

Responses to the Mission Council resolution on the Windermere Centre from collective bodies, and individuals with particular involvement with the Windermere Centre

Note: This collection consists of papers which are long and detailed, from organisations rather than individuals, or from individuals with a particular knowledge of the Centre. This approach is intended to aid understanding of the points raised in the papers.

These submissions appear as received, although we have edited into the URC's house style. The name and other details of the author(s) appear at the beginning of each submission. Opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the United Reformed Church.

1. Carver Uniting Church, Church Council (equivalent of elder meeting) from the Revd Martyn Coe, Team Minister of the South Lakes Group, 4 November 2016

At the Church Council (elders) meeting at Carver Church this week we discussed the resolution taken to Mission Council regarding the Windermere Centre.

While we are saddened at the proposed closure we recognise that this is not our decision to make and that the wider financial picture needs to inform this decision. We hold all those charged with this work in our thoughts and prayers.

The elders asked me to write to indicate their hope that a way might be found both for good price for the URC Trust and community value to apply equally in any sale of the property. With that in mind they have said that should additional local help be of use in assisting with examining any possible avenues we would do our best to support this. Windermere (like many places) is short of affordable housing and of supported housing for older folk and if we were able to have any influence on any disposal we would invite the trust to explore these possibilities.

We also recognised that within the paperwork sent to Mission Council was the possibility for ongoing life for the Windermere Resource Centre for Learning (RCL) even without the residential building. If the national church would like to examine further work for the RCL or iChurch using Carver we would be very pleased to work to make this possible. We do have additional space which could be used as office space for an ongoing RCL and would also be happy to continue to see the building used for meetings and conferences.

We also want to ensure that our position as a neighbour is protected and will want to ensure that, for example, the boundary is appropriately marked and pathways returned to garden etc., but recognise that this sort of detail will not need doing unless a closure decision is made by Mission Council.

Finally, (but in no way least) we continue to offer any support we can to the staff of the Centre in this difficult time.

If I can offer any help with any of these things, please do let me know.

2. An informal compilation of views from Carver Church members was received on 19 November, via Ruth Clarke, who has been involved with the Centre since its inception. The Hannah Fund was created in memory of the Clarkes' daughter.

This is an informal paper gathered from conversations with me, Ruth Clarke, a non-serving elder. I now go away for two weeks so have had no time for checking with others. I will be at the education and learning meeting on 19 December when I hope that this paper may be used. The Windermere management committee, of which I am a member, agreed that I could write such an informal paper.

Members know that there is a financial issue that may cause the residential Centre to close down. Many feel a sense of bereavement. This local church has worked alongside and helped in the running of the Centre for thirty years. They have had great affection for all three Directors. Some have been close enough to the workings of the Centre to see that the number of staff has increased from its modest beginnings. They have expressed concerns from time-to-time that the Centre was perhaps overreaching itself.

During this time Carver Church itself has developed both in buildings and in function. Members are not afraid of change. They rejoice in the newly developed building and feel gratitude to the United Reformed Church for funding the link building, which has enhanced both the church and the Centre. The Centre has been pleased to be able to use the church as a larger conference room when appropriate. Recently the Church Meeting agreed to allow the use of the building with no charge, refunding the entire sum the centre has paid at the end of the year. Another great change is the recent bringing together of the Windermere Methodist Church and Carver into the new Carver Uniting Church.

Members of Carver know very well that the Centre was set up as a lay training place and hope that it may continue with both the house and lay training. It recognises that the other RCLs have ministerial training as their main object and that Windermere is the only one that was set up for lay training.

If the house is closed, the members would want to help in the continuation of the real work of the Centre as it has developed over the years. They have some ideas as follows:

There are some rooms in the hall and cottage building. One of these might be used as a base by people enabling the work to go forward. We know that the iChurch programme has been commended by General Assembly.

Mission strategy focusing in the resourcing of lay people could be continued without residential facilities. Perhaps Windermere could come to where the people are rather than expecting them to visit Windermere. Online training might also be developed.

A few of us did some thinking about staffing. We thought that at the point of change there could be three members of staff. One or more might be part-time. The Centre has at present one very capable person who could carry on and develop iChurch. Perhaps somebody else with the necessary vision and ability could develop the lay training for the church of the future which is going to rely more and more on lay people. Some of this could be residential using other centres in different parts of the country.

