

Mission Council Round-up 19-21 October 2016

Day one – 19 October

Greenbelt report: Celebrating ‘remarkable’ Greenbelt success

Mission Council this afternoon heard about the success of the United Reformed Church’s involvement in Greenbelt 2016 as an associate partner. Dan Morrell, URC Youth Assembly Moderator-Elect, highlighted the various activities which made up the URC’s contribution to the annual Christian festival of arts and music, telling Mission Council that there was a very good response to the URC’s theme of Scrap the Church? Many people took part in conversations along the lines of, ‘Well what is the church, what is your church, what is the URC?’

The activities included a Cake and Debate session hosted by URC Youth. Dan reported: ‘It was a remarkable success and it was great to see so many young people passionate about their churches and change within those churches.’

Steve Summers, coordinator for the Greenbelt project, added that working together on the Greenbelt project helped develop relationships across Mission, Discipleship and Admin and Resources. Plans are now being made for Greenbelt 2017 when the festival’s general theme will be The Common Good; the URC will develop its Greenbelt activities in ways that connect this theme with its own annual theme of ‘Feast and Festivals’.

Paper M2: The decision-making process

The Clerk, the Revd Michael Hopkins, introduced Paper M2, which explains that, after July’s General Assembly, the Clerk and others had realised that the decision-making processes used by the United Reformed Church require review. He said: ‘Our current standing orders are very unwieldy. The case for change is very clear ... but it’s less clear what the changes should be.’ Unwilling to rush into hasty change, the Clerk is seeking to hear the views of a wide number of people. To this end he issued an anonymous questionnaire to members of Mission Council, asking them to respond openly and honestly to the questions about consensus decision making. The results will be collated and fed back to this meeting of Mission Council.

Paper F1: the joint declaration on the doctrine of Justification

This paper, from the faith and order committee, urged Mission Council to support the proposal that the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) associate with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Introduced by the Revd Dr Alan Spence, committee convenor, he explained that the WCRC wanted a speedy response, as it is hoped there will be a celebration of the Joint Declaration in the Reformation celebrations in 2017. As a consequence, Mission Council needed to make a decision at this meeting. Dr Spence provided some background information as to the importance of the Joint Declaration, saying that, at its centre, ‘is a coming together on a shared doctrine of salvation ... an immense moment in our ecumenical life’. He added that other church bodies support it, including the World Methodist Council in 2006 and the Anglican Consultative Council in 2016 and asked Mission

Council to add their support to it. During the discussion session there were some calls for 'a healing of history' to be included in the document, or the URC's response to it. John Proctor also explored the link between justice and justification saying 'Justification is not only a legal doctrine, but it is profoundly relational too. God draws people into right relationship. By embracing the cross, God brings us from distance to intimacy. And if God has done this for me, I cannot be careless about the well-being of my neighbour. As God's care is shaped in the cross, then we who live by the cross are invited to an active and committed love for the people of God's world. Justification flows naturally into justice.' Taken by majority decision, the two-part resolution was put to the vote and carried unanimously without abstentions.

In brief:

- The Revd John Proctor, General Secretary, called for nominations for a committee convenor, most of whom were present, to stand for the current vacancy on the Mission Council Advisory Group, which meets three times a year to review the business material that comes to Mission Council. Mr Proctor asked for nominations to come to him by lunch time on Thursday. An election is scheduled for Friday morning.
- Miriam Webb was appointed as minute secretary for this meeting of Mission Council.
- The minutes of the March meeting of Mission Council were agreed and signed by Alan Yates. the Moderator of General Assembly moderating the opening session
- The Revd Richard Church, Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship) updated Mission Council on the past case review. Mr Church said that there had been some confusion across the synods as to how public this information should be – urging those in a position to publicise the work in the local churches to do so.
- David Thompson updated MC on the Peel Commission (Resolution 38), which relates to disciplinary procedures for those not ordained as Ministers of Word and sacraments. He said that the work that needed to be done would take time and a report would, in time, come to Mission Council.
- Papers H1 and H2, the papers from the ministries committee on deployment and call, were introduced. The conversation and debate will continue in two sessions tomorrow and we will bring a full report as soon as we can.

Day two – 20 October 2016

Paper G1: The 2017 budget

This finance paper was presented by John Ellis, treasurer, who explained that the 2017 budget was very similar to the 2016 budget with the main difference being a decrease in the total number of stipends paid.

Mr Ellis also highlighted that the costs of the past case review are uncertain but that the Church was committed to pay what was needed. If it becomes clear in the next six months that the budgeted figure

is far too small, then it will be revised and presented to the May 2017 meeting of Mission Council. The budget resolution was passed by consensus.

