

# CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BEDFORDSHIRE

## Report on Local Ecumenical Partnerships and Churches Together Groups

### *Examples of Good Practice*

#### **Introduction**

The 16 responses received to the request for information and reports on the life and experiences of Local Ecumenical Partnerships and Churches Together Groups have produced a wealth of examples of good practice as well as indications of difficulties encountered and things that would help. One LEP said that it would be helpful 'to meet with others in a similar situation to share ideas and experiences'. This report aims to do just that: to share with us all what each of us has been doing, and to highlight some particular examples of good practice which others might wish to consider adopting or adapting in their own context. These will be reported under the general headings of 'Services and Events', 'Civic, Social and Community Work', and 'Inter-Faith Relations'. The LEP or CTG concerned are referred to by the initials set out below.<sup>1</sup> The question to bear in mind throughout is how far we are developing and promoting ecumenical working 'not as an extra, which absorbs energy, but as a dimension of all that we do, which releases energy through the sharing of resources'.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Services and Events**

Many of us hold joint services, events and activities throughout the year: Joint Newsletters, Fellowship Meals, Advent and Lent Courses, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Services, Exchange of Preachers, Women's World Day of Prayer, Holy Week Services, including Passover Meal (with a representative from 'Jews for Jesus' (HC)), Good Friday Open Air Witness, Easter Dawn Service, Christian Aid Week, Pentecost Celebration, United Remembrance Service (SHI), and Christmas events, including Carol Singing, Crib Festival (HC) and Christmas Tree Festival (SHI).

There was a Christian Band Concert in July (EB) and a Summer Holiday Club in August (HC). There were Annual Days (LE) or Away Days (BG; LE) of Reflection and Prayer, and a Day of Prayer, 8 half-hour sessions on issues to do with prayer held in response to requests in the village Parish Plan Survey for opportunities for prayer and Bible Study (CL). The Roman Catholic 'Year of the Priest' was observed together, 'keeping ministers, priests and pastors very much in our prayers' (BS). A weekly prayer group meets in people's homes (SHA). It has also been recognized that 'our regular Sunday evening ecumenical services have been drawing fewer folk over recent years' so 'a decision was taken to bring ecumenical worship into our mainstream programme. For the

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<sup>1</sup> BG Bedford Goldington; BI Biggleswade; BS Bedford South; CL Clophill; EB Eaton Bray; HC Harrold and Carlton; LE Leagrave; LI Lidlington; LL Leighton Buzzard and Linslade; LU Luton; SHA Sharnbrook; SHI Shillington; STE Stewartby; STO Stotfold; WO Woburn and District.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to *The Next Steps for Churches Together in Pilgrimage* BCC/CTS 1989 p. 3, quoted in new Churches Together in Bedfordshire Constitution section 3.

first time we suspended our principal Sunday morning services in favour of a joint service at the Methodist Church including Holy Communion and a Joint Junior Church. 150 or more attended. This may become a more frequent practice' (LE). There was a United Confirmation Service at an LEP with 10 candidates aged 12 to 84 (HC). However, there were difficulties in accepting changes to service times so as to spread the workload for the minister and ensure equitability for the three churches (HC). It would also be helpful to spend more time on the issue of ecumenical worship where this includes Roman Catholics, perhaps through worshipping and celebrating together in other ways than the Eucharist (WO). In some places it is also difficult to attract many of the ever-increasing numbers of new residents to worship, though there is no problem with their coming to social activities (SHI).

In January there was a Covenant Service in Lidlington that included the signing of the Constitution, rededication of members to God's service and to the Single Congregation, and the commissioning of the Lay Leadership Team (LI). In Biggleswade a 'Declaration of Intent' was agreed. Christians Together In Leagrave (Anglicans, Methodists and Christian Pilgrims Church) expanded to embrace Luton Tabernacle Church (Elim Pentecostal) (LE).

### **Civic, Social and Community Work**

Churches Together in Luton is seeking to improve its performance in Communications, through its website and e-mailing, in fostering its Clusters, some of which are active, others moribund, and in better inter-faith relations. Its Area Deans have met with the Chief Executive of Luton Borough Council and with the Luton Council of Faiths. The Council is well-organised but not truly rooted in localities. The Churches are well rooted locally but disorganized as a Christian Body as a whole. Many ecumenical Christian organizations have a positive impact on the well-being of the town: NOAH, LCET, Dignity, Grassroots, Street Pastors, and the Town Centre Chaplaincy which it is proposed will minister to all who use or work in the town centre. The Borough Council uses the Council of Faiths as its main contact point (LU).

