

ECUMENICAL PARISHES

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The building up of one Christian congregation under the leadership of a team ministry, consisting of minister and laymen in full or part-time employment, has been recommended for a new area in Corby by a study group representing the Anglican, Methodist, Congregationalist and Baptist Churches in Northamptonshire. The study group hoped that the recommendations will also be considered for implementation in new areas in Peterborough, Wellingborough, Daventry and Northampton.

Corby Development Corporation is proposing to extend the southern part of the new town to accommodate a further 35,000 people and, at the request of the Corby Council of Churches, this area, in which building is expected to begin next year, has been designated as one for ecumenical experiment.

Members of the study group presented their recommendations to the leaders of their churches on 1 March in a report Planning the Ecumenical Parish and the second paragraph of the report reads:

"We began work with the conviction that the churches could no longer afford--either in money, manpower, or on grounds of scandal--to act independently in newly developing areas. Just as industry and secular government want to deal with "The Church" and not with the churches so we believe that people making a new life in a new area want to face one call and not many. Our basic assumption has therefore been that we must make suggestions for a single Christian congregation with one main centre, sponsored by several (we would hope all) of the major denominations."

An introduction to the specific proposals adds:

"Christians must be sensitive to the pressures of God and of the world and we are convinced that expression cannot be given to the new insights into the Church and its mission, nor can the Church keep pace with the population movement and the rapidly changing social patterns unless it acts ecumenically."

It is envisaged that the experiment would begin with the formation of a team composed of two ordained men of different traditions and one or more laymen who would have full time secular jobs. The ordained men might also be in secular employment. The advantages of this are seen to be (a) the assumption that the ministry of word and sacraments is essentially a full-time professional occupation would be counteracted; (b) the financial situation would be eased; (c) a certain freedom from traditional patterns of ministry would be possible; (d) the identification of the minister with society would be intensified and the risk of preoccupation with "religious" activities reduced; (e) housing accommodation could be obtained in the same way as for others coming into the area. The study group adds: "We believe that it is of fundamental importance to begin with a team ministry, for it is only in community that the truth about men can be realised and demonstrated."

Membership of the congregation would be open to those who move into the area and are already members in good standing with the participating churches. New members would be admitted by a form of initiation. This would consist of Baptism by immersion or affusion (if not already administered); a public profession of faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour; the laying on of hands by the Anglican bishop and team members with a prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit; and participation in the Holy Communion. Preparation for membership would be given over an extended period and include active participation in the life of the congregation.

The study group recommends that the central act of worship should be a weekly Eucharist which would include the preaching of the Word. "Full communion among the members of the congregation is essential to be consistent with the spirit of the experiment." Here it is asked that mutual recognition be accorded to all the ordained ministers sharing in the experiment. If this proves impossible, it is suggested that a joint celebration of the Holy Communion by an Anglican priest and a Free Church minister might prove to be an intermediate solution. Alternatively, there might for a limited period be a service each Sunday according to either Anglican or Reformed tradition which all would attend, but at which not all would receive Communion. The possibility of separate celebrations of the Eucharist was considered but rejected because (a) this would divide the congregation during the period of early growth when unity is essential, and (b) if the habit took root it could prove difficult to terminate.

A regular, perhaps quarterly, meeting of the full members of the congregation is seen to be essential in order to "give tangible expression to the conviction that ministry and mission are to be shared by the whole people of God". The section of the report devoted to mission emphasises that the Church must develop naturally with and within the community. In certain situations, it suggests, it will be necessary for the Church to be anonymous. ("This anonymity will be the measure of her identification with her neighbour, that is the society of which she is an integral part.")

An important paragraph in the report discusses the dangers of paternalism and points out that the Church must resist the temptation to provide community needs, even though this is what many will expect. As part of the community the Church must think with the whole community about its common needs and share in community action towards meeting those needs. "Instead of paternalism the Church must aim at identification and involvement even to the point of sacrifice.. Whatever is done to demonstrate the involvement of the congregation in the community (visiting, study groups, action survey, etc.) must express the fundamental conviction that the Church does not do on its own that which it can do with the community."

Moving on to the practical requirements, the study group recommends the setting up of a Sponsoring Body. This would consist of representatives, ministerial and lay, of the participating churches and be responsible for (a) initiating the experiment; (b) making the first appointment; (c) making the first appointments to the team, subsequent appointments would follow consultation with the team and the congregation; (d) arranging to receive from the churches their financial support to provide the salaries and to finance the experiment; (e) giving continuing guidance in matters of theology and discipline; (f) acting in a consultative relationship to the team; (g) reporting to the participating churches and consulting with the British Council of Churches from time to time.

On the financial aspect, only general guide lines are offered but the Sponsoring Body is recommended to pay attention to the securing from the participating churches of an annual agreed sum for a defined period to underwrite the venture. The establishment of equitable stipends for members of the team is seen as important, and although the new congregation should be expected to share in the financial obligations it is recognised that it could not immediately become self-supporting.

The long term plans for buildings should aim at one set of premises to accommodate the activities of the congregation as well as youth facilities, welfare clinics and the varied requirements of a community centre. It is, however, pointed out that "it is very difficult, if not impossible, to foresee at the outset the size or best arrangement of the buildings which will finally be required" and some form of temporary accommodation is recommended. This temporary accommodation must be adequate for a considerable period, at least five years, otherwise "there will be strong pressures in the new congregation to devote an inordinate amount of time and energy to the provision of permanent buildings".

The report concludes by affirming:

"We believe that in any new area of development freedom and courage are demanded to experiment in the sphere of both church structures and mission. This will enable differing traditions to co-operate in such a way that the emerging congregation can develop its own ethos within the disciplines and fellowship of the whole Church. The congregation will then have its own structure of discipline and life within the community in which it is set, so that by its involvement and identification with that community it may manifest the presence of Christ at every level."

The Bishop of Peterborough, the Chairman of the Oxford and Leicester Methodist district, the Moderator of the East Midlands Province of the Congregational Church, and a representative of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, have received the report as "valuable contribution to ecumenical experiment" and have commended it to their respective churches for consideration and comment at an early date. They have also agreed to set up a provisional Sponsoring Body to examine the implications of the report with a view to possible action in Corby. This will meet under the chairmanship of the Revd Frank Scuffham, an Industrial Chaplain at Corby, and will have lay and ministerial representatives from the participating churches.

Members of the study group were the Revds E. Buchanan, R. W. Dooley, F. L. Schffham, F. N. Towndrow (Anglicans), E. B. Grant, R. Hayden (Baptists), J. E. Garside, L. E. Jenkins, S. B. Harris (Congregationalists), L. F. Skinner (Methodist).

Copies of Planning the Ecumenical Parish may be obtained from Ecumenical Study Group, 23 Linden Road, Northampton, prece 2s 6d post free.