

Paper A1

Toward the future of the United Reformed Church

Business Committee

Toward the future of the United Reformed Church

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The General Secretary: The Revd Dr John P Bradbury john.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Mission Council invites the Officers of the Assembly, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to appoint a small group (of no more than 6) to oversee a review of the structures, resources and work of the United Reformed Church to enable us to respond faithfully to the challenges present in paper A1. The review group is asked to report to each Mission Council and General Assembly and to bring recommendations and resolutions when appropriate. It invites the group to bring a proposed remit and timescale for work to General Assembly 2021.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To initiate a review of the life of the United Reformed Church.
Main points	To initiate a group to oversee a denominational review, who will report to future Mission Councils and General Assemblies, and bring a remit for their work to General Assembly 2021.
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	Business Committee, Officers of the Assembly.

Summary of Impact

Financial	To be funded from the Central Secretariat Budget.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	

Background

God's call for the Body of Christ to be faithful is one which invites us to face every new time and occasion with renewed vision. To engage in faithful worship, witness, service and evangelism in the way God calls us to today may not be the same as what was faithful for those who went before us. Ours is a living God, whose Spirit calls us on.

As the United Reformed Church approaches its 50th year of Jubilee, it is right that we discern once again what it means to be faithful. Jubilee is classically a moment of 're-set'. Are we called in this moment to 're-set' the life of the United Reformed Church better to enable us and those who will follow after us to respond to the call to be faithful?

When thinking about the future of the Church we are instinctively drawn to visions and dreams – and they are vital to our Spiritual health. But visions and dreams need rooting and grounding in what can seem like more mundane institutional matters. The people Israel dreamed of forms of glory but were called to walk in the wilderness for 40 years, and spent 70 years in exile. Some of those who followed Christ and shouted 'Hosanna', had to get their heads around the fact that the way of Christ led not straight to glory, power and might, but the self-emptying of the cross. Do we, perhaps, need to dwell with the thought that our time and place might be one where we are called to faithfulness in the wilderness, or to take up our cross? Any dream or vision rooted in returning to past glories rather than staring long and hard at the reality of the place God has brought us, might well be us being led astray. Our decline seems inexorable – and our task is to ask what it is to be faithful in this immediate context. Ironically, perhaps, our dying to the forms of church life that once were thriving, releases resources which, with careful discernment, will allow the seeds of new, resurrected forms of church life for the future to be sown.

It has become very clear, in a whole range of areas of church life, that carrying on as we have been is no longer an option. It is a moment to face squarely the reality of the place to which God has brought us, and to ask what is required of us in terms of the shape of the body and the necessary Spiritual gifts of governance and administration to fit us to respond to the call of God which is eternal. This call comes to us in a variety of seemingly mundane ways, but if we do not heed it, we will fail to respond faithfully. It would be helpful just to reflect on a few of the challenges facing us:

COVID 19

The ongoing Coronavirus pandemic has been revelatory of many things. It has shown us the most extraordinary creativity and adaptability as we've responded faithfully to God's call to worship, witness, service and evangelism in a radically transformed context. It has also revealed to us huge frailty: we recognise that many of our congregations may never return to in-person worship again. There will be a wave of church closures, posing us questions about how we pastorally care and enable worship for those who won't again return to in-person worship within their church communities, and what we faithfully do with the resources released.

Deployment and M&M

It is quite clear that our deployment of ministers of stipendiary Word and Sacrament has reached breaking point. Synods struggle to keep up with ever decreasing target figures, despite creating ever larger pastorates. We talk about the need to work in new ways, and new patterns and forms of ordained ministry which may well be true, but equally we need to name the entirely unrealistic expectations we place upon stipendiary ministers and the serious limitations on what ministry can achieve in many congregations. Per person, what the Church requires for the Maintenance of the Ministry fund goes up and up, and it is only through extraordinary grace and generosity that we are able to support the stipendiary ministry that we do have. We rejoice in the gifts and graces of many Elders and lay people who minister in church life and are excited by the possibilities of NSM Model 4. But, we all know that in informal conversation when we are not

required to put a brave face on it, the system is stretched beyond breaking point and congregations and ministers are suffering because of it.

The pension fund deficit

The reality of a deficit in the ministerial pension fund of up to £45 million has revealed to us something of the extent and complexity of the financial resources that the United Reformed Church has at its disposal. This figure represents less than five recent years growth in the combined cash wealth of our synods. In this sense, we are a church with some serious resources. It also reveals the complexity of our financial arrangements. Currently, the family of the United Reformed Church holds its assets that support the work of the wider church in 14 different Trusts; in each synod and the national United Reformed Church Trust. These vary hugely in wealth, the wealthiest few synods holding most of the wealth of the whole URC, whilst other synods live with perpetual financial precariousness. The complex nature of our conversations about the pension fund have revealed how difficult it is to plan financially in strategic and joined up ways.

The risk our structures pose

The last Mission Council heard in anguished terms the challenge that the Nominations Committee has in filling all the necessary vacancies to keep the current machinery of the United Reformed Church operating. It requires over 500 volunteers just to keep the committees, advisory groups and working groups of the General Assembly functioning – that is before one thinks about the extraordinary levels of volunteer work and ministry it takes to enable the life of congregations and synods. The risk of failure to vital elements of our life together because we can no longer support this work is huge.

Who we are called to be?

Who we are is the body of Christ. As disciples our identity is rooted in Christ. In Christ, we find ourselves rooted in the very being of God, joined to one another in witness and service to the world. Baptised into Christ, Christ's story becomes our story. Death and resurrection become our story. God never abandons God's people, and Christ will always, this side of the Kingdom, have a Church. What shape are we called to be? If we shepherd our resources with wisdom and care, what new worship, evangelism, witness and service might become possible? What do we need to let go of – what does 'death to self' look like for the United Reformed Church? How do we prune and plant and tend that out of death the shoots of new life might emerge? How do we prepare ourselves to recognise the new shoots of resurrection life when we see them?

It is clearly time to ask ourselves some difficult questions about what we are called to leave behind, put down, allow to go the way of the cross, to fit ourselves to be faithful in this moment. This will also release new resource and energy for new work in the future and we need to discern with wisdom where the seeds of resurrection are planted. We need to catch a vision of the possible, live into resurrection hope, and face with wisdom the tough challenges of the present.