The Churches are making a joint response to the opportunities provided by the Biggleswade East Development, taking part in working groups, agreeing a 'Declaration of Intent' and liaising with developers and local authorities on a possible physical presence shared by the churches (BI). Elsewhere there is concern that the planning process locally and regionally should take account of the spiritual and living community needs of people from the beginning of the development process (LL).

A new Youth Initiative has begun, addressing the local need of a place for youth to meet. A local café owner has agreed to open for youth only 7 – 9 p.m. on Wednesdays. Some 30 come and a youth club is due to open soon (WO). Two delegates went to the parish of Staaken in Berlin-Spandau to begin negotiations on youth contacts and exchanges with Leagrave, as part of a partnership which included visits to celebrate the Fall of the Berlin Wall and to see the 'Charity Village' which provides care for all sorts of people with special needs (LE). A Pastoral Group prepared a Pack for Carers and members attended

a course on 'Caring for the carers' (HC). A Good Neighbour scheme offers car lifts and assistance to those who need this (SHA). There are monthly Lunch Clubs (SHA) and 'Open the Book' teams who act out Bible Stories for children in schools (SHA).

Christian Representatives are appointed ecumenically to Hockwell Ring Community Centre Users' Committee and the local Neighbourhood Governance Committee (LE). Churches are joining in the local Campaign in support of 'Making Luton a Fairtrade Town by 2011' (LU). Churches work with the local police to help and support each other (LL). Clophill Christians Together supported Clophill Churches Aid in its appeal for Macedonia and collected blankets, warm clothing, food, medical equipment, sewing machines and money for this cause.

### **Inter-Faith Relations**

Following the arrival of the first Mosque and Synagogue in Leagrave, an Inter-Faith Forum was held on 'living with neighbours of different faiths', involving Christians, Muslims and Jewish community members (LE). In One World Week two evening discussions were held considering a Christian and a Muslim response to world poverty (SHA). There was a visit to the inter-faith Othona Community in Bradwell-on-Sea (LE). Religious Leaders from Luton have also been invited to a Deanery Conference in Berlin 'to share our experience of inter-faith relationships. Spandau wants to learn from Luton' (LE). However, thanks mainly to a handful of agitators and outsiders, Luton, unfortunately, has developed an undeserved national reputation as a place of possible tension between different faiths. Following the firebombing of one of the mosques, a joint meeting was organized by Churches Together in Luton, the Council of Mosques, Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots to pledge these organizations to peaceful coexistence. The 'Luton in Harmony Campaign' is about promoting understanding within our communities, celebrating diversity, and working for our town to have a positive reputation on the national and international stage. It invites individuals and organizations to sign a pledge to play their part in this. Also, Luton Council of Faiths is setting up a better system of e-mail communication from and to Luton Borough Council and its member organisations (LU).

### **Helps and Hindrances**

People were asked: 'What would assist you in your ecumenical journey?' and 'What particular challenges did you face?' Closer working of the clergy and a real lead from some of them would certainly help (SHI; BS). So would denominational programmes that took account of ecumenism rather than ignoring it (BS). But are those who have difficulty in finding representatives on committees or in getting people to attend or help organize meetings (BG; CL; STO) acting in the old Council of Churches way of putting on extra events 'which absorb energy' rather than in the Churches Together way of 'releasing energy through the sharing of resources' where ecumenism has become 'a dimension of all that we do'?

‘Your prayers’ would help (EB). So will ‘continuing to build on good relationships between Churches’ (BI). And perhaps we can all be encouraged by the following conclusion reached by one LEP (HC):

*The materialistic and secular world in which we live demands from us a new attitude of confidence and solidarity to be an effective voice in this wilderness. The LEP is an important step in this direction for our three Churches and I feel we should be proud of what has been achieved. For the LEP helps us to present to the world outside in our villages a relevant and contemporary image and a force for good to be reckoned with.*

Rev Dr Colin Davey, Consultant to Bedfordshire Ecumenical Committee

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