

Paper 14

Walking Forward: Still much to do

Walking the Way Steering Group

Basic information

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Action required	For information only.
Draft resolution(s)	N/A

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	This paper provides a general summary of feedback from across the denomination on the work of the Walking the Way steering group, and contains a summary of the steering group's work since Mission Council met in November 2020.
Main points	Patterns have emerged in feedback gathered by the steering group on its work. As well as using this to shape its short-term work, the steering group has split into two task groups looking, respectively, at long-term strategy and long-term communications / resourcing needs. The steering group hopes to bring proposals to General Assembly in July 2021 to assist the Church in deciding how to proceed.
Previous relevant documents	Mission Council 11/15 papers M1 and M2 Mission Council 3/16 paper M1 General Assembly reports 2016, p.11 Mission Council 11/18 paper I2 Mission Council 11/19 paper I3 Mission Council 03/20 paper I3 General Assembly reports 2020, p.195 Mission Council 11/20 paper M1.
Consultation has taken place with...	Mission Education and Learning Communications Children's and Youth Work Finance.

Summary of impact

Financial	Funding for Walking the Way is currently secured until the end of the calendar year 2021. Further deliberation will be needed by General Assembly in July 2021 on how to proceed.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	The ecumenical and interfaith implications of our work, especially in planning for the URC's 50th anniversary, are being considered.

1. Feedback

- 1.1 In approving the budget proposed at its November 2020 meeting, Mission Council secured funding for Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today until the end of the calendar year 2021. The Walking the Way Steering Group extends its warmest thanks to everyone involved in securing this outcome.
- 1.2 In the short term, this has allowed the Walking the Way work to continue, but there are still major questions for the Church to consider about the long-term future of whole-of-life discipleship as a focus within the denomination.
- 1.3 To help answer these questions, the steering group collected a wide range of feedback from across the denomination ahead of its January 2021 meeting, including from synod teams (moderators, training and development officers, children's and youth development officers, mission enablers and their equivalents) and listed contacts, children's and youth work, education and learning, global and intercultural ministries, and a general call for feedback from readers of the Walking the Way all-church e-newsletter.
- 1.4 In analysing the feedback, the steering group recognised a number of patterns emerging, including:
- a) An integration gap in which some have engaged with Walking the Way, but many have not
 - b) As a body, people in authorised ministries of the URC have not fully engaged with Walking the Way, meaning that the local communities they serve are often unaware of what it is, or how they can engage.
 - c) Confusion about the fact that Walking the Way is not an initiative or programme, yet has programmatic elements, such as Stepwise. We need to define Walking the Way more clearly, by what it is rather than what it is not.
 - d) Awareness that, in many cases, the values of Walking the Way are not yet embedded in the everyday reality of people's lives, either because they are not aware of what Walking the Way is or have not fully understood it
 - e) A desire for fewer resources to be produced by the Steering Group, and more content to be included in resources produced across the denomination which emphasises discipleship. There is a need for fewer worship materials and, instead, more materials which look at discipleship in everyday life.
 - f) If others in the URC can produce something, the Steering Group should not do so. In all new work, the question should be asked 'Is it needed, and if so, what about it is uniquely URC?'
 - g) The need for a branding refresh which makes Walking the Way's connection with all areas of URC life more visible.
 - h) The need for Synod Moderators to be active in engaging with and promoting Walking the Way, as leaders in their respective regions.
 - i) The need for Walking the Way to be included explicitly in committee agendas, job descriptions and strategy documents across the denomination.
 - j) The need to have a truly intergenerational focus in all that we do, such as the recent Advent and Lent packs do.
 - k) Learn the lessons which lockdown has taught us. Those who have engaged online during this time must not be lost. Churches need to re-gather intentionally, not exclusively.
- 1.5 It is clear from the feedback that there is still much work to be done on whole-of-life discipleship as a focus within the life of the denomination. To assist Mission Council and General Assembly in exploring what, when and how this should happen, the steering group has split into two task groups, looking respectively at long-term strategy and long-term communications / resourcing needs. These tasks groups will report back to the March 2021 meeting of the steering group which will, in time, bring proposals to General Assembly in July 2021 to assist the Church in deciding how it wishes to proceed.

2. General Update

- 2.1 *New Reality, Same Mission* – These materials continue to be promoted as a good resource for local churches in looking outwards into their local neighbourhoods to identify and deal with growing and changing needs in these strange times. This may seem counterintuitive when many local churches are focussing on survival, but this is precisely the nature of God's mission. It is to be engaged in precisely when things are difficult, not when we have everything in order. The main document is being kept up to date, and a general summary provided, along with a supporting document to help local churches navigate sources of mission funding.
- 2.2 *Lent* – In light of feedback that the steering group should avoid creating new materials by itself, wherever possible, the steering group has sought to promote the Bible Reading Fellowship's new *Holy Habits: Following Jesus* resource. The steering group has also worked collaboratively with children's and youth work, education and learning and others to produce *Walking towards Lent together*, an intergenerational pack of resources to support households and families on their Lent journey, building on the success of the Advent packs in 2020. Early feedback on these resources has been positive.
- 2.3 *Communications* – It is clear from the feedback received that real-life stories of individuals and churches living out their faith continue to be crucial as sources of inspiration and encouragement, especially in these times. Work is being carried out with colleagues in the communications office to improve the steering group's social media strategy to produce better content more suited to the platforms we use ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#)), as well as make use of some simple web tools on the webpages which the steering group is responsible for, whilst we wait for a new website. Update e-mails, e-newsletters and other direct communications with networks and local churches will increase to ensure that everyone across the denomination feels connected and able to contribute to, as well as gain from, the work of the steering group.
- 2.4 *Online discipleship* – The steering group remains clear that its contribution to the continuing growth of online faith development must be firmly in the field of discipleship. The fact that worship, fellowship and other attributes of faith are being developed online is to be celebrated. However, the steering group is concerned with how this trend might strengthen people in living out their everyday lives as followers of Jesus. The steering group is organising a series of online events to bring together groups and individuals from across the denomination with previous involvement or experience in this field to build up a network for sharing wisdom and good practice. It is hoped that this, in turn, will help the Church to address wider questions about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and what that looks like in online environments.
- 2.5 *Accompaniment / mentoring* – Feedback, particularly from synod teams and contacts, reveals an increased need in local churches, as well as individuals, for accompaniment and mentoring support as they unpack what it means to truly live as disciples of Jesus in every aspect of everyday life. Work on the pilot accompaniment programme with the [London Institute for Contemporary Christianity](#) continues, with participating churches in Southern Synod offering positive feedback on their involvement, and online envisioning events in Mersey Synod resulting in ten to fifteen local churches expressing a significant interest in participating when the programme (hopefully) begins in May 2021. Analysis of the pilot accompaniment programme, as well as the development of mentoring within Stepwise, and work with education and learning on the Discipleship Development Strategy / Fund, continue to influence deliberations on how local churches might be supported to participate in such accompaniment / mentoring activities in future.