

## Faith and Society Files: Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity

A six-session study guide to encourage small groups of Anglicans and Baptists together, perhaps from neighbouring churches, to wrestle with some of the questions raised by the *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity* report, and in so doing to get to know each other better and share more deeply together in God's mission.



## Introduction

Baptists and Anglicans are often in conversation! Parents chat in the playground, volunteers discuss the next stage of the town-wide youth project, and ministers talk together over lunch. But from 1992 to 2005 a small group of Baptists met with a small group of Anglicans, both groups appointed by their respective denomination, to talk through some of the issues which have been difficult and controversial, to affirm those things on which there is agreement and to clarify differences of opinion. This group produced a report, *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity: Anglicans and Baptists in Conversation*, which was published in 2005, and is simply described here as the 'Report'. Both Churches are keen for this conversation to continue and to include many more people. This study guide has therefore been produced in the hope that it will encourage small groups of Anglicans and Baptists together, perhaps from neighbouring churches, to wrestle with some of the questions the reports asks, and in so doing to get to know each other better and share more deeply together in God's mission.

This Study Guide has been written with a number of expectations and assumptions:

- That a small group will commit itself to look at all six studies;
- That this small group will include both Anglicans and Baptists;
- That this is essentially a spiritual exercise seeking to listen to each other and to God;
- That those participating have NOT read the Report, and that the Report is NOT necessary for the studies, although participating in these studies might prompt reading of the Report itself;
- That the ultimate goal is increased understanding, deeper relationships and shared mission.

This Study Guide is based on the Report, and contains both the questions the Report asks and a number of direct quotes. These are in boxes in *italic* type. At times the exact wording, but not the sense, has been slightly edited.

### Language

One of the problems in conversations like these is often a struggle over language. Sometime this is because different churches use words that have a 'technical sense', which are familiar to those of one tradition but not another. So Baptists might refer to 'the Church Meeting' and Anglicans to 'the PCC'. These studies will afford us the opportunity to get to know and understand each other's language. Sometimes different traditions will use the same word, but the precise meaning and nuance of the language may be different. So when Anglicans talk about a service of baptism, they may instinctively have in mind infant baptism, although Anglicans of course baptise professing believers as well, whereas Baptists will certainly only be thinking of believers' baptism, when a disciple professes his or her own faith. These studies will also offer the chance to talk together about what we mean by different words.

## **Preparations**

Most of what you need for these studies is contained here. In addition it would be helpful if everyone had a Bible and there were some pens and paper.

Occasionally there is a small amount of preparation needed. For study one, there is an activity which needs to be prepared by one person, perhaps the person who might act as facilitator or leader of the group. Study five asks everyone to do a little research before the session, so that information can be shared.

At the end of each session there are suggestions for prayer, and this may be handled differently by different groups, according to what is comfortable for that group. Given the nature of the studies, one way we would encourage you to use these times is to ensure a variety of approaches. A different person might be invited to prepare to lead that part of the study, and different people might lead the prayers in different ways. One week, for example, there might be prayers which are prepared and led, reflecting a more formal liturgy. Another week there might be spontaneous prayers; another week there might be intentional silence at moments through the prayers. In this way the group will be able to *experience* some diversity as well as *talk* about it.

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## 1. Who are you? Telling Each Other Our Stories

Aim: To begin to get to know each other in the group, some of the history of the two Christian communities and some of the differences between the churches today.

### Opening activity

Welcome to the first session! A good way to begin (assuming everyone has tea and coffee) is for everyone to introduce themselves very briefly – there will be opportunity for telling longer stories in a moment.

Have a short period of silence and ask God to speak to you as you talk and listen together. Then read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Don't discuss it, but allow another short period of silence for people to think about it.

### Our own stories

Stuart had rarely been to church, except for the obligatory weddings and funerals and he did not understand what went on. But his son had joined the scouts which met at the local Baptist Church and as a family they went to a special service. It still felt rather strange, but everyone was very friendly and helped them feel welcome. They went back for other special services, and gradually began to go more often. In time, Stuart realised that not only did he know lots of people at the Church and understand what was happening, he also felt he had been changing as a person. When the Minister announced a new 'only looking' group, Stuart was keen to go and it confirmed for him that he did want to follow Jesus and he had become a Christian. With great excitement he was baptized last Easter Sunday and is becoming more involved in the work of the church.

Ruth was brought up in an Anglican church, where she was baptized as a young baby. She continued to go to church with her family and when she was 11 she joined the choir, which she enjoyed enormously. When she was 16 she responded to the invitation from the Vicar to join a confirmation class and felt that she had come to believe for herself all she had been taught. With real excitement she was confirmed a couple of months later on Easter Sunday evening. Ruth's faith has grown and developed; she still sings in the choir and is also very involved in working with the young people at church.

Here are two quite different stories about responding to God's call and finding personal faith. 'Ruth', of course, could have grown up in a Baptist Church and 'Stuart' could have joined an Anglican church as an adult.

But what is your story? Take the chance to spend some time telling each other your stories – concentrate, as for Ruth and Stuart, on the initial part of your journey, rather than all the things that have happened since. Unless the group is too large, do this all together.

