

## GROUP G

\* Who are we?

Identity?

- tension: local v. tri-national v. international
- do we have one?
- do we need a brand? One brand does not fit all
- do 'punters' care? (about URC as denomination or just local community)
- celebrate differences/diversity

Our history/variety frustrates us/prevents finding 'the one way'

\* Where are we at with ecumenism?

- can't plant new church unless it is ecumenical – time for review?

\* We allow freedom in worship decision making

\* Can we not re-plant rather than plant new? (i.e. plant within existing congregations)

\* Let old idea/structure continue alongside new idea/structure

\* We may be small, but we can be part of BIG!

## GROUP G

- Are we not journeying already?
- How do others see us/our brand? (accept they are varied, don't represent the whole of the church)
- What do we value? What do others (outside the church) value about us? How do we perceive ourselves – challenge us to view ourselves differently
- Keep surprising people that the negative perceptions the outside world has of us should actually be positive.
- Keep the URC blue
- We want local churches to be out in their community more – developing relationships, meeting them, challenging perceptions
- What are we about – increasing numbers? Spreading the word?
- We need to use the skills of our people better (focus on what we are good at rather than what we are not good at)
- Recognise 'we' (local, synod, tri-national) should do a few things well, rather than do lots of things badly
- Recognise people retiring later/working longer hours/maximise after church time
- Recognise the way we work, committees work, we do church, does not tie in with the real world/changing make-up of congregations
- Make all feel at home in the decision making (local, committees, denominational) and change how we do it (use job share, team/task group)
- Empower/enfranchise people, rather than using gimmicks to hook people
- Greater use of technology – cyber church? skype? services online, intimations on web

- Keep personal meetings/relationship through inter-person contact/keep the church human whilst utilising/maximising technology
- Podcast the sermon, come together to discuss it (don't assume all have access to the internet or church building)
- Keep the buildings/space and utilise/maximise them more
- don't just see/view 'hall users', 'car park users' as £
- Learn from mistakes of others (keeping living with differences e.g. same sex issues and Church of Scotland)
- How far do we do with 'tent ministry'?

## 1

No one size fits all is refreshing as we are so diverse. Must allow for Spirit to work in different ways.

### Flexibility

Must touch and excite local church

What if our buildings are assets not burdens!

Doors should be open and welcoming

Lets stretch the boundaries of whom we welcome!

What is the theology behind our buildings?

## 2

About relationship building

We need to redefine what church is

What is our unique selling point?

Need to redefine 'membership'

In our DNA to restructure but too much time and energy spent on this

Where has the Spirit gone?

We need to identify what is missing in our church

We need to regain sense of who we are, why we are here, and then find out our priorities

Why are the scenarios about structure? Disappointing!

## 3

Scenarios

1. Feels like restructuring to cope

2. No energy for organic union, but raises some important questions. Are local people really interested in what is happening?

3. Too consumerist!!! Local unions already happening although sometimes feels like a tack over bid!  
Other churches are more CONFIDENT!

## 4

We have lost confidence in expressing our faith

We have lost confidence in the importance of Church Meeting

We need to assert spiritual leadership, importance of

4. Strength in relationship, pooling of resources, high quality strength that this is a sending model!!

But missing bits about serving local community

5. Very narrow scenario. Might work in some places but not across URC

### Holy Spirit

Discernment:

- \* when we come together – listening to one another – prayer – moving into grace
- \* at peace with oneself
- \* retrospective reading of Holy Spirit
- \* awareness of learning and growth
- \* in times when inspired and excitement
- \* there at the edges of your experience
- \* when we are ready to be courageous
- \* linking intuition to movement of Spirit
- \* individual and collective
- \* in disturbing
- \* excitement and caution – openness

### Scenarios

1. ... a salutary warning! Decline rather than choice

2 and 3. Seem unrealistic at the moment – unity not uniformity

4. An 'order' within the Church Catholic

Not in any scenario – Kingdom of God

Too much about church

Where is the dance of God going now?

Ecumenism beyond our comfort zone – congregation/new churches

Partnership with RC Church (1 billion!)

