

Paper Z1

Synod Moderators

Where is God calling the URC?

United
Church
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2017
Church 2017



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Where Is God Calling The URC?

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Nicola Furley-Smith moderator@urcsouthern.org.uk
Action required	For information and discussion
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To open up a discussion with members of Mission Council on where God is calling the URC.
Main points	As a denomination we need to a) acknowledge that we are not the church we once were but that we still have an important part to play in being the people of God; b) commit to clear and precise communication between the different councils of the church; c) learn to do a few things and do them well.
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	The General Secretary

Summary of Impact

Financial	None
External (e.g. ecumenical)	

Where is God Calling the URC?

1. In September 2016, the Synod Moderators met with The General Secretary, The Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship), Secretary for Ministries, two members of the Ministries Committee and the Principal of Northern College for a 24 hour consultation on Ministry and Deployment. It is out of the discussion from that meeting, that we, the 13 Moderators, feel Spirit-led to write to Mission Council of our concern and hopes for the Church.
2. At the outset we wish Mission Council to know that our comments stem from a genuine desire to galvanise the church into action and to address some of the weaknesses which we believe are hindering the growth of God's Kingdom. We are aware that some of the issues we raise here also relate to the interaction between local churches and synods. Often we experience the URC not as a hierarchy of councils, but as circles of belonging, which are linked through personal contact and where authority is experienced through pastoral relationships. There are positive initiatives moving forward God's mission arising from local Church Meetings, Synod Meetings and General Assembly; we do not always pay sufficient attention to the 'gears' that link the different councils and which mesh together to transfer movement from each council to the others.
3. We offer our reflections from the position of those who have a key responsibility for the linkage both between synod and local churches, and of that between denomination and synod. We wish to focus here on the latter in order to help the work and effectiveness of Mission Council. Our reflections arose from a Moderators' Meeting where the Biblical reflections fed into our broader conversation.

Firstly, we are not what we were.....

"By the rivers of Babylon....we wept"

Psalm 137

One of the jobs of the Levites was to sing songs in the Temple. Travellers arriving in Jerusalem could hear their haunting and inspiring voices from miles away as they approached the Holy City. Their renown was far and wide – so much so that when they arrived as exiles in Babylon, the Babylonians ask them to, "Sing for us the songs of Zion." "How can we sing the songs of God on foreign soil?" Although Jews would eventually make a home and thrive in Babylon, it is important not to have any romantic notions or false impressions regarding what the exile was like. Babylon was no picnic.

4. It is said that, when the United Reformed Church came into being in 1972 with 192,136 members and 2080 churches, it was never intended to be a denomination in its own right but was always looking for future opportunities of union. Now, 45 years later with 56,000 members and 1500 churches our memory still holds fast and we are, even now, lamenting 'singing the Lord's song in a strange land.' We acknowledge we are still called to be both servants in the world and citizens of the kingdom but we have not let go of the old ways in order to be able to look beyond the church of yesteryear. As a church we are still engaged in many of the activities we were engaged in 1972, and more. We need to stop acting foolishly as if we are a big church and be honest with who we are. Indeed, since 1972 we have tried many 'inspiring songs' some of which have generated signs of the Kingdom but our honesty with who we are needs to lead us to the conclusion that we, the Church, are not what

we were. We are tiny lights which we need to keep burning bright in local communities. And that is OK.

Secondly, we need to be....
Jesus washes the disciples' feet
John 13:1-17

Walking in sandals on the filthy roads of Israel in the first century made it imperative that feet be washed before a communal meal, especially since people reclined at a low table and feet were very much in evidence. When Jesus rose from the table and began to wash the feet of the disciples he was doing the work of the lowliest of servants. The disciples must have been stunned at this act of humility and condescension, that Christ, their Lord and Master, should wash the feet of His disciples, when it was their proper work to have washed His. The humility expressed by His act with towel and basin foreshadowed His ultimate act of humility and love on the cross. And the disciples are once again renewed with this simple act of servanthood.

5. There appears a lack of understanding centrally of what it takes to galvanise the grass roots. The answer to a declining membership seems to invoke a flurry of initiatives (for want of a better word). Vision 4 Life, Vision 2020, What is the Spirit saying to the Churches? and now Walking the Way are all cases in point. Yet we know that, if initiatives are to work, they have to swell up from the grass roots giving a sense of ownership, otherwise they will seem like they are being imposed upon us from 'on high'. Some of these have caught the imagination of the few but often our 'good ideas' are not bedded in the needs of the churches. Meanwhile many churches are struggling with fewer, older members and increasing demands from legislation and aging buildings, so that such initiatives are not seen as an imposition but also as proof that their concerns are not properly understood by the wider church.
6. We need desperately to look again at the way the church at Assembly level
 - communicates with Synods and local churches in a way which is clear and precise;
 - listens to Synods and local churches especially about what is being asked of them in terms of personnel and finance. There are times when having 13 different ways of doing something is right but there are times when a process needs to be denominational;
 - retains personnel and committees which might once have been appropriate for a denomination 3 times our size and instead makes more use of the wider gifts available from people by gathering people to do significant pieces of work when needed.
7. Listening to each other would have underlined the fact that, in a small church, we simply do not have the capacity to find a plethora of people to fulfil all the roles that are being asked of us. We need to consider whether the church, and its committees, may be asking people to do more than they can cope with.

