

Paper M6

URC-Methodist strategic oversight group

The URC-Methodist Reciprocal Arrangement

United Church 2016
Church 2016
Reformed Church 2016
Church 2016



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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd John Proctor john.proctor@urc.org.uk
Action required	Mission Council is asked to take note. Synods should consider making their own responses
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To invite synods to consider ending an arrangement that once served well but is not now as helpful as it used to be
Main points	It may be time for the Churches to end the Reciprocal Arrangement as a formal expectation, while continuing to support one another generously in particular local situations
Previous relevant documents	Nothing recent
Consultation has taken place with...	The Methodist Church. Synod Moderators and synod property staff

Summary of Impact

Financial	In practice the effect may be very slight indeed
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Greater clarity may emerge in dealings between Methodist and URC congregations.

The Reciprocal Arrangement

1. What does the Arrangement do?

The Reciprocal Arrangement (sometimes known as the Reciprocal Agreement) came into being at the start of the 1990s. It provides for Methodist and United Reformed Church funds to be invested in shared buildings. Typically it applies when a local congregation in one of the two traditions closes its doors, sells the building, and merges with a nearby fellowship from the other tradition, as an LEP. Proceeds from the sale might then be used to develop the other church building, even though it is held under different trusts to that of the property that was sold. A key feature of the Reciprocal Arrangement is that this money will carry no legal charge to require its repayment should the second building eventually be sold too – if, for example, the united congregation decides a decade or two later that its life must end. The freedom from such a legal charge has often given local churches the confidence to develop their buildings and their congregational life in creative ways, which have in turn released energy and shaped opportunity for effective Christian mission.

2. Who has supported it?

The legal title of Methodist buildings is held by the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes as the Custodian Trustee, whereas most URC buildings in England and Wales are held by the various synod trust companies. Therefore the URC synods (apart from the Synod of Scotland, which had not yet come into being) were asked to commit themselves formally to this Arrangement within the first year or two. A number did so, although at least one synod declined, on the grounds that the synod meeting could not direct the Provincial Trust Company; nonetheless, the URC has been widely supportive of the Arrangement. The Methodist Church has supported it too.

3. How well has it worked?

The Arrangement has proved creative and helpful in many places. An organised list of these situations has, however, proved impossible to assemble. While we honour what has been done, we have no complete record of it. There is no evidence of any systemic bias towards either Church, although there may be local memories of one tradition 'doing better out of it' than the other in a particular area. If this had happened, it would not be surprising; one could not expect complete symmetry in every corner of the land.

4. How is it working today?

There is no thought at all of withdrawing from commitments made under the Arrangement. Money that has been committed is precisely that – committed. However, expectations have moved on since the early 1990s. Perhaps there is less energy and enthusiasm now for some ecumenical ventures. There is certainly a higher level of sensitivity around the responsibilities of charity trustees. Possibly for these reasons, among others, the Arrangement is presently being applied rather unevenly, and is sometimes surrounded by a more visible caution than would once have been the case.

5. Where should we go from here?

It seems that the time has come to draw a line under the Arrangement as a formal bilateral commitment. It was never exactly that anyway, due to the diffuse polity in the URC, compared with the structure of the Methodist Church. In part for that reason, it would be difficult to construct a new reciprocal scheme that had a uniform and formal structure. So perhaps it is now better to proceed no less carefully but on a case-by-case basis according to local circumstances.

6. A less formal generosity?

Both churches continue to value each other's witness highly, and we welcome opportunities to worship and work together both in local situations and more widely. There will still be occasions and places for dealing collaboratively with church buildings, and we shall do so best when each side seeks to be generous. But the formal structure that has helped us to do this since the early 1990s is no longer serving the present need. Subject to the comment of Mission Council and the agreement of the Methodist Council, we suggest that the Methodist Conference and the URC's synods release one another from formal obligations under the Arrangement. The obligation that will remain is the regular Christian debt, to love one another, and so to devise, explore and adopt practical, timely and generous ways of expressing that love.