

Response to
Embracing the Covenant
– report of the Joint Implementation
Commission under the
Anglican/Methodist covenant –
from the Manchester Diocese

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Introduction and context of the response

Embracing the Covenant (ETC) (2008) was the Quinquennial report of the Joint Implementation Commission (JIC) under the Covenant between the Methodist church of Great Britain and The Church of England.

In July 2008, General Synod passed the motion set out below proposed by the (now late) Bishop of Peterborough who was the co-chair of the JIC

‘That this Synod:

- (a) thank the members of the Joint Implementation Commission for their report *Embracing the Covenant* and for their work during the past five years;
- (b) commend the report, with its recommendations, for study, action and response in the Church of England, and for discussion with members of the Methodist Church;
- (c) endorse the Commission’s recommendations regarding the shape of its work in the next phase; and
- (d) request that Bishop’s Councils consider the report and refer it for study by other appropriate bodies in the dioceses and that responses be sent to the Council for Christian Unity by 31 December 2009.’

First and foremost we want to express our appreciation of the work of The Rt. Revd. Ian Cundy as co chair of the Commission. We also endorse the commendation and thanks that this motion expresses for the work of the Joint implementation Commission.

Methodology

The Bishop’s Council delegated the task of drafting a response to “Embracing the Covenant” to the Venerable Mark Ashcroft, appointed as Diocesan Ecumenical Officer in April 2009, who collaborated with John Fenner, the Manchester and Stockport District DEO.

The steps taken in compiling this response have been

- Meetings with Methodist DEO colleagues
- Review of the literature produced
- Consultation by email with the Council for Christian Unity
- Conference of Church of England and Methodist clergy with involvement in joint working in Greater Manchester and Rossendale
- Review of the 2008 Archdeacon’s Articles of Enquiry which included a question on the Covenant.
- Report back to Bishop’s Council in December 2009 and discussion there

Following discussions, this report focuses primarily on our response to the Chapter entitled “The Unity we have and the unity we seek” with comments also on the first chapter “Taking stock and looking ahead”.

Just as the foreword to ETC states “We share in the disappointment of others at the slow pace of change in the relationship between our churches”, we too would

echo these sentiments. The response draws on the encouragements that the Covenant has brought to the mission of the churches, as well as identifying the obstacles that practitioners at the local level still encounter.

There are thus three issues that we try to address:

- a) What is the progress of the Covenant thus far at local level?
- b) What hampers joint working and mission?
- c) Where should the implementation of the covenant be heading in the coming years?

What is the progress of the covenant thus far in Manchester Diocese?

The progress is patchy.

On the one hand there are pioneering pieces of joint working, one of which Nexus/Sanctus1 featured in the Embracing the Covenant report – and has, since that report, jointly appointed a Methodist to take over the leadership; on the other hand, the survey in the Articles of Enquiry 2008, revealed that 75% of Anglican parishes had minimal contact with Methodist colleagues either on a social level or in terms of joint worship, let alone joint mission.

There are, nevertheless, numerous encouragements along the way and we highlight just a few examples from practitioners working in Greater Manchester and Rossendale that the Diocese serves:

- Sharing of services – for some joint services are the highlights of worship
- Praying together as ministers is highly valued
- In addition to the Nexus/Sanctus1 Fresh Expression of church, the Fresh Expressions area Strategic Team (FEAST) together with the course on Mission Shaped Intro and Mission Shaped Ministry has been an excellent partnership with the Methodists Districts and now includes the URC.
- Deanery Pastoral plans formed by the Diocese in 2006 had ecumenical and often Methodist input.
- The new Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee has a senior Methodist representative.
- Making appointments in consultation, where this has happened has been an important affirmation of the relationship.
- At Emmanuel Salford – a new team, new church building, formation of a mission committee jointly, joint Community Day, working together has been hugely positive.
- Joint Lent groups and Holy Week activities happen in many areas including across churchmanship traditions.

- “At local level people don’t identify as Anglican or Methodist but just as members of St Catherine’s”
- Enabling Christian presence in a community whereas, if by themselves, there would be none
- The presence of a Methodist colleague on the Westcott project, which involves training ordinands through placements in inner city contexts.
- The organists at an Anglican parish and a Methodist church are now married to one another!!
- Amending Canon 28 is a big boost.

On a wider level, the regional Training Partnership (Southern North West Training Partnership) is an ecumenical training partnership on which and in which Anglican Reader students and ordinands train alongside Methodist counterparts, and are taught by Methodists as well as Anglicans. Although numbers of Methodists on the Course are disappointingly small, it is a good example of working together.

Reflection on Progress

In all of this, we discern a slow but sure change of culture, that working in partnership with one another across the two denominations is becoming second nature.

It is probably true to say that one result of the covenant is that the Methodist-Church of England link seems the natural one to pursue first in ecumenical thinking, though this has not excluded other denominations.

It is also noticeable that many of the places of ecumenical partnership are either areas with high deprivation or more rural areas e.g. Wardle, Bacup, Miles Platting and Salford. The driver of working together can appear to be necessity not vision.

What hampers joint working and mission?

There are a number of issues that make ecumenical working and implementing the covenant at a local level difficult.

Some of these are as follows:

- Many thought that the ecumenical dimension was consistently **an afterthought**, e.g. in appointments at the end of the process – “oh! we had better let the Anglicans / Methodists know.”
- **Bureaucracy** – this was perhaps the biggest bugbear; it includes
 1. The sending of duplicate sets of information on finance and statistics in different formats to the denominational head offices. This is made worse if a third denomination is involved.

