

Churches Together in Harborough

Reigniting Vision?

A starter for conversation and development by Rev. Andy Murphy, February 2024

Where are we now?

From the start, it is worth acknowledging some factors which have affected CTH recently. Our individual churches are ministering in a post-pandemic world, where many of the things we previously took for granted are questioned. Church leaders are working different patterns, many new ministers have arrived recently, and churches are adapting to changing circumstances in their wider denominations. Where diaries and personal circumstances are increasingly full for ministers and church leaders, involvement in the CTH Forum has been regrettably low, but understandably so.

Meanwhile, we have a continued desire from congregations and the Harborough community to work together wherever possible as Churches Together. Especially among the established members of many of the churches, there is a proud and fond recollection of the many things we have done together or achieved ecumenically in this town. Many of these continue successfully as Christian organisations – such as the Cube or the Bower House – although the retirement of the Street Pastors should cause us to be asking afresh if and how we need to address some of the wider social needs.

Generally, Christianity in Market Harborough remains relatively strong, compared to a national average, and the churches retain influence and respect in the town at large. There are new and emerging congregations, exciting expressions of church, and several churches appealing to younger demographics. It is to be noted, however, that this youthfulness is not always reflected or represented at CTH meetings or gatherings – which seem to be dominated by a very faithful traditional core.

Where did we come from?

I do not have the dates or details for when CTH was founded, but I hear many anecdotes about the things we did together, the people involved, and a growing sense of unity. It's worth reading our **current constitution** (revised in 2021) which you can find on the website:

<https://www.harboroughchurches.org.uk/constitution.html>

The Constitution is actually quite a simple document which does not prescribe too much. There is great potential within this for us to do much together, and to do new things in new ways.

Generally, it is worth remembering that we are part of *Churches Together in Leicestershire*, which is part of *Churches Together in England*, part of *Churches Together in Britain and Ireland*, which is part of the *World Council of Churches*. This is an international body which grew up after the Second World War. All of these ecumenical organisations require members to have

a commitment to one another, and to have a formally recognised way that member churches can be involved and have a voice.

These organisations came about after hundreds of years of churches splitting and warring. With the end of the War, there was a sense that a divided world needed a uniting Church; at the very least, that the Church of Christ should be leading the way in reconciliation. For many of our predecessors in history, disagreement and difference meant the necessity of division; that we could not be in communion with one another. The ecumenical movement, however, has tried to say that there is so much more that unites us, in Christ. Our differences in fact can be a positive - leading to a greater diversity of mission and worship, and a greater number of people reached with the gospel. There will be some things that as individuals we do not agree on, but we can still grow in fellowship with one another. We can be enriched by styles of worship different from our own, we can pray for one another, and we can show a friendship and forgiveness in relationships which can be a witness to the love of Christ that we have received. We can also, as the Holy Spirit inspires us, work together to achieve things that have a positive missional or evangelistic impact on the wider community.

We can work together with purpose, to bring a part of God's kingdom to the world around us; to win people for Jesus Christ. And in a world where many simply do not know or understand the reasons for the apparent divisions of the churches, our unity can have a purpose in itself – speaking volumes about the reconciling power of Christ.

Where might we go together?

The answer to this is open to the limitless possibilities of God! But a few thoughts...

The need to encourage ecumenical participation among the younger members and newer churches is essential if we believe the vision of Churches Together is worth passing on, if we believe in the missional power of Christians working together, or if we simply want to echo the prayer of Jesus (in John 17) that we should all be one.

Part of what we do together may indeed be to build upon and develop established practices of things that increase our fellowship and broaden our sense of unity. Other things will require new vision, courage, and a willingness to take risks.

It is worth noting that for many younger Christians, the simple act of different denominations meeting or worshipping together is not an achievement in itself. There may be a sense of 'So what?' Undoubtedly for the emerging church, there needs to be a strong sense of *purpose*.

Purpose inspired by vision.

Vision inspired by God.

But our visions also need to be tested, discerned and developed by the Christian community, waiting on the Holy Spirit, to get a sense of God's leading. We have two places in which we can do this. One the formally-established **CTH forum**, where ideas can be shared, votes taken, and working parties established (as per the constitution). The other is the informal **Ministers' Fellowship**, which meets several times a year to share in fellowship, food and prayer.

