

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND

Review of Churches Together in Cumbria, 2017-2018

The remit of the review

1. Churches Together in England does not normally undertake reviews – we simply don't have staff capacity. However, given the importance of the pioneering work being done in Cumbria, we were happy to agree to the request of the Executive of Churches Together in Cumbria (CTiC) to carry out a review.
2. At the November 2017 Executive meeting, it became clear that in addition to reflecting on the purpose of CTiC, the mandate was actually much broader: to review the ecumenical endeavour in Cumbria and, in particular, to reflect on the relationship between Churches Together groups, God for All, mission communities and other ecumenical groupings.
3. We welcome this wider remit as it is clear that these are all interwoven and we cannot surgically separate out CTiC and Churches Together groups from the other many and exciting ecumenical currents in Cumbria.
4. It was also clear to us that we are not being asked to comment on the various structures of CTiC or, indeed, of the God for All and related structures. We remain unclear about the God for All and the Growing Together structures which we find particularly opaque. It is inevitable that in an evolving ecumenical environment there will be a degree of messiness, and occasionally, confusion.
5. Originally a longer timescale was envisaged for this review but this was truncated due to the resignation of Helen Boothroyd. A consequence is that we have relied very heavily for our reflections on conversations in two Executive meetings, a meeting of Church Leaders and a 'focus day' set up for us on 8 February 2018 when we met with people from Ambleside, Barrow, Carlisle and Hawkshead. We deeply appreciated this opportunity to meet a variety of people engaged ecumenically in various ways across the county. What we heard from all sources was fairly consistent and we hope that no other significant point of view has been omitted.



Characteristics of ecumenical relationships in Cumbria

6. It has become clear to us that the ecumenical landscape in Cumbria is distinctive for a variety of reasons.
7. Cumbria has had more than its fair share of tragedies and disasters – in particular, foot and mouth in 2001, the floods of 2009, the shootings of June 2010 and more recent floods. Responding to these has drawn the Churches closer together as they have responded to basic human need in so many ways. Their response to these disasters has established the Churches as a serious player in the eyes of Cumbria's administrative and political structures.
8. Working together at these times has forged strong relationships which have resulted in the desire for the Churches to work and grow together ever more closely. These relationships have been facilitated by the unique and challenging geography of Cumbria.

Here denominations which might have been wary of each other in other places have grown in understanding and mutual support. As one person put it to us, 'Here you have to get along with your neighbours.'

9. CTiC has played a seminal part in building these relationships, co-ordinating disaster responses and liaising with secular authorities. In particular, the work of the Social Responsibility Forum and its Officer has been key. CT Cumbria has heavily invested in social responsibility for many years and it has born fruit. The recent work on dementia has been given a framework and legitimacy and has been furthered by CTiC. We are delighted that CTiC has not waited for our report to appoint a new Social Responsibility Officer.
10. Well before God for All, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church had been exploring the idea of a United Area in Cumbria and it was partly to facilitate this that the URC North Western Synod created a separate URC Area for Cumbria which shared the boundaries of the Methodist District. These conversations were revived in 2009¹, very quickly involved Anglican observers and then developed into a tripartite conversation with the Carlisle diocese taking an equal place at the table. Co-terminosity was considered to be important for the development of 'an ecumenical county' and has been served by further bold decisions about changing boundaries.
11. None of this would be possible without a profound depth of relationship between Church Leaders. We have seen this over the years most clearly at county level and it is quite remarkable. We appreciate that this is dependent on the particular blend of personalities involved and the depth of their ecumenical understanding and tolerance and we sincerely hope that as leadership changes, the Churches will appoint leaders who will develop the pioneering work begun so strongly.²
12. We have also glimpsed strong relationships at local/mission community level – East of Eden and Barrow are shining examples of how people with profoundly different spiritualities and theological backgrounds can discover an energy in their shared discipleship and, where appropriate, ministries. We note with real pleasure that this applies not only to clergy but also to clergy and lay people working together. We say this because if Cumbria's vision is to succeed, it will need to harness the ministries of *all* God's people. All are called to be themselves, to play their unique part in what God intends for Cumbria.

