

# Rich diversity or a 'grey mush'?

## The opportunities and challenges of working with other local churches



Over the last several years, inter-church relations in many of our communities have developed significantly, moving from mutual suspicion to mutual respect and cooperation.

This presents significant opportunities to impact our communities, but also a number of potential challenges. Will our activity be determined by a 'lowest common denominator'

unity of greyness; or will God give us grace to fully express the multi-coloured diversity of his church?

This paper does not seek to present a policy on these matters, but to explore some of the questions. Each city/town/village is different, are we must trust God to lead us, as we seek to engage with churches around us!

## Working with other churches in mission



**Mark Mumford leads Community Church Derby. This talk was given by him at the Salt and Light European Leaders' Conference 2006 and also available in audio form at [www.saltlight.org/resources](http://www.saltlight.org/resources) – follow links to**

**conference resources. Mark is part of the European Apostolic Team for Salt & Light, and has a number of years experience of working with other churches across the city of Derby, UK**

### Is it worth it?

If any of you have tried working with other churches over a period of time you'll find that sometimes the question comes up: "is this worth it?" Anybody ever felt that? There are often challenges, obstacles and things that get in the way! I want to give us three reasons why I think it is worth it.

### It's what the world sees

We sometimes underestimate what the world sees! When they look at us they don't see 'charismatic' or 'reformed', they just see 'the church'. The church appears to be not working together, without any harmony and to be doing similar

things in our communities but without any joined-up-ness. Jesus said, probably more on an individual basis, "by the love that you have for one another they will know that you are My disciples." So if we have attitudes of hostility, competitiveness or whatever it is between us, I do believe that we're cutting across something that's in Jesus' Heart.

### One congregation can't do it alone

I don't care how big you are or you could be: one congregation can't do it alone! I was provoked by a book I read a few years ago called *Primary Purpose: Making It Hard for People to Go to Hell from Your City*, by Ted

Haggard. It's about being joined together and united in mission within our communities. He asks the question "if your goal is to grow your own church then you'll approach things in one way, if your goal is to reach a city/town/village it changes everything."

If you take a step back and say, 'how can we reach this city?' then immediately it forces you to say, "there is no way we are going to do this on our own." There is no way we are going to reach every different people group in our city in Derby, which is a very diverse city. Immediately the mission becomes greater than our own parochial things, we are pushed into cooperation and working alongside others.

### It's what God wants

Get out of that! In the Bible we find they did not have the 'political' problems that we have today, with the diversification of the Church. We can't rewind history and say 'let's go back in



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history, let's pretend this is virgin territory and let's all start again! We can't unravel 2000 years of church history that have brought us to this point. What we can do is take an attitude and approach that sees that even among different denominations, styles and approaches, together we make up the Body of Christ in an area. Then we can see something happen.

Romans 15 says "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God, so that the Gentiles may glorify God for His mercy."

## Attitude and activity

I would like to suggest that the two main things here are attitude and activity.

*Attitude always comes before activity.* If you enter into joint activity without dealing with your attitude first you will probably exaggerate your differences. Sometimes you'll go into an activity together and you will feel less like unity than you've ever felt before, because of the different things that crop up. Something has to happen inside us that I choose to want to work with others, I choose to do stuff, I choose so theologically, I choose so for the sake of our community. Even if there are things that would get in the way of it.

"My experience is that after a few years of sitting, listening, serving, getting to know people there was a point where I realised nothing was going to move on unless I took a lead.

"Whilst accepting that although I am younger and have much less theological training than the 'proper ministers' around me, I can still take a lead and make a difference."

(a church leader)

If all we have is an attitude without some activity then it becomes just a nice idea. Unity is a nice idea, and I often say in church 'we want to be united' and everyone says 'yeah!' You can't be against unity, it's like being against love! But, that must flow out into some sort of activity, something that we do together.

