

# BIRMINGHAM CHURCHES TOGETHER

Review 2006-2007

## *Towards a new way of being together*

The Report of the review group

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**The appendices are a separate electronic document.**

## 1 The principles of this review

- 1.a Reviewing Birmingham Churches Together has been exhilarating and exciting<sup>1</sup>. We listened and reflected and, above all, we asked ourselves what God wants of the Christian people in Birmingham and Solihull. The details of our work, together with some recommendations, follow. But before we were able to come to any consensus, we asked some fundamental questions. It is only in the light of these questions, and our conclusions, that our report can be understood.
- 1.b 'What *is* Birmingham Churches Together?' we asked ourselves. As we listened, we noticed that the term 'BCT' is ambiguous and was being used in very different ways. Many interpretations are possible. Perhaps primarily, BCT is seen as an alliance of the historic Churches – with the implication that others do not wish to include themselves in that alliance. BCT is also a set of meetings which involve ecumenical enthusiasts but not, perhaps, many of the people central to the lives of their Churches or denominations. Again, BCT is the name of the charity which employs the officer and rents offices. Churches, denominations, belong to BCT; Churches Together groups and Local Ecumenical Partnerships look to it for support. This understanding of BCT implies membership – so BCT is something which organisations, Churches, denominations, join or enter into a formal relationship with.
- 1.c The broad sweep of our remit, however, and the discussions of the Birmingham and Solihull Church Leaders<sup>2</sup> hinted at a profound dissatisfaction with these understandings of 'BCT'. We were asked to conduct a root and branch review, looking at the detail of BCT, the broad sweep of its work and, perhaps crucially, looking outwards, in particular at those Christian groupings not associated with BCT. In all this was a deep desire to work together with all Christian people and a readiness to shed/discard/eject/offload whatever stands in the way of that vision. This dissatisfaction and desire come, we believe, from God, who is inviting and challenging God's people in Birmingham and Solihull to a new way of being together.
- 1.d As we became aware of these movements of God's Spirit, we remembered the time when the Churches – not just in Birmingham, but in Britain and Ireland – last articulated a major dissatisfaction with the way their common life was organised. They moved away from Councils of Churches to the *Churches Together* philosophy, often seen as a shift from councils of enthusiasts, forging ahead or acting as a sort of supra-church, to the idea that Churches as a whole needed to find some way of sharing a common life, of doing together all which does not need to be done separately, of moving forward as a whole, *together*.
- 1.e In this attempted shift, it was decided to retain the term 'Churches', while noting that some prefer to call themselves 'denominations' and some would prefer neither, opting for a more generic, if perhaps colourless word like 'bodies'.
- 1.f At no point was it intended to suggest that moving together implied uniformity. Indeed, had that been the aim, it would have been impossible. We celebrate the great diversity with which God's people worship and work for the Kingdom and name it grace-filled, a gift from God. Nevertheless, we recognise with sorrow and shame the

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the context in which the review was requested, its remit and the members of the review team can be found in appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> While member Churches differ profoundly in their understanding of what might constitute a 'Church Leader' and in the power or authority s/he exercises, nevertheless, they all have someone who exercises some sort of overview or *episcopate* of Birmingham and Solihull and it is the 'peer group' of these people, all of whom are able to articulate fairly accurately the 'mind' of their Churches, which makes up what, for convenience, is called the Church Leaders' Group.

disunity which is the sinful fruit of that diversity, sinful fruit among so much grace-filled fruit.

- 1.g Equally, at no point was it intended that the new nomenclature should exclude. Indeed, the shift to the *Churches Together* bodies was made in full partnership with the Roman Catholic Church and the Black-Led Churches. These new structures were designed *together*, explicitly to enable Black-Led Churches and the Roman Catholic Church to participate fully in bodies which would be instruments of Christian unity, enabling member bodies to live, pray, work and mission *together*.

#### 1.h The key to the review

In practice, of course, it is clear that this vision has only partly been realised. Certainly, the Roman Catholic Church has been a full and equal member of Birmingham Churches Together<sup>3</sup> since the 1960s, demonstrating this not only on paper and in attendance at meetings, but also by its realistic contribution to the expenses associated with ecumenical life. The Council of Black-Led Churches, too, is an active partner in BCT, choosing to be a Body-in-Association. Its Chair participates fully in Church Leaders' meetings and its Secretary was an equal member of the panel which interviewed and appointed the current Ecumenical Development Officer. However, it is clear that some of the 'Council of Churches' culture has continued to operate within BCT and ***a space within which all Christian Churches/denominations/bodies can operate together has yet to be created***. This insight is the key to the review.

