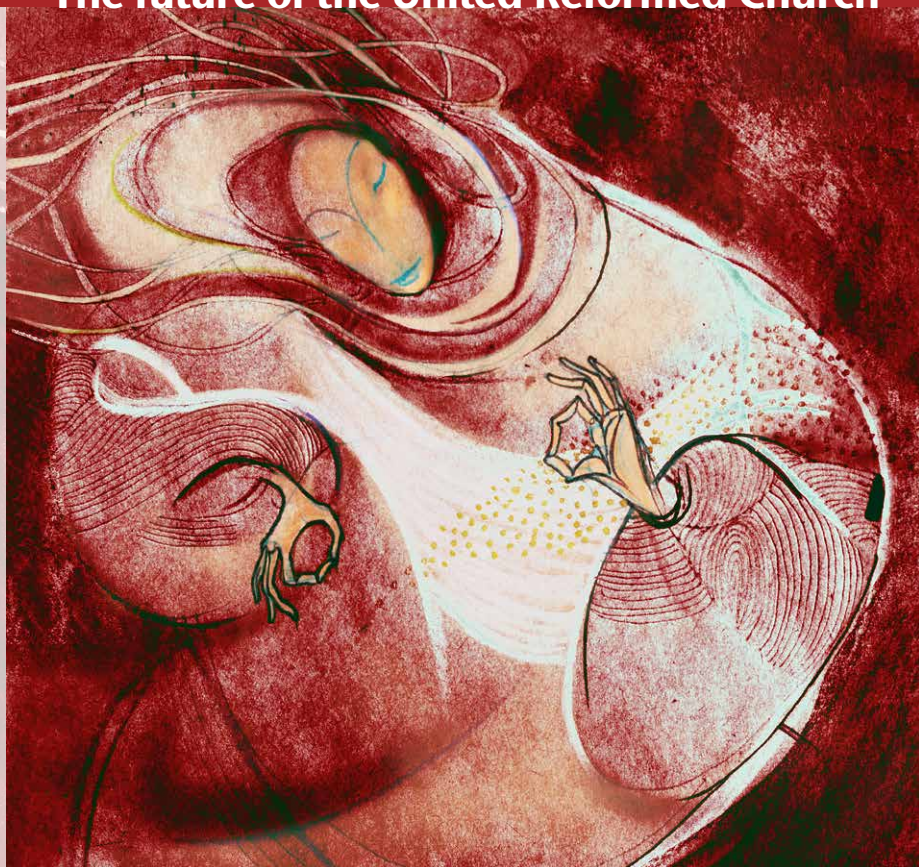


What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?

The future of the United Reformed Church



Study guide for churches

The faith and order committee report to
General Assembly 2014

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As you engage in the exploration of the questions, you may find it helpful to refer to the faith and order page of the United Reformed Church website:

www.urc.org.uk/urc-resources/faith-and-order



Part one: Introduction

The issues regarding the future of the Church in these islands, and of the United Reformed Church, have been before the Church particularly sharply since the second half of the twentieth century. This study guide has emerged out of three years of discussion in the United Reformed Church's faith and order committee and Mission Council, culminating in reports and resolutions agreed by the General Assembly in 2014.

Realism

A two-fold note of realism undergirds the discussion: realism about the present state of the United Reformed Church, and realism about the God in whom we put our trust.

There is realism about declining congregational numbers and the tiredness and bewilderment felt by many congregational members, as people face the changing situations in which the Church finds herself as this part of the 21st century. Ministers speak of the increasing stresses they have to bear, being challenged to look after more and more smaller congregations.

There's another note of realism, that is the realism about who God is, the God who continues to be greater than we can dream of or imagine. In the discussions that have taken place, the phrase 'functional atheism' has at times been used to indicate the lack of anticipation that we can have about the reality of God, that grace-filled reality which continues to embrace, surprise and challenge us at each point of our lives. The danger of the pressures of decline is that we start to lose confidence in the Gospel.

Future of the Church

Holding this two-fold realism together is a reminder of the prayer of confession in the service each Sunday. There can be a danger of getting so caught up with ourselves as miserable sinners that guilt and despair overtake us. But the prayer of confession is only complete when the words of forgiveness are pronounced, and we know that in Christ, by the grace of God, we are set free, from all that burdens and binds us.

In the discussions about the future of the Church, General Assembly believes that we have come to the point where we want to affirm the future of the Church and of the United Reformed Church in particular. The Mission Committee has helpfully pointed to the need to regain confidence in our faith and is offering further work on developing discipleship.

If we take the first note of realism, to take such a step as this might seem like folly. Are we not just gently declining and should we not just be realistic about this and plan for the Church's end? But the Church needs to look to the second note of realism, about the faithful God, revealed in Jesus Christ once for all time, giving people power through the Holy Spirit. General Assembly has been led to the affirmation of the future of the United Reformed Church, as part of the wider body of Christ, filled with the Spirit, a visible sign of God in the world.

Underlying this affirmation is a renewed trust in the significance of the Holy Trinity in giving life to and shaping the Church, and not only this, but offering, as has been done over many centuries, life and freedom for the world. The significance of the Trinity lies in the personal relational nature of the three-fold God in whom we trust. In God we become who we are meant to be, fully human, in relationship to God and to one another. The gift of this relationship is part of the gift we offer to the world, and stands in contrast to the functional, measurable, adversarial and fragmented view of the world which so often seems to prevail. The future of the Church depends on participation in the life of the Trinity, realised in each local gathering of Christians offering good news to a troubled world.

First order and second order issues

Participating in the life of the Holy Trinity, in the life of God, one in three and three in one, is the first order issue, which brings us to the source of life and refreshment and renewal.

There are many 'second order issues' which take up time and energy – finance, structures, numbers, the shape of ministry, deployment. Valuable work is being done by many people in these areas, as we can see in the Assembly reports.

But the first order issue is about God, and God shaping the Church and the world.

So how is God shaping this particular part of the body of Christ, the United Reformed Church? This is what we are looking at in our discussions about the future of the Church – the gifts that God has given to this Church, not exclusively, but gifts that are still to be cherished, and offered for the life of the world.

These reports affirm two underlying aspects of the United Reformed Church's nature – being Reformed and being United.

Being Reformed means re-formed, being renewed, not by our own endeavours, but in dependence on the Word, and shaped by the Spirit. Being reformed means sharing life and decision-making in a particular way, honouring the gifts of the Holy Spirit in each person and listening to the Word of God through the shared words of each person, reflecting on the deep riches of scripture and the treasures that God has revealed to us in our tradition over many centuries.

Being United means being faithful to our particular tradition over the last forty-two years, even in the midst of the pressure to view unity as a second order issue that the Churches can come to eventually, if at all, rather than a priority for the sake of the world. In the midst of the challenges which the call to unity faces, we affirm that the United Reformed Church still has a prophetic call to

witness to unity, a call that is even more needed in a fragmented world, a call that is not about uniformity, but is rather a celebration of the rich diversity that the one triune God offers.

The two reports, in parts two and three, affirm the centrality of being Reformed and being United as the core marks of the United Reformed Church, not to repeat the past, but to reclaim in new ways the significance that the past has held for this Church.

