**Reconciling Communities in the Diocese of Leicester**

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## **Reconciliation in Deepening our Discipleship**

### **1. Theological significance of reconciliation**

* *"From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:16-20)*

Reconciliation, in the Christian view, is where justice, truth, peace and mercy meet. It starts from a place of recognising our own need for forgiveness, the mercy we have received from God, and the command to show the same compassion to those who have wronged us. Compassion – literally ‘to suffer together’ – doesn’t mean writing off wrongs or ignoring the need for justice. But it does involve seeking a way forward together.

Indeed, reconciliation is where all of creation is heading. With the Fall, our relationships with God, with each other, with the natural world, and with ourselves were all fractured. Each of these ruptures will be healed in the New Heaven and New Earth, and in the meantime, we seek to point to that future reality in how we live now. In particular, trusting that “*our struggle is not against flesh and blood*” (Ephesians 6:12), we can witness to the topsy-turvy Kingdom of God by praying for those who persecute us and loving our enemies, (Matthew 5:44).

Reconciliation does not mean uniformity: difference and diversity are part of God’s creation, and it is only after the Fall that the gift of difference is twisted into rivalries and conflict. Instead, we look to the vision in Revelation, presaged at Pentecost (Acts 2:11), of “*a great multitude […] from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb*” united in their praise and worship of God (Revelation 7:9). In other words, we seek to glorify God through our differences rather than suppress them.

### **2. The importance of reconciliation within the Church**

The ‘ministry of reconciliation’ starts within the Church itself. Jesus demonstrated the importance of being reconciled among ourselves for what it means to be a disciple in His final prayer:

 *“[T]hat all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one –**I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17: 21-23)*

Christian unity, therefore, is crucial to how we worship God and witness to the world.

So important is reconciliation to the life of the worshipping community that it is an integral part of the communion liturgy. Before we are able to receive the bread (representing the body of Christ), the congregation declares itself to also be a representation of the same Body – first, through the sharing of the peace and then through the affirmation, ‘Though we are many, we are one body because we all share in one bread’.

This pattern of being reconciled to one another before we seek oneness with God is drawn from Jesus’ own teaching. He asked His disciples to make peace with anyone who “*has something against*” them before offering their gift to God (Matthew 5:23–26). Similarly, several of the New Testament epistles argue against allowing differences in wealth, spiritual maturity (see 1 Corinthians 8), or legal disputes disrupt the worshipping community.

Paul describes what a reconciled Church would look like, as a community where differences serve and enrich each other, and each ‘part’ is able to fulfil its unique vocation.

*“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised byone Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many […] If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”**On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 17-22)*

In this sense, we are called to be reconciled to one another because we can only represent the Body of Christ when the gifts of all its members are recognised and valued.

### **3. Where is the need for reconciliation within the Church?**

Despite the foundational importance of unity amongst Christ-followers, there are disagreements and divides at every level of the church and on virtually every theological and ecclesiastical issue. Within the Church of England, two especially contested issues concern women’s ministry and same-sex relationships. These debates are especially intractable because they are interwoven with different beliefs about the interpretation of particular passages, the nature of the Bible’s authority, the weight of other sources of authority and guidance– reason, tradition, conscience, experience and prayer – and the relationship of the Church of England to the Roman Catholic Church.

There are also particular groups which often feel marginalised within churches, raising questions of power, justice and equality. These include: people from UK Minority Ethnic backgrounds, those who identify as LGBTQI+, people with disabilities and mental health conditions, neurodiverse individuals, and survivors of abuse.

Power can also affect the relationships between clergy and laity, between churches, and between parishes and the central Church of England or Diocese. The [Rural Commission](https://leicester.anglican.org/content/pages/documents/1566989956.pdf), for example, found that rural parishes can often feel overlooked and deprioritised in comparison to those in Leicester city and other towns in the Diocese. Accordingly, the first recommendation to come from the consultation process was for the Diocese to ‘shift in self-understanding from an urban diocese with a rural edge to a rural diocese with urban heartlands, working in partnership, and led by all God’s people.’

