

Paper X1

Responses to the
recommendations of
The Gathering

National Synod of Wales



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National Synod of Wales: Responses to the recommendations of The Gathering



Basic Information

Contact name and email address	Sally Thomas ecumenical@urcwales.org.uk
Action required	Discussion and transmission to General Assembly
Draft resolution(s)	Mission Council recommends to General Assembly that the paper entitled 'United Reformed Church response to the Commission of Covenanted Churches' (Paper X1) be submitted as the United Reformed Church's response to the Commission.
Alternative options to consider, if any	

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	Recommendations for a Uniting Church in Wales with a number of recommendations for the churches and leadership of all five denominations to consider.
Main points	These are set out in points 5.1 to 5.6 of the paper.
Previous relevant documents	In October 2012 the Commission for the Covenanting Churches in Wales organised an event called The Gathering. This was in response to a request from the churches at a 2009 meeting that the Commission come up with proposals for unity. In preparation, three working parties with representatives from each denomination plus Cytûn met to address and prepare material on Pastoral Oversight, Church Governance, and a new Liturgy for Holy Communion. The full reports and details of the day itself are on the Cytûn website link: http://www.cydgynulliad.org.uk
Consultation has taken place with...	Churches in the Synod of Wales have been asked to discuss the recommendations. To date 42 have responded and there has also been a Synod discussion. Ecumenically, there has been one meeting of church leaders. The whole process came from a Commission consultation, has been discussed at subsequent Commission meetings and will be discussed at a special meeting in November.

Summary of Impact

Financial	No detailed information as yet. The ongoing funding of the Commission and cost of the next Gathering scheduled for October 2015 is a consideration. If the recommendations are accepted, either as they are or amended, then a task group will be set up to consider future financing (Section 5.3.c).
External (e.g. ecumenical)	As above, 5.3.c states that "leaders, lawyers and administrators" of all five denominations work together on the new ecumenical structures. The impact on our existing L.E.P.s will be something we shall then need to work through with them. It should be noted that should these or subsequently amended recommendations not be accepted by all five denominations there will be press coverage around churches failing to agree. This will also impact on our wider ecumenical partnerships whichever way the final decision goes.

United Reformed Church response to the Commission of Covenanted Churches

1. Process

We see The Gathering process as a step in the continuing ecumenical journey in Wales. We are thankful for the Covenant going back to 1975 and want to continue conversations that make that real for people in Wales, so that the unity we believe we have in God can be seen more clearly.

We recognise that the recommendations from The Gathering are not a full scheme of union, but represent sufficient work to test whether the covenant partners are ready for interchangeability of ministry. We offer this response as part of the consultation to help refine the recommendations into proposals that might gain wider acceptance.

The summary recommendations have been shared with local church meetings and 42 have responded. There have been discussions at some local ecumenical meetings, but it is unfortunate that local reporting back suggests that many local Anglican churches had not heard about The Gathering. The process of each covenant partner making an individual response has also meant that we have reacted from our own tradition and prejudices. More joint conversations may have helped us to imagine the future together.

We continue to see ourselves as part of a uniting church movement and affirm positive ways of working together. As the Statement of Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church says: “We affirm our intention to go on praying and working, with all our fellow Christians, for the visible unity of the Church in the way Christ chooses, so that people and nations may be led to love and serve God and praise him more and more for ever.”

2. Principles

We believe that the desire for unity is rooted in the Bible, in Jesus’ prayer ‘that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe’ (John 17:21). It would also be natural for us to begin thinking about unity in diversity by reflecting on the nature of God as Trinity calling people to be the Church, continuing the ministry of Christ as partners in God’s mission.

When the United Reformed Church Task Group on Personal and Conciliar Leadership and Authority reported back to Mission Council in October 2002 it noted ‘The way forward in ecumenical dialogue is not to try to fit into one another’s categories, making compromises here and there, but for all our churches to walk together to somewhere beyond our current position... Unity is not a matter of ecclesiastical joinery - it is about the place of the Church within the purposes of God’ paragraphs 1.3.3 and 1.3.5.