In *City Vision – Churches together in the City* (in Derby) we've narrowed that into a very clear sense of purpose. It's not just that we want to be together, but we are together with a sense of purpose, so we have three primary things that we are looking to achieve together: Evangelism; prayer; community projects and social action.

## Joint meetings?

I have a lot more faith that we can do things in the three areas above than any other. Joint Celebrations and joining together in settings aren't good!

We recently had a Celebration when we had J John preaching and the South African Children's choir. We all threw our Sunday morning in together and it was great! The trouble is that behind the scenes there was grumbling. One church seemed to make sure that all their main church members were in the choir on the stage. Another provided lots of children and no children's workers. The congregation came out saying "wasn't that a glorious morning" and I was going 'grhhh'!

Celebrations can sometimes exaggerate our differences. Sometimes you get good Celebrations but I don't think that God's ultimate intention for us is that we just have

Celebrations together, but rather to have some sense of our working together having an impact in our communities.

## Challenges!

As we work together, two or three areas of challenges keep coming up:

### Expectation

Setting the expectation of what your togetherness is going to mean is important. If you're around for a long time you will realise there are times when it ebbs and times when it flows. Part of that is the change of personnel that you will get. Most other churches

have a fairly fast turnover of ministers etc. So you can have one person who is really keen to work with you and then someone with whom you just don't get on!

Occasionally someone says 'why don't we have City Elders?' Or 'City Apostles?' The ultimate expression of that is that you cut yourself off from all your other denominations or affiliations to belong to that. At times we have been pushed along that road and I have had to get very clear in my own thinking that that is not where we are going. It's not what I want or what I feel we should be doing. Often the ones who suggest it are the ones with least to lose! I like to think that my/our own primary belonging is to our family - to Salt and Light - and it is not a hindrance to what goes on in our city but is something that I bring to the city to enrich it. Our cooperation is that we see 'the Church' as one, but it doesn't

"We need more friendship, less formality."  
(a church leader)

mean we uncouple everything and become one isolated church in the city.

## Style

You get into a prayer meeting and often the question is "how do we pray"? Do we believe in warfare or not? Do we pray this or that?

We need to settle something in our own heart that we are going to accept people differently. We need to settle the issue that we will always look to speak well of one another.

Students come to us and the first thing I say is "there are some great churches in Derby and all we want is for you to find somewhere where you can plug in, where you fit most comfortably". If I can say that and really mean it (and I do) Derby is a better place for it.

I find theological differences less problematic these days and the main issues tend to be those of style.

## Non-integrating churches

What do you do about churches that don't want to work with others? I am told there are 18 black Pentecostal churches in Derby. Most of them are quite small and none want to join in.

Then there are the Catholics. This is a problem because for some people they can't be part of our unity and for others we must have them in to prove our unity. In Derby the problem is the Catholics don't want to be part of what we're doing, so all we can do is show positive signs of friendship. It might be different in your

situation.

Across Europe it is a similar problem. I was in Italy once in an evangelical church and their first question to me was 'what's your view on Charismatic Catholics'? Then they said 'how can the Holy Spirit inhabit the anti-Christ?!' That might be an issue for you or it might not!

In a city you can say there are a number of churches who want to get together and a number that don't and that's OK. When you are a smaller town/community and there are only 4 or 5 churches it can often work better for you because you know you need to work together and do things that have a very visible presence, or it can be more difficult again because you don't have a lot of choices. ■

## My own story



**25 years ago my story began when I first went to a town called Eastwood in the East Midlands. A small town with 4 churches and us.**

At the time, if I'm really honest, we were very separatist. We were pretty arrogant and thought 'we were it'. Like many in the 'New Church' movement we thought denominations were dying and that the Church of England would be gone by 2005! We thought they were the old, we were the new, and we presented that attitude and saw no value in joining with others. As I look back we have had to repent of some of our attitudes in those early days! Fortunately we did not think like this for too long.

One of the first things we did *together* in Eastwood was a tent mission, which provoked the first round of issues! The first question was 'who is going to get the converts?' As we ended up with more counsellors than anyone else, there was then suspicion that we were going to 'grab' more people for our church!

