

# **Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church: A Comparative Research Project in the North East of England**

## **Overview**

### **Background**

In January 2006 the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University, in collaboration with Ushaw College, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the Anglican Diocese of Durham, the British Academy, The Jerusalem Trust, and a number of other sponsoring bodies, hosted an international research colloquium on the theme ‘Catholic Learning and Receptive Ecumenism’. The colloquium brought together 150 theologians, ecumenists, and ecclesiastics from across many religious traditions for the purpose of exploring a fresh way of conceiving the ecumenical task appropriate for today’s contemporary culture; this approach is referred to as ‘Receptive Ecumenism’.

The essential principle is that the primary ecumenical responsibility of each faith tradition is not to ask ‘What do the other traditions first need to learn from us?’ but rather ‘What do we need to learn from them in ways which can help us address difficulties in our own tradition?’ The hypothesis being: if all religious traditions were asking this same question seriously and acting upon it, then all traditions would both move in ways that would deepen our authentic respective identities and draw each of us into a more intimate relationship.

The January 2006 colloquium tested this strategy in relation to the host tradition – Roman Catholicism – in the process of doing so the need was identified the real need for a subsequent, much more practically-focused and fully collaborative research project. The aim of this project would be to explore the relevance of this principle – the thinking behind Receptive Ecumenism to life ‘on the ground’ in the local churches of the northeast. The hope was that this would provide a model of good practice for ecclesiastical communities well beyond the northeast of England, for professional ecumenists, and for researchers working on ecumenism and ecclesiology.

Consequently, in October 2007, a regional comparative research project was launched in the north east of England under the title ‘Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church’. The project involved six representatives of the major denominational groups of the region working in full partnership with the staff of Durham University’s Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University’s Business School, and the former North of England Institute for Christian Education.

## Project Outline

The basic plan for this research project was to undertake a comparative study of the workings of six participating denominational groups in the region:

- United Reformed Church – Northern Synod
- Salvation Army – Northern Division
- Roman Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle
- Northern Baptist Association
- Methodist District of Newcastle
- Methodist District of Darlington
- Anglican Diocese of Newcastle
- Anglican Diocese of Durham

The research was carried out by three research teams, each of which was comprised of: 1) key local practitioners and church personnel; 2) specialists in the fields of finance, management, and organisational studies from Durham University's Business School; and 3) theologians and sociologists/anthropologists of religion from Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion, local theological colleges, and the North of England Institute for Christian Education.

## Key Trajectories of Research

This project unfolded along three key trajectories of research, each with its own research team working in a coordinated yet relatively distinct fashion, the results of which have been integrated into in this document. The trajectories are:

1. Governance and Finance, which focused on the organisational cultures and systems of authority, accountability, strategic planning, and finance operative in each tradition.
2. Leadership and Ministry, which asked how practices of leadership are seen and utilised within each of these traditions.
3. Learning and Formation, which asks how the respective cultures and identities of the churches are nurtured, transmitted, and shaped through the habits, practices, processes, and programs operative at various levels.

Together these trajectories and related research teams explored the following questions:

1. What are the organisational patterns reflected in the formation of church?
2. How do those structures promote or impede Christian identity or certain styles of ministry?
3. What are the positive and negative aspects of the various models in relation to formation?
4. Phases of the Regional Project.

## **Project Stages**

### **Phase I: Current Status of Participant Traditions**

Phase I involved a detailed mapping of what, at least in theory, is happening in each of the participant traditions relevant to the three aforementioned trajectories (Governance and Finance, Leadership and Ministry, and Learning and Formation) at the congregational, intermediate, and regional levels of each denominational organisation. Together this material provided the groundwork for subsequent Phases by highlighting not only the forms involved and practices undertaken but also the issues including possible case-studies relative to denominations, which would allow for a more intensive study.