The Cumbria vision

13. Cumbria has a remarkable ecumenical vision, and is truly at the cutting edge. There is nothing quite like Cumbria in the rest of English ecumenism. The scope and originality of what is being attempted is far-sighted and courageous. It is far-sighted because it is based on the recognition that no one denomination can ensure a consistent Christian presence across the county. In a sense the survival of 'territorial Christianity' in anything but name depends on ecumenical co-operation. The Churches of Cumbria have a long and deep commitment to social responsibility issues. God for All is intended to ensure that the evangelism aspect of mission is similarly resourced and valued.
14. The twin aims therefore of maintaining Christian presence in each community through the sharing of resources in mission communities, and the God for All intent of allowing every person in Cumbria to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, are demanding serious

¹ JB: I was asked to facilitate a URC/Methodist meeting on Saturday 17 January 2009 in Penrith and I believe this was the meeting which kick-started a series of meetings which appeared subsequently in my diary as 'United Area meeting' and, then, in April 2010, the 'tripartite meeting'. I ceased to facilitate the meetings when Cumbria appointed a CEO who belonged to none of the partner denominations. Subsequently, as the process developed, this criteria for a facilitator was considered unnecessary.

² This has already been done in the case of the URC Area President.

innovation. Our 'focus day' took place in the weeks before *Moving Mountains* and we encountered genuine enthusiasm that churches were planning and working together on this.

15. The vision is also courageous because it demands living with discomfort – cutting edges are painful places, where participants can easily be hurt. That 'hurt' comes in a variety of forms: leaving comfort zones, reaching across geographical and ecclesiological divides as large mission communities are formed, losing power, or having one's spheres of power re-defined or re-negotiated.
16. As Cumbria moves forward towards closer co-operation, commitment and communion³, the balancing act between the partner denominations in the Covenant Partnership and the Companion Churches becomes more challenging. We recognise the difficulty, at both county and local level, of Partners moving and working ever closer together without marginalising Companions and we celebrate the decision to move forward as far as possible in an inclusive way. This is where Churches Together in Cumbria is key.

Mission communities and power

17. Mission communities are clearly at a very early stage of negotiation. Their naming is not accidental – they are intended to enable mission and they are communities coming together and pooling resources to deliver the best possible pastoral care.
18. However, we picked up a lack of clarity about what they are and what they are for. We understand that Church Leaders and those steering the concept think of them as 'missional', charged primarily with the first of the five marks of mission 'To proclaim the good news of the kingdom'. However, the view from the ground is rather different and we received contradictory messages. Are they simply about practicalities? Are they federations of churches or 'super-parishes', an arrangement to cut down the number of Church Wardens and PCCs required? Are they akin to a single congregation LEP, sharing a common purse but worshipping in several different buildings? Is their primary purpose maintenance, about maintaining presence and enabling surplus buildings to be closed? Are they just for the Covenant Partners or can they include the Companion Churches too?⁴
19. Underlying that are issues of geography, identity and power. It would ill become outsiders to talk authoritatively about this, but what we heard was that geography is peculiarly significant in Cumbria, that local identity is fluid and varied – very different in South Lakeland to the Eden Valley, for example, and different again in Carlisle. That in itself presents challenges around the creation of mission communities.
20. A further challenge in rural Cumbria is 'vast geography and tiny numbers'. In one of our conversations we were told of a Methodist congregation with four members, another with eight, a Baptist church with four or five members. These numbers increase significantly in the tourist season so, for example, a Catholic congregation of 80 could find its numbers increased to 200 on some Sundays. These numbers also mean that ageing congregations are particularly vulnerable.

³ of the 'c' scale of ecumenical relationships. *Bishops Behaving Ecumenically* (David Hawtin, undated publication, p 14 www.methodist.org.uk/media/3030/bishops_behaving_ecumenically0707.pdf) states: In charting relationships both actual and aspirational, the Churches have drawn on this scale, each point beginning with the letter 'C': From Conflict to Competition to Co-existence to Co-operation to Commitment to Communion. Experience indicates that the movement is backwards as well as forwards. The 1987 Swanwick Declaration draws on this model with its call for the Churches to move 'from co-operation to commitment'. www.cte.org.uk/SwanwickDeclaration

⁴ We didn't see the [Archways](#) document until after our focus day. It stresses that the Covenant Partners will always be involved in a mission community and that 'other denominations are welcome to participate in different ways ... and will be invited to be part of ... conversations and planning. It doesn't actually say what is a mission community.