- 1.i Unusually, this review has acted as a catalyst. Rather than wait for the recommendations of the review group, various bodies within BCT have already begun to implement changes, prompted by questions posed by the review. This review report, therefore, must necessarily have something of a provisional nature. What Birmingham Churches Together should become is already being worked out with a wider group of people than was originally envisaged. We are aware that a new understanding of what is needed will emerge in the months ahead and that we are being asked to provide a skeleton for something that has not yet been born. So we have tried to design something which is robust yet flexible, something which can be adapted to changing needs.
- 1.j Two developments, in particular, have been significant for this review. First, in order to explore 'existing or potential relationships' (cf appendix 1, review remit #b.iv) with new ecumenical partners, it was necessary to identify those partners. External funding has been obtained to carry out an exercise to map all congregations in Birmingham and Solihull, especially the culturally-centred and non-English-speaking ones. This work is in progress.
- 1.k Secondly, the Church Leaders, inspired by the vision of a space for the *whole* Christian people of God in Birmingham and Solihull, have asked themselves who else needs to sit round a table with them. We are hugely encouraged by the fact that those who have come to the table share a similar vision and have welcomed the invitation.
- 1.l In the light of our reflections and in the light of this move by the Church Leaders, therefore, we find ourselves rejecting the understanding of 'Birmingham Churches Together' as an alliance of the historic Christian Churches. If that is what it is at present, we believe, it is merely a shadow of what God intends for it. Surely, the only faithful answer to our question 'What *is* Birmingham Churches Together?' must be: the whole Christian people of God in Birmingham and Solihull, living, praying, working and missioning *together* in the service of God's Kingdom.

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<sup>3</sup> The Roman Catholic Church is, of course, a full member of all Churches Together bodies throughout Britain and Ireland, but for the purposes of our report, we now focus on Birmingham and Solihull.

- 1.m At this point, we offer a *caveat*. Let us not be distracted by terms and titles, for they can obscure what we believe the Spirit is saying to the Churches in Birmingham and Solihull. While in this report we will continue to use the term 'Birmingham Churches Together', we are not necessarily suggesting that this will be the name for the 'big tent'<sup>4</sup> under which we hope the Christian people of God in Birmingham and Solihull will gather. What we *are* suggesting is that each historic Church (the current BCT member bodies) should have its own place in that 'big tent' alongside the new ecclesial groupings which are already being represented in the expanded Church Leaders' group. This new 'big tent' should replace the current BCT much in the same way BCT itself has largely made unnecessary the Free Churches Group which once was so important.
- 1.n This new inclusive 'big tent', therefore, and the new relationships it represents, is the focus of our report. Whatever patterns of relating, whatever structures are put in place, must serve those new relationships. Issues of nomenclature, membership, ownership, funding, constitutions must not become obstacles, although we appreciate they need to be addressed. But they are not primary. Similarly, legal obligations, while needing to be honoured, should not prevent the current BCT from making whatever flexible change is necessary to serve the whole Christian people of God in Birmingham and Solihull.

## 2 The format of this report

- 2.a A list of acronyms can be found in appendix 2, on page 2 of the appendices document.
- 2.b Initially we intended to describe BCT in one section of our report and then, in a further part, to report our findings. This proved repetitive, confusing and clumsy. We are therefore presenting some of our observations in indented italic text in the context of a description of BCT where this is sensible. The rest of our observations and recommendations are in #5 to #11 of this report.

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<sup>4</sup> We use the image of a 'big tent' in a very specific way and with a particular 'picture' in the mind, ie a Bedouin type tent, open to the sides, able to be added on to; flexible, and welcoming, allowing people to look in as well as out.

### 3 BCT Overview and context

#### 3.a Boundaries

The boundary of Birmingham Churches Together is broadly contiguous with the combined boundaries of Birmingham City Council and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. For the most part BCT's boundary coincides with that of the Anglican Diocese of Birmingham. BCT is bounded by four other intermediate bodies: Worcestershire (South), Coventry and Warwickshire (East), Churches Linked across Staffordshire and the Potteries (North) and Black Country Churches Engaged (West). However, some ambiguity exists with regard to the precise boundaries with these bodies; for example, parts of Sandwell can relate to either BCT or Black Country Churches Engaged; this is not a problem. The 1987 Swanwick conference recommended that ecumenical instruments at intermediate level, like BCT, should take boundaries based on secular counties rather than boundaries based on those of one or other denomination.

#### 3.b History

In the early 1950s, three ecumenical bodies came together to form the Birmingham Council of Christian Churches, familiarly called BC3. The three bodies were the Birmingham Christian Social Council, Birmingham United Missionary Council and Birmingham Christian Youth Council. As BC3 developed in the 1960s it employed a Secretary to oversee the work. During the 1980s many church people were involved in a structure of committees addressing a range of issues and concerns. These structures were dismantled during the 1990s to ensure 'less talk and more action'. BCT came into being in 1996 when the constitution was changed to reflect the *Churches Together* movement initiated at Swanwick in 1987.

*We note that the dismantling of the committees anticipated the shift of ethos from a Council of Churches to 'Churches Together'. One characteristic of the new ethos is making connections between what already exists, rather than creating new structures.*

BCT is a registered charity constituted in 1965 with the object 'to promote mutual understanding and fellowship among the Churches which accept Jesus Christ as God and Saviour'<sup>5</sup>. Today it employs an Ecumenical Development Officer and an Administrative Secretary.

#### 3.c Membership

Membership is open to Churches or associations of churches in the Birmingham/Solihull area whose national bodies are signatories of Churches Together in England and assent to the Basis and Commitment of BCT.

In 2007, the following subscribed to BCT. (The figures refer to the amount of subscription and the percentage it represents; and the last number is an estimate of the number of individual congregations/churches in the BCT area.)

The Church of England, Birmingham Diocese	£17,200 (37.4%)	175
Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham	£14,700 (32.0%)	84
Birmingham Methodist District	£6,500 (14.1%)	71
Heart of England Baptist Association	£3,730 (8.2%)	55

<sup>5</sup> Charity number: 243931. See Charity Commission website for more detail.