### **Phase II: Testing and Identifying Respective Areas of Good Practice and Difficulties**

Phase II moved from the level of theoretical self-description to the lived reality of church life with a view to: 1) testing how the respective theoretical descriptions work in practice; and 2) identifying respective areas of good practice and difficulties/dysfunctions. Each trajectory employed its own methodology:

1. Governance and Finance employed qualitative methods, with formal structured interview questions.
2. Leadership and Ministry employed a questionnaire that yielded quantitative data.
3. Learning and Formation employed a series of over 30 ‘listening audits,’ whereby a researcher participated or sat in during a number of adult Christian learning groups (e.g. house, scripture, RCIA, or specially convened participants) of different congregations and traditions where willing members talked about their positive and negative experiences of adult Christian learning.

### **Phase III: Ethnographic Case Studies Across Participating Denominations**

Phase III pursued more detailed ethnographic case-studies that focused where possible on two congregations from each of the participant denominations. These case-studies were cross-trajectory, serving to bring these three areas into an integrated focus by examining common problems or concerns that both lay and ordained members of the congregations encountered.

### **Phase IV: Identification and Analysis of Receptive Learning**

Phase IV identified and analysed how fruitful receptive learning might, in practice, take place across the different traditions, whereby one tradition’s particular difficulties might be helped by another tradition’s strengths or gifts. The end result was the creation of specific proposals for logical or complimentary denominational groupings focusing on the hypothesis of Receptive Ecumenism stated at the beginning of this report: ‘if all religious traditions ask this same question seriously and act upon it, then all traditions will move in ways that will

deepen our authentic respective identities and draw each of us into a more intimate relationship’.

## **Phase V: Findings and Publications**

Phase V was the dissemination of findings and development of project resources for the local traditions as well as the writing and dissemination of academic publications.

## **Projected Ecclesial Outcomes**

In addition to leading to significant fresh knowledge and deeper understanding in the fields of ecclesiology, ecumenism, practical theology, sociology and anthropology of religion, and organisational studies, ecclesially, the greater hope is that this project will:

1. Identify a range of well thought-through and tested practical proposals that will result in real receptive learning within the participant traditions, enabling each with integrity intact to live their respective callings and mission more fruitfully.
2. Provide a thoroughly researched framework against which to assess the various traditions and how they might most effectively work together.
3. Demonstrate a much-needed and highly significant model of good practices by demonstrating a particular creative way of living the contemporary ecumenical challenge that can be offered to the wider church, both nationally and internationally.

## Summary of Key Findings

The following section presents the key findings of the research in denominational order, along with the recommendations for receptive ecumenical learning.

### **United Reformed Church – Northern Synod**

#### Recommendations

1. The introduction of specific programmes of education to foster outreach among congregations.
2. The establishment of a new class of lay leader(s) to treat specifically the context of Mission Partnerships.
3. Christian learning and formation must be employed in such a way as to better inform the overall strategic decision-making of the church, especially with regard to Elders' Meetings.
4. A renewed understanding of Eldership that informs the United Reformed Church's identity and, thus, further contributes to a culture of support for Mission Partnerships.

#### Ecumenical Reception

1. The United Reformed Church may want to learn from the team-ministry model used by both Anglicans and Methodists.
2. The United Reformed Church may want to adapt an entry-membership course like Alpha (Anglicans) or the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults a.k.a., RCIA (Roman Catholics).
3. For more mature members and to boost lay participation, United Reformed Church may want to adapt a Methodist and Baptist Christian leadership and discipleship course.
4. The United Reformed Church may want to compare its mother and toddler group with Salvation Army's group.
5. The United Reformed Church should compare the synod's four-year plan with the Salvation Army's three-year review of mission in the local church.
6. The United Reformed Church may want to explore the mission and development of social programmes with the Assemblies of God and Methodists.
7. How can the Moderator's role more usefully take on more symbolic-personal significance?

### **Salvation Army – Northern Division**

#### Recommendations

1. The development of translocal ministry across corps in the region and a rethinking of strategy for a collaborative social mission across the local corps.
2. The development of new leadership roles with a view to collaborative corps partnership. This might involve an increase of authority to a tentmaker soldier to relieve pressure on an officer, which thereby adopts the Joint Pastorate model from the

United Reformed Church, a clustering model from the Roman Catholics, or a form of circuit ministry from the Methodists. There should be an encouragement of culture of the local officers. Regionally there should be a development of women's ministry cohort that allows the sharing of ideas in a way that fosters mutual support and interaction (intra-relatedness) amidst the corps.

