues, to seek to ensure that, when it comes to the Methodist Conference, what is proposed is able to meet with the Conference's approval.

Ecumenism in Scotland

The Scottish Christian Forum is now the ecumenical body in Scotland, this following on from the decision of the 2024 Methodist Conference, along with that of ecumenical partners (the members of ACTS).⁹ Work is now underway to sort out the working methods for this body, and put into practice the decisions made by the Churches in Scotland. Alongside this, the work of trusteeship for ACTS continues, with that body also changing and developing into its new role as a grant giving body.

There are a number of bi- and tri-lateral partnerships and declarations within the ecumenical landscape in Scotland, that allow for the addressing of issues between respective Churches, and the growth of friendship both locally and institutionally. Among these is the Episcopalian, Methodist and United Reformed relationship within 'EMU', which in the next year will be undergoing its periodic review. Alongside this the EMU Churches, working with the Church of Scotland and others, are conducting an ecumenical audit of church life in Scotland, looking at both local, regional and national matters, to see where things are going well and where more support is needed.

Methodist relationships with particular Churches

The Church of England

The Methodist Church in Britain and the Church of England are committed to an especially close relationship with one another under the Anglican-Methodist Covenant. Signed on 1 November 2003, the present connexional year marks the Covenant's 21st anniversary. A special anniversary service was held at Methodist Central Hall Westminster, followed by evensong in Westminster Abbey, in November 2024. At that event, both the then-Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and President of the Conference Helen Cameron spoke solemnly and with sincerity: both about the frustration of not having achieved more in our journey together as Churches over the past 21 years, but also recognising how far we have come – and the potential and the mandate that our Covenant relationship continues to hold, for us to grow much closer in our life together. With her address, the President of the Conference articulated a profound vision of what our life together as Churches should mean:

"...We all know too well that our desire for unity can get overtaken by our fears about losing things – particularly control; about having to let go and becoming different. But if the Cross is the place where we are truly one, then we need to learn again the strange upside-down nature of God's order: where what appears to be loss is found to be gain; what appears to be death is really life in all its fullness; what appears to be desolation is glory.

"To be renewed this day in our faithfulness to God's gift and promise of unity, through our Covenant together, is to be renewed in our willingness to be together where Jesus is, in his lifting up upon the Cross. To be where Jesus is, upon his Cross, is to suffer, and resist the powers that be and their vision for the world. 'When I am lifted up,' says Jesus, 'I will draw all people to myself.' To be where Jesus is on his Cross is necessarily to have a universal horizon.

⁹ ACTS is Action of Churches Together in Scotland — from 1990 to 2022 the national ecumenical organization for churches in Scotland, which is now defunct in that form, but is transitioning to become a grant-giving body to support ecumenical work in Scotland.

“Our trust in each other, this Covenant, our Christian unity cannot be an end in itself. It has value if it’s a necessary step towards the unity that God wills for the whole world. Otherwise, we’re just part of the continued polarizations of the world in terms of faith and no faith, and every faith.

“To be renewed in our search for Christian unity, which this anniversary of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant permits, surely is to commit ourselves to a larger and more urgent unity – which includes most obviously the divisions between religions and faiths that are the source of so much pain and hurt and destruction in our world currently.

“So my prayer at this moment is that we will keep walking together in trust and in hope: not necessarily towards each other; but hand in hand together, towards the world – where peace is required, and justice needs seeking. May we do that together, in and through the love of God.”

Life in Covenant

The past several months have been a difficult time for the Church of England institutionally; and relationships at local level with Methodists, while excellent in many places, continue not always to be easy in others. Methodists continue to experience difficulties with the Church of England’s provision for ministry to those who are opposed to the ministry of women. And so the way forward in our relationship together as Churches is not without its challenges. Nevertheless we continue to explore how we may build bridges and share more closely in each other’s life and ministry.

