

# Paper F1

## Future of the Church

Faith and Order Committee



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## Faith and Order Committee: Future of the Church

### Basic Information

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<b>Action required</b>	Discernment by Mission Council with regard to where the Spirit is leading the United Reformed Church in terms of our particular gifts
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	No
<b>Alternative options to consider, if any</b>	No

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	‘Will these bones live?’ This paper outlines issues with regard to the characteristics and identity of the United Reformed Church, in order to continue the discussion from the May 2013 Mission Council about the future of the church and of the United Reformed Church
<b>Main points</b>	Focus on the areas that were identified in the Mission Council discussion about which United Reformed Church people are passionate and which URC people value about the URC, rather than the larger number of issues about which people were critical, on the grounds that the renewal of the church arises out of God’s generosity and the gifting of the Holy Spirit. Raises issues and questions that need more focussed attention in order to consider the way forward, particularly with regard to URC identity, URC passions and values, where the Holy Spirit is already discerned, the longer strands of history that shape the URC and the call to ecumenism. Questions are offered for discussion. A section on the nature of the church from the Basis of Union is appended.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Several FAOC discussion papers on the future of the church, a summary of which came to the May Mission Council
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	The Faith and Order Committee, across several meetings; interested individuals, through social media and wider consultation; and the May 2013 Mission Council

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	If the URC discovered more confidently God’s purpose for this church, perhaps she might discover more of God’s generous provision
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	This paper starts to raise questions about the nature of the URC’s ecumenical engagement and the level of the URC’s commitment to this.

# Future of the Church

## Looking at the 'Purpose and Goal of the Church'

### Introduction

This paper pulls out and summarises the positive themes that were raised in the May 2013 Mission Council discussion on the future of the Church. (In the comments it is clear that 'church' is understood in variety of ways, including the local congregation, the United Reformed Church as a whole, different churches of different traditions across the United Kingdom, or the church universal across time and nations. This raises an issue about the need for clarity with regard to which meaning is being discussed at any one time, and the need for attention to the interconnectedness of the body of Christ.) There were many critical comments expressed, but these are not the subject of this paper. This is on the grounds that the renewal of the life of the Church (in any of the forms mentioned) arises out of God's generosity and the gifting of the Holy Spirit and that the discernment of these is critical.

A number of scenarios about the future of the United Reformed Church as a whole, and its congregations in particular, were brought to Mission Council. A helpful discussion was had about these scenarios, with no one scenario being seen as describing the way forward, but many fruitful comments being offered about a variety of options. A particular strand of thinking addressed the issues of the identity and characteristics of the United Reformed Church, in relation to other Churches and in terms of the URC's own identity. The paper offers some further areas for discussion in order to take forward the United Reformed Church's reflection on where the Holy Spirit is leading this particular church next. Key comments included: 'We need to be attentive to where change comes from; do we see the Holy Spirit as more active in the local, the regional, the national, the central life of the church?' 'We need to regain confidence in the faith.'

A comment has been made that addressing these issues is hard work, but doing nothing is not an option!

### Questions asked

There were a range of questions asked in the group discussion:

#### Identity

A much asked question was whether we have a United Reformed identity which holds congregations together, and if so, whether it both celebrates our diversity and also holds us together across congregations and nations. A corollary to this was whether we need a United Reformed Church identity. Some were strongly in favour, others disagreed. Others made a plea for discovering the United Reformed Church's USP (unique selling point) and some argued that our USP is in our particular combination of gifts

#### Our passions

A number of passions were mentioned: synergy, realism, energised vision, use professionalism, cooking, church buildings used well, youth work, singing, Christ should be enjoyed, organic unity, Liverpool (FC & team work)

## What we value about the United Reformed Church

The freedom to decide, the freedom to worship and freedom of conscience, each one tested against authority of scripture and Church Meeting; the decision making processes; a vision for governance based on Elders and Church Meeting; the URC enshrines meetings which are empowered to discern the working of the Holy Spirit, even against a majority view; Informality and lack of 'respect' (difference); The way we related to the word of God in the Bible; our commitment to social justice; our willingness to die as a denomination; inclusivity and tolerance; the Eldership; lively, imaginative local churches; Allowing individuals to express faith commitment (bottom-up); Local church decides who members are; Children and young people equal partners; Holy Spirit is working through all/any; Discernment re call of minister; flexibility – try it and see, liturgical flexibility too; the sovereignty of God (can we find our way of saying 'God gave me this word?'), Does our worship reflect the joy that should flow from that awareness? Sharing of gifts a URC characteristic – M&M and resource sharing more than political! (and need to work on how we offer and receive gifts in a range of ways)

## History

Are we sufficiently attentive to the history of the United Reformed Church, that history as it arises out of the sources of our faith, in the scriptures and the early church, from the Reformation and the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England, and from the strands of the church which have formed the United Reformed Church? Are we a church that lives in the present rather than builds on the past – but does this lead to a loss of confidence in our faith and our church as we lose touch with our roots? An argument was made for the desirability of a greater familiarity with the founding United Reformed Church statements with regard to our faith and the church in the Basis of Union. (see excerpt in Appendix A)

## Discovering the Holy Spirit

There were a range of comments about where people experienced the Holy Spirit, individually and collectively, including: in our shared discernment: when we come together: listening to one another, prayer, moving into grace; when a person is at peace with him or her self; awareness of learning and growth; in times when inspired and excited; there at the edges of experience; when people are ready to be courageous; in being disturbed, in openness; in excitement and caution

