

Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth



Churches Working Together

A Code of Practice for Parishes

Revised Edition 2008

Portsmouth Diocesan Christian Unity Committee

Churches Working Together

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The Diocesan Christian Unity Committee

The Diocesan Christian Unity Committee consists of members appointed by the Bishop to advise him on ecumenical matters and to assist in carrying out our diocesan policy on ecumenism. The committee is assisted in its work by a Council for Christian Unity composed of representatives from each Pastoral Area together with observers from other churches and the County Ecumenical Officers for the area covered by the diocese.

Foreword by the Bishop of Portsmouth

In response to the Diocesan Pastoral Plan set out in *Go Out and Bear Fruit* the Diocesan Christian Unity Committee has revised the 1999 Code of Practice for working together with other Christian churches. I commend this new document to Parishes and Pastoral Areas and, in particular, to their pastoral councils.

It is increasingly clear to me that we cannot achieve our potential as a Christian Community if we attempt to do so without reference to our brothers and sisters in other Christian communities. Ecumenism has, therefore, an important part to play in fostering both 'Communion' and 'Mission' which as you know I have put forward as the key words in our approach to the years ahead.

A faith which is deeply and personally lived together with other Christians, becomes a powerful force for good in the whole community and can be one of the major factors which shape the well-being of society. There is so much disunity in society that we need to commit ourselves to increasing the unity among Christ's followers and to be seen by all to be doing so.

It is in this spirit that I present this Code to you all. Particular Parishes have their own special circumstances and problems and not all the advice will be relevant in every situation but I do hope that clergy and pastoral councils will look carefully at this Code and use it to help bring Christian Communities closer together both in prayer and in service to the wider community. We should remember that we should not be doing separately anything which can in conscience be done together.

God Bless you all

t Crispian Hollis Bishop
of Portsmouth

Introduction

' . . . it is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian Unity, is not just some sort of "appendix" which is added to the church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does; it must be like the fruit borne by a healthy and flourishing tree which grows to its full stature.' *Pope John Paul II in Vt Unum sint', para 20,25 May 1 995.*

'Indeed all the faithful are asked by the Spirit of God to do everything possible to strengthen the bonds of communion between all Christians and to increase cooperation between Christ's followers.'

Vt Unum Sint', para 101.

'Concern for restoring unity pertains to the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone according to the potential of each.'

Second Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism, para 5.

These very strong statements of the Church's approach to Ecumenism should form the foundation of our approach to praying and working with other Christians. So much good work goes on already that there is a temptation to rest on our laurels. Unfortunately the world around us does not stand still and there is a constant need to see whether the way we relate to the other Churches is suited to the needs of the times and of the area.

Quoting *Go Out and Bear Fruit*, 'guided by the Diocesan Christian Unity Committee, Pastoral Councils are expected to develop greater awareness of opportunities for ecumenical involvement and collaboration at all levels — this could include appointing a member responsible for ecumenical liaison and advice.' This is particularly important when dealing with people in civic and public life or in business as this is usually better done ecumenically.

No prescription will fit every Parish. In a Diocese like this there are so many different types of Community; big city, small country village, seaside holiday resort and so on. But some general principles will have wide application and this Code suggests ways in which Parishes might better work towards Christ's wish 'that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you.'
(*John 17:21.*)

Formation

At the heart of all our dealings with other Churches it is important that our parishioners should understand their own faith and in particular the Church's attitude to the other Christian Churches. Those who represent their parish should therefore be people with a good grounding in their own faith and an understanding of the Church's teaching on Ecumenism.

The Diocesan Christian Unity Committee is willing to arrange training for those who are members of local 'Churches Together' or who are responsible for Ecumenical matters on the Parish and Pastoral Area Pastoral Councils.

Formation is vital also for the whole Parish. Wherever possible any study groups on the Catholic Faith should include a section on Ecumenism. Sometimes the other Churches will be able to help in providing speakers or information. County Ecumenical Officers and local 'Churches Together' can be useful resources as well.

Understanding other Christians and the way they worship helps towards working together and every opportunity should be taken to learn more about them.

The Role of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC)

Parish Pastoral Councils are crucial to the development of the Church in the local area. It is there that the resources of the Church are deployed and it is there that decisions are taken that affect the way the Parish carries out its Christian Mission. It follows that in line with the Church's current thinking one of the important functions is to oversee the formation of the Parish generally and in ecumenical matters in particular.

Every Parish will have its own Mission Statement or Constitution for its Council and its make up will vary from place to place. The membership should include one person delegated as the 'ecumenical member' who has a working knowledge of all ecumenical activity taking place in the area. Ideally this person should be the Catholic Representative on any 'Churches Together' or similar group.

PPCs should review regularly the extent to which the Parish co-operates with other Churches. In particular they should consider whether it is possible to arrange Parish activities so they do not clash with Ecumenical activities or with particular activities in other Churches in the neighbourhood. With the spread of electronic communications it should become increasingly possible to dovetail the dates of Church Events more closely in the future. Even Mass times may have to be altered if this is needed so that people may take part in a special Ecumenical event.

Discussion groups have done much to encourage people of different Churches to work together and PPCs should encourage people to take part in them. Other Christians could be invited to events both spiritual and social arranged by the Parish.

