



## **Staying Connected: Ecumenical Priorities for Hertfordshire 2020-21**

*So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

*Romans 12 v 5*

### **Background**

In both May and September 2020 representatives from local Churches Together groups as well as ecumenical churches and organisations across Hertfordshire came together on Zoom to share news of how churches were responding to the changes brought about by the Coronavirus. This new way of meeting was facilitated by Churches Together in Hertfordshire and allowed for a broader sharing than was usually possible from across the whole country. Similar conversations had been taking place in towns and villages but the hope was that by learning what was happening more broadly, new relationships could be made, ideas and experiences shared and a greater understanding of the ecumenical “map” of Hertfordshire at this time could be discerned.

Churches Together in Hertfordshire are very grateful to all who take part in these meetings and the churches represented at the meetings were various and included the following denominations as well as a number of local churches; the Quakers, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Church of England, United Reformed Church and Elim Pentecostal Church.

### **Ecumenical Opportunity and challenge**

At the meeting in May a great deal of time of given to sharing what was happening in the churches and the atmosphere was one of both concern but also excitement at what had been possible during lockdown. The extreme situation brought about by the coronavirus pandemic had brought about great creativity and energy in many people, both clergy and lay, although it was recognised that churches had also found this time very challenging. There was an excitement about the new reach that online services and enterprises had brought. A full report of the this meeting is available on the Churches Together in Hertfordshire website.

There was also an acknowledgement of the ecumenical opportunity that the new situation created as people could try out a new tradition or see what was happening at the church “down the road” quite anonymously. Those in interchurch families commented that for the first time they could attend both churches, no choice was needed, and this was spiritually and emotional beneficial for them. However it was acknowledged that in some areas ecumenical activity had ceased and everyone was focused on their own church situation and congregational needs. What has been encouraging is the number of Churches Together Groups who have met online in more recent months, indicating that this initial inwards gaze is moving outwards again as people consider what can be done together.

### **Shared Concerns**

At the meeting in September there was a discussion about some of the particular concerns that were held across the churches and also of the ecumenical priorities as the country moved out of lockdown and into what has often been described as the “new normal”.

Concerns were:

- Pastoral – especially the lonely, those who were mentally or physically unwell, the unemployed and others living in poverty and the bereaved.
- Clergy burn out – an acknowledgment of the extra burden on all those leading churches at this time, this also has an impact of ecumenical work as it is considered less urgent.
- Training for clergy and lay people in digital communications
- Prayer – lack of focus on prayer and spiritual depth in such a busy and demanding time.
- Lack of conversation around death and dying both within and outside the church.
- Inwards looking gaze of the church to the detriment of ecumenical and community relations.

### **Ecumenical Priorities: *Staying Connected***

From the discussion there were many repeated ideas and some strong views about what the churches need at this time. All appeared to come together under the theme of *Staying Connected* and there were several aspects of this connectedness, all of which seek to enable the broader mission of God in Hertfordshire. These are; staying connected with God, staying connected with each other both within the church and within neighbourhoods and communities, staying connected with those not always included in church activities and staying connected with other churches so we can continue to support and serve each other.

### ***Praying Together***

The importance of prayer was highlighted both for individuals, individual churches and across the churches. The concept of prayer walks and praying specifically for your town or village was discussed. Local ecumenical groups were praying together and the need and desire for this to happen more frequently and broadly was noted.

#### **CTH Action:**

- **The next county wide meeting will be held in January 2021, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and will primarily be a prayer meeting.**
- **The annual prayer diary will be reproduced for 2021 to further encourage ecumenical prayer across the year.**
- **Signpost to good resources to encourage prayer whenever and whenever possible.**

### ***Love Thy Neighbour***

The needs of the lonely and vulnerable both within and outside the church was noted as a priority. Much activity is already happening especially in larger towns with regard to foodbanks and CAP schemes. There was also discussion of providing spaces where people can discuss issues of death and dying which are often avoided both within and outside the church. All churches need to be active in caring for others and also sharing how that is happening in their context with neighbouring churches, wherever possible working together to meet the needs of their community. Chaplaincies were also considered both in need of extra support and as an ecumenical opportunity. This need also extends to all in ministry and it was noted that the support of clergy to each other and from lay colleagues is really valuable.

#### **CTH Action:**

- **Share stories of good practice across the ecumenical networks to local groups and also through the CTH website and social media.**
- **Discuss with Church Leaders and Ecumenical Officers how clergy are being supported.**
- **Discuss with chaplaincies what support they might require at this time.**

### ***Get Digital***

It was acknowledged that some churches had struggled with the technology to get services online and others had excelled in this area. The need for broader support and training was identified.

#### **CTH Action:**

- **To establish what training is available either within Herts or more broadly specifically for the church context and share this information across the county.**
- **Where possible put people in touch with each other to support new ways of doing things.**

### ***Inclusion***

A number of local groups have been focusing on inclusion and this seems to also be part of the broader theme of “staying connected”. No-one should feel that the church is not a space for them as all are part of Gods broader mission and including all should be an ecumenical priority.

#### **CTH Action:**

- **To consider what work CTH needs to do to be more inclusive.**
- **Working with CTE nationally and sharing this knowledge and information with churches locally to share good practice.**

### ***Working Together***

Although much is different both within the church and within broader society the ecumenical imperative outlined in both the Lund Question and the Corby Principle remains the same. The Lund question of “whether they (the churches) should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately”, and the Corby Principle of “churches should not do on their own what they can do with the community” act as a challenge to all the churches at this time. While all churches are looking afresh at they operate, how they worship and how they serve their communities they must also remember to consider how can we do this in partnership with others, with other churches and organisations within the community.

In a desire to keep going the church must not become inward looking but remember the broader mission of God in the world and the role of the whole church within it.

#### **CTH Action:**

- **To continue to support and promote ecumenical working in all its forms across the county wherever possible and share examples of good practice with others.**

*Doral Hayes*

*Ecumenical Facilitator for Churches Together in Hertfordshire*

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