



MISSION COUNCIL

13 – 15 MAY 2013



Faith and Order Committee

The Future of the Church

Introduction

The Faith and Order committee started a conversation about the Future of the Church in the autumn of 2011. Around 30 papers were received, in response to an open request for reflections. The FAOC has spent four of its meetings focussing on this discussion.¹ (Be warned – this is not a quick fix discussion!) the discussion is now coming to Mission Council in order to take the next steps forward.

Issues

The ‘future of the church’ is a discussion to be held not only by the URC, but by churches across Western Europe. It is in particular an issue where congregations are ageing and declining, but not so much a focus for discussion where congregations are flourishing and growing. We want to look at the way in which the URC is still held in God’s embrace and the distinctive way in which we are entrusted with re-telling the Jesus story.

Some of the points highlighted in the discussion are as follows:

- There is a genuine desire to discern God’s purposes together for the whole church, so that different voices are heard and taken into account.
- We want to be passionate – not just about ourselves, but about God and God’s purpose for the church, which means placing ourselves into God’s hands at each step along the way, seeing the church not just as a human institution which needs to be well organised, but as the Spirit-filled body of Christ in each place. We want to recognise the places where people are energised and fired up, as being places where the Holy Spirit is present.
- We need to be attentive to the particular nature of the Reformed tradition with regard to conciliarity and the authority of scripture.
- There is a concern that in some places the rightful Reformed emphasis on conciliarity has been interpreted as a need to be primarily concerned about structures rather than the spiritual life of the whole people of God in relationship to God, to one another and to the world. One contribution helpfully quoted “Rowan Williams wants to remind us that there is something deeply deceiving, though seductive, about thinking of the church as a human association. We want to organise it and run it better, so that it will succeed.” Instead we need to place our trust in the generous God who holds us in life.
- There is a desire to wrestle together from differing theological standpoints with regard to the authority and interpretation of scripture.
- There is a need to look again at our understanding of who God is, within a Trinitarian framework, in a way which can inspire people, give people confidence in their faith and the language with which to talk about the gospel to friends and neighbours.

¹ Copies of the compilation of the papers, a summary of the papers, and a summary of the FAOC discussions are each available from Helen Garton at Tavistock Place. helen.garton@urc.org.uk

- We want to celebrate the gifts given to the United Reformed Church, emerging over several centuries, such as the participation of the whole people of God in decision-making, the possibility of each person's discernment of the Holy Spirit to be recognised, and an ability to be counter-cultural.

Process at Mission Council

We are offering five scenarios for discussion, not as options to choose one or the other, but to help us think about what the URC would miss if it wasn't there, and how we discern the particular calling of the URC in these changing times. This is a discussion more about vision and ethos than organisation and structure. There will be group discussion and feedback, which will then be looked at again by the FAOC in order to discern the next steps forward.

Revd Elizabeth Welch
Convener, Faith and Order Committee