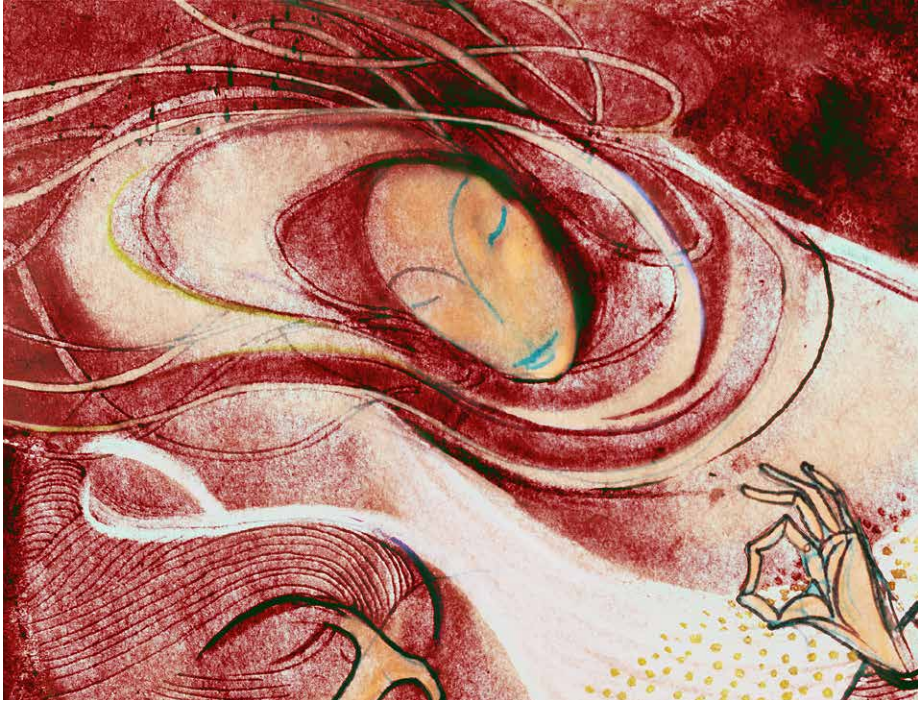
The United Reformed Church is rich and diverse. Each congregation has her own calling in each place, and it will be different. But the United Reformed Church as a whole has a particular calling which shapes the life of each congregation, the way in which together we are shaped by God in a particular way, as part of the whole body of Christ.

Conciliarity

The United Reformed Church re-affirms the significance of conciliarity within her tradition, and the way we hold it as a gift we offer to other Churches and to our world; but this also needs to be re-formed, re-newed and re-shaped in the way it works out.

The big picture that we want to affirm is about the gift of conciliarity as God's gift, not just to the Church, but to the world. Conciliarity is about people being drawn into relationship, a relationship that engages in robust discussion and argument about difference, a relationship that affirms the importance of the participation of each person, a relationship that holds together, even when the going gets difficult. For this is what being drawn into relationship with the Holy God, one in three and three in one, offers, to the Church and to the world.

Conciliarity impacts upon the way we enter into dialogue with each other, the way we listen to partner Churches and Christians, and the



way we engage with the political discourse of the day. Conciliarity points to the importance of shared, living relationships, in which people speak as the Holy Spirit leads each one.

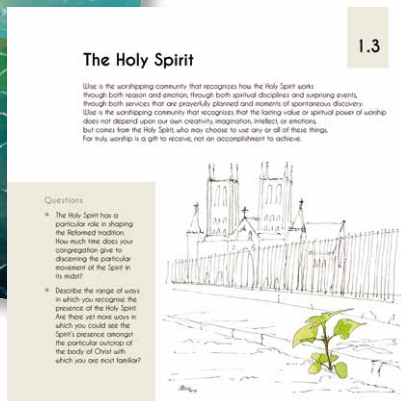
There is a whisper around that the councils of the Church, whether at local level, at synod or even at General Assembly, are not necessarily experienced as energising, inspiring and life-giving, as safe places in which people can share their deepest dreams and anxieties about themselves and about this God who at all times both holds us in a warm embrace and challenges us to be a risk-taking people. There is even a rumour that church meetings can be seen as irrelevant and boring, as times that people try to avoid, rather than queue up to go to.

Part three lists affirmations about conciliarity, and concerns that need to be addressed.

The *Worshipping God* booklet

As a visible sign of trust in the gracious and loving God who gives us life and renews that life within us, the United Reformed Church has published a worship booklet, *Worshipping God*, a gift from the World Communion of Reformed Churches, that has been sent out to each congregation. *Worshipping God* is offered to aid study and reflection on the nature of worship and to affirm that in worship the Church is renewed and fed and given life by God and thus transformed to serve God in the world.

What we are looking for in the discussion about the future of the Church, is not a programme or a plan, but a conversation that goes beneath the surface of the 'interesting times' in which we find ourselves, a conversation that prayerfully seeks to discern the Spirit's guidance to the United Reformed Church. Using *Worshipping God* alongside the conversation about the future of the Church will help our discernment of where God is leading the Church, re-focussing on the priorities and purpose of all that lies at the heart of the Church.



Invitation to take part in the discussion

This study guide is offered to all who feel led by the Spirit to engage in the conversation about the future of the United Reformed Church. You are invited to respond to the questions below, or to offer your reflections on the full texts of the reports and the scenarios.

Areas for discussion in congregations and synods (in elders and/or church meetings; in house groups and study groups; by individuals or by communities as a whole; in Synod meetings or training days)

1. Name a particular blessing from God you have received through participation in the United Reformed Church (see paragraph 4.3 in the report in part two)
2. Describe an encounter with the Holy Spirit that has been significant for you (see paragraph 4.4 in the report in part two).
3. Reflect on the way in which you are involved in conversations about God, the three-in-one and one-in-three, and the way in which those conversations help the Church to reflect the life of God in God's world.
4. Ponder on the characteristics of being United and being Reformed that are of particular significance to you and that you desire to offer to your local community (see sections five and six in the report in part two).
5. Consider your experience of church meeting. Does it match up to the aspirations of section four or the reservations of section five in the report in part two?
6. Look at the marks of the Spirit and see where these are evident in your congregation (see paragraph 3.3 in the report in part three).
7. Read the scenarios and see which of them speak to you in your context.

Timetable for responses

The United Reformed Church is in a time of discernment and listening to the Holy Spirit. The voices of all those through whom the Spirit speaks are important in this conversation.

- Responses are invited by the end of July 2015, as a contribution to the ongoing discussions.
- A further report will come to General Assembly in 2016. This period of reflection both needs time and takes time. If there were quick fix solutions to the future of the Church, these would by now be evident. Instead, the United Reformed Church is engaged in an ongoing process of listening and waiting upon God.
- Please respond to faithandorder@urc.org.uk



Part two: Affirming the United Reformed Church's future



1. Summary of paper

1.1 The United Reformed Church is here to live and not to die. This life is rooted in the life of the one triune God, who calls the Church into being, through the life of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The affirmation the faith and order committee feels led to make is that the future of the United Reformed Church is not about dying, but about living more fruitfully, prophetically and adventurously, being re-energised by the power of the Holy Spirit in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. This carries with it a trusting openness to God's future, rather than a specific plan or a particular structure or a programme for reorganisation. The future of the Church lies in God's hands. Our human response is to discern the mind of Christ and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

1.2 This affirmation arises from discussions that have taken place since the autumn of 2011 on the future of the Church. This paper, the first of three, proposes that the United Reformed Church renew its commitment to be both Reformed and United, seeking to be renewed in the particular life-giving gifts that God has offered us, and reaffirming the United Reformed Church's prophetic call to unity. Paper 2 (referred to in part three of this booklet) affirms the United Reformed Church's gift of conciliarity, particularly as experienced in church meetings. Paper 3 (not in this booklet) affirms the gifts of elders and asks for more work to be done, particularly on the role of 'celebrant elders'. A task group has been set up to take this forward. These papers, with their affirmations, are offered as a starting point for the reinvigoration of the United Reformed Church. However, they do not propose easy answers, quick fixes or specific programmes.

2. Background to this paper

2.1 In the autumn of 2011, the faith and order committee responded to a request to look at the United Reformed Church's understanding of Church membership. Reflecting on membership led to wider reflections on the nature of the Church and the current viability of the United Reformed Church in particular. An invitation went out on the United Reformed Church website and through the synods to contribute papers on this theme. Thirty papers were received, covering a range of fruitful areas including: Theological perspectives; historical viewpoints; sociological, philosophical and contextual dimensions; and practical suggestions, including an interesting proposal that the United Reformed Church should become a pioneer missional movement or a Reformed order within another Church.

2.2 A set of these papers was made available at General Assembly 2012, and there was a fringe meeting after the close of business one evening, attended by about 30 people, in which further comments and reflections were invited.

3. Scenarios

3.1 Out of these responses, the faith and order committee offered to Mission Council a set of five possible scenarios as to the way forward. They are summarised below and appended in full. The scenarios were offered to focus discussion around the issues that arise when thinking about the future of the United Reformed Church, and they have been discussed with groups of churches and ministers in different parts of the three nations. Responses received are as follows:

1. 'Steady as she goes, being realistic about ongoing decline' – i.e. more or less staying the same. This scenario gained the least support from Mission Council.

