

Paper X1

Northerly Synods collaboration
Report on progress and learning

United Reformed Church
2016



Paper X1

Northerly Synods Report on progress and learning

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	Jacky Embrey – Moderator Mersey Synod David Herbert – Moderator Northern Synod Andrew Mills – Moderator North Western Synod David Pickering – Moderator National Synod of Scotland Kevin Watson – Moderator Yorkshire Synod Melanie Campbell – Synod Clerk Northern Synod Melanie.campbell@urc-northernsynod.org
Action required	none
Draft resolution(s)	n/a

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To share learning points from inter-synod collaboration, as experienced by the northerly synods.
Main points	Innovation, capacity and effectiveness can be derived from collaboration. Relationships characterized by trust and mutual support can engender the freedom to explore different ways to release potential. Dedicated resources enable the process.
Previous relevant documents	Mission Council Report X1 May 2015
Consultation has taken place with...	Moderators of the northerly synods Synod Clerks of the northerly synods General Secretary

Summary of Impact

Financial	Cost savings have not been calculated.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	None

Northerly Synods Collaboration

Introduction

1. The five northerly synods comprising the Synod of Scotland, North Western, Northern, Yorkshire and Mersey synods are seeking to understand how collaboration may assist them to fulfil their duties and responsibilities more effectively. Since October 2014 this process has been facilitated by the Moderator of the Synod of Wales. At this time the meeting could see no medium term advantage to changing synod boundaries or numbers of synod moderators and this has continued to be the case.
2. The lessons learned and progress made to date are being shared with Mission Council, in the hope that they prove informative to others also.

Background

3. A meeting took place in February 2014, attended by synod representatives, nominated by their Executives. This meeting led to resolutions, which were agreed by Synod meetings in each of the northerly synods in March 2014, and enabling exploratory discussions.
4. Subsequent meetings in October 2014 and January 2015 led to the northerly synods establishing six task groups which sought to share practice in the priority areas of safeguarding, communications, human resources, finance, 'being Church' and listening and reconciliation. The groups were asked to explore how collaboration might help synods to become more effective in these fields.

Developing Ways Forward

5. The Task Groups' progress is summarized as follows:

5.1 Safeguarding Task Group:

Two dedicated safeguarding posts have been created and each post will be responsible for safeguarding activity in two synods. Sharing the posts affords greater capacity than an individual synod might achieve for a specialist role, gives scope for developing practice networks across local authority rather than synod boundaries and allows more efficient use of resources.

Additionally, training materials have been shared to enhance practice and understanding and prevent duplication of effort.

The Task Group will next be focusing upon further areas for collaborative action as well as specific safeguarding topics to ensure safe and consistent practice is developed and maintained.

5.2 Communications Task Group:

Much of the Northerly Synods activity has focused upon 'behind the scenes' priorities. However, the decision to establish a shared newsletter 'Over the Wall' has been welcomed as a tangible expression of the collaborative trust and support which has developed over the past 24 months.

The newsletter is produced by Chris Reed, Synod Clerk in Yorkshire together with the Communications group and they will continue to provide two editions each year. The

newsletter shares information from each synod as well as the latest news of the collaborative venture between the five synods.

The Communications Group has also looked to develop and share common policies such as Wi-Fi policies where appropriate, as well as recommending a platform for on-line meetings and communications.

5.3 Human Resources Task Group:

All synods were concerned about their Human Resources practice and documentation, both within synod offices and churches.

The HR Task Group has developed and agreed common HR policies and procedures for each of the five northerly synods together with shared Staff Handbooks, and contracts of employment. Developing common contracts and Staff Handbooks offers greater flexibility for future joint appointments, secondments and reciprocal sharing of staff should this be desirable. This has been facilitated with the support of an HR consultant and the next phase will be to offer an operational support service for churches across the northerly synods.

5.4 Finance Task Group:

This group comprises some synod finance staff and Synod Treasurers. They are continuing to explore how collaborative working may promote efficient and effective practice. The three synods using Sage accountancy systems are sharing templates and have developed some common processes which has led to significant time saving in some areas. There is an aspiration to have more consistent reporting of accounts across the synods for comparison of costs and expenditure.

5.5 Listening and Reconciliation Task Group:

Helping churches experiencing difficult times emerged as a priority for the northerly synods, acknowledging they could benefit from mutual support in this area. As discussions progressed, it was felt to be advantageous to develop a service to assist churches experiencing difficulty, with suitably skilled and experienced people to facilitate constructive dialogue. The service will be available to all of the northerly synods. Eighteen people have been identified and agreed to participate in the service. The first training event has been designed with Place for Hope, and took place in July 2016. The service will go live in 2017.

5.6 Being Church Task Group:

This task group sought to understand what it is to be church and to minister. It is their work that will become our focus over coming months.

6. Lessons learned

- a) Those involved with the collaboration have valued the trust and support which have developed. It is recognised that this trust has made possible the giving and sharing of resources.
- b) The synods are in agreement that the outcomes to date could not have been achieved as single synods working in isolation. This is because shared energies have fostered greater capacity and promoted innovative approaches unavailable to synods working alone. In this sense collaborative action has been effected to bring about concerted change in five synods.
- c) Sustaining what has been put in place is important and benefits from having the will, support and resourcing of all the northerly synods.

- d) Cooperation between the synods is based upon an understanding that synods are free not to participate in a particular activity, or to delay their involvement if that better meets their context and needs.
- e) Being clear about all practical arrangements for joint posts is necessary.
- f) Advertising in the national press becomes affordable when sharing costs, and produces a strong field of candidates.
- g) Dedicating time and resources to the process helps to ensure progress is made.

Next Steps

7. The task groups are continuing their work and as their activity matures the synod clerks will offer oversight and support to them. This frees up the wider northerly synods group to turn their attention to what it means to be church in the northern parts of the British Isles.
8. The next phase of the northerly synods collaboration will be upon learning and supporting each other as they address challenges relating to deployment, falling membership and finding new ways of being church.

