**Mission Council Round-up November 2015**

Mission Council is the executive body of the General Assembly, and meets twice a year. Its latest meeting took place at The Hayes Conference Centre in Derbyshire from 13to 15 November. All [papers relating to the meeting](http://www.urc.org.uk/mission-council-and-general-assembly/1805-november-2015.html)  are available on the website.

**Friday 13 November 2015**

**Opening session: Moderator’s address**

In the opening session, the Revd David Grosch-Miller, Moderator of the General Assembly, addressed the Mission Council with a sermon reflecting on Moses’ burning bush encounter with God in the Sinai Desert. He urged the Mission Council to seek to take notice of what is happening in the world around us and be prepared to be surprised and encounter God in the least likely of places.

Mr Grosch-Miller drew upon Lawrence Kushner’s observation that essence of the encounter was not the miraculous, but a test of Moses attentiveness. Moses would have had to have watched the bush for several minutes before he could possibly have known that there was a miracle to watch.

“What God needed was someone who could pay attention and not be so preoccupied with the necessary that they failed to contemplate the extraordinary.”

He reminded the gathering that God chose Moses for activity in socio-political arena. “If the oppressed cry out, God will surely hear.”

“God has a dream and an invitation for us to inhabit that dream,” he said. “The dream that God has for people who suffer today will be about safe places for refugees fleeing war and poverty. It will be about caring for creation and a responsible use of limited resources. It will be about dignity and respect for each human life.”

He concluded by urging the gathering to “let curiosity and deep longing for God guide us and become part of God’s dream for the earth and her people”.

**URC logo update:** Mr Peter Knowles, convenor of the communication and editorial (C&E) committee, gave an update on the URC logo. Some will recall that the C&E committee brought a paper to the May meeting of Mission Council detailing plans for an open competition for a new logo. Although the paper was withdrawn, it was recognised that the current logo was not fit for digital purpose and the committee were given permission to modernise the logo, to make it fit for both print and digital uses – although retaining the cross and fish elements. Some work had been done on this and Mr Knowles showed the working rough design to Mission Council.

**Missional Discipleship: Papers M1 and M2:**

These papers brought jointly by the Mission and Discipleship department; were presented by the Revd Richard Church, Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship) and Ms Francis Brienen, Deputy General Secretary (Mission). Paper M1 is concerned with the spending of the next phase of funding which the denominating has been encouraged to apply for from the Council of World Mission through its Mission Support Programme. The funding is designated for ‘strategic mission work and encourages the member churches to undertake new ventures addressing the challenges of their mission contexts.’

Mr Church said: ‘the intention behind the paper is to invite the Church together to grow as disciples’, to focus anew on helping the United Reformed Church grow in confidence in evangelism and to make disciples. It became clear that there might be some convergence between the need to deepen discipleship and the recommendation of the recent Training for Learning and Service (TLS) review, which expressed a desire to work towards a integrated system of whole-life discipleship with ‘all learning opportunities being open to all, anchored in the Christian revelation, and building up the Church.’ The speakers were very clear that this was not a new programme, but rather a way to use what we already have to resource local churches to make disciples.

Discussion from the floor was positive and members welcomed the concept of ‘Missional Discipleship’ although there were some questions; specifically about the involvement of ecumenical partners, the study of United Reformed churches that are growing and whether the papers were unnecessarily skewed towards TLS. There was also some debate about the idea and practicalities of culture change within the denomination and the need for this process to include children and young adults as well as older adults.

Mission Council was asked to receive the report, endorse its direction of travel and ask for further information in March 2016. The resolution was agreed by consensus.

**Age of application for non-stipendiary ministry: Paper H1**

The Revd Nicola Furley-Smith introduced this paper which simply seeks to remove the age-related entry qualifications with regard to non-stipendiary ministry. She began by reminding Mission Council that this matter had been deferred from General Assembly 2014 and Mission Council November 2014. In the intervening months a task group has met and concluded that the age limit should be removed and the matter has now come back to Mission Council for decision. There was a short discussion, with a few members expressing discomfort at the idea of no age limit, these contributors saying that they would prefer to have an agreed and set minimum period of service after training whilst another member counteracted this by reminding Mission Council that ‘this was not a job, but a call.’ The resolution was agreed by consensus.