The United Reformed Church, West Midlands Synod	£2,470 (5.4%)	29
The Society of Friends, Warwickshire Monthly Meeting	£880 (1.9%)	12
The Salvation Army, West Midlands Division	£470 (1.0%)	5
Cherubim and Seraphim Church	£60	
Greek Orthodox Church	£60	
Lutheran Churches	£60	
Welsh Congregational Church	£60	
Welsh Presbyterian Church	£60	

The criteria for membership is set out in #VI of BCT's constitution<sup>6</sup>.

- 3.d The Council of Black Led Churches, Christian Aid, CAFOD (the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development) and the Churches Industrial Group Birmingham (CIGB) are BCT Bodies in Association. BCT's Member Churches are also members of the West Midlands Churches' Forum (cf 4.j below).

*It is clear that BCT and the partners listed here value these partnerships and the Review Group commends the way BCT supports these bodies. The relationship with the CIGB, in particular, is an excellent example of good practice. This, again, is an example of one of the prime values of BCT – that it makes connections.*

3.e Two committees

Two committees meet under the auspices of BCT, the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group (WELG) and the Forum for Spiritual Directors.

*We affirm the existence of both these committees. In the light of the expansion of the Church Leaders' group and the desire of BCT to become more inclusive, we welcome and encourage the WELG's wish to become more representative, reaching out to fringe women's groups within the Christian community and working more widely than it does at present. BCT can help it to develop in these ways on request.*

*We note that the Spiritual Directors' Forum seems to be working well. However, the lack of an effective link person with BCT means that the potential of the relationship with BCT has not been realised.*

3.f Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs)

There are twelve single congregation LEPs across Birmingham and Solihull shared between Anglican/Methodist (7), Anglican/URC (1), Anglican/Methodist/URC (1), Methodist/Baptist (1), Methodist/URC (1) and Moravian/URC (1). There is one Anglican/URC shared building LEP and one Anglican/URC Covenant, in addition to those Covenanted LEPs which developed from Churches Together groups (cf #3.g below).

Covenanted LEPs have been set up in Birmingham University, Aston University, the University of Central England and University Hospital.

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix 3.

The main text of the constitution (#IX)<sup>7</sup> assumes a separate Sponsoring Body for LEPs but the BCT terms of reference<sup>8</sup> state that one of the tasks of Council is: 'To act as the Sponsoring Body for Local Ecumenical Partnerships (Shared buildings, Congregations and Covenants) on the advice of the Consultative Group for Local Ecumenical Partnerships.'

Further in the text of this document it states that the membership of this Consultative Group is: The General Secretary<sup>9</sup> (Convener), the Denominational Ecumenical Officers, appropriate representation from the Denominations, as necessary and those appointed to assist in the support of LEPs, as necessary.

*We note that the Ecumenical Development Officer and the Denominational Ecumenical Officers work well together as a team, particularly for the support of LEPs and local ecumenism generally, and we commend this good practice. This meeting may or may not wish to rediscover its title of LEP Consultative Group – we use it now in this report simply for clarity.*

*We affirm the importance of each denomination providing someone to act as Denominational Ecumenical Officer. The DEO should have a good relationship with and know the mind of his/her Church Leader.*

*We note that for the past few years Council does not seem to have been acting as a Sponsoring Body and the Church Leaders' meeting has not plugged this gap either. We note that part of the task of a Sponsoring Body is to support and encourage LEPs and it is proper for it to ask a sub-group such as the LEP Consultative Group to do most of this work, referring back to it as necessary. We note further that despite the terms of reference of the LEP Consultative Group, reviews of LEPs are, as part of the ecumenical episcopate, the responsibility of the Sponsoring Body and review reports should first be submitted to the Sponsoring Body before being made public. It follows, therefore, that Church Leaders should be an integral part of this process.*

*Our suggestions for the establishment of an Ecumenical Development Group (cf #7 below) may ensure effective ecumenical episcopate but we recommend that the LEP Consultative Group keeps the situation under review and, if there is a need to involve the Church Leaders more closely, brings appropriate proposals to the Ecumenical Development Group or the proposed new Trustees' Co-ordinating Committee. The LEP Consultative Group will also ensure that LEP reviews do not mainly become, de facto, the responsibility of the Ecumenical Development Officer alone.*

*We note that there is a backlog of reviews, a problem which is reflected throughout England and recommend that addressing this backlog should be a priority. We note too, the tremendous value of the in-depth accompaniment style of review which the Ecumenical Development Officer is developing but suggest that light-touch reviews should nevertheless take place in the short term in order to support and encourage the LEPs and to strengthen their connection with BCT. In the course of our review we have become aware that these connections are not as strong as they should be.*

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<sup>7</sup> See appendix 3.

<sup>8</sup> See appendix 4.

<sup>9</sup> The current Ecumenical Development Officer replaced the General Secretary and assumed his tasks.

### 3.g Churches Together groups

Thirty-nine local Churches Together groups are listed with BCT and at least eight have signed covenants to work together. Five of these are covenanted LEPs. A small number continue to operate using the title of Council of Churches. Communication between BCT and the local Churches Together groups is sporadic, with less than half in regular contact with BCT.

