**What is the Spirit saying to the churches?**

*The United Reformed Church is not here to die, but to be reborn.*

**Reflections from the faith and order committee**

1. **The Spirit-led pilgrimage of the United Reformed Church**
   1. The United Reformed Church has been travelling on a journey guided by the Spirit of God.

1.2 We believe that the Spirit inspired our forebears to recognise that the state has no authority to legislate for the worship and practice of the Church. In England and Wales some 2,000 ministers chose in 1662 to be excluded from the established Church and from public office rather than conform to state legislation in matters of religious practice. Throughout these lands meeting houses and chapels were built, where Dissenting congregations worshipped with the freedom which they believed was their God-given duty and privilege.

1.3 We believe that the Spirit led us to recognise the role of women in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. We have just celebrated the 100th anniversary of Constance Coltman's ordination in the Congregational Union of England and Wales.

1 .4 We believe that the Spirit called Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Churches of Christ to come together in the United Reformed Church. As a united Church we have heard God's calling to continue to work for the unity of the wider Church even at the cost of our own traditions and institutions.

1. **What is the Spirit saying to our Church today?**

2.1 The Spirit is leading us to a renewal of faith in God, in which we can let go of the guilt and burdens that weigh us down, and be open to God's grace to guide us. The Spirit is leading us to trust that God holds the future, even when the future appears uncertain.

2.2 We believe that the Spirit is calling us to reaffirm our ecumenical commitment; to understand more clearly, and so regain greater confidence in, the central features of our own Reformed tradition; and to commit ourselves to a life of radical discipleship, directed towards God's mission in the world.

2.3 We offer six affirmations, which point us to our faith in God and the renewal of the life of the URC, believing that as we put our trust more deeply in God this Church will be reborn. These affirmations build on URC's *Basis of Union* and the resources offered in Vision 2020. Each of these is stated briefly and then expanded, to include particular aspects of our life that we celebrate and some of the possibilities and challenges before us.

2.4 We offer no easy answers. But we do offer a wealth of areas of URC life that can be celebrated, and possibilities and challenges for the future. We affirm both the characteristics of being united and Reformed that shape the URC's life and the huge diversity in which these characteristics are lived out in each place. We invite our local churches to ask themselves 'What is the Spirit saying to the churches?' and to see what can be celebrated, and where the possibilities and challenges lie for each congregation. We hope that the examples we outline will act as a trigger for thinking about many other areas.

**3. God is the generous gift-giver**

**3.1 God's gifts are poured out in creation, in Jesus and in the Spirit.**

**3.2 The Church's first response to God is the offering of worship. The URC celebrates the centrality and joy of worship as a living encounter with God, in which God is known and lives are transformed, and out of which people share in God's transforming action in the world.**

**3.3 We celebrate:**

3.3.1 The offering of worship. Worship centres on the opening of the Word and the breaking of the bread, offered in a range of ways, as the congregation feels led, building on the wide range of approaches to worship today. Worship draws people in to the mystery of the holy, receiving generously from the wellspring of God's love. Worship is the starting point for mission, as people participate in God's mission to the world, new people are welcomed, baptism is offered and different ways of worship are explored.

3.3.2 These different ways of worshipping are given life through a valuable range of initiatives, including Fresh Expressions, Messy Church and cafe-style church; the 'Worshipping God' booklet; TLS training, now being updated because of the Missional Discipleship work; and the URC Daily Devotions, originally produced by Northern and North Western Synods.

**3.4 New possibilities and challenges**

3.4.1 Sharing innovative and creative patterns of worshipping across the churches.

3.4.2 Living out our ecumenical commitment by receiving further the gifts of spirituality and worship offered by our brothers and sisters in Christ from different traditions.

3.4.3 Developing the reflection on the nature of worship in a changing and increasingly secular world e.g. in the Theology of Worship group developed by the West Midlands Synod Training Officer.

**4. God is our source, our guide, our goal**

**4.1 We celebrate the gifts and treasures of the Reformed tradition, acknowledging the rootedness in a theological heritage that goes back to the early Church, and open to the leading of the Spirit in new ways today, as the Spirit led our Reformed ancestors in their cultures and contexts.**

**4.2 We celebrate:**

4.2.1 The conciliar nature of the URC, in which it is affirmed that the Holy Spirit speaks through each person, gathered in the councils of the local church, the regional and national synods and the General Assembly, is a gift of our tradition.