2. The United Reformed Church of Great Britain – Anglicans, Methodist and United Reformed Church uniting across the three nations, leading to a major sell-off of buildings and the development of new vibrant congregations. There were strongly divided views on this, with some folk very much in favour and others against, feeling it to be unrealistic and liable to a loss of United Reformed identity.

3. Encouraging local unions in each place. Some objected that this too would lead to a loss of United Reformed identity.

5. New forms of Christian communities predominate, such as migrant churches, Fresh Expressions and 'de-branded' churches, leading to a great variety – and only a handful left with a recognisable United Reformed identity. Respondents recognised that such variety was already a reality.

4. The development of 'pastorate churches' of 10 to 15 congregations, each pastorate having one central church building hosting a monthly united service with cell group meetings in between. Funds from the sale of church buildings would be released to support staff and a lively programme at the central church. Views on this one were mixed, with a strong resistance to a major structural re-organisation.

6. There is also a potential scenario that considers the growth of the 'Cyber-church', dependent on the development of social networking and new technology, creating the possibility of online communities. This is already beginning to appear in some places. A scenario was not offered to Mission Council but has been explored in a subsequent faith and order meeting.

3.2 Discussion was lively! Mission Council did not feel that structural re-organisation, whether within the United Reformed Church or with ecumenical partners, was the primary way to renew the life of the Church. Rather there was a desire to re-focus on: Spirituality, embracing a renewal of prayer and worship, and seeing the ways in which spirituality connects with the whole of life; on theological reflection, giving time to consider the gifts of the United Reformed Church's particular Reformed heritage and the way those gifts shape and invigorate our shared life today; and on practical local initiatives – reaching out to meet material and spiritual need in each community.

4. United Reformed Church identity

4.1 Context and realism

4.1.1 These are challenging and changing times for the Christian faith across Europe, where traditional churchgoing has been in steady decline. The United Reformed Church across its three nations has not been immune from this experience. The Christian faith is being challenged on many sides, significantly from a militant atheist perspective. There are challenges which arise out of the western enlightenment and post-enlightenment world: About the role of reason and experience, the nature of authority and institutions, approaches to scripture, the tension between personal autonomy and community, and the place of structures in the life of the Church. Various shifts have taken place. There has been a shift away from a providential understanding of God, acting in history and providing for God's people in a variety of ways, to a belief in causality. There has been a move away from institutions to a focus on the self, with an emphasis on self-expression and self-realisation rather than on the security of religious institutions, rules or mutual belonging.

4.1.2 Much has been written about the decline of the Church and the Christian faith from sociological, philosophical and theological approaches, and about possible responses. It is clear that there are no quick fix answers. If there were, Churches across Europe

would have found them and would be acting on them. Not having easy answers is itself a challenge in this contemporary age, which expects ever quicker solutions. This means that seeking God's guidance for the future of the Church is not going to be an easy road. It is a path that will require hard work and commitment. Yet, in responding to these contemporary challenges, the Church offers a glimpse of eternity in the present moment – a different way of living from the relentlessly increasing pace of life. In the presence of God; it is possible to go beneath the surface of life, drinking deeply from the wells which give life (John 4).

4.1.3 There are two dilemmas that can hold the Church back from responding to God's call in the present situation. One is the sense of despair and negativity that afflicts organisations which feel they are in decline, leading to helplessness and hopelessness. The second is a desire to focus on details and activities instead of the bigger picture. The faith and order committee wants to be realistic about the range of fears and anxieties that people face across the Church and to give opportunities for these to be named. However, in what the committee is bringing, there is a focus on the joy of life in Christ, the energy the Holy Spirit offers and the vision of what God holds in front of us. We assert that it is out of vision that strategy emerges, and out of strategy that management develops.

4.1.4 The faith and order committee could have added another two scenarios. One is the possibility that we are about to die as a Church. The committee is not offering a strategy for closing churches – an option which is time-consuming and painful and takes the Church away from the more fruitful business of letting the Spirit grow among us. We believe that while death is part of the natural cycle of life, the energy of the Resurrection and the Holy Spirit leads us to focus on growth and fruitfulness. So this paper is not offering an option that talks about death. Nor are we offering a scenario that says we are about to double in size. While for some congregations, especially those with people from a range of ethnic backgrounds, this may be the case, there are more congregations which are declining or just holding their own. This paper aims to sound a note of realism about the present situation.

4.2 Identity – being United and being Reformed

4.2.1 Discussion on the scenarios led to reflections about the United Reformed Church's identity. Do we have an identity? Do we need one? There were strong views on both sides. Some felt that we should discover the United Reformed Church's unique selling point (UPS). Others said that the United Reformed Church's USP is in its particular combination of gifts. Any identity we articulate will need to enable us to celebrate our diversity as we seek to hold together across congregations and nations.

4.2.2 The source of Christian renewal is in the gift of God's love, and the United Reformed Church shares the same origins – as do all Churches – in the life and death of Jesus, the Resurrection and Pentecost. It is by this Gospel that all Churches emerge and are shaped, taking form in different ways at different times in human history in response to changing circumstances. In the 17th century in England, some of our ancestors rediscovered the gift of the Spirit in particular personal and local community ways; in the last 40 years we discovered it in the challenge to unity. Some say that Christian faith can be held personally without any need for Church. However, the faith and order committee wants to affirm that being a Christian means being rooted in mutual belonging within the body of Christ, and that Churches are the embodiment of God's purpose in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.

4.2.3 The question before us now is: Where is God taking this particular part of the body of Christ today? Is the combination of gifts that we have received over the centuries and in the last four decades still a combination that we are distinctively called to offer to a needy world?

4.3 The values and passions of the United Reformed Church

We asked people to name the things the United Reformed Church is passionate about. Here is what they said:

- Freedom in Christ – freedom to decide, freedom to worship, liturgical freedom and freedom of conscience, each one tested against authority of Scripture and church meeting

- Decision-making processes that challenge us to seek the mind of Christ together, even against a majority view
- Informality
- The relationship to the Word of God in the Bible
- The commitment to social justice
- Our willingness to die as a denomination
- Inclusivity and tolerance
- Lively, imaginative local churches
- Allowing individuals to express faith commitment (bottom-up)
- Local church deciding who its members are
- Children and young people as equal partners
- The Holy Spirit working through all/any
- The discernment we exercise in calling a minister
- Flexibility – try it and see
- The sovereignty of God (can we find *our* way of saying “God gave me this word”?)
- The sharing of gifts as seen in the ministry and mission fund and resource sharing between the synods.

4.4 Discovering the Holy Spirit

4.4.1 We also asked where people experienced the Holy Spirit, individually and collectively. Here are some of their answers:

- 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 herself
- 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.

4.4.2 We heard stories about the movement of the Holy Spirit in people’s experience: Passionate ecumenism in Hungary, faith in action in Sierra Leone, new life after a church fire or a decision

to relocate, fruitful community engagement, transformation after congregational conflict, and the Mission Council experience that led to Catch the Vision. None of the stories was about programmes or restructuring. Rather, we recognise the Spirit in signs of hope and possibilities of growth. We begin by seeking to discern together.

4.5 Conciliarity

One of the Spirit's particular gifts is the way in which the United Reformed Church embodies conciliarity. A separate paper will address conciliarity and the church meeting, examining both the gifts of conciliarity and some of the challenges that the United Reformed Church faces in embodying conciliarity in each place.

4.6 Eldership

Elders are also a gift as local ordained leaders in each congregation and this too is the subject of a separate paper. General Assembly 2012 voted to consider the implications of creating an order of ordained local ministers. At the same time, the Synod of Scotland had requested that more work be done on lay presidency. As a result of extensive deliberations on these two areas, the paper entitled 'Ordained local ministers' affirms the role and ministry of elders.

4.7 United and Reformed

One thread in the discussion at Mission Council described United Reformed Church identity as being about a distinctive combination of characteristics – like a recipe or a culture. It is not that the United Reformed Church has characteristics which are not individually shared with other Churches; it is that the particular combination of these characteristics constitute our distinct identity. This paper will now move on to consider the two separate but inextricably intertwined strands of being Reformed and being united, in order to affirm God's particular calling to the Church at this time.