### **GROUP F**

Our passions:

Synergy, realism, energised vision, use professionalism, cooking, church buildings used well, youth work, singing, Christ should be enjoyed, organic unity, Liverpool (FC & team work)

What do we think of the Holy Spirit? Moments of revelation

Hungary – Being ecumenical in worship in 1989: An act of holy passion

Mission Council – October 2002, the Church Life Survey and Finance - so dire that something had to be done – Catch the Vision

Churches gel and build vision – responding to community needs

Church Secretary – neighbour coming to church

Church meeting – shut the building and become the worshipping heart of the village

Church re-ordering – happened by fire: new appreciation of true essentials

Elder from Sierra Leone – true stories of faith ignited action spontaneously

Bible – stories connect with real life

1996 – deep debates on contentious issue dividing the church: transformation through real life stories

### Scenarios are not options but prompts

What do we learn about God from this?

‘Steady as she goes’: does it mean being inevitably stuck in a rut?

- avoiding change actually chooses the change of victimhood

- lacks a powerful vision: change happens reactively

- as with other scenarios it assumes that the UK population will stay as it is; that we will get through economic stresses; and ignore that non-established churches depend on population density

Church of England: if every member makes a new member every year – it will be 2038 before numbers increase. Rate of decline is that high.

How do we define church size? What about measuring the church’s impact?

The church is a place where people seeking stability gather – so they are unlikely to change?

The Universal Church is more than the URC. When will the funds run out?

‘All Congregationalists’ – conciliar nature a very thin version of what it is now.

Where is the Spirit in this? Why are we afraid of dying?

What do we have to keep alive for, other than spread the gospel message of Jesus

The hospice movement speaks of a good death – scenario 1 is a picture of a bad death. Keeping the life support system going

Stewardship – what are positive and or threadbare models of this? Using resources more creatively.

The parable of the Talent: burying the little we have as opposed to the ‘Widow’s curse’ of Elijah

BUT: what are the other churches doing throughout the week. The scenario doesn’t say.

4 Synod Moderators and 3 Church House Staff – Old Guard while the church is getting on with it.

Scenario 2: where is the Spirit in this?

2023 – rather slow progress?

- lack of warmth for organic unity currently, but the Cumbria model (and in Cambridge in embryo) may offer an alternative

Ordination – a symbol of something else

Denominational theologies would have to be merged

Would we all become Anglicans (Church of England)? How many CofE would opt-out due to women clergy?

This seems all about styles of worship

What is stopping us doing this now? Agreeing financial years and boundaries would be a huge step forward. E.g. following the Cumbria model = attitudes of Bishops/Moderators/District Chairs.

Couldn’t General Assembly encourage this?

Somewhere between scenarios 2 and 3

Doing it on a medium scale could be very time-consuming. How do structures cope?

Advantage of a Uniting Church is to streamline and reduce meetings

The systems exist but the attitudes are what is effective – start from the bottom up

The idea behind it hints of what Jesus would have wanted

Working together would help with numbers enough to address local big issues

### Scenario 3

Positives – allow local flexibility and avoids splits: ‘This is the church in this place’

- strength from the grassroots: needs an enabling atmosphere to enable this. URC/CofE have more in common as congregations than URC/Methodist

New housing estates – lack of ecumenical church planting compared to the past

Cumbria – storms and floods created togetherness

RC will be the dominant church in 2033 – different demography: they have more children and hold onto them better. And migration. So – include the RCs in scenarios.

Authorisation for Lay Presidency becomes an issue in base communities

### Scenario 4

A bit like the old Methodist ‘class’ system

Lacks ecumenical aspect

Not sympathetic to old and very young?

Congregational nature holds building in high regard

Not having a building can be positive or negative

What about the community facilities in the buildings that were sold? And what about existing LEPs?

World church – ministers are used to operating in very big areas

This scenario is OK for people who are already committed to church. What about nominal churchgoers who rely on the building? But buildings also give out the wrong messages too sometimes

### Scenario 5

Where’s the core? Where are the resources? [1-5: ‘normally’ has to be strong enough to support new difference. Our current ‘normally’ isn’t necessarily right with the Spirit]

Where’s the wider church? How do local incarnations take part in wider discussions and express membership?