21. It is always difficult to talk about power in a church context, but we have to acknowledge its existence and potency because it relates closely to anxiety and fear, and therefore to pastoral effectiveness. Power isn't a bad thing. It's a gift of God and, at its best, it is power to empower others, not to control or disempower them. The Church shares in the authority of Jesus, and all denominations and networks of churches empower their various officers to exercise legitimate power. Ecumenical bodies and instruments do that too, with a slightly different theological nuance – our powers are, as it were, delegated to us by our Member Churches. So, when we talk about power, we are discussing legitimate power, and the ways in which those legitimacies interact and rub against each other.
22. There are clearly power issues around mission communities. Some of those are quite natural. Bringing four parishes into one unit will inevitably result in the question 'Can they do that in my parish?' Equally (and less helpfully) there will be incumbents who will try and resist the bishop's authority, come what may, because they don't agree with the vision: 'I don't want a mission community leader telling me what to do in my parish!' It becomes even more complicated when mission communities attempt to incorporate non-Anglican congregations with their different ecclesiologies, assumptions and authority structures.
23. A rather more subtle version of power is about the relationship between the Covenant Partners and the Companion Churches. In some places we picked up real anxieties that the creation of mission communities marginalises Companion Churches. 'There is always a tension because mission communities can't embrace all denominations.' In other places Companion Churches rejoiced at the progress being made and were acting as cheerleaders for mission communities. It might be worth probing this further to find if it is a function of geography (South Lakeland compared with Barrow for example) or of denomination (Baptist compared with Catholic for example). Or it may simply be dependent on the relationships between clergy in a particular location.
24. Another place where power issues are influential is in the development of the new structures to serve the putative ecumenical county – Cumbria Christian Learning is clearly intended to train and resource the whole Church in Cumbria, and the Reach team to spearhead its evangelistic efforts. What we picked up at grassroots was an anxiety (no more than that) about Anglican 'dominance'. It's worth staying with that for a moment.
25. Cumbria is where it is ecumenically because the diocese of Carlisle has exercised an ecumenical discipline and generosity well beyond anything we have encountered elsewhere. It has taken seriously the Anglican understanding that the parish church is at the service of all people in the parish area while respecting their personal ecclesial choices. So far as is possible within its legal constraints the diocese has striven to recognise its Covenant Partners and Companion Churches as true Churches of Jesus Christ and fellow pilgrims. It has put at the service of all a huge amount of its resources and has allowed its mission and priorities to be influenced by its ecumenical partners. There is huge ecumenical generosity here, a practical response to the Gospel imperative 'that all may be one that the world may believe'.⁵ That is reflected in the vision of God for All and mission communities that the Gospel and the mission of the Church are for the whole community, for all the people of Cumbria. That understanding is a gift of Anglican ecclesiology to the whole Church.
26. What we were hearing at the grassroots was the well-known ecumenical sound of the small confronted with the large. And in Cumbria that will always be there. Working with that reality will require infinite patience and linguistic carefulness from the Church of England – and an equal portion of self-questioning and tolerance from the smaller partners. It is no more and no less than a local working out of the ways Christianity has been historically structured in England. The art for all of us now is to understand how the established nature and advantages of the Church of England can be used creatively for

⁵ Paraphrase of John 17:21.

the maintenance of what remains of 'vicarious', 'implicit' or 'diffusive' Christianity, and how we can all build on that in shared mission. The Churches in Cumbria are already discovering that their gifts are complementary, 'Everyone knows that everyone has something to offer.'

27. The corollary of that, of course, is a question which must be posed and yet is probably impossible to answer. How can the visionary ecumenical developments in Cumbria be future-proofed? Given their dependence on the remarkable generosity of the diocese of Carlisle, what will happen if a future bishop decides to back-track?
28. It is worth adding here that we also noted with pleasure that the Covenant Partners are beginning to experience the fruits of their commitment in the sharing of ministerial resources where appropriate, a process that will only be aided by a positive reception of *Mission and Ministry in Covenant* by Methodist and Anglican decision-making processes.

Churches Together groups

29. Visionaries have their eyes on the future, on the days when mission communities include all denominations and congregations, are an established part of the scene, and Cumbria is fully ecumenical. That leads some to suggest that Churches Together groups are simply parallel structures, a duplication which saps energy and should be stopped. Why, they argue, do we need Churches Together groups when mission communities should be what it says on the tin, 'churches together'?
30. We do not wish to dampen enthusiasm, but we would point out that this is not what we have heard at grassroots or, indeed, at county level. As we've listened we've heard a number of different stories.
31. In Ambleside there is a strong Churches Together group. We were told of good long-standing relationships and it was clearly perceived as a place where all the churches can relate and work together on a level playing field. There was real anxiety that the formation of a mission community would result in the Companion Churches being marginalised. The obverse of that was the anxiety of one of the local clergy that Churches Together in Ambleside was almost a 'para-church' – 'a church in themselves' – or just a group of friends whose activities needed to be more firmly grounded within the church communities themselves. We didn't entirely understand this as, on enquiry, it seems as if all the clergy in Ambleside are full participants in the Churches Together group and most of the churches' mission, in the sense of social responsibility action, is funnelled through it. Was this an anxiety about lay leadership, we wondered, or about lay leadership by members of a Companion Church? The plea from Churches Together in Ambleside was for a 'mixed economy' of Churches Together groups and mission communities. 'Please don't throw the baby out with the bathwater' they said to us.
32. Hawkshead provided a different perspective, having joined forces with the benefice group. Although there was some regret that 'the Churches Together culture' and a sense of intimate fellowship had been lost, the gains in friendships and relationships across a wider geographical area outweighed them. Here there was no sense of the marginalisation of the Companion Churches. When we asked here what a mission community is, we were told that it signified a geographical area with a strong common evangelistic purpose and outreach. There was no suggestion that Covenant Partners and Companion Churches would have a different status within the mission community nor any hint of an understanding that a mission community would be the 'super parish'⁶ described in Ambleside.