3. The development of formation in a way that is responsive to the need for changing patterns of corps life and strategic direction. Examples of this include:
  - a. Developing formation within an intra-corps context or using a mission plan format that would encourage members to think both strategically and creatively about the types of mission their corps should or could be engaged in, or what alternative forms of worship might they adopt within the context of shared resources.
  - b. Helping to consolidate members' efforts, whilst offering varied expressions of Army identity in mission and worship. A 'permissive' approach to identity should be encouraged; however, such diverse expressions need to be underpinned by a collective sense of mission and outreach, including the deployment of resources.
  - c. Establishing a role in the Corps Council for a 'rotating member' to be operative at a more localised level (working horizontally, for example) to encourage cross-fertilization of ideas and resources within the Salvation Army.
  - d. Offering regional training programs or opportunities for local officers. Using the annual regional event/retreat as opportunity for officers to commit to translocal ministry, train deaconates, and develop mission development plan(s).

## Ecumenical Reception

1. As ecclesiastical traditions decline congregations are led to become more dependent on each other in a more localised sense. For example, the dismantling of the district level within the United Reformed Church with a view to partnerships created around mission, provides an excellent case-study in the challenges that may present themselves in intra-Corps relations. Questions to consider:
  - a. How is the authority of the minister exercised in church negotiations?
  - b. How might the eventual outcome of the United Reformed Church, with churches forming pastorates, inform models for relations that balance the need of diverse congregational styles within the rationalisation of mission?
2. Similarly, what can the Salvation Army learn from the Catholic experience of clusters, which were created as a direct response to decline in Priests and the need to rationalise worship? This has been felt very strongly at parish level. The sacramental dimension to worship is a challenge to the Salvation Army, yet as worship centres become rationalised within the Salvation Army worship may also become more charged with ritual significance.
3. William Booth had his roots in Methodism, so one must ask, does the structure of circuit ministry now offer something back to the Salvation Army as a model for oversight within the intra-corps relations at this historical juncture for the survival of corps?

4. In linking mission with a worship base, the Assembly of God (initially represented in the study), a Pentecostal grouping, has some highly motivated social mission projects linked to worship centres. For example, the regeneration of an old school in the north east into a social centre with a mixed economy of practices (Osteopaths, Sure Start), linked through the building to charismatic forms of music and worship. How then might the Salvation Army assess the place of worship, music, and social mission with regard to the Pentecostal experience?
5. In thinking about mission, much of the emphasis on innovative expressions of church life is centred on mission to the young. Such a move rightfully counters an increasingly ageing church population. Yet, arguably, old-age is the growing part of the population. How much of the mission focuses on the old? And if not, what could the Salvation Army learn from programs found in other denominations, specifically in this particular mission field?
6. In thinking about diverse ministries, the seven years training of ordination preclude older members becoming Officers? And can this be negotiated through the development of auxiliary offers? In thinking about auxiliary officers, what can be learned from the rise of the diaconate within the ecumenical context?
7. The Church of England has found success with Fresh Expressions. How can innovative Anglican expressions of church inform the continued questioning of a Corps Identity?

## **The Roman Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle**

### **Recommendations**

1. The restoration of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, which builds presbyteral and lay consultation into a single constitutional body, rendering force to its consultative voice.
2. All parishes should have Parish Pastoral Councils.
3. Pastoral Area Councils need to overlap with cluster meetings.
4. The development of governance roles for the laity in the life of their local church and parish church. In particular, as more and more parishes are clustered or amalgamated in the absence of a priest, diaconship becomes an increasingly valued leadership role for communities. Married men should continue to be encouraged into the role, along with women.
5. Explore the possibility of married priesthood and alternate models of priesthood (e.g. Local ordained Ministry, part-time and non-stipendiary ministry?)

