

Paper Y1

Private members' resolution

Moderators and Clerks of the Mersey and North Western Synods. Proposer: Brian Jolly; seconder: Jacky Embrey

The Future of Lay Training in the URC and, in that context, the Future of the Windermere Centre

United Church 2017
Church 2017
Reformed Church 2017
Church 2017



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Basic Information

Contact	Brian Jolly brianjolly322@btinternet.com
Actions required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Mission Council:</p> <p>a) believes that there is an increasingly apparent and urgent need for a viable, costed strategy for lay training and congregational development across the URC, and calls for the development of such a strategy;</p> <p>b) agrees that this strategy needs to take account of existing lay training and development resources and opportunities available within and beyond the URC and needs to be sensitive to the varied geography and the uneven distribution of financial and human resources across the Synods;</p> <p>c) asks the Education and Learning Committee to facilitate the development of this strategy, with the active involvement of relevant people from the Synods and the URC Resource Centres for Learning;</p> <p>d) recognises that such training and development needs to be delivered in a variety of ways which are likely to include on-line, face to face and residential components; it must be easily accessible to all in the URC; and it is therefore likely to require the use of several locations across our three nations;</p> <p>e) agrees that the Windermere Centre should continue to operate as one of the URC Resource Centres for Learning while this strategy is being developed and agrees that during this period the primary foci of the work of the Centre should be on providing hospitality to URC people and events and on the development of its commercial hospitality business; and</p> <p>f) welcomes the generous offer from North Western Synod of up to £250,000 over three years to reduce the net cost of the Windermere Centre to the URC during this period of review.</p>

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	Subject: Lay training and congregational development in the URC and, in that context, the future of the Windermere Centre. Aim: A good process that will produce a lay training strategy for the URC, after which the future of the Windermere Centre can be properly considered.
Main points	This resolution recognises the need for the development of a coherent and comprehensive strategy for lay training and congregational development across the URC and, in that context, proposes that the Windermere Centre should continue as a URC Resource Centre for Learning while that strategy is being developed and agreed.
Previous relevant documents	Mission Council, November 2015, Paper D1 and Minute 15.34 Mission Council, October 2016, Paper D1 and Minute 16.58
Consultation has taken place with...	The future of the Windermere Centre has been under review by the Education and Learning and Finance Committees since the October 2016 meeting of Mission Council. However, this review has not included adequate consultation with the Synods and the consultation period ended prior to any of the spring Synod meetings. This resolution reflects resolutions passed at the March 2017 meetings of Mersey and North Western Synods. These Synod resolutions, with the reports that accompanied them, are attached to this paper as appendices.

Summary of Impact

Financial	It is hoped that the financial support offered by the North Western Synod will keep the net cost of the Windermere Centre to the central URC budget below the level previously agreed by Mission Council for 2017 and 2018. It may also allow for some of that budget to be spent on other lay training provision (including <i>Walking the Way</i>) during the period of development of a comprehensive lay training strategy. Other Synods, in particular Mersey, may be willing to contribute to or add to this financial support. There has been no opportunity to discuss this.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	The development of a strategy for lay training and congregational development across the URC should include consideration of where and by whom that strategy should be delivered, including the URC Resource Centres for Learning, and other URC and ecumenical facilities and resources.

The Future of Lay Training in the URC and, in that context, the Future of the Windermere Centre

1 Format and content of this paper

1.1 This paper comes to Mission Council on behalf of Mersey and North Western Synods. Both Synods passed relevant resolutions at their March 2017 meetings. The officers of the two Synods have worked together on this joint paper, following advice from the General Secretary that Mission Council would find it easier to deal with one paper with resolution(s) rather than separate papers with different resolutions covering similar ground.

1.2 The constraints of process and timetable mean that this paper is actually presented to Mission Council by the Moderators and Clerks of Mersey and North Western Synods in their capacity as personal members of Mission Council.

1.3 The Mersey Synod met on 11 March 2017. In response to a request made at the previous meeting of Synod (following the reporting of the October 2016 meeting of Mission Council) for a discussion on the future of the Windermere Centre, its Executive Committee had prepared a draft resolution from the Mersey Synod for Mission Council. This resolution was, after debate and some slight amendments, passed by Synod. The report from the Mersey Synod Executive to its Synod in March 2017 and the resolution passed by that meeting of Mersey Synod are attached to this report as Appendix One.

