

Mission Council round-up: May 2017

All Mission Council papers are available online.

Day One: Friday 12 May 2017

Mission Council begun with opening worship. Following opening worship, in which the Revd Kevin Watson, Moderator of General Assembly, preached, Mission Council dealt with some matters of basic administration – including the appointment of Andy Braunston as minutes secretary, the introduction of all new members, acceptance of the minutes from the last meeting of Mission Council in October 2016 and John Proctor, General Secretary, noted that the Revd Bernard Thorogood, former General Secretary (1980-1992) would turn 90 ‘in a few weeks’ time’ and birthday greetings were to be sent to him from Mission Council.

Paper X1: The Fourth Scottish Church Census

The Revd Dr David Pickering, moderator of the National Synod of Scotland, shared with Mission Council some key outcomes for the URC of the 2016 Scottish Census of Churches, the results of which were published in April 2017.

The census shows that church attendance among all denominations over halved between 1984 and 2016 – a trend more than reflected in figures showing that URC membership fell by 60% to 56,000 in this period. During the same period, older people roughly doubled as a proportion of the congregation while the number of children roughly halved.

Average congregations in Scotland in 2016 were 105, but, while no figure was given for URC congregations, David Pickering noted he ‘had yet to see a congregation of 105 in a Scottish URC.’ Yet he counseled against despair and pointed to more positive indicators among the trends. Fresh Expressions are growing, he reported, as are churches offering mid-week services, independent and evangelical churches and those with numbers swelled by immigrant attendees. Some 65% of churches made environmental advocacy their concern – and Dr Pickering noted that the 400th Eco Congregation had just been announced in Scotland.

Dr Pickering told Mission Council how *The Sunday Herald* newspaper recently reported on ‘Christianity in crisis in Scotland’, but how the newspaper also quoted him as saying: ‘It is a crisis and an opportunity. The Scottish Church Census doesn’t make terribly happy reading. But it also presents a new opportunity for the church to portray the love of God and the good news of Jesus in a new way for a new generation. That’s an opportunity and a challenge for us.’

He asked Mission Council to consider what the census findings about age, size, demographics and other trends tell us and how the Church should respond. He shared some recent suggestions from ordinands at Scottish College, which included: 'Regaining our nerve', 'making small beginnings', and 'opening up new modes of ministry.'

Paper F1: 'The Wider Fold' and Paper F2: The future of membership

Papers F1 and F2 on church membership were presented by the Revd Elizabeth Welch on behalf of the faith and order committee. Full discussion was held on both and adjourned until later sessions of Mission Council. Paper F1 was referred to a group for rewording.

Paper I10: The 2017 General Election

Grace Pengelly, Secretary for Church and Society, presented Paper I10, on the forthcoming General Election, noting the surprise all felt that it had been called!

Ms Pengelly said: 'It's time to think of our role as citizens – what this General Elections means for the future of the UK.' Acknowledging significant levels of voter fatigue, she added that she – and the Joint Public Issues Team – did want people to engage with the election and its many issues, and not just Brexit. Ms Pengelly outlined three issues which JPIT are particularly keen to highlight: UK poverty and how we can challenge politicians to be more ambitious in their response to it; migration – specifically how we treat refugees and asylum seekers; and finally, how can we encourage voters to focus on the UK's role in the world.

Ms Pengelly asked Christians to prayerfully reflect on these political issues, and to vote, concluding with the strong and simple message: 'Think, pray and vote.'

Paper H1: Thinking further about call

Paper H1, 'Thinking further about call' was presented by the Revd Paul Whittle, in his capacity as convenor of the ministries committee. The paper continued the thinking on call which emerged from the October 2016 Mission Council, when the ministries committee was asked to bring proposals for a reworked practice of call; Paper H1 is still a working paper, outlining a suggested direction.

Mr Whittle began his presentation by saying that call happens in different ways; adding that while he likes how the URC practises call, it's not the only way. He says that many across the denomination

think that the URC should start looking at call in a different way – to include how best ministers can be deployed to encourage mission. Mr Whittle said that the direction of travel favoured by the ministries committee was to move the ‘responsibilities of call’ from the Church Meeting(s) to synod, so that synod (or an intermediate body or committee to which the synod chooses to delegate to) is the calling group.