### **Ecumenical Reception**

1. What does it mean to share as laity in the threefold ministry through baptism? Baptism is something we all share, yet what is it specifically about the interpretation of baptism within other denominations that facilitates lay participation? Here the Catholic Diocese has much to learn from the Methodists and United Reformed Church. The question to explore is this: what is it about the theological understanding of baptism that Methodists and the United Reformed Church carry that facilitates/fosters this participation?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that: “it is the Church that believes first, and so bears, nourishes, and sustains my faith. . . . It is through the Church that we receive faith and new life in Christ by Baptism.” In contrast, while Methodists nonetheless profess the faith of the universal Church, the emphasis is put primarily on the personal decision of the believer in Jesus Christ. The point is not that the Catholic Church repudiates the emphasis on the individual’s faith qua the church, but rather to note the difference of where Methodists place emphasis and the way that such emphasis is reflected in high levels of engaged membership.

2. What can other denominations teach us from a practical standpoint, about structures to implement lay participation at both the regional and parish level? To take the former, why not address the implementation of a Diocesan Pastoral Council within the existing Council of Laity? Here useful learning could be had from the Methodist Church Synod which allows for a routine process of memorials, which invoke concise discussion and voting that thereby provide raw data for informed consultation. This would make good on what Pope Francis calls ‘synodality,’ which cannot only apply to episcopal collegiality, but to the whole people at all levels: parish, local church, and Universal church. In other words, in developing both a Diocesan Pastoral Council or the existing Council of Laity, how might a greater sense of ‘synodality’ be developed within their statutes or practices? To take the latter, the Anglican church has a long tradition of parochial parish councils. One could imagine a cross-fertilisation of practice by inviting Anglicans to such councils, giving an entirely novel twist to shared local ministry and the beginnings of a shared practice for governance.
3. The Anglican experience of Team Ministry (i.e. a formal collaborative ministry established to serve a particular benefice that may include more than one parish) offers an example of the type of ministry which is suited to clusters. Team ministry should extend to the role of the laity and their active contribution in the sharing of worship resources etc. in a bid to win back the sense of spiritual creativity in the life of the worship. It is noted, however, that training provisions are already offered through the Diocese, although the channels continue to function primarily at deanery/diocesan level.
4. One feature of Methodist and Anglican ecclesiology shared by the Catholic Church is the role of the permanent diaconate. The difference pertains to the ordination of women to the role of deaconess. What can the Diocese learn from the experiences of both men and women in these positions with a view to the further development of the permanent diaconate that includes both men and women within the Diocese (not withstanding that permission would need to be sought from Rome).

## **Northern Baptist Association**

### **Recommendations**

1. Baptist churches would benefit from fostering greater interdependency through the cultivation of Translocal Ministry. This could help balance out the dangers of isolationism, which congregational ecclesiology can foster. This recommendation is not simply a matter of expediency in the light of church attendance and provisions—although, the need to finance mission and ministers remains a challenge to an isolated



congregations. Rather, the aim is to foster the effective collaboration to which many individual Baptists aspire (and to which The Nature of Assembly recognises), thus affirming the ‘interdependence of congregations’. Practically speaking this should include:

- The development of joint pastorates that would also enable a shared strategic platform for mission and discipleship, whilst remaining sensitive to the inward bonds of trust found in local churches and providing the opportunity to widen the mission understanding.
  - A joint ecumenical day on ‘Shared Churches’ could be organised with a view to the differing denominational experiences of shared ministry to facilitate the cultural shift and provide tools to develop local programs of discipleship with that in mind.
  - Where Regional Assembly is perceived to operate according to a consultative model, as identified by our interviewees, a more deliberative model would encourage participation in the Assembly with a view to the independent churches. The various practices of the United Reformed Church and Methodist Synod commend themselves in this regard.
2. The regional development of translocal ministry. By way of incentivising translocal ministry, churches in receipt of a Home Mission Grant could be formally asked to consider shared ministry as condition of receipt. The cultural shift from a church and its ministers to shared ministry and church grouping has also been marked in the Catholic tradition through clustering. Reflection on the experience of Roman Catholic clustering from the perspective of the laity could facilitate the cultural shift within the Northern Baptist Association.
  3. A number of questions should be posed regarding the role of elders and deacons answering them in tandem with ecumenical partners (formal or otherwise), such as:
    - How do elders think about ‘locality’ or ‘place’ especially within a postmodern context?
    - Do elders think of their congregations or wider contexts?
    - How does eldership function when congregations move to being one church in different buildings?
    - How would elders learn to identify within groups of churches?
    - What does a ‘culture’ of eldership suggest to you?
  4. The aim is to increase the importance of deaconship within a translocal economy, rooted in a covenant ecclesiology:
    - For example, notwithstanding any legal status afforded to a minister by statute, the church recognises that the minister and the church are in a relationship based on Christian love, trust, and mutual accountability.
    - A minister shall be, in the first instance, in a relationship of mutual accountability with deacons, elders (if any), and also with the church meeting.
    - If a theology of covenant is to be developed translocally, then one should readdress the provisions for understanding the above.
  5. Adequate provision for training must be established in support of the above, and more generally in terms of discipleship. Many churches operate small groups, with Bible study at their heart, approached through a range of other issues such as a discussion

about prayer, symbols and sacraments, or about other faiths. In some instances, groups emerge from a desire on the part of the lay people to meet and study – or reflect together. In others, groups are seen as an integral part of the church’s life. How then can the culture of discipleship be cultivated through Eldership?

## Ecumenical Reception

1. In the first instance, the interdependency of Methodism lends itself to thinking through Baptist issues to the extent that presbyter and minister undertake roles beyond the confines of their local congregation. The connexional principle is manifest in churches being grouped into circuits with circuit superintendents who, in principle, exercise oversight, foster vision, and encourage collaboration in the light of the Methodist connexion. The General Secretary of the Methodist Conference, Martyn Atkins has argued that, ‘It is crucial to realise afresh that our commitment to connexionalism is primarily a spiritual commitment before it is a descriptor of our structures’. In other words, one way to understand the spiritual connexion is through a wider appreciation of precisely what it means to be a covenant church and vice-versa.
2. Initial suggestions regarding translocal ministry as a means to foster interdependency grew out of reflection on the Methodist connexion—to the extent that presbyters and ministers undertake roles beyond the confines of their local congregation. While the structure of Methodism and its financial underpinnings do not commend themselves to Baptist structures or ecclesiology, there are possible lessons to be learned from the United Reformed Church, which has dismantled its middle tier—formally called ‘the district’—in favour of more informal partnerships with a view to resourcing mission through ‘mission partnerships’. Subsequently, this evolved into pastorates, or groups of churches—usually two ‘joint pastorates’. Pastorates are predicated on a formal statement of intent that governs the way in which independent churches relate to one another, with special reference to the sharing of ordained ministry. In contrast to Methodist circuits, which are standardised across the connexion, pastorates may be drawn up between churches. Thus, churches can retain their own identity along with elders and the local church meeting, although decisions relating to calling a minister are undertaken jointly. In short, pastorates enable a shared strategic platform for mission and discipleship, while remaining sensitive to the inward bonds of trust found in local churches and structures of congregational decision-making.
3. When posed ecumenically, the question can be asked: ecclesiologically, what can the Northern Baptist Association learn from the other traditions in regard to their theology of elders and deacons? For example, what can the Baptist tradition learn from the Presbyterian element of the United Reformed Church, which gives theological consideration to the place of eldership? These questions may best be posed in terms of an ecumenical study day.