1.4 Officers of the North Western Synod had a long awaited meeting with Assembly staff in London on 16 March 2017. It was only after this meeting that the Synod Executive Committee could finalise a report plus resolutions for the North Western Synod meeting on 25 March 2017. These were Synod resolutions but they included permission given to the Synod officers to frame appropriate resolution(s) for the forthcoming meeting of Mission Council. The two reports from the North Western Synod Executive to the March 2017 meeting of its Synod and the resolutions passed by North Western Synod at that meeting are attached to this report as Appendix Two.

1.5 It was only after the meeting of the North Western Synod on 25 March that it was possible for the officers of the two Synods to start talking about the possibility of making a joint presentation to Mission Council. Although there was no problem in principle, the format of the Mersey Synod resolution made this problematic. After consultation with the General Secretary and the Clerk to Assembly it was agreed that this joint paper could be presented with the two separate Synod reports and resolutions attached as appendices. This will enable members of Mission Council to read those reports as background to this paper, and it will enable members of the two Synods to see that this paper is consistent with and true to the resolutions passed by Mersey and North Western Synods at their March 2017 meetings.

2 It is too soon for a 'final decision' on the future of the Windermere Centre

2.1 In October 2016, Mission Council resolved that a 'final decision' about the future of the Windermere Centre should be made at its meeting in May 2017. There is no decision

that would truly be final apart from a decision to close the Centre. We strongly believe that, for a number of reasons, it is too soon for such a decision.

2.2 The process and timetable during and since the October 2016 meeting of Mission Council have felt as though the decision to close the Windermere Centre has already been taken when that is not the case. It is apparent that the Education and Learning and Finance Committees came to a settled view on this matter in December 2016. Alternative views have been received and published but there has been no real dialogue with those wanting to consider other options.

2.3 In the same resolution of the October 2016 meeting of Mission Council, the Finance and Education and Learning Committees were instructed to look at the implications of ceasing to use the Windermere Centre, “mindful of the need to consult with [among others] the North Western Synod”. Requests from officers of the North Western Synod for a meeting with relevant Assembly personnel eventually resulted in such a meeting taking place on 16 March. This was after the official deadline for papers for the May 2017 meeting of Mission Council (we are grateful for the extra time we have been given) and after the papers for the Synod’s March 2017 meeting had been issued. It meant that there has been no opportunity for North Western Synod to discuss this matter with the other northerly synods, except for this very late co-operation with Mersey Synod over this paper. This process feels very different from the one recently used in relation to the Westminster College appeal.

2.4 This has been a seriously faulty process which could have been so much better had Assembly staff and Synod officers been able to work together towards an agreed outcome. If an inevitably controversial decision is taken after such a flawed process, there is a real risk of serious fracture in relationships within and across the denomination.

2.5 We have been told that one good reason for making a decision to close the Windermere Centre at the May 2017 meeting of Mission Council is that it would remove the uncertainty for the staff. We find it incredible that the uncertainty for the staff created by the actions of Mission Council in October 2016 is now offered as justification for a decision which the Windermere Centre staff definitely do not want.

2.6 The most important reason why it is too soon for a decision to close the Windermere Centre is that we do not have an agreed strategy for lay training and development in the United Reformed Church. We, therefore, don’t know what the future use of the Centre by the denomination might be. It is our view that such a strategy needs to be developed and agreed before a proper discussion about the future of the Centre can take place.

3 Lay Training and Congregational Development in the United Reformed Church

3.1 It is our view that there is a clear and urgent need for a viable, costed strategy for lay training and congregational development across the United Reformed Church. Some of the factors that suggest the need for such a strategy are: the URC’s major drive towards developing the missional discipleship of all its members and congregations under the banner of *‘Walking the Way’*; the work being done on a replacement of the very successful *‘Training for Learning and Serving’* programme; the much talked about significant and rapid decline in the number of deployable stipendiary ministers in the URC; and the disparity among synods in their ability to provide their own resources to support lay training and development.

