

Partnership Joint meeting “New Beginnings” with Denomination leaders

4 July 2023

7:30pm at Toothill

Chair. Mark Dowling

Visitors:

Ven Christopher Bryan, CofE Arch-Deacon of Malmesbury

Rev Shirlyn Toppin, Methodist Circuit Superintendent Minister, Upper Thames Circuit

Rev Gerald England, URC Synod Pastoral Adviser, South Western Synod

Notes: Chris Scarisbrick

Present 31. Representatives of all 4 churches were present. No further detailed attendance taken.

- **Welcome**

Mark welcomed those present.

- **Introductions**

Denominational leaders were introduced by the chair.

- **Opening devotion**

- Prayer
- Reading Psalm 44 vv1-8

...in God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name for ever

- **Denominational leaders in turn share with us**

- The background - How have we got here
- The current situation – Your perspective
- The future - What is your vision for our futures

Christopher Bryan

To celebrate:

Christian witness in these urban villages

Service to diverse communities

Buildings which welcome

Active schools ministry

An example of Christians working together

SCLEP is one structure among many possible options which enables collaboration between denominations to serve the Kingdom of God

Many different ways of being ecumenical

Not in itself a denomination, or a separate tradition. Rather a partnership between denominations, expressed within one congregation

To enable mission and ministry – meant to make it easier

A good idea in its time

Into new housing estates, where a combined Christian witness was needed

Where each denomination provided a minister, who worked as part of a team

In a culture which wanted representation and sophisticated rules to govern meetings

And yet did not have Policies on Safeguarding, Health and Safety etc
In a society where there was much more volunteer time

What has changed? Why now?

Denominations unable to resource paid ministry – no longer Baptist/URC paid ministry, Methodists likely to withdraw within a couple of years. Anglican able to fund next incumbent

Yet ministers and SCLEP have to fulfil requirements from all four denominations, including financial contributions, duplication.

Less volunteer time to manage this

Culture is more informally collaborative

Likely to be difficult to recruit next Anglican incumbent into an SCLEP

A future pattern?

A new structure

A denominational alignment – consistent practise on policies, finance, ministry

An ecumenical culture – the best of what you are. Worship, care, collaboration, mission, licensed preachers

Church of England committed to replacing Clive when he retires; to continue Dioces of Bristol ownership of Lydiard Tregoze and Shaw

Work alongside ecumenical partners, in a light touch structure

Slides attached at Annex A

This is the start of a conversation, discerning together, what the future is here.

It's Christopher's proposal that we figure out the right future and dissolve the SCLEP eventually.

Shirlyn Toppin

We need to make a decision for 2026, when Clive leaves. There is no intention to make Toothill a Methodist church by default. It's a decision for Toothill church. We may be able to be flexible about the building even if Toothill doesn't choose to become Methodist.

WSLTCP has a complex structure, and it would be a nightmare to explain a vacancy, even more so to introduce a minister.

The constitution restricts us.

It's important to talk about the future.

John 4 says we need to worship in Spirit and Truth, not impose a structure.

Gerald England

URC is the smallest denomination and have provided ministry over many years, but there are huge pressures and reduction in numbers of ministers.

Still committed to ecumenical vision, links across denominations where possible.

Structures have become a millstone and its no longer possible to support with ministers, need to find another way that makes sense.

- Questions from all the churches

It may not be possible to answer all the questions now, but they will all be addressed

Point of information, there have been URC and Baptist minister here in the past

1. Why dissolve the SCLEP, why now?

2026 Clive retires, no more free church ministry likely available, and very forbidding job description, means any recruitment unlikely

2. What are the timescales for any wider consultation/information/permissions?

2026 end point, would be good to know where we are by then

More time may be helpful. The Synod isn't telling you what to do, but suggesting...

3. Will there need to be a Baptist members meeting to authorise the plans?

Each denomination would have to vote for fairness. We'd need to figure out how that is done

4. When exactly will the Partnership dissolve?

There are constitutions and contracts that have mechanisms that need to be activated to dissolve the existing arrangements. FIRST we need to figure out the future shape, and agree that is what it is. Then have the relevant church meetings, then do the legal stuff.