Mr Ellis continued, presenting an overview of future budget projections and highlighting uncertainties. He pointed to the 2019 budget as a particular challenge, not least because of the potential consequences on the Ministers' pension fund of volatile financial markets following the Brexit referendum. The ultimate impact of this was unknowable as yet, but Mr Ellis said a larger pension fund deficit could make the overall budget deficit unsustainable and would require further action. He concluded by restating that these projections were presented for overview and were not binding – the detail of the 2018 budget will start to be worked up next Spring.

Announcement from Jenny Mills, convenor-elect of children and youth work committee

The Revd Jenny Mills, convenor-elect of children and youth work committee, made a short announcement to Mission Council, beginning with the fact of the recent resignation of Karen Morrison, Head of Children's and Youth Work Development. Karen's last day in post will be 24 February 2017. Ms Mills went on to announce that a review of the role is imminent, to be conducted by Ms Mills, Tim Lowe, Linda Harrison and Mary Hawes (of the Church of England). The review team will consult as widely as possible in the time available – the review is to be concluded by 31 December 2016. The aim is to advertise the post, with the new job description, in February 2017 with the hope that the post will be filled by July 2017.

Ms Mills also made it clear that the review will have three areas of focus:

- The current job description and person specification – are they realistic?
- The programme and its expectations and;
- The role of CYDOs and the covenanted 25% - how can we enhance and optimise their work.

Ms Mills then moved to thank Karen Morrison for her faithful service over the past 18 years, saying: 'she has given of herself to the role ... and because of her work, our children and youth work is exceptional. Karen will be missed – she has changed lives and inspired our young people and for that we are profoundly grateful.'

The Revd Gwen Collins, chaplain, then led Mission Council in a prayer of thanks for all that Karen has done, and then Karen addressed the Council, saying, 'Thanks to you all ... I go with a heavy heart and I wish you all well. My parting shot is this: please take our children and young people seriously, they are a third of our Church, so do cherish them and cherish all those who cherish our young people.'

Paper L1: The redevelopment of Church House

John Proctor, on behalf of the URC Trust, introduced paper L1, supported by Dick Gray, chair of the Trust, and Jane Baird, Deputy General Secretary (Administration & Resources). He explained that the

conversation about developing Church House started about three years ago and identified the following requirements of the development of Church House:

- To make the building more accessible, including the addition of a lift;
- To reduce its impact on the environment;
- To generate income year by year by letting the top floor, to offset maintenance and utility costs;
- To make the building flexible to meet changing needs.

The General Secretariat, he said, had worked hard at the details of the project, but their efforts to keep within budget had not succeeded, due in part to the rigorous requirements of the local planning department and the complexity of the project. However, he warned that costs could only be reduced further by such steps as using less durable or less environmentally friendly materials, which would defeat the point of the project.

Jane Baird, Deputy General Secretary (Administration and Resources), responding to questions from the floor, explained that quotes for IT and video conferencing equipment had not been included in the costs because this was considered as work that would have been necessary regardless of the redevelopment project. She said that the contract with the building company is at a fixed price and any costs caused by the project overrunning would be covered by the company; the £20,000 contingency fund is to cover unexpected costs such as finding asbestos not found by the original asbestos survey. She estimated that the replacement of the services (e.g. plumbing, electrical wiring) aspect of the redevelopment project would last for 25 years, and the actual 'bricks and mortar' for much longer.

The resolution, to proceed with the redevelopment project, with particular reference to the budget increase and planning permission, was passed by a large majority.

Paper J2: Nominations committee, names for various responsibilities

Carol Rogers, secretary to the nominations committee, introduced the paper, and began by saying it was with regret that Irene Wren had stepped down from her role as convenor. Mrs Rogers then notified Mission Council of two new nominations, not listed on the paper: The Revd Hilary Smith, to serve as the Mersey Synod representative on the mission committee and Mrs Margaret Marshall, to serve as a member of the task group looking at the future of Assemblies. The resolution to approve the nominations was passed by consensus.

En bloc resolutions

Noting that three papers – A1, from the Assembly arrangements committee; M1 from Mission and Discipleship on 'Walking the Way' and paper X1, the report on the Northerly Synods – had been removed from en bloc, and further noting one change in paper J1 (that Ms Catriona Wheeler will serve until 2018, not until 2020 as printed in the paper) the resolutions remaining in en bloc were passed by consensus.