3.2 The aim of such a strategy should be, so far as possible, to provide equal access for every member and congregation of the URC to high quality training that meets their particular needs. It is likely that such provision will require a mixture of on-line, residential and locally delivered face-to-face opportunities. This is likely to need a number of locations around the

country where face-to-face and residential training can be provided. (For example, Westminster College is no easier to access from the north-west than the Windermere Centre is to access from the south-east.)

3.3 The main responsibility for facilitating the development of this strategy will be with the appropriate Assembly committee, but it is vital that there is proper consultation with and appropriate involvement of the Synods and the Resource Centres for Learning as well as other potential partners. It is also crucial that such a strategy embrace the training and development resources and materials that already exist within and beyond the denomination.

3.4 It is our view that it could take up to two years to develop and agree such a strategy. It is also our view that it would be inappropriate and unwise to make any change to the status of the Windermere Centre while this work is being done.

4 Practical and financial issues

4.1 We are aware that both the current Transitional / Interim Director and the Operations Manager of the Windermere Centre are on short-term contracts that are about to end.

4.2 We have argued that there should be no change in the status of the Windermere Centre while a lay training strategy for the denomination is being developed. On the other hand, it seems to us that it would also not make sense to invest a lot of time or money during this period in growing the Windermere Centre's own programme of training courses. It would be better during this period for the Windermere Centre to focus on providing hospitality to other people from the URC who want to provide or facilitate training at the Centre. That suggests to us that it is probably not necessary to appoint a new Director of the Windermere Centre at this time, but instead to cover such residual responsibilities as there are in other ways until the lay training strategy has been developed, and its implications for the Windermere Centre are known.

4.3 It is our view that the other major focus of the Windermere Centre during this period should be on maximising the net income it can generate from commercial hospitality business, at those times when the Centre is not required by URC people or events. Commercial hospitality business includes but is not limited to bed and breakfast business. We don't believe that this opportunity has been properly explored or exploited thus far. It is possible that this could totally change the perception of, and the net cost of, the Windermere Centre by the time that the lay training strategy has been developed. This suggests to us that a new Operations Manager should be appointed soon, possibly on a fixed term contract.

4.4 The offer of significant financial support from the North Western Synod is intended to take the financial pressure off the central URC budget sufficiently to allow the time for this lay training strategy to be developed. There has been no time to discuss this matter with other Synods. It may be that other Synods, in particular Mersey, might be prepared to contribute to or add to this offer of financial support. It may be that this financial support could enable the Education and Learning Committee to spend more of its budget on new forms of lay training, including *Walking the Way*, during this period of review and development.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Readers of this paper should note that neither Mersey Synod nor North Western Synod is advocating that the Windermere Centre stay open indefinitely or unconditionally. We are advocating that there be a proper process that, first, produces and agrees a strategy for lay training and congregational development across the denomination and then, in that context, decides on the future of the Windermere Centre.

Paper Y1: Appendix one

Report from meeting of Mersey Synod on 11 March 2017

1 Extract of report from Synod Executive Committee

Windermere Centre

A decision will be made at the May meeting of Mission Council on the future of the Windermere Centre. Members had the opportunity to send comments by 1st March to a dedicated website set up by Revd Fiona Thomas. At this Synod meeting you will have the opportunity to put forward your thoughts concerning the Windermere Centre, and these views will be used by the Synod Mission Council representatives to inform them before they go to the May Mission Council.

2 Mission Council papers

Members of Synod were provided with Papers D1 and D2 from the October 2016 meeting of Mission Council plus the relevant part of the report of that meeting including the agreed resolutions - redacted, as they appear on the URC website.