How do people influence decisions? Local works, but how does it relate beyond itself? How do they belong to a wider family? It may have to rebuild new covenant relationships.

We’re already used (in some cases) to more than one congregation within a church. ‘Messy Church’ in half-term holidays – how to build a sense of commitment? (one example). How big is the small core group and how sustainable is it? Any re-imagined church runs the risk of becoming an institution. Routinisation tends to lead to new steps in ecumenism.

More imaginative about how we resource – don’t want to lose the URC (even in ecumenism, Fresh Expressions, etc)

We like the URC happy to share, but want to retain ecumenism – don’t want the URC to die (whatever was thought in 1972)

OK to have URC identity

Re-imagine the role of ministers of Word and Sacrament – multiple church pastorates not sustainable

Vision 4 Life and decline may force us to do what we know we need to do (lay/ordained teams, etc) – Holy Spirit seems not to work through programmes or restructuring – not enough ministers in too many meetings and in too many buildings

The Society of Friends is much smaller and has identity and structure

Have confidence in who you are as a local church  
Inclusivity of URC freedom, tolerance  
Lively, imaginative local churches  
We struggle to match our structures to those of other denominations (top-down)  
Allowing individuals to express faith commitment (bottom-up)  
Local church decides who members are  
Children and young people equal partners

Expressing faith in action and corporately as well as individually  
Ability to innovate  
Enable individuals to be responsible in local church  
Ministry of whole people of God – ontological views of ordination  
'Via media' – national and local  
Church of people and ordained/commissioned leadership  
Freedom of conscience and conciliar  
URC – what we value about our identity  
Holy Spirit is working through all/any  
Discernment re call of minister  
Decision making processes  
Concerns about obliteration of historically important traditions  
However, we may need to compromise

Need to go back to emphasis on discipleship  
Can we learn from Uniting Churches in other parts of the world?

#### 4. Features that attracted us

Release of people and buildings  
Intimacy of the small group  
Getting together to celebrate in a larger group  
Accountability to something larger than the pastorate

#### 2. attractive model

Could be combined with 4 in encouraging accountability  
(Cumbria as a working model)

### **GROUP A**

We discern the Holy Spirit in many and varied ways – seeing signs, possibilities of growth  
But we begin by seeking to discern together  
What are the healthy characteristics of the URC...

- \* a vision for governance based on Elders and Church Meeting – vocation
- \* flexibility – try it and see
- \* not just about what happens Sunday morning

\* liturgical flexibility too... [is there a fundamental/paradigm shift??- if so key question may be 'Where does authority lie?' Moving to charismatic figures having own experience of transcendence, but we test against authority of scripture and Church Meeting]

\* sharing of gifts a URC characteristic – M&M and resource sharing more than political! 'Coming together and hold together by goodwill

\* sovereignty of God (can we find our way of saying 'God gave me this word'?). Does our worship reflect the joy that should flow from that awareness? (Like all denominations, our congregations come from all traditions – but we don't then impose an identity!)

### Move to the scenarios

Commend the idea of a network or 'order' in a larger (?united or not) church

(Our ministry now seems to be a stumbling block – mutual recognition, different training, are issues...)

What is their place in local union scenario?

Maybe many would fall adrift

Pastorate churches exciting some

But concern for smaller cells: these are significant (danger! Letting our halls is not doing mission!)

Not a one size fits all!

If we like 5, this needs support mechanisms

Maybe sustainable as aspect of 4

Set up of messy church in supermarket!

Significance of today's society as networkers – not commitment

But are all these scenarios of a dying church?

Need for neighbourhood witness in deprived areas – which scenario supports gathering and support of people? Would 4 encourage formation of a cell there? And route in for Fresh Expressions to the wider church??

Work now to change mindset of those who relate differently (like the under 75s?!). (Sadly few of our young people operate in wider church area...)