⁶ Our words, as we struggled to understand mission communities, not theirs!

33. Ecumenical co-operation in Barrow, we were told, goes back to the 1930s 'when the churches came together to support the strikers with soup kitchens'. Here a very positive story was told of the ways in which Believe in Barrow, Churches Together in Barrow and the nascent mission community were working together and weaving creatively in and out of each other's activities and pieces of service. There was no sense of competition, with people and churches belonging to one, two or all, though there was no pressure, no expectation that anyone had to be at everything. We were told that each had a different character and while there were no clear boundaries (and nor did they want them), we came to understand that the strength of the Churches Together group was justice and social action, Believe in Barrow was more evangelistic and the mission community more collective. 'We are like a trinity', we were told, 'complementary not competitive. We are like a family, with different roles, but all the family of God.' Listening to this account was dynamic and energising, and we pondered how they had avoided the traps of possessiveness. All our interlocutors agreed that relationships and trust were key, that they weren't hung up on labels, and that all their activities were perceived by the people of the peninsula as being the work of 'the churches in Barrow', including the four independent churches, as well as the historic denominations.
34. Carlisle, again, presented another dimension – a sizeable city with many churches and a far larger independent sector much of which was ecumenically suspicious. Here the Churches Together group has done excellent and vibrant work through the years, including Street Pastors, a Fairtrade shop and shared children's and youth work. Some of its initiatives have broadened beyond the churches to those of other faiths or of no faith. At present Churches Together in Carlisle is struggling (hopefully temporarily) for leadership as both clergy and laity are over-stretched. Mission communities have yet to take off in Carlisle ('mission communities is like wading through mud') and they would be unable to encompass the wide spectrum of church allegiance in Carlisle and may be parish focused rather than looking outwards towards the city as does Churches Together in Carlisle. It performs a serious and necessary umbrella role for all churches in Carlisle and given the diverse nature of the city and its churches it is evident that it would continue to do so even after mission communities are established.

Churches Together in Cumbria

35. It is quite clear that the excellent relationships (cf #11) between Church Leaders of both the Covenant Partners and the Companion Churches have been nurtured in the context of Churches Together in Cumbria (CTiC) and the regular meetings of Church Leaders. It is these relationships which have made possible the Covenant and in the commitment of the Companion Churches to the *Growing Together* process.
36. We heard universal praise for the work of staff, and particularly of Ruth Harvey and Helen Boothroyd during their time in office. We were told that it was easy and helpful to plug into wider networks of relationships in Cumbria through CTiC. It was also noted that within all those working ecumenically in Cumbria, only the CTiC staff have as part of their remit responsibility to nurture and promote Christian unity.
37. There was a perception in some places that CTiC was out of touch with what was going on at the grassroots level – once again that may be a function of geography. We heard twice that meetings were frequently held in South Lakeland which was not easy to access from the north and west of the county, and that folk in Cumbria don't 'travel well'. We heard it said that local Churches Together groups were 'not seeing encouragement and support from CT Cumbria because they are focused on mission communities'. Twice we heard that CTiC 'hadn't visited'. While we question whether that is an appropriate criticism, it is felt to be so at local level and therefore deserves some attention. We are also aware that this is a problem for every Intermediate Body in England!
38. More positively, CTiC has enabled the church community to be taken seriously by local government. The reputation it has built up, particularly in social responsibility work and

dementia policy and care, is exceptional and enhances the work of all the Member Churches. In the context of social responsibility, we were told that CTiC is a unique forum in which to examine and assess critically new initiatives.