Unity thus involves inclusion and parity of esteem, not just the absence of conflict. So, putting into practice the Diocesan priority of Reconciling Communities in our own worshipping communities might involve:

* Ensuring a church building is physically accessible for people with disabilities and culturally accessible for people from different backgrounds
* Establishing Minster Communities which harness the unique strengths and opportunities of different worshipping communities
* Encouraging the vocation discernment of people from minoritised groups
* Learning from, and supporting, partners in our Link Dioceses
* Creating liturgies which allow people to worship in different languages or modes of expression

### **4. Principles and Habits for Loving Amidst Difference**

Reconciliation is an ongoing journey because, as with all parts of our spiritual formation, we continually have to ‘put off [our] old self’ and step into the new life made possible through Christ (Ephesians 4:22). This journey can be best sustained by patterns of life and structures developed and routinely practiced within our worshipping communities. The habits and principles below, which might offer such patterns and structures, have emerged through consultation with worshipping communities in the Diocese of Leicester.

In the Rule of Life followed by the Community of the Tree of Life, the principle of reconciliation is summarised in the phrase “I choose to listen first and speak life”. In other words: start by listening deeply, putting aside judgments, counter-arguments and solutions, and trying to see the world through the other person’s eyes. Listening first also means taking time to listen to God – where is God at work in and through that other person – and to remember that God’s Word on the cross is that no one is beyond God’s love and mercy. How we respond should then be motivated by a desire to see the other experience the fullness of life which God intended for them.

Other worshipping communities have found the habits (Be Curious; Be Present; and Reimagine) covered in the [Difference Course](https://difference.rln.global/), which also emphasises the importance of listening, to be helpful in resolving conflict and tensions. As well as listening to each other’s stories and perspectives, the below principles can give a tangible picture of what loving those different from us might look like.

1. **Confess our biases - in whom do you struggle to see the image of God?**

As we go through life, we are invariably conditioned to have beliefs and preconceptions about individuals, groups and communities which are different from us. But, as Christians, we believe that everyone is made in the image of God and therefore has inherent and irrepressible value, irrespective of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, religion, or any other characteristic. This means we must reflect deeply on our attitudes and biases, seek to demonstrate unconditional love that is free from judgement and suspicion, and welcome people as they are, rather than welcoming them in the hope that they will become and behave like us.

Jesus knew that when we reflect on our own shortcomings, we are less likely to judge or exclude others. In John 8, we read of how Jesus defended a woman “caught in the act of adultery”. He told the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees who were about to stone her that any among them who was without sin could throw the first stone. None of them dared claim to be faultless and even Jesus, who *could* make such an assertion, refused to condemn her. In seeking to understand others, then, we must also become aware of where we have fallen short of our own standards – especially those which we are urging others to follow.

The [Unconscious Bias training and resources](https://www.leicester.anglican.org/about-us/world-in-a-diocese/resources-training-and-events/unconscious-bias-training-/) developed as part of the Intercultural Worshipping Communities programme can help one become aware of, and interrupt, one’s unconscious prejudices.

*Are there media sources you follow which increase your sense of opposition to certain groups? Try fasting from them for a month to see how your attitudes change.*

1. **Cast out fear -** **what are the fears behind our conflicts, exclusions or prejudice?**

One of the obstacles to open and honest communication is fear. People may avoid talking about their experiences or sharing their beliefs because of the fear of the impact on their relationships, their professional or personal lives, their public image or even their physical safety. On the other side, we might fear feeling exposed, being challenged, or having to question something we have long believed, if we engage with someone different from us.

When we fear difference, we are prone to suppress it, to seek to control it, or to separate ourselves from it. These fears compromise and dilute our common life and worship, and hence God calls us into perfect love, which casts out fear (1 John 4:18). As Paul writes to the Corinthians, love ‘*does not insist on its own way’* (1 Corinthians 13:5) – we cannot love those we seek to dominate, but first we must cease to see their agency as a threat.

1. **Practice ‘kenosis’ - do I use my power to serve others, even those with whom I disagree?**

The term kenosis comes from Philippians 2:7 where St Paul describes how, in becoming incarnate, Jesus ‘emptied himself’– an example, he implores all Christians to emulate:

*“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness”. (Philippians 2:3-7)*

Similarly, Jesus called His disciples into lives of mutual submission:

“*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.* *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,**and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—* *just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28).*

In other words, following the example of Jesus means not seeking to safeguard or expand our own power but to use our influence for the sake of others.

Each of us has power of one sort or another, even if we do not feel particularly influential or important – whether because of our education, income, citizenship status, being able-bodied, occupation, age, ethnicity or gender. By belonging to certain social or demographic groups, we might benefit from particular social advantages or degrees of respect that others cannot so easily claim (this is known as ‘privilege’). We can better appreciate what power we have, especially compared to others, when we deeply listen to the experiences of others and learn about the barriers and challenges they face. This then gives us the opportunity to reflect on how we can better empower others.

