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## United Reformed Church Mission Committee Discussion paper of the Review of Ecumenical Relations

### Introduction

In January 2010 the Mission Committee approved the terms of reference for a review of Ecumenical Relations (appendix 1). A group of four people from across the denomination and the Secretary for Ecumenical Relations was brought together. The group, which was supported in its work by the Administrator for World Church and Ecumenical Relations<sup>1</sup>, began its work in November 2010.

The core documents for the review were the General Assembly adopted papers ‘Three Ecumenical Principles’ (2001) and the ‘Statement on the Nature of Ecumenical Relations’ (2007). The group recognised that much of the description of the ecumenical landscape from 2007 is applicable today. Churches, including the United Reformed Church, are still grappling with the twin challenges of ‘describing, affirming, managing and developing the diversity in our unity’ and ‘living with difference.’

The group also wishes to affirm the four ways forward in response to these challenges articulated in the statement:

1. The importance of organic unity as defined by the 1937 Faith and Order Conference, ‘A Church so united that the ultimate loyalty of every member would be given to the whole body and not to any part of it.’
2. A commitment to reciprocal recognition
3. The image of a standard (inter-)national core and responsible local variant expression
4. Ecumenical exploration of the theme of space

A denomination wide consultation has formed the major element of the review to date. Twelve Synods sent representatives including a number of Synod Moderators, Synod and Denominational Ecumenical Officers, members of Synod Ecumenical Committees, and members of Regional Ecumenical committees/organisations. The consultation was joined at various points by General Assembly staff and Conveners and members of General Assembly appointed permanent working groups e.g. Faith and Order Reference Group. The consultation programme had been discerned from conversations which had taken place in a number of Synods in a preparatory phase. The consultation was designed to be a place to share experience and explore the resulting questions rather than seek out answers or test policies.

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<sup>1</sup> The members of the review group were Rev Lindsey Sanderson (Synod of Scotland, Convener); Rev Roy Fowler (South Western Synod); Rev Stuart Jackson (Synod of Wales); Mrs Valerie Jenkins (Yorkshire Synod); Rev David Tatem (Secretary for Ecumenical Relations), Helen Garton (Administrator for World Church and Ecumenical Relations)

## Discerning the signs of the times

From the review process three key themes have emerged for the review group.

### A. The complexity of ecumenical relationships

Complexity is a major factor in the ecumenical relationships of the United Reformed Church. Because ecumenism is primarily relational it is always changing and the challenge is to continually respond in ways which reflect the changing context. As the URC continues to develop its sense of being a church in three nations, we can see that in each of those nations ecumenism has its own dynamic and relationships (TofR3). As a consequence the URC finds itself with different priorities and partners in each nation. In Wales for example, the Covenanting Churches; in Scotland the EMU (Episcopal, Methodist, URC) Partnership; in England, the Anglican-Methodist Covenant and across the nations e.g. the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

However, even within nations, and particularly in England, within different geographical regions, different relationships can take precedence. Relationships with other three nation churches are not necessarily any less complex. Methodist-URC relations take on different characteristics in England, Scotland and Wales.

Complexity can also be seen in the range of partners with whom we engage. Partnerships include formal ecumenical structures which exist at national and county levels and local initiatives which may bring a wider range of partners than the formal structures. Partners may be the traditional churches of the ecumenical movement, and newer partners, particularly from the black and ethnic minority communities. There are many initiatives with which the denomination, Synods and local churches engage which are ecumenical initiatives but which would be hesitant to describe themselves as part of the formal ecumenical movement e.g. Street Pastors; Fresh Expressions.

Within this review European and World partnerships were also under consideration (TofR3). This adds a further dimension to our sense of partnership and belonging to God's *oikumene*.