Our traditions would not see any particular church order as being essential. At the same time members hold deep convictions about how the Spirit shapes the life of churches. We affirm the ministry of the whole people of God, with some set aside for particular ministries. We affirm the local congregation as an important agent in God’s mission, and note that many of our local churches in Wales are suspicious of external interference.

Eldership has been important in our tradition as a locally elected and ordained leadership team within a congregation. We offer this as a model that has the potential to include collaborative working and spiritual depth.

We affirm that there should be equality of opportunity for people in the discernment of God's call to all ministries in a Uniting Church in Wales. It was through the call of local church meetings that the call to ministry of women and gay people was first recognised. In the same way, we have affirmed the freedom of local congregations to respond to their context by offering the registration or blessing of civil partnerships. Whilst not all in the United Reformed Church agree with this, we would expect such freedom to be respected in a Church Uniting in Wales.

3. Possibilities

It will be some time before the responses of other denominations are known. Full reporting back and future steps will be the focus of the next Gathering scheduled for October 2015. The Gathering in 2012 was widely reported and we do not want the reports of the next to be about failure. We are committed to greater ecumenism but do not get the impression from local churches or ecumenical partners that this is the way to do it. The congregational responses to the recommendations as they stand are only part of the story. We are working with other denominations all the time on the deployment of ministers in shared situations and the current recommendations do nothing to make that easier.

We would like to see a mission emphasis as the core element of what happens next. We believe there is more to say about the United Reformed Church position than that reflected in the Gathering reports.

We are mindful of current successful examples of ecumenical collaboration and hope for similar effective developments -

- Local ecumenical partnerships bringing Christians in a community together.
- Chaplaincy models where labels are not as important as responding to need and showing God's love, where different ministries are recognised in team contexts as an important example of mutual respect.
- Franchise models of ecumenical working such as food banks, street pastors, messy church which are of our time and are a visible way that Christians are working together to respond to people and meet their needs .

In their responses, and whatever their concerns about the current recommendations, local churches expressed strong commitment to local ecumenism.

4. Response to the Commission

The Synod wrote to all local churches in January 2013 asking for their response to the recommendations. By the deadline date of June 13, forty two churches out of a hundred had responded with others reporting that they will be discussing it later in the year.

The 'Summary of Recommendations' document from the Gathering papers says, "It is the Commission's hope that, at the end of the consultation period, these recommendations - perhaps refined by our combined wisdom - may become proposals for the future."

PLEASE NOTE THAT THOSE SENTENCES IN BOLD BELOW ARE QUOTES FROM THE GATHERING PUBLICATION 'SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS'. THE NUMBERING ALSO FOLLOWS THAT OF THE GATHERING.

5.1 The first recommendation invites the five Covenanted Churches to think of themselves as the Church Uniting in Wales.

We consider ourselves to be a church that has already brought together different traditions and is committed to working for unity. We note that the Covenanting Baptist churches signed the covenant as individual congregations, or as part of LEPs who were part of other covenant partners. The 1975 Covenant and 2005 Trefeca Declaration which the recommendations intend to bring to fruition are at Appendices 1 and 2.

The second recommendation includes several bullet points concerning oversight and interchange of ministers. Each bullet point is followed by our response, which include key questions which we believe require further discussion before the recommendation can be accepted:

The Commission recommends

5.2 a. That the Uniting Church will have nine jurisdictions – the six existing Anglican dioceses plus a Methodist jurisdiction, a Presbyterian jurisdiction and a United Reformed Church/Covenanting Baptist jurisdiction, each of which will be invited to elect its own bishop;

The United Reformed Church concern here is one of parity. The recommendation of a 6/3 balance between current diocese and new jurisdictions is therefore a concern depending on what decisions are to be taken by the bench of Bishops of the Church Uniting in Wales. This is not clear from the documentation nor, therefore, what the difference in representation means.

Many of the Local Ecumenical Partnerships that currently exist in Wales will be under more than one jurisdiction with no clear indication of the implications of this, nor of how it will facilitate the decision about how to deploy ministers in LEPs.