39. We heard a concern that the leadership of CTiC and mission communities overlap and we heard people wondering whether the development of mission communities will mean that there is less need for CTiC. However a Church Leader of one of the Covenanted Partners warned: 'don't pretend that God for All is more than it is'. It has become very clear to us that it is only within the context of CTiC that all Member Churches have an equal status – some are prevented by their ecclesiology or other factors from becoming a Covenant Partner and this *de facto* leads to an unequal relationship, even when they participate as much as they can. 'CTiC', we were told, holds us all together.' It is evident to us, therefore, that it is vital that those in the Covenanted Partner Churches making key decisions are also playing a full part in CTiC. Perhaps, here, CTiC can look to Barrow for inspiration? There they thought that the establishment of a mission community would spell the end of the Churches Together group but that has not proved to be the case and, indeed, all forms of ecumenical life in Barrow are flourishing.

Tentative conclusions

40. After all these conversations we are convinced that the Churches in Cumbria have taken the Gospel imperative about unity with complete seriousness. This is a spiritual and theological process which is of God and demands patience, discernment and careful nurturing. Those who are in it have to be in it for the long haul. We urge them to reflect theologically on their experience so that the Churches in other parts of England might be encouraged to undertake their own journeys in response to that imperative.
41. We are aware that geography and local contexts mean that mission communities will embed at differing speeds with differing emphases and we welcome their establishment. In some places, where only congregations of the Partner Churches exist, a mission community made up of all of them will probably not also need to meet as a Churches Together group. However it is very clear that *de facto* mission communities⁷ cannot embrace all denominations on an equal footing. Therefore, just as traditional LEPs participate in Churches Together groups, so, too, we hope, will mission communities. 'Churches Together' is a constant reminder to mission communities, and to the Covenant Partners at county level, not to be content with the remarkable commitment they have to each other, but to continue to aspire for more.
42. Similarly, at County level, we believe that the excellent relationships between the Covenant Partners and the Companion Churches need to continue to be nurtured in the context of the equal partnership which is Churches Together in Cumbria.
43. We would, therefore, envisage a 'mixed economy' which may be based on a differentiation of task, with mission communities (alongside Companion Churches and others) focusing on proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, while missional transformation of society in the struggle for justice and care for creation being focused through CT groups. Clearly there cannot be rigid boundaries between these two focuses, but we envisage, as in Barrow, overlap and co-operation, care not to duplicate work or meetings and, above all, deep respect and commitment for and to each other.
44. The edges are always important in an enterprise like ecumenism in Cumbria. There will always be churches that are on the edge – independent charismatic churches and new churches perhaps. At the moment one of the great positives of local Churches Together groups, and of CTiC, is that they are able to scan the horizons and create the relationships that are essential to co-operating in mission together in appropriate ways.

⁷ If we have understood them correctly as akin to a single congregation LEP worshipping in different buildings.

45. We had been seriously concerned about the future of the Social Responsibility work which has been focused in CTiC. That has a long history running back over a quarter of a century and it has born significant fruit in the respect with which secular authorities view and use the Churches and their provision. For those outside the Church the social responsibility work is the significant reality and sign of ecclesial authenticity. We had been most anxious to see that it had been hanging by a thread. Reputations which take a great deal of work to build can be very easily lost. Churches Together in Cumbria and the Church Leaders need to keep in mind the excellent reputation of CTiC's social responsibility work and find ways of ensuring that it continues to thrive. The news of the appointment of a new Social Responsibility Officer while the review was being undertaken was therefore warmly welcomed.

Finally

46. The insights we have received from Cumbria have energised and excited us. The boldness and expansiveness of your vision is truly commendable and unequalled in English ecumenism. So it is hardly surprising that you are encountering challenges and grappling with problems. It would be worrying if you weren't, because that would mean that the change you envisage is not worth having. You have set your eyes on nothing less than kingdom building, and that is an enterprise that God is blessing and will continue to bless.

47. Relationships have been key to your work. They have enabled the vision and service the enterprise. They have engendered the trust which has allowed Covenant Partners to draw ever closer together with the generous and prayerful support of Companion Churches. CTiC has been crucial in this and, we believe, will be important in the future. Relationships, however, are double-edged swords and are vulnerable to changes in leadership at both county and local level. You have done and continue to do what you can to future-proof the work in terms of planning and covenants and agreements and must leave the rest to the providence of God. We pray that God give you the patience and faithfulness and endurance to live with the reality of the messiness of church life, of a mixed ecumenical economy, to allow as much local variation as possible and to continue to discern together, Covenant Partners and Companion Churches both, where God is inviting you next to walk. Only God has the map; we make the path by walking.⁸



48. The stories are humbling. Thank you for allowing us to be part of the journey.

15 May 2018
Jenny Bond
David Cornick

⁸ cf *Caminante no hay Camino*, Spanish poem by Antonio Machado. For the Spanish and for translations, see: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58815/traveler-your-footprints> or <http://gwenglish.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/poem-of-day-antonio-machados-caminante.html>