4.2.2 The 500th Anniversary celebration of the Reformation in 2017 reminded us of our heritage and of the courage and commitment of those who went before us.

**4.3 New possibilities and challenges**

4.3.1 Deepening our knowledge of this Reformed tradition equips the Church to be more faithful in contemporary opportunities for mission. There is a need for the councils to work more closely together and the local churches to feel more affirmed and supported by the wider councils.

4.3.2 In 2017 the commemoration of the Reformation has been an important occasion to focus particularly on those aspects of our identity that belong to our Reformed heritage.

**5. God leads people into truth**

**5.1 In the power of the Holy Spirit, truth is received in many ways, through Scripture and the tradition of the Church, through the testing of personal experience, through the discernment of the gathered people of God and through wrestling deeply with issues of the day.**

**5.2 We celebrate:**

5.2.1 The drawing together of Scripture, tradition and experience that are God's gift to this Church (as seen in the URC's founding document 'A Statement Concerning the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church' - see URC website).

5.2.2 The variety of ways of studying and interpreting Scripture. Growing in knowledge and understanding of Scripture helps to articulate the faith in relation to tradition and experience and to give confidence to God's people to speak of the faith in a changing world.

5.2.3 The times we have stood for truth against the prevailing culture, as in our Dissenting history, and the new understandings and initiatives to which we have been led.

**5.3 New possibilities and challenges**

5.3.1 Renewed study of 'A Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church', (building on the study guide 'What is the United Reformed Church?' which can be found on the URC website) so that congregations and members are aware of the foundations of this particular tradition of the Church and what these traditions still offer this Church and the world in which this Church is set.

5.3.2 Our discussions about the marriage of same-sex couples have highlighted the multiplicity of interpretations of Scripture. The faith and order committee is initiating a study of the different ways in which we value the Bible in this Church and how these different approaches can be developed further.

5.3.3 Engaging in dialogue with science, responding to the 'new atheism' and our increasingly secular culture.

5.3.4 The way in which the URC is led into prophetic truth in terms of our social and political witness.

**6. God in Trinity draws people into a relationship of love**

**6.1 We affirm the value of the local church as the place in which God's love is known and lived out. The URC celebrates the w hole people of God, each one, young and old, with his or her own gifting from the Spirit, each one given voice by the Holy Spirit.**

**6.2 We celebrate:**

6.2.1 There are many good news stories across local churches, particularly as seen in the recent 'It Just Works' consultation, the valuable work of Pilots, the Youth Assembly, our ministry among and with children and young people, and the huge range of work that takes place with older people.

6.2.2 Elders are a particular gift to the United Reformed church, set aside in each congregation for spiritual leadership and pastoral care.

6.2.3 Ministers of Word and Sacraments, entrusted with oversight and inspiration of each congregation, have a particular role in leadership.

**6.3 New possibilities and challenges**

6.3.1 The proposed focus on Missional Discipleship is being developed to help people to grow in the knowledge of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to reach out to people in a spiritually hungry world.

6.3.2 Discovering new ways of sharing good news stories and examples of good practice more widely for mutual encouragement, developing the sharing of stories from the recent consultation (http://thingsthatwork.urc.org.uk/), in the URC's *Reform* magazine, on the URC website and social media platforms.

6.3.3 To support the local church, further work is being undertaken by the faith and order committee on the nature of membership. The report 'What Is the Spirit Saying to the Churches?' offered study material on the role of the Church Meeting.

6.3.4 The Authorised Elders paper approved by the 2016 General Assembly looks at affirming and consolidating the role of elders, particularly regarding a new proposal about authorising elders to preside at Holy Communion and bringing forward a suggestion for the development of team non-stipendiary ministry.

6.3.5 The URC's ministries committee is working on a variety of issues about ministry and the pressures faced by both ministers and congregations in view of the way in which ministers are spread more thinly.

**7. God reshapes the Church to meet the challenge of different contexts and cultures**

**7.1 We celebrate the 'risk-taking' nature of our obedience to the Spirit across our history and in our present social and political stances.**

**7.2 We celebrate:**

7.2.1 The Church's work with people on the margins evident in the amazing variety of work undertaken by local churches, with foodbanks, homeless people, refugees and a host of other initiatives.

7.2.2 This is matched by the wider URC's engagement through the crcw programme, racial justice and intercultural ministry, the work of Church and society and the Joint Public Issues Team and the development of interfaith work.