*The heart of ecumenical working is at the local level. It is clear to us that encouraging and revitalising Churches Together groups is an urgent priority. The reality of the current experience and structure of Churches Together groups, which are often still working on the Council of Churches model, whether they use that nomenclature or not, does not facilitate the churches doing mission together, although, in theory, Churches Together groups should be an excellent conduit for mission. The mapping exercise should enable the BCT office to help Churches Together groups to explore their relationships with those Christian churches and groupings who are not members, much in the same way as BCT is doing.*

*Local CT groups are well placed to contribute to the development of their local neighbourhood through Birmingham City Council's Local Area Agreements and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council's Local Area Action Plans. We encourage BCT to develop a role in facilitating Churches Together groups to become more outwardly focused into their local community, especially as the impact for the local neighbourhood is much stronger if churches are seen to be working together.*

*Freeing the Ecumenical Development Officer from the Management Groups of BCT Training and Restore will release energy for this vital task of working with Churches Together groups (cf #10.b below).*

## 4 The structure of Birmingham Churches Together

*The BCT structure, at its best, is an instrument for the intermediate or 'county' level to resource the local level and for the local level to resource the intermediate level. It should not be somewhat separate from the life of its member Churches but should act as an ecumenical instrument, facilitating the working together of its member Churches. It should be a place of facilitating and encouraging mission rather than of maintenance.*

### 4.a Presidents and Church Leaders<sup>10</sup>

There are three Presidents of BCT:

- Most Rev Vincent Nichols, the Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham
- Rt Revd David Urquhart, the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham
- Revd Elizabeth Welch, the Free Churches Moderator (elected by the leaders of the Free Churches)

The three Presidents meet with other Church Leaders, including:

- Chair of the Birmingham District of the Methodist Church
- The two Regional Ministers of the Heart of England Baptist Association
- West Midlands Divisional Commander of the Salvation Army
- Representative of the Warwickshire Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends
- Priest in charge of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral
- Chair of the Council of Black Led Churches
- Elnora Ferguson (Society of Friends) is Deputy Moderator of the Free Churches group.

*While enthusiastically endorsing the desire within BCT and, indeed of the Church Leaders themselves, to expand the membership of BCT so that it becomes a 'big tent', we note the importance of ensuring that the Church Leaders' group for the most part remains a relatively small peer group. Experience in other Intermediate Bodies suggests that when this ceases to be the case, the agenda becomes more generalised and the leaders of the larger Churches gradually cease to attend the meetings.*

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<sup>10</sup> In common with general practice throughout England, the uppcase 'Church' is used here to designate a larger body than a local congregation. It would be used, for example, to describe bodies like the Church of England or the Methodist Church or an Arch/diocese or District or Synod area. The lowercase 'church' refers more to a building or a congregation in a locality. We are aware that the term 'local church', whether upper or lower case, means 'diocese' for both Anglicans and Catholics, while others use it to refer to a particular congregation. We therefore avoid the term in the interests of clarity and when it is unavoidable to use the term 'local level' we mean precisely that, and do not mean 'diocesan level'.

We are also using the term 'Church Leader' to designate those who have a broad role, such as those named in the list of BCT Church Leaders here. We are aware that, at a local level, especially for the Black-Led Churches, those with pastoral care of local congregations are sometimes called church leaders but, for clarity, we do not use the term in that sense here.

#### 4.b Trustees

At present, the Trustees of Birmingham Churches Together are the three Presidents, the Chair of Council (cf 4.c below), the Hon Secretary and the Hon Treasurer. They are serviced by the Ecumenical Development Officer who prepares the agenda and minutes and attends all meetings.

It is the legal responsibility of the Trustees to manage BCT's affairs.

*At present the Trustees are personally liable for BCT. We recommend that, as a matter of urgency, the Trustees consider both the charitable status of BCT and whether BCT should become a company limited by guarantee or something similar which would limit the personal liability of each Trustee. We are aware, however, that due to current changes in charity law, the situation is still in a state of flux. We note the preliminary work done by Peter Middleton and recommend strongly that BCT address this issue as a matter of urgency. John Bradley, in Churches Together in England's London office, may be helpful here.*

#### 4.c BCT Council

The Council of Birmingham Churches Together normally meets three times a year, early in the evening at All Saints House. Its membership includes:

- The three Presidents and other church leaders listed above
- Chair appointed for a two year period, in turn from the Church of England, the Catholic Church and the Free Churches.
- The Honorary Secretary and Honorary Treasurer
- Denominational Ecumenical Officers (Anglican, Methodist, URC, Baptist & Catholic)
- Eight or more Denominational Representatives
- Six representatives of Churches Together Groups
- Representatives of Bodies in Association
- Chairs of Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group and Forum for Spiritual Directors
- Chair and project worker of BCT projects (BCT Training and Restore)
- Ecumenical Development Officer

#### 4.d BCT projects

BCT acts as an umbrella charity for two projects, each with a management committee: BCT Training and Restore. Annual audited accounts are presented for approval to the Trustees and Council of BCT. The BCT Trustees are also Trustees of these projects.

*Both Training and Restore value their connection with BCT and it is clear that being an organic part of BCT can be important for the establishment and growth of projects.*

*Although BCT does not have a clear strategy about the 'ownership' of projects or a clear rationale for undertaking them in the first place, we note that BCT's role in this regard has yielded good fruit. While we recognise the possibility of BCT undertaking future projects, we wish to stress that BCT would have value and cohesion even if it did not have projects. It follows, therefore, that if, in the future, it was decided that a project would yield better fruit if it became a separate charity, this should be encouraged.*

*Over recent years, however, BCT staff have spent an increasing amount of time and energy on the support of projects. This, inevitably, has taken them away from other, more core tasks. Undertaking projects has also complicated BCT's accounting and places demands on the BCT Treasurer.*

#### 4.e BCT Training

BCT Training is a result of the merger into BCT in 31 December 2001 of the Birmingham Council for Christian Education (BCCE). BCCE grew out of the Sunday School Union and over the years it worked mainly with children and young people and their leaders, but not exclusively so. During the 1990s, its work included: training leaders for work with children and young people; and support of Barnes Close (as a resource base for activity and training events) and bookshop outlets carrying a wide range of resources for all ages.