(We are seeing strengths in 4 and 5

Can we make a case for 1 – but how to identify which?

Value in gradual downsizing

[We see the new as a mixed economy – need whatever equips people best to witness to Christ]

? each individual needs to experience the Christian life in different sized group

- and contagious enthusiasm may be found in the smallest churches

What about reducing stipendiary ministry? And train missionaries for reaching out, while presiding Elders do the word and sacrament stuff...

Never too late! – must revisit heavy dependence on stipendiary ministry (which goes against our core values)

And look to greater variety of ministries

'Whole people of God' presiding at communion – call for ordained local ministry?

## **GROUP B**

What do we value about the URC?

Freedom to decide

Enshrines meetings which are empowered to discern the working of the Holy Spirit, even against a majority view

Informality and lack of 'respect' (difference)

The way we related to the word of God in the Bible

Our commitment to social justice

Comment: 'I have not heard anything unique. Is it the combination that are unique?'

Our willingness to die as a denomination

Eldership

Comment: the church has not fully adapted to the faith that 1 minister 1 church is over

Is that because we have not fully adopted Provisionality?

Church leadership not having decision-making powers makes for interesting ecumenical meetings.

Senior officers' powers have reduced over the years (societal change?)

Equality needs a central focus to work

### Scenarios

Not enough clear sense of who we are to make this work

Maintaining existing model is not the way forward

Talking and building can lead to self-discovery

### Scenario 2

Discussion on Uniting Church in Wales

Buildings are a block to mission

'Eucharist' is polarising

### Scenario 3

Growing multi-cultural churches

LEPs are simply a way of holding back decline

Freedom from building worries can re-energise

The person in the pew does not mind

Institution offers a skeleton to define the body – so if this is inhibiting it needs to give wider boundaries (i.e. be less prescriptive)

Baptismal unity is the key

### Scenario 4

Cell groups

Networking (with reservations)

If no control ethos it is nothing

e-church only? – private and centre led (in practice)

confirmation on on-line community and real



### Points raised/made

- \* Migrant congregations (e.g. Korean community is SW): two ethnic groups challenge each other, possibility of a missional church
- \* Scenarios 2, 3, 4 and 5 have some positives and involve 'substantial letting goes'
- \* How do we stay as a family of the church with any of the scenarios?
- \* United (sic) Church of Australia: lessons to be learnt
- \* Scenario 1 is depressing!
- \* Denominational resentments less of an issue now
- \* We don't need to look for just one scenario to meet our hopes/desires/aspirations
- \* Allow people to be part of the URC without resentment (modern technology to be used?)
- \* Local closer relationships with Methodists
- \* The HUB principle/parent church for those facing a struggle
- \* 'De-branding' a process that can attract others who could be encouraged to engage, especially those currently outside the church
- \* A welcoming church means a home to be part of
- \* Don't have to have a building to be a church
- \* What do we want a URC identity for?
- \* Should there be a death scenario?
- \* Half of scenarios won't be possible without partners

What is the purpose of the Church?

Barriers:

- structure is under strain
- laity under pressure to play their part (lack of volunteers)
- laity complacency/competency

Distinctive characteristics

Church meeting (gathering at its best is something to cherish)

Some meetings 'play safe'

Aspire to make church meetings work

Good at working with a range of partners

Which aspects of characteristics/more work done on

'in partnership'

'gathering'

Exploring identity

'diversity partnership'!

Successful LEPs

Nobody prepared to press the unity button

How do we open this conversation up across the church?

V2020 has the structure to ensure this happens!

Quality of worship needs to be explored and improved

Inter-Assembly year used to promote 'creative' gathering to explore scenarios

Scenarios of Synods

B – best option, with variance!

Consider having fewer than 13 Synods!

## GROUP F

Medium Term Strategy Group 'Better Synods'

From the discussion on 'The Church' we bring over:

Synod is a support structure so responds to what churches are going, rather than having fixed guidelines

Refer to 1972 – 2 reasons for Synods:

a) Control of Congregational Moderators

b) Provide a unit of support larger and better equipped than Districts

Synods were more even in size (population)

The paper doesn't recognise why we are now uneven – Northern Economic and Industrial decline  
Stable – Wessex and Midlands; Decline – Southern and Thames North; why?