Papers H1 and H2: Ministers and deployment

Discussions on papers H1 and H2 – looking at Ministers of Word and sacraments – their deployment and the basis of their call – snaked through Mission Council, with the papers being considered on three occasions. These are big issues for the United Reformed Church, indeed for any denomination, and it was good that Mission Council engaged with them so fully.

Papers H1 and H2 were introduced on Wednesday by the Revd Paul Whittle, convenor of the ministries committee and the Revd Craig Bowman, Secretary for Ministries. Paper H1 explored a range of issues related to the role of ministry and stipendiary ministers while H2 explored the question of call, particularly as it relates to the call of ministers of Word and Sacraments. Four resolutions were brought to Mission Council in the early evening of Thursday and a fuller report, including the decisions made, will follow as soon as possible.

Ministers and deployment: The resolutions

Resolutions H1a-d

The Revd Paul Whittle, Moderator of Eastern Synod and Convenor of Ministries, presented four resolutions (a to d), drafted in response to the group work done by Mission Council this morning on the seven questions in paper H1. He explained that some of the questions did not need resolutions, but assured delegates that this did not make them any less important and that the ministries committee would consider all the responses it had received.

Resolution H1a relates to question 1 on the practice of call – in the sense of the process of call to ministry administered by Church, rather than the call of God. Mr Whittle said that many (though not all) people were saying that the way we practice call needs to change, so this proposal would move the locus of call from the local church to the synod. In response to questions from delegates, the clerk indicated that the proposal would require a change to the Basis of Union. Mr Whittle confirmed that often a synod would need to delegate this practice to a subsidiary body, and he intended that practice would be uniform across the synods. He also assured Mission Council that they were being asked to explore possibilities, not being presented with a decision to change. The resolution was carried.

Resolution H1b relates to question 4 concerning the ministry budget. In response to questions, Mr Whittle confirmed that the term ‘other ministries’ includes lay ministries. He said that the ministries committee envisaged synods being free to decide which ministries to support. Certificates of eligibility were discussed and Craig Bowman, the Secretary for Ministries, reported that the committee is planning to reintroduce them, but would split the available funds between certificates and the ministries now under discussion. The resolution was carried unanimously.

Resolution H1c relates to question 7 on the M&M covenant. It was carried unanimously without debate.

Resolution H1d also relates to the M&M fund. It was carried unanimously without debate.

These resolutions together gave the ministries committee a clear mandate to explore new ways of managing, deploying and calling ministers within the URC, while leaving the central councils of the Church to decide on any far-reaching proposals that might now emerge.

Here is the text of the resolutions as passed:

Resolution H1a

Mission Council asks the Ministries Committee to bring proposals for a reworked practice of call with the aim of:

- Synods and local churches together discerning opportunities for the best use of ministers reflecting the aspirations of God's people and the needs of the local congregations;
- Ministers being called to service by synods;
- Synods having the flexibility to move ministers as appropriate in response to the discernment of new opportunities;
- Synods engaging local congregations in a process of learning, support and encouragement to enable widespread understanding and acceptance of this understanding and working out of call.

Resolution H1b

Mission Council asks the Ministries Committee to produce a scheme for making M&M funds available to synods for the support of other ministries, for consideration at a future meeting of Mission Council.

Resolution H1c

Mission Council reaffirms the covenantal understanding that churches contribute to the M&M fund according to their ability and receive from it according to their mission needs. Mission Council calls for further work to be done by Ministries and Finance to promote the communication of the achievements of the covenant, to enable local churches to own and celebrate their wider mission role.

Resolution H1d

Recognising that synods are raising M&M contributions and assessing need and local church resources in different ways, Mission Council asks the Resource Sharing Task Group to identify the formulae used in each synod and report to Mission Council regarding the commonalities and differences.

Paper I2: Local ecumenical working

The Revd Bernie Collins, convenor of the mission committee, introduced this item, and the Revd Dr David Cornick, General Secretary of Churches Together in England (CTE), introduced the 'New framework for local unity in mission' document, which he said was 'an attempt to explore and earth a pathway through ecumenical working'. Dr Cornick made it clear that process in which we are involved is a consultative one, 'there are 45 member churches (of CTE) and one size will not fit all.'

Mr Cornick went on to paint a picture of the ways in which the English ecumenical picture had changed in the past decades and the impact this had on today's ecumenical working, and why a new, light-touch framework is needed. The full text of David Cornick's presentation is [here](#).

Mission Council then moved into buzz groups to further discuss these issues, before the Revd David Tatem, the URC Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, introduced the draft resolution which is concerned with responsibility and the exercise of oversight of local co-operative working. After a short and lively discussion, and with small amends made to the text of the draft resolution, the resolution was passed by consensus.