Following the Mr Whittle’s presentation there was a lengthy discussion on the floor, with some asking if the implication was that calling group will replace the Church Meeting, and others if it was just a way to persuade local churches to organise as clusters. While confirming that congregations would still have a role in the proposed ‘calling groups’, Mr Whittle said the paper was ‘about practicalities and realities’ and encouraging ‘churches to cluster and do things in different ways’, adding that ‘some churches need to cluster ... often there are not a lot of other options.’ He stressed his belief that Paper H1 is a practical and theological response to reality: ‘If our theology is not practical ... then I wonder what is wrong with our theology ...’.

The Revd Peter Meek, moderator of East Midlands Synod and member of the ministries committee, said: ‘We need to call ministers in a new way that allows us to be flexible and allows us to serve the churches. And leaving Church Meetings to make the decision to issue a call, may not, paradoxically, be in the best interests of the churches. We’re looking for a way to issue call that is both rewarding to ministers and beneficial to churches – and we cannot do this now.’ He added: ‘Now lots of ministers are not called by Church Meeting – for example synod moderators, those working in our colleges this is not a dramatic change – simply about how we incorporate more of what we are already doing in this sphere.’

Before the resolutions were put for decision, Mr Whittle confirmed that the final decision on this would go to General Assembly and this was a step on the way, checking in with Mission Council that the work is developing in an acceptable way. The three resolutions passed, recognising disagreement.

Paper M3: Youth representation in councils of the Church

This short paper took forward the decision of the 2016 General Assembly to provide more flexible and practical ways of arranging youth representation in the councils of the Church. As a change to the Structure of the URC, this matter had been referred to all the synods during the winter, and none of them had objected to its progress. Requiring a two-thirds majority at Mission Council to secure final approval, the resolution was passed unanimously and now takes immediate effect.

Paper Z1: Where is God calling the URC?

Twelve URC synod moderators came on stage on Friday evening to present paper Z1, asking members of Mission Council to discuss decluttering the Church and where God is calling the URC. Members of Mission Council then split into discussion groups and will feedback in a later session.

Day Two: Saturday 13 May 2017

Paper B1: Commitment to God's creation

Presenting Paper B1, Dan Morrell, Youth Assembly Moderator, said: 'Tackling climate change is a big issue for those of URC Youth age. We need to demonstrate to the wider church and world that we care. Climate is changing so let's change ourselves, because we must.'

The paper was warmly received by Mission Council. It was reported that some churches have joined the Big Church Switch as a result of it.

Asked what specific luxuries the URC might sacrifice, Mr Morrell offered the example of using environmental criteria when selecting venues for meetings. It was suggested that the assembly arrangements committee be encouraged to book venues on these principles.

Hannah Jones, Youth Assembly Moderator Elect, answered a question about the contribution of meat production to climate change, saying that having one vegetarian day a week made a big difference.

The paper was presented with one amendment: removing the phrase 'as is also indicated in the Environmental Policy' in paragraph 11.

An amendment to resolution C was agreed by Mission Council: the phrase 'Mission Council instructs URC Youth Executive to work' is to be replaced with 'Mission Council instructs mission committee and communications committee to work collaboratively with URC Youth Executive to work...'

The three resolutions related to paper B1 were passed by consensus.

Paper J1: Current List of Committees and Representatives

Carol Rogers presented Paper J1 on behalf of the nominations committee, with the addition of the Revd Steve Faber as a second JPIT representative. The three resolutions relating to the paper were

passed by consensus, and the Revd Peter Meek was greeted by Mission Council as he went forward to an extended term of service as Synod Moderator in the East Midlands.

Paper J2: Supplementary Report

Carol Rogers then presented Paper J2 as a supplement to J1. The Moderator Alan Yates thanked Mrs Rogers for four years of sterling service as secretary of the committee.

Paper M5: Updating Nominations Committee rubrics

A resolution to update the rubrics of the Nominations Committee as set out in Paper M5 (as amended on the order paper) of Mission Council May 2017 was passed by consensus.

Paper M4: Law and Polity Advisory Group

Mission Council voted by majority on two resolutions to amend the Structure of the URC and the Rules of Procedure – in order to update and clarify the Church’s appeals procedure as set out in Paper M5.

Speaking for the Law and Polity Advisory Group, which brought the resolution, the Revd Michael Hopkins, proposing the resolution on behalf of the group (with the General Secretary acting as clerk for this item), said: ‘This update does not involve major changes of principle, but rather spells out things that have perhaps been implicit. We want to be helpful to everyone, fair to everyone, transparent to everyone. We still do not have perfect Rules of Procedure. But this change to the Rules is not set in stone – it can be changed again by a single vote of Mission Council.’

