



MISSION COUNCIL

13 – 15 MAY 2013

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Medium Term Strategy Group Initial Report - Our Scope

1 At its October 2012 meeting Mission Council set up a Medium Term Strategy Group: see October's Paper B and Minute 12.32 (now in the Resources section of the URC website). This is its first report.

Membership

2 In accordance with the criteria and procedure agreed by Mission Council, the Revd Dr Romilly Micklem and Ms Linda Austin have joined the General Secretary and the Treasurer to form the core group. Instead of one wider reference group, the core group proposes to consult with the stakeholders on each separate issue under consideration.

Comments Received

3 The October invitation for additional comments from Mission Council members to be sent to the General Secretary elicited responses from three people. They highlighted the primacy of the local church in its obedience to the Holy Spirit; the need for appropriate, lean and effective wider structures; and the importance of sustainability in resource planning. Their comments have informed the Group's thinking.

Exploring the Scope

4 The Group has spent time reviewing the extensive work done in the various reviews which led to its creation, in accordance with the first of its Terms of Reference. A very wide variety of interesting topics are covered. Recalling the comment at the October Mission Council that some people were confused as to how this Group fitted with all the other groups, we attempt in this paper some clarification about its proposed areas of activity.

5 It is clearly the case that almost all business brought to Mission Council by a particular Committee or Group has some potential knock-on effect elsewhere in the Church's life; and most decisions contain some element of "strategy". A strategy group could therefore be involved in everything and anything. That is not our understanding of how we can be most useful to the Church's mission.

6 Looking at the live issues brought to the 2012 Assembly and the areas where fresh answers are being sought, there are many subjects that can continue to be addressed by existing Committees and other denominational bodies. The spiritual health of the Church is being addressed in various ways by several Assembly Committees. However there are some issues, particularly in relation to the apparatus and structures through which we seek to support the work of local churches, which do not fit easily into the brief of any single existing group. And in these areas some good questions are being raised which cannot sensibly be addressed until other, prior questions have been answered.

7 We therefore suggest the Group should take a specific interest in subjects which meet all the following tests:

- are important to the life of the United Reformed Church; and
- have wide implications for the way local churches and the Councils of the Church do their work; and
- have a significant impact on the use of financial or personnel resources over the next 5-10 years; and
- do not fall specifically within the brief of any existing Assembly Committee or Mission Council Task Group.

The manner in which the Group would be involved would vary. For example, sometimes it might be co-ordinating the timetables of other pieces of work; sometimes it might be initiating work itself.

8 Looking at the work we have reviewed, examples of subjects that seem to us to meet these tests and on which the Church is seeking fresh thinking include:

- the pattern of our 13 Synods – on which we bring another paper to Mission Council
- the pattern of our Assembly Committees – on which we believe some work should be done once the staffing proposals for Church House are agreed
- the pattern of General Assembly – where we welcome the thinking of the Assembly Arrangements Committee being brought to this meeting of Mission Council and suggest that these and other changes are trialled in 2014 before any more wholesale review of our short experience of biennial Assemblies is undertaken
- the relationship between the URC Trust on the one hand and the General Assembly and the Mission Council on the other – on which we are asking initially for the URC Trustees to articulate current understandings
- the setting of longer term budgets – on which we do not envisage doing significant work until after the 2014 budget has been set.

9 On subjects where the Group identifies there could be value in it becoming involved, we would always welcome ideas, prayer support and inspirations from anywhere in the life of the Church and certainly including local churches and Synods. In addition, we would, in line with our Terms of Reference, seek to:

- ensure Assembly Committees and Task Groups with an interest were aware of our thinking and that we were not duplicating contributions they are equipped to make;
- advise Assembly Committees and Task Groups of ways for co-ordinating their work and offering other comment;
- seek to stimulate ideas on creative future options;
- consult the internal stakeholders and beyond;
- co-ordinate material coming to Mission Council for discussion and/or decision, in conjunction with the Mission Council Advisory Group;
- reflect carefully and prayerfully on the outcomes of Mission Council discussions;
- draw together coherent proposals for consideration at General Assembly meetings.

10 There are several subjects arising out of the work we reviewed where we believe other bodies can make progress without being dependent on the outcomes of work sketched above. Therefore in the Appendix we provide a summary of that work and invite Mission Council to note what is planned.

Resolution

Mission Council welcomes the initial report of the Medium Term Strategy Group and notes the planned work shown in the Appendix.

Appendix

Committee work arising from Paper B, Mission Council October 2012

The paper “Medium Term Planning in the United Reformed Church” which was presented to Mission Council by the general secretary in October 2012 proposed various pieces of work for the committees of the Church. Updates are given in italics at the end of each section.

Faith & 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? [A discussion for FAOC to facilitate at Mission Council]
- b. What is our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church? [ditto]
- 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: in particular, can we enable churches to die with dignity, recognising that this is natural?
- d. There is significant concern about the health of church meeting. [A discussion to share with the Medium Term Strategy Group]

Discussion (a) takes place at the May Mission Council. Discussion (b) is scheduled for November. Achieving good endings (c) will be in a report to the November Council from the Joint Property Strategy Group. FAOC wishes to consider church meetings within the context of an examination of vibrant conciliar life at all levels.

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?

The work on denominational structures is in hand. The Medium Term Strategy Group proposes that any work on the future of committees be deferred until after there is agreement on the pattern of central staff structures.

Ministries Committee

- a. 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?

This question perpetually underlies the work of the Ministries Committee. They continue to address it from a variety of angles, including their current work on ordained local ministry. This is also very much the concern of the Education & Learning Committee. See E&L’s recent promotion of the TLS (Training for Learning and Serving) programme, the development of online learning, and the ongoing offerings of the four resource centres for learning.

Mission Committee

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

The Mission Committee will be bringing proposals regarding evangelism to the November Mission Council meeting. They are addressing the issue of church planting principally through full participation in the Fresh Expressions initiative and ongoing support of migrant congregations.

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?

MCAG has had a first discussion on a process which integrates Mission Council planning with planning for the business of the Assembly over the full two year cycle. There is no enthusiasm for decision making other than in face-to-face meetings, but every possibility for consultation will be explored. Synods are encouraged to express their ideas and concerns in the form of papers for discussion at Mission Council. Synod issues are often channelled through the appropriate Assembly committees; this means that sometimes a synod initiative arrives at Mission Council appearing to have been introduced by a committee. Further thoughts would be welcome on the evolution of Mission Council into a body which truly provides a meeting place and discussion opportunity for concerns arising from the synods.

Medium Term Strategy Group – to enable decisions at Mission Council and General Assembly

- 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)?
- m. The relationship between the United Reformed Church and the URC Trust needs clarifying. What is the solution that will honour our core principles and conciliar convictions while reducing unnecessary duplication or governance overload?

Questions concerning the synods (a, c, d, f, h, l) are reflected in MTSG work brought to the May Mission Council. The role of the synod moderator (e, g) is scheduled for November. The 2014 Assembly will reflect lessons learned in 2012 (k) and it is proposed to defer a more thorough review (i, j) until afterwards. The URC Trust has commissioned a paper on the relationship between the Church and its Trust (m). This leaves only (b) which cannot be addressed until more fundamental issues concerning the synods are resolved.