2. The demands of finding representatives on numerous committees from both denominations can redirect energy for mission into maintaining the status quo.

3. To local practitioners it can seem as if “Senior staff”, head office staff, and legal departments are behind on their understanding of ecumenical matters and the difficulties local people face. This manifests itself in people being given conflicting advice from head office and delays in implementation. Likewise, power and authority were recurrent themes relating to the difficulties that people faced e.g. this quote, “Maintenance of [denominational] authority is more important than the maintenance of Christian presence in the community.”

- Ecumenical endeavour is often based on the **personal relationships** of the ministers; if one moves on and a new one appointed it can all fall apart.
- **New buildings** are a major headache – we have a number of these in progress or planned. Salford is going well thus far; however, projects at Withington, Droylsden, and Miles Platting are all proving difficult. This is partly because of the current economic climate, partly because they are all set in areas of high deprivation, but also because the necessary procedures and trust between the denominations is not yet in place.
- **Structures** as the report highlights are a hindrance to mission. Cultural differences regarding who has the authority and how decisions are taken is often not understood. Some would say that the structures and organisations appear incompatible with differing boundaries and radically different ways of for example deploying stipendiary clergy.
- **Recognition (or not) of ministers** from the other denomination is a major barrier to mission and also to a lesser extent the recognition (or not) of confirmation. Episcopal ministry cannot be ignored.

Where should the covenant be heading in the coming years?

This poses a number of questions

- What is the kind of unity we seek?
- What should the JIC be working on?
- What should we be doing locally?

Reflecting on the encouragements and hindrances that emerge above, there does need to be new energy and drive behind the implementation of the Covenant; a drive that comes from conviction and vision rather than mere necessity, but also a drive that is realistic in terms of what can be achieved and

what the priorities are. There needs to be a proper sense of urgency about the enterprise in the light of experience on the ground and the pressure that both denominations are facing with respect to the numbers of stipendiary clergy.

There is the cautionary tale of St George Abbey Hey and Abbey Methodist church. No progress was made in working together; both churches closed and now neither Anglicans or Methodists have a presence in that community. We are in danger of creating deserts especially in our cities where there is no Christian presence in our most deprived communities.

What is the kind of unity we seek?

Recalling Edinburgh 1910, the unity we seek **is one related to mission** rather than a unity that is focussed on ecumenism or unity itself. It is about what we do together, recognising the unity in Christ that is already shared.

We seek a unity where the ecumenical dimension is a **forethought** not an afterthought.

We seek a unity that results in consultation and care being taken on appointments and deployment. This would entail:

- Involvement of both denominations in appointments where an LEP comprises all or even part of the parish
- A 6 month probation when LEPs are involved to ensure that the person appointed can work ecumenically
- Minutes of the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee and the Deanery ones and the Circuit minutes relating to deployment should be shared

In addition to the practical unity that enables joint mission and working together, we support the structural unity that Embracing the Covenant advocates

We do need to seek **full visible communion**: although the authenticity of each others ordained ministers and sacraments are affirmed, we would like to move to the place where each others' ministers are fully recognised, and therefore sacraments are fully accepted, and indeed where each others confirmations are accepted.

We are also looking for **some kind of organic unity** which might involve

- looking at boundaries of Deaneries/Dioceses/Circuits and Districts in order to move to greater coterminosity
- streamlining the structures and bureaucracy

That is to say, organisational issues are factors that impede mission and so should be addressed, despite, people's reservations about the term.

One model of unity that might be examined is something akin to Orders such as the Franciscans which have a distinctive character and some independence within the one Roman Catholic Church.

What should the JIC be working on?

Although there was a good deal of practical material in “Embracing the Covenant”, especially on the comparison of decision making processes, the report still has the feel that much of the work has been focused on theoretical rather than practical issues, ontological rather than functional concerns. It may be time to concentrate more on the latter.

We recognise that the theoretical and practical always impinge on each other and we welcome the suggestion on page 21, points 4 and 5 of working on issues of confirmation and membership. This in turn will mean addressing issues of episcopate in due course.

One example of this would be national guidelines for Registrars giving legal advice on ecumenical matters such as recognition of ministers, joint worship as well as material on Constitutions and Sharing Agreements. This could be on an accessible website for preference.

Likewise, national good practice norms could be established to pilot Dioceses and Districts and Circuits through the decision making processes that enable joint working and the accountability structures that are appropriate e.g. on statistics and financial returns.

In November this year, a service celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the Chronically sick and disabled persons Act was held at Manchester Cathedral. This groundbreaking legislation changed the culture of the day by making it not simply good practice, but a requirement for local authorities to provide equal access to services for people with disabilities. **The legislative route** may be worth considering in implementing the covenant; for example from a Church of England perspective, making it a legal requirement for Methodists to be consulted as interested parties when

- a church is to be made redundant
- pastoral reorganisation is taking place

As regards the **future shape** of the commission, discussed at the end of Chapter 1, we are content with all the recommendations put forward. We are conscious that the URC have joined in with the Fresh Expressions team locally and it makes sense to incorporate the URC more into these discussions, while recognising the unique history and the Covenant between the Church of England and the Methodists.

What should we be doing locally?

We have already been involved in meetings for strategic planning across the Diocese. These have been well received but we can do more to work for the growth of the Kingdom and perhaps involve other partners in the discussion.

We clearly need to develop protocols for managing large projects involving new buildings that enable us to work together effectively.

Greater Manchester has a relatively large number of LEPs, many of which are good examples of joint mission and working together. For us our relationship as denominations is a significant and fruitful one. We look forward to the further implementation of the Covenant and offer our support to the JIC as it continues its work.