5. Reformed identity

5.1 What do we understand as the essence of our Reformed identity? In part this is a political question. In Scotland, the Church of Scotland is the national Church, and as a Reformed Church, carries with it a particular understanding of the Reformed relationship to the nation. In England, the Church of England is both Catholic and Reformed, with its own particular role to play in relation to the state. English forebears of the United Reformed Church came in part out of a separatist dissenting tradition in the 17th century, holding to a particular view of the role of the Church as over against the state. In Wales, there is no established Church, so each Church is free to relate to political authorities as it feels led. The view across the United Reformed church is a mixed one, not least because of the differing national contexts within which it finds itself.

5.2 Does the United Reformed Church live in the present or build on the past? How do we ask this question without losing confidence in the way in which faith held over generations gives us our roots? What would we learn if we returned to our stories, not least reminding ourselves of the issues for which our Reformed ancestors were prepared to die?

5.3 Churches are shaped and re-shaped by their connection with Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, through the histories of their particular traditions, going back to the incarnation. Each Church is shaped by its faithfulness to Christ and the Spirit, discerned anew in every age, in anticipation of the final goal, when God draws all creation to God. We urge congregations to revisit two important documents, the founding statement on faith and the Church in the Basis of Union, and the statement concerning the nature, faith and order of the United Reformed Church, believing that familiarity with these will strengthen our sense of identity (appendices B and C on the website).

5.4 The statement concerning the nature, faith and order of the United Reformed Church reminds us that we as a Church accept the witness of the historic creeds. The Revd Prof Alan Sell, in a paper to Mission Council March 2014, pointed out the Reformed understanding that United Reformed Church worship and meetings are credal gatherings. Articulating this sense of the credal dimensions of worship and meetings, and, revisiting the Reformed creeds and confessions can stimulate reflection on the Christian faith.

5.5 Mission Council worked on identifying the particular range of Reformed characteristics which shape the United Reformed Church's identity today:

- *Semper Reformanda* – openly and intentionally stating our readiness to change in light of experience of the Holy Spirit;
- Our particular interpretation of the priesthood of all believers;
- Elders – ordained and set apart for shared leadership;
- The church meeting, in which people together discern the leading of the Holy Spirit, and through which power is shared;
- The ability to develop policies that embrace diversity, e.g. in recognising both infant and believers baptism, but not re-baptism;
- Upholding the rights of personal conviction;
- The strong sense of social justice and action;
- Freedom in worship, centring on Scripture;
- Valuing the local church.

5.6 Reformed spirituality

There is a need to discern the spiritual gifts of the Reformed tradition and the ways in which these can renew the lives of individuals and congregations. At the heart of the Church's life is the prayerful discernment of the Holy Spirit, both within and between congregations and Churches. Resourcing this discernment will help the life of the Church to flourish and be more effective in speaking of God, and God's promise of life in all its fullness, to the communities in which United Reformed Church congregations are set.

6. United identity

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 The United Reformed Church's founding vision was of significant union between the Churches of the UK. In 1972, the United Reformed Church celebrated the birth of a new united Church, bringing together the Congregational Church of England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England. The dream was further realised in unions with the Churches of Christ and the Scottish Congregational Church. This dream is foundational to the Basis of Union and has been reaffirmed at previous Assemblies. The most recent significant discussion was in the 2007 General Assembly which resulted in the adoption of a statement on the nature of the United Reformed Church's ecumenical engagement (see appendix D on the website). There was also discussion in Mission Council as recently as November 2011 with the review of United Reformed Church ecumenical relations.

6.1.2 However, 42 years later, the United Reformed Church has not seen the wider union it prayed for. While the United Reformed Church has a well-regarded commitment to the ecumenical journey, other factors affecting the life of the Church in the UK have come to the fore. There has been a growth of secularisation, leading to a retrenchment of many historic denominations as they have sought their own survival. There has been a critique of 'structural' forms of ecumenism, over against newer 'missional' forms of ecumenism such as street pastors and night shelters. There has been a blossoming of new Churches, both home-grown and those fuelled by immigration, with their own sense of identity and their desire to flourish. Some have perceived there to be a lack of confidence in the Gospel across the United Reformed Church, (described as 'functional atheism') which has resulted in diffidence about sharing the faith both within the Christian community and in the wider community.

6.1.3 The March 2014 issue of Reform brought together four helpful and challenging reflections on ecumenism, both local and international, commenting on the nature and future of the ecumenical journey. The general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) refers to the unity statement adopted at the Assembly in Busan in 2013, which is offered to the Churches as a stimulus to further thought on the unity that is God's desire for God's people (appendix E on the website). The faith and order committee is studying this document alongside the WCC 'Common Vision' statement to see how best to engage the United Reformed Church in responding.

6.1.4 The faith and order committee brought a paper on the United Reformed Church's ecumenical identity to the March 2014 meeting of Mission Council. It called the Church to be at the ecumenical cutting edge of Christian life in the UK today, wholeheartedly bringing its Reformed identity to the table. The committee believes that this is the United Reformed Church's particular contribution to the life of the Church in the UK at the present time – a clear grasp of Reformed identity and a prophetic calling to unity. This has the potential to lead to the renewal of the Church and its outreach into the world. The United Reformed Church, in its particular experience of unity and its particular interpretation of conciliarity and the commitment to stay together with a diversity of views, seeks to pursue the goal of visible unity with partner Christians, in order to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in an increasingly divided world.

6.1.5 We issue this call at a time when there seems to be limited desire from other Christian traditions to engage meaningfully with the United Reformed Church. We must hold the significance of the ecumenical drive. Through our clarity about what we offer from our own identity to the ecumenical scene, we will be realistic. We will not be discouraged when our gifts are not received by others, nor will we complain about them. Rather, living with our own integrity, we will see where the Spirit is speaking to the Church and leading

across the Churches. As one Mission Council respondent put it in the November 2013 meeting: “What does faithfulness to our calling mean? Not beating others up, but quietly raising the ecumenical dimension, seeking partners where they may be found, but not being deterred from doing pieces of work if we’re on our own.”

6.2 Receiving other Churches’ gifts

There are things we can learn from other parts of the Christian tradition that would benefit our life. How might we explore the gifts of other traditions? How open are we to receiving them?

6.3 Local ecumenical partnerships (LEPs)

There is a need to celebrate the gifts of these partnerships, as well as exploring where the future of such partnership lies. There will be a fringe meeting at General Assembly on local ecumenical partnerships; there is a Churches Together in England working group, which includes the United Reformed Church’s ecumenical officer, the Revd David Tatem, looking at issues with regard to LEPs, how they work and what their future may be.

6.4 Balance of ecumenical engagement between local, regional and national

In a Church in three nations, committed to the importance of the local congregation in each place, there is a need to look at the capacity for developing ecumenical relationships that will differ depending on the locality, the region and the nation.

6.5 Developing new partnerships

There is a range of new partners springing up from outwith the historic Churches who bring with them new and different possibilities for shared life and work.

7. Practical issues

7.1 In general

Our discussions have given rise to a host of practical issues, some of which are listed below. We have seen the value of *vision2020* and *Vision4Life* in enabling congregations to grow in faith and direction, and we hope that further appropriate resources may be offered as this period of discernment and reflection continues.

- a) Identify the Church's priorities, locally, regionally and at the Assembly level (e.g. increasing numbers? Spreading the Word?), looking at the interconnectedness of priorities and accepting that the Church cannot do everything.
- b) Release ourselves from guilt at our failings and all the things we think we could do but we do not have the time for; focus instead on trusting in God's grace.
- c) Look at greater use of technology – cyber church, Skype, services online, intimations on web.
- d) Ask the United Reformed/Methodist joint property strategy group for help with a theology of church buildings.
- e) Re-visit the nature of ministry and the relation between lay and ordained ministry, particularly in the light of deployment. This work is in progress.
- f) We are in an age where institutions and structures are often bypassed by looser networks such as social media. Do people still need the Church? And, if so, what for? What kind of structures will enable denominations to flourish in the future?

