

39. Ecumenical Report

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Gathered by one Shepherd

Extracts from the homily of Pope Francis to those gathered for the Ecumenical Prayer Vigil, St Peter's Square, Rome, September 2023

"Together". Like the early Christian community on the Day of Pentecost. Like one flock, loved and gathered by one Shepherd, Jesus. Like the great crowd in the Book of Revelation we are here, brothers and sisters "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9), from different communities and countries, daughters and sons of the same Father, inspired by the Spirit received in baptism, and called to the same hope (cf. Ephesians 4:4-5)

As we approach the important anniversary of the great Council of Nicaea, let us ask that we may know how, like the Magi, to worship in unity and in silence the mystery of God made man, certain that the closer we are to Christ, the more united we will be among ourselves. And as the wise men from the East were led to Bethlehem by a star, so may the heavenly light guide us to our one Lord and to the unity for which he prayed. Brothers and sisters, let us set out together, eager to meet him, worship him and proclaim him, "so that the world may believe" (John 17:21).

A group of Methodist young adults accompanied the Secretary of the Conference to attend the ecumenical vigil in Rome in September 2023. The vigil was part of the Pope's initiative of a process of 'synodality', encouraging the voices of all within the Roman Catholic Church to be heard and to include the voices of ecumenical partners in that listening.

Trish Earlam, one of the participants offers a reflection on the Methodist Church website of her sense of being at times lost, and yet the joy and affirmation of being part of such a broad and welcoming ecumenical event. Her reflection is at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/our-stories/together-gathering-of-the-people-of-god/> and here are a few extracts:

I often get lost; but if I am lost in worship, even if it is in another language, and I can feel God's presence, then it is a good thing.

Throughout the weekend we lived with host families. This gave us an insight to life in Rome. Some families spoke English well, while others spoke none at all, we

muddled through using our hands, Spanish, French and sometimes our phones for translations. We shared food and stories, hobbies and found similarities within the differences. I will be staying in touch with our wonderful host Gabriella.

We met each another as a Parish Group, as a Methodist Group, and we were hosted by the Revd Matthew Laferty the Executive Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome for two evening meals. There was a wonderful sense of unity and inclusion throughout the whole weekend. I often get lost but if I am lost in togetherness with people from all backgrounds, denominations, and cultures then this is a good thing.

When thinking about what I shall pass on to the young people I work with, the congregations I preach to and the ecumenical partners I gather with, I shall tell them that this trip has taught me rather than fearing being lost in the differences, I should be lost more often in wonder, worship, and togetherness.

Life in Covenant

On 3 November 2003 the Anglican-Methodist Covenant was signed, representing a new relationship and new hope for transformation as the British Methodist Church and the Church of England committed themselves to work together for the sake of Christ's mission. The Life in Covenant Group and the Methodist Anglican Panel for Mission and Unity (MAPUM) are supporting plans for a year of events marking the 'coming of age' of the Covenant as it reaches its 21st anniversary in November this year. It is hoped that a service will be held on 4 November at which the Archbishop of Canterbury and the President and Vice-President will be present – this will be an affirmation of on-going commitment to work together, as well as an opportunity to acknowledge the areas in which the commitments within the Covenant are as yet unfulfilled.

When meeting with the President and Vice-President of the Conference, both the Archbishops of Canterbury and York spoke warmly and with commitment of the need for the covenant relationship between our churches to continue and to be deepened.

It is in this context that the new Life in Covenant Group has met to continue the work of advocating for and supporting the Covenant – with a realism that many in both churches do not know of its existence, or understand its meaning for local mission and ministry. The Revd Tim Norwood (CofE Officer for Local Ecumenism) and the Connexional Ecumenical Officer facilitated an online meeting of District and Diocesan Ecumenical Officers, enabling a warm and realistic conversation about the impact of the Covenant in their contexts and participants offered helpful suggestions about ways to mark the 21st anniversary.

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Free Churches Group (FCG)

The Free Churches Group comprises twenty-seven denominations which seek to promote faithful Christian witness in the public square.

FCG seeks to express the unity in Christ that is shared by Free Churches in England and Wales by promoting fellowship, shared counsel and working together, where possible, to extend Christ's kingdom in every sphere of society. This is done whilst recognising that each Group Member remains at liberty to fulfil its own distinctive witness and mission.

There is a particular focus on chaplaincy work in Prisons, Healthcare and Education although much wider issues in these areas and other fields are considered. Maintaining the spiritual testimony of the Free Churches, upholding their full religious liberty and taking action on matters of principle, where appropriate, are rooted in FCG's mission.

A recent initiative is a collaboration between the FCG and the Methodist Church in launching The Chaplaincy Chain Podcast which aims to open up conversations about the joys and challenges of chaplaincy by exploring its depths and breadths. Follow the link to hear the Moderator of the Free Churches Group, the Revd Helen Cameron, host a conversation about the importance of honouring chaplaincy in the life of the church.

Churches Together

The various national and pan-national ecumenical bodies continue to work together, producing resources, encouraging shared mission and ministry, and learning from one another as we all work out what it means to be the Body of Christ in this challenging world.

The Methodist Church continues to be committed to working with ecumenical partners from a wide variety of Christian traditions. We continue to encourage flexible ways of working together wherever possible as we engage in God's mission. The call to unity is a gospel imperative and a mission imperative and we continue to be challenged by the "Lund Principle"¹ that we should "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately." The challenge is not only to

1 The Lund principle is derived from a question raised by the 1952 Faith and Order Conference of the World Council of Churches, held at Lund, Sweden. "Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?"

seek to act together but to articulate, understand and seek ultimately to resolve or to hold together those deep differences which divide us.

The Concordat between the United Methodist Church and the Methodist Church in Britain continues to offer opportunities for mutual learning and support for both churches. Four members of the Methodist Church in Britain have attended the UMC General Assembly, at a time when that Church faces great challenges, with a number of conferences and some local churches disaffiliating from the denomination.

Engagement with our Methodist and Uniting Church partners in Europe continues through the work of the European Methodist Council (EMC) which continues to meet online and in person. The EMC is a critical place for us walking with UMC Conferences as they make decisions about their future and we pray for all those impacted by decisions currently being made.

We also continue in our work with the Churches' Commission on Migration in Europe (CCME) as well as our support of the Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome (a partnership with EMC and the World Methodist Council) and Mediterranean Hope (a partnership project based in Lampedusa working with refugees).

Since 2019 the role of Connexional Ecumenical Officer has been part of the work of the Assistant Secretary of the Conference (ASC), supported by an Assistant Ecumenical Officer. Whilst the ASC will retain oversight of the work of the new Connexional Ecumenical Officer, for capacity reasons the roles have been separated. The Revd Steven Cooper was appointed to the role of Connexional Ecumenical Officer by the Methodist Council and began work at the end of April.

*****RESOLUTION**

39/1. The Conference receives the Report.