



What are the key ingredients for life-giving ecumenical mission in Leeds?

Research and report by Paul Lancaster

There has long been a view that ecumenical mission activity in Leeds is strong and effective.

“Leeds is a place where ecumenical things happen” said the late Lewis Burton, first Ecumenical Officer for West Yorkshire. In a 2015 *Ecumenism in Leeds* report by Sue Hoey, on behalf of Leeds Church Institute, there was a similar statement; “Over the last ten years ecumenical activity in Leeds has blossomed...”

These claims are evidenced by the scope, breadth and variety of the 75 plus ecumenically-based projects that are now operating in the Leeds District. In broad terms the projects are tackling challenges around poverty, homelessness, hunger, housing, education, cross-cultural mission, and issues affecting ex-offenders, pregnant women and sex workers. There is also a lot of work focused on students, youth and children. Given this positive picture, what can we learn and what are the life giving ingredients that have given rise to ecumenical mission in Leeds?

Earlier this year, I conducted research based on this question on behalf of Leeds Church Institute. In this research, an ecumenical mission project is defined as a Christian organisation/project/network that includes two or more different Christian denominations or traditions. The findings are based on information gathered from 75 ecumenical mission based projects and ten in-depth interviews. The following summary highlights what these projects considered ‘life-giving ingredients for mission’.

Prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit

During the last 20 years, prayer has been a vital ingredient under girding ecumenical mission across the city. Prayer activity has taken various shapes and is most noticeable recently through the Leeds Lent Prayer Diary and Prayer for Leeds (P4L).

Prayer for Leeds has been building a network of relationships in order to mobilise prayer with a focus on the various spheres of city life such as healthcare, business and education. The main occasions for united prayer have been monthly prayer lunches, 24 hour prayer events and the Global Day of Prayer. Although the prayer gatherings seek to be inclusive, they have been supported predominantly by those from newer Charismatic/Pentecostal churches.

The Leeds Lent Prayer Diary is a resource produced annually to inform and enable prayer for ecumenical

mission and various mission projects. This diary is predominantly used by those in Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist and URC churches. It supports individual’s prayers and is used a resource for shared intercessory prayer in worship services in local churches.

These two focuses for prayer are not the only ones but they do represent prayer intentions with a Leeds-wide ecumenical mission focus.

Vision, Passion and Commitment

During the interviews two of the unspoken and probably most life giving of the ingredients is the vision and the passion of those involved. This was particularly noticeable with those involved with youth and children’s work but not solely; the drive behind Faith in Elderly People and particularly its work and mission with those with dementia was also very evident. Many of the interviews lasted some time because there was a desire to express their heart for their work. It is also noticeable that initial vision and passion not only gave energy to the projects but opened up far more opportunities than were previously envisaged and enabled them to work beyond their reach. In virtually all of the projects it was the vision for the work that encouraged others to want to be part of steering groups and action teams.

Social Action and Evangelism

One of the main characteristics of the ecumenical projects is their emphasis on social need first rather than overt up-front evangelism. This represents a shift in theological thinking as well as in the form of mission. It was not so long ago that such an approach would have been dismissed by evangelicals as compromising the gospel whereas now many who would describe themselves as of an evangelical persuasion see no issue with this. One has only to look at the aims of each organisation to see how meeting a social need is very much to the fore. This is not suggesting that the gospel message is not being shared but as one project leader said this happened more indirectly. Another suggested that the main thrust of ecumenical mission was “social action and then evangelism tacked on, whereas before it was the other way round.”

Relationships

Another striking aspect of the projects is the level of interconnectedness between them stemming from an openness to share information and support one

another. Every one of the ten interviewees said they had links and some level of relationship with either LCCT, Network Leeds, Hope for the Nations, Churches Together Groups and particular churches.

Intercultural and international relationships

In the last ten years, the population of Leeds has become even more multicultural and it is now designated as the second most diverse city in the UK after London. Many of the projects saw the need for stronger relationships between the various nationalities and believed that the credibility of Christian mission depended on it. Hope for the Nations and ADMIN in particular are promoting this. It is encouraging to see the growth of intercultural training being offered in various forms in order to encourage this.

Visibility

People talked about the importance of the visibility of their mission ensuring support and engagement from individuals and churches. Overall, people reported that building a reputation takes time and effort. For example, Hope for the Nations (HFTN) advertised its two main annual events for five years and gathered responses from many of the ethnic churches, but it took longer than this to be more widely recognised. A tipping point came when a report about its work was published and circulated at a key ecumenical event.

Those involved with youth and children's projects felt they had sufficient visibility since most people now were aware of their work. Other groups, including Home for Good and African Diaspora Ministries (ADMIN) would like to see greater development in this area and hoped this would come from networking and partnering with other churches.

Financial and general support

Finance is obviously a very practical ingredient for projects. Just over half of the projects in the Leeds Lent Prayer Diary received initial funding from Leeds Christian Community Trust or Seedbed Christian Community Trust. This is funding that has been provided by Christian philanthropists from outside the city over a period of 15 years. Such funding has not been available to the same extent in the past couple of years.

Some projects reported current problems around finance, for example, Kidz Klub had to stop running one of their buses that picks up children and Sunflower ESOL said their biggest challenge was a lack of finance. On-going finance is considered a challenge and a worry by many.

Looking to the future

Those interviewed identified a number of issues that they hope to address to secure and develop their mission work into the future.

- A desire to see much wider church support rather than just committed individuals. The whole question of the relationship between church congregations and specific ecumenical mission projects is perhaps something that needs to be given more focused attention.
- New funding sources need to be identified and secured; and projects need to learn to work well in a context of increasing uncertainty. It has been suggested that there needs to be a closer relationship between those in business and mission projects, and there has been some evidence of financial support coming from this quarter.
- Many involved with mission in the city are increasingly above the age of 50 and not many from the younger generation are seen to be supporting it. It is important to acknowledge that those above the age of 50 have often great experience and capacity, and that they are an age group that is proportionally over represented in our churches. Nonetheless, it would be good to involve younger adults too.
- Many of the mission initiatives did not set out first and foremost to create an ecumenical project. Rather, they saw a particular need, developed a vision and had a passion in order to fill a gap. Since they were open to receiving help more widely they became ecumenical by default. It is important that there is space and support for such creativity in the future.

Conclusions

It seems that there is hardly an area of city life that is not being covered to some degree. The projects don't just exist in isolation but interconnect meaningfully and purposefully with different networks across the city, with many gaining useful credibility with Leeds City Council and other secular bodies. Theological differences do not obstruct their work and there is a widespread recognition that social need is the first focus with opportunities to share the gospel taken when appropriate and sensitively. There is a widespread recognition of the transformative contribution that each is making to the life of the city and many individuals are supporting them financially or offering voluntarily help to maintain the work.

Key life giving ingredients that are sustaining ecumenical mission in Leeds include:

willingness to start a grassroots project targeting a particular issue or need

seeing social action as the first level of approach in living out and communicating the gospel

developing a clear vision and a passionate commitment to the cause

gaining support by mobilising others and finding sufficient financial support;

generous financial giving from philanthropists;

being open to networking and information sharing with similar organisations in the city

not allowing organisational, denominational or theological differences to obstruct the work

always working at building relationships across the city

recognising the need to work cross-culturally wherever possible

an increasing commitment to sharing in prayer and allowing the Holy Spirit to inspire and guide us finding the way forward

As we look closely at ecumenical mission in Leeds it is clear that there is much for us to take encouragement from.