7.2 Ecumenical

- a) Ask synods to target ecumenical possibilities and put some resources into these.
- b) Put together a collection of stories where the United Reformed Church is contributing ecumenically, contributing good things.
- c) Identify the issues and attitudes that block ecumenical growth and development and devise ways of addressing these.
- d) Look for signs of resurrection, identifying where God is present in and between our Churches and celebrating this presence.

- e) Look at the Cumbria and Cornwall covenants and the models they offer for ecumenical counties.

7.3 Affirmations and challenges

- a) The United Reformed Church affirms that our primary identity lies, as with all Christians, in relation to the one triune God, source, guide and goal of our life.
- b) The United Reformed Church affirms that our particular identity, shaped by context and conviction, is an offering to the three nations in which we are set.
- c) The United Reformed Church affirms that the Church, participating in the trinitarian and relational life of God, is called to model this life throughout the world, in both its inner and outer life. The gathering of people in relationship in each community is part of the embodiment of God's gift of life for the world.
- d) The United Reformed Church affirms that the renewal of congregational life is key to the renewal of the Church. Without congregations, there is no Church. This is not about a 'one size fits all' idea of a congregation – congregations vary enormously; it is about the way in which people are valued and held together. We affirm that in the body of Christ, congregations are held together with one another, sharing insights and support for mutual enrichment. The United Reformed Church has a particular contribution to make about the way in which authority is held within and between congregations.
- e) There are important questions about the way our wider structures enable mutual enrichment. But, prior to these are the questions around whether our congregations feel on fire with a Gospel that is for all people and are able to communicate this fire with the communities in which we are placed. This passion arises out of people's rootedness in God and their openness to the Holy Spirit through prayer, worship and the reading of Scripture, those aspects of our shared life which have sustained God's people over the generations.

7.4 This paper is offered to help a two-fold discernment, a discernment about ourselves in the United Reformed Church and a discernment about the triune God who brings us into being, holds us in a warm embrace and sends us out into God's world. This discernment involves prayerful listening to the Spirit and respectful listening to what is on each other's hearts and minds.

Resolutions:

- a) **General Assembly, affirming the United Reformed Church's identity as both United and Reformed, gives thanks to God for the particular gifts of these two threads in the Church's life, prays for the discernment of the Holy Spirit in the renewal of each, and commits the United Reformed Church to continue with the prophetic calling to unity in both the Church and the world.**
- b) **The General Assembly commends the paper *What is the Spirit saying to the Churches? Affirming the United Reformed Church's future* for further study and reflection. Assembly invites people and councils at each level of the Church to feed back comments to the faith and order committee by July 2015.**



Part three: The United Reformed Church's gift of conciliarity



1. Introduction

1.1 In autumn 2011, The United Reformed Church's faith and order committee initiated a discussion on 'the future of the Church' (see separate 2014 General Assembly paper 'What is the Spirit saying to the Churches? Affirmation of the United Reformed Church's future' for the details of this discussion.) The discussion has taken place over several 24-hour faith and order committee meetings and three meetings of Mission Council in 2013 and 2014, and an understanding of the identity and gifts of the United Reformed Church has been re-affirmed. Several issues have emerged for further work and this paper looks at one of these areas – the gift of conciliarity: the way in which the Holy Spirit speaks to the Church through the different councils. While conciliarity has many dimensions to it, this paper addresses conciliarity at the congregational level, in church meetings, recognising that more work needs to be done to interpret conciliarity in synods and General Assembly. A further paper looks at the role of elders, another distinctive gift of the United Reformed Church.

1.2 While every Church has an identity based in part on its understanding of its councils, the United Reformed Church believes that its particular understanding is a helpful offering to the wider ecumenical movement. It is an approach to life which can also make a valuable contribution to society. However, the United Reformed Church has not always fully lived out the riches of its own understanding of conciliarity and needs renewal in this area. This paper looks at a cross section of issues, gifts and practical dimensions.

2. Setting the scene

2.1 The nature of conciliarity can be viewed from a range of perspectives.

2.2 The appendix includes a brief historical summary, including some of the critical issues from the United Reformed Church's traditions. We are the inheritors of understandings of conciliarity which shaped our forebears.

2.3 In the Mission Council discussions, the church meeting was clearly identified as one of the distinctive characteristics of the United Reformed Church. Mission Council members said: "The church meeting – a gathering when at its best is something to cherish"; and "we need to reclaim the importance of church meeting and find our place in it." The councils of the church which are most familiar to the members of the United Reformed Church are the church meeting and the elders meeting.

2.4 A range of critical comments has been raised, particularly regarding the experience of conciliarity in the local church meeting.

- Members do not necessarily feel the need to go to church meetings
- Church meetings can become business-focussed rather than engaging in worship, prayer, Bible study and reflection on mission issues
- Chairing is not always done well
- There can be a culture of bullying and misuse of power
- Discerning the work of the Holy Spirit through the voice and experience of each member is not always given priority
- Church meetings are not connected well to the other aspects of discernment of God's purpose in a local church, e.g. study groups and outreach activities
- Church meetings and elders meetings can feel like they are duplicating agendas without having a distinctive role for each one

- Discussions skirt around the surface of the faith and of people's experience, rather than digging in to the depth of faith and experience
- Church meetings can require hard work on behalf of the church members, which people are not always prepared for
- Church meetings do not necessarily feel part of the wider 'mutual episcopate' which connects with meetings of synod and General Assembly.

2.5 Sociological observations are also valuable. It is interesting to note Daniel Jenkins' comment in 1944:

"The church meeting in a Congregational Church is an indispensable part of the church's life. A Congregational church does not make sense without it. [...] But in many of our churches it has ceased to be a living force and is maintained, often only by a few faithful people, out of respect for a tradition which no one understands very clearly any longer. Some churches founded comparatively recently have given no place to the church meeting even in their constitution, while a surprisingly large number acknowledge that they find it more convenient to function without one, all responsible decisions being taken by the minister and a small body of officials who call a church meeting only at irregular intervals to confirm the more important arrangements they have made."

Jenkins goes on to make this telling point:

"Unless we can re-establish our church meetings as living fellowships there will be little reason for our maintaining our distinctive existence as Congregational churches."

2.6 Participation in church life used to provide a social cohesiveness that has come under challenge with the great variety of alternative social activities available today. Enlightenment individualism has led us away from an understanding of human

community focused on mutual responsibility and nurture. The sense of decline of the Church in general in the West, and of the United Reformed Church in particular in the UK, has led to a questioning about the relevance of the Christian faith and its visible expression in church structures. With the pressures of decline and the resultant uncertainty about the Christian faith, some church meetings now avoid the big issues about God and faith in favour of practicalities such as building maintenance, finance and structural organisation.

2.7 Theologically, some interesting questions arise. The United Reformed Church testifies that God is present in the councils of the Church through the work of the Holy Spirit. But, do those who attend meetings go in anticipation of encountering God? What is the nature of that presence in the church meeting? If encounters with God evoke mystery, awe and wonder, do these elements need to be more visible in church meetings?

2.8 The Revd Prof Alan Sell (United Reformed Church minister, writer and theologian) gave a talk at Mission Council in March 2014 in which he emphasised that the conciliarity of the United Reformed Church is about discerning the Word and the Spirit in the community of believers, in a spirit of mutual episcopate. Councils of the church are not 'higher' or 'lower' but 'nearer' or 'farther', depending upon the person's standpoint, and are radically interconnected in their seeking the mind of Christ. Councils give continuity to the past, as in the handing on of the apostolic tradition, and they open the way to the future by discerning the new directions in which the Holy Spirit is leading the people of God. Councils are critical to the life of the Church because they are the key place in which the purposes of God are discerned for the believing community.

3. The gift of conciliarity

3.1 What is the Spirit saying to the United Reformed Church?

3.2 United Reformed Church conciliarity is about discerning the mind of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit in the community of believers. "The existence of the Church is not the product of human activity, but is to be traced back to the Lord himself, in the sovereign self-giving of God in his Spirit, who, through his Word, calls the Church into being and by his own breath makes it alive with the very life of Christ." Arising out of this understanding, Alan Sell argues that our councils are credal gatherings, primarily there to affirm and interpret the Christian faith, and, as a consequence of that affirmation, to encourage people in their living out of that faith.