## The Methodist Districts of Newcastle and Darlington

### Recommendations

1. Develop programs of formation to allow for the strengths of congregational formation (i.e. close ties of friendship in Christ) while remaining attentive to wider circuit-level concerns, both practical (e.g. resourcing for mission) and theological (e.g. enacting the body of Christ) in ways which drive home the ecclesial significance of Methodism's unique contribution to the ecumenical scene: the connexion.
2. Reassess the role of the circuit superintendent with an emphasis on the theological nature of oversight. This would help impress upon local congregations the theological value of the connexion through his or her representative ministry.
3. Assess how superintendents can work more proactively rather than reactively to the current forces of circuit rationalisation. This might include, for example, developing the theological understanding of oversight to include a prophetic role alongside the priestly and kingly aspects of oversight.
4. Encourage superintendents to identify the charisms in the congregations to promote the connexional principle.
5. Encourage stewards to consider the 'culture' of their officership in both socio-practical and theological terms.

### Ecumenical Reception

1. One way to recover connexionalism is to re-evaluate the role of the superintendent qua representative of connexionalism, i.e. recovering a representative ministry for the superintendent. This is not to suggest a form of ordination akin to bishops, but to suggest that the roles embodied in the episcopal tradition have much to offer in securing the unity of Methodist Church. This is not to suggest a hierarchical understanding of episcopacy – resisted in Methodist ecclesiology – but to ask how the spiritual function of episcopacy, i.e. the 'unity' of the Body of Christ it represents, can be 'repeated' within Methodist ecclesiology.

For example, strengthening the role of sacramental oversight given the Superintendent (e.g. presiding local services more often?) would strengthen the representative ministry of connexional unity. This might mean strengthening the pneumatological basis of ministry rather than apostolic hierarchy – an entirely different way of framing the problem to that of the spiritual connexion verses the practical function of the connexion. The practical function requires the former. In this, the Methodist can receive much from the Anglican Church. To put the matter more particularly, given the strategic drive on the part of the Anglican Diocese of Durham to strengthen the role of the Deanery, what might the Methodists learn from the Anglicans in this regard?

2. How might a more robustly sacramental vocation to the ministry be fostered for superintendents? Superintendents preside over the ministries of Word and sacrament, including worship and doctrine, and exercise a personal episcopate following Christ's

servant ministry: priest, prophet, and King – the threefold spiritual powers. How might superintendence in the UK Methodist tradition be developed ecumenically in light of Catholic and Anglican understandings of episcopacy?

## **The Anglican Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle**

### **Recommendations**

1. The dioceses should explore the extent to which the four official locations of governance at diocesan level (bishop, diocesan synod, bishop's council, and the diocesan board of finance) enable a clear strategy to be articulated and its implementation enabled with a view to embedding local parishes in that shared strategy.
2. The dioceses should explore further the ecclesiological basis and effectiveness of enhancing the role of deaneries as a key part of the organisational strategy, with particular reference to an increasingly mixed economy of churches (e.g. fresh expressions) and ministerial positions.
3. Assess the ways in which Anglican identity can be strengthened.
4. There are both personal and structural rigidities – individuals, particularly clergy, but also parishes, which may choose not to participate in a diocesan strategy or who resist change. Anglicans should address the difficulties in encouraging parishes to cooperate and collaborate, in the light of their traditional independence.
5. The development of an effective strategy in response to anticipated future problems arising from falling clergy and congregations and anticipated financial difficulties.

### **Ecumenical Reception**

1. In terms of strategy, what can the Anglican Church learn from the current strategy of the Catholic Church: *Forward Together in Hope*?
2. In the development of a stronger middle tier of governance (the deanery), Anglicans can learn from the struggles that the Methodist Church faces in the shift to reconcile a more congregational outlook with oversight and the United Reformed Church's structural re-organisation. What can their efforts teach the Anglicans about the need to foster intra-Anglican relations?
3. How might Catholic 'clustering' offer a model for sustaining wider expressions of parish life with a cohesive sense of one's religious identity?
4. The Anglicans have already developed a wealth of ministerial opportunities, lay and ordained alike (e.g. non-stipendiary ministry, reader ministry), yet Freehold, or its legal successors, and the legalities associated with parish reorganisation make rapid redeployment of clergy and pastoral reorganisation more difficult to achieve. What can the Anglicans learn from all the denominations about parish re-organisation?