One person for digital mission

One person for developing the lay training

One PA

One personal assistant who would help with the practical tasks (office, travel arrangements, holding the fort when others out and about and generally backing up the work).

There could well be properly resourced volunteers from Carver if appropriate.

3. North Western Synod Executive, via e-mail from the Revd Brian Jolly, Synod Clerk, 7 December

I have been asked by the executive committee of the north western synod to write concerning the future of the Windermere Centre.

At a recent meeting of the executive committee the synod moderator reported on the recent Mission Council discussion and resolution over the Windermere Centre. Members of the committee had prior to the meeting received the post-mission council statement issued by Church House, including the section on this matter.

The committee expressed significant concerns over the process being used to determine the future of the Centre, the status of the consultation currently being undertaken, and the pastoral care of the Centre staff.

Concerns over process were about the sudden way in which the matter was raised at Mission Council (the paper had been tabled at the meeting with no prior notice), the apparent lack of adequate data, and the push for a quick decision. It was felt that consultations on the matter should be such that they gained the confidence of the church, by being careful and reflective, inviting input from across the church, and set within a realistic timetable.

Regarding the status of the consultation, the committee was concerned that although the resolution passed by mission council was for various consultations to be undertaken so that Mission Council in May 2017 could be in a position to make a final decision about the future of the Centre, the post Mission Council statement issued by Church House stated that Mission Council was minded to favour the closure of the Centre; moreover, we understand that the statement has already led staff at the Centre and many members of churches within this synod and beyond to conclude that the closure of the Centre by the May 2017 meeting of Mission Council is a *fait accomplis*.

The pastoral care of the Centre staff was of concern to the committee, especially in the light of widespread understanding that the closure of the Centre is a *fait accompli* and meaningful consultation will not be undertaken.

A member of the Windermere Centre management committee who is a member of the synod executive committee reported that should the management committee wish to submit proposals for the Centre to remain open they have been set a deadline of 12 December. The view of the executive committee was that such a deadline indicated that the timetable for consultation was inappropriate.

The committee noted that the Mission Council resolution included provision for consultation with the North Western Synod, and that the synod has heard nothing concerning this from Church House since the meeting of Mission Council.

Included in the financial and other data available for consideration by the May 2017 meeting of Mission Council, the committee would like to see a full comparison of recent and projected investment in each of the Resource Centres for Learning, and reasoned papers concerning historic and projected benefits to the church from their operation.

The North Western Synod would certainly not argue blindly for the Windermere Centre to remain open. We believe the Church should use its resources carefully and strategically. For this reason, the executive committee believes the matter should be granted a high level of attention and consultation. However, at present the committee is far from convinced that the process being followed can meet such need.

I shall be grateful if you will confirm that the content of this letter will be made available to the education and learning committee for consideration at its next meeting, and that you will respond to each of the concerns of the north western synod which are detailed above.

4. The Revd David Lawrence on behalf of the Free to Believe committee, 29 November 2016

The Free to Believe committee received the news of the probable demise of the Windermere Centre with immense sadness. Members reflected on significant experiences in their personal journeys which had been associated with the Centre and were dismayed at the possibility that such opportunities would be denied to others in the future.

The fact that the Windermere Centre provokes such personal reflections is far from irrelevant. There are now very few opportunities for members of the United Reformed Church to affirm their common identity by meeting outside the confines of mundane week-by-week church life. To spend time removed from the pressures of daily life alongside others, especially when those others bring the experience of another fellowship whose circumstances are very different, is to affirm the nature of the Church as wider than a single fellowship or group pastorate. It is not without significance that Free to Believe itself emerged from a conference at Windermere and would probably never have happened without it.

While we value the contribution of Westminster College to the life of the Church, events at Westminster have a very different feeling to those at Windermere, which tend to be more about encountering other participants than the institution.

Given the need to reverse the serious erosion which has taken place over recent years in the sense of identification by local members with the United Reformed Church nationally, we do not consider an expenditure of £3 per head of membership to be in any way excessive, especially considering the staggering imbalance between the actual number of those who now make up the Church and the cost of providing staff and facilities for its cumbersome administration and governance. A sense of identity, essential if the Church is to survive, will not be facilitated by adding another employee, no matter how talented and enthusiastic, to central staff nor by any amount on expenditure on Church House.