The final resolution as passed reads:

'Mission Council encourages CTE to explore the implications of Recommendation 4b of the New Framework for Local Unity in Mission document:

'that the denominations involved in specific instances of local co-operative working (including existing local ecumenical partnerships) take responsibility for the oversight of that work;

'and that if they look to a sponsoring body to facilitate this they should nevertheless continue to hold that responsibility.'

Day three – 21 October

Paper A1: Plans for GA2018 and beyond

Paper A1 is an update paper, there is no resolution attached but several members of Mission Council wanted clarity on both the decision made and future plans.

Specific questions included: would the 2018 and subsequent Assemblies include a Children's Assembly?; would the 2018 venue be fully accessible? (commenting that the 2016 venue, the Southport Convention Centre, had not been) and was there a possibility of Assembly being permanently located in one, fully accessible, venue? The point was also made that the Assembly arrangements committee seems to exist to tell the Church what Assembly it's having, rather than respond to requests to deliver an Assembly that will clearly benefit the life of the denomination.

Sandy Nunn, moderator of Youth Assembly, contributed a good news story about Youth Assembly, which he described as 'an efficient and effective Assembly for 120 people, delivered for just £9,000 of the URC's central budget.'

The Revd James Breslin, convenor of the Assembly arrangements committee (AAC), answered. He said that making sure the Assembly venue was accessible informed the decision of venue, and the AAC worked closely with equalities committee to ensure that it was so; and, on the question of geographical location and the possibilities of permanent location, he said that that was a question for the newly formed task group on Assembly matters. He strongly refuted the point that the AAC dictated General Assembly – saying that the committee listens to what people say they want, and then strives to provide it ... although budgetary constraints mean that not all that is requested can be provided.

He also confirmed that there were no plans to reinstate the Children's Assembly, and the Clerk confirmed that the decision to cease providing a Children's Assembly had been made by Mission Council in October 2012.

Karen Morrison, Head of Children's and Youth Work Development, added that the budgetary constraint was only one reason stopping the Children's Assembly taking place – finding suitable accommodation

for the young people, taking the time to properly prepare young people to attend, and engage with Assembly business, and ensure adequate staffing levels, were all challenges.

Paper X1: Report on the Northerly Synods Collaboration

Ruth Whitehead brought a question to Mission Council about whether all 13 synods should look at informal groupings of the synods – following the lead of the five Northerly synods. And if so what would the status of these groupings be? Places of cooperation, joint work (such as shared panels) and encouragement? Or a more formal tier of administration? Or a full council of the Church? A full discussion followed, and Mission Council were in agreement about the many benefits of informal cross-synod co-operation, and equally clear that another layer of formal administration was not required. Several members queried whether it was necessary for the Northerly synods to report to Mission Council in the way that currently do and Mission Council agreed that there was not. John Proctor, General Secretary said he would be pleased to have conversations with other synods wishing to discuss the benefits of working together.

Paper M1: Walking the Way – the next steps

Mission Council this morning discussed Paper M1 from Walking the Way Steering Group, updating members on developments since General Assembly.

Concerns were expressed about a lack of clarity, communication and focus about Walking the Way and the way it which it would connect with congregations. Several members also expressed disquiet about it being seen as a ‘top down’ initiative.

Andrew Mills, Moderator of North Western Synod, highlighted four key areas of concern centred on Strategy, Consultation, Output and Resourcing and commented: ‘Have we actually consulted with our congregations about what they would need and most value – and therefore most use? If our congregations are to be engaged in this, then there should be more consultation and greater clarity.’

The Revd Richard Church, Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship), said: ‘Walking the Way is an emphasis on missional discipleship. Many local churches concentrate on membership; you can belong to a group but forget that you have a responsibility to grow in Christ and that growth will change your own life, your priorities and your church life. That’s an emphasis that we want to embed in the denomination and that requires a culture change. Walking the Way also fits with Feasts and Festivals because that is about retrieving our identity as a denomination and striking a note of festivity about it. We do earnestly rather well but the purpose of Feasts and Festivals is to change the tone.’

Concerns were also voiced that a vast array of resources are already available and there was a real danger of duplication.

The paper highlighted that consultation has taken place with the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (LICC) because of LICC’s established track record of working with local churches to try and change the ‘climate’ so that people want to find out about growing and developing in the faith.

Francis Brienens talked of the application for Council for World Mission funding for the employment of a project coordinator, to communicate the Walking the Way emphasis, to fund publicity and advocacy materials and to ensure that the many different strands of Walking the Way are woven together effectively.