The changes had already received first approval at the July 2016 General Assembly and were then referred to the Synods before being brought to Mission Council for final approval.

Paper H2: Ministries Committee Deployment Formula

Presenting Paper H2 on behalf of the ministries committee, the Revd Paul Whittle explained that targets for the number of stipendiary ministers were introduced in 1979 so that deployment would be arranged more fairly among synods. He noted that they are only targets and they allow for flexibility. ‘We try to keep close to those targets,’ he said, ‘but ministers have the awkward habit of

following the Spirit of God.’ The present business, however, was to make sure that the targets are planned as clearly and constructively as possible.

In 2016, Mr Whittle recalled, at General Assembly ministries committee proposed removing the population element from the formula for deciding targets. The two alternative resolutions relating to Paper H2 therefore offer a straight choice: to remove the population element from the formula (resolution A) so that targets would depend only on the URC’s own numbers of members and congregations, or effectively revert to the status quo (resolution B), in which the total population of the area served by a synod would also be a factor. He commended resolution A but said the most important thing was to make a decision and move on.

Comments from members of Mission Council included the observation that simpler formulae are less time consuming and easier to understand and to trust. This would be an opportunity to act on the principle of ‘decluttering’ discussed in an earlier session.

One concern expressed was that removing the population element from the formula would disenfranchise more remote locations. It was pointed out that resolution B would mean a significant reduction in Scotland’s long-term target, from 14 ministers to 12.

Mission Council first determined which resolution was to be put, deciding, in a majority vote, on resolution A. That resolution was then passed by large majority.

Paper M3: Youth representation in councils of the Church

John Proctor, General Secretary of the URC, presented Paper M3, which proposed more flexible and practical criteria for the representation of URC Youth in Synod meetings and General Assembly. Having already been agreed at the Southport General Assembly in 2016, and been before all the Synods, it was now given unanimous final approval, and becomes part of the Structure of the URC with immediate effect.

En Bloc Business

The following papers were passed en bloc:

- Paper B2: Pilots Advocate
- Paper B3: Review of children’s and youth work
- Paper F3: Report of the ongoing work of the faith and order committee
- Paper G1: Financial outcome 2016

- Paper G2: Ethical investment guidelines on usury
- Paper G3: Ending of the stewardship sub-committee
- Paper H3: General updates from ministries committee
- Paper I2: Ghanaian covenant recommitment
- Paper I3: The Kingston declaration
- Paper I4: URC response to 'A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission'
- Paper I5: Issues for the URC arising from 'A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission'
- Paper I6: URC-Roman Catholic dialogue
- Paper I8: Update on Walking the Way
- Paper M2: Consultation on standing orders
- Paper O1: General report from the human resources advisory group
- Paper R1: Safeguarding update
- Paper R2: Past case review update
- Paper T1: Ministerial disciplinary process
- Paper U1: Report of the task group on the future of General Assembly

Paper D2: Governors of Westminster College – Appointment of Tutor

On behalf of the governors of Westminster College, the Revd Nigel Uden, moderator elect of General Assembly, invited Mission Council to note the appointment of the Revd Dr Robert Pope as tutor in church history and doctrine at Westminster College. Mr Uden acknowledged the “fine period of service” of Dr Pope’s predecessor, the Revd Dr John Bradbury, which had included a period as acting principal during the sabbatical of Neil Thorogood.

Mr Uden said: ‘The appointment panel was aware of Dr Pope’s highly relevant experience and his profound sense of vocation.’

The report was received with acclamation.

Paper G4: New Treasurers arrangement

John Ellis, as Treasurer of the United Reformed Church, presented Paper G4, which proposed an amendment to the investment committee’s terms of reference, in order to allow an appropriate sharing of duties between the incoming Treasurer and Deputy Treasurer. The resolution was passed by consensus.

Paper 17: World Council of Churches Glasgow Assembly Bid

The mission committee of the United Reformed Church reported that Churches Together in Britain and Ireland had decided not to bid to host the 2021 General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Glasgow. The committee therefore withdrew its resolution that the URC support the CTBI bid.

Explaining the background to the withdrawal of the resolution, the Revd David Tatem, URC Secretary for Ecumenical Relations, reported that CTBI member Churches had expressed concerns over the financial implications of hosting the Assembly. Other comments were raised from the floor expressing sadness that the profile of the World Council of Churches had reduced in recent years, and noting that Britain could have posed difficulties as a host country for the Assembly given the UK's record of turning away appointed delegates of particular countries.

