

Ecumenical County of Cumbria

Outreach Strategy

Background

The Declaration of Intent signed by the Methodist, United Reformed and Anglican churches in Cumbria in November 2011 committed those churches, among other things, 'to seek out every possible opportunity for joint initiatives at local and county level in mission to all the people of Cumbria'.

That we, as three distinctive traditions, are partnering together for this task of outreach acknowledges our commitment under God to our relationships with each other and to all the people of our county; and also that we recognise and celebrate the presence of a multiplicity of modes of Christian discipleship.

Mission is multifaceted and embraces responding to human need by loving service, seeking the transformation of unjust structures within society, and the safeguarding of the integrity of creation. It includes proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers. The Five Marks of Mission were endorsed by Churches Together in England in 1997

While recognising the full breadth of missionary activity encompassed within any definition of mission, this strategy focuses on the proclamation of Good News and on the nurture of new believers. This is for two reasons:

- these themes are specifically Christian; others of social and environmental justice are shared by many people of goodwill, of all faiths and none. Moreover, within the county, many churches are already actively engaged in social and environmental issues supported by Churches Together in Cumbria working groups and staff and by other agencies both within and outside of church structures. (For example, the CTiC Social Responsibility Forum and Development Officer; Environment Group)
- these are areas where many individuals and local congregations struggle. They need specific help to work out their response to Jesus' command to make disciples (Matthew 28:16-20).

We acknowledge the need to put a strong emphasis on the tasks of proclaiming the Good News and making disciples. This strategy is intended to form a consistent whole along with equivalent strategies for ministry and for the use of buildings.

Introduction

Each person who lives or works in or who visits the county will be in a different place on their life and faith 'journey'. Some will actively self-identify as Christians and will have a connection to a church community. Some will identify with another faith group. Others will be nominally Christian, while a significant number describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'. In the 2011 Census a quarter of the population of England and Wales identified themselves as having 'no religion'.

One metaphor to describe the evangelistic task is that of journey. Journeys take time, and routes can vary. Our task is to help people on their journey 'to faith', and their journey 'of faith'. Another metaphor is that of 'seed sowing' – offering people insights and experiences that, in small and large

ways, might open their minds and hearts to God. Sometimes the seed will sprout and sometimes not. For others, the metaphor might be more like the tending of a garden that may itself yield more flavoursome fruit with fertile seeds of its own. The Church itself is in perpetual need of re-evangelisation and continuing conversion.

The underlying thrust of this strategy is an active intention to encourage churches and individual Christians in Cumbria to make the most of existing evangelistic and faith sharing opportunities, as well as to seriously engage with those people who are beyond the fringes of church life, and to encourage and enable them to reflect on where they encounter God. Such an approach will require a playful and open mindset and a willingness to take risks in trying out new things.

Fresh Expressions are referred to in this document. They are a movement that aims to re-imagine Christian community in ways that are accessible and attractive to both de-churched (i.e. those who have been active members of the Christian community in the past) and unchurched people (those who have never been part of any Christian community). It is “changing church for a changing world” and promotes the idea of mixed economy, namely the need for new styles of church alongside more traditional expressions.

Spirituality is a buzz word in these early years of the 21st century. The Christian spiritual tradition(s) are a rich resource that are sometimes taken for granted by those within the church, and often unrecognised by those outside it, who are exploring their spirituality.

The term ‘Mission Community’ is used within this strategy. This is taken from the Ecumenical County Ministry Strategy which defines ‘Mission Community’ thus:

Congregations will be grouped together into ecumenical Mission Communities – perhaps around 50-60 across Cumbria, usually with clear geographical boundaries, but recognising that fresh expressions of church are likely to be based as much on networks as places.

A stipendiary, ordained “leader in mission” will usually oversee a Mission Community. These leaders could be from any of the partner denominations.

Each Mission Community will be served by a ministry team typically consisting of the stipendiary ordained leader and a number of other paid or self-supporting lay and ordained ministers, including the leaders of each congregation

This strategy has been carefully worded, avoiding too much religious jargon, in order that it can be understood by all. Our hope is that it is broad enough for the whole church to embrace it, and open enough for every local congregation to interpret it in a way that is appropriate to them.

Purpose

**To help all people in Cumbria, of all ages and backgrounds,
discover more of God and God’s purpose for their lives;
so that they will discover more of Jesus and the Good News
and become followers of Jesus within a Christian community.**

This strategy is an attempt to help people across the county of Cumbria to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength; and to grow into loving neighbour as self.

Strategy

1. The Christian Person

Christian people are called to live out their lives as disciples of Jesus Christ and as witnesses of all that God has done throughout human history and in their own lives. Each has a unique faith story, a unique group of contacts and unique opportunities to relate with other people. Warm, open friendship is proven to be the primary means of people coming to faith.

This strategy stands or falls according to the response of the individual Christians in Cumbria.