### Stories from our past

Anglicans and Baptist both have long histories and emerged from what is known as the Reformation. After the upheaval and conflict during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward and Mary, the ‘Elizabethan Settlement’ in 1559 finally broke the administrative, judicial and financial ties between the papacy and the church in this country. The Church of England was expected to be a church for the whole of the country that was ‘both catholic and reformed’, that is it continued historically from the Roman Catholic Church and sought the same breadth, but was changed in the light of criticisms of the Reformation. There were, however, those who remained unhappy at being part of a national church so closely connected with the state, and they joined together as ‘Separatists’ in their own congregations. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there emerged from these Separatists those who thought that believers’ baptism, practiced within a

*The existence of a prayer book in English (rather than a Latin Liturgy), the Bible also available in English, and Holy Communion administered in both kinds (bread and wine) testified to a concern for the participation of the laity in the life of the church. (Report, page 7)*

*The Book of Common Prayer was viewed with suspicion by people who saw spontaneous prayer as a mark of sincerity and an expression of the inspiration of the Spirit. The Act of Uniformity in 1662 intensified their view of The Book of Common Prayer as an instrument of oppression, as many Baptists and other Nonconformists were fined and imprisoned. (Report, page 8)*

community of committed disciples, was the mark of Christ’s followers, and so the ‘Baptist’ movement began, with the first church being established by English exiles in Holland, probably in 1609. Two years later a group came back to England and formed a church in London. The 400 years since then have had moments of hostility, toleration and cooperation. The Anglicans have had more legal power, and Baptists and other dissenters have at times been persecuted and imprisoned, and barred from opportunities. For example, it was not until the founding of University College, London in 1823 that non-Anglicans could go to University in England. On the other hand, a Baptist minister in the nineteenth century commented that Baptists have sometimes shown ‘narrow-mindedness

and sanctimoniousness ... two horrid things’ (Report, p. 17). Yet there are also many examples through the centuries of Anglicans and Baptists working together at many different levels. The Report itself gives more of the history and tells more stories of cooperation.

- How do you respond to this very brief account of the development of the two churches?
- How much do you know about the history of your own tradition? Are you able to add to it stories you know from the past both of cooperation together but also of tensions and difficulties?

- What do you know about relations between churches in the area where you live?

*When William Brock went to London in 1848 as first minister of Bloomsbury Chapel, he used to walk down Gower Street on Sunday mornings with the rector of St George's, Bloomsbury, the Revd the Hon. Henry Montagu Villiers, later Bishop of Durham. They would exchange a blessing as they parted for their respective churches. (Report, p. 17)*

What current examples can you think of cooperation together?

What tensions do you still think exist between Baptists and Anglicans?

*In the middle of the twentieth century many Baptists were encouraged towards ecumenical endeavour by Earnest Payne, General Secretary of the Baptist Union and a President of the World Council of Churches. He planned his own memorial service at Bloomsbury Baptist church, but at the request of the Dean of Westminster it was transferred to the Abbey. (Report, p. 18)*

### **Our Own Churches**

In advance, the following terms should be copied onto small individual pieces of paper, folded in half so the writing cannot be seen and put in a basket in the middle of the room. The basket may be circulated so that all in turn choose a piece of paper, at random, and see if they can explain to the rest of the group what the term or the title means. If they are struggling, see if others can help them out, and be careful because some words will mean different things in different churches. There may be other words that you would like to add as well, and if so write them on slips of paper and add them to the basket.

BUGB	Church Meeting	PCC
Synod	Regional Minister	Rector
Rural / Area Dean	Anglican Communion	Baptist World Alliance
Diocese	Deacon	Elder
Association	Suffragan Bishop	

What do you value in particular about the life of your church today? You might think, for example, about the services, other activities, connections in the local community or with the wider church.

If possible, divide into twos or threes, which include people from different church traditions. Share your responses together and then feed back those which feel particularly important to the whole group.

### **Prayer and Worship**

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Have a short while of silence to let some of the words and images fill your minds. In the silence think about how the discussion in this session has given you new insight into the passage.

Thanksgiving: Take the opportunity to thank God for your own journey of faith, for the others in the group and their own journeys, for the churches you represent and for being part of the body of Christ.

Intercession: Can you think of others who are still at the beginning of their journey? In a time of quiet mention them by name, asking that God will continue to lead them on.

Finish with the Lord's Prayer together (decide what version you will use).

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## 2. Baptism: A Special Moment in a Longer Journey

Aim: To recognize the differences in the way Anglicans and Baptists practise baptism, and to explore what is held in common.

### Opening activity

Look back to the stories of Stuart and Ruth in the last session, especially their baptisms.

How do they compare to your experiences? In twos or threes, encourage each person to briefly share the story of their own baptism.

In the midst of the differences in the accounts of Stuart and Ruth, what same elements did you find in the stories?

What does baptism mean to you?

### Hearing the pain

Baptism is an obvious area where Anglicans and Baptists have different practices, and these have sometimes led to those from both churches feeling hurt. At times the hurt has been deep, with the feeling that it is not only a disagreement about baptism, but that both churches do not really think the other is a 'true' church.

The Report published from the formal conversations recognized the hurt that had been felt over the years, and suggested two positive ways of thinking about what we hold in common. But first, let us also hear some of the pain.

*Baptism has an essential place within the whole process of initiation, which is the journey of Christian beginnings... The baptism of children gives joy to Anglicans, and Baptists feel deeply that in the baptism of believers they have a great treasure. Pain is caused to Anglicans when a Baptist church baptizes as a believer someone previously baptized as an infant. Pain is also caused to people in Baptist churches who forgo baptism as a believer which they desire, for the sake of healing wounds within the wider Church. (Report, page 73)*

What examples of 'pain' can you give, either from your experience or from the experience of others whom you know?



## Sharing in one baptism

Read Ephesians 4: 1-6. This lists seven things, which the believers share, including 'one baptism'. Some commentators suggest that the setting of this whole passage is at a baptismal service.

*There is one baptism because there is one Lord Jesus Christ – the unique indivisible Saviour. There is one baptism because there is one, unique, unrepeatable saving action of God in the death and resurrection of God's own Son. (Report, page 65)*

*There is one baptism because there is one Lord, who was immersed into the terrible desolation of sin and death for all humanity and raised from the waters of chaos by the power of the Spirit of God. Beyond all our imperfect perceptions of baptism, our division, and whatever time gaps are involved in the process of Christian growth, there is still one immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus through the Spirit. This we understand to be the interpretation of the Scriptural text, 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism'. (Report, page 36)*

In the report the first large point that Baptists and Anglicans agree upon is that the 'one baptism' is the baptism of Jesus in which we all share. Read Mark 1:9-11 and 10:35-40.

