

# Paper 16

Mission Committee

Not Strangers but Fellow Travellers

United Church 2017  
Church 2017  
Reformed Church 2017  
Church 2017



# Paper I6

## Mission Committee

### Not strangers but fellow travellers: United Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue

#### Basic Information

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<b>Action required</b>	Take note
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>None</b>

#### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	Report of the second phase of bilateral dialogue with the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales
<b>Main points</b>	Mission Committee has received and commended the work of the dialogue group and approved the move to a third phase of work to commence in 2018.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Report of phase one of the dialogue submitted in 2012
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Mission Committee Faith and Order Committee

#### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	Travel and meeting costs for group members
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	Continued and improved relations with Roman Catholic Church

## United Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue

1. For the last decade a representative group from the United Reformed Church has met for dialogue on matters of Christian faith and practice with a group representing the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. The dialogue has worked in five-year phases, and a report on the second phase has recently been submitted by the members of the dialogue to the URC's Mission Committee. This report is set out in full below, under the title 'Not Strangers but fellow Travellers'.
2. Members of the dialogue have found the experience fruitful and believe it is of value to the Churches that commissioned it. They have therefore urged that a third phase be commissioned. The Mission Committee has the authority and budget to respond to this request on behalf of the United Reformed Church, and it has approved the move to a third phase of the work, to commence in 2018.
3. No decision is needed from Mission Council about this. The report is put before Mission Council because it is a matter of interest and importance.

## Not strangers but fellow travellers

1. At an ecumenical encounter in Malmo, Sweden, in October 2016 Pope Francis commented: *'We remember [the Lutheran Reformation]... with a renewed spirit and in the recognition that Christian unity is a priority, because we realise that much more unites us than separates us. The journey we have undertaken to attain that unity is itself a great gift that God gives us.'*
2. In the 2016 General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, Rev Kevin Watson, current Moderator of Assembly, encouraged the URC to become 'people of the way': *'Go plant your footprint, one step at a time into your community; walk with your neighbour and you will find the living Lord Jesus walking with you and ahead of you.'*
3. The metaphor of pilgrimage is nothing new in the Christian life or even the ecumenical venture. It may however be significant that it has recently been used by leaders representing both our traditions (see above). The second phase of discussion between the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales and the United Reformed Church described below can no longer be seen as the beginning of our walk together as churches, but it may helpfully be understood under the rubric of 'conversations on the way'. As a URC contributor commented: *'We... saw [through the first phase] that the idea of travelling together was one of the most popular images of the way in which our local relationships have matured.'*

### Conversations on the way

4. The first five years of dialogue explored overarching theological themes of our two traditions. This second five-year phase focussed more closely on how our Christian journey is experienced at ground level. As one of our co-chairs commented: *'In the first phase we discussed together what it meant to us to belong to the local church; and those discussions were lively as well as sharing with one another at a deep level. Nevertheless, precisely because the question was, 'What does belonging to the church mean to me?' we did not engage in a great deal of description of the life of the local congregation. Much of this we so much take for granted that we never think it necessary to describe or explain it; yet it is precisely in these differences of local practice, which we all take for granted, that some of our most significant assumptions about the nature of the Church, and particularly the local congregation, lie.'*
6. The report of the first phase was drafted by David Thompson and made available in January 2012. Its introduction describes the reason for and history of the beginning of the dialogue;
 

*'The Committee for Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales under the late Bishop Michael Evans suggested that the scope of the Catholic Church's ecumenical conversations be widened beyond the discussions with the Anglicans and the Methodists to include the United Reformed Church. The URC welcomed the approach in 2006, and two Co-chairs and Co-Secretaries were appointed to plan the work for an initial period of five years. We knew that there were international links between us, but nothing at the national level; we also knew that in several places, particularly, but not only, new housing areas, there were areas of mission where we are closer than perhaps we think.'*

7. This second report, therefore, describes the second five-year stage of dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales and the United Reformed Church, taking place between 2012 and 2016. There has been both continuity and change among the dialogue participants. Archbishop Bernard Longley and the Revd Professor David Thompson have continued to be our co-chairs, and Mgr Timothy Galligan and Revd David Tatem our co-secretaries. Malcolm Townsend was replaced in 2012 by Revd Lindsey Sanderson, minister in pastoral charge of the URC congregations of Righead and East Mains in Scotland, while on the Roman Catholic side Anne Doyle was replaced in 2015 by Canon John O'Toole, the National Ecumenical Officer for the Catholic Church in England and Wales. An approach was made to the Bishops Conference of Scotland which has not yet resulted in a Scottish Roman Catholic member of the dialogue.
8. We have continued to meet twice a year for 24-hour sessions at different locations within England and Wales, usually connected with one or other of our traditions, sharing morning and evening prayer and a celebration of the Eucharist alternating according to the form of each Church, as well as hearing something of work done locally within the hosting community. This social and liturgical framework has continued to promote fellowship as well as dialogue between us. Initial plans to look more closely at current working examples of ecumenical cooperation between our traditions (e.g., in Milton Keynes or Cokerkmouth), however, came to nothing – maybe this is something that a third phase of dialogue could pursue (see below).
9. Starting from an examination of congregational life at the local level, we have explored similarities and differences (sometimes both exhibited in the same instance) in our local practices.