### B. The effects of denominational restructuring

Strong feelings were expressed that since the demise of the Ecumenical Committee and the formation of the Mission Committee and Mission Team, the visibility of Ecumenical Relations within the denomination has diminished. This has been exacerbated by the move to a biennial General Assembly and the lack of a specific ecumenically focussed report. Where in the past, the Ecumenical Committee provided a focus for ecumenical relationships, reflection and action, to which other General Assembly committees were invited to have representation and input, in the new Mission Committee ecumenical relations is one of seven major subject areas. Therefore the agenda time and resourcing available to ecumenical relations is of necessity much reduced. The former Ecumenical Committee also provided a structural relationship for the Secretary for Ecumenical Relations and the Ecumenical Officers of the Synods of Scotland and Wales. During the course of the review it was agreed that the Ecumenical Officers in Scotland and Wales would be part funded from General Assembly budgets as much of their remit should properly be understood as General Assembly business and the review group welcomes this initiative.

Linked to the reduced visibility of ecumenical relations is the perceived invisibility of Faith and Order work. The Faith and Order Reference Group now sits within the remit of the Deputy General Secretary rather than the Secretary for Ecumenical Relations. Much of the Faith and Order work of the denomination is carried out quietly by small groups of highly skilled and experienced people but there is little knowledge of the fruits of their work, or even the key issues

under discussion. The dissemination of the fruits of these discussions is vital to the health of Local Ecumenical Partnerships who need to understand the theological underpinnings of their practice in order to differentiate between local tradition and the consequence of deeply held beliefs. We need to hold together both faith and order concerns as well as reflections upon practice.

The demise of Districts has also had an impact on ecumenical relations (TofR2). Synods have responded differently to life without Districts with a variety of ‘key people systems’ or committees in English Synods and national roles in Scotland and Wales. Within England it is common practice to find a URC representative on a County Ecumenical Body. In addition to these representatives some Synods have an Ecumenical Officer or Ecumenical Committee. Churches Together in England has just completed its review of the Intermediate (county) bodies and the URC will need to consider that report and its response to it.

A further issue for ecumenical relations is the increasing sense of fragmentation across the Synods within the URC. (TofR2) This is most acutely felt with the development of Synod policies in the areas of deployment and ministry which at best can be confusing for an ecumenical partner working with the URC across a number of Synods.

### **C. The energy for ecumenism.**

One third of URC congregations are Local Ecumenical Partnerships, our commitment to unity is written clearly into our governing documents, our history is a story of union across three nations and four ecclesial traditions. Many of our partners would identify our commitment to ecumenism as the indelible DNA of the denomination. However the consultation recognised that there is a need for a renewed vision for ecumenism, but the consultation was uncertain about the content of the vision. It has to be recognised that many within the denomination do not find energy within the ecumenical movement as traditionally understood and express their ecumenical commitment through initiatives such as Fresh Expressions and Street Pastors (see above) giving rise to new discussion about ‘light-touch ecumenism’<sup>2</sup>.

Concern was also expressed that in the Vision 2020 framework for mission, ecumenism, articulated as Christian Partnerships is simply listed as one strand out of ten in the framework. John 17:21ff states the rationale for the quest for Christian unity - ‘so the world may believe’. Unity and mission belong together and so ecumenism must, and does, flow through the entirety of the Vision2020 framework and should not be restricted.(TofR1) The review group’s discussion with the Mission Team members reaffirmed that to varying degrees much of their work is ecumenical through specific working with partner churches i.e. Joint Public Issues Team (URC/Methodist/Baptist); Rural Officer (URC/Methodist) or representing the URC i.e. on CTBI /CTE Networks, or engaging with ecumenical initiatives i.e. More than Gold, Fresh Expressions. It was felt that the ecumenical work of each team member ought to be fully acknowledged so that the ecumenical grounding of Vision 2020 would be strengthened.

From this overview a number of specific areas of concern and challenge emerged, which are offered for further discussion.