- How does sharing in the one baptism of Jesus connect to the personal stories you have told? Does it help hold the stories of Stuart and Ruth, and your own stories, together?
- What are the other six things in the passage from Ephesians which believers share? How do you think these other things connect you to the others in the group?

One consequence of this for both Anglicans and Baptists is that baptism is a vital and important thing, but that an individual can only be baptized once, because it is a once-for-all sharing in the once-for-all event of Jesus' death and resurrection. This explains why some Baptists have wanted to baptize as believers those baptized as infants: it is because they have considered such people not to be baptized. It also explains why Anglicans have been so hurt by this; it is because they have considered such people to be baptized twice.

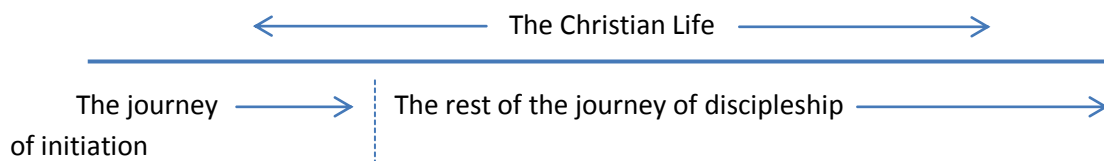
## Sharing common journeys

When you looked earlier at the stories of Stuart and Ruth, among the similarities you may have mentioned are: baptism, personal faith, church teaching, serving in the church. The second way in which the Report finds common ground between Anglicans and Baptists is not by comparing infant baptism with believers' baptism and suggesting they are the same thing, but by comparing what it calls 'journeys of initiation' in each Christian communion. The beginning of the Christian faith does

not happen instantly, even for those who talk about a sudden conversion, but happens over a period of time and involves a number of things, although certainly for some people it is a much longer journey than for others. An illustration and a diagram may help.

Think of someone making a trip around the world by air, visiting a number of countries. While the departure lounge at the airport marks the beginning of the travel schedule, actually there will be an opening phase of the journey to get to the point of departure. This may involve conceiving and planning the trip, getting travel documents and inoculations, packing and walking to a bus or a train and making the journey to the departure lounge. These are parts of the journey, and may either take a long or short period of time depending on circumstances. It may be difficult to trace a moment when this first phase of the journey began. But walking to the departure gate, we know that these beginning are now over, and the grand project is now truly underway.

Like this journey, the beginning of the Christian life involves a number of elements and events: among them are the gracious moving of God's spirit in the human heart, the faith of parents, baptism, Christian nurture in the fellowship of the church, an experience of conversion or repentance, an individual confession of faith, taking part in the Lord's Supper (or Eucharist) for the first time, and being commissioned to share in the mission of God in the world. *All* this belongs to the phase of 'beginning' or initiation.



The illustration and the diagram suggest that baptism is part of the initial journey which we take into the Christian life, but that baptism may happen within this at different points for different people. For some it will be at the very beginning of the journey of initiation and for others at the end of the journey of initiation. For some, baptism will happen at the same time as a personal confession of faith, for others that confession will happen later on, perhaps through the act of 'confirmation'. While our journeys may take a different shape, we can recognize that we have made the same journey. For all, baptism can act as a meeting place where God comes to us with loving grace, and where there is a human response of faith, though both grace and faith will be appropriate for the stage in the journey. In the case of very young children, the faith expressed will be that of parents and the Christian community.

The Report suggests that, even where Baptists do not want to regard infant baptism as the same event as believers' baptism, they may still be able to recognize aspects of God's grace and human faith within it, and so be able to say that overall 'we have made the same journey!'

Stuart and Ruth had quite different journeys of initiation, but are both now firmly set on the path that follows Jesus. And both experienced similar things, although in different orders and at different times. How does this connect back to the personal stories you have told? Does it help hold the different stories together?

*Though baptism is the pivotal event of this process, other elements are also vital. As an unfolding process by which the grace of God is received and appropriated, Christian initiation is necessarily extended in time, even if certain crucial elements are sometimes compressed together. It constitutes a journey into Christ and his Church. The initiation is not complete until the journey has been completed and the process has run its full course. It includes instruction in the faith, personal profession of faith, strengthening for service by the Holy Spirit and admission to Holy Communion. (Report, page 63)*

The Report asks a number of specific questions for both Anglicans and Baptists to think about. One is:

*Could the member churches of the Baptist Union of Great Britain reflect on the nature of Christian initiation as a process, and consider whether they might recognize a place for the baptism of infants within the whole journey which marks the beginning of the Christian life? This question is asked in the context of an Anglican understanding that the beginning has not come to an end until Christian disciples confess faith in Christ as Lord for themselves and are commissioned for service in the Church and world. (Report, page 73)*

- How would you respond to the question to Baptists?
- What do you think is the importance of what is said to be the 'context of an Anglican understanding'?
- Might this question and its context help to overcome divisions between Baptists and Anglicans on the question of baptism?

### **Concluding Activity**

Look back at the diagram above about the journey of initiation. Sketch out your own journey of initiation (try and confine it to this rather than the whole of your Christian life), thinking about what elements were important and what order they came in. Share this with each other. You might like to do this on one piece of paper, with a different line for each person with the key elements in order. This would help to show the similarities and differences within the group.

## **Prayer and Worship**

Thanksgiving: Take the opportunity to thank God for your baptism and for the various people who were influential in your own journey of initiation, perhaps demonstrating Christian love and teaching you in the faith.

Confession: Take the opportunity to confess to God where you have been insensitive to others, particularly from different churches, and for the way that sometimes our churches have treated each other.

Intercession: Pray for those who feel pain and hurt because of the way they have been treated by churches and other Christians.

Share the Lord's Prayer together.

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### 3. Baptism: Problems and Possibilities

Aim: To look at three specific issues connected with baptism and at how these particular difficulties might be understood and begin to be resolved.

