

Synod Moderators' report

Wisdom in liminal times

Synod Moderators

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Ruth Whitehead moderator@urcsouthwest.org.uk
Action required	Discussion. Discussion questions for the whole denomination, especially in local pastorates.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	In these very difficult times, the report is offered to the General Assembly and to local churches <ul style="list-style-type: none">• to explore the idea of liminal (between) times• to help to navigate a way forward for the church• to give local churches courage and hope for the future• to find renewed trust in God's future.
Main points	In liminal times we need to <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be prepared to wait• Deepen our communal discernment• Shape our institutional memory• Clarify our purpose• See the way forward emerge.
Previous relevant documents	Previous Synod Moderators' reports to General Assembly.
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Moderators and some ministers in local churches.

Summary of impact

Financial	No direct impact from this report.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	The thinking of this report could be explored in local pastorates with ecumenical partners.

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When the Synod Moderators' report for General Assembly 2020 was being finalised, we were just beginning to hear of Covid-19 cases spreading in the UK. There was a discussion about whether we should mention this in the report or not, as we wondered whether it would still seem relevant by then. With hindsight, the pandemic was the defining event of 2020. It has seemed to many of us to be like a lens, magnifying and highlighting the faults and fissures that already existed in the URC, and also showing up with clarity the strength of faith which still exists.

There can be little doubt that the virus has meant that we cannot carry on doing the same things in the same way. For some churches this has accelerated a move towards closure. For others, new technology has been embraced at a speed we could not have anticipated. For all churches there has been plenty of time to reflect on how we are meant to exist and serve and glorify God in 2021 and beyond. The decay of the old order and the emergence of the new is happening at dizzying speed. These are what are sometimes called 'liminal times' – when old securities are ebbing away and new structures have not yet emerged. Liminal times are disorientating, difficult and downright scary.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan spiritual writer, describes liminal space in this way.

...a unique position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to entrust and wait, you will run...anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.

The Bible is full of stories of liminal times – of people who wander in the desert to find the presence of God and the place where they must settle – Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, God's people returning from Babylon ... all waited and wandered and wondered, until God's way into the future was clear to them. We cannot hear the story of the life of Jesus without recognising, as the second order of communion in 'Worship from the URC' states, that God gave us Jesus 'To be born and to grow up in difficult times when there was little peace'.

Our celebrations of Easter would not be complete without Holy Saturday – when the world holds its breath between death on Good Friday and resurrection on Easter Sunday.

A liminal time is not a time for problem-solving or frantic activity. But that doesn't mean there is nothing for us to do.

Susan Beaumont, a Baptist minister in the US and consultant in religious organisational life, states that:

During liminal seasons it is important to revisit and shape the important vocational questions of the congregation: Who are we? Who are we here to serve? What is God calling us to do or become? What are our most important priorities and how might our priorities be shifting in this season?

As we recognise and live through liminal times we can return to the question of who we are in many ways, and perhaps as we prepare for the 50th anniversary of the formation of the URC in 2022 it is a particularly good time to remind ourselves who we were then,

what our lasting principles of faith are, and what those principles teach us about the church we need to be in 2022 and beyond.

If we are to navigate these liminal times, Susan Beaumont points out that we will need to:

1. Hold steady and be **prepared to wait** for the way forward to emerge. This is not a time for problem-solving. But this doesn't mean we do nothing – in the meantime we can.
2. **Deepen our communal discernment** about what God would have us do.
3. Shape our institutional memory, telling our story.
4. **Clarify our purpose**, asking who we are, who we serve, and what God is calling us to be next.
5. Be ready to **see the way forward emerge** out of the chaos of the passing of the old ways.

The following stories are anonymised because in a sense they could be many people's stories, many churches will 'see' themselves in these stories of churches and ministers in our synods making 'sense' of who, where and what they are.

Lived examples

Being prepared to wait

1. During the days of the first lockdown, one minister seized the opportunity to work alongside a village support group to deliver food and prescriptions for the most vulnerable residents. From this grew a five-minute doorstep Bible study, the three-minute prayer, as well as regular telephone conversations on the doorstep with those who struggle with mobility issues.

There has been a broader recognition of God being present within the community and indeed in the world around us. Lives have changed as people have reconnected and strengthened their faith in God and recognised God walking beside them.

2. Another church has struggled during this time. Lack of technological capacity or up-to-date devices / software among older members meant online worship wouldn't work or would be exclusive. They have managed only two services in church since last March. Some have been very appreciative of receiving worship material by email / post, and the Secretary has mentioned that it has been good to have more space to reflect at home, rather than attend services in church where she has various responsibilities to think about. The Elders lacked technological capacity to hold virtual Elders' Meetings earlier on but the last three Elders' Meetings have been held virtually.

Church is about the people rather than the buildings, and buildings can become a burden. However, not only older church members have missed meeting together for public worship; the twice weekly coffee mornings have been much missed by customers who don't attend church and have been struggling with loneliness.

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More positively, the number of people requesting the fortnightly Prayer Chain has increased significantly. Elders have grown in the ministry of pastoral care, keeping in contact regularly by phone. This has been particularly appreciated by those living alone.