We have reflected on how we understand and value in our churches: Scripture; the Eucharist; ministries; baptism; marriage; and sacramentality more generally.

This approach resonates with the spirit of Receptive Ecumenism, which we encountered in the first five years of dialogue through input from the Receptive Ecumenism project at Durham University); [1] as well as with a recent Churches Together in England leaflet *Sharing our Spiritual Treasures* [2], which suggests as a format for local ecumenical discussion:

- Bring to the meeting something which is significant for you, and which you want to share.
- Say why the contribution you have brought is important to you.
- Listen to other people without comment.
- Reflect on the spiritual treasures that people have shared. Have any of them chimed with your experiences, or have they been different?

## 10. Similarities

### a) Mutual struggles

1. As in our previous dialogues, we have identified similarities in the way both our traditions are endeavouring to relate to the surrounding culture, both in the experience of not being state churches and also noting the countercultural experience of living as people of faith in a post-Christian society.

2. In our divided world it can be hard for each of our traditions to maintain and strengthen a sense of community. The increasing arrival of migrants in both our churches (e.g Polish Catholics, Ghanaian Presbyterians) with their own experiences of being church can strengthen or fragment more established indigenous communities of faith.
3. Though we approach authoritative interpretation of the Bible from somewhat different perspectives (see also below), for both traditions, the reception of Scripture may be less than ideal among our local congregations.  
     RC member: *'Many Catholics may not be reading / praying scripture in their personal life as they may not feel that this is what they are called to do.'*  
     URC member: *'Many URC people are afraid to expose how little they know about the Bible.'*
4. We are grappling with an increasing shortage of ordained ministers, and the consequent necessity, practically as well as theologically driven, of greater lay participation in both our churches. This requires responding to an overdependence on ordained clergy in both traditions.

b) Mutual encouragement

1. Our core understandings of Baptism (immersion or the threefold pouring/sprinkling of water, with the Trinitarian invocation) are mutually recognised and recognisable; a RC participant commented: *'this helped to correct the misconception that in the URC "anything goes".'*
2. A URC participant reflected on understandings of marriage: There are differences in particular practice [e.g., varying positions between our churches on the use of annulment, divorce, remarriage]. Is the rationale behind these practices as different as the practices themselves are? The URC does not adopt a policy of 'anything goes' but normally expects one of the partners to be a member of or attendee at a United Reformed Church. Similarly, with the possibility of dispensations, the Catholic Church does not have a policy of 'nothing goes unless certain other conditions are met'.
3. 'Sacraments emerge and are possible because God's creation is full of signs, some natural, some human activities; this makes it possible to take certain signs and endow them as specific sacraments'. At the same time, sacraments are about relationships, with God and with one another. The reformed tradition has always wanted to stress this to avoid any possible mechanistic view of sacraments. The social position of RC priests and URC ministers within the local community can be very similar, and both can still play an effective role within largely secular society.

## 11. Differences – both actual and perceived

11.1 The group found that a useful method of discussion was to be honest about the caricatures of each other's positions that sometimes existed in local churches, and to move from there to a discovery of what each church actually believed or did. In some parts of Britain there is little contact between our church traditions, which proceed in parallel; in other places the relationship is close. We also often inherit mutual suspicion and caricatures of each other rather than true understanding. These differences, actual or merely perceived, can helpfully be addressed, as one of our URC members has suggested, under three headings: authority, liturgy and ministry.

## a) Authority

1. From the RC point of view, Scripture and sacred tradition make up a single deposit of the Word of God, interpreted by an acknowledged teaching authority. In the interpretation of Scripture, it was asked from a RC perspective, how without such an authority could one be sure of correct understanding? All interpretation is provisional and subject to correction, came a URC response, referencing the question of slavery in the Bible.
2. For the URC authority, subject to the Word of God, lies in councils within the local church, the region and ultimately General Assembly. The local minister represents the wider United Reformed Church in the local community. For Roman Catholics the focus of unity and authority alike is the diocesan bishop, acting as a member of the college of bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome. The local priest acts as the bishop's representative in the parish.
3. It is too easy to caricature each other's positions on authority! URC can hold that RCs have no mind of their own and just do what they are told, and that all children must be brought up in the Catholic tradition. RCs can imagine URCs believe what they like – anything or nothing!