#### **1. Understanding of Unity**

Forty years on from the original formation of the URC, and now as a community of four ecclesial traditions and three nations we would encourage denomination wide discussion of the URC’s

- current understanding of the concept of ‘organic unity’ and its ecumenical vision

<sup>2</sup> ‘light-touch ecumenism’ has been used as a descriptor for ecumenical activity which uses joint activity as its starting place rather than a traditional Faith and Order perspective.

- the way in which that understanding and vision is articulated in programme activity, representation and resource allocation.

## 2. Faith and Order (TofR1)

We would encourage the Faith and Order Reference Group to give particular consideration to:

- questions of Presidency, the role of Elders and ordination, and Baptism giving the Disciples of Christ tradition particular attention in these reflections
- questions of reception, episcopacy and authority in the URC in light of ongoing discussions about the possibility of Ecumenical Bishops within the Welsh Covenant and discussions between the Methodist Church and Church of England concerning bishops
- questions concerning the mutual recognition of ministries

## 3. Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) (TofR2)

Local Ecumenical Partnerships have been the heartbeat of the ecumenical movement at a local level. At their best LEPs challenge denominations to push the boundaries of ecumenical engagement, at their worst they can become mired in multiple church bureaucracies to the detriment of everything else. Within our current ministry, deployment and ecumenical policies within Synods and as a denomination, the URC should give particular consideration to:

- creating new LEPs out of a sense of mission and purpose not as a lifeboat strategy for dying congregations
- the challenges of and responsibilities towards LEP vacancies
- encouraging URC ministers to serve in LEPs and exploring the barriers to URC ministers pursuing ecumenical appointments
- the review of LEPs and fresh thinking on LEPs (focussing on structure following relationship and vision) currently being undertaken by Churches Together in England and any consequences this may have for URC involvement in LEPs in Scotland and Wales
- the reluctance of some denominations to form new LEPs
- how denomination specific initiatives and requests for information and finance are handled in an LEP context
- the development of Fresh Expressions and emerging church models as new manifestations of Local Ecumenical Partnerships
- establishing coherent policies on ministry in ecumenical appointments which are consistent across the denomination (i.e. regarding stipends, manse provision)

## 4. Church Planting (TofR2)

It is recognised that different denominations have played either ‘leading’ or ‘following’ roles in the church planting movement. The URC has played a ‘leading’ role in the development of Local Ecumenical Church Plants giving money and ministers generously. Rarely has the denomination planted URC congregations or given members to new church plants. There is a concern that the commitment to ecumenical church planting using the LEP model has meant that the URC has ‘lost presence’ often to independent churches. Within our current ministry and deployment policies the URC should give particular consideration to:

- the ways in which the denomination participates in church planting initiatives
- the ways in which the denomination participates in the Fresh Expressions initiative and other expressions of emerging church.

## 5. The Methodist Church

The Methodist Church is a key partner of the United Reformed Church. The denomination should continue

- developing relationships with our Methodist partners in the three nations, as appropriate (i.e. Methodist Anglican Panel for Unity and Mission & Anglican/Methodist Covenant in England; EMU in Scotland and through the Covenant in Wales)
- exploring issues between the two denominations through bodies such as the Strategic Oversight Group and the envisioned Logjam Group which will seek to address ministry concerns at a denominational rather than Synod level
- supporting local Methodist /URC partnerships and United Areas through the Methodist/URC Liaison Group
- exploring the combining of the MURCLG and MAPUM to support local initiatives in England.

## 6. Investment in People (TofR1)

An external perception of the United Reformed Church is that a commitment to ecumenism is part of its indelible DNA. However if that is the marker by which the denomination wishes to be known then it must continually invest in people to ensure a culture of ecumenism remains at the heart of the denomination. There are many examples of such investment in young people, through FURY, lay people, ordinands and ministers, many of which include the international dimension of our ecumenical relationships. As a denomination we should to continue to:

- provide education and training opportunities in ecumenical formation for all engaged in ministry
- utilize the fruits of receptive ecumenism<sup>3</sup> as a mechanism for congregations and individuals to continue their ecumenical formation and self-understanding of faith.