In 1997 the charitable objectives of BCCE were constituted to be the 'Advancement of the Christian Religion in particular, but not exclusively by:

- a) Providing support for those engaged in the churches ministry of Christian education with especial consideration for children and young people,
- b) Developing Christian education through churches and other organisations
- c) Co-operating with church denominations and inter-church bodies and
- d) By promoting and supplying literature and other requisites helpful and suitable for the work of Christian education.<sup>11</sup>

These charitable objectives were presented to BCT Council on 27 June 2000 when it was agreed that BCT would set up a training committee and assume responsibility for BCCE funds which were in the region of £300,000. BCT has a responsibility to ensure that the earmarked BCCE funds are used for training that is compatible with these objectives.

A new purpose statement was adopted in January 2007 to enable BCT Training to prioritise the support of Basic Skills Education projects in churches across Birmingham and Solihull. This work is now under way, new members to the management committee are being recruited and a funding strategy is being developed.

*We welcome the changes made by BCT Training in parallel with this review and affirm the work being done by this project. We note that the Ecumenical Development Officer line manages the Training Officer and that this works well.*

#### 4.f Restore

Restore seeks to welcome and support refugees and asylum seekers and has been part of BCT since October 2000. Its aims are to:

- encourage friendship and build resources (primarily through the church network in Birmingham and Solihull) to support asylum seekers and refugees;
- enable refugees and asylum seekers to make a valued contribution to society;
- work to raise awareness, change attitudes and challenge prejudice in the host community.

Restore was started in 1999, when churches in the Ladywood and Edgbaston area saw a need and were motivated to take action. Up to that point, most asylum seekers had been accommodated in London and the South East, but a new government policy of dispersal sought to house them more evenly across the country. This led to a significant increase in new arrivals in Birmingham. BCT became the umbrella

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<sup>11</sup> The reference is to a revised BCCE constitution dated 1993 from a printout dated 20.8.97 when the constitution was finally adopted. A copy is available on request from the BCT office.

organisation for Restore in October 2000 to enable it to more tangibly express its desire to be an ecumenical project supporting marginalised people.

*We affirm the hugely important work of Restore and recognise its strong growth over the past years. We note that Restore has a vibrant management committee and that its staff are ably supported by a small steering group. Line management is provided by the Chair of Restore. We recognise that Restore wishes to remain identified as a project of the Churches of Birmingham and Solihull. Restore is clear that its work is stronger if it is ecumenical and receives the active support of the Churches.*

#### 4.g Staffing

BCT employs a full time Ecumenical Development Officer (who devotes one day a week to the West Midlands Churches Forum) and a part time Administrative Secretary (28 hours) who also provides Training with accounting support. Restore employs two full time staff: a project co-ordinator and a befriending co-ordinator, and also a part time administrative secretary. BCT Training employs a full time project officer and a part time administrator. Legally, the BCT Trustees are the employer of all the staff.

Line management is provided by BCT's Ecumenical Development Officer for the Training project officer, and by the Chair of Restore management committee for Restore's project co-ordinator. The Ecumenical Development Officer's line manager is appointed by the Presidents and is, at present, the Chair of Council.

*While the Administrative Secretary is crucial to the work of BCT, we note that the role is expanding and developing in the light of new technology and of changes in the support needs of the Ecumenical Development Officer. We note that the present Administrative Secretary may leave when she reaches the lower retirement age in the next eighteen months and that she is well placed to advise and contribute to a new understanding of what is needed in the role. We recommend that her expertise is utilised in the review of the expanded and reclassified role which we hope will release the Ecumenical Development Officer from office management responsibilities.*

*We note, too, that it may be appropriate for BCT to buy in help on an ad hoc basis, and that external funding will be available for some tasks. The mapping exercise is a good example of both these points.*

#### 4.h Birmingham Ecumenical News (BEN)

BEN is a quarterly newsletter that is sent to all clergy and churches across Birmingham and Solihull. It carries articles, news items, notices of events, courses and job opportunities. It is a key means of communication for churches and 1500 copies are distributed each quarter. A small subscription of £5.00 is charged for each church per annum. There is a poor response to this request. Where it is paid, the subscription is normally channelled through local Churches Together groups.

We welcome the development of BCT's website which makes available an electronic copy of BEN and a constantly-updated events page – the *BENextra* page.

*We recommend that BCT instigates a review of BEN.*

#### 4.i The BCT office

The BCT office is located at All Saints House, 172 Herbert Road, Small Heath, Birmingham B10 0PR.

*There has been a suggestion that since the BCT office moved from the city centre, contact with local people has been reduced as it is less easy just to 'pop in' to the office. Practically speaking, we suggest that a city centre office is not a realistic prospect and while we accept its disadvantages, we note that the hard-pressed Ecumenical Officer and Administrative Secretary might welcome fewer interruptions!*

#### 4.j West Midlands Region Churches Forum (WMRCF)

The WMRCF draws together representatives from each of the Christian denominational areas across the region along with representatives from regional church bodies and networks such as Industrial Mission and Social Responsibility. The main purpose of the Forum is to enable the Churches of the region to engage with regional government, in particular Regional Action West Midlands, the Regional Assembly and the Government Office. The Forum meets three times a year, each time in a different venue across the region.