**Spending priorities within Education & Learning: Paper D2**

The Revd Richard Church presented this paper for information; it details the steps Education and Learning (E&L) have taken to reduce their spend since 2013 and move towards a flat budget for 2016. Mr Church made the point that now that Education and Learning was part of the Discipleship department there were new opportunities for economies of scale. He also made the point that there was a real need to support education and learning in discipleship across the whole church and that is was ‘absolutely necessary for lay people to be properly resourced.’ Mission Council was then asked if it had questions on the paper – and a lively discussion followed. The Revd Ruth Whitehead made the point that the central E&L budget was not the only place where money was spent ‘on training all of God’s people’ and the Revd Nicola Furley-Smith said that the cut in minister’s EM3 funding had had a negative effect on the ground and that she, in her role as Synod Moderator, had noticed a lowering of morale and a drop in the number of ministers undertaking formal training because they could no longer afford it. This comment met with approval and recognition from many members.

The Revd David Grosch-Miller, in the chair, reminded Mission Council that this paper was for information only, and suggested that Mission Committee agreed to end the discussion, on the understanding that the matters raised in the discussion had been heard and would be fed into future committee and department discussions.

**Windermere Centre Support: Paper D1**

The Revd Dr Neil Messer presented paper D1, which concerns the ongoing medium-term support of Resource Centres for Learning. The paper recommended that support for existing resources be maintained in order to maintain flexibility for strategic decisions to be taken by General Assembly in 2016.

Dr Messer presented a second resolution commending the Windermere Centre and its management committee on the work they have done to ensure the Centre’s financial viability, and expressing its support of the Centre’s work over the period 2015 to 2018. All indications are that changes at the centre have had a very positive effect on its finances and Mission Council enthusiastically applauded the Windermere Centre’s work and the resolutions were passed by consensus.

**The 2016 Budget: Paper G1**

Mr John Ellis, in his capacity as treasurer, introduced the denomination’s draft budget for 2016 announcing that it contained six helpings of good news:

* The pension fund for ministers does not require additional funding
* The recalled General Assembly cost less than expected
* The Windermere Centre was on a firmer financial footing
* The overall M&M giving was better than expected
* The 2015 out-turn will be better than budget and the expected 2016 budget deficit was easily covered
* And, as far as could be told, there were no ‘budget horrors’ awaiting us in 2017 or 2018.

Mr Ellis concluded: ‘The moral of this tale is that even finance can leave Mission Council really happy. Hallelujah!’

A few questions followed, including one asking if all committees had met the budget cuts required by General Assembly 2012, and Mr Ellis assured Mission Council that they had. He went on to add that, as 90% of the Church’s central income comes from the local churches, it is their giving that decides the total amount of central expenditure. The resolution was passed by consensus.

**Inter-synod resource sharing methods: Paper V1**

The Revd Paul Whittle, Synod Moderator of Eastern Synod, presented Paper V1 which deals with the way resources are shared between the 13 Synods.

In November 2013 the Mission Council had requested the Resource Sharing Task Group to propose a mechanism for inter-synod resource sharing.

Mr Whittle said that the task group had carefully considered the resolution, listened to those responsible for finance in the synods, and had concluded that it would not be helpful to introduce a mechanism. He offered his opinion that the current voluntary system is as robust as it needs to be.

Following discussion and comment on structural justice, generosity and communication within synods, the resolution was passed, recognising disagreement.

**The Historic Cases Review: R2**

The Revd Richard Church, speaking on behalf of the Safeguarding Advisory Group (SAG) presented Paper R2, updating Mission Council on the Historic Cases Review which was given the green light at the May meeting of Mission Council. The Revd Elizabeth Gray-King has been project managing phase one – the initial triage of Ministers’ files – and that is now underway and expected to be completed by the end of November. Mr Church asked Mission Council to authorise a second phase – when any individual connected with the denomination, now or in the past, will be invited to report any concern that they, or someone else, could have been a victim of abuse. Mr Church concluded by making it clear that this work is an essential piece of work that we are required to do and must be set in the context of the Judicial Review.

There was a considerable amount of discussion; not least a group of concerns, mainly from the synods, revolving around processes, protocols and people – and the balance between them.

Although it was recognised that there was much work to be done on the details of the phase two processes Mrs Gray-King made it clear that she and all others concerned with designing these processes were very well aware of the need to get them right and put the needs of people at their centre, adding: “to me, a good process is good pastoral care.”

