



MISSION COUNCIL

13 – 15 MAY 2013

A1

Scenarios

It is Easter Sunday, 2033. As you get into your solar-powered electric car to join your fellow Christians for morning worship – grateful for the medical advances that have given you and your contemporaries an average life expectancy of 103, and the anti-Alzheimer’s drugs and other medications which promise that those extra years will be healthy and active ones – the first item on the BBC morning news is about the latest five-yearly survey of religion in Britain conducted by Dawkins College, Oxford.

The survey shows that religious affiliation in Britain has fallen to an all-time low, though the number of those self-identifying as Christians has risen since the last Dawkins College survey in 2028. At 21%, Christianity has regained its place as the biggest single religious group, a little ahead of Islam at 16%. However, those claiming ‘No religion’ number 52%, and that total includes 19% who self-identify as atheist, humanist or secularist.

In the light of these figures, the Secular Celebrant of Dawkins College gives an interview calling for some of the Faith Seats in the Westminster Senate to be reserved for the British Humanist Fellowship, and the Minister of State for Minority Cultures describes Government initiatives to preserve important parts of Christian cultural heritage.

After the news report, the presenter reminds listeners that the new Archbishop of Canterbury will discuss the survey in her first Easter sermon, to be broadcast live later that morning.

You think back twenty years, to the meeting when Mission Council first started discussing the future of the United Reformed Church. You recall the further discussions, the sometimes heated and painful arguments, the decisions, actions and hard work in the years that followed. Your memories lead you through one of the following five stories...

1. Steady as she goes

After that Mission Council meeting in May 2013, you very quickly sensed a change of mood in the URC. Nobody doubted the advice from the denominational leadership and external consultants that the church lacked the resources to maintain its present structures and activities. But an increasing number of voices at all levels argued that the URC’s present structures reflected core convictions about the identity and ethos of a Reformed Nonconformist church with a strong ecumenical commitment. Sweeping changes to structures or patterns of ministry would mean abandoning our distinctive calling as a church and losing some of the distinctive gifts we gave to ecumenical partners and society. By the 2018 General Assembly that mood was overwhelming, and proposals for the radical restructuring of Synods were decisively rejected.

Over the coming years, the URC avoided drastic changes to its structures or patterns of life, making only the adjustments needed to cope with declining numbers and resources. By 2030 the membership of the URC had fallen to 23,000 from its 2013 total of 68,000. As numbers and income fell, the church stood by its commitment to support local congregations as much as possible. Your church is now a lively Christian community with a membership of 62, making it the largest of the 370 congregations in the Synod of the Midlands and Northern England.

Since Easter is a busy time for the forty or so stipendiary ministers in the Synod, your own minister will be leading worship in four of her other churches today, and you are looking forward to a rare visit from the half-time Synod Moderator. Though most stipendiary ministers serve eight or ten churches, an agreement with the Congregational Federation for joint accreditation of ministers has eased the pressure somewhat.

However, although relations between the URC and the Federation are now quite friendly, the most recent conversations about union ended inconclusively. You remember the report of these conversations at the last quinquennial General Assembly in 2031: there was some uneasy laughter when a speaker from the floor quipped, 'Well, what does it matter? We're all Congregationalists now, anyway!' As you recall, none of the four Synod Moderators, nor the three full-time Church House staff, looked particularly amused.

2. The Uniting Churches of/in Great Britain

You wonder what this morning's Easter Eucharist will be like. It is only seven years since the historic services held simultaneously in Westminster Abbey, Llandaff Cathedral and Iona Abbey to mark the URC's union with the Methodist Church and the Anglican Churches in the three nations to form the Uniting Church of England, the Uniting Church in Wales and the Scottish Uniting Church.

Many congregations are still coming to terms with the merger of all remaining URC and Methodist congregations with the Anglican churches in their parishes. However, the sale of so many redundant church buildings (most, though not all, URC and Methodist) has boosted the Uniting Churches' resources tremendously. As a result, the shortage of ordained ministry that had grown acute in all three churches by the late 2010s has largely disappeared.

Your own former URC minister resigned and transferred to the Congregational Federation once it became clear that Methodist and URC ministers would have to be episcopally ordained to serve as presbyters in the Uniting Churches. Your parish has a presbyter from a Methodist background and a newly ordained curate from a high-church Anglican tradition. The curate admits she still finds it awkward handing out the bread and the trays of communion glasses to the elders for the distribution of the elements, while some of the elders are distinctly unhappy about the Reserved Sacrament. However, there is plenty of goodwill and everyone is trying their best to make these new patterns of church life and worship work well.

3. Local unions

As you park near Broad Street Church (Baptist/Moravian/URC) and enter through the automatic glass doors, you ponder just how diverse the experience of being a URC member can be these days. The church's policy of encouraging congregations to unite with the most appropriate local partners has been in force for fifteen years, and there are now just a handful of URC-only congregations left.

Before you moved to your present town three years ago, you were a member of a Methodist/URC congregation in your village. After the old Methodist chapel developed structural problems that the membership of twenty couldn't possibly afford to repair, the congregation entered into a sharing agreement to worship in the parish church. The proceeds from the sale of the chapel paid for the repairs to the parish church roof, and relations between Anglican and 'Chapel' congregations were warm from the outset – though joint worship was limited to a few special services a year.

Broad Street is very different: a growing multi-cultural congregation where white faces are in the minority, and the worship band and choir lead you in styles of worship you never knew existed. You find yourself wondering, not for the first time, just what the distinctive URC contribution to such varied churches is. In your experience, it is mostly reflected in the different kinds of arguments you find yourself having: in your village church it often meant reminding the Church Council that some

decisions had to be taken by Church Meeting, not merely reported there; at Broad Street the battles seem to be about persuading people that infant baptism really is baptism, or getting them to take an interest in the reports you bring back from Synod and General Assembly.