We should project into the future by taking past trends into account

Trust: could we go back to the Presbyterian system of Trust-body

'The power of the Synods' was a strong factor in the desire of Congregationalists to stay out

The Paper

- Finances uneven and resources stretched

- variations and we are all up against it

- businesses that survive in good times tend to fail in testing times

- tension builds when resources are limited

- 'it's not fair' – community conflict and competition

Our perceptions of each other are important

What is our theology of resourcing – 'my/our money' as shutters go down

Accidental inheritance of resources – how do we act with grace?

How do we put resources into where the calling is? Are we limited by the law about what we do with resources?

Don't fudge it any longer

How do we balance grace and hope with pragmatism and realism?

Free market economy and sense of scarcity will influence our thinking – but can theology counteract that?

Good stewardship of resources – are we too hung up on our comfort cushion in times of scarcity?

'Redundant buildings' – the use is tied

Can we not sell or use our buildings while we are still alive? Act while we are in a position to act. Use what is still alive instead of waiting until we are dead.

Re-invest in our property portfolio, but be astute about whether the church there is alive or dead on its feet.

Question: worship – waiting: should we be attentive to the Spirit, rather than restructuring (takes time and energy) immediately. E.g. Northern Synods talking to each other realistically. Contained

vulnerability. Pragmatic and realistic: understand what is happening and hallow the 'interim' and underpin insecurity.

## **GROUP F**

Two tasks – not necessarily overlapping

What is the purpose of the Church?

See the Basis of Union, paragraph 11 – it doesn't narrow down the shape or activity of the Church (others have cited the need to build up the confidence in the faith in the flip charts)

What are the URC's distinctive characteristics?

Paragraphs 12ff

[Are we losing our institutional memory?]

We tend to operate in spirals and circles of action and memory – and we are doing re-envisioning constantly

We tend to think of our worst examples and run ourselves down

We are self-critical and apologising for ourselves – we do not remember that we have been enriched by God (cf Jim's worship today)

Rowan Williams appreciates us more than we do ourselves – all are equal and given permission to act 'pregnant with possibilities'

What should we work on?

Look at existing Reformed resources over the last 50 years – we keep recycling and repeating ourselves

Do less – live out what has been agreed already

e.g. 1995 patterns of ministry, Equipping the Saints

celebrate what we've done

we think like younger siblings – always in the shadow of older ones

look into the detail of what other people are saying about us

Positive stories – a URC minister got Bolton started as a Fairtrade town

Use Appreciative Inquiry processes

Choose one thing and do it well – works in small congregations

How do we open up the question?

LMMR – if done properly it asks these questions

These questions would be good for Area Meetings (or equivalent)

If we were a business we would be snapping up ideas all the time from others – is fear and mistrust stopping us flowing with the Spirit?

We recognise the foolishness of doing things apart, easier than how to do things together – LEPs and Churches Together vary greatly in effectiveness often due to contingent factors

Grassroots needs to be strong but also an enabling bigger organisation

Ecumenical cooperation – be patient and persistent. And use the shared buildings creatively – apt liturgy and community service

Can we bring 'Church Meeting' more to the focus or has its centrality gone? Do people realise that it is fundamental?

'Occupy' – passionate people who knew their subject had daily 'church' meeting

Get people to talk about their faith – testimony

Purpose of the Church

- to participate in reign/kingdom of God
- we need to find where it is and then celebrate in it

Characteristics

- all in Basis of Union! But how many of us have read it!!!
- Church meeting
- Eldership
- call of all in church to ministry
- need to unpack it in ways which light people up!!
- need to stop beating ourselves up
- all of this is stunting our confidence and passion in the Gospel
- we need to reclaim the importance of Church Meeting and find our place in it.
- fed up with guilt trip on Larger Synods!!

Do the scenarios really address the real issue of lack of people and financial resources?

What is unique is the combination of many elements common to many denominations, but found uniquely in URC?