On a more positive note, the Revd Bernie Collins, Mission Committee Convenor, reported that churches in Germany are in the process of submitting a bid to host the WCC Assembly in 2021.

M6: Marriage of same-sex couples in Guernsey

The General Secretary John Proctor presented Paper M6 <http://bit.ly/2pJBFPm>. Explaining that legislation for the marriage of same-sex couples is now available in Guernsey he asked: 'Does Mission Council want to give the same powers to the church meeting in Guernsey as in England and Wales?' The resolution was passed by consensus.

Paper Z1: Where is God calling the URC?

On Friday evening, all 12 of the United Reformed Church synod moderators who were present came on stage to present Paper Z1 together, asking members of Mission Council to discuss 'Where is God calling the URC?'

Speaking on their behalf, Nicola Furley-Smith, Moderator of Southern Synod, commended the skill of decluttering, which she said requires recognising 'what sparks joy for you and what doesn't'. She asked: 'Should we not be doing fewer things and doing them well?' The 'closet rule', she said, is 'Before you put in a new item of clothing, throw out an old one'; so the closet rule for churches is 'Don't start a new ministry until an old one is stopped.'

Peter Meek, Moderator of East Midlands Synod, said: 'We listen to many who feel the Church is at a crucial moment. We are engaged in frenetic activity that does not feel like our own, and pulled in

too many directions. Healthy churches are relentlessly efficient not just busy. Decluttering is life-changing; suddenly you're surrounded by those things which give you joy.'

Members of Mission Council then split into groups to discuss questions A to D in the paper.

On Saturday, the synod moderators reported back from the discussion groups. Speaking for them, David Herbert and Ruth Whitehead said the groups were enthusiastic about the principle of decluttering Church life, but found it harder to identify what to give up. The question, they posed is 'How do we decide what is vital and what is a luxury?' This conversation, they said, needs to be continued after Mission Council, involving those who have an overview of working of the URC, bringing feedback and positive stories to the November 2017 Mission Council.

Paper X2: Stipendiary Ministry Numbers

Mission Council considered but eventually declined to support a resolution asking the Church to examine the financial implications of releasing money from the Church's reserves in order to maintain stipendiary ministry at 2017 levels for a limited period (Paper X2).

The motion, tabled by West Midlands Synod, failed to proceed after concerns were raised that running down URC reserves would impact on the income and security of the Church, and would deflect from a need to get on with developing new models of ministry. Nonetheless West Midlands Synod was commended for its analysis in Paper X2 of the need to find ways of supporting cultural change in the URC's life in order to build up future capacity for local church leadership.

Day Three: Sunday 14 May 2017

Paper F1: The Wider Fold

On Friday afternoon, the Revd Elizabeth Welch presented Paper F1 on behalf of the faith and order committee. The paper proposes a scheme for including isolated members who wish to continue as part of the United Reformed Church while not being able to belong to a local church. Ms Welch explained: 'We want to honour the commitment of those at a distance from local church who want to maintain membership.' She recalled how, after Mission Council in 2014 decided that church membership needed to be reconsidered, the faith and order committee looked at principle, while the law and polity advisory group looked at process.

The paper was presented with two amendments. The first is to be inserted as paragraph 2.0 (just above 2.1)

2.0 Isolated Membership allows people who have belonged to one of the Church's local congregations, and whose circumstances no longer permit meaningful local membership, to maintain their commitment to the United Reformed Church. It is intended for people who have joined the URC in the regular way through the decision of a Church Meeting, but who are now unable, for reasons of distance or mobility, to remain closely involved an existing local church. It is not possible to list all the situations that might lead to people requesting Isolated Membership, but possible examples are:

- students and young adults, studying at a distance from home, or in a transitory lifestyle in the early years of a career;
- members of the armed forces and their households;
- members of the URC who have moved home, and no longer have a nearby URC that they can attend regularly;
- URC members worshipping in a church that had earlier been a LEP, but from which the URC has withdrawn;
- URC members whose local church has closed, and who are not able to worship in another URC congregation.

The second amendment was to the draft resolution 2, line 6. The phrase 'this Roll' is to be replaced with 'the roll of isolated members'.

Answering questions for clarification, Ms Welch explained there would be one local church in the whole URC holding isolated members.