The trouble was that although we weren't the biggest church in town we did have the highest level of commitment, and when we said there would be 60 of us involved, some of the churches couldn't get that sort of commitment. We had dived in not realising that this was a threat to them, so part of our learning was to not appear as strong as we were. We learnt a few things in those days and then we moved over to Derby.

We have now done a few corporate missions in Derby over the years. When you do missions don't get caught up by numbers. I think missions are worth it just as a prophetic statement for what it says and for what you're looking to achieve together. Numbers are one factor, but not the ultimate reason to do or not do things in the future. ■

## PRACTICAL POINTERS

# Some pointers

**Trying to work out what you think about different proposed inter-church initiatives is not always easy, and depends enormously on the local situation and personalities. This article picks up many of the themes explore in Mark's article and gives few practical pointers to help you along!**



## Principles

### 1. We're all part of God's family, the universal Church

"There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4.4-6)

This has been a core principle

for our family of churches, and so needs little further explanation.

### 2. Unity in diversity

However, whilst the Bible talks about unity (above) it also talks of diversity. Unity amidst diversity is envisaged, not bland homogeneity. Ephesians 3 talks of the church being a variegated, multifaceted demonstration of the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians talks of God

giving different gifts to each of us, yet expecting us to work together as a harmonious body, in love. Colossians 3 talks of the pre-eminence of love: "Put on love, which binds [everything] together in perfect unity."

As Mark comments in his article, 'meeting together as joint churches' or even 'merging' are usually not workable, and probably not what God wants. God wants variety, but with unity based on mutual love.

Paul talks of both 'no divisions' (1 Co 1.10) and later in the same letter, 'diversity for the sake of the gospel' (1 Co 9.19-23). Clearly a balance is envisaged, with the church community needing to embrace people of all ages, backgrounds and races, whilst reaching out in 'targeted' ways to these very same people-groups.

This tension is a matter for current debate, as the church in the UK seeks to rediscover its mission. (See for example discussion in the CoFE's Mission-Shaped Church report and theological responses to that paper).

*continued on page 4*

### 3. The local church is the agent of mission

With the rise of mission and evangelistic para-church movements in the last few centuries, there is now an increasing agreement, between both church and para-church agency leaders, that the local church should be the primary agent of mission.

For example, *Global Connections*

In Mark's article he makes the point that we need to think 'city' rather than just asking 'who is going to get the converts?' Nevertheless, Terry's point is that we do need to properly convert people, and that includes consolidation into a local church. Evangelism without consolidation is not biblical evangelism! So, the question needs asking, albeit in a non-competitive way!



(previously the *Evangelical Missionary Alliance*, representing mission societies), now has as its mission statement: "Church at the heart of mission."

There are a number of approaches to the so-called para-church movement. Some see traditional mission societies as separate "church" communities in their own right; some see no place for para-church, seeing local church as the only valid agent of mission and others see a role for para-church in providing (specialist) support for mission.

Increasingly, churches, denominational and otherwise, are seeing the value of networks and streams - mutual relationships that enable church to do more together than they can alone.

### 4. God wants to add people to churches, not just save them individualistically

"Evangelism is not simply a matter of getting a number of individuals saved; it is about the advance of God's community in the earth. Historically, our attitude to evangelism has tended to start with the individual. Once saved, he or she has been free to pursue the secondary matter of finding the church of their choice if they so desire. Through Christ, God has established a new community on the earth. In early Acts, to be saved, therefore, was to be added to this community, not simply to get right with God and go to heaven when you die! Belonging to God's newly established society was all-important." (Terry Virgo)

## Differences

Mark's article rightly paints a positive picture of healthy inter-church relations in many of our towns and cities.

However, he also comments on churches that are not involved, some of whom 'opt out' because of theological perspectives, but there are many other (non-theological) reasons why church leaders and churches don't get on: personality differences, history (e.g. of church splits in town), differing focus/priorities/values and differences regarding charisma.

