

The purpose of this set of leaflets is to provide Catholics with practical information about joining with other churches in their locality in a Local Ecumenical Partnership. LEPs, however, are not merely convenient organisational structures. The shared life of an LEP can be a powerful statement of the nature and purpose of Christ's Church. Many LEPs are communities which draw Christians into an ever closer fellowship in which they support one another along their journeys of repentance, renewal and mission.

Why the Church?

God calls all people to become his children, sharers in his divine life. Catholics believe that the grace which God gives to help us to respond to his call comes through visible signs, 'sacraments'. Although we commonly speak of the *sacrament* of Baptism or the *sacrament* of Marriage, the word 'sacrament' can also be used of other signs of God's will for our salvation. The sacramental principle — that visible signs disclose God's saving work — is fundamental to Catholic theology.

The Second Vatican Council, in its great teaching document on the Church, declared that God established the Church to be the “visible sacrament” of the unity of all who, “in faith look towards Jesus, the author of salvation and the principle of unity and peace”. (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] n.9) Although suffering from the disputes and divisions of past centuries, it is the one Church, as established by God in Jesus Christ, which exists here and now on this earth. Pope Paul VI, reflecting on Vatican II's teaching, described the Church as “the visible plan of God's love for humanity,” because God desires “that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit.” (quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.776)

For Catholics, therefore, the Church is a

- *visible* (is experienced here on earth)
- *sacrament* (a sign used by God for our salvation)
- of *unity* (shows God's will that we be one with him and each other)

A real, though imperfect, communion

While the Church is a sacrament of unity, we live in an age when Christians are disunited. For over 40 years the Catholic Church has worked alongside other churches and ecclesial communities to end the scandal of disunity, playing a full part in the ecumenical movement. It understands the goal of that movement as being visible unity in which there will be full communion among all Christians.

Even in the present situation of Christian disunity the Catholic Church believes that a real, though imperfect, communion already exists among Christians. Vatican II acknowledged that Catholics share with other Christians the practice of prayer and worship, reverence for the Bible as a rule of faith and of life, and belief in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are united in a particularly close way with those Christians who celebrate the sacrament of Baptism. (*LG*, n.15)

Because of the importance which they attach to the sacramental principle, Catholics wholeheartedly support those initiatives which make explicit their communion with other Christians. At the national level Catholic bishops have entered into a covenant with other Christian leaders: “to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another in the Church, which is his body; and to fulfil their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world”. (*Constitution of Churches Together in England*, article 1) Many bishops, through county ecumenical bodies, are members of one or more covenants with regional Christian leaders within their dioceses.

At the local level Catholic parishes make visible their communion with other Christian congregations in a variety of ways. Some are members of *Churches Together* groups, others enter into the more formal covenant of a Local Ecumenical Partnership as described in the introduction to this set of leaflets.

LEPs: visible signs of communion

The participation of a Catholic parish in an LEP is a clear sign of the close fellowship which it enjoys with its partners. The shared life of an LEP can be a sacramental sign of local communion: both an eloquent statement to the wider community of the extent to which these Christians from different traditions are united in faith, and the means through which God brings his people in this locality into closer unity.

Disunity is an impediment to mission; it undermines the Church's call to humankind to become one People of God. Conversely, a growth in communion strengthens mission. When it is widely known that the different churches in a town or district work and worship together they are more likely to be listened to because they live what they preach.

The journey towards Christian unity is one of repentance and renewal. In their Decree on Ecumenism the bishops at Vatican II wrote, “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart”. (*Unitatis redintegratio* n.7) The commitments made in an LEP covenant provide opportunities for repentance and renewal to take place. As Catholics join with other Christians in a spiritual ecumenism of worship, prayer, study, and service in the community, so together they are confronted by the demands of the Gospel. From whatever tradition each has come they enter into a deepening dialogue with one another, and so acquire the confidence to be open to each other about their failures to follow Christ as faithfully as they should. Out of that shared repentance comes the will to support one another along the path of renewal, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:2-3)

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