- a. All shall be enabled to live out whole life discipleship in ways that are sometimes counter-cultural, but always God-focussed; and to be able to give a reason for their Christian life-style.
- b. All shall be supported and encouraged to be able to discern how God has been at work in their lives, and then to talk naturally about their experience and understanding of God,
- c. All shall be helped to recognise the opportunities that already present themselves (work, leisure activities, voluntary service, family life, time with friends...), for loving, caring and sharing their faith story,
- d. All shall be helped to understand that social responsibility (though not the focus of this strategy) is an outworking of their faith, and adds credibility to their words.

2. Congregations

Each existing Christian community will be resourced to deepen its existing journey of discipleship

- a. We will promote a missionary mindset within the life of our churches by encouraging all those involved in leadership to consider how the message presented impacts on daily life, that this interpretation is clear and obvious; and by offering support to all within the church as they consider how that message might be shared with people beyond the church. Church activities, including worship, shall be attractive, accessible and comprehensible to visitors through interpretation, adaptation and explanation.
- b. Churches and people will be encouraged to critically consider the quality of welcome that they offer to visitors and newcomers, to be ready to be changed in terms of culture, perspective and behaviour by new attendees, and to offer non-judgemental hospitality towards strangers and visitors. All Christian communities and groupings in the county shall be encouraged to undertake a welcome audit on a periodic basis and to explore the quality of welcome that they offer.
- c. Local churches are encouraged to consider and to find appropriate ways of keeping in contact with those who have celebrated a life event in their church, e.g. by appointing named contacts, sending of cards and invitations to special events.
- d. Local churches will be encouraged and resourced to make festival services into community events.

3. Mission Communities

Mission Communities will exist to resource their member congregations for outreach and to help resource local churches that range in size from tiny to small to medium to large with the help they need to engage in this work.

- a. Each Mission Community will be encouraged to think outside the box and develop styles of church that fit the yearnings of those around them and the various cultures that exist across age groups, stages of life, place of origin, social background and interests and values. Network Youth Church is one example in the county of church that is developing for a particular subset of the population.
- b. The ecumenical county shall encourage Mission Communities to be playful, prayerful and creative in their approach to developing Fresh Expressions, to feel released to try out new ideas, and to understand the termination of projects as not being a sign of failure but to celebrate pieces of work done for God's glory
- c. Each Mission Community will include opportunities for its members to talk about their faith as well as to share experience of how they have found ways to talk about their faith with their friends and contacts
- d. Each Mission Community will be encouraged to offer a seekers course on at least an annual basis.
- e. Each Mission Community will offer a high quality and personalised 'product' to all in their locality planning a thanksgiving/baptism, wedding/blessing or funeral/memorial service in their churches.
- f. Mission communities are urged to consider how they might resource the various spiritual needs of their locality, and how to make it easy for people to access spiritual support.
- g. Each Mission Community will have a website that includes, as a minimum material that explores Christian life, faith and spirituality; details about worship; contact details for congregations and leaders; community activity and contacts; and links to spirituality and prayer websites such as sacred space or rejesus; as well as organisational matters such as buildings or church history.

4. Clergy and Ministers

Those involved in the leadership of local churches, alongside offering a ministry of word, sacraments, teaching, and pastoral care, have a key and crucial role in encouraging and enabling individuals to participate in the external mission of the church. Those who are called to ordained ministries are role models in both practice and example to those they lead and care for enabling the whole church community to realise the potential of new and existing faith-sharing work.

By nature of their role, clergy and ministers have a unique opportunity to engage with individuals and their community. Many people only make contact with their local church or representative of the Christian community in times of celebration or bereavement. In addition a significant cohort of the population do attend church for festivals and at other key points in the year.

- a. All those who exercise a leadership ministry within the local church will be encouraged to reflect regularly on their own discipleship, ministry and personality. This might be with the accompaniment of a spiritual director or other support network. It is vital that those in leadership sustain the spiritual reserves necessary to maintain their work and to continually discern their own existing and emerging gifts that God is offering to help with their leadership of the Christian community.
- b. Clergy and ministers will be encouraged to recognise, and make the most of, the opportunities presented by weddings, funerals, baptisms, festivals etc so that all involved experience something of the reality of God's love and purposes, and receive a broader experience than 'booking' and receiving an occasional office.

5. Evangelists

While all Christians are called to be witnesses, some have a specific vocation to the ministry of evangelism. The strategy will help churches identify who are their evangelists – people with a gift, personality and enthusiasm to share faith with others and to encourage others to share their faith. This ministry shall be formally recognised, appropriately resourced and subject to a similar enabling pattern of discernment, formation and commissioning as other ministries within the life of the church.

- a. The ministry of evangelist in any ministries, vocation enquirers and discernment events that take place within our county
- b. Initial formation and training opportunities for those exploring the ministry of evangelist, will be resourced and recognised ecumenically through an appropriate act of commissioning.