We recognise that other reformed churches around the world have accepted bishops for the sake of unity. For example, the Porvoo Communion, consisting mostly of churches in Northern Europe, states in its declaration:

“We acknowledge that the episcopal office is valued and maintained in all our churches as a visible sign expressing and serving the Church’s unity and continuity in apostolic life, mission and ministry. And the churches commit themselves to welcome persons episcopally ordained in any of our churches to the office of bishop, priest or deacon to serve,[..] in that ministry in the receiving church without re-ordination; - by invitation and in accordance with any regulations which may from time to time be in force”.

However, unlike other churches, in particular the Methodist and Anglican churches in the USA, Porvoo does not yet accept the office of bishop as equally open for women and men.

Another example is The Lund Statement by the Lutheran World Federation which includes: “58. Absence of this episcopal succession does not necessarily mean that there has been a loss of continuity in apostolic faith. The possibility of recognising that churches may be apostolic even if they have not preserved the sign of episcopal succession is of great ecumenical significance, since the mutual recognition of ministers exercising episcopé at the supra-congregational level is vital in ecumenical rapprochement among churches. At the same time, a church which has not preserved the sign of historic succession is free to enter a relationship of mutual participation in episcopal installations (consecrations) with a church which has retained it, and thereby to adopt it for itself, without thereby denying its past apostolic continuity. The readiness of Lutheran churches to recognise the value of the sign of apostolicity in the historic succession of episcopal ministers and to adopt this sign, without requiring its necessity, is a contribution to the ecumenical movement.”

Within the United Reformed Church in the UK context, for some the image of a bishop is alien and emotive. Sensitive conversations would be needed to address any misconceptions and gain acceptance. Some respondents urged that a different title be considered. The recommendations do not suggest a mechanism for the United Reformed Church and Covenanting Baptist congregations to elect a bishop and this would require conversation before the recommendation could be affirmed.

The Commission recommends

5.2 b. That a description of the bishop's role be drawn up and agreed by all five Covenanted Churches;

Within current United Reformed Church polity, some of the functions of a bishop are fulfilled by a Synod Moderator, but it is clear from the title that these are performed as a representative of the Synod Meeting, and any personal authority is held within the authority of a council of the church. This is particularly true in the deployment of ministers, where a committee of synod decides where ministers are to serve, and the local pastorates decide who to call. We believe that more exploration of assumptions about the power of bishops would be helpful before a role description can be drawn up.

The Commission recommends

5.2 c. That the bishop be consecrated into the historic episcopate, i.e. ordained by the laying on of hands by at least three bishops who are themselves part of the historic episcopate;

We have heard many concerns about the historic episcopate and the idea of apostolic succession. We would identify continuity as coming from the work of the Holy Spirit, the teaching of the Gospel, and the councils of the church. We wonder whether this could be represented by Elders being involved in the laying on of hands during the consecration of bishops. With our understanding of the Priesthood of all believers we would want the breadth of our traditions represented in the way bishops are recognised.

The Commission recommends

5.2 d. That the bishop will ordain all those who are to become ministers within the bishop's jurisdiction;

The Structure of the United Reformed Church currently says that the Synod Moderator shall - "preside, or appoint a deputy to preside, at all ordinations and/or inductions of ministers and all commissionings and/or inductions of CRCWs within the province or nation"
(*Basis of Union, Section B paragraph 2.4*)

It is not necessary for the synod moderator to preside or be present at the ordination of elders who share in ministry but are not 'ministers'. The Commission recommendation doesn't take account of the ministry of CRCWs (Church Related Community Workers) who are diaconal ministers but not ordained, nor Elders who are ordained but not presbyters or priests.

The Commission recommends

5.2 e. That the bishop will be a bishop in the Church Uniting in Wales and will share collegiality and full interchangeability with all the other bishops of that Church;

Our concern at the beginning of the process was that The Church in Wales did not allow for women bishops. However, the decision of the Governing Body of the Church in Wales in September 2013 that women are now eligible to be appointed bishops removes this concern about inequality expressed by many in the United Reformed Church and opens the way for interchangeability.

The Commission recommends

5.2 f. That the bishops of all nine jurisdictions in the Church Uniting in Wales consult with each other at least twice a year;

We believe that to adequately and thoroughly address co-operation in mission or deployment of ministers across Wales, more meetings would be needed. We think that the Commission needs to express more clearly what the bench of bishops would do.