In February, the President and Vice-President of the Conference met with the Archbishop of York in their annual meeting (that would normally also include the Archbishop of Canterbury, but for that position being vacant at the time). Their discussion included sharing around the joys and challenges affecting our two Churches at the moment. Both the President and the Archbishop expressed a shared desire to move forward with the ongoing work needed to enable fuller sharing between our Churches in the mission of God, including work towards a hoped-for relationship of ‘full communion’ between our Churches, in which our ordained ministers will be able to serve interchangeably between the two. There was conversation around the key issue of safeguarding in the life of our Churches, to which the Vice-President, Carolyn Godfrey, brought particular insight from her professional experience as a Safeguarding Officer. A mutually illuminating discussion about the distinctive ministries of deacons in the Methodist Church and the Church of England led to a shared desire for further conversation to learn about the different forms diaconal ministry takes in our two Churches, and about how those ministries may relate with one another. The meeting also included discussion of the Methodist Church’s leading role in the Let’s End Poverty campaign, and about how our churches can share together in responding to the needs of local communities.

The ‘Life in Covenant’ Group continues to meet regularly, to help support the relationship between our two Churches; and the Faith and Order bodies of our two Churches have recently begun to re-examine the *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* proposals that might enable full interchangeability of ministers (in the first instance, presbyters) between our two Churches. This work continues.¹⁰

MAPUM: Methodist-Anglican Panel for Unity in Mission

The MAPUM – which in addition to Methodist and Anglican representatives includes active observer participants from the United Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Baptist Union – continues to meet regularly to support shared mission between the Methodist Church and its Anglican and other ecumenical partners, particularly at local level. The focus of MAPUM is not on Anglican-Methodist relations *per se*, but more broadly on the mission of the Church in Britain, and on how Methodists and Anglicans – together with others – can most effectively share in that enterprise.

A successful initiative of the MAPUM in March was an online joint gathering of Methodist Superintendents and Church of England Area Deans and their colleagues, to learn from each other about the ways in which Circuits and deaneries work, and to explore how they might work together. This gathering established a precedent for such joint online gatherings for Anglican and Methodist

¹⁰ For more on the Anglican-Methodist Covenant for England, see <https://anglican-methodist.co.uk>

colleagues, which will be developed further, to explore various issues of mutual concern in the exercise of our mission and ministry in local communities.

The Roman Catholic Church

The Methodist Church received with sadness the news of the death of His Holiness Pope Francis, and paid tribute to his life of faithful Christian witness.¹¹ At the time of writing, we await news of the late Pope's successor, and hold in prayer the Roman Catholic Church as she navigates this period.

The British Methodist-Roman Catholic Dialogue Commission met over three days in November 2024 in the ecumenical shrine village of Walsingham, Norfolk, to conclude its work of the past five years. The commission worked on its final report of this quinquennium, which will be released soon, and prepared for the next round of its work. The commission includes representatives of both the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England & Wales, and of Scotland; and Methodist representatives from across Britain, although we currently have a vacancy for a Methodist participant from Scotland.

On the agenda for the dialogue's coming phase of work is the study document *The Bishop of Rome*, published by the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity in June 2024. Issued with the blessing of the late Pope Francis, it is a creative and generous-spirited document that seeks, with humility and self-awareness, to explore ways in which the office and ministry of the Pope might come to be offered, understood and received as a gift for all the Churches; as way of helping to signify to the world the essential unity of the Church.¹²

The Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome (MEOR)

The Methodist Church in Britain continues to support the excellent work of the Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome. The Director of the MEOR, currently the Revd Matthew Laferty, has for some years been deployed as a mission partner of the British Methodist Church. A process is now underway to transfer the mechanism by which the Director is deployed to the United Methodist Church, working in partnership with the World Methodist Council and other partners through the MEOR Forum¹³ – the governing body of the MEOR, co-chaired by the General Secretary of the World Methodist Council and the President of the Methodist Church in Italy (OPCEMI). The Methodist Church in Britain will remain a close partner with the MEOR, but this change in its organisational arrangements will enable it to break free from historical concerns of being too heavily under the direction of British Methodism, and enable it to flourish as the representative body in Rome of the World Methodist Council.¹⁴

