



**MISSION COUNCIL**

**13 – 15 MAY 2013**

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## **Medium Term Strategy Group**

### **Even Better Synods**

#### **Purpose**

1 This paper is designed to promote a creative discussion about the future purpose and shape of synods.

#### **Process**

2 There is the possibility of the May Mission Council engaging in two substantial pieces of forward thinking. One comes from the Faith and Order Committee, inviting thoughts on how the United Reformed Church might express itself in future at local level. The Medium Term Strategy Group has encouraged this discussion as it is a fundamental building block for the work it has been asked to do. The Group has also prepared this paper which invites parallel thinking about how the synod structures of the Church might best support all those local expressions. Members of Mission Council are asked to consider it as part of their prayerful preparation for the Council meeting. Whether there will be opportunity for a full discussion of this paper at this Mission Council meeting depends on the progress of other business, not least the response to the Faith and Order paper. If it seems more helpful, the paper will be brought back at a later date.

3 In considering this work on synods, the Medium Term Strategy Group will naturally wish to consult the existing synods. However the Group feels that Mission Council, where representatives from all the synods meet and pray together and can learn of their very different synod experiences, should first help shape proposals for the whole Church. Then they can be offered to individual synods for comment from their own perspectives.

#### **Background**

4 In fulfilling its remit to review the output of various recent review processes, the Medium Term Strategy Group was struck by how many of the issues linked in some way to the future work of the URC synods and therefore also to their purpose in the Church's fifth decade. The questions being raised were summarised in paragraph 3 of last October's Mission Council Paper B and amplified in the discussion on the paper at the Council. They are briefly rehearsed here:

- What role do the synods play in *episcopal* oversight?
- What is the right balance between the various tasks laid upon synods?
- Should the role of Moderator be limited to, or more focused around, pastoral work?
- Who should exercise disciplinary roles?

- Should technical support services be provided centrally rather than from synods?
- Should the Synod Trusts, dealing mainly with finance and property, be centralised?
- Who should pay for the running costs of a synod?

## The Current Reality

- 5 Some key aspects of where the synods find themselves today include the following:
- (i) They are very different sizes: the largest has over three times as many members as the smallest; the smaller synods have fewer members and stipendiary ministers than the larger districts had in the 1970s.
  - (ii) There are distinct issues in the two national Synods of Wales and Scotland.
  - (iii) Since the ending of districts, the synods have evolved very different patterns: in some synods there are structured groupings that have regular meetings, their own Pastoral Committees and deployment responsibilities; in other synods the work has mainly been centralised.
  - (iv) In most churches the Synod Moderator and other synod staff are respected and readily used, especially as an emergency service.
  - (v) Many of the most innovative ministry posts in the Church, not least church-related community workers and Special Category Ministries, are devised and supported by synods.
  - (vi) Financial resources are very uneven: almost all synods now need proceeds from selling redundant buildings to cover their running costs but selling a property in one part of the country can produce several times the sum that selling the same property would produce in another area. The Inter-Synod Resource Sharing scheme is very dependent on the giving of just two synods.
  - (vii) Personnel resources are stretched: finding volunteers for synod posts is hard.
  - (viii) Costs of running the network of 13 synods are significant at around £4m per annum. There is a small but growing number of paid staff posts shared between adjoining synods.

## Vision for the Future

6 The Medium Term Strategy Group suggests the United Reformed Church needs to consider what sort of synods God now requires of us in order to support most effectively the mission of the Church.

7 The formal responsibilities of synods are set out in the Manual and reproduced in Appendix 1. As a list of items which the local church seeks from the wider Church, we detect no clamour for this list to be rewritten. However there are questions about whether all these functions are best located at synod level, and some of the work we reviewed envisaged certain tasks being moved to Assembly level. Hence the parallel list of the current tasks of the General Assembly is also given in Appendix 1 for reference.