## 7. European Partnerships (TofR3)

European relationships operate on two levels; the bilateral relationships with Reformed churches in other countries and participation in European ecumenical bodies. The URC is a member of both the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). The URC sends representatives to each organisation's assemblies and can nominate representatives to the various committees and bodies that are set up on either a permanent or short term basis. We currently have no-one serving on CEC but for the last 12 years the Revd Fleur Houston has served on the central committee of CPCE. Her term of service is due to end at the next Assembly in Florence and as she serves on behalf of a number of Reformed Churches from the UK it would be appropriate if another UK CPCE member was to nominate the next member. This raises questions about how the URC engagement with CPCE is maintained at an effective level when we don't have direct representation.

In our bilateral relationships the policy has been for some years to ask Synods to engage in and develop appropriate European bilateral relations on behalf of the whole denomination (see Appendix 2). These have been variously effective and there are deficiencies in how this works. There is often a negative perception by our partners that the partnership is not being taken seriously by the URC as they do not relate to the whole denomination. There is also the perception that there is a lack of European identity within the URC.

In seeking to develop our European partnerships

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<sup>3</sup> 'The essential principle behind Receptive Ecumenism is that the primary ecumenical responsibility is to ask not "What do the other traditions first need to learn from us?" but "What do we need to learn from them?" The assumption is that if all were asking this question seriously and acting upon it then all would be moving in ways that would both deepen our authentic respective identities and draw us into more intimate relationship.'  
<http://www.centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk/?cat=6> {accessed 09.09.11}

- the review groups suggests that a conversation is held with the Secretary for International Relations and the Mission Committee about locating responsibility for the European partnerships within International Relations.

## **8. Global Partnerships (TofR3)**

The United Reformed Church is a member of four global bodies – the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council and the Council for World Mission. Responsibility for these partnerships currently lies with the Secretary for International Relations and so fuller discussion of the URC's engagement with these global bodies would be better considered within a review of International Relations. However, the review group would affirm the importance of these relationships, particularly for the witness the URC, together with other United and Uniting Churches, gives within global bodies.

In our participation in global ecumenical bodies we would encourage the development of the cooperation through CTBI in agreeing representation for governing bodies and in shared reporting back to member churches.

## **9. Representation**

During the course of the review, the review group was specifically requested by the Mission Committee to look at the question of URC representation to Ecumenical organisations. A detailed cost and value analysis is currently being undertaken by the review group to address this issue and a preliminary analysis of representation is attached in Appendix 3.

## **Conclusion**

Many people currently engaged in various aspects of the ecumenical movement in the United Kingdom have described the current period as an 'ecumenical winter.' As the United Reformed Church approaches forty years since its first inception, many of the dreams of those working towards union in 1972 have been realised, whilst others have not yet been brought to fruition. At this particular anniversary it is pertinent to ask again, 'What is our vision of unity in the United Reformed Church?' 'Does the URC discern a call to be a leader in the ecumenical process once again?' 'In what ways can we work with our partners to re-energise structural, formal ecumenism and fully engage with new expressions of ecumenism in emerging church movements?'

This paper is offered to Mission Council as a stimulus for discussion and as a mechanism for further consultation in the review of ecumenical relations.

## Appendix 1: Terms of Reference for a Review of Ecumenical Relations

- 1) To extend the reflection on the URC's Three Ecumenical Principles (2001) and its further Statement on the Nature of Ecumenical Relations (2007); to consider in depth how the URC's ecumenical commitment connects with the development of mission strategy and initiatives.
- 2) To review again current patterns and trends in relation to local ecumenical activity and the extent to which they are adequately resourced and supported through Synod and other ecumenical support officers, networks, resources and guides. To take into account the different patterns of working that is emerging in synods across the UK in the wake of the demise of districts and to reflect on how team working in that context can be best developed and supported.

