

Paper 15

Mission Committee

Issues for the URC arising from
the consultation on the document
'A New Framework for Local Unity
in Mission'

United Church 2017
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Reformed Church 2017
Church 2017



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Basic Information

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Action required	Discussion and advice on expanding and advancing the issues identified.
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	The New Frameworks document raises issues both for ecumenical co-operation and for individual denominations. To identify issues for future strategy and advise on how and when those issues should be responded to.
Main points	There are trends and ecumenical decisions that are being and will be made in which the URC needs to engage. Because of these there are also strategic decisions which the Church may need to make in order to respond or take creative initiatives.
Previous relevant documents	A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission
Consultation has taken place with...	24 Hour consultation of synod representatives. Mission Committee Faith and order Committee

Summary of Impact

Financial	To be determined. None at this stage.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Relationships and co-operation with ecumenical partners.

Issues for the URC arising from the consultation on the document 'A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission'

1. Preamble

This is a starter document which others are invited to develop.

The consultation identified and to a limited degree discussed various issues for the URC in particular, arising from the consultation. The overall responsibility for ecumenical relations lies with the Mission Committee and many of the areas lay specifically within its remit but some of the issues are also clearly related to other areas of responsibility. These other responsibilities are indicated in italics in the notes following.

Please also note that the notes are essentially pointers and not attempts to expand or explore the issues except where it has seemed necessary to make the note clearer.

The abbreviation SER refers to the Staff Secretary (Secretary for Ecumenical Relations) and ERG to the Ecumenical Reference Group and is indicated where the particular responsibility for responding lies with that post.

2. LEPs

What do we, as the URC, expect there to be in LEPs. This is related to our sense of identity.

How do we respond to the issue identified in the response to CTE of 'United Churches' ? i.e. those LEPs that do not see themselves as partnerships but as single entity churches.

Eldership (*Ministries*)
Church Meeting

3. Oversight and reviews (*Ministries*)

There is an important question of the provision of training for reviewers and the provision of resources with which to carry out reviews.

LMMR: There could be a review of how this is applied. There is the opportunity for experience sharing.

Staffing Consultative Groups – in some places these have ceased to operate and need to be re-established. (*SER*)

Relationships with new ecumenical partners (e.g. Pentecostals, migrant churches)

Guidelines on good hosting / good practice is necessary and issues such as how to form a covenant.

Synods need to find out which churches are hosting which groups and this should be mapped across the country in order to be able to provide appropriate support and to learn from the experiences. So there needs to be a high degree of local and synod awareness of developments.

There needs to be a good level of knowledge about the new partners. What kind of partnerships may or may not be possible or appropriate. There may be issues of acceptability based on doctrinal or pastoral grounds. There is also the question of the authority of General Assembly in establishing a 'URC position' on particular issues. (*Faith and Order*)

There needs to be a centralisation of information for the sharing of wisdom. (*Discussion with Communications*)

4. Membership in LEPs

There are several issues: (*SER and ERG*)

In some LEPs the URC is almost invisible.

Who controls the assets?

Should we remain involved in or leave certain LEPs? How do we decide?

There is the legal issue of identifying URC people who need to make URC decisions.

We need to 'firm up' our identity. Trust law needs to be clarified.

Crucially we need to be able to clarify 'how membership works' in LEPs. What does it mean for different traditions and how / if it is possible to belong to more than one denomination?

5. Fresh Expressions and Church planting

We need to revisit our 'policy' on only planting churches ecumenically. [Comment from the Secretary of the Mission Committee: this is not an official URC policy, but a particular interpretation of an Assembly decision many years ago.]

There is a need for strategic thinking and planning for both.

6. Sharing of ministry (*Ministries*)

The question of fixed term appointments needs to be clarified. There is inconsistency. How long should a fixed term be agreed for?

There needs to be a balance between the URC and Synod approach to the terms.

The commitment of ministers to working ecumenically / in an LEP.

There needs to be better training on 'being ecumenical'. This needs to be linked with the colleges. (What about the next version of TLS?) (*Education and Learning*)

The 'Welcome to the URC' course could be reviewed (there are mixed experiences about its usefulness) (*Education and Learning*)

The mentoring of ministers is important (The document is being re-written) (*Ministries*)

7. Mission and Structure

The CTE page on the requirements of the URC in LEPs needs updating. It needs to contain reference to lay ministry and to 'URC gifts'. This needs to be done centrally. (*SER and ERG*)

There is a need to collect evidence of where ecumenical 'investment' has worked on the ground (for an example see Cumbria). (*Discussion with Communications*)

Episcopacy will need to be revisited at some point. (*Faith and Order*)

The personal liability of trustees needs clarifying and there needs to be guidance on the recruiting and training of trustees. (*Law and Polity Advisory Group*)

The visionary question of 'what do we believe the church to be?' (*Communications are dealing with this but conversation with Faith and Order*)

How do we recognise non-traditional ministers? Do we need greater flexibility in deployment? (*Ministries*)

Appendix

The following comments were received from John Bremner in response to the consultation report. They are appropriate to the continued conversation and are therefore reproduced here.

I was particularly concerned about the two paragraphs below:

1. *'We believe that the search for and growth of ecumenical partnership at local, intermediate and denominational level needs to be given as much encouragement and support as possible. We recognise that our structures and patterns are expressions of identity and may contain deeply embedded patterns but also acknowledge that these may sometimes be obstacles to unity in mission and as such we should be prepared to question, challenge and as necessary change them.'*
2. *'This challenge comes to the church at all levels and often extends to denominational leadership in particular, to make ecumenical cooperation the highest priority, recognising that in all our traditions that is not always the case. We believe that this is not a time to withdraw into denominational bunkers. This has implications both for the initial training of clergy in ecumenism and for appropriate continuing professional development, especially at times of movement into leadership roles.'*

It is, of course, true that the primary 'raison d'être' of the United Reformed Church is the search for unity within the Church universal; but it is also true that we are a Reformed Church and, as such, believe that our particular tradition has things of value to offer to the wider Church. We therefore need to be very careful when we are talking about those '*structures and patterns (which) are expressions of identity*'.

During the Consultation, the General Secretary outlined the five criteria which are essential if the United Reformed Church is to enter into any ecumenical partnership, these criteria being: Eldership, Church Meeting, Baptism of both believers and infants, the ministry of Word and Sacraments and a coherent relationship with the wider Councils of the Church. It seems to me that we must be much more careful about how we evaluate the relationship between our core values as a church committed to the ecumenical road and as a church which understands itself to be part of a tradition (the Reformed tradition) which has much to offer the wider Church.

It is also clear that the CTE 'New Frameworks' document is pointing us to some major challenges to established ecumenical thinking. The habit of launching out into experimental activity in the hope that some future church union (or some as yet unknown breakthrough in understanding) will sweep away the bothersome minutiae of ecumenical problems has to be changed into a much more honest approach to the divergences in ecclesiology which exist between us and many of our partners. The Consultation itself was warned that the Charity regulators, both north and south of the Border, are no longer willing to turn a blind eye to fudges regarding financial responsibility, which so often arise because of these divergences, and we owe it to future generations to address these and other concerns. So whilst this is not the time (is it ever the time?) '*to withdraw into denominational bunkers*', neither is it the time '*to carry on regardless*'. To ignore the very real challenges which are now apparent would be tantamount to burying our heads in the sand, when what is really required is a thorough assessment of what has been achieved and what the obstacles are to moving forward.