*Have you ever been in a situation where you were in a minority? How did that make you feel?*

## **Reconciliation as Loving Service of the World**

Advocating for, and witnessing to the possibility, of reconciliation can also be a way in which we love our neighbour as there is increasing evidence of segregation, division, and inequality in the UK:

* In 2020, the UK public’s single biggest concern – selected by 39% of respondents surveyed for Edelman’s Trust Barometer – was that people were becoming less tolerant of others and more extreme in their views.[[1]](#endnote-1)
* A growing proportion of people report that all their friends are of the same ethnicity, religion, age, and have the same level of education as them.[[2]](#endnote-2)
* The number of racially or religiously aggravated hate crimes has risen in recent years, with spikes at the time of the EU referendum, 2017 terrorist attacks and 2020 Black Lives Matters protests. The Leicester and Leicestershire police force has the third highest hate crime rate based on religion in England, and ranks in the top five for all hate crimes, and those specifically based on race and sexual orientation.[[3]](#endnote-3)
* Britain has been found to be one of the most age-segregated countries in the world with divisions between generations increasing over the last decade.[[4]](#endnote-4) This can be seen financially, geographically, and politically as older generations are more likely to live in rural areas, have greater wealth, and vote differently from their younger counterparts.[[5]](#endnote-5)
* Social attitudes are increasingly pivoted around the libertarian-authoritarian axis: younger people are more likely to hold socially liberal, ‘progressive’ values, and to regard multiculturalism, feminism, LBTQ+ rights, and the green movement as positive forces while older generations have, on average, more authoritarian attitudes.

From feelings of loneliness to access to job opportunities, and from levels of crime and corruption to economic growth, the connections we have to, and our trust in, each other has very real material effects. So, addressing these divisions can be an important way in which we love our neighbours as ourselves.

*What are the fractures you see in your community? Did you see people initially come together to support each other in the first lockdown? Has that sense of solidarity endured – why/ why not?*

### **How Worshipping Communities Can Bring Communities Together**

One of the ways to prevent conflict and division arising is through bringing people together across difference. The Contact Hypothesis proposes that interpersonal contact, especially spending time together regularly over an extended period, can reduce prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination. This theory has been proven to reduce racial prejudice, prejudice towards women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ people.[[6]](#endnote-6) These effects are best achieved with three enablers:

* **Equal status**. Both groups must engage equally in the relationship. This means recognising people’s agency, dignity and gifts, rather than acting paternalistically.
* **Common goals**. Both groups must work together on a common goal – a goal that can only be attained if the members of two or more groups work together by pooling their efforts and resources.
* **Intergroup cooperation**. The groups must be working in partnership, rather than in competition, towards the common goal.

An example of these three enablers in action comes from [One Roof Leicester](https://www.oneroof.org.uk/our-work/orl-night-shelter), which brings together individuals and organisations from different faiths to act on a shared passion to support those experiencing homelessness. Their winter night shelter rotates between seven faith venues - three Anglican churches, one Baptist chapel, one Roman Catholic church, one Hindu Temple and one Synagogue. The fact that One Roof is not ‘owned’ by the Church means that people and institutions from other backgrounds feel able to equally contribute and work together.

When members of an otherwise diverse group are working together for a common cause, the significance of their differences and disagreements often wanes by comparison. So, it follows that when churches are working for reconciliation in their communities, the relationships *within* the congregation will improve as well. For example, one Intercultural Worshipping Community in Leicester was able to move beyond some of the tensions caused by theological disagreements when they became involved in supporting women involved in prostitution, asylum seekers and refugees. It gave them a focus for their prayer and their time together, and presented an opportunity to see what they were able to do as a group which they wouldn’t be able to do alone.