We seem dependant on sparse volunteers to take a lot of change actions

One possible future is everyone chooses a denomination. Where do the congregations feel they belong. Its possible to identify with a denomination and worship happily in a different denomination.

What can be loosened and added to make relations between the churches to be better? Please put your minds to that over the coming months.

5. Comment from the floor - We've been told at the AGM that the Partnership will be dissolved, now we hear about the proposal to dissolve, if we choose to...

We have a declaration of intent and direction of travel, the exact details of how and the end point are as yet not clear.

6. Can Christopher guarantee finding a replacement of Clive's position?

We will advertise, if we can recruit, we have the budget, we will appoint.

7. What are the chances of recruiting someone to a structure similar to this?

Its possible, but a much smaller pool of candidates.

8. What will happen to the denominationally recognised lay ministers

Most denominations have the ability to recognise/authorise lay ministers from other denominations to lead services.

9. When will changes take place?

Already addressed indirectly

10. What are your plans for our parish (CofE) and churches (Meth, URC, Bap)?

Its for us to discern. URC will never leave a church uncared for if they wish to be linked to URC. There are constraints

11. In originally establishing the LEP, the Partnership Churches and the 4 denominations made a Covenant, headlining :

- *We exist in order to BE the People of God and EXTEND the Kingdom of God throughout West Swindon and the Lydiards.*
- *There are also 5 specific commitments within the Covenant, which many people in all our churches value.*

We specifically commit ourselves prayerfully :

- *to seek to understand more clearly the Vision of God and His calling to grow His kingdom here*
- *to discover more from the Scriptures about the theological basis for our unity-in-mission, and its practical consequences*
- *to conform ourselves to the values of Jesus, as enshrined in his teaching on discipleship and our 'Declaration of Intent'*

- *to share together in missionary outreach to the people that God leads us into contact with through our daily lives*
- *to serve all the people of West Swindon & Lydiard Tregoze with the same unconditional covenantal love that God has for them.*

What specific advice does each Denomination now offer to the Churches, to rebuild and develop these commitments for a sustainable future?

All of those things will remain important, the way you do that will change

It's a good opportunity to revisit your vision.

The individual churches can adopt similarly.

12. Why has Shirlyn not been invited to preach at Westlea?

A representative from Westlea apologised and promised to invite her at the next available slot in the programme

13. After the ending of the SCLEP in 2025, what other forms of Church association should we consider in West Swindon – Churches Together, or any others?

Local informal arrangements can and do occur. Often through clergy

14. The 4 churches that remain have a significant amount of work to reorganise under their chosen denomination. However denominational choices come with support (and standard templates for charity etc) The choice also comes with limitations of clergy appointment, acceptance of ministry from other denominations, use of the building etc. Westlea seems to have more flexibility, but in some of our scenarios more work to do. We want to know what discretion and flexibility the leaders will apply. In perpetuity, or for 20 years, or for 5 years.

If there is a new structure, the decision comes with responsibilities. This should be taken into account in the choice.

If CofE structures were adopted, we'd need to have a timeline to plan the changes safeguarding etc.

It comes down to us. We will simply have to decide

Identifying with the partnership as "wanting to be member of all 4 denominations" rather than a denomination.

Structure of one denomination don't need to constrain identity.

15. At which time, if any, will we have to take up new membership?

CofE have electoral rolls. URC is simpler

16. Will the only new membership be for the Church of England?

No

17. Do you have to be a member to have a role in Church such as Church Warden, Secretary, Treasurer, Committee Member?

Yes, unless CofE (baptised and on the electoral roll). Some posts you just need to be resident in the parish

18. What other regulations need to change?

Yet to be determined

19. What timescales do you envisage for answers to our queries here today?

Timescales are for us to determine

20. Will preachers from other denominations be able to lead?

In many cases, yes

21. Will ministers be able to maintain our rich tradition of celebrating communion in different styles, sometimes referred to as Free Church Communion?