#### Opening activity

We live in very mobile times, in which people move both geographically and between churches frequently. How well do you know your own church? On a piece of paper make a list of the various different church backgrounds from which people in your church come.

Read the following passages: Acts 8:26-40 (the Ethiopian eunuch) and Acts 16:11-15 (Lydia). These are two compressed accounts of the 'journey of initiation' we explored in the last session.

What different elements can you detect within these stories?

One of the controversial points in the account of Lydia is the reference to the baptism of her 'household'. Some think that this baptism *would* have included children, others that it *might* have included children, others that we do not know but the stress is on those who believed. Do you have a particular view and what might it contribute to the discussion you are having?

Last time we suggested that we share in the one baptism of Jesus and we all experience a journey of initiation, which will contain similar features, although perhaps at quite different occasions. In this session, we look at some of the practical consequences of these ideas and some of the problems we encounter in the lives of our churches. Look at the following stories:

Peter was baptized as an infant in the local Anglican Church because it was the normal thing to do. But his parents only went very rarely, and Peter grew up without any contact with a church. When he went away to University he became friends with a number of people who went to the Christian Union, most of whom went to the local Baptist church. Going with them initially for an occasional special event, Peter began to go more often, to ask searching questions, until the point when he told his friends he wanted to be a Christian. Soon afterwards he approached the minister of the Baptist church about being baptized.

Susan was baptized at the local Anglican church, where her parents were regular attenders. She became involved in the children's activities and as a teenager joined a confirmation class and was confirmed. A couple of years later she drifted away from church and went only occasionally. Some years later, married with young children, Susan began to go to church again through friends at a toddler group, which was held at a Baptist church. As Susan started to go to the Baptist church, it awoke lots of memories from the past, and soon Susan was involved in lots of different ways. A few years later, one Sunday evening there was a baptismal service and as she watched Susan felt that this was what she wanted to do – her confirmation was a long time ago and she was not sure that it had meant much at the time. She said nothing to start with, but the thought kept coming back to her, so eventually she had a word with the minister after the service one Sunday.

If you were the minister what would you say to Peter and Susan? How would you explain the reasons for your decision? If your decisions about Peter and Susan are different, can you explain why?

## Second Baptism

We need to pause for a moment to think about the language we use for this kind of situation. Anglicans will tend to say that someone who has been baptized as an infant and is then baptized as a professing believer is being 're-baptized', whereas a Baptist will tend to speak of their baptism as a believer as their first 'true' baptism, and resist the language of 're-baptism'. These words are already loaded with meaning and emotion. There is no easy solution to this problem of language, but since we need to use words, the language of 'second baptism' is used in this unit. A person who has been baptized both as an infant and as believer has gone through two processes which are named by the different churches concerned as baptism. So when this Study Guide speaks of 'second' baptism it is trying to use the phrase in as neutral a sense as is possible, respecting different convictions.

The Report asks a number of questions for both Baptists and Anglicans to think about, arising from real experiences, like the stories of Peter and Susan above.

To Baptists the Report asks two questions:

*Will member churches of the Baptist Union of Great Britain which practice open membership resolve that, where they agree to a request for a second baptism, it should only be after careful pastoral counselling of enquirers? In such a conversation enquirers would be made fully aware of alternative paths of initiation. (Report, page 73)*

Some Baptist churches, as written in their trust deeds or constitution, are 'closed' membership. This means that membership is restricted to those baptized as believers. But the majority of Baptist churches are 'open' membership, which means membership is on the basis of profession of faith. This question is addressed particularly to these open membership churches.

- How would you respond to the question?
- What would you want to talk about in this process of 'careful pastoral counselling'?
- Thinking back to the last session, how would you explain these 'alternative paths of initiation' to either Peter or Susan?

*Would the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain appoint a group to prepare a service of worship which might offer a form in which those baptized as infants, but not yet confirmed, can mark their public profession of faith and reception of spiritual gifts in some other way than baptism? (Report, page 73)*

Imagine, for a moment, that you are the small group the Baptist Union Council has commissioned to pursue this question and make some recommendations. What would you suggest?

To the Anglicans the Report asks two questions:

*Where individual Anglicans have received a second baptism in a Baptist church, will parish churches within the Church of England nevertheless continue to welcome them as full participants in their life? (Report, page 74)*

*In a situation where a Baptist church follows the recommendation outlined in point two above [and offers careful pastoral counselling], will a parish of the Church of England refuse to allow the practice of second baptism to disrupt their partnership in life and mission with Baptists there? (Report, page 74)*

How would you respond to these questions? Suppose Peter and Susan do receive a second baptism in a Baptist church and then move to a different town, where they decide to attend the Anglican church. Will they be welcomed like any others? Would anything need to happen to ensure their welcome and acceptance?

### **Infant Baptism**

Whereas Anglicans have expressed concern about the Baptist practice of second baptism, Baptists have expressed the concern that sometimes infants are baptized in Anglican churches in situations where the family is not part of the church and does not bring the child to church afterwards either. This, of course, is not the teaching or expectation of the Church of England, which expects baptism to be followed by nurture and teaching leading to confirmation.

So the Report asks two more questions, addressed to Anglicans:

*Could all parishes reflect on the consistent teaching of the Church of England that infants are baptized on the understanding that they will receive Christian nurture, with the intention that they will come to confirmation and so profess the faith for themselves? (Report, p. 74)*

How would you respond to this question? How do you think the practice of your church relates to this request?

*In the light of the whole process of Christian initiation described in this report, will all parishes in the Church of England pastorally support those parents who believe it is right to defer the baptism of their children until they reach the age of discretion? (Report, page 74)*

The request, initiated by parents themselves, for a service of blessing and dedication rather than baptism is becoming more common, perhaps partly because regular worshippers in Anglican churches have grown up in other traditions and partly because parents are expressing their hopes and desires but allowing their children the space to decide for themselves. Have you ever had experience of this? How do you think your church would respond?