The new safeguarding officer, due to take up her post in January 2016, will be fully involved in designing the phase two processes – and Mrs Gray-King also extended an invitation for anyone who felt they had something to contribute to the process invited Mission Council members to get in touch with her.

Other concerns related to an apparent tendency to skew the review pastorally – forgetting the legal needs of this work; and concern about clear communications to local churches. Mission Council was told that legal advice would be sought throughout the process and also that a communications strategy was in place. It was asked if it would be possible to make a complaint about a Council of the Church; Mr Church said that the query had been noted.

The question ‘should the triage of files be extended back before the URC was formed in 1972?’ was also discussed at some length. Mr Ellis, as chair, suggested that SAG look at the possibility of extending the triage and report back to Mission Council in March 2016. This found favour with Mission Council.

Drawing the debate to a close Mr Ellis reminded Mission Council that the resolution asked for further work on the detail, and asked Mission Council if they were ready to mandate this. They were, and the resolution was resolved by consensus.

**Saturday 14 November 2015**

**Environmental Policy: Paper I1**

The Revd Tracey Lewis, convenor of the Mission committee, introduced Paper I1, the draft environmental policy. This paper was before Mission Council for information and to give opportunity for comment and feedback, allowing the paper to be refined before it goes before General Assembly in 2016 for ratification/decision.

Mrs Lewis explained to Mission Council that in the 10 years since the current environmental policy was adopted, the understanding of the environmental challenge had changed. “It is again time to catch up. It is time to speak up. It is time to act.”

The thrust of the draft policy is not to be prescriptive, she said. “It is a statement of intent and a framework for action.” She added that the paper was written with the recognition that not all can respond to the environmental challenge in the same way.

Questions were raised about the particular focus on carbon reduction, and on the appropriateness of carbon offsetting.

Mission Council heard comments on the challenges of implementing and auditing the proposed reduction of church’s carbon footprint incrementally by 5% each year.

Also raised for consideration were how the sections dealing with the policy’s theological underpinning might be made more accessible and how resources for worship and teaching might be developed.

Mission Council commended the general direction of the paper, and expressed its gratitude to Dr Andrew Bradstock, Secretary for Church and Society until October 2016, who drafted the policy.

**Ethical Investment Guidelines on climate change issues: Paper G2**

This paper was introduced by Mr John Ellis, in his capacity as treasurer, and has the clear aim of establishing an ethical investment policy in relation to fossil fuels. The existing ethical investment policy prescribes avoidance of investment in a number of areas but does not include environmental issues.

Mr Ellis outlined the two choices before the denomination: total immediate disinvestment – which, whilst headlining grabbing, would be unlikely to result in long term change; or a policy of active and carefully targeted engagement with fossil fuel related companies in which we hold significant assets. Paper G2 favours the latter option and Mr Ellis made two pertinent points: that the URC is part of a group of denominations which together represent £billions and thus their voice (our voice) has the potential to be heard loudly; and that the URC, as part of this group, has experience and a good track record of making this strategy work – citing success at effecting policy changes at recent AGMs of both Shell and BP.

During the following discussion there were a few members who favoured total and immediate disinvestment, with the Revd Dr David Pickering saying that the choice was not an easy one but for some it may boil down to a ‘principle and heart’ decision against a ‘pragmatism and head’ one. Dr Pickering said that for him both his heart in principle and head pragmatically were in favour of disinvestment and for the URC to make a very public stand. There were other questions on the timing of possible disinvestment (when the engagement option had been tested and failed), to which Mr Ellis replied that, whilst there were no guarantees about outcomes, or timescales, for him, having a voice at the table, was vital. At this stage in the debate, the Revd David Grosch-Miller, in the chair, asked Dr Pickering if he would allow Mission Council pass the resolution recognising disagreement; Dr Pickering concurred, requesting that his disagreement be formally noted.

**En bloc papers**

The en bloc papers were passed by consensus. It should be noted that a paper being in en bloc does not mean it’s less important than timetabled items, but rather that the en bloc items contains those items where decisions can be reached responsibly without further discussion. Readers are encouraged to read the en bloc papers, which are available online via the link on page one of this Round-up.

**Youth Structures and Guidelines: B1**

We are highlighting this paper, which was in en bloc, because it represents a significant change in the life and structures of the United Reformed Church. Paper B1 informs us that, with immediate effect, the name ‘FURY’ is replaced by ‘URC Youth’ and this is as part of wider changes to their structures and guidelines. Three documents – *The URC Youth Handbook, Framework and Assembly Standing Orders* – contain the [full details of the restructuring](http://www.fury.org.uk/the-urc-youth/) .

