

Paper S1

Update

Medium Term Strategy Group

Church 2014
United
Church **Reformed**
Church 2014



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Medium Term Strategy Group: Update

Basic Information

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Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	Mission Council welcomes the update from the Medium Term Strategy Group and asks them to proceed with the work identified until the new general secretariat has put alternative medium term planning arrangements into place.
Alternative options to consider, if any	<p>1. If the life of the group is not extended beyond the 2014 Assembly, essentially it is discharged with effect from this Mission Council. This would leave various pieces of work incomplete, including some significant thinking about the future of the Assembly committees and the role of their conveners in light of the new Church House structures.</p> <p>2. There has been a comment that the group is too managerial in its approach. Mission Council might wish to consider asking the Nominations committee to identify an additional member to redress the balance.</p>

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To provide an update on the work commissioned in October 2012. To identify the next phase of medium planning work to be undertaken.
Main points	The Medium Term Strategy Group has drawn together work done by various reviews and working groups 2010-12 There is progress to report on synod issues, including structure, finance and the role of the synod moderator.
Previous relevant documents	Mission Council Paper B (October 2012), D and D1 (May 2013), and S (November 2013).
Consultation has taken place with...	Convener of the Faith and Order Committee.

Summary of Impact

Financial	
External (e.g. ecumenical)	

Medium Term Planning in the United Reformed Church

An update on the work arising from Paper B,
Mission Council October 2012

1 Introduction

This paper is offered to provide Mission Council with an overview of the work of medium term planning which has taken place since General Assembly 2012 and to propose next steps for Mission Council comment.

2 Background

2.1 In October 2012 Mission Council agreed to appoint a Medium Term Strategy Group to oversee a project of reflection and decision-making across the full range of issues which had emerged from various review groups and task groups which had presented their work since the previous Assembly.

2.2 This paper offers a general update on that project, noting that the specifics will be reported to General Assembly 2014 by the committees and groups responsible for them. Some urgent questions have now been addressed and decisions have been made. Other work remains outstanding. In some cases, exploration of a presenting issue has revealed deeper questions deserving the Church's attention in the next phase.

2.3 General Assembly 2012 finished with remaindered business. While a four-day Assembly could not resolve the host of questions it had received, it did set the scene for the many discussions that were to follow. The incoming moderator, the Revd Dr Michael Jagessar, challenged the Church to commit itself to "living conversations" on the issues of the day. He reminded us of God's generosity whenever we were in danger of succumbing to a narrative of decline and scarcity. The period 2012 to 2014 may well be remembered as the time when the United Reformed Church began to face its biggest questions with faith, courage and perseverance.

3 The questions we asked

3.1 The paper which the general secretary presented in October 2012 (Paper B) asked, what does a faithful, vibrant, sustainable United Reformed Church look like? It went on to propose specific questions under five major headings: the local church, the synods, General Assembly, Mission Council and Church House. These questions were allocated to various committees and groups for consideration. They are listed in the appendix.

3.2 It is beyond the scope of this paper to address each of the questions in full. The Book of Reports for General Assembly 2014 will give account of the thinking that has taken place and the conclusions reached. Seasoned members of Mission Council will recognise major themes from the 2013 meetings, including the future of the Church, the distinctiveness of the URC, the work of discernment in the councils of the Church, modes of decision-making, evangelism, the challenges facing the synods, and inter-synod resource sharing.

3.3 In some cases an issue has been transferred from one group's agenda to another's. In others, a conscious decision has been taken to defer an issue. Some of the work, such as consideration of the effectiveness of governance by committees, will need to be carried forward.

However, in the course of these many discussions and in the ongoing life of the Church some new questions have emerged. It has been helpful to have a group responsible for tracking progress on various pieces of work and endeavouring to co-ordinate the thinking of the Church across its many task groups and committees.

4 Progress to note

4.1 The Medium Term Strategy Group has kept a strong link with the Faith and Order committee (FAOC) throughout the 18 months of its life. FAOC has repeatedly challenged Mission Council's attention to distinguish between first and second order issues, each requiring a different kind of approach. Under their leadership, new clarity is emerging around the first order issues of the theological vision, values and ethos of the United Reformed Church, the distinctive contribution which the URC makes to Christian life and witness, and the work of the Holy Spirit through the councils of the Church. By their nature, these are questions which require continuous reflection. They will never have once-and-for-all answers.

4.2 It has been the Medium Term Strategy Group's role to address the second order issues in which we translate our understanding of the nature and purpose of the United Reformed Church into structural solutions to a host of pressing concerns. "Successful" solutions, MTSG said, would be sustainable (meeting foreseeable needs for the next five to ten years), scalable (capable of expansion or contraction as the Church's resources grow or diminish), and flexible (providing a common framework which can be adapted to suit the different needs and practices of each synod or local church).

4.3 General Assembly

Although Mission Council accepted the Medium Term Strategy Group's recommendation that a thorough review of the biennial General Assembly should be deferred until one more Assembly had taken place, various steps have been taken to improve the conduct of business at Assembly 2014. Principal among these is the new standing order dividing business into three categories: en bloc, majority voting, and consensus decision making. There will also be a session in which Assembly meets concurrently in five separate groups to consider the work completed by the committees since the last Assembly. This will allow for serious attention to be given to each committee report while allocating the majority of Assembly's time to current issues and proposals for the future.