### **Baptism and Membership**

One final issue the Report raises in connection with baptism, is addressed this time to Baptist churches. Originally most Baptist churches had a 'closed' membership, but as mentioned above, the majority of Baptist churches are now 'open' membership. The change originated in the desire of Baptist churches to be hospitable and welcoming and to admit to membership those attending the church who had grown up, and been baptized, in other Christian traditions. In order to avoid difficult questions about the meaning and significance of infant baptism, most 'open' membership Baptist churches made a public profession of faith the sole requirement of membership. The unfortunate, and at the time unforeseen, consequence of this is that there are now members of Baptist churches who have not been baptized at all at any time. This is a concern for Anglicans, for whom baptism as an infant or as a believer, is essential and it is also a concern for some Baptists, including those involved in the conversations. There is a version of 'open' membership which makes believers' baptism normative in a Baptist church, but which also admits to membership on the basis that applicants have been baptized as infants in other traditions, as long as they have also made profession of their own faith.

So the Report asks this question to Baptists:

*Could member churches of the Baptist Union of Great Britain adopt the policy that those who have never received the sign of baptism, whether as an infant or as a believer, should not be admitted to membership without being baptized? (Report, page 74)*

How would you respond to this question?

How do you think the practice of your church relates to this request?



The report poses a final question to *both* Baptists and Anglicans, which goes deeply to the heart of our attitude to each other, and which may help us truly to worship and work together:

*Can the Church of England and Baptist churches determine that neither differences in baptismal practice nor the situation of second baptisms should prevent them from seeing in each other the presence of the one true Church of Jesus Christ? (Report, page 74)*

How would you answer this question, and what would be some of the practical implications of your answer?

### **Prayer and Worship**

Thanksgiving: Look back at the initial activity. Thank God for the variety of people there are in your churches, with all their different backgrounds. You might extend this to different cultural and geographical backgrounds as well.

Intercession: Pray for those who have been baptized recently, as infants or as believers, in your churches or who might be coming to baptism soon, that they might continue to grow in faith and love for God.

Share the Lord's Prayer together.

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## 4. Covenanted Together: Local Ecumenical Partnerships

Aim: To explore the way that our two traditions have worked together in Local Ecumenical Partnerships and to consider the challenges they bring our own local churches

### Opening activity

Just suppose that the various churches in your local area agreed to close and everyone would come together to form a new church. What it would look like, what its services would be like and how it would function are still a 'blank piece of paper'. From your experience of church and particularly from your church 'tradition', what would be the positive things, for example that you particularly appreciate, that you would want to be included in the life of this new church? What would you not want to take with you?

It cannot, of course, happen quite like this, and for a variety of reasons. Some are very valid reasons. There are legal constraints for the Church of England and all of us are rooted in the historic faith of the Church expressed in different ways by our denominations. There will also be other less valid reasons, perhaps due to a deep sense of superiority or too strong a fear of change.

### What is a Local Ecumenical Partnership?

But there have developed in recent years some very particular examples of committed working together known as Local Ecumenical Partnerships (or LEPs). These projects are when two or more denominations have come together in a particular committed covenant relationship for the sake of the mission of the Church. There are over 800 such LEPs in England, of which around 175 involve both the Church of England and Baptist churches. Of these 175, 13 involve just the Church of England and a Baptist church working together, with the rest involving at least one other denomination as well.

There are different kinds of LEPs. Some new churches have begun as LEPs, while other churches have grown together to form an LEP. An LEP is defined as having 'a formal written agreement affecting the ministry, congregational life, buildings and/or mission projects of more than one denomination'. There are a number of different basic kinds of LEPs:

- A single congregation, drawn from two or more denominations. All the services and activities will be for the entire congregation, and there will be one 'ministry' (even if more than one minister) for the congregation. For example, Baptists and Anglicans might come together to plant a church on a new housing estate and from the very beginning everything is combined. By law the LEP will need to keep two membership rolls, those who recognize themselves as Anglicans and those as Baptists, although it is also possible for people to join both.
- One building, with several congregations. There will normally be separate services and other activities for each denomination, but a formal sharing of one building and working together

in other ways. For example, two existing churches with their own buildings, might decide to work together more closely in partnership and share one of the buildings, but retain separate congregations.

- Several congregations in partnership. Two or more local churches, with their own buildings, services and activities covenant to work together. For example, a number of churches in a town work and worship together more and more, to the point that they decide to make this a formal 'covenant' together. They do lots of things together, but as separate congregations.
- There are also chaplaincies in Colleges, hospitals and hospices, prisons and industry which are another form of LEP.

Some churches will be a mixture of these kinds of LEPs. Wendover Free Church, for example, is a Baptist – United Reformed Congregation, which shares a building with the Roman Catholic Church and is in covenant relationship with the local Church of England parish church.

*Ecumenical Worship which is not the lowest common denominator, but the result of a great variety and riches of resourcing, involving both the framework of a structured liturgy and the spontaneity of more contemporary modes, has the possibility of being amongst the most attractive to the consumer generation (however fervently we might deplore this aspect of our contemporary culture on ethical or philosophical grounds). (Report, pages 23-4)*

Do you have any experience of being part of an LEP? Share these briefly together.

Suppose you were a member of this church. What do you think would be the positive things? Do you think there would be any frustrations? What might they be?

In 1993 All Saints' Church of England Church and Didcot Baptist Church together planted a congregation as an LEP on the new Ladygrove Estate in Didcot. They meet in the local school hall and describe their Sunday services as family friendly with lively contemporary music, but drawing on the traditions of both churches. For example, they alternate between using the Anglican and Baptist traditions when they celebrate Communion. Currently they have a minister from the Church of England.