3.3 There are five marks of the Holy Spirit which affect the way in which councils are seen. These marks are offered as an aid to reflection both to those who organise and those who participate in church meetings, to see the ways in which the Holy Spirit is recognised in each place:

- 1 The Holy Spirit is the giver of life and the energiser. In shared discernment, the Church identifies the aspects of life that give energy and learns to sit lightly to those aspects which drain people of energy. This is not about choosing an easy road, but about being passionate disciples, set on fire by the Spirit.
- 2 The Holy Spirit is the giver of gifts and these come through different languages and voices. The Church is called to identify and celebrate the diversity of gifts held within the body of Christ, not judging people, but helping each one to discover his or her particular gifts, giving thanks for the gift of each person in each part of the Church's life and recognising that it is the same Spirit drawing all people to God.

- 3** The Holy Spirit is the Indweller, dwelling in the midst of God's people. A high priority of the Church's life is to rediscover the importance of worship, prayer and theology, to sense the tangibility of God – in sign and symbol, in bread and wine, in each other – and to convey that tangibility to a needy world. The Church needs to find again an appropriate sense of 'fear and trembling' in encountering the mystery and wonder of the living God in our midst.
- 4** The Holy Spirit leads God's people into truth – not my truth or your truth, but God's truth. As members of the body of Christ talk together, different perceptions of truth are shared, recognising that God's truth will only be seen in all its fullness at the eschaton. One of the Reformed characteristics that the United Reformed Church cherishes is wrestling to discover where the truth lies, continually open to new insights.
- 5** The Holy Spirit is the Sender. The Church is not here for itself alone, but, by sharing in the life of the Holy Spirit, shares in God's purpose for God's world.

3.4 It is interesting to note that in the Basis of Union, the founding document of the United Reformed Church, theological considerations with regard to the nature of the Church are offered separately from the functions of the various parts of the structure. Where the church meeting is explicitly discussed, it is through a list of its functions. While the first functions listed are helpfully about outreach, mission, and considering the Christian faith, the church meeting's dependence on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and its part in God's purpose for the Church and the world are not spelt out at this point. In the 42 years since the original coming together of Congregationalists and Presbyterians in the United Reformed Church, there has been a sea change in the UK in terms of the reducing visibility and prevalence of the Christian faith, a change which has had an effect on Christians' understanding of their faith and the way this faith is held. There is therefore a need to spell out the theological undergirding of conciliarity, rather than only looking at function.

4. Affirmations with regard to conciliarity as expressed in the church meeting

4.1 The United Reformed Church is not alone in honouring the role of church meetings, but the United Reformed Church is distinctive in its understanding of the relationship between the various councils of the Church, from the congregational to the Church-wide level. The church meeting is only one of the councils of the Church and operates in mutuality with the conciliarity embodied in the other councils. Conciliarity also occurs outside the formal councils.

4.2 What follows is a list of affirmations with regard to the role and purpose of the church meeting. These are the aspirations arising from the United Reformed Church's interpretation of conciliarity and the promises that this holds for the discernment of the Holy Spirit.

- a) The United Reformed Church's understanding of conciliarity and the role of the church meeting within this understanding is a defining characteristic of the United Reformed Church, but not the only defining characteristic.
- b) The church meeting reflects the underlying spirituality of the United Reformed Church in terms of the discerning of the mind of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit by the whole people of God. It connects with a range of other expressions of this spirituality, including the regular worship life of the Church, prayer, study of the Scriptures, and small group discussions.
- c) The church meeting is rooted in prayer, worship, and listening to the Holy Spirit.
- d) The church meeting is a place in which people listen for the voice of God in and through the multiplicity of different voices that speak. It symbolises and celebrates God's affirmation of each person as worthy and valuable, each of us a vehicle through whom the Holy Spirit may be heard.

- e) The church meeting is based on Scripture reinterpreted over the centuries in response to different ways of discerning the mind of Christ. Acts 15, for example, offers a picture in which an issue arises, there is heated discussion, agreement is reached, and a decision is then disseminated. Revisiting scriptural understandings of conciliarity and the models it offers would be helpful.
- f) The church meeting is the place in which people (lay and ordained) hold each other to account in mutual faithfulness to the Gospel.
- g) The church meeting is a place for bringing to the surface the conflicts between different personalities, diverse interpretations of the Gospel and different viewpoints, and working these through in creative ways.
- h) The church meeting is inspirational in that it depends on the Holy Spirit who energises, renews and equips the whole people of God.
- i) The church meeting is about discerning God's path for that particular local community, which means developing an understanding and connection with the people of the place.
- j) The church meeting is about wrestling with the intellectual, social, political and theological issues of the day.
- k) Church meetings in any given locality are shaped and informed by their connectedness to other church meetings and the wider councils of the Church. As the interconnected network of relationships is built, so the mind of Christ is discerned.

5. Ongoing concerns

5.1 Mission Council and the faith and order committee identified a range of issues and questions which still need to be addressed if these affirmations are to be modelled in each place. The United Reformed Church confesses that the practical experience of church meetings does not always live up to its aspirations.

5.1.1 The spirituality which undergirds the church meeting

This is not always clearly understood or easily made visible. It would be helpful to update the *Refreshing the Church Meeting* booklet, putting the church meeting in the context of United Reformed Church conciliarity.

5.1.2 The relationship between elders and the church meeting

It is not clear to everybody the roles of each and which topics are best addressed by one or the other (bearing in mind that trustee legislation has opened up a new raft of issues for elders to discuss). The secretary of Mission Council's law and polity advisory group has prepared a helpful and extensive advisory statement of the church meeting's various roles, powers, functions, limitations etc, based on the Scheme of Union, the United Reformed Church Acts and his own experience of church meeting as it has operated in three flourishing city churches. Though not yet in its final form, a version of this document can be found on the United Reformed Church website (www.urc.org.uk): www.urc.org.uk/images/documents/The_Church_Meeting.pdf

5.1.3 The relationship between personal and conciliar leadership

There is an argument which says that leadership through the church meeting may be too diffuse for the rapidly-changing times in which we live. There is a counter argument which says that in its attentiveness to the different voices in church meeting, the United Reformed Church demonstrates an alternative style of leadership in these changing times. It would be helpful to look further at the way in which individuals' gifts are affirmed and offered alongside the gifts of shared leadership in each church.

5.1.4 Vocation

One of the roles of church meeting is to help those attending church feel affirmed, enthused and confirmed in their vocation in God's world. It would be helpful to take time to reflect on what is happening in a meeting if these dimensions are not present.

5.1.5 Conflict

Church meetings are not always attentive enough to power struggles and conflicts and are sometimes insufficiently equipped to resolve them. More reflection on the sources of conflict, and more training on how to respond well to it, would be helpful.

5.1.6 Frequency of meetings

Does the church meeting meet too often, so that it is in danger of looking into the detail of practical business rather than being attentive to the Holy Spirit and the time in which the Holy Spirit moves? Or, should the church meeting meet more frequently, so that it has sufficient time for the whole community to wait upon God? It would be helpful in each place to determine the 'first order' issues pertaining to the Gospel that need the primary focus of the gathered people, and the 'second order' issues of good order and regulation that could be delegated to smaller groups.

5.1.7 Attendance in relation to a church's size

In larger congregations, a small percentage of people attend church meetings. More work needs to be done on this phenomenon and the consequent effectiveness or otherwise of church meetings.

5.1.8 Wider connections

Church meetings are not always seen as connected to the wider councils of the Church and vice versa. The connection and interplay between the different foci of church life needs to be addressed if the relationship between these councils it is not to be just a matter of handing things down or handing things up.

5.1.9 Models

Not everyone is enthused by church meetings, for various reasons. There is concern about the amount of attention given to the minutiae of church life. Some are asking whether the conciliarity embodied in church meetings could be developed using social

media. FURY Assembly has particular ways of enabling different voices to be heard and different views to be exchanged and could contribute to a discussion of helpful ways of encouraging mutual connectedness at different levels of church life.

5.1.10 Agendas

Many different views have emerged about church meetings and their role in practice. Would it be helpful to undertake more research into church meetings' issues as they are perceived on the ground? Could church meetings be a focus for the imaginative retrieval of the centrality of the Gospel, both in the content of the items discussed and in the way these items are addressed?