8 Nonetheless it is evident that different synods have developed their work in different ways. We found the classification created at the meetings of the five northern synods very helpful in setting out the dimensions which every synod now seeks to provide in one way or another:

- (i) Service – meeting the perceived needs of the churches;
- (ii) Instrumental – providing a vehicle for the churches to do things together which they could not do for themselves, eg regional ecumenical relationships;
- (iii) Co-operative – enabling the churches to support one another through active networking;
- (iv) Governance – setting priorities, initiating programmes and managing resources.

9 We see the challenge now as being to rethink synods so that all these four dimensions can flourish but with the flexibility to recognise and welcome the diversity of emphasis in different parts of the denomination. We also believe we need a framework for synods that can be sustainable in terms of personnel and finance over a decade or more. That implies that the chosen patterns need to be able to be useful instruments of God's purposes whether the United Reformed Church continues to decline in membership quite rapidly or starts to grow again.

10 We also believe that the synods have a role in challenging local churches in fulfilling their local calling. This means a synod and its structures must remain more than just a provider of services. The creative use of ministerial deployment and the imaginative use of Local Ministry and Mission Reviews (LMMR) are two of the ways in which this challenge can be expressed, in line with the urging of General Assembly.

11 No detailed work has been done on any new synod model but, drawing on the thinking of various previous groups, we offer sketches of four different scenarios to promote Mission Council discussion. None of these are proposals or recommendations and certainly none of them would be without their complications. However each of them seems to us to have a degree of coherence and it would be very helpful to have a feel for where Mission Council senses the future might lie. This could then shape further work by the Group or others.

12 The four scenarios are attached as Appendix 2.

## **Questions for Discussion**

Q1 Are there any major additions you would wish to make to the summary of the current reality in paragraph 5 above?

Q2 If you were forced to choose only one of the four scenarios as the basis for our future pattern, which one of the four would it be?

Q3 What are the three most important amendments you would want to make to the scenario you chose in Q2 to improve it?

John Ellis  
23 March 2013

## APPENDIX 1

### A summary of the functions of the Synod and the General Assembly

This summary is offered for quick reference only. Wherever further detail is required, please refer to the Structure of the United Reformed Church, [http://www.urc.org.uk/images/the\\_manual/B%20%20Structure.pdf](http://www.urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/B%20%20Structure.pdf). And please note (a) that “ministers” includes CRCWs and (b) that references to district councils are correct!

**The Synod** is responsible for exercising the following Functions

(i) to take action which supports

- \* the spreading of the Gospel at home and abroad,
- \* the life and witness of the United Reformed Church,
- \* the interests of the Church of Christ as a whole,
- \* the well-being of the community in which the Church is placed;

(ii) to encourage church extension, new causes, mission projects;

(iii) to decide upon all matters regarding the grouping/amalgamation/dissolution of local churches;

(iv) to take appropriate action on matters referred to it by the General Assembly;

(v) to provide a forum for concerns brought forward by local churches;

(vi) to raise issues for consideration by the General Assembly;

(vii) to give concurrence in calls to ministers and to conduct ordinations, commissionings, and inductions;

(viii) to appoint interim moderators;

(ix) to care for the churches of the synod and conduct consultation visits at regular intervals;

(x) to appoint representatives to General Assembly;

(xi) to appoint the officers and members of the district council(s) within its boundaries;

(xii) to appoint [various listed categories of people] to service on synod;

(xiv) to devise mission strategies and encourage local churches in mission at home and abroad;

(xv) to exercise oversight of ministers and church related community workers;

(xvi) to oversee candidates for [the full range of] ministries and determine their eligibility for a call;

(xvii) to implement the ministerial disciplinary process and incapacity procedure as appropriate;

(xix) to appoint and review non-stipendiary ministers; to accredit, support and train lay preachers and worship leaders;

(xx) to give authority for appropriate lay persons to preside at the sacraments;

(xxi) to consider the resignation of ministers;

(xxii) to foster ecumenical life and witness in each local community, and in Scotland and Wales to undertake responsibility for national ecumenical relationships, under the authority of Assembly;

(xxiii) to decide upon all matters regarding erection/major reconstruction/disposal of buildings;

(xxiv) to receive, hear and decide upon references and appeals;

(xxv) to recommend ministry candidates;

(xxvi) to do such other things as may be necessary...