*(Involvement in CTBI and the three national instruments through Church house secretary and two national officers (Wales is currently vacant). This includes team working with corresponding post holders in partner denominations.*

*Networking within the URC through Synod ecumenical officers or committees and in relation to URC denominational ecumenical officers on intermediate bodies. Direct relationships to local churches when requested from national level.)*

- 3) To map the ecumenical relationships at the 3 nation, European and international levels in which the URC currently plays a role and therefore:

To consider the distinctive nature of ecumenical engagement in Wales, Scotland and England and the implications for the work of ecumenical officers in each country.

*(In each of the three nations the ecumenical officer's remit also extends to cover interfaith relationships. This has a significant ecumenical dimension itself through relating to the interfaith networks on an ecumenical basis and co working with other denominational desk officers for interfaith.' The February meeting of mission committee decided that interfaith should not be a feature of this review.)*

To review the way in which the URC has delegated its European relationships to synods and its representation on and involvement in European Ecumenical bodies. *(Ecumenical relations also extend to cover European connections through bodies such as CEC and CPCE. Through the system of synod and longstanding national links we also have links with churches such as the Waldensians in Italy and the Pfalzkirche.)*

To review the URC's engagement with world ecumenical bodies.

### Part 2

- 1) To analyse the working relationships of the Secretary; the networks and teams to which the Secretary belongs and the consequent implications for the role of the Secretary within the Mission Team. To make suggestions for desirable clarifications or alterations.

## Appendix 2: European Partnerships

This is the official list of partnerships which exist between synods and European Church partners. It is recognised that there is a variety in the levels of active engagement across the partnerships e.g. the partnerships between Eastern Synod and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and South Western and the Evangelical Church of Lippe, Germany are no longer functioning whilst the Wessex, Reformed Church of France link and Scotland, Reformed Church of Hungary link are well established and developing partnerships.

Northern	None
North Western	Waldensian Church in Italy
Mersey	Mission Covenant Church of Sweden
Yorkshire	Protestant Church of the Palatinate in Germany
East Midlands	Reformed Church in Croatia
West Midlands	Evangelical Church of the Union in Germany
Eastern	Protestant Church in the Netherlands
South Western	Evangelical Church of Lippe in Germany
Wessex	Reformed Church of France
Thames North	Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren
Southern	Reformed Church in Sub-Carpatho, Ukraine
Wales	None
Scotland	Reformed Church in Hungary



### Appendix 3: Table of Representation on Ecumenical Bodies and Structures

Name of Body	Acronym	Nature of involvement	Annual Cost	Comments
<b>Churches Together in Britain and Ireland</b>	CTBI	Denominational Membership	£10,000	
CTBI Faith and order Reference Group		URC Representative		Travel costs
Churches Interreligious Network	CIRN	URC Representative		ICOW, SER
China Forum		URC Representative	Approx £50	Travel Costs. Has been Walter Houston for 16 years.
Network Meeting		URC Delegates	Approx £250	Annual event for last three years. Usually SER can be others.
<b>Action of Churches Together in Scotland</b>	ACTS	Denominational Membership	£8750 from General Assembly budget	
Members' Meeting		2 Synod representatives	Travel costs met by Synod	Mod and SNER
ACTS Networks -Faith Studies -Church & Society -Church Life -Mission		2 Synod representatives on each Network	Travel costs met by Synod	
Scottish Churches Rural Group		1 Synod representative	Travel costs met by Synod	
Scottish Churches Racial Justice Group		1 Synod representative	Travel costs met by Synod.	
Churches Agency for Interfaith Relations in Scotland	CAIRS	1 Synod representative	Travel costs met by Synod	SNER
Working with children in the church community		1 Synod representative	Travel costs met by Synod	CYDO

