

Paper Z1

Synod Moderators

Where is God calling the URC?
A growing conversation: criteria for
doing things well

United Church 2017
Church 2018
Reformed Church 2018
Church

Paper Z1

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Where is God calling the URC? A growing conversation: criteria for doing things well

Basic Information

Contact name	The Revd Nicola Furley-Smith moderator@urcsouthern.org.uk
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	Mission Council receives Paper Z1 regarding criteria for doing things well and resolves that
Proposer: Simon Walking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) All councils of the Church are encouraged to examine their existing work to discern whether resources of time, effort, and money are currently being expended on work that should now be brought to a conclusion, thus releasing them to do fewer things and to do them well. (ii) Synods be asked to consider the paper in relation to their work. (iii) All papers coming to future meetings of Mission Council and General Assembly shall address the purpose, relevance and necessity of any new work to the local church in furtherance of our part in God's mission and to grow the kingdom of God.
Second: Nicola Furley-Smith	

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To continue the conversation with members of Mission Council on where God is calling the URC and to offer some criteria for pruning the activities we do.
Main points	As draft resolution.
Previous documents	Mission Council Paper Z1 May 2017.
Consultation has taken place with...	Mission Council previously and the General Secretary.

Summary of Impact

Financial	No immediate impact.
External	No immediate impact.

Where is God calling the URC?

A growing conversation: criteria for doing things well

1. Healthy churches regularly examine their work to reduce ministry clutter. And the healthiest ones start reducing clutter, not *after* they find a great new idea, but *before*. It seems to us that three things have come together to help us feel something should be done across the denomination:
 - 1.1 *Walking the Way* and its focus on discipleship
 - 1.2 The reality of the situation of local churches, and indeed the synods that we belong to, who have experienced a decline in numbers and capacity – and can identify with the need to declutter
 - 1.3 The mark of a healthy church ‘that we should do a few things and do them well’.
2. The discussion at Mission Council in May 2017 seemed to agree that ‘Something’ should be done, but did not have time to produce practical agreement as to what we might need to give up.

Time to prune

3. The concept of pruning is clear in John 15:1-17. God calls us to prune that which does not bear fruit. The cutting out of unproductive trees that drain resources can also be found in Jesus’ parable in Luke 13: 6-9. Trees that do not bear fruit are not only wasteful in themselves, they also take away from what still has potential to bear good fruit. Pruning is often neglected when things are going badly; *as we try to cling to what we had* – you can get away with it for a while – but not forever. We need to understand the effectiveness of our programmes both in hard numbers and spiritual impact and then be willing to prune thoughtfully so *that* we can focus our resources on what matters most to God.
4. Any pruning is about producing more fruit, not for our own benefit, but to be a blessing to those around us, by being part of God’s work in the world. When fruit trees and vines are pruned it is the energetic new growth that follows which will produce the blossom and then the fruit. In our meetings, we have often been reminded of Frederick Beuchner’s comment that, ‘The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.’ (Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC)

5. This suggests that we should be able to answer the following questions for our present and future work:
- What need is this work meeting?
 - Whose need is being met?
 - What were the outcomes from this work in the past?
 - What outcomes are expected from this work in the future?
 - Who else is doing this?
 - Are there other ways of achieving the same outcome?

These assume *that* our criteria are based on needs and outcomes, related to fruitfulness. Where the outcomes are beyond our control, it may be worth talking about our behaviour which is within our control.

Discerning God's gardening

6. In John's image of the vine (John 15:1-8), God is the gardener – the expert vine-dresser. God sees both potential and wasted resources more clearly than we see them. The challenge is therefore how to discern how God sees the potential for fruitfulness, not simply fruit per se but **good** fruit. So there is a discernment to be done about what will bear fruit in our work as a church as well as further discernment about what kind of fruit. This is about embodying our prayer 'thy Kingdom come, thy will be done': in seeking to do God's will and in our vision of God's rule.
7. Praying for the Spirit's guidance and gifts helps us to work from first principles to address our current context, but we also already have provisional sign posts to God's reign, which have been worked out through prayer, study and debate.
8. Bearing both in mind, the kind of questions we see as helpful in discerning God's way forward are:
- Will the work help people to be more loving, faithful and hopeful?
 - Does the work have an impact on local communities or national life?
 - How does the work fulfil the Vision2020 statements, the functions in the Structure of the URC, and the aspirations of the Basis of Union to build up the body of Christ for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4vv.12)?
9. We acknowledge that these questions are about moving us towards perceived goals. Fruitfulness also means building on what has given us energy in the past. The difficulty is creating questions that are broad enough to carry different theological perspectives but focused enough to help us make choices.

Criteria for developing fruitfulness

10. Discernment includes understanding who we are, our gifts and skills, but involves moving beyond self-centred perspectives. Councils of the church are good at keeping things steady, but find it difficult to innovate and respond quickly. The decline in

church membership suggests that our neighbours do not see the relevance of being part of the Church.

11. We see the need for imagination and experimentation, so do not want to spend so long on discussing how we decide what we will do that we do not begin anything significant, however we do want to use available resources effectively.
12. We continue to look for opportunities to share the good things that are happening in local churches and 'spread the pollen' to other places. Part of being adaptable will be to develop an understanding of where decisions need to be taken to direct resources to branches that can grow.
13. The metaphor of pruning helps us to focus on **what** we need to cut and to work towards **how** we decide what cuts to make. We need to think about how we make our decisions, as a small denomination which recognises that we cannot do everything we once did or might wish to do. Accepting that we cannot do everything, what criteria might help us to decide – not between a good thing to do and a bad thing to do, but between various options, any one of which may be 'good', but not the **best** use of our limited resources of energy, people and time (and money - but we have deliberately put this last)?
14. We offer three criteria to help our fruitfulness: purpose, relevance and necessity.
 - 14.1 **Purpose.** Be clear on why something is a **priority** for local church mission. When reports come to Mission Council or General Assembly, as well as considering actions, financial impact etc. we should also ask *why* this is necessary, or a priority for now. This question could be added to the introductory sheet. Indeed, in the consideration of all pieces of work our denomination is involved in we suggest the words 'so that' are used: we should undertake X initiative so that... is achieved. And if the 'so that' rationale isn't the core of what we are about, or prayerfully considered as a current priority, then we will know that this is not for us at the present time.
 - 14.2 **Relevance.** Be clear that any decision should depend on whether there is an evident and genuine need among local churches, and on whether there has been demonstrable support from synod representatives in the meeting i.e. the meeting of Assembly or Mission Council.
 - 14.3 **Necessity.** Be clear that we only start new pieces of work if that work is needed because it is not being done by someone else.
15. Although these three criteria may seem to some to apply to new priorities and initiatives, they are just as applicable to those things we are doing regularly. We need to remember to look at existing things also with equal thoroughness. Further, we need to consider where the resources to do the piece of work will come from, and weigh this against the perceived benefits and the potential loss of not using the resource elsewhere.

16. Our aim is to get maximum kingdom benefit:
 - 16.1 We need to celebrate things that we decide have reached a conclusion or lack the relevance they once had. It may be that there are some things that we cannot do now but might do at some point in the future.
 - 16.2 We may also need to mourn the things that we find we cannot do or should cease to do, enabling us to release them and freeing us to turn wholeheartedly to the things we agree to do now.
 - 16.3 We need to understand the intent of everything we do, measure it and keep discarding what doesn't work to strengthen our calling as the Body of Christ. We need to remember to allow God to guide us to serve the purpose of the Kingdom. How do we measure our effectiveness?

Perhaps that's the next part of the conversation.