She told how Neil Hudson, from LICC, is working with the Walking the Way steering group in a consultative role and how he had helped them to think about a change in culture and mindset. Francis said: 'The church becomes far more about not what *you* can do for the church but how are *we* equipping you for your life? It's an emphasis that will have to come from *all* of us.'

Kevin Watson saw Walking the Way as asking the question, 'What would it look like to be Jesus Christ in the world? it's not membership, it's not going to church on Sunday, it's walking with Christ every day.'

Other members welcomed Walking the Way and its emphasis on trying to remind churches, and encourage individuals, to become a community of contagious disciples.

Richard said, in designing Walking the Way, the steering group were attempting to cast a vision of discipleship across the denomination and they were encouraged when people said it articulated what is in their hearts and what they were hoping and waiting for. 'This is not being imposed from a small group. We are trying to encourage people to improvise within that vision. Go out to your synods and churches and then tell us what Walking the Way means to you, rather than waiting for it to come from centre outwards. If this is something that the Spirit is saying to the Church, then it's all our responsibilities to work with it. I promise you we'll keep listening.'

Paper D1: the future of the Windermere Centre

(This item added to this report on 26 October 2016)

The future of the Windermere Centre, one of the United Reformed Church's four Resource Centres for Learning was discussed during four separate sessions of Mission Council. The discussion was wide-ranging and careful, and included the Centre's financial position. Mission Council considered three options:

1. To pursue a partnership with an ecumenical hospitality provider;
2. To continue to operate on the current model and;
3. To close the Centre.

The conclusion was that of the three options, Mission Council was minded to favour the third option to close the centre. With sadness, Mission Council considered that the financial challenges of keeping the Centre open are too great and it did not wish to continue underwriting the costs of maintaining the Centre. The finance and the education and learning committees, noting that the final decision about the Centre has not yet been taken, have been tasked with looking at the full implications of closing the Centre. The two committees will bring a report to the next meeting of Mission Council in May 2017, and it is expected that the final decision on the future of the Windermere Centre will be made then.

A clear call was made to Mission Council to use the Centre as much as possible between now and May 2017. There was absolutely no doubt about the high regard which members of Mission Council have for the staff at the Centre, with many people speaking of the great hospitality and service provided by the Centre.

Mission Council, the education and learning committee and the Human Resources office at United Reformed Church House are mindful of the importance of:

- The pastoral care of the Windermere Centre staff
- The legal requirement for proper consultation with the staff
- To consider any alternatives suggested in that consultation
- The value of the work of the Resource Centre for Learning to the denomination
- The need to consult with the URC Trust, the Windermere management committee, the North Western Synod and Carver United Reformed Church.

Mission Council asked the education and learning committee to bring to the May 2017 meeting of Mission Council creative proposals for the continuation and development of the work that the Windermere Centre has been involved in, specifically its pioneering work on digital discipleship and iChurch.

Mission Council fully recognised how distressing this uncertainty is for staff, and is committed to keeping them as well informed as possible throughout the coming weeks and months.

The full text of the resolution reads as follows:

Mission Council, mindful of the importance of:

- *The pastoral care of the Windermere Centre staff*
- *The requirement for proper consultation with the staff*
- *The necessity to take seriously any alternatives suggested in that consultation*
- *The value of the work of the RCL to the denomination*
- *The need to consult with The URC Trust, The Windermere Management Committee, the North Western Synod and Carver URC.*

Instructs the finance and the education and learning committees to look at the implications of ceasing to use the Windermere Centre building and to bring to Mission Council in May 2017 detailed proposals to enable a final decision to be made in the light of all the above consultations.

Mission Council thanks (the ecumenical hospitality provider [name of provider deleted]) for its continuing support to the Windermere Centre but does not wish to pursue the option of a formal partnership.

Mission Council agrees that the budget support arrangements for the Centre made in November 2015 should remain in place until at least its May 2017 meeting.

Mission Council requests the education and learning committee to bring forward creative proposals for the continuation and development of the Resource Centre for Learning. This should include exploring how the work on digital discipleship may be carried forward.

In brief:

- David Pickering thanked the human sexuality task group, now stood down, for all their work, and informed Mission Council that the first same-sex marriage in the Scotland Synod had taken place earlier in October.
- Peter Knowles was elected to serve on MCAG for a period of four years, or when he ceases to be a committee convenor, whichever is the sooner.
- The Clerk reported on the answers received to his questionnaire consulting on the decision making process in the URC: He summarised thus: 'Consensus stays, en bloc stays, and you have indicated that you would like some degree of standardisation and simplification.'