

SOMERSET CHURCHES TOGETHER **ANNUAL REPORT 2008**

Structure, Governance and Management

After careful consideration, the Council and Standing Committee of Somerset Churches Together (SCT) developed a new Constitution during 2007 with the intention of submitting it to the Charity Commission for approval at the earliest opportunity. After each member church had approved the document during the course of 2008, it received final approval from the Council at its meeting held in September of the same year.

The new Constitution outlines a revised organisational structure for Somerset Churches Together. It replaces the Somerset Churches Together Council, which previously met four times annually, with a Forum which meets only twice a year. It expands the membership of Standing Committee beyond the serving denominational ecumenical officers to include representatives from each of the member churches which does not have such an officer and three representatives elected annually by the Forum. It also defines the membership of the Forum in considerably wider terms than that of the former Council which was largely limited to the Standing Committee and nominated representatives of the member churches. The new Constitution means that, in addition to the membership of the former Council, the new Forum should also include representatives from each local Churches Together group affiliated to Somerset Churches Together, a representative of each Local Ecumenical Partnership sponsored by Somerset Churches Together and one representative from each Body in Association (CAFOD and Christian Aid, etc).

It is hoped that the new organisational structure will lead to fewer meetings and more opportunities for the member denominations and the local churches to fully participate in the life and work of Somerset Churches Together. The Constitution is similar to those developed by neighbouring intermediate bodies and is intended to meet the requirements of the Charity Commission.

Objectives and Activities

In order 'to advance the Christian religion for the benefit of the public', Somerset Churches Together seeks to support the common Christian witness of its member churches, provide ways in which they may consult with one another and work and pray for Christian unity. This is achieved through a variety of aims including the support of local ecumenism, the care and support of Local Ecumenical Partnerships, and the encouragement of shared worship, service, and evangelism. Other aims include the encouragement of early ecumenical consultation and the development of good relationships with other faith communities.

In order to meet these aims and others, Somerset Churches Together was involved in a number of activities during 2008. An Annual Gathering attended by over one hundred people was held in November to support the churches in their response to the needs and opportunities of society. This event followed on from the 2007 Gathering and focussed on the theme of *Churches in Community – from Vision to*

Action with a mixture of keynote speeches, presentations and workshops. Contributors included the Bishop of Bath and Wells, the Bishop of Clifton, and representatives from the Genesis Trust, the Linx Project and Keynsham and Saltford Churches Together's *More to Life08* programme. With a similar mixture of presentations and workshops, the October 2009 Forum will focus on the theme of *Christians Together in a Spiritual Age*. To assist the churches in their relations with local government and other secular bodies, Somerset Churches Together provided representatives for the Forum for Equality and Diversity in Somerset (FEDS), the Somerset Community Cohesion Forum and the Consultation in Interfaith Community Action. Somerset Churches Together also supported and encouraged the work of the Mental Health Chaplaincy within the Somerset Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and was represented on the Somerset Health Authority's Equality and Diversity Group. It continued its association with the Sanctuary Tent at the Glastonbury Festival, Christian Aid and CAFOD.

Throughout 2008, Somerset Churches Together continued to support local ecumenism, particularly through the encouragement and support of local Churches Together groups by means of occasional visits, the newsletter which appears four times a year and the website. The County Ecumenical Officer gave presentations and held 'awaydays' for Churches Together groups in Wellington, Burnham-on-Sea, Bridgwater, Wincanton, Glastonbury, Portishead, Pill and elsewhere. Some of these visits were in response to requests for support and help with developing more shared service and evangelism among the churches and discovering less cumbersome administrative structures for their work together. Somerset Churches Together also continued to support the churches in the development of a shared mission strategy on new housing developments in Yeovil and Weston-super-Mare. Representing all the local churches in Yeovil, Somerset Churches Together Yeovil Local Development Monitoring Group (SCYLD) has helped the churches in Yeovil to achieve a common approach to mission on the new estates in the town. It has also facilitated a recent agreement from the churches to explore a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO) as a way of overseeing mission to the new estates, provided it meets ecumenical concerns. The Somerset Churches Together Weston-super-Mare Monitoring and Development Group continued to facilitate a common approach to mission on the new estates to the east of the town. The Council has continued to enthusiastically support the Fresh Expressions of Church initiative by publicising its local courses and encouraging participation in it.