You've lost count of the number of times people have turned to you in Church Meetings and asked, 'What's the URC position on this?' – and you have to admit that often you don't know. You find yourself wondering where in the URC's structures you could go to find out, and how much it really matters anyway.

4. Pastorate Churches

Your journey this morning is longer than usual: being Easter Day, today is the monthly Celebration Service at the central church of your URC pastorate. By the mid-2010s it had become hard to deny that the URC could no longer sustain its hundreds of small churches: ordained ministers were spread ever more thinly, congregations of ten or twenty lacked the people and money to keep their buildings usable, and the demands of legal compliance became impossible to meet.

After long discussion, a controversial proposal was agreed by the 2018 General Assembly: the thirteen Synods would be merged into five, and locally the church would be re-organised into pastorates of about 10-15 congregations. Each pastorate would have one central church building, able to accommodate all the congregations and the pastorate's church and community activities. The sale of the other church buildings would finance the re-ordering needed, or the purchase or construction of a new building.

A typical pattern of church life developed fairly quickly following this decision. In most pastorates a celebration service was held around once a month in the central 'Pastorate Church'. Often these monthly celebrations came to be combined with pastorate lunches, socials, meetings and other events. For the rest of the month the congregations of the pastorate functioned as 'cell groups'. Some cell groups met in members' homes for prayer, worship and Bible study, either on Sundays or during the week. Others joined nearby churches for Sunday worship, and this arrangement was often recognised by local ecumenical agreements.

You remember all too well the sacrifice and heartache that the changes meant to many, as congregations left church buildings that had been central to their faith stories for generations, and surrendered something of their own identity to become part of a new Christian community. You have had many conversations with friends who described it as a kind of bereavement. Yet the majority faced these changes courageously, and many discovered surprising new possibilities. The sale of buildings released funds to turn Pastorate Churches into high-quality resources for pastorates and their wider communities.

People as well as buildings were released for creative ministry and mission. Your pastorate has two full-time stipendiary ministers, a half-time youth worker and a half-time salaried Executive Officer who handles most of the administration, finance and compliance work. The building is a hive of activity all week, with lunch clubs, job-seekers' advice centres, toddler groups, daily worship, café church, evangelistic youth work and much more besides. With only one central service a month, the ministers are able to spend time with the cell groups on other Sundays. And released from the burden of church administration and building maintenance, the cell groups themselves have discovered unsuspected gifts of pastoral and spiritual leadership among their members, sometimes becoming places of extraordinary Christian nurture and spiritual growth.

Another Assembly resolution back in 2018 made it possible for those out of reach of a local URC congregation to belong to the URC without being members of a local URC congregation. With the continuing growth of social networking since the 2010s, a vibrant network has grown up of URC members who worship most of the time in local churches of other denominations, but remain virtually

– and strongly – connected to the URC online. Some have begun to call this network ‘a Reformed order within the wider church’, as members bring the particular gifts and insights of the URC’s tradition to their local Christian communities. In some places, Pastorate Churches and their leadership teams have become hubs of support for this ‘order’.

5. Local incarnations

That Mission Council meeting back in 2013 was when you first heard someone remark that the churches which were flourishing in the URC were the innovative local expressions of church rather than the ‘normal’ URCs. Some were established URC congregations that had ‘de-branded’ themselves in order to develop new ways of being church in their contexts, calling themselves names like ‘River Church’ or ‘The Meeting’. Others were congregations that had developed among migrant or international communities and then chosen to join the URC. Still others were innovative experiments in Christian community beyond the walls of the church building (‘fresh expressions’, they used to be called – you never liked that name).

You had no idea back then how true that remark would prove. Now, twenty years on, there are only a few dozen of what you still think of as ‘typical URCs’ left, and many of them are struggling with small congregations, lack of resources and buildings in disrepair. The ‘fresh expressions’ and the ‘de-branded’ and re-branded churches, on the other hand, have multiplied – which is why you are not on the way to a church building, but to the swimming pool at the local secondary school, which your group has hired for the morning. Normally you would meet in a private room in the pub in the next village. Apart from the small core group of you brought together by your minister to establish this new community, many of its twenty or so regulars are new to Christianity. Others severed their links with various churches long ago, having been hurt or alienated in various ways by their fellow Christians; but a renewed spiritual hunger has made them seek faith and worship again, and they find your community a safe place to explore Christian commitment once more.

At the beginning of this year, a young couple who have been part of your community for two years or so asked to be baptized. So you have used your meetings during Lent to explore the meaning of baptism and devise a baptismal liturgy together, and today your two catechumens will be baptized by immersion in the swimming pool, while you and some others will renew your baptismal vows and the whole group will promise to support the newly baptized couple in the next stages of their journey of faith.

And so, back in 2033...

As you think back over the past twenty years, you find yourself asking:

- Did we discern rightly what God was calling us to be and to do as a church?
- How faithful did we manage to be to our particular tradition: out of the things that were really important about the United Reformed Church, what did we keep and what did we lose?
- What gifts have we continued to offer our ecumenical partners and the wider society?
- What has proved exciting, invigorating and life-giving about the path we chose? What proved discouraging and life-draining?
- In our church now, what is still recognisable of the United Reformed Church as it was in 2013, or in 1972?

What answers would you give if each of (1) – (5) were the story you recalled of the twenty years since 2013?