*Many moments of revelation were identified: Hungary – Being ecumenical in worship in 1989: An act of holy passion; Mission Council – October 2002, the Church Life Survey and Finance – so dire that something had to be done and Catch the Vision emerged; Churches gel and build vision, responding to community needs; Church Secretary – neighbour coming to church: Church meeting – shut the building and become the worshipping heart of the village; Church re-ordering – happened by fire: new appreciation of true essentials; Elder from Sierra Leone spoke of true stories of faith igniting action spontaneously; Bible, where stories connect with real life; 1996 – deep debates on contentious issue dividing the church: transformation through real life stories.*

The comment was made that the Holy Spirit seems not to work through programmes or restructuring; we discern the Holy Spirit in many and varied ways, in seeing signs, and possibilities of growth, but we begin by seeking to discern together

## Ecumenism

There were many questions raised as to the current state of play with regard to the United Reformed Church and ecumenism. Some felt that the URC should have the courage to die, this being translated as losing her identity within another Church; others felt that the URC needs to reclaim its own sense of identity, and offer this as a gift to other Churches. The model from Cumbria was mentioned positively on several occasions. General comments included ‘There’s no energy for organic union, but it raises some important questions. Are local people really interested in what is happening?’ Among the practical points made was the need to look further at the nature of LEPs, especially in terms of the ‘double denominational requirements’ on LEPs and to suggest that we need to review the agreement that we cannot plant a new church unless it is ecumenical.

### A small selection of ongoing issues

- Need to identify our priorities (e.g. increasing numbers? spreading the word?) and accept that we cannot do everything.
- Look at greater use of technology – cyber church? skype? services online, intimations on web.
- How far do we do with ‘tent ministry’?
- Need to work on the theology behind our buildings.
- Re-visit the nature of ministry and the relation between lay and ordained ministry, particularly in the light of deployment.

## Questions for Mission Council discussion

Start by sharing what each member of the group means when the word ‘church’ is used, (e.g. congregation, the United Reformed Church, Churches of other traditions, the Body of Christ) and look at the implications of these different levels of meaning for the wider discussion.

1. What do you identify as the core characteristics of ‘Church’ that need to be present in a denominational body or a congregation for Church to be Church?
2. What do you identify as the distinguishing characteristics of the United Reformed Church that give life and health to this Church and are our gift to other Churches and to the world around us?
3. Do you discern the Holy Spirit bringing the URC to the point of being ‘ready to live’ or ‘ready to die’? Outline the reasons for your answer.

**A practical suggestion:** Bearing in mind the need to be attentive to the Holy Spirit’s leading in taking us forward, would it be helpful to suggest that each council of the United Reformed Church (Elders, church meeting, Synod, committees, Mission Council, Assembly) spent the first hour of its meetings in 2014 in theological reflection, asking where the people of that council discern the presence of God in their lives and where they see the Holy Spirit’s leading for the future of their work?

# Appendix A

Excerpt from the United Reformed Church Basis of Union

## The Church and The United Reformed Church

1. There is but one Church of the one God. He called Israel to be his people, and in fulfilment of the purpose then begun he called the Church into being through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. The one Church of the one God is holy, because he has redeemed and consecrated it through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and because there Christ dwells with his people.
3. The Church is catholic or universal because Christ calls into it all peoples and because it proclaims the fullness of Christ's Gospel to the whole world.
4. The Church is apostolic because Christ continues to entrust it with the Gospel and the commission first given to the apostles to proclaim that Gospel to all peoples.
5. The unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the Church have been obscured by the failure and weakness which mar the life of the Church.
6. Christ's mercy in continuing his call to the Church in all its failure and weakness has taught the Church that its life must ever be renewed and reformed according to the Scriptures, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
7. The United Reformed Church humbly recognises that the failure and weakness of the Church have in particular been manifested in division which has made it impossible for Christians fully to know, experience and communicate the life of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church.
8. The United Reformed Church has been formed in obedience to the call to repent of what has been amiss in the past and to be reconciled. It sees its formation and growth as a part of what God is doing to make his people one, and as a united church will take, wherever possible and with all speed, further steps towards the unity of all God's people.
9. The United Reformed Church testifies to its faith, and orders its life, according to this Basis of Union, believing it to embody the essential notes of the Church catholic and reformed. The United Reformed Church nevertheless reserves its right and declares its readiness at any time to alter, add to, modify or supersede this Basis so that its life may accord more nearly with the mind of Christ.
10. The United Reformed Church, believing that it is through the freedom of the Spirit that Jesus Christ holds his people in the fellowship of the one Body, shall uphold the rights of personal conviction. It shall be for the church, in safeguarding the substance of the faith and maintaining the unity of the fellowship, to determine when these rights are asserted to the injury of its unity and peace.

## THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH AND THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

11. Within the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church the United Reformed Church acknowledges its responsibility under God:- to make its life a continual offering of itself and the world to God in adoration and worship through Jesus Christ;- to receive and express the renewing life of the Holy Spirit in each place and in its total fellowship, and there to declare the reconciling and saving power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ;- to live out, in joyful and sacrificial service to all in their various physical and spiritual needs, that ministry of caring, forgiving and healing love which Jesus Christ brought to all whom he met;- and to bear witness to Christ's rule over the nations in all the variety of their organised life.