**Question on deployment**

The Revd Paul Whittle asked a question in three parts:

* What information can be given as to the currently anticipated number of stipendiary ministers in five or 10 years’ time, and;
* Assuming a continued downward trend, what thinking has taken place, or is likely to take place, between departments within the denomination, as to how we can equip both the ministry and laity,
* And how much freedom might be possible for synods to create new ways of deploying resources, in order to respond robustly to the challenge of being an effective church over the next ten or so years.

This question was posed under Standing Order 8.1 so no discussion is permitted.

Richard Church responded:

With regard to the number of stipendiary ministers: in 2016 there will be 356; in 2019 it is expected that this will fall by a figure between 30 and 50 ministers, depending upon assumptions about the cost of ministry on one hand and the number of people paying to support it on the other. By 2025 the figure is likely to fall by around 100 but the point was made that predictions of this nature are an inexact science.

To the second part of the question, Mr Church pointed to the growing consensus expressed across the Assembly committees to ‘discover afresh our calling to be missional disciples’, commenting that the effect of this emphasis would be a better understanding of the contribution made by stipendiary ministers. He pointed out that General Assembly has repeatedly reflected on this issue and will do so again in 2016 when Assembly consider the questions of Authorised Elders and the work on Missional Discipleship.

On the final part, Mr Church said that the decisions as to deployment already reside in the synods and reminded Mission Council that more radical proposals were put to 2012 General Assembly (resolution 26) and were rejected.

**Joint Property Strategy Group and Church Buildings Forum: Paper Q1**

This paper, for information only, was presented by Mr Cliff Patten on behalf of the Joint Property Strategy Group (JPSG). He gave an update on the work of the JPSG and the Church Buildings Forum on the past two years, which has focussed on Methodist-URC sharing of resources in connection with encouraging visionary uses for church buildings; Mr Patten commented: “When our buildings become economically unsustainable the church family that occupies them often fails too – we need to find ways to control that.”

There was a short discussion on the floor of Mission Council, the Revd Elizabeth Clark, the National Rural Officer based at the Arthur Rank Centre, reminded Mission Council of the excellent relevant resources available on the Arthur Rank website, and the Revd Richard Church made the point that sometimes removing the burden of an unsuitable building and transplanting them into new building can reinvigorate a congregation and he gave an example of this happening in North Western Synod. Mission Council thanked the JPSG for its work.

**Finance and Future Planning: Paper A1**

The Revd James Breslin, convenor of the Assembly Arrangements committee, presented Paper A1 concerning the financing of the Assembly 2016.

The paper contains resolutions for Mission Council to instruct the Assembly Arrangements committee to book all accommodation for future assemblies, for synods to cover part of the cost of representatives’ costs for accommodation and for synods to cover the whole of the cost of the travel arrangements. It was also proposed that evening meals be the responsibility of individual members of Assembly.

The paper quickly led to discussion about the purpose and place of Assembly in the life of the United Reformed Church, and how the time is used.

Comments and questions from the floor highlighted the tension between the financial restrictions of Assembly and the desire for it to be more than a business meeting – a showcase and celebration of the church.

Many spoke of the importance of shared meals as a vital part of the business and fellowship of the Assembly.

In response to the wider issues of how to balance the various things that Assembly could do, two synod moderators, the Revd Andrew Mills and the Revd Nicola Furley-Smith brought a resolution asking the general secretary to “initiate a review of the ways in which our meeting together as General Assembly may develop in the future so that it can better reflect our ethos as a conciliar church”.

The resolution was passed by consensus and John Proctor, General Secretary advised that in March Mission Council would get an initial response outlining the lines of enquiry and establishing the kinds of questions that need to be answered.

The review should consider whether General Assembly can be funded without calling upon additional finance from individuals and synods.

The three resolutions were passed by consensus.

**Authorised Elders: Paper F2**

The Revd Elizabeth Welch, convenor, presented this report of a small task group of Faith and Order Committee. Paper F2 responds to the need for local leadership able to celebrate Holy Communion in the absence of an ordained minister of word and sacraments.

The committee asked Mission Council to determine whether the paper is headed in the right direction, and to offer either clarification, ideas for development or to make suggestions for alternative directions.