The Commission recommends

5.2 h. That all existing ministers agree to the laying on of hands by at least one Anglican bishop and at least one other bishop representing the other traditions within the Church Uniting in Wales. This would be regarded not as an ordination but as a step forward to full covenanted ministry.

Ministers who feel that their existing ministry should be recognised have found it hard to accept that they should go through another ceremony that would include the laying on of hands. We ask The Commission to look again at how other uniting churches have addressed this, such as the Churches of South and North India and Pakistan.

In the United Reformed Church, we are familiar with the idea that one might be locally ordained as an Elder and then go on to ordination for wider service as a minister of Word and Sacrament without this being seen as re-ordination, because the kind of service is very different. However, we believe that ministers from other parts of the United Reformed Church would see having hands laid on them by a bishop as an additional barrier to serving in the National Synod of Wales. Ministerial formation and in-service training are significant here, yet are not mentioned in the report or recommendations.

In 1987 the Commission published a service for “The Inauguration of a Uniting Church in Wales’. While the hopes of uniting then did not reach fruition, the carefully chosen words of the service still have much to offer. They include each church leader saying to one another and then to every minister as part of the act of laying on of hands -

“May God continue his blessing already given in your ordination; may God use our action here for the reconciliation of all our ministries within the Uniting Church in Wales.”

We ask the Commission to consider this form of recognition and acceptance of ministers from Covenant partners.

The responses from some ministers indicate that they would not be willing to undergo anything that would look like a re-ordination. Likewise some local churches have indicated that they would not want to submit to the authority of a bishop. Whilst we need to consider how to care for those who feel they could not be part of a Uniting Church in Wales, we would like the Commission to consider whether an attempt at visible unity that creates more fragmentation has achieved its aim. We are also mindful of our churches working creatively with congregations including those from denominations that are not Covenant partners.

The third recommendation says that

5.3 Following acceptance of the invitation outlined in 1. above, the Commission recommends:

5.3 a. That all member jurisdictions will, for the present, continue to operate their existing ecclesiastical polity;

It is difficult in cross border churches like the United Reformed Church to change the relationship with the wider denomination without having a clearer structure for a Uniting

Church in Wales. We know from our current ecumenical partnerships where differences in polity cause friction, and would hope for ecumenical co-operation to help smooth these problems rather than continue them.

5.3 b. That the Gathering of the Church Uniting in Wales be held annually; and

We have concerns about the cost both for this and wider aspects of the recommendations.

5.3 c. That leaders, lawyers and administrators representing all five member Churches be asked to draw up, within a period of five years a Scheme and Constitution for the Uniting Church based on the recommendations in Section 5 of the Report of the Working Group on Church Governance.

Section 5 addresses the long term recommendations for structure and governance.

We have concerns that they create additional levels of governance for which none of the denominations has capacity and that they misunderstand the current dynamics of the partnership. For example, it recommends authorisation of forms of service which could be counter productive for those who value the autonomy to create contextual worship and whose service books exist as a resource not as something anyone should feel obliged to adhere to. The proposed structure and language used has caused a significant number of churches to express concern that it is too Anglican. While we accept this is not the intention, it is, we would suggest, a section that needs further conversation.

An additional and significant concern is the financing and deployment of ministry. Denominations are already feeling themselves vulnerable in this regard. A new infrastructure to sit alongside and work with existing ones is likely to be unsustainable.

We also recognise that affirming the Welsh language in church life is an important element in ecumenical dialogue in Wales, and as significant as the issues about church order.

The fourth recommendation says that

5.4 The Commission recommends as good practice the appointment in the Church of England of cathedral canons from other denominations.

The United Reformed Church would welcome this happening now. Current practice is for ecumenical guests to be full voting members of the United Reformed Church National Synod of Wales.

The fifth recommendation says that

5.5 The Commission recommends that its member churches explore together the role of the diaconate to see whether they can reach a common mind on this issue.

The United Reformed Church's diaconal ministry is CRCWs (Church Related Community Workers) who are commissioned but not ordained. Discussions as recommended would be welcome.