**General Assembly** is responsible for exercising the following Functions:

(i) to oversee the total work of the church;

(ii) to make decisions on reports and recommendations from its own committees, issue directions and take actions for the propagation of the gospel, the welfare of the URC, the interests of the Church of Christ as a whole and the well-being of the community in which the Church is placed;

(iii) to conduct and foster ecumenical relationships;

(iv) to support missionary work at home and abroad;

(v) to determine the standards and scope of training for ministers;

(vi) to recognise/oversee theological colleges;

(viii) to appoint moderators of synods;

(ix) to remit questions to church meetings, elders' meetings, district councils and synods, and to call for reports from these councils;

(x) to interpret the polity, practice and doctrine of the URC and determine when personal conviction is asserted to the injury of its unity and peace;

(xi) to alter, add to, modify or supersede the Basis and Structure;

(xii) to establish rules for its own proceedings and those of other councils/commissions;

(xiii) to appoint additional members to serve on synods;

(xiv) to make alterations to the boundaries of districts and synods;

- (xv) to consider and decide upon references and appeals;
- (xvi) to establish rules of procedure for referrals and appeals;
- (xvii) to admit ministers, probationers and congregations to the URC as recommended by synods;
- (xviii) to decide on applicants' inclusion on the Roll of Ministers and the Roll of CRCWs;
- (xix) to raise funds, pay stipends to ministers and attend to financial matters;
- (xx) to consider and decide upon issues transmitted by other councils of the URC;
- (xxi) to exercise specified functions within the ministerial disciplinary process and incapacity procedure;
- (xxvi) to do such other things as may be necessary...

## **APPENDIX 2: Alternative Scenarios**

### **Even Better Synods.....Scenario A: Small is Beautiful**

- Synod focus on pastoral care of churches
- Replace existing synods by 30 synods of around 50 churches each
- Each synod decides on deployment and pastoral issues in its area
- A half-time Synod Moderator exercising pastoral and managerial responsibilities
- Secretarial and admin support for the Moderator paid for by the synod churches
- Synod could employ other staff if churches choose to pay for them
- Technical support to churches (eg legal, Safeguarding) provided centrally and charged for to users
- Disciplinary roles centralised and charged to synods on basis of use
- Three regional trust bodies hold and administer investments and properties for about 10 synods each, with each synod represented on the trust body; grants given to synods for their work. Trust costs funded out of trust income.

### **Even Better Synods.....Scenario B: Fair Shares for All**

- Retain existing 13 synods, with synods continuing to provide pastoral support and services
- Full-time Moderator but with focus on pastoral work
- Full-time Manager with focus on synod staff, legal compliance and disciplinary processes in synod funded (as Moderators are now) from central M&M Fund
- Additional mission and technical staff in synod team at individual synod's discretion and paid for by synod
- Synod Trusts retain current responsibilities
- All synod investment income and 50% of all property sales income given to central Trust; 1/13<sup>th</sup> of the total proceeds from the 13 synods then handed back to each of them

### **Even Better Synods.....Scenario C: Streamlining the Infrastructure**

- Replace current synods by three Regions, perhaps Southern (old South Western, Wessex and Southern Synods; 19,000 members), Central (old Wales, West Midlands, East Midlands, Thames North and Eastern Synods; 22,000 members) and Northern (old Mersey, North Western, Yorkshire, Northern and Scotland Synods; 21,000 members)
- Each Region to have a full-time Moderator for inspirational spiritual leadership and strategic coherence, eg in leading URC engagement with the region
- Well-equipped regional offices (perhaps in Bristol, Birmingham and York) led by godly managers and with professional staff where local churches normally turn for support, with some core staff funded from M&M by reducing central staff in London
- Management and disciplinary issues dealt with by regional staff
- Within region regular pastoral matters handled by local groupings of around 10-20 churches with volunteer leadership
- Former Synod Trusts administered together in the region

### **Even Better Synods.....Scenario D: Minimising Disruption**

- Maintain the status quo where funds and personnel permit