

# Thoughts on the future of the Windermere Centre

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## My background

I write as a URC Elder, who did a part-time “apprenticeship” in retreat-giving and spiritual direction at Osterley Retreats (1997–2004), worked as a full-time retreat-giver at St Beuno’s Centre of Ignatian Spirituality (2006–2014) and has given retreats and workshops in a range of centres, including the Windermere Centre. I was at the Windermere Centre last week giving a workshop *Exploring Spiritual Direction* and return early next year for an LGBT retreat and a Lent retreat. I’ve been very involved in the URC Retreat Group for a long time, and, along with Sue Henderson, was one of the two URC Trustees on the Retreat Association (2005–2012). Academically I write on the conversation between psychoanalysis and spirituality, and am very conscious that the individual and collective aspects of spirituality are important.

Lots of retreat centre work means I am used to contexts that mix spirituality/retreats and courses. From a Reformed perspective, I think that we put the boundary between these in a slightly different place from some of the episcopal traditions, but think that there is an important place for the resourcing of individuals as part of the process of resourcing the church.

I’m also conscious that, for all the value of the local church, it is also healthy for people to explore both there and in a wider context, and see these as complementary.

Inevitably this means I look at Windermere with half an eye on other residential centres.

I also do some professional web development, and have designed and run web sites for retreat centres, thinking particularly about what is needed for their web marketing.

## Context

All the mainstream denominations are experiencing decline and this is re-shaping our experience of church. I think that the resourcing of individuals outside their local context is an increasingly important part of the process, both because shrinking congregations can make that harder to do locally, and because change makes it more important for people to explore other ways of doing things and learn from people in other places. It’s really important that this is not about a sense of rivalry between residential centres and local churches: these are all about developing discipleship.

Other denominations have residential centres, and ecumenical thinking should encourage us to go to events in other centres and to run things in non-URC centres. But we should also be contributing by offering things in URC centres. That is partly so that we are giving as well as receiving, but it is also about affirming the value of what we bring. A very recent example is that the *Exploring Spiritual Direction* event was initiated because at most spiritual direction courses and conferences URC people are in a tiny minority and it is helpful for that not always to be the case, particularly because it provides a way to think about what might be “spiritual direction by another name”.

### **Lawrence's resignation as Moderator-elect**

It's hard to imagine Lawrence's resignation as Moderator-elect not having a knock-on effect. As the reasons are not public knowledge there is the added concern of projecting things onto this.

The stark look of the web site recently, and the bold question "What's the point of church?" have been read by some people as expressing a negative attitude to the URC. It's not clear that this is fair (Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion* could attract the same criticism), but this might well have undermined support for Windermere in a way that a change of director could alter.

### **"Pay what you can" and "It's your space"**

These were both controversial ideas. In terms of residential centres, both are highly unusual.

This doesn't necessarily mean they are wrong, but a particular concern is that both of them would amplify the effects if the people running a centre are not in a good place: I fear that this has happened.

For "*Pay what you can*" there seem to be issues around how people work out what is appropriate to pay. Before a decision is made that rests on this revenue stream it would be worth looking closely at how it has been working. The crucial questions are whether people on higher-than-average incomes have felt it natural to pay more, and how it has worked for people on low incomes. The latter are a really important and difficult group to find out about: experience at other retreat centres is that people in this bracket either don't go, or struggle to save up the money to go, and that the people who name financial difficulty are often those who have enough not to feel humiliated to ask. It is possible that "pay what you can" can be tweaked both to give better guidance on what the centre need not receive, and to be targeted on low-income groups, or that it could be abandoned and other methods used to reach this group.

"*It's your space*", at its best, would develop a strong sense of community connection to the centre, which is a good thing. The snag is that it tends to mean a double recruitment exercise, one to see what support something might have, and the second to cause people to book. It also means that the schedule is not known that far in advance. My instinct is to alter this so that at least a skeleton programme is arranged well in advance: experience from other centres is that people do book many months in advance, so the core programme should be publicised with much longer notice than now. This is particularly important if high-profile events are planned that would be likely to fill the centre completely (and perhaps need the use of additional nearby bed-and-breakfast accommodation) — I have made a few suggestions for things in this form and I am sure others have as well.

The positive about "It's your space" is that it should mean much closer connection between the centre and people using it. This could go a lot further in terms of the use of social media and possible discussion boards and resources on the web site so that the range of people it is reaching is greatly increased. That achieves something in terms of discipleship generally, and

boosts the centre. Exactly how this looks depends on the people involved, but things like resources on prayer and reflections on lectionary readings should be eminently possible. It should also be possible to have resources in addition to the publicity information linked in to at least some of the forthcoming events which both encourage people to come to them and give something to those who can't (as an example, something on spiritual direction in the Reformed world linked to last week's *Exploring Spiritual Direction* event might well have been valued by people who couldn't come).

### **Web site**

Wearing my web-designer hat, the existing web site seems in need of attention. The really crucial things are

- the programme is not sufficiently obvious: if people have to look for it, the risk is that they won't;
- the programme also lists all events as one list: if people have to search down, the danger is that they only look at the first few things — there needs to be a clear summary of what is coming up, so people can get a good sense of things at a glance;
- in the days of facebook and twitter, the events need to be listed in a way that means a link to an event can be posted on social media that shows with a good photo and appropriate summary text: at present marketing via social media is not doing all it could;
- one of Windermere's prime assets is its location, so it is vital that there be photos: frequent visitors to the centre could do with being reminded, but this is particularly important for bringing in new people (including those from outside the URC)
- adding online resources (as above) to broaden the impact of the centre and attract more traffic via google.

Improving the web site seems an obvious way to boost the marketing: this matters both to the finances of the centre and because lots of people attending means the centre is helping more people.

### **Co-operation with other URC centres**

There is a danger of Westminster College and Windermere being seen as in competition. In reality they are far enough apart to mean this needn't be the case. From the perspective of national discipleship strategy, my instinct is that it would be worth putting resources into encouraging people to go to events at Windermere, Westminster and Holy Island. This is partly about marketing, but is partly about co-ordination and the sparking of ideas.

## **Proposal**

From conversations at Windermere last week, it sounds as if plans are in hand on the management side to reduce the current deficit.

It takes a while to turn a residential centre around. In addition, the present uncertainty about its future beyond May is already hitting bookings, so 2017 revenues will be reduced by the present review, and it will take a while for staff morale to recover from the present uncertainty. In view of this I encourage a five year commitment to fund the centre with:

- a national appeal as was recently done for Westminster: I picked up last week that there are some practical things such as improving the seals on the fire doors, which could be brought together as a “refurbishment” appeal, and this could also include an appeal for funds to help people on low incomes to come;
- re-vamping the web site and adding new resources;
- a thorough review of “Pay what you can” to see whether it is working or should be improved or dropped;
- a thorough review of “its your space” to improve the connections with the wider URC community;
- the creation of a programme where at last the skeleton has events published at least six months in advance, so that the programme itself gives a reasonable flavour of the centre;
- if the new director post is seen as half-time, then it might make sense to combine this with a half-time role promoting spirituality more generally, including residential things at Westminster, so that Windermere is seen as a core national resource.