

The Ecumenical Perspective

The *Priorities* document insists that the British Methodist Church will pursue its objectives “in partnership with others wherever possible”. One expression of this is the denomination’s commitment to working with other denominations and through ecumenical instruments, networks and agencies. This expresses our commitment to unity in mission: finding diverse ways of responding to the overriding mission challenge facing the churches as well as responding to the High Priestly prayer of Jesus “that they may all be one . . . that the world may believe”.

[2] Current Connexional engagements include participation in international and national ecumenical bodies, processes around the Covenant with the Church of England and the joint pastoral strategy with the United Reformed Church for the three nations that both churches serve. In many localities Methodists are part of Churches Together groups and similar partnerships. For a significant minority of Methodists, their local church allegiance is already expressed through Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs), nearly half of which are single congregation partnerships which also involve the United Reformed Church.

[3] How would the Team Focus proposals in the Core Paper affect and assist these ecumenical aspects of being Methodist? How would they make ecumenical partnerships more effective in responding to the overriding challenge that faces all the churches in 21st century Britain?

Formal Structures

[4] The Filters Panel examined existing arrangements serviced by the Connexional Team. They were not convinced a smaller Team should continue devoting resources to European ecumenical bodies in addition to their global parallels. Within Britain the Panel questioned whether there was a need for both national Methodist ecumenical officers (in England, Wales and Scotland) and District ones; and all this in addition to the ecumenically appointed officers.

[5] JSG however felt that in current circumstances all these structures should still be supported by the Team, although noting that in Wales a locally funded arrangement was about to be put in place. For the longer term beyond 2008, they recommend a time-limited Project to examine how best to support the Scotland District in its ecumenical relationships.

[6] The proposal for the reconfigured Team includes the “Red” responsible for External Relationships assuming the title of Connexional Ecumenical Officer and some of the representative tasks of the present postholder. As ecumenical activity cannot be confined within one area of the Team’s work, it is proposed that the Leadership Support and Research Unit should take on much of the Team’s work in supporting ecumenical efforts. This would include being the place within the Team with the expertise to advise on the structuring of LEP constitutions and related formalities.

[7] Overall this should provide as least as good a service from the Team on formal ecumenical matters as is offered by the present Team.

[8] During the course of the work on Team Focus, we have also kept in touch with our partner denominations, especially on those areas of the Connexional Team’s work that currently have an element of formal partnership with a sister Church.

Priorities into Practice: Team Focus

Anglican-Methodist Covenant

^[9] The Core Paper proposal would make little difference to work on the Covenant. The Joint Implementation Commission (and any successor body) would be a Project in the terms of the proposal. This would ensure there was a clear deadline by which time any work had to be completed if Team resources were to be used to support it.

Local Opportunities

^[10] Much of the most fruitful ecumenical work grows out of local relationships. The Connexional Team is unlikely to be the initiator or main driving force behind such progress. However, nothing in the Core Report would make these initiatives more difficult. Indeed, although the historical, internal differences between denominations can be blockages to partnership working, they seem to have little relevance to the mission challenge facing the churches.

^[11] While the Team may not be the initiator, the Core Paper proposal potentially provides more help for the places with energy for ecumenical initiatives through the increase in grants available for innovative local mission work.

United Congregations

^[12] Frustrated by duplication and overlapping - but not identical - systems, many united congregations would hope for a reconfigured Connexional team that simplified the "bureaucracy" and governing structures. There is no quick or easy way to achieve this.

New Option

^[13] The move to a smaller Connexional Team has opened up a new possibility that may prove very helpful beyond 2008. After discussing options informally with the senior officers of the United Reformed Church, JSG have commissioned with them a joint feasibility study into the possibility of sharing London premises with the URC equivalent of the Connexional Team. JSG hope it will be possible to make a report to the March meetings of the URC Mission Council and the Methodist Council and receive a steer from each of those bodies. If sharing were to take place, the opportunities for identifying fresh possibilities for increasing the two denominations' capacity for mission could be substantial. One aspect of this might be the streamlining of denominational procedures that are found irksome in those united congregations which include both Methodist and URC components.