The paper proposes that synods should arrange for the appointment of elders within local churches as elders authorised to celebrate Communion in the absence of an ordained minister.

A wide-ranging discussion followed, reflecting on many of the practical, pastoral, theological and ecumenical issues that the paper raises.

Among the considerations that the Faith and Order committee take from Mission Council are the ways to respond to developments such as Messy Church and Fresh Expressions of Church and the increasing need for Holy Communion to be celebrated in homes and care homes. The place of baptism in discussion of sacraments, and the role of lay preachers were also raised.

Following a lengthy discussion, Mission Council was of one mind to give the task group time to do further work and to report back to the March 2016 Mission Council and determine whether the paper is ready for General Assembly.

**SUNDAY 15 NOVEMBER**

**Progress report from the Task Group looking at the Church’s engagement with 20-40 year olds: Paper U1**

Ms Victoria Paulding, convenor of the Task Group, presented this paper reporting on the activities of the 20-40 Task Group which was formed following a resolution at 2012 General Assembly to consider how to improve the integration of 20-40 year olds at every level of the denomination. She outlined some of the conversations the Group had had, and the anecdotal evidence collected on the “missing generation”, but added that they were now keen to engage in and with more solid research – and for that they needed more time. Ms Paulding specifically referred to a research project undertaken by the Church of England (which they are willing to share with the URC) and which will report on its initial findings in January 2016. In the light of this she asked Mission Council to agree to extend the work of the Task Group for two years to allow this second phase of research to be completed and for fully-costed proposals to 2018 General Assembly.

A wide ranging and positive discussion followed. The Revd Dr David Pickering told Mission Council that Yorkshire Synod was in the process of planning for a Special Category Minister, focusing on 18-25 year olds and to work with the ecumenical chaplaincy at the universities in Leeds. Several comments were made about the importance and urgency of this work. There was a call for an interim report(s) to Mission Council and/or General Assembly in 2016, as well as a more immediate communications strategy alerting the denomination to the existence and scope of this Task Group’s work, and encouraging the local churches to engage with issues relating to “the missing generation” sooner rather than later. Ms Paulding confirmed that she would prepare interim reports and engage with Reform and other communications channels available.

The resolution was passed by consensus.

**Paper F1 “What is the spirit saying to the churches”**

The Revd Elizabeth Welch, convenor of the Faith and Order Committee, presented the committee’s paper: “What is the spirit saying to the churches” for discussion and comment. She introduced it as an exploration of what it means for each congregation, and for the whole of the Church, to be Reformed and to be open to the Spirit’s leading to new and sometimes risky directions.

The paper takes the form of seven broad affirmations about God, each followed by a brief comment on its implications for church life and mission.

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

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

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

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.

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

6.       God through the Word and the Spirit reshapes the church to meet the challenge of different contexts and cultures.

7.       God draws people to be one.

Following discussion in small groups, comments were made on the ways that the paper links to the Vision 2020 framework and to the Basis of Union.

A diverse discussion followed on the broadness of the affirmations, and the place of criticism, challenge and promise alongside the affirmation.

The Rev Dr Neil Messer, convenor of the Education and Learning Committee, observed that while the affirmations may appear on face value to be general enough to be beyond disagreement, closer consideration raised profoundly uncomfortable issues. “The affirmations implied questions about what the United Reformed Church is for, whether and why we need the United Reformed Church.”

The convenor said this paper is to encourage and help and inspire people to be beacons of life and hope in their local communities. All comments will be fed into the committee’s discussions and reflections as it seeks to do further work on this paper.

**In brief:**

* It was announced that Ms Cassie Wright has been appointed as the URC’s new safeguarding officer, and is scheduled to start her new role on 4 January 2016.
* The Revd Tracey Lewis invited the Moderators to write a letter of support and solidarity to churches in France following Friday night’s terrorist attacks and tragic loss of life in Paris. Mission Council supported the suggestion unanimously.
* Ms Francis Brienen announced that an appointment had been made to the post for Secretary for Church & Society and that Ms Grace Pengelly plans to take up the post on 4 January. Ms Brienen said she was absolutely delighted and excited by the appointment, adding that not only was this the first time a woman has been appointed to the role, but that Ms Pengelly is under 30.
* Mission Council warmly welcomed David Pickering on his appointment as Moderator of the National Synod of Scotland.