The sixth recommendation relates to Local Ecumenical Partnerships

5.6 a. Within Local Ecumenical Partnerships, the Commission recommends: that ministers be encouraged but not required to attend a denominational court other than that of the denomination to which they belong; and

For some denominations this is already happening. For example, the Presbyterian Church of Wales /United Reformed Church Guidelines state (Page 51)

When a minister is serving in a joint church or joint pastorate it is reasonable to expect them to continue to fulfil the obligation of their parent denomination.

It is also reasonable to expect them to attend some of the wider councils of the other denomination, in the case of a United Reformed Church Minister, principally Presbytery and in the case of a Presbyterian Church of Wales minister, principally one of the two meetings of Synod each year. These expectations should be made explicit to the minister, the local joint church or pastorate, the Synod Elders and Presbytery before the minister's induction.

And 'How to Make it Work' the guidelines for Methodist / United Reformed Church LEPs (pages 3/4) has -

The status of the minister in the other church.

The authorised procedures of both denominations permit a minister in a Local Ecumenical Partnership to enjoy full status in both churches.

The United Reformed Church paragraph 2(3)(a) enables a Methodist Minister who is directly working in the service of the United Reformed Church within a particular Synod to be a member of that Synod.

United Reformed Church ministers are expected to seek the status of Authorised Minister from the Methodist Conference. There is a requirement to make a declaration that he or she will not during the period of authorisation so preach or act as to deny or repudiate Methodist doctrinal standards.

Having full status in both churches and obligations within two denominations means that it is advisable for the Circuit and the United Reformed Church Synod, in discussion with the local church/pastorate, to agree on what are reasonable expectations and obligations before the minister is called/appointed. Adjustments can then be made once the minister has settled into his or her style of ministry.

While the benefits of such mutual recognition of ministry far outweigh the disadvantages, the latter must be acknowledged. Being qualified for membership of a double quantity of official meetings is a mixed blessing. Sensitivity and flexibility on the part of the Circuit and Synod as well as the local church(es) and the minister, are needed to decide which must be attended. Ideally, the expectations of the minister in a Methodist/United Reformed Church Local Ecumenical Partnership should be agreed beforehand as part of the terms and conditions of service. The Liaison Committee recommends attendance at Circuit Meeting and the Synods of both Churches as a high priority. The United Reformed Church minister ought to share in the Methodist Circuit Staff meeting. The informal ministers' meetings common in the United Reformed Church, although very valuable, are not equivalent.

5.6 b. The Commission recommends that churches entrust the administration of the Partnership to a Sponsoring Body selected from members of the Commission of Covenanted Churches or Cytûn.

We would welcome and support this happening effectively. Currently, the United Reformed Church National Synod of Wales has joint liaison groups with both the Methodists and the Presbyterian Church of Wales which consider strategy and give oversight to existing LEPs.

6. Summary Comments - If not this, then what?

We would expect further possibilities to emerge from discussion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are committed to the conversations without a set idea of the conclusions that will be reached. Like the disciples on the Emmaus road, we hope that talking and travelling together will provide the opportunity for the living Word to re-shape our future. We will always be open to God surprising us with fresh recognition, vision, wisdom and hope.

Appendix 1

The 1975 Covenant

Confessing our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour,
and renewing our will to serve his mission in the world,
our several churches have been brought into a new relationship with one another.

- * **Together we give thanks for all we have in common.**
- * **Together we repent the sin of perpetuating our division.**
- * **Together we make known our understanding
of the obedience to which we are called.**

We do not yet know the form union will take.

We approach our task with openness to the Spirit.

**We believe that God will guide his Church into ways of truth and peace,
correcting, strengthening and renewing it in accordance with the mind of Christ.**

Appendix 2

The Trefeca Declaration 2005

We reaffirm our commitment to journeying together in covenant relationship.
In the consultation process of 2003-4

We have heard and understood each other better.

We remain committed to the goal of the journey being
the visible unity of the Church in the way that Christ wills.

As covenanted partners, within the family of Cytûn, we commit ourselves
during the six-year period 2005-2011 to:

- * a fuller sharing in one another's ministries
- * making the best possible use of the provisions of each church;
- * always undertaking new work jointly,
except where in conscience we must do so separately;
- * pooling resources in order to provide a united witness to Wales;
- * and listening to what the nation is saying to the Church.