Christ the Cornerstone is an LEP in the centre of Milton Keynes. Set up in 1979, with a new church building opened in 1991, it is the first ecumenical city centre church. There are 5 denominations involved – Baptist, Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, URC. Together they have covenanted to share their life in worship and service to the community and world. At present they have three ministers (Catholic, Anglican and Methodist) and a pattern of worship services that embraces the different traditions. The church is at the heart of the retail and commercial life of MK, and provides – amongst other things – a cafe, a counselling service, and space for other community activities. It is part of a wider partnership of churches in MK overseen by an Ecumenical Moderator who is currently a Baptist.

What do you think are the most positive things about this LEP? What might be transferable to other situations?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:12-26. We read this passage in the first session as we began our studies together.

How might this passage be particularly applied to these different LEPs?

How might this passage be applied to your churches and their relationships together and with other churches?

### **Possibilities in a Local Ecumenical Partnership**

Because of the particular commitment that churches make together in an LEP – a covenant partnership – the questions and issues about working together are raised more acutely. We saw last time that second baptisms is a problem generally for Anglicans and Baptists, but for a single-congregation LEP it is a particular difficulty. The scenario is possible that someone who is baptized in this church as an infant in an Anglican service asks later to be baptized as a believer in a Baptist service! So the Report goes further for LEPs and asks

*Could the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain invite Baptist churches which are part of single-congregation LEPs to refrain from baptizing as a believer those who have previously been baptized as infants? (Report, page 74)*

In Baptist congregations that are not LEPS, the Report suggests that those who ask for baptism, having already been baptized as an infant, should be carefully counselled and made aware of different patterns of the 'journey of initiation' (look back to session 2), but that they may be baptized if they persist with an informed conscience. The Report now suggests that, in the particular covenant partnership of a single-congregation LEP, the high level of commitment of members from different traditions to each other should lead to a greater self-imposed discipline, and so a second baptism should not be a possibility. Does that distinction seem right to you?

The Report asks four other questions specifically to LEPs:

*How are children to be regarded within the fellowship, especially in relation to Communion? (Report, page 26)*

*How does the authority of the Church meeting relate to the authority of the bishop and the synodical structures of the Church of England? (Report, page 26)*

*How are new Ministers appointed, and what is the interplay between local call and denominational appointment? (Report, page 26)*

*How do we recognize the growing numbers of men and women in LEPs who do not wish to be categorized as either Baptist or Anglican but wish to be considered simply as members of such-and-such ecumenical church? What happens when such people move? (Report, page 27)*

If you are part of an LEP, you might want to read pages 19-28 of the Report and spend more time looking at these questions.

If you not part of an LEP, these questions still raise important issues where there may be different practices in our churches. Look especially at the question about children in the fellowship. The report draws attention to a situation in which baptized children on the Anglican roll of an LEP may share in Holy Communion before confirmation, while children on the Baptist roll of the same age may not, having not yet received believers' baptism. Different Baptist churches will have varying approaches to when children can share in communion. If there are children and young people in your own church, share together the ways that your church seeks to include them and nurture their faith. What are the similarities and differences between Baptist and Anglican situations you know about?

### **The Challenge of a Local Ecumenical Partnership**

In what ways do the stories and questions encountered in this study encourage and challenge your churches to worship and work and together more closely with each other, or with other churches beyond those involved in the study group?

Whatever your relationships at present, can you suggest opportunities for closer partnership and mission together?

**NB Take a look at the next study because it asks you to do some preparation!**

### **Prayer and Worship**

Thanksgiving: Take this opportunity to thank God for the partnership in mission between churches at local, national and international level. Think of specific examples which you know.

Intercession: Pray for the mission and ministry of each other's churches and for the work of other churches in your local area, including any forthcoming activities and events, and for other organisations and initiatives, such as Churches Together in England, the week of prayer for Christian unity, Christian Aid and Tear Fund.

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## 5. 'Apostolic Foundations'... The Nature of the Church

Aim: To explore the nature of the Church, especially the way that one fellowship of believers relates to others.

### Opening activity

The Introduction mentioned that language was important, but not always clear. This session will need to include some technical and quite difficult language and we will begin here. In the list below all the terms refer to the life of the church: put a tick beside those words you understand and might use, a cross beside those words you don't understand or would not use and a question mark by those you are not sure about.

*Apostolicity*  
*Association*  
*Bishop*  
*Catholicity*  
*Church*  
*Covenant*

*Communion*  
*Diocese*  
*Province*  
*Succession*  
*Regional Minister*

Share your answers, and begin to discuss what some of the words mean. The study will use these words and hopefully will help make things clearer.

Both Baptists and Anglicans, since their beginnings, have been concerned about what it means to be part of the 'true' Church, and who is part of this 'true' church. A line from what is known as the Nicene Creed (written in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century) says 'we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church'. But what does this mean?

Read 1 Peter 2: 4-10. List the various different ways in which this passage describes the Church. How do you think your church expresses these different things?

### Catholic

Holy Trinity is an Anglican Church which has been at the heart of the village for centuries. Parts of the building are over 700 years old and while much has changed in the village, including Holy Trinity, the church's presence over all this time has been an important continuity.

Cornerstone is a Baptist Church and has met in a school hall for the last five years. It was begun by a small group of people who travelled out of the town to go to church, but decided, with the blessing of others, to begin a Baptist church near where they lived.

As you read 1 Peter 2, you might hear words such as ‘a chosen people, a holy nation, a people belonging to God’ as describing the group of Christians who meet together as church week by week. But you might equally hear it as speaking of all God’s people, even though they are spread out across the world.

Both Holy Trinity and Cornerstone are part of the Universal Church, that is the people of God which extends in time and space. The word ‘catholic’ means ‘whole’ and describes this Universal Church. Often it is spelt with a lower case ‘c’ (catholic) when it means universal and with an upper case ‘C’ (Catholic) when it refers to the Roman Catholic Church.