## b) Liturgy

1. In Catholic worship, the Mass obviously plays a more central role than Holy Communion does for the URC:
2. RC member: *some Catholics might say 'As a community, how do we witness? We go to Mass!'*
3. Within the URC, preaching of the word and Holy Communion are regarded as equally sacramental while social action beyond worship is also viewed as part of the church's witness.
4. URC member: *Presence is a witness in a busy [city-centre] place.*
5. Though officially baptism is mutually recognised (see above), baptism as a 'Catholic' may be required to enable entry of children into a Catholic school if there is great demand for places.
6. In caricature mode, URCs can sometimes be suspicious of what they see as 'magic' words in the Mass and apparent superstition relating to sacramental practices; and may ask themselves why there is ritual but no freedom in worship; yet there is no celebration of Holy Communion in the URC that would not include the words of institution. RCs can suspect that URC ministers and other worship-leaders are permitted to make their liturgy up as they go along.

## c) Ministry

1. Apart from the obvious difference in gender roles in our churches' ordained ministry, although both have a variety of ordained and non-ordained ministries, trying to make direct comparisons is unhelpful, even though there are similarities in the training procedure for priests and ministers. For the URC, there is less focus on continuity

through individuals: ordination is carried out by a council where continuity is to be found. There is a clear difference in the call and appointment of priests / ministers, and differences too in disciplinary procedures. A RC member commented on the URC emphasis on the role ministers have in enabling the gifts of others. The Catholic focus on this is not perhaps so strongly highlighted.

2. Caricatures of our differing positions can hold here too. At local level URCs can perceive that the Roman Catholic Church sees itself as big enough not to bother with ecumenism. RCs can hold that URC ordination is not valid and its ministers only work on Sundays.

## 12. Where do we go from here?

1. After ten years of dialogue, it is time to check our bearings. If there is to be a third phase of dialogue, it is noted that most members of the group will be standing down for various reasons, though it is hoped a few exceptions will allow some continuity. Input from both Wales and Scotland has been much appreciated and it is hoped that this will continue in the third phase.
2. A third five-year stage of dialogue could helpfully be tasked with producing resources for use in local ecumenical conversations, building on the pattern of similarities and differences offered in this report. It might also be worth drawing others beyond the immediate group into the process – for example, encouraging schools as well as local churches to reflect on RC-URC relations, and also building on the already flourishing teaching relationship between the Margaret Beaufort Institute and Westminster College in Cambridge[3]. It was noted that there are few examples of such bilateral dialogue; most ecumenical situations generally involve more than two partners. A URC participant highlighted the greater complications inherent in multilateral dialogue.
3. A RC participant commented that there has been a shift in our relationship as dialogue participants, during our journey together, from ‘face to face’ to ‘side by side’. It is to be hoped that further dialogue will build on this achievement and share it more widely.

### *Membership of the Group*

#### *Roman Catholic*

Fr Colin Carr, OP, ecumenical theological consultant to the North East of England Churches

Ms Anne Doyle, member of the Catholic Bishops' Conference Committee for Christian Unity (until 2014)

Mgr Timothy Galligan (Co-Secretary), Parish Priest at Bearsted (2006-11) and Battersea (since 2011)

The Most Revd Bernard Longley, Archbishop of Birmingham (Co-Chair)

Sr Dr Patricia McDonald, SHCJ, The Pontifical Beda College, Rome.

Canon John O'Toole, the National Ecumenical Officer for the Catholic Church in England and Wales (since 2015)

Dr Clare Watkins. Lecturer in Ministerial Theology, University of Roehampton.



*United Reformed*

The Revd Dr John Bradbury, Vice Principal, Westminster College, Cambridge  
The Revd Dr Sarah Hall, Minister of the South-West Hants Group of URC churches,  
Southampton

Ms Ann Shillaker, Elder, Trinity URC/Methodist Church, Porthcawl. A URC  
representative on the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales

The Revd Lindsey Sanderson, Minister of Righead and East Mains URCs

The Revd David Tatem, Secretary for Ecumenical Relations (Co-Secretary)

The Revd Professor David Thompson, Emeritus Professor of Modern Church History,  
University of Cambridge (Co-Chair)

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[1]

(<https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/constructivetheology/receptiveecumenism>)

[2]

[http://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/240589/Home/Resources/Local\\_Ecumenism/Resources\\_for\\_local/Sharing\\_our\\_Spiritual/Sharing\\_our\\_Spiritual.aspx](http://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/240589/Home/Resources/Local_Ecumenism/Resources_for_local/Sharing_our_Spiritual/Sharing_our_Spiritual.aspx)

[3] It is suggested that the next group might involve one participant each from Westminster College and the Margaret Beaufort Institute.