Somerset Churches Together's Anglican Methodist Covenant Development Group continued to support the growth of the Covenant among churches throughout the year. It organised further meetings to which Anglican rural deans and Methodist circuit superintendents and others were invited to meet together informally over lunch. Leaflets were produced to enable Anglican and Methodist churches to share their life more closely with one another and with churches of other traditions. To mark the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Anglican Methodist Covenant in 2003, the Group organised an evening of presentations and discussion in Paulton Methodist Church at which over sixty people reflected on the latest Joint Implementation Commission Report and the development of the Covenant in the past five years.

During 2008, Somerset Churches Together has continued to serve as Sponsoring Body for all ten Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) in the Somerset area. Through the work of its LEP Support Groups, LEP Staffing Consultative Groups, LEP Review Teams and the County Ecumenical Officer, it has also provided ongoing advice, support and periodic review for them. Ecumenical Review Teams visited Batheaston and Worle LEPs during the year and reported positively on their work. Ecumenical Staffing Consultative Groups facilitated ecumenical consultation during the appointment of new ministers and clergy at Bournville and Worle LEPs. Locking Castle LEP's finances were considered and recommendations made by an ecumenical Finance Review Group. Ongoing advice and support was provided by LEP Support Groups and SCT Representatives throughout the year. LEPs remain an important visible sign in Somerset of the churches' commitment to one another and help the churches in the visible expression of Christian unity.

One of Somerset Churches Together's aims is to encourage the fostering of good relations among the faith communities. As part of this work, it has continued to provide representation and support for the recently formed Somerset Faiths and Beliefs Forum, working in partnership with *faithnetsouthwest*. It recently made an application on behalf of the Forum for funding from the Faith in Action Fund, administered by the Community Development Foundation and sponsored by Communities and Local Government. *Faithnetsouthwest* provided support and advice on work with other faiths at Somerset Churches Together's November Gathering and in other ways.

Somerset Churches Together has provided a meeting place for the Somerset Church Leaders during the year. As in previous years, it has enabled its Presidents to meet together twice in 2008 and has organised another twenty four hour retreat for them at Downside Abbey which now takes place annually.

A major challenge during the year has been the development of a new structure for Somerset Churches Together as outlined in the recently approved Constitution. Apart from two remaining vacancies, the widened membership of the Standing Committee is now complete. However, some traditions are finding it difficult to provide two further representatives for the Forum in addition to a representative on Standing Committee. The second stage of the development of the Forum's new membership will take place in 2009 when each LEP sponsored by Somerset Churches Together and each affiliated local Churches Together group will be asked to nominate one representative. All members of the Forum will be invited to attend two Annual Forums held in January and October each year. The Annual General Meeting will take place as part of the January Forum.

Achievements and Performance

The work of facilitating common witness among the churches, providing ways in which the churches may consult with one another and working and praying for Christian unity continues to face big challenges. The view persists in some places that LEPs, intermediate bodies such as Somerset Churches Together and other ecumenical structures stifle mission, the heart of ecumenism, locking it into 'a bureaucratic web' and make it difficult for churches with a more evangelical theology to join in. The claims are exaggerated. There is some evidence to suggest that,

when wholeheartedly supported by their external denominational authorities and intermediate body, many local ecumenical partnerships flourish and grow. It is also evident that the ideas of mutual giving, mutual receiving and self sacrifice embedded in the theology of the Anglican Methodist Covenant may be having a significant impact on the spirit in which joint decision making in some LEPs is taking place. However, some of the criticisms of ecumenical bureaucracy need to be urgently addressed. There are local Churches Together groups which need help and encouragement to move beyond routines which are more appropriate to local Councils of Churches twenty or thirty years ago. Somerset Churches Together needs to continually monitor its ways of working. God is doing new things and there is a need to be open to them at all levels. There should be creativity and a movement out in new directions.