PPCs should always consider the possibility of working with other Churches when new projects are proposed whether these relate to spiritual matters, property or activities. Evangelism of the 'Unchurched' is a field especially suited to a joint approach by the local churches. Parishes should always consult with the Diocesan Christian Unity Committee when a formal Covenant or Local Ecumenical Partnership is being considered. And they are encouraged to be open to the diversity of gifts that are to be found in all people and places. These gifts come from the Holy Spirit and are to be found in all Christian communities.

The Role of the Pastoral Area

A Pastoral Area is, at present, a collection of parishes, and sometimes ecumenical activities may be more effective by being at this level. Unfortunately it is rare that a Pastoral Area has common boundaries with similar groupings in other Churches. This can cause problems but it should not deter the search for new opportunities for ecumenical dialogue and shared initiatives.

The Council for Christian Unity is made up primarily of Pastoral Area representatives and it is important that they should be ex officio members of the Pastoral Area Pastoral Council. These representatives should also work closely with the 'Ecumenical' members of the PPCs within their area. Where that is not possible they should ensure that information that comes to them through the Council for Christian Unity is passed on to all the parishes.

The Role of the Clergy

Some of our Parishes cover a wide area in which there are many other church communities, possibly several of the same denomination. Thus there may be several Clergy groups within the area. Where possible the Parish Priest or a member of the Pastoral Team (Assistant Priest, Deacon, Religious etc.) should be a member of any such grouping, but where there are too many one of the laity may be asked to represent the Priest.

Sometimes it is possible for the local clergy to 'exchange pulpits' either in Christian Unity Weeks in January or at Pentecost, or at other times of the year. This exchange is often better arranged for non-Eucharistic Services. It may be appropriate to involve others rather than the Parish Priest.

The biggest task for the clergy in ecumenical matters is to encourage the people of the parish to take a full part in relations with other Churches. The Priest so often finds that when he tries to work with other churches he does not get the support from the laity that he might have hoped for. This is a fairly common problem and we have to accept at this stage in ecumenical development, that encouragement and formation of the laity in this field may require a great amount of effort. Members of the Diocesan Christian Unity Committee are happy to help and support the clergy in this task.

Praying Together

Many areas have regular joint services and in many places the Catholic Church takes a leading role in these. There are times when it can be a good idea for a small group of people from the churches in the area to get together to plan a joint service. On other occasions it will seem best for a service to be conducted in the format of one particular Church.

Parishioners should be encouraged to go to other Churches and to join in small ecumenical prayer groups. Ever since Vatican II we have been urged by the Church to join others in prayer and worship. We need to get into the habit of going occasionally to other people's churches and to welcome other people of faith to our churches. This can be done without anyone compromising their own beliefs.

When others are invited it is very important to make sure that service sheets of some sort are available. This applies both to Mass and to other events, particularly funerals. Other people so often want to know how we do things and to join in, but are unable to do so because of unfamiliarity.

The pain of incomplete communion is always present and will be until unity is achieved. When others who cannot join us in Communion come to Mass it is often helpful if they are specifically invited to come for a blessing. It may be better at present not always to include celebration of Mass as an Ecumenical Service. There is a rich diversity of other forms of liturgy.

One of the most effective ways of praying together is to exchange prayer requests and regularly to include prayers for other Churches' intentions in our own bidding prayers, especially at times of significant events such as patronal feasts and changes in clergy.

Common Activities

There are numerous ways in which Churches can work together. Suggestions are available from County Ecumenical Officers and from the Diocesan Christian Unity Committee, which is always ready to provide speakers to address pastoral councils and other local groups.

Parishes should also be prepared to provide people to speak to other Churches and to encourage other churches to send people to talk to us about what they are doing. There will be times when it is appropriate to ask representatives of other Churches to attend a parish meeting which is considering a particular project.

Parishes should co-operate to the maximum possible extent with other Churches in work in schools and with young people generally, and also in work on all social justice and ecological issues.

Much good work already goes on in the field of overseas development. Many of our parishes and parishioners take a leading part in Christian Aid and One World Week activities. There is also scope to involve the other Churches in our own Family Fast days for CAFOD.

And of course there is great scope for people of all Churches to praise God together in music and song! Music is also one of the ways in which church people can get together socially. This and other forms of social activity together can do much to strengthen the bonds of friendship between Christians. It is recommended that where there is joint worship there should be some form of social gathering afterwards. A simple cup of tea is often enough.

Publicity

It is important that we should advertise the fact that we believe in an ecumenical approach. One of the recommendations of Churches Together in England (CTE) is that Churches should display a suitable logo on their Notice Boards. This can be either the CTE logo or some local production. A line on the Notice Board to the effect that the Roman Catholic Church is a member of Churches Together in England can also be helpful.

Wherever possible arrangements should be made for the local Churches to exchange newsletters and magazines. In some places the local Churches Together produce a combined magazine for all the local Churches. Equally it should be possible to arrange for the local Churches to make contributions to each other's newsletters.

It would be a neighbourly gesture if our notice boards included a note of the service times in other churches in the locality where this is practicable.

Contacting the Diocesan Christian Unity Committee

The Diocesan Christian Unity Committee can be contacted through the Head of Department of the Diocesan Department of Pastoral Formation. Address, telephone number and email address can be found in the Diocesan Year Book and on the Diocesan website.