BCT receives subscriptions from Churches across the West Midlands to enable the Ecumenical Development Officer to act as Secretary to the Forum. This income is equivalent to 20% of salary and office costs or one day per week.

The Forum was not part of the remit of the review group.

## The main recommendations of the review

### 5 Reflections on the current structure

- 5.a From the outset of this review, and, indeed, in the appointment of the new Ecumenical Development Officer which preceded the review, it has been clear that a key issue is the relationship between the Presidents, Trustees, Church Leaders' Group and the Council of Birmingham Churches Together. To be blunt: Who sets policy? Where are the key decisions made? Where is the ultimate responsibility?
- 5.b Despite the BCT constitution (cf #5.e below), from a legal point of view, the answer must be 'the Trustee body' and this answer has enabled the Officer to be appointed and the review instigated. This was not, however, felt to be entirely satisfactory and the review group was specifically asked to consider the matter.
- 5.c Current practice is for the Trustees to meet immediately before a Church Leaders' meeting, both for Trustee business and to prepare for the Church Leaders' meeting. The current Chair of Council stood in for the Bishop of Birmingham during the inter-regnum period and was therefore, in effect, an acting President. Notwithstanding that all members have equal responsibility as Trustees, the meetings have felt like a Presidents' meeting serviced by the Ecumenical Development Officer with the Hon Secretary and Hon Treasurer in attendance. There is now no separate meeting of Presidents.
- 5.d What seems to be happening at the moment is that leadership of the two projects is being exercised well by their Management Committees, with due reference to the Trustees. However, leadership of the rest of BCT's affairs is, in practice, exercised by the Presidents and Church Leaders. While it can be argued that this reflects the reality of Church structures, we suspect that Church Leaders and Presidents themselves would share our conviction that it is not entirely satisfactory. This state of affairs is partly due to the unsatisfactory working of the BCT Council.
- 5.e BCT's constitution (#IX) states that the Council 'shall be the main policy making body of Birmingham Churches Together, overseeing all aspects of the work'. It is also the Sponsoring Body for Local Ecumenical Partnerships (see #3.f above). The experience of the review group, however, is that the Council is the weakest part of the BCT structure. At present, many of its members do not attend the meetings, or, at best, do not attend regularly<sup>12</sup>. This works against coherent thinking and the experience of the review group is that the Council lacks teeth, tends to rubber-stamp what is being suggested and lacks critical and strategic thinking. Its potential size mitigates against realistic decision-making. There are serious questions about how well its delegates are able to report back to their constituencies, and those who attend faithfully tend to be the ecumenical enthusiasts rather than the movers and shakers of the BCT Member Churches.
- 5.f Nevertheless, discussions at Council revealed a strong commitment to the concept of the Council not as an added extra but as a gathering or a space where the Churches can share, where there are representatives of the whole Church, not just of Church Leaders. In particular, the lay voice is especially valued.
- 5.g The constitution also states that the Council 'will convene an Assembly at least every two years (preferably annually) to enable a wider constituency to share in its work'. This has not happened since 6 June 2003, suggesting a need to review the Assembly format perhaps to ensure that it attracts a broad constituency and is a gathering-together of what is already happening rather than an extra layer of activity.

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<sup>12</sup> Item 7 of the minutes of the 20 February 2007 BCT Council meeting state: 'it was acknowledged that total membership [of the Council] was about 33 people and frequently turnout is less than one-third'.

## **Who needs to meet with whom for what?**

*Page 19 of this report contains a graphic representation of the structures described in the following paragraph and the membership connections between them. It is probably best consulted when the reader feels the need for it as s/he reads.*

### **6 Presidents and Church Leaders**

- 6.a Given the current successful practice of Presidents and Church Leaders' meetings (cf #5.c above), we recommend that the Presidents continue to meet with the Ecumenical Development Officer for a short time immediately before Church Leaders' meetings. They are clearly free to invite anyone else to these meetings if they consider it to be helpful. The prime purpose of these meetings is to ensure a clear focus for the Church Leaders' meetings and to consider any matters proper to the Presidents which do not need to be addressed in the wider Church Leaders' context.
- 6.b With the *caveat* expressed in #4.a above about their size and peer-group aspect, we welcome the development of the Church Leaders' meetings. We see no reason why these meetings cannot continue as they are without the need for formal membership, if informality is what makes them work. It is, perhaps, one of the responsibilities of the Presidents to ensure that these meetings continue to be as successful as they have been during the course of the review.