Theos has produced a guide for churches looking to engage more deeply with their communities, and especially looking to build more positive relationships with secular partners: [Nurturing Social Cohesion: Why it matters and what your church can do about it](https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2020/11/26/nurturing-social-cohesion-howto-guides-for-churches-and-policymakers)

### **Interfaith Engagement**

Engaging with people of other faiths can be an important pillar and expression of our own beliefs. As Rev’d Tom Wilson, Director of St Philip’s Centre, writes, if we follow Jesus’ command to love our neighbours as ourselves, “and if we understand “neighbour” to mean “fellow human being” including our enemies, as Jesus’ teaching suggests, then that means we must be uncompromising in our commitment to seek divine blessing for and the flourishing of all faith and belief communities, regardless of whether we share their convictions or not.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Interfaith engagement can take many forms, including:

* Personal relationships – this starts with seeking to be a good neighbour to anyone regardless of their background. Friendships with people of other faiths should, like any relationships, be characterised by respect, compassion and service. It can also be an appropriate context to ask questions about what someone believes and to share one’s own faith.
* Personal or collective learning, e.g. St Philip’s Centre runs [a series of courses](https://www.stphilipscentre.co.uk/our-work/our-courses#churches) for churches and other organisations to have a better understanding of the beliefs and practices of other religions.
* Church engagement with other faith communities, e.g. pulpit swaps or twinning initiatives which establish longer-term relationships between places of worship.
* Reading sacred texts together – this is a helpful means of understanding a faith through the lens of its sacred or normative texts. Scriptural Reasoning, for instance, brings together people from typically the Abrahamic faiths to read and discuss texts relating to a particular theme from each faith.
* Social action – partnering with people of other faiths to address an issue of common concern can lead to greater impact. This is the principle on which Leicester Citizens is based – they bring together a number of institutions, including schools and places of worship, so they can speak on behalf of many thousands of people and thereby wield greater influence.

### **Gifts Worshipping Communities Can Bring to Building Social Cohesion**

1. **Vocations**

As well as giving all Christians the ministry of reconciliation, God calls particular individuals to be peacemakers in specific ways and situations. Trusting that God distributes His gifts generously, we can look widely for where God is at work inspiring people to work for peace and reconciliation in their own lives, communities and beyond. This can be blessed with prayer and/or practical support as we seek the flourishing of all (inspired, for example, by Jeremiah 29:7).

For instance, the model of community organising used by Leicester Citizens seeks to grow community leaders wherever anyone has a passion to seek social change. This approach starts with listening to people’s stories and coaching them to act on their sense injustice and lead others to do the same.

*Is there a need which God seems to be calling people within and outside your church to meet? What is already being done, and how can you support that collective vocation?*

1. **Facilities**

Church buildings can be a blessing to their local communities, especially given the recent decline in the numbers of youth centres, libraries, pubs and other community spaces. Church’s facilities can be used by other worshipping communities, community groups, or social action projects. In our Diocese, for example, there are churches hosting winter night shelters, daytime activities for people with experience of homelessness, soup kitchens, community pantries, debt advice, English language classes, support and activities for refugees and asylum seekers, and breastfeeding and parenting support groups.

Church buildings also have a symbolic resonance in terms of community spirit. As was noted in the *Rural Commission*, they can become a vehicle for cultural memory and a sense of shared local identity, creating a feeling of belonging even among those who don’t attend services. Similarly, Leicester Cathedral became a focus for civic pride when Richard III’s body was reburied there, raising the city’s profile at a national level and highlighting the city’s cultural significance. Polling done in 2012 found that 59% of the public agreed that “[Anglican] Cathedrals belong to the whole, not just the Church of England” and 56% felt they were “important symbols of identity in their community”.[[8]](#endnote-8)

But recognising the need to bring people together as equals, and the sense of power which comes from being the host, it is worth asking:

* Is there an opportunity to affirm the gifts of others by accepting their hospitality?
* Are there any physical barriers to people fully participating in events in our building?
* Are there any cultural barriers to people fully participating in events in our building? (A church’s grounds or gardens might offer a more neutral alternative).
1. **Relationships with Schools and Growing Faith**

Many schools are themselves intercultural communities, with pupils from culturally, socioeconomically, and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Like churches, schools have a clear interest in building and maintaining healthy, fruitful relationships across difference. By supporting schools in this respect, churches can have a clear impact on the cohesion of their local communities, including through families who would not typically attend services.

Two school-based projects which encourage pupils to learn about, and include, children and young people who are different from themselves are the [Schools Linking](https://thelinkingnetwork.org.uk/national-schools-linking-network/leicester/) Project (managed by the St Philip’s Centre) and [Refugee Welcome Schools](https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/news/campaigns/refugee-welcome-schools.html) (supported by Leicester Citizens).