The main area of discussion was about whether it should always be a council of the Church which commended an individual to the scheme, or might sometimes be a minister. Members of Mission Council also asked whether the paper should be more explicit about expecting financial contributions from isolated members.

After discussion, the General Assembly Moderator, Kevin Watson, asked the chaplain, Mark Robinson, to pray for all those who feel a sense of isolation. The debate was adjourned while a group worked on the wording to bring back to a later session of Mission Council.

On Sunday morning, the Assembly Moderator ruled that, in the light of issues raised, consideration of the matter would be adjourned to another time and place. Ms Welch indicated that she would report back to the next Mission Council.

Paper F2: The Future of Membership

Presenting Paper F2 on Friday afternoon on behalf of the faith and order committee, the Revd Elizabeth Welch said: 'Confusion has crept into churches about membership in the body of Christ. Some non-members are more committed than members; some don't feel adequate to become members. But their relationship with the body is not about feeling worthy, it's about the grace of Christ to them. How do we recognise that?'

The paper proposed that churches should keep two rolls, one of voting members, one of members of the larger church. Ms Welch said that the committee was asking Mission Council to consider whether the work done so far was going in the right direction.

Mission Council discussed questions about the meaning and terminology of church membership. After adjournment, on Sunday morning, Ms Welch presented an amended resolution agreeing that more work was needed by the faith and order committee. The amendment was that the phrase 'accepts the broad principles set out therein' be replaced with 'affirms the work that has been done to date'.

The amended resolution was not carried. The Moderator thanked the committee for the work it had done, and the convenor indicated that the important topic of church membership was one that the committee would need to pursue.

Paper I1: Greenbelt

Steve Summers, URC at Greenbelt Project Coordinator and Development Worker for Church Related Community Work, presented Paper I1 to report to Mission Council about the United Reformed Church's association with Greenbelt.

The partnership, which began in 2016, has been seen as a natural fit for the URC, as Greenbelt's dynamic fusion of the arts with issues of faith and justice resonates with the URC's rich Nonconformist history of exploring radical Christianity and working for justice.

A video shared with Mission Council from last year's festival shared enthusiastic endorsements from URC festival-goers, who talked of faith renewal, refreshment, great speakers, arts, creativity, fellowship and family fun.

URC plans for this year include a 'pop-up picnic liturgy', a discussion panel, knitted treasure hunt and banquet. On the final day, festival-goers will be invited to take home an item of knitted food along with an action card encouraging them to identify and build relationships with those who feel less than welcome in their communities or churches. Mr Summers reported that 60 knitting circles had now been recruited to knit for the event.

URC buildings forum website

David Tatem, the URC Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, announced the launch the website of the URC buildings forum website www.urcbuildingsforum.co.uk. The site is expected to go live in the coming week.

The forum exists to share resources to help churches have a mission-based focus on buildings. Mr Tatem asked for feedback about what users find useful about the site.

Appreciation for John Ellis, stepping down as URC Treasurer after 10 years

General Assembly moderator the Revd Kevin Watson, who chaired the final session of Mission Council, offered thanks to former Moderator John Ellis, who has stepped down from the role of Treasurer after 10 years' service in this role. Mr Watson said:

'John has brought to this role all the professional expertise that we would expect from him. He has an amazing mind for detail. Many times he has been in the Chair as Moderator, I have been struck by how perceptive he has been to the conversation and the spirit. It is a rare gift to be such a detailed person but also to have vision. John visited many local churches during his time as Moderator. Of course, he could not take off his Treasurer hat and I have heard many reports from local church treasurers about the compassion and understanding he showed to each of them. I think of Romans 12 – he never thought too highly of himself but came alongside. Thank you John for all you have brought us as treasurer of our denomination.'

Resolution in support of Church House staff

The Revd Kevin Watson brought the following resolution from the chair to recognise the displacement and disruption staff have dealt with during ongoing renovation work on Church House:

Mission Council:

- Records the appreciation of the whole United Reformed Church to our Church House staff;
- Recognises the many extra demands placed on the staff as a result of the redevelopment of their offices;
- Expresses its profound gratitude for the dedication of our staff, highlighted again by the last few months and
- Instructs the General Secretary to convey this appreciation to all staff.

This resolution was passed with acclaim.

Votes of thanks

Thanks were given to all those present at Mission Council, in particular to three convenors of General Assembly committees – Tim Meachin, Elizabeth Welch and John Ellis – and retiring Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations David Tatem, for all of whom, this would be their last Mission Council in post.