3 Resolution

The Executive Committee presented the Synod meeting with a draft resolution for Mission Council. The final wording, after slight amendment during discussion, was:

Mersey Synod:

- a) **commends the work of the Windermere Centre**
Synod voted to accept this resolution (1 abstention)
- b) ***seeks a pause in the closure decision, pending further detailed discussion of what the URC will need for lay training and congregational development in the future;***
Synod voted to accept this resolution (13 opposed)
- c) ***believes that there is an increasingly apparent and urgent need for a viable, costed, national strategy for lay training and congregational development to be in place in the URC, and calls for the creation of such a strategy;***
Synod voted to accept this resolution (1 abstention)
- d) **believes that, regardless of where in the country such training might be provided, it should incorporate residential, teaching and IT components, as currently provided at the Windermere Centre;**
Synod voted to accept this resolution (1 opposed, 3 abstentions)
- e) ***believes that a positive strategy for the future may well utilise more than one existing URC centre, and one or more of those owned or run by our ecumenical partners.***
Synod voted to accept this resolution (2 opposed, 1 abstention)

Paper Y1: Appendix two

Report from meeting of North Western Synod on 25 March 2017

1 Extract of original report from Synod Executive Committee (issued before meeting with Assembly officers on 16 March)

The Windermere Centre

26 Most members of the synod meeting will have some awareness of the discussions at the last meeting of Mission Council concerning the future of the Windermere Centre.

27 The Executive Committee has concerns over the adequacy of the process being used to prepare for a further discussion at the May meeting of Mission Council, where it is envisaged that a decision about the future of the Centre will be made, and the nature of the information shared by Church House with the wider church.

28 Representatives of the committee have been in dialogue with the Secretary for Education and Learning, and others, and on Thursday 16 March have a meeting with the General Secretary, the Deputy General Secretary (Mission), the Secretary for Education and Learning, the Interim-Director of the Centre and others to consider whether this synod might be involved with committees of the General Assembly to enable a longer and more thorough review of the life of the Centre over recent years, and research and analysis of the potential of the Centre to continue to serve the United Reformed Church in the future.

29 It is anticipated that a resolution for consideration by the synod meeting on 25 March may arise from the meeting on 16 March and further consideration of the matter by the Synod Executive Committee in the following days. If this is so, the text of the resolution (numbered Resolution 5 on the agenda) will be emailed to members of the synod meeting as soon as possible in the week before the synod meeting on 25 March, and paper copies of the text will be available at the synod meeting.

2 Supplementary report from Synod Executive Committee including resolution sent to members of Synod on 23 March 2017

SUPPLEMENTARY PAPER FROM EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE CONCERNING THE FUTURE OF THE WINDERMERE CENTRE

to be read in conjunction with section 8 of the report of the Executive Committee in the *Book of Reports*

Bad process leading to bad feeling

1. Most members of the synod meeting will have heard of the discussions about the future of the Windermere Centre at the October 2016 meeting of Mission Council. Following that meeting, this matter was discussed at the November 2016 meeting of the Executive Committee. It was agreed that the Clerk should write to Fiona Thomas, the URC Secretary for Education and Learning, to express our concerns. These concerns were about the process being used, about the status of the consultation requested by Mission Council and how we in the Synod might engage with it, and about the pastoral care of the staff at the Windermere Centre. It was made clear that the Synod Executive Committee was not arguing blindly that the Windermere Centre should remain open indefinitely but was arguing for a thorough and inclusive process of review.

2. Correspondence has continued between Synod officers and Assembly officers. We have been keen to do more than complain about process. We have been trying to find a good way forward. It has to be reported that the Synod officers have concluded that “consultation” has mainly been between the two Assembly committees, and that the URC Education and Learning Committee came to a settled mind about the closure of the Windermere Centre at its meeting in December 2016. Synod officers were not offered a meeting with Assembly officers until March 2017. Resolutions for the meetings of our own synod meeting and for the May meeting of Mission Council should already have been submitted by the time this meeting took place. We have now been allowed one week after our Synod meeting to finalise any resolution to go to Mission Council.

3. Another concern about process has been to do with the way this matter is being handled compared with the way the Westminster College situation was dealt with just a few years ago. The North Western Synod gladly contributed a significant amount to the Westminster College appeal, even though most of its members have never visited that College, nor are they ever likely to do so. Had the two conversations been taking place at the same time there might have been different responses.

4. These concerns about process are important not just in relation to the matter being considered, but because of the potential harm that could be done to the peace and unity of the United Reformed Church. Even if the closure of the Windermere Centre is the right decision for Mission Council to make, if the decision is made after inadequate consultation and consideration then it could do serious and lasting harm to the church.