A further challenge is the continuing claim, evident inside and outside the ecumenical movement, that the cause of church unity, once vigorous and creative, has finally run out of steam. Some say that this is because most people are now concerned with the differences between Christianity and other faiths rather than disagreements among Christian denominations. For others, the reason is that, because of the understanding and fellowship produced by dialogue, division, once seen as scandalous, now looks more like beneficial diversity. There is weariness and a loss of vision in some places. Some see the ecumenical movement as an irrelevance and encumbrance to the real church business of their denominations.

However, there is evidence that God's spirit of unity continues to be very much at work in Somerset. Are the disillusioned looking in the wrong places? At the local level, many continue to show a huge openness and goodwill towards people of other traditions and are happily engaged with them in creative outreach and imaginative worship. When 'churches together' becomes 'mission together', many sceptics enthusiastically join in. Ecumenical street pastor schemes are emerging in a number of places, there are many examples of churches cooperating in social outreach projects and real signs are evident of people from different traditions jointly exploring new ways of being church. *Hope 08* in Somerset and *More to Life08* in Keynsham and Saltford are just two of the many ways in which Somerset churches of different traditions have sought to engage together in God's mission. When there is prayer, real vision, passion and conviction, ecumenical work will flourish.

Financial Review

Following discussion at a Somerset Churches Together Standing Committee meeting in September 2008, the Council agreed at its November 2008 meeting that, with effect from 29 January 2009 and subject to review after one year of operation, the West of England Baptist Association (WEBA) should provide financial services to Somerset Churches Together to ensure that its financial and accounting requirements are carried out efficiently and effectively and comply with all relevant legislation and good practice. It also approved a draft agreement, drawn up by Mr Tom Dunne, the Treasurer of Somerset Churches Together. According to the agreement, WEBA's services to Somerset Churches Together will include preparation of the annual budget and accounts, notification of annual subscriptions to member bodies, payment of expenses to the County Ecumenical Officer and others, payment of all invoices and preparation of accounts etc required by the

independent examiner and other services. The Council also agreed that an honorarium of £500 per year should be paid to WEBA for the services provided to Somerset Churches Together and that either side may terminate the agreement by giving not less than six months notice of its intention to do so.

Finally, the Council agreed that Mr Tom Dunne should be appointed Honorary Treasurer to Somerset Churches Together with effect from 29 January 2009. It agreed that his duties should include the monitoring of Somerset Churches Together's income and expenditure and the provision of advice to Standing Committee on any action needed. WEBA should provide the Honorary Treasurer with the accounts and reports and any supplementary information necessary to carry out the role.

Plans for Future Periods

The small group discussions which followed David Spriggs' presentation, *Moving on Together*, at the AGM of Somerset Churches Together in January 2008, identified two areas of ecumenical work which should receive the highest priority – the encouragement of cooperative working among the churches which impacts on the local community and the organisation of pilgrimages and retreats for the Presidents of Somerset Churches Together. These priorities will continue to receive the same attention throughout 2009 as they have in 2008.

Subject to the approval of Standing Committee in March 2009, other priorities will include the continued development of Forum membership, including Bodies in Association, the submission of the Constitution to the Charity Commission, the organisation of an 'Away-day' for members of local ecumenical partnerships, the planning of the 2009 Forum and the completion of Reviews at Locking Castle and Brean LEPs. Further areas of work will be the creation of an agreed policy for the Churches' mission together in new housing areas, the development of better links with the new and Pentecostal churches and contributions to the Bath and Wells Diocese's 1100 celebrations.

Grateful thanks are due to the Chair of Somerset Churches Together, Revd Nigel Coles, whose term of office will come to an end in January 2010. Many thanks are also due to Jeanne Brown, Revd Alison Fry, Revd Kathryn Taylor and Revd Nick Williams who retired as Council members during 2008. All the prayers and support for Somerset Churches Together which are offered by many other people are also greatly appreciated.

Robin Dixon
County Ecumenical Officer
January 2009