Both Holy Trinity and Cornerstone are connected to the Universal Church ‘in space’, that is with others in different places now, as well as in time. Holy Trinity is part of one of the 44 Dioceses, which is in one of the two Provinces of the Church of England, and the Church of England is part of the world-wide Anglican Communion. Cornerstone is part of one of 13 Regional Associations and a member of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. The Baptist Union is a member of other international bodies, such as the Baptist World Alliance. Baptists speak of churches being in a ‘covenant’ relation together, indicating a bond of trust rather than a connection regulated by law, language which is also being increasingly used by Anglicans for their ecumenical and world-wide relations.

Drawing on the work you have done since the last session, what information can you share with each other about these relationships which your church has? What difference do they make to the life of your church? In what other ways may these wider relationships help?

### **Apostolic**

Based on the Greek word meaning ‘sent’, a church is apostolic when it is connected back in time, to the church of the first apostles, and when it continues its teaching and mission.

While Baptists have not tended to use the word ‘apostolic’ and will be less familiar with the ancient creeds, they have expressed this same desire to be rooted in the earliest church with the language of being ‘a New Testament church’.

The question is about how this connection back in time to the church of the Apostles is expressed.

*The apostles were those who were called by the risen Christ to proclaim the gospel and to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations. It follows, therefore, that when we say that the Church is apostolic we mean two things: first, it is a community in which the gospel preached by the apostles is believed and lived out in the obedience of faith in the power of the Spirit; second, it is a community summoned by the risen Christ to go on proclaiming that same gospel among all nations in the power of the Spirit so that people who are not yet believers will enter into the obedience of faith. (Report, pages 89-90)*

The Report records that Anglicans and Baptists agree on four marks of an apostolic church:

- Faithful transmission of apostolic doctrine (especially in preaching)
- Proper celebration of sacraments: baptism and communion
- Some form of historical continuity, or at least intention to stand in continuity with the church of the apostles
- Participation in the apostolic mission

How would you try and expand these four points further? Write them on a blank piece of paper with plenty of space between them. Then try and add other words around each of the four statements which you think are important for expanding and explaining them. For example, you might write 'authority of Bible' near the first point.

*How much do Baptists and Anglicans share a concern that the life and mission of the Church should stand in continuity with the Church of the Apostles?*

*How far are Baptists and Anglicans able to see each other's churches as truly sharing in the apostolic mission of the people of God?*  
(Report, pages 120-1)

The Report suggests that Baptists and Anglicans do share a real concern that the church should be apostolic, and would like to see each other's church as apostolic. But there are contentious issues and the two significant ones, addressed by the Report, are whether each church thinks the other is practising baptism properly (as we have seen in sessions 2 and 3) and whether bishops are a key way the church today is connected with the past (which we look at next time).

How would you want to answer the questions? Remember the questions are carefully posed, and are not asking for a 'yes' or 'no' answer.

## **Holy**

1 Peter describes the Church as a 'holy nation'. Holy here means 'set apart' rather than any sense of being perfect. Part of the humility and listening so central to the conversations arises from the recognition that all churches have made mistakes and may have things they believe wrong. But the report affirms that the churches are together on a journey, which will be perfected in heaven – the technical term used to describe this future is 'eschatological'.

While recognising our current limitations there are still important questions about exactly how much agreement we should look for on important issues now and how much differences should simply be accepted in Christian love.



Look back at your piece of paper where you have added words to help expand the four points. As a group try and ring or highlight those words which you think ought to be agreed, leaving those where you think there is space for difference.

*A Baptist church asking whether it is able to recognize another church as apostolic is not asking that the doctrine and worship of that church be perfect, but that they be on the way to being eschatologically perfected. (Report, page 115)*

## One

Neither of our communions has seen the apostolicity of other bodies as a simple yes-or-no question. The Church of England has developed a broadly three-stage process, beginning with implicit recognition ('seeing') of another body as apostolic, proceeding to a formal declaration of that recognition, and thence to a full interchangeability of ministries. The Baptist Union of Great Britain and its churches tend to see less of a distinction between the first two of these stages.

Although we believe in one Universal Church, we recognize its brokenness, and the Anglican – Baptist conversations were one small part of working at our 'oneness'. How might this continue? Baptists tend to stress developments at a local level and Anglicans at a national level, which is one of the tensions.

How would you personally like to see the relationships between Anglicans and Baptists develop in the future, at both a local and national level?

## Prayer and Worship

Thanksgiving: Think back to the beginning of the session, and give thanks for those who have been particularly influential for you in the past, in whatever Christian tradition they stood; also think of those who are influential now, and be grateful for the gifts and abilities God has given them.

Confession: Take this opportunity to recognize the superiority and lack of humility which have sometimes characterised the way we have related to others, both as individual and as churches, and seek God's forgiveness.

Intercession: Pray together for God's whole church throughout the world, perhaps for people and places that are known to individuals and especially for those who seek to be disciples of Jesus in difficult circumstances.

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## 6. 'And God gave some' .... Ministry in the Church

Aim: To think about the nature of ministry in the Church, and to bring the studies to a good conclusion

### Opening activity

Think about two or three people who have been particularly significant for you in your Christian journey. Share these stories with another person, and then choose one person to talk about with the whole group.

### The Call to Ministry

For all of us, there will have been those who have been particularly influential and helpful to us as we have grown as Christians. Such people may have had formal roles in the church or not. Among the many who are members of the Church, God has always called some to have particular responsibilities and ways of life. While all members are called to share in the ministry and mission of the Church, some are called and set aside to be 'Ministers' in a particular sense – although our two Churches have understood the details of this differently.

Read Ephesians 4:7-16

This passage suggests something about both the role of some to whom God has given particular gifts and the responsibility of all of us who are part of the church. How would you describe these different roles and responsibilities?

How would you explain to others the role of the minister or ministers, or priests, in your own church? How might it compare to the passage in Ephesians 4 (Note that this is only one way the New Testament describes such roles)? What are the similarities and differences between different answers?