5.1.11 Local ecumenical partnerships

More work needs to be done on how United Reformed Church conciliarity and the role of the church meeting finds expression in local ecumenical partnerships.

5.1.12 Membership

This has been identified as an area on which more works needs to be done and the faith and order committee will be responding to this request in its autumn 2014 meeting, noting that the children's and youth work committee have also identified this need.

5.1.13 Good practice

It might be helpful to draw together and share some stories of fruitful and effective examples of conciliarity and the church meeting.

5.2 Conciliarity and the possibility it provides for discernment has at its best the potential to be a renewing, re-energising, fruitful and creative response to the work of the Holy Spirit in the United Reformed Church.

Resolutions:


- 1. General Assembly affirms conciliarity, and in particular the role of the church meeting, as one of the gifts of the United Reformed Church, both to the wider Church and to the society in which this Church is set.**

- 2. In order that this affirmation may become a source of renewal across the United Reformed Church, General Assembly commissions the faith and order committee, in consultation with other committees as appropriate, to undertake the following work:**
 - a) to produce resources for study which emphasise the theological understanding that undergirds conciliarity,**
 - b) to suggest resources to enable meetings to be more engaged in their discernment of the mind of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit,**
 - c) to offer reflections on the nature of church membership and ways in which it has evolved and is evolving,**
 - d) to encourage the United Reformed Church through such media as *Reform*, the United Reformed Church website, and the United Reformed Church Facebook page to publish stories of creative ways in which churches meet.**

- 3. General Assembly invites further reflection on this paper in the councils of the Church at all levels and invites comments to be fed back to the faith and order committee by July 2015.**



Part four: Scenarios



These scenarios were offered to Mission Council to aid discussion about the directions in which the Holy Spirit is leading the United Reformed Church. They were not offered as options in order to choose one rather than another as a way forward. They were offered as possibilities to focus the reflection on the future of the Church and to identify the areas which need addressing.

Introduction

It is Easter Sunday, 2033. As you get into your solar-powered electric car to join your fellow Christians for morning worship – grateful for the medical advances that have given you and your contemporaries an average life expectancy of 103, and the anti-Alzheimer’s drugs and other medications which promise that those extra years will be healthy and active ones – the first item on the BBC morning news is about the latest five-yearly survey of religion in Britain conducted by Dawkins College, Oxford.

The survey shows that religious affiliation in Britain has fallen to an all-time low, though the number of those self-identifying as Christians has risen since the last Dawkins College survey in 2028. At 21%, Christianity has regained its place as the biggest single religious group, a little ahead of Islam at 16%. However, those claiming ‘No religion’ number 52%, and that total includes 19% who self-identify as atheist, humanist or secularist.

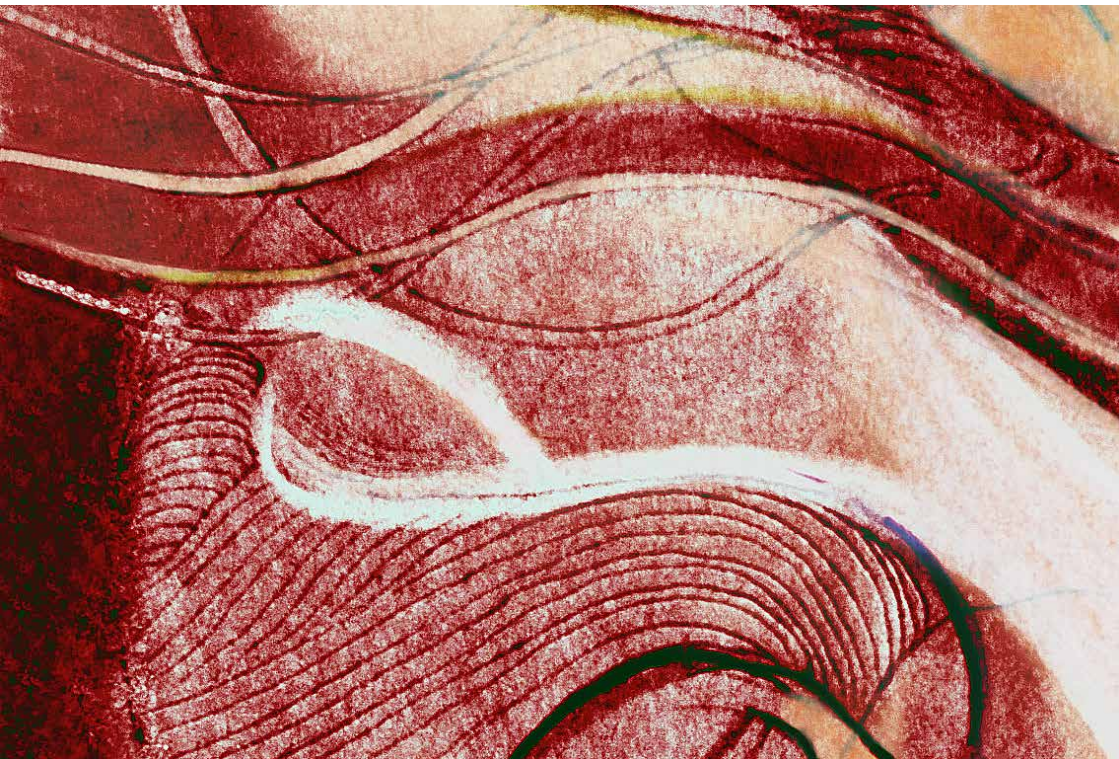
In the light of these figures, the secular celebrant of Dawkins College gives an interview calling for some of the faith seats in the Westminster Senate to be reserved for the British Humanist

Future of the Church

Fellowship, and the minister of state for minority cultures describes government initiatives to preserve important parts of Christian cultural heritage.

After the news report, the presenter reminds listeners that the new Archbishop of Canterbury will discuss the survey in her first Easter sermon, to be broadcast live later that morning.

You think back twenty years, to the meeting when Mission Council first started discussing the future of the United Reformed Church. You recall the further discussions, the sometimes heated and painful arguments, the decisions, actions and hard work in the years that followed. Your memories lead you through one of the following five stories...



1. Steady as she goes

After that Mission Council meeting in May 2013, you very quickly sensed a change of mood in the United Reformed Church. Nobody doubted the advice from the denominational leadership and external consultants that the Church lacked the resources to maintain its present structures and activities. But an increasing number of voices at all levels argued that the United Reformed Church's present structures reflected core convictions about the identity and ethos of a Reformed Nonconformist Church with a strong ecumenical commitment. Sweeping changes to structures or patterns of ministry would mean abandoning our distinctive calling as a Church and losing some of the distinctive gifts we gave to ecumenical partners and society. By the 2018 General Assembly that mood was overwhelming, and proposals for the radical restructuring of Synods were decisively rejected.

Over the coming years, the United Reformed Church avoided drastic changes to its structures or patterns of life, making only the adjustments needed to cope with declining numbers and resources. By 2030 the membership of the United Reformed Church had fallen to 23,000 from its 2013 total of 68,000. As numbers and income fell, the Church stood by its commitment to support local congregations as much as possible. Your church is now a lively Christian community with a membership of 62, making it the largest of the 370 congregations in the Synod of the Midlands and Northern England.

Since Easter is a busy time for the forty or so stipendiary ministers in the synod, your own minister will be leading worship in four of her other churches today, and you are looking forward to a rare visit from the half-time synod moderator. Though most stipendiary ministers serve eight or ten churches, an agreement with the Congregational Federation for joint accreditation of ministers has eased the pressure somewhat.

However, although relations between the United Reformed Church and the Federation are now quite friendly, the most recent conversations about union ended inconclusively. You remember the report of these conversations at the last quinquennial General

Assembly in 2031: there was some uneasy laughter when a speaker from the floor quipped, 'Well, what does it matter? We're all Congregationalists now, anyway!' As you recall, none of the four synod moderators, nor the three full-time members of Church House staff, looked particularly amused.

