

# Paper L1

The URC Trust

Church House –  
plans & prospects

Church 2015  
**United**  
Church **Reformed**  
**Church** Church 2015

# Paper L1



## The URC Trust

### Church House – Plans & Prospects

#### Basic Information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	Rev Dick Gray, convener of the Trust dickgray643@gmail.com
<b>Action required</b>	Outline approval, according to the resolutions below.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<p>a) <b>Mission Council accepts the view of the Trust that the URC can make good and efficient use of Church House for the foreseeable future, for the work that we need to do centrally;</b></p> <p>b) <b>Mission Council therefore asks the Trust to seek estimates for a limited project to remodel Church House, in ways that will improve access, the use of space and potential flexibility for letting;</b></p> <p>c) <b>Mission Council asks the Trust to report back, with a more precise scheme and clear financial information.</b></p>

#### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	To outline the approach the Trustees propose to take to the development and use of the URC's offices at 86 Tavistock Place.
<b>Main points</b>	The Trustees believe that our present office building can serve us well for the foreseeable future. They would like to explore a modest development plan to make the building more accessible, to make better use of the accommodation, and to allow us to let out part of the space, if the URC ever ceased to need it all.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Mission Council Paper L1, November 2014.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Mission Council, last November. There were previous enquiries about sharing space with other churches, which came to naught.

#### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	To explore the plan would probably cost £10K-20K in architect's fees; to implement it would cost at least a six-figure sum, for which future Mission Council approval would be sought. Any income that resulted would not be immediate, but might well extend over a very long period.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	We would remain in close proximity to most of our largest ecumenical partners.

# Church House – plans & prospects

1. In November 2014 members of the URC's Mission Council were invited to discuss Paper L1, from the URC Trust, which set out some thoughts about the possible development of Church House. Discussion was not decisive, and reasons for this may have included the following:
  - 1.1 Some members had not been party to earlier exploration of the matter, in the previous year or two.
  - 1.2 That earlier discussion had not itself reached any very sharp conclusions.
  - 1.3 A number of members did not know the building at all well.
  - 1.4 The matter was not perceived to be urgent.
  - 1.5 Capital investment would need to be heavy.
  - 1.6 There was clearly risk involved.
  
2. The Trust meeting in December 2014 accepted that a focused discussion at a central council of the Church would depend on more precise proposals, and also on proper advocacy of those aspects of the matter of which the Trust was persuaded. With that in mind, the Trust recalled that the building presently serves four main purposes:
  - 2.1 **Admin and Resources:** It provides a base for certain services that the Church expects to fulfill centrally: payroll, financial management, budgeting, pensions, retirement housing, planning and preparation for central councils, website, publications, *Reform*, media liaison, records management.
  - 2.2 **Discipleship:** It provides a centre where strategic decisions can be turned into programmes, oversight and action by staff who serve our congregations and synods: education and learning, crcw development, ministries, children's and youth work, safeguarding.
  - 2.3 **Relationships:** It provides a base from which we can relate to other bodies: other churches; international church visitors to the UK; government; various ecumenical groups; and financial bodies (who help us to steward our reserves).
  - 2.4 **Meetings:** It provides a venue for meetings, with good rail links to most of our territory. As a conciliar church, we value talking things over, drawing on expertise and opinion from around the Church and seeking wide ownership of what we do.  
Further ...
  - 2.5 A small number of the staff provide services to the building, rather than directly to the wider Church – most obviously cleaning, caretaking, reception and IT staff. Most of the others have a wide remit, and their regular professional work reaches well beyond the building.
  - 2.6 Most of this work is done better because it is all in one place – because, for example, Education and Learning can speak with Finance, HR with *Reform*, and Safeguarding with ecumenical colleagues. When we asked our committee conveners about location, they spoke strongly in favour of staff being close to one another. That helps to nurture a sense of teamwork and of service to the Church. Church House is constantly and deeply engaged with the whole URC. It has to be somewhere.
  
3. We have explored the idea of sharing space with another denomination, and drawn a blank. We have asked our two London synods about buildings we might move to, if Church House were judged unsuitable. Nothing suitable and accessible comes to their mind. There does not seem much sense in selling and buying on the London market. The purchase cost would be pretty close to the market value of our building, especially if we needed to do any work at all to adapt new premises to our particular needs.

4. We could think of moving to another city. That would involve a hefty transition cost, not least because many staff would not follow us. It would distance us from some relationships that matter to us, and – although it is not central – London still seems to be the most convenient transport hub for meetings. Moving is not unthinkable; but it would be difficult, and there is no clear case or obvious destination in sight.
5. There is a good case for staying in Church House. It is not grossly unsuitable. We could imagine it being made more suitable, but this is not an urgent need. We own it. It doesn't feel smart and fresh, but nor is it tatty. We do not foresee costly or major repairs in the next few years. We use the building fairly fully. It is handy for several major rail links. It is near to some of our closest ecumenical partners. Yet, for all this, there are three reasons why it does not entirely suit us:
  - 5.1 It is not disability-friendly. Three quarters of the building is only accessed by stairs.
  - 5.2 It does not use space very tightly, as it has a lot of small, separate offices and some wide corridors.
  - 5.3 It is not at present easy to partition. If our needs were to reduce, we could not – on the present layout – rent out the portion we did not need. But some quite modest alterations would allow this, by making each floor separate and independent of the others.
6. If we wanted to resolve all three points above, we should need a substantial building project, to reshape a good deal of the interior of Church House. We could probably find the capital to do this, if we built a floor or two of flats on the roof, and marketed these. Committing to that work would not be without trouble and risk, and November's Mission Council did not exhibit much enthusiasm for it.
7. So could we undertake instead a more conservative building project, to put a lift into Church House, and to make it possible to separate the three main floors? Then we could consider letting a floor, if we ever ceased to need it. This would address 5.1 and 5.3, at least. We also could remodel the basement modestly, and make some inert space work better for us. We do not know how much all this would cost, because we have not asked, but it would surely cost far less than extending high above the roof. It would not have, in the short term, an obvious income stream to offset the necessary capital investment, but in the medium and long term it would give us flexibility to let out floor space that we did not need.
8. Church House is not, as an annual budget item, a vast expense. We need to do some work centrally, and we need a place for the people who do it. Certainly we could save some space if we held more of our meetings through audio or video links, although we realise that not every meeting works well in this format. We might also save on record and archive storage, if we moved this out of London or put it on to electronic media. In the context of the House as a whole, while saving on meetings and storage would be worth doing, it would not be a grand solution to anything. But it would free some space, and that in turn might help part of the building to earn money for us.
9. In summary:
  - 9.1 We shall need some central staff and some regular meetings in the decades ahead, even if the present complement and pattern change.
  - 9.2 There is a lot of benefit in staff working together.
  - 9.3 There are many advantages in being where we are, and the Trust cannot see a strong case for another venue.
  - 9.4 We could either improve the building quite radically, and solve all three problems listed in 5 above.
  - 9.5 Or we could seek estimates for a more limited job, that would solve 5.1 and 5.3, but not 5.2, and for which we should need to find the capital ourselves.
  - 9.6 The Trust would like to explore 9.5, and recommends accordingly.