*How far can Anglicans and Baptists see the ministries of one another's churches as effective instruments of the Holy Spirit? In particular can Anglicans see ordained Baptist ministers as exercising a ministry of word and sacrament which is being used by the Holy Spirit to nourish and build up the Church of Christ? (Report, page 121)*

How would you respond to these questions?

There are formal and informal convictions about this issue. A single-congregation Anglican Baptist LEP, such as Ladygrove Church we encountered in Study 4, may have alternate Anglican and Baptist communion services. The fact that there can be single congregation LEPs at all means that the Anglicans believe, at least informally, that a Baptist communion is a spiritually nourishing service and

Baptists find similar nourishment in an Anglican Eucharist. Yet a Baptist Minister, who perhaps one week has presided over a Baptist communion service, cannot formally preside at an Anglican communion service, restricted to ordained Anglican ministers.

### **Oversight and Authority**

Another key term is the Greek word 'episkope', which means 'oversight' and from which the English word 'episcopal' comes. The New Testament speaks of those appointed as 'overseers' in the church, or in some translations, 'bishops'. Passages to look at would be Acts 20:28, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1. Part of the role of such oversight is to bring a vision of the whole church into the local situation, and to expand the horizons of a local church about what Christian life and mission means. Both Anglicans and Baptists think that oversight in the Church is important, but understand it in different ways.

For Anglicans Bishops have a key role in this oversight, but work with lay people and clergy in a Diocese and with other bishops nationally. For Baptists there is the creative tension between the role of the whole church in overseeing its life and the specific roles of ministers, deacons and elders.

One way of focussing on oversight and authority is to think about who makes different decisions. Who will make the decisions about the following issues and what process will take place (don't think about your response to the issue, but the process which will happen)?

- a new initiative in mission
- removing the pews in the church and replacing them with chairs
- responding to a request to bless a civil partnership

### **The Role of Bishops**

One of the key differences between Baptist and Anglican church structures is the presence of bishops in the Anglican church. Anglicans believe the New Testament provides the theological basis for three 'orders' of ministry: deacons, priests

(presbyters or elders) and bishops, and individuals are ordained to each. So a bishop is ordained to his office, having earlier been ordained a deacon and priest.

Baptists have generally believed in two 'orders': Deacons (who were ordained in the early years of Baptist life) and Ministers who have always been ordained. Baptists think that offices of 'presbyter' and 'bishop' are identical, and that the local minister exercises both. Some Baptist churches also have elders, who are not usually ordained but share oversight with the Minister(s). When a Baptist Minister is appointed to be a Regional Minister and so to work in a larger area, he or she is not re-ordained, but exercises the same kind of oversight which they practised in a local church.

*The continuous ordination of bishops, to whom is committed the ordination of other ministers, is a 'sign' of apostolic continuity. Anglicans are able to distinguish between the sign of the reality of apostolic continuity, and to recognize the reality even in the absence of the sign. (Report, page 84)*

- What has your experience been of the ministry of bishops?

- What have been the positive features?

There are points of contact with Baptist patterns. Regional Ministers often work with and alongside the Bishops of that area, as well as those from other denominations. At an ordination and induction a Regional Minister will normally be involved – not out of necessity but out of ‘good order’. The Regional Minister in this context can represent the wider church in a particular way.

- Have you been to an ordination or induction service?
- Describe what happens and try and work out again the similarities and differences.

One aspect of the difference is in the way the two churches use language. When Baptists refer to the ‘local church’ they always mean a group of Christians meeting regularly together in a particular congregation. For Baptists this is the expression of the Universal Church that is most readily seen as being ‘church’, and where they can participate most easily in the church of Christ. Although more casually Anglicans might refer to a parish church as the ‘local church’, more formally they understand the Diocese as the ‘local church’ in which the Bishop is the minister, assisted by all the priests and deacons. For Anglicans it is vital that new ministers are ordained by a Bishop.

The hope of the Anglican church is for a united church at the heart of which is the ‘historic episcopate’, that is bishops ordained in succession to each other in a particular geographical area. While the whole community of the people of God stands in ‘apostolic succession’, Anglicans think that Bishops are a God-given sign of that continuity. The Baptist understanding of the local church and the ‘oversight’ (*episkope*) exercised by the minister of the local congregation means the churches think rather differently at this point. But the Report suggests that they should ask two questions about how we think about each other now.

*Can Baptists understand why Anglicans value the ministry of bishops as a sign of historical continuity between the church of the Apostles and the life and ministry of the church today? (Report, page 120)*

*Is it possible for Anglicans and Baptists to discern the same reality of pastoral responsibility and oversight in each other’s church structures? In particular, can Anglicans discern this oversight in and among Baptist churches, even though there is no office of Bishop according to the Anglican understanding of that office? (Report, page 121)*

How would you respond to these questions?

## Concluding our studies

*In the light of these reflections on apostolicity, are Baptists and Anglicans able to see the presence of the one Church of Jesus Christ in each other's churches, and in what ways could this be publicly expressed? (Report, page 121)*

This question links back to the last session, but it is also the very last question in the report and brings it together.

The general tone of the Report is hopeful that the answer to the first part of the question is 'yes'. Do you agree? What reasons would you give?

How would you begin to answer the second part of the question about expressing this publicly?

Gather what you have learnt together by looking at the following three questions. Use a separate piece of paper for each question and briefly write down the answers people give – keep this as a record of your conversations.

1. What have you discovered or learnt during the studies? Can each participant choose one thing to share with the whole group?
2. If there were one thing which you think should happen as a result of what you have discovered and learned what would it be?
3. What will you personally do as a result of the studies? Ask each participant to share one thing with the group.

## Prayer and Worship

Thanksgiving: Take the chance to thank God for each other in the group and for all that you have learnt about each other, about your churches and about God during the studies.

Intercession: Take the chance to pray for those who represent the churches at regional and national level. If you know, pray for them by name. Pray too for the Colleges and Courses which train men and women for ministry. Pray again for the way your local churches might live and work in the future as partners in the Gospel.

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