There has been some hesitation in making the Ministers' Fellowship (MF) a forum for CTH discussion, especially since some church leaders who meet in that group are from churches who are not officially associated with CTH. However, if we are to reignite, reimagine or recapture our ecumenical vision, this is surely an important place for God's work to be discerned. It is not necessary that the ideas/visions come from the ministers themselves, but in order to gain the enthusiastic participation of the churches, it is important that such ideas are allowed space and prayer, to find a positive consensus among the church leaders.

The Ministers' Fellowship can then be one route by which new ideas and visions flow to CTH.

Of course, lay representatives can also bring ideas directly to the CTH Forum (which may of course then be sent back to the MF for further discussion).

This leads us to the Forum itself. Currently we allow 2 or 3 voting reps per church, in addition to the recognised church leader or minister of each church, and representatives from the Christian organisations in Market Harborough. The meetings are not closed, however, and other people may attend and participate if they wish.

Thinking about a way forward for the Forum has been hampered somewhat by a lack of forthcoming volunteers to take up the positions of **Chair and Vice-Chair**. Our unwritten convention has been that these roles should alternate between 'lay' and 'ordained'. Our inherited understanding has been that these roles should be for 2 years at a time, leading to a person being on the Executive Committee for a total of 4 years, with the Vice-Chair automatically being nominated as Chair after the first two years as Vice-Chair. This is off-putting to some, but it is also slightly misleading as the constitution does not mention any automatic succession, it says that the roles are annual appointments, and that the "The Chair and Vice-Chair shall not normally hold office for more than two consecutive years". There is therefore room in our existing constitution for a lot more flexibility to fit the changing needs and commitments of our members.

The **Executive Committee** is not set in stone either. The Forum elects five executive officers: Chair, VC, Secretary, Treasurer and Communications Officer. Some of these are currently vacant, and at least one other person (minutes secretary) attends Exec meetings. I see no reason why others could not be invited to come and be part of Exec discussions when necessary, in a more fluid and dynamic way.

It is also being demonstrated (with the 'Easter Live' event currently being planned for Good Friday, for instance) that many visions and ideas require a purposefully-selected working party to bring together gifts and skills from our various churches. In this case, the Exec plays a purely supportive, advisory and administrative role. But it is worth emphasising that being recognised as an official organisation, having a bank account and insurance, and the good name of CTH with other local organisations, all seem like very useful things for anything we want to do together. Our structures may seem cumbersome, but I think they are worth maintaining, while at the same time thinking flexibly and dynamically about what we do.

It has been expressed that our **Forum meetings** have been somewhat lifeless, and so members are reluctant to invite people along or even to appoint reps from their churches. I have experienced (and chaired) some of these dull meetings! But I also know that to breathe life

into a situation needs people coming with prayer, enthusiasm and ideas. Where established things are enjoyed by established people, those established people can't always grasp new visions until new people come along. I hope that the current Worship & Prayer nights, and the Easter Live event can encourage newer generations of Christians that ecumenical events are not lifeless, that God is moving powerfully, and that the way to make more things like this happen might be to come along and breathe new life into the Forum. There they will find a warm reception of people who are not just trying to plod along with the same old things, but who have the same desires to see hearts and lives changed for Jesus.

In Summary, I would like to make some suggestions for CTH to consider prayerfully at every level:

1. Can we affirm that CTH is an incredibly valuable expression of the Kingdom of God in Market Harborough? And can we renew our commitment to it, both in prayer and action?
2. Our current constitution is fit for purpose, but the application of it needs to be open to a more dynamic approach.
3. There is no requirement for ministers/church leaders to chair the Forum unless they feel called to do so. CTH has been very well-led on many occasions by lay people. And there is no requirement to think of it as a '4-year term'.
4. The Exec could be open to inviting additional members either to serve for a year, or just for particular occasions, moving towards a much more dynamic turnover of individuals involved (possibly with a suggestion that people serve for a limited time).
5. There needs to be greater clarity in role descriptions for the Exec posts.
6. We should look to establish working parties for two or three exciting vision-led events or projects each year, and not necessarily following old patterns.
7. There needs to be greater connection and flow of ideas between the Ministers' Fellowship and the CTH Forum, and I would recommend that the Chair of CTH (or Vice-Chair) is always invited to the MF as a link person.
8. Encouragement should be given to ministers to proactively bring along to CTH those members who can bring life, vision and enthusiasm, as well as wisdom and understanding, to our meetings.

Andy Murphy, 31st January 2024