4.4 Even Better Synods

4.4.1 In May 2013 the Medium Term Strategy Group led Mission Council in forward thinking concerning the synods. We noted the difference in size between the synods (both geographical and in the number of churches and people), as well as their different circumstances around staffing and financial resources. There is a variety of roles which synods can fulfil and the 13 synods of the URC each place the emphasis in a unique way:

Service – meeting the perceived needs of the churches

Instrumental – providing a vehicle for the churches to do things together which they could not do for themselves, e.g. regional ecumenical relationships

Co-operative – enabling churches to support one another through active networking

Governance – setting priorities, initiating programmes, managing resources

4.4.2 Through exploration of a series of scenarios, Mission Council established that there was no appetite for structural change, either to reduce the number of synods into larger regional bodies or to increase their number so that they would encompass fewer churches. Further thought was needed about their administrative functions, and this took place at the November 2013 Mission Council meeting, where the idea of a centrally funded manager for each synod was explored. It was decided that each synod should continue to address its administrative needs in its own way.

4.4.3 In November 2013 Mission Council affirmed the principle that each synod should have a guaranteed income sufficient to meet its basic needs, and the Resource Sharing Task Group was asked to draw Mission Council's recommendations into a coherent plan.

4.5 Role of the synod moderator

With various questions about the synods resolved, attention could turn to confirmation of a new role description for the synod moderators. This is the main item which the Medium Term Strategy Group brings to the March 2014 Mission Council meeting for decision.

4.6 Role of the synod clerk

There have been several requests for a review of the role of the synod clerk. The Medium Term Strategy Group believes that it would be more appropriate for this work to be undertaken at synod level. We are working on a tool to facilitate this process.

5 Significant issues for the next phase of exploration

5.1 "Right sizing" the central operations of the Church (N.B. the aim of this is to make things work better, not to save money, although the effective use of scarce resources would also be considered)

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing Assembly-level programme work
2. Scope of Church House provision, including use of premises, central staffing, based on research into the needs of the churches
3. Long term financial planning

5.2 Good governance

1. The effectiveness of governance by committees
2. The respective roles of committee conveners and Church House line managers in relation to the new general secretariat
3. Size and frequency of General Assembly
4. The relationship between the trust bodies and the councils of the Church
5. The possibility of appointing one group of trustees to serve the trust bodies of several synods

Resolution

Mission Council welcomes the update from the Medium Term Strategy Group and asks them to proceed with the work identified until the new general secretariat has put alternative medium term planning arrangements into place.

APPENDIX

From Paper B, “Medium Term Planning in the United Reformed Church”,
Mission Council October 2012

The Medium Term Strategy Group was appointed to oversee the process by which these questions, delegated to the appropriate committees, were considered.

Faith and Order Committee

- a. *Are we still persuaded that the ongoing life of the United Reformed Church as a separate denomination is within God's purposes for the building of the Kingdom? What specifically would be lost if it ceased to exist?*
- b. *What is our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church?*
- c. *Our churches represent every stage of a life cycle from new inceptions through development, maturity and end of life. Work is needed on understanding this cycle. Can we enable churches to die with dignity, recognising that this is natural?*
- d. *There is significant concern about the health of church meeting.*

Human Resources Advisory Group

- a. *An effective denominational structure needs to deliver six functions: embodiment, development of strategy, governance, management, advice and implementation. Who within the structure should be responsible for each?*
- b. *Some people say that the concept of operation by committees is past its sell-by date. What other options exist? What is most appropriate for the United Reformed Church?*

Ministries Committee

The Ministries Committee has repeatedly challenged Assembly, synods and churches to be imaginative and flexible in meeting the leadership needs of the churches. However, the model of stipendiary ministry stretched ever more thinly persists. What can we do to encourage churches to explore and implement other possibilities?

Mission Committee

- a. *How do we re-evangelise the Church?*
- b. *How about church planting?*

Mission Council Advisory Group

- a. *Most of the Mission Council agenda arises out of committee work, with only occasional items from the synods. Is the balance right? How should the Mission Council agenda be generated?*
- b. *Given the ever increasing pressure on Mission Council agendas does modern technology offer other options for consultation? Decision making?*

Medium Term Strategy Group

- a. *What are synods for? (Service? Providing the vehicle for regional witness/action? Enabling churches to cooperate and support one another? Governance? Some/all of the above?)*
- b. *What is the long-term viability of inter-synod resource sharing? Is it what we want?*
- c. *Should the synod trusts be centrally coordinated?*
- d. *The level of service offered to churches varies synod by synod depending on wealth. Are we content with this reality?*
- e. *Do we agree the proposed role of the synod moderator?*

- f. Should service/administrative functions be moved from the synods to Church House? If so, how would this be funded?*
- g. Should synod moderators have a formal role in the ministerial disciplinary process?*
- h. How many synods should there be? Does each require a full-time synod moderator?*
- i. The Assembly is essential to the health and faithfulness of the United Reformed Church. Does the current pattern of biennial Assemblies deliver what we need?*
- j. Do we have the membership of Assembly right? Should it be larger? Smaller?*
- k. When is it appropriate to use consensus decision making? When should other modes of decision making be employed?*
- l. Where resources and support are needed for mission and programme work, how do we determine whether these should be provided by the synod or the Assembly (or both or neither)?*