The United Reformed Church

The Methodist-URC Liaison Group continues to meet twice in each calendar year, once in person usually in London and once by video conference, to discuss topics of common interest and concern to both Churches, especially in relation to where the two Churches work together in Local Ecumenical Partnerships. Recent topics have included: the deployment of ordained ministry at a time of acute shortage of ministers; trusteeship and oversight in relation to Local Churches, Circuits (Methodist) and mission areas (URC); and the constitutional status of Ecumenical Areas. The group has published guidance notes for the welcome and induction of Methodist and URC ministers in Local Ecumenical Partnerships and is currently working on general guidance concerning the formulation of Terms of Settlement and Letters of Understanding in situations where a URC minister is to serve on the staff of a Methodist Circuit or a Methodist minister is to serve on the staff of a URC Mission Area. We encourage Local Ecumenical Partnerships to rediscover the rich ecclesial and spiritual endowments of the Methodist and Reformed traditions, as found for example in the offices of elder and steward. In all its work, the group takes account of the different legal and ecumenical context in Scotland and in

¹¹ The Methodist Church's full statement on the death of Pope Francis, with a prayer of thanks for his life, is available at www.methodist.org.uk/about/news/a-statement-on-the-death-of-his-holiness-pope-francis/

¹² The document *The Bishop of Rome* is available to read at www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2024/2024-06-13-il-vescovo-di-roma-nuovo-documento-dpuc.html

¹³ These partners include the Methodist Church in Britain, the Italian Methodist Church and the European Methodist Council.

¹⁴ Visit the website of the Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome at <https://meorome.org>

Wales. The group is grateful for the support and guidance of the respective denominational ecumenical officers, Steven Cooper (Methodist) and Lindsey Brown (URC). The presence of Hilary Treavis, ecumenical officer for the Baptist Union, as an observer is greatly valued for her wisdom.

International ecumenical engagement

The Methodist Church in Britain maintains ecumenical links internationally, not least through its membership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE).¹⁵

In March 2025 the Methodist Church was represented by the Connexional Ecumenical Officer at an historic ecumenical conference in Rawalpindi, Pakistan hosted by the Christian Study Centre – an ecumenical institution that involves the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Pakistan (our partner Church in Pakistan, being a union of Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian and Lutheran Churches), and others. The theme of the Conference was the Council of Nicaea at 1700 years, and what it means for the Church today – particularly in responding to a context that is majority-Muslim. Keynote speakers who travelled to Pakistan for the conference included HE Kurt Cardinal Koch of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, the Rt Revd Dr Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and HE Archbishop Angaelos of the Coptic Church in Britain. The conference represented a significant and internationally noteworthy moment of ecumenical witness by the Churches.¹⁶

In October 2025, in this 1700th anniversary year of the Council of Nicaea, the World Council of Churches will hold the Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order, near to Alexandria in Egypt. This is a major global gathering, the last such conference having taken place in 1993. The theme of the Conference will be: “Commemorating the Council of Nicaea: Where Now for Visible Unity?” The Methodist Church in Britain will be represented at the conference by the Revd Evelyn Bhajan.

Conclusion

This report in many ways only scratches the surface of the ecumenical life of the Methodist Church. There are many other areas of shared engagement with other Churches, across the Church’s life both connexionally and locally, which are not captured here. Some of these points of ecumenical engagement are reflected in other reports to the Conference.

Locally, up and down the Connexion, Methodist churches are actively engaged in partnerships of various kinds with their local ecumenical neighbours. In the past year, for example, well over 200 Methodist Local Churches have entered into or renewed arrangements to licence their premises to local ecumenical partner churches for use for worship – most commonly Pentecostal and new and independent churches that may not have their own premises.

The past year has been the first for some time in which the Methodist Church has had a full-time Connexional Ecumenical Officer. The Methodist Church’s ecumenical relationships locally are also supported by an expert network of District Ecumenical Officers, who do a huge amount to promote and enrich the ecumenical life of the Methodist Church – although there are vacancies for these roles in some Districts. In addition we are indebted to the staff of TMCP (Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes), to whom falls a significant amount of work in supporting Local Churches in their ecumenical arrangements, wherever property is concerned.

Work has begun, albeit at an early stage, on formulating an Ecumenical Strategy for the Methodist Church, in order to give a clear and coherent basis to our ecumenical engagement at every level of the Church’s life. This will come to the Conference in due course.

¹⁵ See the websites: CTBI: <https://ctbi.org.uk> – WCC: <https://oikoumene.org> – CPCE: www.leuenberg.eu

¹⁶ More information about the Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi – and about the conference that took place 27th-30th March 2025 – can be found at the Centre’s Facebook page at www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100091624969153

*****RESOLUTION**

42/1. The Conference received the Report.