

- It is recognised that we are already working in closer consultation, primarily with our Baptist and Church of England partners and their interfaith networks.
- The Jewish Fund has now become the Interfaith Fund with a focus on providing local grants.
- The URC is now a full member of the Interfaith Network.

4.11 There is a wide range of interfaith work taking place at local level, of which the following are only a few examples. The IFRRG was pleased to hold one of its meetings at the London Interfaith Centre, where last year the Revd Dr John Parry, a URC minister, was appointed co-director. Earlier this year, Grassroots Luton celebrated its 25th anniversary. Grassroots works to empower Luton's faith and cultural communities. It supports community work in the Beech Hill Bury Park area of Luton through the ministry of Karen Campbell who is the Church-related Community Worker based there. In Blackburn, Mal Breeze, a Church-related Community Worker, is working with two local churches situated in areas with high Asian populations. Mal reaches out to local mosques and other places of worship to forge closer links. Although misunderstandings and suspicions inevitably exist, the situation is far from the picture of 'divided communities' portrayed by the *Panorama* episode 'White Fright: Divided Britain', which aired in January 2018.

Response to the 2016 General Assembly Resolution 37 on Israel/Palestine

4.12 The mission committee set up the Israel/Palestine task group, bringing together a team of people with considerable experience of the subject. The Revd Brian Jolly was appointed as the group's convenor. Other members included the Revd David Tatem and the Revd Philip Brooks (past and present URC secretaries for ecumenical and interfaith relations), Grace Pengelly (URC Secretary for Church and Society from January 2016 to July 2017), John Davey, Andy Lie, the Revd Sally Thomas and Derek Estill (General Assembly Moderator-Elect). The task group met several times to listen to a wide range of knowledgeable and interested parties, to explore the URC's existing active involvement with Israel/Palestine and to consider carefully how Resolution 37 might be implemented. The group's report and recommendations were discussed and approved at the February 2018 meeting of the mission committee.

4.13 From the outset, the task group agreed that the key words in the Assembly resolution were 'explore and develop ... in order to enable synods, local churches and individuals to become more aware and respond'. It was noted that because of the nature of the polity of the URC, it is difficult to make statements from the denomination. This led to a focus on how we might help raise awareness so that as a denomination we can promote a dialogue which will add to peace initiatives. Taking into account the intensely polarised nature of the debate around Israel/Palestine, the following programme was agreed by the mission committee with the request for the Israel/Palestine task group to oversee its implementation.

4.13.1 The mission committee welcomed the inclusion in the 2018 General Assembly of an interfaith panel from the three Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, modelling positive interfaith dialogue and engagement.

4.13.2 '12 Faces of Hope' – This year's General Assembly displays the World Council of Churches (WCC) exhibition '12 Faces of Hope', which launched in 2017 coinciding with the 50-year mark of the Six-Day War and the resulting occupation in Palestine. The exhibition offers 12, individual, short narratives written by people from different backgrounds, sharing their hopes for justice and peace in the Holy Land. The exhibition is now available to synods and local churches to use and display as a focus for discussion. It can be booked by contacting the Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations.

Mission

- 4.13.3 Pilgrimage – In June 2017, the National Coalition of Christian Organisations in Palestine issued an open letter to the WCC with a desperate plea for support from Churches across the world. Within the letter was an appeal for Christians to visit Palestine and actively see the situation on the ground.⁴ One of the criticisms of most pilgrimages is that they are conducted almost in the way of a biblical Disney tour, with tour operators and guides airbrushing out the suffering and injustice of those people trapped in the day to day realities of life in the region. The URC gave financial support to the Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine (FODIP) for the production of a short film entitled ‘Walking the Tightrope’ which highlights this issue. The DVD provides an invaluable way of preparing anyone who might be considering a pilgrimage.
- 4.13.4 Denominational educational visit – General Assembly Moderators normally undertake an overseas visit as part of their term in office. Derek Estill has chosen to go to Israel and Palestine, but in planning this trip he is committed to ensuring that it should have benefit for the wider denomination. Given that Resolution 37 originated in three synods, it is hoped that there would be interest amongst the synods in sending a representative to take part in the Moderator’s planned visit, which will take place during 2019. URC Youth are very keen to be involved and there is the intention to identify at least one young adult to take part. This visit will require funding support and it is suggested that selected delegates should contribute by raising some of the money locally, as well as seeking support from the URC’s Interfaith Fund. It is hoped that their synods might also consider offering a contribution.
- 4.13.5 Study guide – With the impetus of a denomination-wide visit to Israel and Palestine, the task group has agreed to identify as well as write study material to be made available pre- and post-visit.
- 4.13.6 The denominational visit is intended to raise awareness within our synods and local churches. To qualify as a delegate, participants would be expected to engage with the study material, ideally alongside local synod and church groups. They will be asked to commit to feeding back to the wider Church on the learning experience of their visit. The aim is that the build up to the visit and the subsequent debriefing after it will be invaluable in raising awareness. As a result, more people can be equipped to engage with the issues around Israel and Palestine.
- 4.13.7 Resource list – A list of helpful resources has been produced with the aim of providing accessible information, so that local churches and synods are better able to educate themselves about the issues involved. This list will be particularly useful for those people engaging with the study guide.
- 4.13.8 Theology of the land – The recent decision by President Trump to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel significantly adds to the difficulties of finding a two-state solution. It would seem good timing to encourage some in-depth reflection about the theology of the land itself and explore how this could be carried out with ecumenical partners. Such ideas as ‘two states, one homeland’ or ‘shared land theology’ could be considered.

⁴ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/christian-organizations-in-palestine-release-open-letter> (2017 Open Letter from National Coalition of Christian Organizations in Palestine)