In addition, the Church of England’s Growing Faith strategy looks at the intersection between households, churches and schools to simultaneously enrich those environments with the gifts which children and young people have to offer, and to build their faith. Embedded within this approach, then, is the aim to build relationships across generations.

*What opportunities do children and young people have to shape worship in your community?*

1. **Leadership and Convening Power**

Community leadership is especially important in times of crisis, change and transition, as people look for answers, comfort and a way forward. This is seen, for example, when churches host vigils and services of remembrance. A powerful instance of this was the funeral of Antoin Akpom at St Peter’s Highfields, which was attended by thousands of mourners, Bishop Tim Stevens, the city mayor and a local MP. Church leaders in situations like these can help whole communities express a shared sense of loss and confusion, and wrestle together towards hope.

Churches and church leaders are often also trusted to facilitate between disparate parties and interests in pursuit of common solution. This, for example, is the Diocese’s role in the Homelessness Charter for the City of Leicester: it serves to broker relationships and collaboration between different organisations who have an interest in supporting people experiencing homelessness.

But in seeking to bring people together as equals, leaders within the Church should seek to work *with* people, rather than do *to* or act *upon*. Rather than assuming power as a matter of course, we must be willing to recognise others’ influence, work alongside, share power with, and learn from others.

*What might good community leadership look like as we grieve what we have lost during the pandemic?*

## **Next Steps**

Reconciliation is inherently relational and so cannot be done with a top-down approach. Therefore, as you consider what ‘reconciling communities’ might look like in your context, you may want to reflect on the following as part of a larger group:

* What is the change we want to see in the world?
* What gifts, strengths, and ‘assets’ do we have which can help us get there?
* Who can we partner with along the way?

There are several practical steps and resources which might help guide your collective reflections and discussions:

**For Leaders within Churches**

* The Reconciling Leaders Network have developed a 5 session course called [Difference](https://difference.rln.global/the-course/) for church-based groups which looks at crossing divides, navigating disagreement, practising forgiveness, and risking hope.
* [The Living in Love and Faith course](https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/living-love-and-faith-resources) can be run to explore issues of sexuality, relationships and marriage in a group context.
* The Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together can be explored more deeply in the [five-session course](https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/bishops/pastoral-advisory-group/pastoral-principles).
* [Bridge Builders](https://www.bbministries.org.uk/) offers training and a professional mediation service for Christian leaders
* [Place for Hope](https://www.placeforhope.org.uk/home/) provides facilitated conversations, coaching and other support for faith communities experiencing conflict, training and resources for faith communities and individuals.

**For Schools**

* Use the Faith and Belief Forum’s Skills for Dialogue resources (lesson plans, films, presentations and worksheets) for [Primary Schools](https://faithbeliefforum.org/resources/schools-skills-for-dialogue-primary/) or those for [KS3](https://faithbeliefforum.org/resources/school-ks3-lesson-plans/) as part of RE/ PSHE/ Citizenship lessons.
* Lead collective worship/ school assembly on the theme of reconciliation like one for Primary Schools on [Restoring Friendships](https://www.assemblies.org.uk/pri/2653/broken-friendships-matter) and one for Key Stage 4 pupils on [Desmond Tutu and Ubuntu](https://www.assemblies.org.uk/sec/2081/desmond-tutu-and-ubuntu)
* The [Schools Linking](https://thelinkingnetwork.org.uk/national-schools-linking-network/leicester/) project is continually recruiting schools and offering CPD sessions for teachers to deliver the programme with lesson plans, videos and resources.

**For Anyone**

* Coventry Cathedral’s Community of the Cross of Nails has a range of [resources and training opportunities](https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/ccn/resources/) to help facilitate reconciliation, inspired by the city’s story of destruction, restoration and renewal.
* Online training in [Deep Listening](https://www.udemy.com/course/the-power-of-deep-listening/) can help you develop active listening skills
* [Living Room Conversations](https://livingroomconversations.org/) is a project to help people connect across divides, with conversation topic guides, training and resources to help facilitate meaningful and healthy discussions. This includes specific resources for [faith communities](https://livingroomconversations.org/faith-communities/) and [schools](https://livingroomconversations.org/allsides-for-schools/). The project is based in the U.S. but many of their resources can be applied to a U.K. context.
* Hold a [Big Scrumptious Faith-Filled Feast](https://kitchentable.org.uk/feast/) to bring people of all ages to eat and share stories together
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