Scottish Churches National Sponsoring Body for Local Ecumenical Partnerships	NSB	2 Synod representatives	Travel costs met by Synod	Mod & SNER
Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office	SCPO	1 Synod representative	Annual contribution from General Assembly budget £600	SNER or Synod Church & Society Committee representative.
<b>Churches Together in England</b>	CTE	Denominational Membership	£17,500	
Directors		URC has one director		Travel Costs
Enabling Group		URC Representative	£110	ICOW, SER
Group for Local Unity	GLU	2 URC representatives		ICOW, SER + a Mod.
Theology and Unity Group	TUG	URC Representative		ICOW, SER
Free Churches Group	FCG	Membership	£1,930	ICOW, SER
County Ecumenical Bodies		URC Representatives	Unknown	Usually a mod plus DEO. 60 bodies of one form or another.
<b>Churches Together in Wales</b> - Trustee - Board - Project Officer - Finance Ctte - International Ctte - Racial Justice Ntwk -	CYTUN	Membership	£8750  Travel costs met by Synod  Synod contributes up to £800 for local events	WNER  Trustee (Mod) Mod, WNER WNER Synod Treasurer Rep Rep
Commission of Covenanting Churches - Liturgy panel - Governance panel - Episcopo Panel		URC Representative	Costs shared 50:50 by General Assembly and Synod of Wales	Mod, WNER, plus 1 representative  representative representative representative
<b>Bi-Lateral Bodies</b>				

C of E / URC group		Selected URC membership		Group now completed its work. Pending decisions on future work.
RC/URC group		6 URC members	Approx £750	Residential plus travel costs. Group report pending
Methodist / URC Liaison Group	MURCLG		Approx £550	Travel
URC/ Presbyterian Church of Wales liaison group	URC/PCW JLC		£200 approx	Welsh mod plus WNER and 3 others.
Wales Meth/URC Liaison Group				3 reps
Rep to UWI				WNER appointed by URC Gen Sec
Rep to Covenanted Baptists				WNER
Church in Wales Governing Body				WNER
PCW Assembly				Assembly Moderator
EMU partnership (URC/Methodist /Scottish Episcopal)	EMU	Synod partnership		Mod. & SNER
<b>Other Denominational Bodies</b>				
General Synod		Representation		Permanent Ecumenical Rep. Currently Graham Maskery.
Joint Implementation Commission	JIC	URC participant observer		Methodist/Anglican body to implement the Anglican/Methodist Covenant. ICOW, SER
Methodist / Anglican panel for unity and Mission	MAPUM	URC participant Observer		
Council for Christian Unity	CCU	URC Participant Observer		ICOW, SER
Methodist Faith and Order		URC representative		Currently a synod training officer.
<b>European Ecumenical Bodies</b>				

<b>Conference of European Churches</b>	CEC	Membership	£7,000	2 Representatives to assemblies. SER + another.
Church and Society Commission	CSC	Membership	£4,500	Occasional representation in meetings.
<b>Community of Protestant Churches in Europe</b>	CPCE	Membership	£400 Expenses £300	1 representative to assembly. Currently URC member of central committee
<b>International Ecumenical Bodies</b>				
World Council of Churches	WCC	Membership	£10,000	Delegates to assembly.
WCC Central Committee	WCC	URC Representative	Travel and accommodation costs for 7 day meeting every 18 months £1,250	Elected at each General Assembly. Current term will end in October 2013.
WCC Faith & Order Commission	WCC	URC Representative	Travel and accommodation costs for meetings	
<b>World Communion of Reformed Churches</b>	WCRC	Membership	£14,500	
European region				
Total Identifiable Costs			£87,190	

## Key:

ICOW = In Course of Work

SER = Secretary for Ecumenical Relations

WNER = Welsh National Ecumenical Officer

SNER= Scottish National Ecumenical Officer

Mod = Moderator

DEO = Denominational Ecumenical Officer i.e. the URC representative on a county ecumenical body.