

Paper F1

Faith and Order Committee

What is the Spirit saying to
the Churches?

United Church 2015
Church 2015
Reformed Church 2015
Church 2015



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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Elizabeth Welch welchea@talk21.com
Action required	Discussion and comment
Questions for Mission Council	Mission Council is invited to consider the affirmations presented and to comment on the points for consideration offered after each affirmation, in order to inform the committee's further consideration of how the results of the discussion process can be offered creatively to General Assembly and through it to the churches.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	Subject: report on the discussion process based on the <i>What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?</i> booklet circulated to churches. Aim: To offer to Mission Council a perspective on the responses and a suggestion of this that can be offered to the General Assembly and through it to the local churches.
Main points	There are affirmations that can be made about the identity of the URC, its direction, initiatives in which it is already engaged and those of which it is on the threshold. Together these can paint a positive and encouraging answer to the question of 'what is the future of the church?'
Previous relevant documents	Faith and Order committee paper on the Future of the Church (page 102 of General Assembly 2014 <i>Book of Reports</i>)
Consultation has taken place with...	In preparing the report – the Faith and Order Committee; in the discussion – local churches.

Summary of Impact

Financial	None
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Various in the longer term, including ecumenical partners.

What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?

- A. The United Reformed Church is on a Spirit-led journey. This journey is in continuity with the treasures with which God has blessed the church over many centuries and open to the ways in which God is leading the church into God's future. After three years' reflection in the Faith and Order committee and Mission Council, a booklet was taken to the 2014 General Assembly, with the title *What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?* It was agreed that this booklet be circulated for discussion by churches and synods. Although only 10% of churches responded, along with a number of individuals and groups, the breadth was of great value. They demonstrated the wide range of thinking with regard to the future of the United Reformed Church and the need to regain confidence in this particular tradition of the church, in God's purpose for this Church, and in what this Church has to offer the world.
- B. The image that comes to mind is that of a tapestry being woven and comprised of many different threads of different lengths, thicknesses and colours which from behind, where we see it, looks chaotic and lacking any rhyme or reason but from the front, where God sees it, has beauty and coherence and is being woven into the image that God is creating. What we have identified are some of the threads of that tapestry that we believe God is weaving us into and we are offering these in a series of affirmations and initiatives.

Story of the booklet and the response

- C. The booklet was drawn up after three years of reflection and consideration by the Faith and Order committee and circulated to the synods and churches by the 2014 General Assembly for discussion. Due to the tight timescale for discussion, the complex nature of the question, and the discussions that were continuing at the same time about same-sex marriage, there was insufficient time for all churches to respond. Some churches are still continuing their discussions. 138 responses were received from individuals, churches, groups of churches, and synods. Many of the congregations within the United Reformed Church, across a broad geographical, theological and numerical range, both value our traditions and feel that the Spirit is at work in their midst.

Affirmations

- D. What we therefore offer here is a series of affirmations, in humble dependence on God for the church's life, work and witness, about the particular calling and identity of the United Reformed Church. No one affirmation is unique to the United Reformed Church; together they make up a picture of this Church. The affirmations start with the Church's faith and trust in God. They continue with a look at a particular aspect of this church and the mission implications of this aspect, and conclude with an indication of where work is being undertaken in a particular area.

1. ***God is the generous gift-giver, bringing the created world into being, offering new life in Jesus and power through the Holy Spirit.***

The church's first response to God is the offering of worship. The United Reformed Church celebrates the centrality and joy of worship as a living encounter with God, in which God is known and lives are transformed. Worship centres on the opening of the Word and the breaking of the bread, offered in a range of ways, as the congregation feels led, building on the wide range of approaches to worship today. Worship is the starting point for mission, as people participate in God's mission to the world, new people are welcomed and different ways of worship are explored. These different ways are given life through such initiatives as Fresh Expressions, Messy Church, cafe church, the booklet and TLS training.

Point for consideration: Would it be helpful to have a clearer understanding of where the overview of worship is held in the URC and how the worship life of the URC could be further developed?

2. ***God leads people into truth, through the work of the Holy Spirit***

The United Reformed Church celebrates the particular drawing together of scripture, tradition and experience that are God's gift to this church, knowing that there are many different ways of studying and interpreting scripture.

Growing in knowledge and understanding of scripture helps to articulate the faith in relation to tradition and experience and to give confidence to God's people to speak of the faith in a changing world.