### **7 A new Ecumenical Development Group**

- 7.a The Council is clearly intended to be the hub of BCT decision-making and strategic thinking, but its size mitigates against this. It also needs to have a strong connection with the Church Leaders' meeting so that it is able to juggle the reality of Church leadership with the reality of a body with lay involvement and a membership which has time to do the necessary work of such a Council.
- 7.b In place of the Council, we recommend the establishment of an Ecumenical Development Group, which would also be the BCT Sponsoring Body. We suggest that it meets more often than Council was able to do (perhaps every two months) and that its membership is constituted as follows, with the quorum being five members:
- i The Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham or his personal representative
  - ii The Anglican Bishop of Birmingham or his personal representative
  - iii The Free Churches Moderator or his/her personal representative
  - iv A Denominational Ecumenical Officer elected by the group which meets with the Ecumenical Development Officer
  - v A second Denominational Ecumenical Officer elected by the group which meets with the Ecumenical Development Officer
  - vi Someone representing a wider voice, perhaps a representative of the Mission Network.
  - vii Someone representing a wider voice, perhaps a representative of the Council of Black-Led Churches.
  - viii Someone representing a wider voice, perhaps a representative of a Churches Together group who is serving on the current Council.
  - ix A representative of a single congregation or shared building LEP.

The Ecumenical Development Officer and the Administrative Secretary will attend and service these meetings.

- 7.c If one of the Presidents is able to be a member of the Ecumenical Development Group in person, it will fall to him/her to ensure an excellent relationship between the Church Leaders' meeting and the Group. If all the Presidents send personal representatives to the Group, the Presidents should ensure that, to achieve this same end, one of these personal representatives also attends the Church Leaders' meeting – much as the current Chair of Council is doing at present.

We recommend that the current Chair continues in this role until new patterns of working have been well established, even if it means increasing the size of the Ecumenical Development Group.

- 7.d The personal representatives should be able to express the mind of the Presidents and the Churches they lead. Each should be in regular contact with their President in order to ensure effective communication. If this connection is not strong, the problem of distance between the Church Leaders and the ecumenical development work of BCT will recur.
- 7.e The representatives of the wider voice will need to be key people in their constituencies to ensure a strong connection.
- 7.f We hope that, in the future, the Ecumenical Development Officer will be able to gather together representatives of Churches Together Groups and LEPs and that representatives to the Ecumenical Development Group could be elected at this gathering. Its main purpose, however, would be networking, to share good practice and to receive encouragement from senior church leaders.
- 7.g Given the desire of BCT to become a wider body (cf #1 of this report) we recognise that the Ecumenical Development Group may wish to co-opt others or invite observers to its meetings. The need for wider representation should be held in balance with the need to be a small enough group to work well – this is crucial. It may be that when the constitution is revised to take account of these new changes, it should be minimally prescriptive and allow for flexibility.
- 7.h A further possibility is that the Ecumenical Development Group might spend part of its meetings addressing its own business and then invite others, eg representatives of Bodies in Association, projects etc, to a second wider part of the meeting. If this happens, it would need to have a clear purpose beyond being a good idea! The default stance of the Group should be openness; business should only be private or confidential if there is a real need.

## **8 A revised Trustee Body**

- 8.a In the light of our comments on the current working of the Trustee Body (cf 5.c above), we recommend that the Trustee Body be reconstituted as follows:
- i The BCT Presidents
  - ii Representatives of the Management Committees of each project (not necessarily the Chair)
  - iii A representative of the Ecumenical Development Group (not necessarily the Chair)
  - iv The Chair of the Trustees' Co-ordinating Committee if s/he is not already a Trustee.
- 8.b The Treasurer should attend the Trustees' meetings and the Ecumenical Development Officer should service them, as at present.
- 8.c The Trustees should give consideration to the need for legal advice at their meetings.

## 9 A new Trustees' Co-ordinating Committee

- 9.a We accept the need for a group to make connections with and hold together the Trustees, the two projects and the Ecumenical Development Group. We are calling this new group the Trustees' Co-ordinating Committee', although we are not entirely happy with this nomenclature. The Trustees' Co-ordinating Committee would offer general oversight to the projects and the ecumenical development work, making connections between them and with the Presidents and Church Leaders. It would be a subgroup of the revised Trustee body, directly accountable to it, meeting more often than the Trustees are able to meet, carrying out preparatory work for them and ensuring that Trustee decisions are implemented.
- 9.b The Management Committees of BCT projects, the Ecumenical Development Group, and the Church Leaders/Presidents would ensure that one of their members sits on the Co-ordinating Committee. This would not necessarily be the Chairs of these bodies.
- 9.c The Chair of the Co-ordinating Committee will sit on the BCT Trustee body.
- 9.d The Treasurer should be appointed by the Co-ordinating Committee and should attend its meetings. The Ecumenical Development Officer should service the Co-ordinating Committee.
- 9.e The Co-ordinating Committee should be free to co-opt others, preferably for a clear term of office, should the need arise. Similarly, it should be able to set up working groups for particular tasks.
- 9.f In particular, the Co-ordinating Committee's membership should include someone with responsibility for understanding Charity Commission law in relation to the working of BCT.

## 10 Some consequences

- 10.a The Honorary Secretary has been a key volunteer and has given a huge amount of time to BCT, especially when BCT was without its main Officer. We note, however, that much of the current post-holder's volunteer work has been in addition to the role of Honorary Secretary and, therefore, can be separated out from that role. Given the move towards more informal structures, we are not persuaded of the need for an Honorary Secretary as such, although as the new structure unfolds, BCT may well wish to co-opt key volunteers to whichever part of its structure is most appropriate.
- 10.b The membership of the Trustees' Co-ordinating Committee and the revised Trustee body makes deliberate connections between the projects and those bodies. We do not, therefore, see a continuing need for the Ecumenical Development Officer to attend the project Management Committees. This will release energy for the core task of ecumenical development generally.