CofE has a structure, authorisation of people, and particular prayers. Flexibility exists to invite authorised ministers from other denominations to preside at a communion service.

22. What support will the denominations give during any transition, particularly with the increased administrative burden of unravelling the current structure and creating new ones?

URC Synod folk happy to help out. Methodists also happy to help. CofE have ecumenical advisors who can help. Its just possible some administrative help might be found.

23. What about safeguarding? This will all come under the Church of England. Various Partnership responsibilities need unpicking in this way – e.g. trusteeship, gift aid, etc.

The list is yet to be written, but there are a fair few things to unpick

24. What's the opinion of Sponsoring Body about dissolution?

SB doesn't have a direction. The partnership will inform the SB, and advise will be shared

25. Have you considered sharing agreements on the two shared buildings ?

CofE view is that if we take away SCLEP, it would be nice to keep it simple, maybe even keep, not change or unravel sharing agreements.

Methodist view is to end the sharing agreements too

26. If the partnership is dissolved would the Methodists take Toothill into the circuit and run it as a Methodist Church?

No. The decision lies here, and within the partnership

27. Toothill are looking forward to welcoming a new part time Methodist Minister in September, will that still go ahead?

Yes.

28. We currently have a financial commitment to all the denominational bodies, when will that cease?

When we decide to stop paying

29. What happens about Westlea?

Whatever Westlea wants.

30. How many churches will Clive's replacement have to be responsible for? Will there still be 4 churches going forward?

In the parish...at least 2, possibly 3, maybe 4...There are 2 CofE parish churches, Toothill and Westlea will have to decide on their futures

31. What happens when Clive leaves? Is there any possibility of someone working alongside Clive in his final year to help prepare for the new arrangements.

There is no funding for an additional stipend. It may be possible to find a non stipendiary minister. Its possible some administration may be available.

32. Will West Swindon remain one parish?

Likely to stay as one parish, if a large one.

33. Should we take the opportunity to demolish Shaw and Toothill and build one eco friendly building?

Look forward to the extraordinary, rather than looking back in regret in 10 years time

Methodist view that, if the partnership is dissolved, the sharing agreements will have to go too

Christopher also reckons sharing agreements are a less desirable option than a simple peppercorn lease arrangement for Toothill.

- Further questions and comments from the floor

34. The fundamental decision (to dissolve) surely should be quick and easy. The actions to change will take a lot longer

35. At Westlea, the denominational rules will constrain who leads services, and preside at communion. This is uncomfortable to us.

CofE: Accountability is a good thing, Christopher is intrigued by what we do.

URC: Need to decide if you want to be accountable to a denomination. Strongly recommended not to go it alone.

Meth: Doing your own thing will no longer be the case, if you become Methodist.

36. Please make the slides available.

<Added to these notes at Annex A.>

37. Are there any churches going through a similar process that we can learn from?

Gerald is happy to help, though West Swindon is unique.

CofE and other denominations have national ecumenical advisors who might help

38. Turnout this evening is disappointing

We all need to encourage people to engage with this process.

- **Next steps**
 - Discerning if dissolving the SCLEP is Christ's will for us
 - Praying about what the future may look like
 - Discussing and deciding as much as possible before writing legalities
 - Researching technical info e.g. buildings ownership and resolving
 - Setting up a formal/legal process
 - Final vote to conclude SCLEP

Immediately – local reflection on this meeting – consider your possible futures separately. Pray, reflect and discuss, hold church meetings to look at future possibilities.

Exec will meet monthly

PC July Wed 26 July at HTS 7:30.

Exec August Wed 23 Aug Zoom 7:30

Meeting of the partners – possible futures together October Wed 18 Oct 7:30

November meeting about planning Wed 22 Nov

- **Closing worship**
 - A moment of silent prayer and reflection
 - Lord's prayer
 - Song Build Your Kingdom here (by Rend Collective)
 - Blessing from Rev Gerald England

Annex A – Slides used at the meeting



Open meeting July
2023.pdf