Third, we need to claim our future...
"Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice"
Romans 12:1-9

After the call to present our bodies as living sacrifices by deliberately turning from the world's pull to the renewed thought patterns God has for us, Paul's first concern for people who offer service to God is that these people live as full members of the body of Christ, contributing to the life of the church according to the measure of faith God has given them.

8. Perhaps part of our dilemma is that we are losing sight of why the central structures exist. We know that the theological key to what we do as the church is service but too often we do not practice what we preach. As we listen to each other we need to be constantly asking ourselves what is it that we have to offer that will serve the church (and not the other way round) in order to keep ourselves accountable to one another and to God.
9. Our practice thus far at Mission Council has been to be given the broad principle of what a committee wants to happen but does not allow the members of Mission Council to 'buy into' the programme or initiative further down the line. We need processes that will see things through. In 2011 we were asked to give consideration to 'shaving' £1 million off the budget. We abandoned that responsibility when we handed the task to the committees themselves but did not follow up whether the 'cuts' that had been made were those the church wanted to make. Perhaps we need to revisit the exercise but this time to prioritise for the denomination. It could be as simple as a denominational Church Life Review (CLR). After all, we ask this of our local churches. This will inevitably be as painful now as it was then but perhaps our offering is to a call to be bold in order to grow God's kingdom.
10. To misquote Cardinal John Henry Newman, "Growth is evidence of life." If we are truly to grow as God's people then our growth should be about quality (health) and not just quantity (numbers). At the heart of our thinking is the Scriptural picture of the church as a living organism, not just an organisation (albeit a spiritual one). Looking at the church "organically" gives us a different perspective on what "health" and "growth" mean. The growth of organisms focuses on their health, their capacity to reproduce, and how the individual 'body' parts interact. Disciples are grown, not built; they are nurtured, not assembled¹.
11. Thus, if church growth is about growing an organism, the health (quality) of the organism will have a direct impact on its size (quantity). If a church becomes increasingly healthy over time, it is more likely and better able to reproduce disciples and the plethora of ministries required to be God's church in the 21st century. We are indeed grateful to those working diligently on all our behalf on Walking the Way and watch with bated breath at its unveiling.
12. Yet, the 7th mark of a healthy church teaches us to do a few things and to do them well². It requires the church to be focused rather than frenetic. It requires the church to do the basics well and to come across to the world outside its doors as good news in its attitudes and ways of working. Above all it enjoys what it does and is relaxed about what is not being done.
13. That takes us full circle to where we started. We are a small church with a big heart. We are tiny lights which need to keep on burning brightly in our local communities for the sake of the Kingdom not for our sake.
14. Given that we hear the voices in our Synods urging our denomination to
 - a) commit to clear and precise communication between the different councils of the church
 - b) learn to do a few things and do them well
 - c) acknowledge we are tiny but need to be bright.

¹ Natural Church Development

² Robert Warren *The Healthy Churches Handbook* 2005

We ask Mission Council to explore the following questions in order to discern where God is calling the URC.

- A. We need to commit to clear precise communication between the different councils of the church.
Where has communication been good between the councils of the church?
What made it good?
What needs to be avoided?
- B. The denomination has often been accused of initiative overload.
Which programmes and initiatives of the last 10 years have you found beneficial?
Why?
Which have not been so helpful? Why?
- C. As a denomination we have made a conscious decision to have 'the ecumenical question' at the top of all our agendas.
Is this still the question that should have primacy. Or is there an alternative or additional priority that we should focus on?
What might we, as a denomination, need to receive or to give up for the sake of more effective mission by the whole church to the whole world?
How might we achieve this?
- D. We are not the size we once were. We acknowledge that we are small but bright lights shining across three nations.
We need to do fewer things and do them well. Looking at
 - a) this Mission Council's present agenda
 - b) General Assembly meetings, structures and committee work.
 What three things might we stop doing? (These might be changes you could make yourself and/or changes you would like others to make).
Are there three essential things we should value the most?.

It is our hope that this is the start of a growing conversation.

The Synod Moderators

March 2017