To treat a focus of identity like Windermere as an optional extra, left essentially to promote itself, is a serious error. We urge that there should be no decision to finalise one more retreat along the path to the fading away of the United Reformed Church unless and until the Church nationally has put its weight, for at least three years, behind a concerted campaign to encourage local pastorates to take advantage of the Centre's facilities, either by organising their own event or by participating in one of the Centre's more general offerings. No moderatorial visit or contact with synod staff, no synod or training session should be considered complete without an exhortation to make use of the Centre to broaden the local church's horizons to include new insights and experiences. The Church's communications staff should be tasked with aiding the Centre in raising its profile. Other central and synod staff should be active in exploring the possibility of delivering training and new experiences through the Centre. Failure to fill the Centre on a regular should be viewed not as a failure of the Centre itself but of the national Church – and a failure which will call into question the likelihood of the Church reversing its fortunes.

We urge Mission Council to reject the temptation to retreat and to commit itself to a bold and committed strategy to use the Windermere Centre as an invaluable tool in the re-invigoration of the life of the Church.

5. The Revd David Salisbury, Training and Development Officer (North) – National Synod of Wales (A member of the education and learning committee until July 2016) 8 December 2016

It is of great concern to me that there is a proposal to close the Windermere Centre. I am concerned for several reasons which I will attempt to outline below.

Firstly, the timescale and notice that has been given to the Church that this might be 'on the cards' is simply too short.

As far as I am aware, it was to the October 2016 meeting of Mission Council that the suggestion that the Centre might close was first made. Yes, there had been questions prior to this, both in the public arena and at education and learning committee, but the most recent messages seemed to suggest that the centre was beginning to do better and that the PWYC and 'It's Your Place' strategy,

implemented in the Autumn of 2014, was beginning to bear fruit. Somehow, and to an outsider, this situation seems to have suddenly changed, taking myself and many others by surprise.

Following the October Mission Council, the news was released that of the three options set before it, the 'preferred' option was to explore closing the centre with a final decision to be made in May 2017. This gave the church just over six months' notice. Then, later in November it transpired that the education and learning committee would be meeting in emergency session on 19 December to look more closely at the proposal and its implications – but that the outcome of this meeting would probably determine the future of the Centre. So from six months' notice, the Church now has at best three weeks to make submissions to the committee in the increasingly vain hope that a positive way forward might be found.

I know I am not alone in thinking that this timescale is far too short. I appreciate that preparations need to be made and there are employment and other legal issues to grapple with, but even with this in mind the six months between the two Mission Council meetings is hardly fair to the Centre or to the Church and so to many people it feels very much like an irreversible decision has already been made, knowingly or not, by the October Mission Council. I feel that this course of actions put both the Centre and the wider Church in an impossible situation and treats people with contempt.

Secondly, I am concerned that the Centre has not been granted enough time to fully establish the PWYC and its Your Place strategy (which appeared to be working) and that the resignation of the Director in July seems to have been the trigger by which the powers that be saw an opportunity to take drastic action. Under the direction of Lawrence Moore, the Centre had very much become a place of radical welcome; a different kind of place which sought to operate in a different way, attempting to model something of God's kingdom. Stories and testimonies from many who witnessed and benefitted from this bear this out. There was always going to be a risk involved in this, and a cost. What we are hearing now is that the Church is not prepared to take that risk or bear that cost, which is sad in itself, but particularly so as it is these very values that many in the church would like to see happening more. Are we not a Church that is prepared to put its money where its mouth is and practice what we preach?

The message that has been given to the church is 'use it or lose it' which from a business perspective might be fair comment. But I wonder whether even this somehow misses the point of what the Centre was trying to become. It almost seems to be placing the blame for the Centre's demise at the door of our local churches that by and large don't go there in the way that they perhaps used to. Whilst there is obviously some sense in this approach it can't be the whole story and seems to reflect a model of church that no longer exists. Maybe this does signal that the Centre is no longer needed and indeed Lawrence Moore recently asked the provocative question 'what's the point of the Windermere Centre'. However, I am not aware that anyone has sufficiently answered that question – and now it seems time to do so is quickly running out.

Others have adequately made the point that Windermere is the only RCL that has lay rather than ministerial training as its core work. This is significant at a time when the number of ministers of word and sacraments are reducing and the church desperately needs more lay leaders to be adequately equipped for service. What would the closure of such a place say to those who offer

themselves for this kind of service, believing it to be a call from God, but that the church as a whole is no longer able or willing to resource?

