



## **Covenants and Constitutions**

A supplement to the leaflet on Local Churches Together

After working closely together for some time, local churches may wish to strengthen their links by pledging to work in harmony and to do as much as is possible together within a Local Churches Together grouping. Differences between Friends and other churches may become sticking points during the process of agreeing a LCT covenant or constitution. One of the most common problems arises when the proposed covenant includes some kind of credal statement as a basis for membership. To help meetings who are wrestling with this kind of situation, we have prepared this supplement.

### **Alternatives to credal membership requirements**

Friends' testimony concerning the use of forms of words to define beliefs was expressed by John Macmurray in 1965:

The central conviction which distinguishes the Society of Friends is that Christianity cannot be defined in terms of doctrinal beliefs; that what makes us Christians is an attitude of mind and a way of life; and these are compatible with wide variations and with changes in beliefs and opinions...

...Faith no longer means the acceptance of an established creed or the assent to an authoritative system of doctrine. It recovers the original meaning of trust and fearless confidence; and this spirit of faith is expressed in a way of living which cares for one another and for the needs of all.<sup>1</sup>

Britain Yearly Meeting is a member of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and the national ecumenical bodies<sup>2</sup> under a 'non credal' clause (formerly known as clause 2b), which reads:

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<sup>1</sup> *Search for Reality in Religion*. John Macmurray. Swarthmore Lecture 1965, reprint 1981 pp.70-71

<sup>2</sup> Action for Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS), Churches Together in Wales (CYTŪN) and Churches Together in England (CTE)

A church, which on principle has no credal statements in its tradition and therefore cannot formally subscribe to the statements of faith in the Basis, may nevertheless apply for and be elected to full membership provided that it satisfies those member churches which subscribe to the Basis that it manifests faith in Christ as witnessed to in the Scriptures and is committed to the aims and purposes of the new ecumenical body, and that it will work in the spirit of the Basis.<sup>3</sup>

This clause is not without its problems for some Friends, since it is an attempt by the other churches to describe us in their terms. However, the clause exists because churches at national level valued the contribution that Friends might make and, understanding our position on creeds, sought to find a way to include Friends in the new bodies. It may be that local churches are keen to include Friends and simply have not realised that Friends have a testimony on this issue. If other churches seem set on including some kind of credal basis for membership, it may be helpful to draw their attention to the above clause, and to suggest that a similar arrangement be incorporated in the local constitution.

Existing examples from local LCTs, which could be taken as models, are as follows:

Note: Although the Society of Friends cannot accept any verbal statement as a basis of Christian unity, they nevertheless wholeheartedly accept and are accepted into participation in this covenant. (Hall Green Churches).

The Religious Society of Friends, although they do not accept any formal credal statement, nevertheless, is a welcome and equal member of CTSD. (Churches Together in Skipton and District).

Some LCTs have gone further and omitted any membership requirement involving creeds, confessions or bases. For example, New Milton CC simply declares the intention of the member churches to continue to

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<sup>3</sup> *Churches Together in Pilgrimage: the next steps*, p.17

seek ways and means of expressing our unity and mutual commitment to Jesus Christ and His Kingdom and will continue to meet and act together, as appropriate, in order to deepen our awareness and understanding of each others' traditions...

Thornbury Association of Christian Churches used the following wording for their covenant:

Rejoicing in the oneness in Christ which we are already experiencing in Thornbury, and looking for the coming together of God's people in the unity of faith and fellowship which is Christ's will and prayer, we the members of (...seven churches...) commit ourselves to working together.

We will remain faithful to the disciplines and heritage of our different traditions while being open to the Holy Spirit leading us on as we serve, share, pray, and witness together. Thus we hope to proclaim the reconciling power of Christ in the world.

Thornbury PM reports that the pamphlet, *To Lima with Love*, was influential in drawing up the covenant.

Huntington and New Earswick Churches Together relies on the membership of CTE as the membership requirement for the churches in the area. Its constitution states:

Membership shall be open to any church belonging to Churches Together in England. This membership at present, locally, consists of the Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic Churches and the Society of Friends (Quakers).

Other alternatives that have been used by ecumenical bodies of which Friends are a part, are as follows:

- a. A church which does not have credal statements within its tradition and therefore finds it difficult to subscribe formally to what appears to it to be a written credal statement in the Basis may apply for and be elected to membership provided that the church demonstrates by its church life and conduct that it upholds the spirit of the Basis. (Australian Council of Churches, 1984.)

- b. Churches which confess and seek to obey Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the Glory of the one God, the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, are invited to seek membership of the Conference, as are Churches which follow the spirit of Jesus revealed in the Scriptures but do not make doctrinal affirmations. (The Conference of Churches in Aotearoa, New Zealand. 1986)

In negotiating with other churches over such alternative wordings, Friends will also wish to be tender to the feelings of other Christians. What suits Friends and Catholics may not be acceptable to the Baptists – and what suits the Friends and Baptists may not be acceptable to Catholics.