Need for Pause in order to properly Review

5. It may be that the resources currently being spent on the Windermere Centre could be spent more effectively. But we do not know this for sure. The decision about the future of the Centre is currently being taken in a vacuum. There are at least two aspects of this that need proper investigation:

Lay training and development strategy

6. The Mersey Synod meeting which met 2 weeks ago, has agreed a resolution for Mission Council which calls for the development of a “viable, costed, national strategy for lay training”. They suggest, and we agree with them, that no decision about the future of the Windermere Centre should be taken until such a strategy has been developed and agreed.

Interim financial strategy for the Windermere Centre

7. The potential of the Centre to make income from commercial bed and breakfast business has not been fully explored. It is our view that this should be the short term priority at the Windermere Centre, whilst it continues to offer hospitality and give priority to those from the URC who want to use it. Any net income generated by this commercial business reduces the net cost of the Centre to the Church.

8. It must be acknowledged that the finances of the Windermere Centre have been a real challenge for the central URC for many years and they have recently deteriorated. For this reason, it was necessary for Mission Council in October 2016 to extend the previously agreed budget deficit for the Centre from £150k to £200k (the actual outturn was slightly better than this). But it was not, in our view, necessary for that meeting of Mission Council to be asked to make a decision about the future of the Centre without proper review, discussion and notice.

9. It is the view of the Executive Committee that, in order to encourage Mission Council to agree to the period of review we are requesting, the Synod should make a substantial financial offer to the central URC to carry a share of the ongoing deficits at the Centre during this period.

10. Therefore, the Executive Committee offers the following resolution for consideration by the synod meeting. The four sections of this resolution will be voted on separately in order to test the mind of the synod meeting.

Resolutions

5A The North Western Synod expresses its deep concern to Mission Council about the process by which the future of the Windermere Centre has been and is being considered. The Synod fears that if these shortcomings are not addressed they could cause significant harm to the peace and unity of the United Reformed Church. In particular:

- i) **At the meeting of Mission Council in October 2016, members were presented with a paper concerning the future of the Windermere Centre. They had no notice of this paper. It had been prepared in haste and lacked vital information. There had been no opportunity for proper consultation. Members were put under considerable pressure to make a quick decision, when such an issue deserved careful and reasoned consideration.**
- ii) **Our representatives at that meeting of Mission Council thought that no decision was taken there and that the matter was deferred to the next meeting. Some of the announcements and actions after that meeting suggested that the decision to close the Centre had been taken in principle. This affected the Centre staff personally and affected their ability to generate business.**
- iii) **The consultation process requested by Mission Council in October, constrained by the deadline of the next meeting of Mission Council, has not engaged properly with those beyond the two Assembly committees and the Windermere Management Committee. The timetable has not allowed other interested parties to properly consider the matter or engage with this process. For example, the consultation with the North Western Synod, requested by Mission Council, has been inadequate; and there has been no formal consultation with other synods.**

Synod voted to approve this resolution (none against, two abstentions).

5B The North Western Synod urges Mission Council to allow a period of, say, two years during which two different reviews should be carried out:

- i) **a strategy for lay training and development across the denomination should be prepared, with wide consultation, aiming at equality of access for all and taking account of existing resources and provision in Synods and in the central URC; and**
- ii) **the ability of the Windermere Centre to generate commercial bed and breakfast business alongside its work as a Resource Centre for Learning should be properly explored.**

There should be no change in the status of the Windermere Centre during this period.

Synod voted to approve this resolution (none against, one abstention).

5C The North Western Synod recognises that the financial situation at the Windermere Centre is putting significant strain on the central URC budget. The Synod therefore offers to contribute up to £100,000 per year up to a maximum of £250,000, to share some of this financial strain during this review period.

Synod voted to approve this resolution (two against, two abstentions).

5D The North Western Synod authorises its Moderator, Clerk and Treasurer to continue working with Assembly officers and colleagues from Mersey Synod on this matter, and to frame such resolution(s) as they think fit for the meeting of Mission Council in May 2017, taking account of the views expressed by Synod at its meeting on 25 March 2017.

Synod voted to approve this resolution (none against, one abstention).