As a resource centre, Windermere is still used extensively by the denomination for committee meetings, consultations and other events and network gatherings. These meetings will still need to be held somewhere and as someone who is fortunate enough to live in the northern part of the UK I can only envisage that these will now predominately be held in the south and east of England – presumably at a greater cost to the denomination too. Again, what message does this give to the fair proportion of folk who do live north of Watford? Stephen Thornton has already pointed out that Windermere is actually at the mid-point of the UK and whilst it might not be as convenient to get to as London or other south-eastern venues it signals that we take seriously that we are a Church in three nations and not just three or four synods.

The Windermere Centre has a long and rich history in the life of the United Reformed Church. It has been of benefit to many people as they have explored their faith, their ministry, and their place in the Church. Once it is gone there will be no going back so let's not rush into making a decision before proper consultation has taken place and the church fully understands and appreciates what it will be losing. If ultimately the decision is made to close the Centre, then so be it – but let's make that decision having given ourselves the time to explore as fully as possible the opportunities that still exist for keeping 'our place in the Lakes' open.

6. The Revd Peter McIntosh, retired URC Minister, former Director of the Windermere Centre (1994-2001) 9 December 2016

To have a sustainable future, the Centre's role needs to be imaginatively rebranded to attract a more clearly defined niche market, not finding itself in competition with the excellent programmes of Westminster College.

I would suggest that niche market is as a pastoral care and retreat centre.

Pastoral care is something in which every church and every minister is engaged. The Centre could become a place where people can be effectively equipped for this ministry, and the organisation of it within their church communities.

The Centre is also ideally placed as a retreat centre for individuals (or teams or groups) to find, guided rest, refreshment and spiritual renewal, in a variety of imaginative ways.

None of this is new. It has been part of life of the place in the past. What is new is to make 'pastoral care training' and 'retreat' the focus, so that the way the Centre is run, its ambience, its life, its routines, even the numbers it accommodates, can sustain and enable that twin focus to be fulfilled in fresh and dynamic ways.

I would be delighted to address the committee (or anyone else) in clearer and greater detail this vision of a reborn Windermere Pastoral Care and Retreat Centre in the future.

7. Andy Guthrie is a member of the Windermere management committee and has contributed the following comments in his individual capacity 12 December 2016

Background

This paper is lodged with education and learning to identify an alternative path to the proposed closure of the Windermere Centre. It is an outline proposal as the timeframe imposed by education and learning does not permit the preparation of a full business case.

It is understood that the proposal should be financially robust and in line with the strategy identified for 'Walking the Way: Living the Life of Jesus Today' (WtW.). I believe it meets these criteria.

Ministry of hospitality

The Windermere Centre is widely lauded for the atmosphere it holds for visitors. This experience is not just happenstance; it is not spiritual because the earth is thin there, but by design. Making the most of the space, ambience, staff, knowledge, spirituality, homeliness and quiriness, it allows the Spirit to deliver what it does to a wide variety of people, delivering depth or breadth as individual needs require. Over the years it has become special to many people and groups. It exemplifies the ministry of hospitality in its broadest sense and creates an environment that is unique within the URC's RCLs.

Separating the RCL from the Centre at this point in time appears to seriously reduce the opportunity to deliver a unique resource to WtW, one which already has experience and empathy with laity, which will presumably hold a key strategic place in WtW.

Business plan

In 2014 the Centre adopted Pay What You Can (PWYC) as an effective business model that is profoundly Christian and the 2015-2018 plan was built around the transformative impact of PWYC/It's Your Space (IYS) which showed an early positive impact in 2015.

In 2015 Mission Council agreed the business plan for the Windermere Centre which was summarised in Mission Council's October 2016 Paper D2 as:

'In November 2015 Mission Council gave its backing to the continued work of the Windermere Centre, encouraged by a Business Plan that expected to reduce the call on Assembly funds over the next few years. For the years 2016-18, Mission Council decided that the call on Assembly funds should be under £150k in any one year and normally under £125k.'

It is acknowledged that the Centre is off-plan in 2016 but that is the result of specific decisions made in the light of the loss of key personnel. The impact of PWYC/IYS was diluted when resources were withdrawn (marketing, brand management, staff development) and income consequently fell.

Every effort now needs to be made to get back on plan and to accrue additional benefits from savings and improvements (including management information systems) identified from working with Christian Guild (CG) over the last nine months.