2. The Uniting Churches of/in Great Britain

You wonder what this morning's Easter Eucharist will be like. It is only seven years since the historic services held simultaneously in Westminster Abbey, Llandaff Cathedral and Iona Abbey to mark the United Reformed Church's union with the Methodist Church and the Anglican Churches in the three nations to form the Uniting Church of England, the Uniting Church in Wales and the Scottish Uniting Church.

Congregations are still coming to terms with the merger of all United Reformed Church and Methodist congregations with the Anglican churches in their parishes. However, the sale of so many redundant church buildings (the majority United Reformed Church and Methodist) has boosted the Uniting Churches' resources tremendously. As a result, the shortage of ordained ministers that had become acute in all three churches by the late 2010s has largely disappeared.

Your own former United Reformed Church minister resigned and transferred to the Congregational Federation once it became clear that Methodist and United Reformed Church ministers would have to be episcopally ordained to serve as presbyters in the Uniting Churches. Your parish has a presbyter from a Methodist background and a newly ordained curate from a high-church Anglican tradition. The curate admits she still finds it awkward handing out the bread and the trays of communion glasses to the elders for the distribution of the elements, while some of the elders are distinctly unhappy about the Reserved Sacrament. However, there is plenty of goodwill and everyone is trying their best to make these new patterns of church life and worship work well.

3. Local unions

As you park near Broad Street Church (Baptist/Moravian/United Reformed Church) and enter through the automatic glass doors, you ponder just how diverse the experience of being a United Reformed Church member can be these days. The Church's policy of encouraging congregations to unite with the most appropriate local partners has been in force for fifteen years, and there are now just a handful of United Reformed Church-only congregations left. Before you moved to your present town three years ago, you were a member of a Methodist/United Reformed Church congregation in your village. After the old Methodist chapel developed structural problems that the membership of twenty couldn't possibly afford to repair, the congregation entered into a sharing agreement to worship in the parish church. The proceeds from the sale of the chapel paid for the repairs to the parish church roof, and relations between Anglican and 'Chapel' congregations were warm from the outset – though joint worship was limited to a few special services a year.

Broad Street is very different: a growing multi-cultural congregation where white faces are in the minority, and the worship band and choir lead you in styles of worship you never knew existed. You find yourself wondering, not for the first time, just what the distinctive United Reformed Church contribution to such varied churches is. In your experience, it is mostly reflected in the different kinds of arguments you find yourself having: in your village church it often meant reminding the church council that some decisions had to be taken by church meeting, not merely reported there; at Broad Street the battles seem to be about persuading people that infant baptism really is baptism, or getting them to take an interest in the reports you bring back from Synod and General Assembly. You've lost count of the number of times people have turned to you in church meetings and asked, 'What's the United Reformed Church position on this?' – and you have to admit that often you don't know. You find yourself wondering where in the United Reformed Church's structures you could go to find out, and how much it really matters anyway.

4. Pastorate churches

Your journey this morning is longer than usual: being Easter Day, today is the monthly Celebration service at the central church of your United Reformed Church pastorate. By the mid-2010s it had become hard to deny that the United Reformed Church could no longer sustain its hundreds of small churches: ordained ministers were spread ever more thinly, congregations of ten or twenty lacked the people and money to keep their buildings usable, and the demands of legal compliance became impossible to meet.

After long discussion, a controversial proposal was agreed by the 2018 General Assembly: the thirteen Synods would be merged into five, and locally the Church would be re-organised into pastorates of about 10-15 congregations. Each pastorate would have one central church building, able to accommodate all the congregations and the pastorate's church and community activities. The sale of the other church buildings would finance the re-ordering needed, or the purchase or construction of a new building.

A typical pattern of Church life developed fairly quickly following this decision. In most pastorates a celebration service was held around once a month in the central 'Pastorate church'. Often these monthly celebrations came to be combined with pastorate lunches, socials, meetings and other events. For the rest of the month the congregations of the pastorate functioned as 'cell groups'. Some cell groups met in members' homes for prayer, worship and Bible study, either on Sundays or during the week. Others joined nearby churches for Sunday worship, and this arrangement was often recognised by local ecumenical agreements.

You remember all too well the sacrifice and heartache that the changes meant to many, as congregations left church buildings that had been central to their faith stories for generations, and surrendered something of their own identity to become part of

a new Christian community. You have had many conversations with friends who described it as a kind of bereavement. Yet the majority faced these changes courageously, and many discovered surprising new possibilities. The sale of buildings released funds to turn Pastorate churches into high-quality resources for pastorates and their wider communities.

People as well as buildings were released for creative ministry and mission. Your pastorate has two full-time stipendiary ministers, a half-time youth worker and a half-time salaried executive officer who handles most of the administration, finance and compliance work. The building is a hive of activity all week, with lunch clubs, job-seekers' advice centres, toddler groups, daily worship, café church, evangelistic youth work and much more besides. With only one central service a month, the ministers are able to spend time with the cell groups on other Sundays. And released from the burden of church administration and building maintenance, the cell groups themselves have discovered unsuspected gifts of pastoral and spiritual leadership among their members, sometimes becoming places of extraordinary Christian nurture and spiritual growth.

Another Assembly resolution back in 2018 made it possible for those out-of-reach of a local United Reformed Church congregation to belong to the United Reformed Church without being members of a local United Reformed Church congregation. With the continuing growth of social networking since the 2010s, a vibrant network has grown up of United Reformed Church members who worship most of the time in local churches of other denominations, but remain virtually – and strongly – connected to the United Reformed Church online. Some have begun to call this network 'a Reformed order within the wider Church', as members bring the particular gifts and insights of the United Reformed Church's tradition to their local Christian communities. In some places, Pastorate churches and their leadership teams have become hubs of support for this 'order'.

5. Local incarnations

That Mission Council meeting back in 2013 was when you first heard someone remark that the churches which were flourishing in the United Reformed Church were the innovative local expressions of Church rather than the 'normal' United Reformed Churches. Some were established United Reformed Church congregations that had 'de-branded' themselves in order to develop new ways of being Church in their contexts, calling themselves names like 'River Church' or 'The Meeting'. Others were congregations that had developed among migrant or international communities and then chosen to join the United Reformed Church. Still others were innovative experiments in Christian community beyond the walls of the church building ('fresh expressions', they used to be called – you never liked that name).

You had no idea back then how true that remark would prove. Now, twenty years on, there are only a few dozen of what you still think of as 'typical United Reformed Churches' left, and many of them are struggling with small congregations, lack of resources and buildings in disrepair. The 'fresh expressions' and the 'de-branded' and re-branded churches, on the other hand, have multiplied – which is why you are not on the way to a church building, but to the swimming pool at the local secondary school, which your group has hired for the morning. Normally you would meet in a private room in the pub in the next village. Apart from the small core group of you brought together by your minister to establish this new community, many of its twenty or so regulars are new to Christianity. Others severed their links with various churches long ago, having been hurt or alienated in various ways by their fellow Christians; but a renewed spiritual hunger has made them seek faith and worship again, and they find your community a safe place to explore Christian commitment once more.

At the beginning of this year, a young couple who have been part of your community for two years or so asked to be baptised. So you have used your meetings during Lent to explore the meaning of baptism and devise a baptismal liturgy together, and today your two catechumens will be baptised by immersion in the swimming pool, while you and some others will renew your baptismal vows and the whole group will promise to support the newly baptised couple in the next stages of their journey of faith.

And so, back in 2033...

As you think back over the past twenty years, you find yourself asking:

- Did we discern rightly what God was calling us to be and to do as a church?
- How faithful did we manage to be to our particular tradition: out of the things that were really important about the United Reformed Church, what did we keep and what did we lose?
- What gifts have we continued to offer our ecumenical partners and the wider society?
- What has proved exciting, invigorating and life-giving about the path we chose? What proved discouraging and life-draining?
- In our church now, what is still recognisable of the United Reformed Church as it was in 2013, or in 1972?

What answers would you give if each of these five scenarios were the story you recalled of the twenty years since 2013?

The issues with regard to the future of the Church in these islands, and of the United Reformed Church, have been before the Church particularly sharply since the second half of the twentieth century. This study guide has emerged out of three years of discussion in the United Reformed Church's faith and order committee and Mission Council, culminating in reports and resolutions agreed by the General Assembly in 2014.

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