Deepening our communal discernment

1. For one minister, a 'mixed economy' approach makes most sense in future, where physical presence and buildings are required in some instances. Buildings are less important to those who have digital capacity, and some could be let go to release space and finance for more pioneer ministries engaging with the unchurched, and reaching out to communities through projects including food banks, debt advice etc (ideally carried out ecumenically).

The balance between the pastoral and the missional is difficult to strike. In the past, the church has almost definitely focused too much on the pastoral and been more inward-looking. However, there remains a place for the more traditional pastoral model of church, typically associated with a building, alongside a pioneering missional approach. If this could be linked with release of funds for new pioneer ministries / CRCW work in the area, that might be an encouragement.

2. The churches who have faced their own liminal times were prepared to struggle, embrace change and flourish. They have been the ones who have set time aside to pray, to tell the story of the church and the community in which they are set. Context has always been paramount. It has been important and necessary for the local church to identify and root itself in scripture. Are we like any of the 'early' churches? Are we rural, suburban or urban? Who is our community and mission field? How do we relate to them? Do we need a building of our own to be a Christian presence here? Can we share a base – the local pub, the library, the health centre, online church?

Shaping our institutional memory

1. There has been lots of talking, sharing, story-telling and honesty, acknowledging pain, fear and vulnerability. Praying that God will hold us through the change, and the Holy Spirit will guide us. Having the courage and willingness to hear how others see us and being willing to connect in new ways.

Relationships and trust matter and must form the bedrock of how we approach others. Our language needs to be understood and not jargon-filled, and we have to honour the stories of others and be willing to journey alongside them. How do we see ourselves, how do others see us - particularly the local community? Use biblical stories to root us in exploring this – Jesus crossing the sea of Galilee. The challenge of crossing that sea, storms, being blown off course. What was the land of the Gerasenes like, what was their culture? How do we feel that moving to something and somewhere that feels challenging and uncomfortable teaches us connection with life on the margins and shows us Jesus' scandalous table fellowship?

Clarifying our purpose

1. For one church, the whole experience of the last year has brought to a head the need to look carefully at the leadership team and the need for new blood and to look very carefully about what they do in the future. The leadership team is,

therefore, inviting new people to the next meeting to talk about the future way forward for the church.

2. The café which is our main form of community outreach has been closed for most of the year, and its future is a little bit in doubt. Worship has been on podcasts and they will need to continue; meetings have been on Zoom and Teams including Boys Brigade, and that needs to be looked at going forward. We continue to seek what God is calling us to do in the 'new normal'.
3. One online synod meeting grew into a two week 'Festival of Tents', a virtual fortnight-long Greenbelt-style Festival with music, talks, prayers, discussion, interviews with open Q&A sessions afterwards. A lasting legacy of that has been 9am prayers via Zoom every weekday, using a variety of liturgies – building a community of prayer online in a daily rhythm which has come to mean so much to us during the varying degrees of pandemic restrictions.

Seeing the way forward emerge

1. A united Church had been warned by their circuit that they were reducing the number of stipendiary ministers, and that when their minister retired in 2021 he would not be replaced – there was simply not enough money in the circuit funds to pay a Methodist minister or to afford the M&M payments expected if a URC minister was in post. The church was facing the prospect of receiving very part-time cover from a minister who would not live in the village.

At the same time, a Baptist regional minister was in touch with a couple who were feeling called by God to missional listening in the town – but property is much more expensive than they had hoped. The church and circuit are now exploring whether the couple can live in the manse in the town, engage in missional listening, and help the church to move from a model of the faithful few looked after by the minister to become a church reaching out to their town with love and hope. Some of the church members have warmed to this immediately, but others are struggling to see what they will 'receive' from having the couple living in the manse who won't even lead worship for them every week.

2. One minister observes: in the pain of it all, that time between Good Friday and Easter Day – that liminal time – was an uncomfortable and challenging place, but a legitimate place to be. In all the situations we faced together, our Good Friday lasted some considerable time and the dawn of Easter Day when it came, although exciting and energising, we were left as the women at the tomb as recorded in Mark's gospel; "*So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid*". The fear we faced was what we now do with this transformed situation. It was for a while, as if we had been disabled by the enormity of the transformation itself, hence the terror and amazement.

Questions for discussion in local churches

1. Being prepared to wait
If liminal spaces are places where we have left what we know and haven't arrived at something new, who or what does God give us to rely on in these times?

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2. Deepening our communal discernment
What do you think God is saying to you in these liminal times? How can you share those things with others to discern what God is saying to your church?
3. Shaping our institutional memory
Were there particular scripture readings that kept you going in the last 18 months and if so, can you say what it was about them that strengthened you?
4. Clarifying our purpose
Who missed us while our building was empty? Have we done new things which build God's kingdom? What is the essential work God has given this church?
5. Seeing the way forward emerge
As you move from what has been to what will emerge, what will you take with you and what will you leave behind (practical things like buildings, but also habits, attitudes and stories)? Are there new partnerships to which you are now being called?

Personalia

Since the last General Assembly report, Andrew Prasad has retired and David Pickering and Jackie Embrey have each returned to ministry in a local pastorate. We have welcomed Bridget Banks, George Watt and Geoff Felton, and with Paul Whittle's move to the National Synod of Scotland, we look forward to welcoming Lythan Nevard as a new colleague in Eastern Synod.