It must also be acknowledged that the task of recovering the financial position has been seriously undermined by the response to paper D1, in particular the public announcement that Mission Council were minded to close the Centre (... sometime after May 2017).

Opening up new opportunities ...

Lawrence's moving on obviously creates a challenge for the Centre to negotiate but also generates new opportunities for different structures, relationships and ideas. Over the years the Directors have all brought something different to the job – and 2017 could offer another such transformation.

Conclusion

The Centre is not a 'sacred cow' and needs to close if it cannot fulfil its purpose, but the discussion about closure has burst open now solely because of short-term financial considerations with no obvious pause to ask: 'What is the purpose of the Windermere Centre?'

Of course the Centre has repeatedly asked the question: What is the purpose of Church? The Centre has historically offered a safe place for the discernment of these hard questions and losing the Centre before *Walking the Way* can find its footings appears very short-sighted.

The Centre keeps a door open to the future, it had a plan that got blown off course, now is the time to use the skills, talents and core strengths of the Centre to deliver that hospitality and theological adventure – whilst returning to the financial targets.

8. Westminster College: A reflection from the teaching staff at Westminster College to add to the discussion about the Windermere Centre. 12 December 2016

As we respond to the invitation to share thoughts on the way forward in sustaining the work of the Windermere Centre we recognise the significance of this moment, and its weight of emotion. With others across the URC we have much cause for thanksgiving in all that Windermere has added to our shared life. As friends and colleagues also charged by General Assembly with shaping a Resource Centre for Learning we appreciate the work and commitment it takes to run Windermere, and the intensity of this present moment. We have been delighted to grow collaborative work with Windermere, and feel the deep irony of that work now entering such uncertain times.

We trust in the URC's conciliar processes and accept that it must properly be for others to reflect upon the current context and to shape the future of Windermere and the sustaining of its work. We note, for example, that Westminster is at the education and learning committee as an observer rather than as a voting member. This has left us wondering how best to helpfully and appropriately speak into the current discussions. We offer the following thoughts, recognising that these are less concrete proposals and more general comments precisely because we are uneasy at one RCL suggesting detailed ways in which the work of another RCL should be handled:

1. Westminster is entirely open and receptive to any further exploration of ways in which the total education and learning needs of the URC can be best met by the range of resources that currently exist. We want to be an active conversation partner as opportunity arises, exploring future possibilities and prospects. We see it as vital that any decisions about the

URC's provision of training hold to the total picture and maximise collaboration to avoid unnecessary duplication or risky gaps. So sustaining Windermere's work must be related to the overall provision at Assembly and synod levels, through the range of RCLs, covering the phases of ministerial formation (EM1, 2 and 3) and the training of CRCWs, equipping lay people, elders, local church leaders and those who minister with children and young people. This demands strategic thinking that builds upon all we have accomplished together, and failed to achieve, after the 2006 Training Review.

2. The ecumenical and cultural context is constantly evolving. URC training provision needs to engage fully with the potential of blended learning and online resources. Collaboration with ecumenical partners and through resources such as CODEC at Durham could play a key role as we move forward. Discussion of Windermere can connect fully with these wider realities.
3. Our sense is that lively discipleship and faithful living in fast-changing contexts are the fundamental needs our training and educational resources must be applied to. That needs to include opportunity for celebration and lament, rest and critical thinking, friendship and space. RCLs can play a major role in offering these. They are a significant part of the direction of travel already being charted across the denomination.
4. It is vital that adequate resources are available to deliver whatever is being asked for from RCLs and others. Many innovations will demand more resource rather than less, and priorities will have to be set. Westminster has committed to funding a sixth teaching post precisely to address our longstanding deficit in resource in delivering wider RCL programmes alongside our initial ministerial training and ecumenical collaboration within the Cambridge Theological Federation. Again this highlights how important broader strategic thinking will be as we go forward together.
5. We would hope that the RCLs might work together to offer a collaborative response to the current situation and possible future patterns in the light of our respective gifts and strengths.

9. Mark Argent, retreat leader offers a relatively extensive description of how a retreat centre might be organised (see separate paper, submitted as a PDF, 11 December).

10. A paper from the most recent Director of the Windermere Centre, Lawrence Moore, is given separately.

*Responses collated by the Revd Fiona Thomas, Secretary for Education & Learning
The United Reformed Church, January 2017*