## 11 Broader implications

11.a While we recommend the abolition of Council, we nevertheless affirm the importance of a forum for the whole Church where the lay voice can be heard. Our conviction is that BCT should experiment with different gatherings to achieve this end. One possibility is outlined in #7.f above and the 'big tent' discussions of the Church Leaders point to another possibility.

11.b It is clear that Assemblies as envisaged by the constitution (cf #5.g above) have not been successful, perhaps because they were an extra layer of church activity instead of a gathering-together of what is already happening.

We recommend removing a requirement for Assemblies in favour of organising meetings in response to a real need. For example, future meetings should anticipate events (like the G8 summit or the **setallfree** commemorations) and gather together all those from the Christian people of God in Birmingham and Solihull who have an interest in those events in order to facilitate planning for them *together*. These meetings may well be something like a resources-fair or a mini-kirchentag.

It follows, therefore, that while there is a place for formal representation of the Churches at these events, they should focus on gathering the enthusiasts for a particular area of life, rather than gathering ecumenical enthusiasts. It also follows that these events should be open to all and will gather together those in membership of BCT and those not in membership. We affirm this flexibility.

11.c Organising these gatherings should be the responsibility of the Co-ordinating Committee, probably by setting up a planning group involving others who are not members of the Co-ordinating Committee. Part of the Co-ordinating Committee's agenda, therefore, would be to look ahead at anniversaries and opportunities. It is very likely that the Ecumenical Development Group and the projects will be keen to make recommendations in this regard.

11.d The Co-ordinating Committee needs to be both proactive and reactive, looking not only to the Church but to the whole of society. In particular it would be responsible for the relationships of the Churches to the Birmingham City Council, the Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, other statutory bodies and voluntary bodies – relationships which need to be two-way.

11.e In all its dealings, the Co-ordinating Committee should be aware of the distinction between doing the work and being responsible for the work.

11.f While we maintain our conviction that this report must necessarily be provisional given the current developments within BCT (cf #1.i above), we note the urgency of regularising BCT's charitable status (cf #4.b above) and recognise that work on a constitution could well be done at the same time. We recommend that flexibility be the key characteristic of such a constitution. (How BCT wishes to develop cannot at present be judged. In the future, for example, BCT might want a change of name, an expanded membership, an expanded Church Leaders' group, one or more extra Presidents etc.) This may also be an opportunity to revisit the basis and commitment of BCT as set out in the constitution.

## 12 Summary of recommendations

*This list is offered simply for ease of reference. It cannot, however, be emphasised too strongly that the review report is an organic whole and the recommendations in isolation almost become a nonsense. Each, therefore, should be read in the context of the report and the appropriate reference is offered to facilitate this.*

*We re-state here a crucial principle: this review report is provisional. What Birmingham Churches Together should become is already being worked out with a wider group of people than was originally envisaged. We are aware that a new understanding of what is needed will emerge in the months ahead and that we are being asked to provide a skeleton for something that has not yet been born. So we have tried to design something which is robust yet flexible, something which can be adapted to changing needs. (cf #1.i above.)*

*Recommendations 12.a, 12.b and 12.c are the main recommendations of the review group. They are such a concise summary that a detailed reference to the text is not possible. Please refer to #5-11 for the explanation.*

### 12.a A new Ecumenical Development Group

- i We recommend the establishment of an Ecumenical Development Group, which would also be the BCT Sponsoring Body, as outlined in #7 of this report.
- ii The relationship between the Ecumenical Development Group/Sponsoring Body and the Church Leaders should be safeguarded as outlined in #7.

### 12.b The Trustee Body

We recommend that the Trustee Body be reconstituted as outlined in #8.

### 12.c Co-ordinating Committee

- i A Trustees' Co-ordinating Committee should be established as outlined in #9
- ii The Co-ordinating Committee should ensure that BCT's deliberations include a wider voice and a lay voice (#11).

### 12.d Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group (WELG)

We welcome and encourage the WELG's wish to become more representative, reaching out to fringe women's groups within the Christian community and working more widely than it does at present (#3.e).

### 12.e Forum for Spiritual Directors (#3.e)

We recommend that the Spiritual Directors' Forum appoints an effective link person with BCT to realise the potential of the relationship with BCT.

#### 12.f Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs)

We commend the current good practice of the LEP Consultative Group and ask it to keep under review the effective implementation of Sponsoring Body obligations as BCT's structures change, bringing appropriate proposals to the Ecumenical Development Group or the Trustees' Co-ordinating Committee should the need arise (#3.f).

#### 12.g Churches Together groups

Encouraging and revitalising Churches Together groups is an urgent priority (#3.g).

#### 12.h Charitable status and the liabilities of Trustees

i We recommend that, as a matter of urgency, the Trustees consider both the charitable status of BCT and whether BCT should become a company limited by guarantee or something similar which would limit the personal liability of each Trustee (#4.b).

ii This task also has implications for BCT's constitution (#11.f).

#### 12.i BCT Training and Restore

We recommend that the Ecumenical Development Officer no longer attends the Management Committee meetings of the projects (#10.b).

#### 12.j Administrative Secretary

We recommend a review of the role of the Administrative Secretary (#4.g).

#### 12.k Birmingham Ecumenical News (BEN)

We recommend that BCT instigates a review of BEN (#4.h).

#### 12.l The Presidents

We recommend that the Presidents continue to meet with the Ecumenical Development Officer for a short time immediately before Church Leaders' meetings (#6.a).

BCT review group  
30 October 2007