**7.3 New possibilities and challenges**

7.3.1 Working to welcome and give homes to refugees; exploring how our buildings can become places of hospitality for people of other faiths and others who seek to build community.

7.3.2 Increasing our solidarity with those who are forced into increasing poverty through changes in economic policy; becoming active in creating alternatives to a consumerist culture that rewards the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

**8. God draws people to be one, offering reconciliation in a broken world**

**8.1 We celebrate the bold steps taken to bring this Church into being through uniting different traditions of the Church and we affirm that our calling is to continue to witness to unity**

**8.2 We celebrate:**

8.2.1 The 400 Local Ecumenical Partnerships in which the URC is involved; the many Churches Together groups, Fresh Expressions of Church and pioneer initiatives in which Christians of many traditions work together.

8.2.2 The URC's participation in the national and international ecumenical bodies, from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe to the World Council of Churches. Our engagement in dialogues with the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales and our role in the conversations just beginning between the Anglican Communion and the World Communion *of* Reformed Churches.

8.2.3 The synod and URC-wide links with Churches across the world; from our long-standing covenant with the Church of the Palatinate in Germany, our links with the Waldensian Church in Italy to the memorandum of understanding recently signed between ourselves and the Presbyterian Church of Korea.

**8.3 New possibilities and challenges**

8.3.1 Taking further the challenges in the World Council of Churches' report The Church: Towards a common vision, about ministry and authority, to see where God might be yet leading us to call Churches to visible organic unity. The URC's response to this report will be presented to the 2016 General Assembly.

8.3.2 Looking at the rich opportunities offered by 'Receptive Ecumenism', a theme initiated by theology staff at Durham University (see their website for further details) to look at what Churches can positively receive from each other.

8.3.3 Maintaining a balance between our commitment to unity, especially in local ecumenical partnerships, and our characteristics as a Reformed Church.

8.3.4 Renewing the URC's bold commitment to call the Churches to unity, in each place, and across the nations, despite the difficulties along the way.

8.3.5 Work on 'The New Frameworks for Local Ecumenism', currently being undertaken in England, offers an opportunity to look at new ways at local ecumenical engagement with new as well as traditional partners.

1. **Summary**

9.1 We know that God has spoken to our forebears, but now we long to hear the voice of the Spirit for ourselves. The faith and order committee brought this aspect of its work to Assembly, convinced that as a Church we do need to hear the Spirit speak. We believe that discussions around the theme 'What is the Spirit saying to the churches?' have encouraged our people to hear the Spirit's voice and will continue to do so.

**A prayer for the United Reformed Church**

Speak Holy Spirit, speak.

Speak like a gentle breeze comforting us in our fearfulness;

Speak like a mighty gale to shake us out of false security;

Speak like a dove to bring peace in our hearts, amongst our people, in this world.

*The faith and order committee*

*Spring 2016*

**Appendix**

1. **Background**
   1. The booklet 'What Is the Spirit Saying to the Churches?' was drawn up by the faith and order committee after three years of reflection and consideration, presented to the 2014 General Assembly and circulated for discussion to the synods and churches. 138 responses were received from individuals, churches, groups of churches, and synods.
   2. The responses indicated that many of the congregations within the URC, of different sizes and across a broad geographical and theological range, both value our traditions and are open to the voice of the Spirit in their midst. These responses were discussed by the faith and order committee, who brought the first draft of its report to Mission Council in November 201 5. This draft received its final shaping at the faith and order meeting in March 2016.
2. **Story of the booklet and the response**
   1. The booklet looked realistically at the numerical decline of the URC in recent years, noting that if there were easy answers to be had, these would have already been discovered. Detailed work was offered on URC identity, including the significance of being united and being Reformed. The Church's gift of conciliarity was looked at, in particular regard to the Church Meeting. Five scenarios were offered as a device to stimulate conversation, outlining possible ecumenical ways forward.
   2. Many detailed and helpful responses were offered to the booklet. People indicated happiness that the question 'What is the Spirit saying to the churches?' was being put before the Church. In some places there was a greater focus on the call to discern and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other places, there was a greater focus on the scenarios. It was clear that no one scenario was favoured to the exclusion of all others.
   3. The breadth of response was of value: it demonstrated the multifaceted way in which the Spirit speaks thro ugh the churches and the wide range of thinking about the future of the URC. It also pointed to the need to regain confidence in this particular tradition of the Church, in God's purpose for this Church, and in what this Church has to offer the world.