Let's explore one or two of those questions:

#### 1. Can I work with Catholics and what do I think of the Catholic church?

This is a complex subject and a lot depends on the exact culture and approach of your local Catholic church. Some interesting reading can be found at the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (see links below) who are seeking to reconcile Protestant and Catholic communities. In doing so they don't shy away from the hard questions!

It could perhaps be said that whilst the core of Catholic teaching still diverges significantly from the evangelical movement, a large number of local Catholics are born-again, Spirit-filled believers, seeking to bring real change within their denomination and eager to relate properly to other churches.

#### 2. Why won't Anytown Reformed Church work with us?

Historically, Protestant/

Reformed/Evangelical churches have often 'opted out' of inter-church relations through a reluctance early in the 20th century to work with liberals, non-evangelicals and Catholics (e.g. see the David Hilborn paper in the references below). This has often led to an atmosphere of non-cooperation which persists to the present day in many circles. They talk of 'gospel unity' and often insist on agreement on a 'basis of faith', based on core 'primary' beliefs.

The charismatic renewal in the latter part of the 20th century saw a high degree of animosity between traditional evangelicals and the new churches, often over issues like baptism in the Holy Spirit which evangelicals saw as 'secondary beliefs' and charismatics saw as 'non-negotiable'.

As the charismatic renewal has affected more traditional denominations, the boundaries have blurred significantly, and paved the way for the greater inter-church unity we are seeing, although differences persist between Reformed churches and the centre-ground of evangelicalism, e.g. as represented by The Evangelical Alliance.

#### 3. Should I work with the Anytown Churches Together ecumenical movement?

The ecumenical movement started in the early 20th century. In 1910 the Edinburgh Missionary Conference agreed that "a disunited Church is a denial of Gospel and a major scandal in mission."

Often associated with liberalism and compromise, the ecumenical movement has largely been ignored by much of evangelicalism and the charismatic movement.

In practice, many of us have found that working together formally through Churches Together ecumenical groupings can be bureaucratic and frustrating. As Mark said in his article, attitude must precede activity; friendship must precede function.

One point to note is that Churches Together in England (relaunched in 1999) have published guidelines (with the endorsement of the major denominations) for people who move to an area where there is no church of their own

"As well as theology, we will encounter a mixture of personality, local history, leadership style, relational style and mission priorities!"

(a church leader)

'flavour'. Broadly speaking, such people are encouraged to be part of the local/village church, and the churches are encouraged to be accepting and embracing. This obviously has implications for our churches, which have traditionally gathered from a wide area, and how village churches might perceive us.

CTE also state the so-called 'Lund Principle': "Churches should act together in all matters except those which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately". This is in obvious tension with one of our founding principles as a family of churches, that states: "Only do together (federally) what cannot be done locally (by the local church)". ■

## Useful resources

Talk given by Mark Mumford and Mark Harland at the European Leaders' Conference 2006 - available from [www.saltlight.org/resource](http://www.saltlight.org/resource) - follow links to 'Conference resources'.

Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland have various resources exploring Protestant-Catholic relations

[www.contemporarychristianity.org](http://www.contemporarychristianity.org)

Church Together in England publish various resources which give a flavour of the values and priorities we will quickly encounter as we meet other church leaders

[www.churches-together.org.uk](http://www.churches-together.org.uk)  
"Preaching that Unites the Streams" article by EA's Joel Edwards [www.eauk.org/leaders-digest/edition32/preaching-that-unites.cfm](http://www.eauk.org/leaders-digest/edition32/preaching-that-unites.cfm)

Ecclesiology - 'Evangelicals and Ecclesiology' paper by David Hilborn, touching on the origins of 'evangelical separatism' - go to [www.eauk.org/theology/key\\_papers](http://www.eauk.org/theology/key_papers) and click on 'Miscellaneous'

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