Opportunities will be offered to those exercising this ministry to meet, in different parts of the county, on a regular basis; and also to join together for an annual event.

6. The Reach Team

It is a reality that a significant proportion of the people of Cumbria have no connection with church. Whatever efforts churches make to invite people in, to go out into communities with various initiatives, these things alone will not evangelise the whole county. Many people are far from what church might offer (although they may find a connection at a time of difficulty or celebration). In order to reach everyone in Cumbria there needs to be initiatives that go beyond what local churches might offer.

- a. A 'Reach' team shall be drawn together, consisting of people holding entrepreneurial vision to develop, expand and implement a pattern of seed sowing opportunities that will awaken people to the possibility of God and the Gospel.
- b. This group will seek to work with all people of goodwill, in as much as they share our intent 'To help people in Cumbria discover more of God and God's purpose for their lives'.

7. Chaplains and county-wide Ministries

Churches have long found that there is a need and desire to engage with the wider community from a broader than local perspective. Historically, Church of England dioceses, Methodist districts and United Reformed Church synods have engaged with a variety of public, private and voluntary sector organisations as part of their work as well as with civic bodies. Chaplains will continue to play a crucial role in representing the Christian faith to a range of secular agencies, bodies and employers and offering the perspective and voice of those they serve back into the life of the church.

Churches Together in Cumbria also offer additional support to, and work and advocate for, the church at local and county level.

- a. Annual events will take place aimed at those families who are bereaved in particular ways, e.g. those who have experienced miscarriage, abortion, infertility, death of a baby, death of a child, families of those killed on the roads, suicide. Some of these county-wide services already happen and will be encouraged.
- b. Some of the work described in 'a' has been developed by chaplains working within the county.
- c. We will develop a series of resources and opportunities that can be offered to the people of Cumbria through a variety of media. These might include (for example) ensuring that contemporary reflections are included in local newspapers and we aim to work in partnership

with local radio, both BBC and commercial, offering relevant and thought provoking subject material. This could include opportunities such as a Sing Christmas event or reflections based on music, sport or other aspects of popular culture.

d. A range of resources will be developed that are targeted at tourists visiting the county; such resources might include quality print material to be distributed via buildings that are kept open, a website that signposts key places around the county and smartphone apps that highlight particular religious/spiritual/beautiful locations and invite the user to reflect on their life, relationships and experience of the divine.

8. Buildings and Grounds

Church buildings are often what those outside of the church first think of in response to the word 'church'. Historic buildings are key landmarks in cities, towns and villages, and they hold an emotional attachment for many people.

- a. Church buildings and grounds shall be accessible to the whole community (as far as possible) and pleasant places to visit.
- b. Churches will be encouraged to explore whether their buildings can be kept open either full time, in daylight hours or during advertised times that are in addition to worship services.
- c. Churches will be encouraged to produce simple resources to their buildings that are explanations of physical features and furniture but also invitations to reflect and ponder on the spiritual story and significance of the building, both past and present.
- d. Churches with grounds will be encouraged to develop their grounds as oases for people to pause. This includes the sensitive maintenance of graveyards but also might include developing quiet gardens, laying out permanent labyrinths and the provision of benches.
- e. Church notice boards will include statements that encourage passersby to ponder and reflect on their lives so that they encounter the spiritual as well as contact information and service times.

Moving Forward

This strategy has been birthed through a lengthy process of thought, reflection, study, discussion and, most importantly, prayer. Prayer is key as this document moves into the process of consultation and come before the relevant synod meetings of the Church of England Diocese of Carlisle, Cumbria Methodist District and the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church. This strategy may also be of interest to other denominations active within Cumbria since the task of the evangelisation of Cumbria belongs properly and rightly to all Christ's disciples in this county.

The question that might seriously be posed is how will we will measure success. While we can never fully know what God might be doing, both in plain sight and in hidden ways, we do hope that it will be possible to see 'growth' in both quantitative and qualitative ways. This is not a paper that is about church growth, although church growth is a part of this agenda. This is a paper that seeks,

To help all people in Cumbria, of all ages and backgrounds, discover more of God and God's purpose for their lives; so that they will discover more of Jesus and the Good News and become followers of Jesus within a Christian community.

Some, we hope, will connect with our existing churches. Others will not, but will have been offered and, we hope, found ways of engaging with God and received nourishment for their own spiritual journey. More work is needed to formulate what success might look like.

We anticipate that at least two groups will be needed to implement this strategy. The Reach Group has been outlined in the paper itself. A further church focussed group will be needed to help implement the proposals contained about local churches, the role of clergy, ministers and other congregational leaders, about the church at county level and how might the issue of formally introducing the ministry of evangelists be tackled. It is for the three partner churches to together decide how the journey onward might be travelled, if indeed this is agreed as being the correct map.

Ecumenical Outreach Group

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