

Covenant Council Report

Seconder: Archdeacon Barry Forde

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I wish to second the proposal of the Report of the Covenant Council and make some remarks as to the charitable status of covenant partnerships. This has been a matter of ongoing engagement, and I am particularly grateful for the Secretary of the Methodist Conference and Co-Chair of Covenant Council, Rev Dr Heather Morris, for her support in this regard.

When the covenant was formed, and single-congregation partnerships began to take shape we had to attend to the intricacies of ensuring that the Covenant Church could comply with and work within two church structures. This became more complicated when churches had to become registered as charities, and in this regard, I'm going to speak about the position in Northern Ireland.

The Church of Ireland went down the road of registering individual parishes and unions as individual charities, though there is something of an anomaly with groupings, when one cure will have two or more charities – each having to act in the best interests of the charity which may not always be aligned with the best interest of the cure. That's a debate for elsewhere. The governing document of all these charities is of course the Constitution of the Church of Ireland.

The Methodist Church in Ireland took a different approach, agreeing with the charity regulator to register as a single charity through Conference and the Connexional system. As such all circuits, societies and missions that sit under the Manual of Laws are all under a single registration umbrella and operate connexionally under that umbrella.

There are merits to both, and one of the blessings of ecumenical partnerships is to see the limitations of yourself through the practices of the other, and vice versa. This has left covenant partnerships in a form of limbo as they will always have to adhere to the requirements of both the Constitution and the Methodist Manual of Laws – each of which is a governing document, independent of the other, for charitable registration.

So, where do they fit in?

Well, the first piece of learning is that the primary objective of covenant partnerships is not to become registered charities. They are to be living communities of faith, expressions of church and community, and as such we should not let the need to register as a charity to become a roadblock to life and mission together.

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The second piece of learning is to understand that what is important from the perspective of both denominations is that appropriate appointments are made annually to administrate the partnership, that appropriate appointments are made to the diocese and conference, that due processes are followed for the inspection, management and development of properties, that the right controls are in place to manage finances and pay appropriate assessments, and that safeguarding is implemented well. In short, whatever umbrella they sit under, do they function well within both Churches.

The most recent place to engage in such a partnership has been Primacy in Bangor. This has been an up-and-down relationship over the years but is now in a place of real health in terms of ministry and mission, trust and relationships. Our options were to form a whole new charitable entity, which we did not want to do as we are not creating a third church. Or, to register with the Charity Commission in accordance with the Church of Ireland practice, but then we could not point to the Constitution as a governing document without turning an ecumenical partnership wholly into a Church of Ireland parish.

The third option, and the one adopted, has been to use the flexibility of the Methodist umbrella to accommodate covenant partnerships, and ensuring that all necessary obligations are met to and through the diocese in terms of finances, properties, appointments and so on.

In short, we have a community of faith working within and with the blessing of, both denominations, adopting the least form of resistance and most easily accessible form of charitable registration.

This is an ongoing journey of learning, adaptation and change in which such partnerships remain fully Church of Ireland and Methodist but also give something of both traditions to the other in the spirit of Christian unity.

I have pleasure in seconding the report of the Covenant Council.