The same-sex marriage discussions have highlighted the multiplicity of interpretations of scripture. The Faith and Order committee is initiating a study of the different ways in which we value the Bible in our church and how we can develop these further.

Point for consideration: Are there other areas with regard to change and continuity in terms of our faith and the life of the church that we should particularly focus on?

3. ***God is known in the relationship of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, into which all people are invited.***

The United Reformed Church celebrates this loving God, who calls us to live in relationship with each other, and affirms the value of the local church as the place in which God's love is known and lived out.

The proposed focus on missional discipleship is being developed to help people to grow in the knowledge of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in order to reach out to people in a spiritually hungry world.

In order to support the local church, further work is being undertaken on the nature of membership and the role of the church meeting. We celebrate the many good news stories that there are across local churches and look forward to sharing these more widely.

Point for consideration: What can we do to more effectively share stories and examples of good practice for mutual encouragement?

4. ***The God whose life abundantly overflows into the world, calls women and men, young and old, equipping and energising children and adults for witness and service***

The United Reformed Church celebrates the whole people of God, each one with his or her own gifting. Out of the whole people of God, two particular ministries are set aside in each place for the upbuilding, and revitalisation of the Christian community.

Elders are a particular gift to the United Reformed church, set aside in each congregation for spiritual leadership and pastoral care.

A separate paper is offered on 'authorised elders', looking at the role of the elder in relation to worship. This paper also raises up the value of non-stipendiary team ministry, seeking shared oversight of each congregation between elders and stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministry.

Ministers of word and sacrament, entrusted with oversight and inspiration of each congregation, have a particular role in leadership. The URC's Ministries committee is working on a variety of issues with regard to ministry, the pressures faced, and the development of non-stipendiary team ministry.

Point for consideration: The paper on 'authorised elders' covers a range of points for consideration in this area.

5. ***God is our source, our guide, our goal.***

The United Reformed Church celebrates the gifts and treasures of the Reformed tradition, acknowledging the rootedness of the Reformed tradition in a theological heritage that goes back to the early church, and open to the leading of the Spirit in new ways forward today, as the Spirit led our Reformed ancestors in their particular cultures and contexts.

The conciliar nature of the United Reformed Church, in which it is affirmed that the Holy Spirit speaks through each person, gathered in the councils of the local church, the regional and national synods and the General Assembly, is a gift of our tradition. Deepening our knowledge of this Reformed tradition equips the church to be more faithful in contemporary opportunities for mission. However, a need was expressed for the councils to work more closely together and the local churches to feel more affirmed and supported by the wider councils.

The 500th Anniversary celebration of the Reformation in 2017 offers an opportunity for study and reflection for United Reformed Churches, and a study guide along with a number of other initiatives are in the process of being produced to aid this reflection.

Point for consideration: Could the period of commemoration in 2017 provide an important occasion to focus particularly on those aspects of our identity that belong to our Reformed heritage?

6. ***God, through the Word and the Spirit, re-shapes the church to meet the challenge of different contexts and cultures.***

The United Reformed Church celebrates the 'risk taking' nature of our obedience to the Spirit, as has been seen in such areas as the ordination of women, in multi-cultural affirmation, in political stances, and in social commitment.

The church's work with people on the margins is evident in the amazing variety of work undertaken by local churches, with foodbanks, homeless people, refugees and a host of other initiatives. This is matched by the wider URC's engagement through the CRCW programme, Racial Justice and Intercultural Ministry, the work of Church and Society and the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT).

Point for consideration: Is this a sufficiently comprehensive and challenging picture? Is there more to be said?

7. ***God draws people to be one***

The United Reformed Church celebrate the bold steps taken to bring this Church into being through uniting different traditions of the Church and affirms the significance of this ecumenical witness. This witness is lived out through the commitment of the URC to some 400 LEPs across the three nations, to shared ecumenical work locally, regionally and nationally, and in the challenge continually offered to live as one people, honouring each other's diversity, in obedience to the one Lord Jesus Christ. The review of LEPs that is currently being undertaken offers an opportunity to look at new ways at local ecumenical engagement.

Point for consideration: How do we maintain a balance between our commitment to unity, especially in LEPs and our particular characteristic as a Reformed Church? Is this commitment to unity still as significant for our church?

Summary

These affirmations are now offered to Mission Council and General Assembly as a celebration of the life of this church, and an indication of where more work is being done in key area to take the life of the church forward.