However, Friends should also be mindful of how words may be re-interpreted. Phrasing which seems innocuous at the time may become a source of future difficulties if the theological composition of the group changes.

### **Paths through constitutional difficulties**

‘Constitutions are rather like creeds’, wrote Peter L Townsend, Clerk of Exmouth PM, in describing what his Meeting had learnt. He advises where possible ‘to avoid getting involved in wrangles about precise constitutional wording’.

Some constitutions may seem very concerned with stipulating what percentage of members present constitutes a quorum, or what the duties of various officers shall be. Generally, Friends seem to find such constitutions alien to our way of doing business, believing that while ‘the letter killeth ... the Spirit giveth life’ (2 Corinthians 3:6). In some situations it can be hard to look beyond the wording of constitutions to find the original vision of Christians coming together and going forward in pilgrimage under the guidance of the Spirit.

It may be that for some churches lengthy, legalistic constitutions are their normal way of doing business and represent security to them. If so, perhaps one of our positive contributions, as Friends could be to offer our insight that words divide and that true unity comes through dependence on the Spirit. Therefore, as Friends we would be looking for a constitution that, in as few words as possible, enabled the churches to come together and commit themselves to working together.

Where Friends become involved early in the process of forming a LCT, perhaps because of a longstanding history of ecumenical cooperation in an area, there is more likelihood of influencing the constitution as it is formed. Where Friends come late to the process, it may be hard for other churches to accommodate the sort of changes we might look for. If this is the case, it may be helpful to offer alternative models of constitutions to help the other churches to see what possibilities already exist and to form the basis for 'friendly negotiations'. Some existing constitutions do manage to be brief and endeavour to keep the spirit of unity in view.

Sometimes the difficulties encountered might leave Friends with a negative feeling about involvement with other churches. It needs to be remembered that, until Friends point out where they stand, it may never have occurred to other Christians that such difficulties could exist. They need to know about our problems, just as we need to know about any difficulties that other congregations may be experiencing. It may be that in voicing our feelings we enable Christians in other churches to express similar hesitations.

When a Local Churches Together group is being contemplated and Friends are party to the discussion, or Friends are invited to join an already existing LCT, the Meeting is bound to be challenged: 'what do we think and believe collectively, and, if we have any misgivings or reservations, how do we put them into words?' Perhaps the Meeting will have the resources and will to work through to a conclusion without assistance or support; so well and good. But perhaps help would be welcome, and help is readily available:

- a. The Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relationships can arrange for an appropriate person to come and help to explore the issues or be present if negotiations become complex (eg, Boscombe Friends requested such help). The larger churches have their own national ecumenical officers; Britain Yearly Meeting has not made such an appointment, but this Committee serves in much the same way.
- b. There is a network of area ecumenical officers, appointed by regional bodies or by the interchurch bodies of the four nations, who can be approached to offer guidance. These can be contacted via the relevant body (CTE, ACTS or CYTÚN). Alternatively, officers within your LCT may have

contact details.

The process is not always easy, and requires persistence, as Exmouth PM found out:

‘Although we are a peaceable people we don’t want peace at any price. We were greatly tempted at one time to pull out altogether so as not to upset others. Fortunately, support from a number of quarters helped us to hold our position and require others to make their judgement on us which necessitated their discovering more about us.’

In a very few cases, even after lengthy negotiations, Friends have felt unable to sign the final constitution or covenant. In Marple the other churches produced the following minute:

‘The Society of Friends while not feeling able to sign any form of covenant, stated in a letter that they have every desire to promote the work of Churches Together, and the Secretary was asked to minute the assembly’s appreciation of the Society of Friends’ work and co-operation, to express our gratitude to them for the many years of service to the community, and to look forward to their continuing fellowship and co-operation.’

Marple PM reports that it was a worthwhile exercise to have held the discussions and that it is satisfied with the outcome.

In some areas, Friends have reported that their CLT has become more narrowly ‘evangelical’ in recent years. However, this has not always prevented Friends from maintaining links with the other churches, although they have sometimes found that the form of their relationship needs to change. Bournemouth PM signed the original covenant made by Boscombe Churches Together in 1998. When this covenant came up for renewal in 2005, some other churches desired a more credal formulation than had existed in the original covenant. Bournemouth Friends felt unable to sign the new covenant as full members, instead opting for ‘observer status’ under the following clause of the covenant:

‘Observer status also applies to the Religious Society of Friends. The Friends have on principle no credal statement and so cannot formally subscribe to any statement of faith, but remain fully

committed to the other statements and commitments set out in this covenant.'

## **Useful contacts**

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