

Faith and Order Committee

Report of ongoing work

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Alan Spence: alan@thespences.org.uk
Action required	For noting
Draft resolution(s)	

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	An update of the committee's work, and outline of its future plans
Main points	Summary of work on cohabitation, theological gender language, Fresh Expressions and Eldership.
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	Equalities Committee, Mission Committee, Fresh Expressions, Pioneer Ministers, Ecumenical Partners.

Summary of Impact

Financial	No financial implications
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Most of these areas of work are of interest to our ecumenical partners, who are facing similar issues.

1. Cohabitation – Marriage and Relationships

The Moderators' Meeting and the Ministries Committee asked Faith and Order to offer a theological view on ministers of the URC cohabiting. The original draft response of the committee was circulated to these groups, but we recognise that that early response does yet not reflect Faith and Order's final mind on this matter. We are, however, willing to participate with any who wish to engage in this ongoing discussion. We note that the recent Methodist report on marriage and relationships, 'God in love unites us', also deals with cohabitation. We have provided comment on the report to the Methodist Church, based on the experience of having taken a similar devolved decision on same-sex marriage to the one proposed to be taken at the next Methodist Conference.

We have contributed by interview and written submission to the Church of England's new document on relationships, 'Living in Love and Faith'.

2. Gender language and the Trinity

The Equalities Committee asked Faith and Order to consider the use of gender sensitive language in our church's Trinitarian formulations, as the only authorised form in the URC Basis of Union is that of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Initially, the enquiry related to Baptism services, but it has subsequently been considered in a wider context. Our committee has worked on a discussion paper which has continued to evolve with input from various interested parties. In its latest form, the Faith and Order response was included in the papers of the cancelled Mission Council March 2020, and can be viewed there as paper F1. We hope that this will provide an opportunity for group discussion at the next Mission Council meeting.

3. Fresh Expressions and Pioneer Ministry

Representatives from Fresh Expressions (FX) and Walking the Way asked Faith and Order to bring some theological clarity to the status of FX within the URC. The committee's initial response has provided the basis for further discussion, both with FX and with Pioneer ministers. Questions have also arisen about the status of communities that are no longer able to offer the basic structures of a congregation within the URC. Faith and Order will now work with other URC Committees, brought together by the Mission staff, to further this work.

4. Baptism

A printed leaflet has been published to aid those inquiring about baptism. This complements an earlier booklet developed by Faith and Order on membership in the URC.

5. Eldership and LEPs

Concerns have been raised about the role of eldership in LEP settings, and questions about whether the URC views the ordination of elders to be essential (of the essence of the church) or simply beneficial (a matter of well-being). The committee has drafted a paper on elders and ordination to underline the significance of eldership within the URC, and the gift it potentially offers to LEPs. We have sent the draft paper to ecumenical partners for consultation, and it will be developed further later in the year, once their feedback has been received.

6. Ecumenical Participation

The Revd Dr Callan Slipper, National Ecumenical Officer for the Church of England, has a permanent place as ecumenical observer on the Faith and Order Committee. We have benefited from his wisdom and input, particularly in the area of 'receptive ecumenism'.

We were also pleased to have as a guest at our meeting in October 2019 the Revd Dr Susan Durber, Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Susan spoke of her work, and gave insight into how WCC Faith & Order deal with difficult conversations.

7. 'What we believe about....?' series

The committee has been working for some time on a short series of two-page articles on what the church believes about 10 central theological themes, including: Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit, the Church and Salvation. The series is intended to provide basic answers for the interested outsider. We expect it to be published before the end of the calendar year and initially posted on the Faith and Order webpage as a resource for the Denomination.

We include one of the articles, as a sample of this work:

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE ABOUT ... THE HOLY SPIRIT?

The Spirit is personal

The English word 'spirit' can refer to the mood or atmosphere among a group of people. While a valid use of the word, this is not what Christians mean when we talk about the Holy Spirit. With the whole Christian Church, the United Reformed Church uses capital letters and a definite 'the' when we talk about 'the Holy Spirit'.

The Holy Spirit carries the presence of God into this world and in this world. God is not just a creator who wound up the world and left it to tick. Nor is God just the one who came in Jesus, stayed with us for a few years, then moved on, back to heaven. But God is also a living presence, right up to date, active within the world today.

The Spirit brings the creative power and energy of God into our world. The Spirit breathes the life and goodness of Jesus among us. We can relate to the Spirit, in friendship and dependence and companionship.

Christians celebrate the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, Whit Sunday as it often used to be called. Pentecost means 'fifty' – just fifty days on from Easter. Acts 2 tells of the Pentecost that followed the first Good Friday and Easter. Jesus had died, risen and ascended. He was gone. Then a wind blew, a fire burned, voices spoke, and lives were filled with a new energy from heaven. The friends of Jesus realised that they were not a people deserted. They were accompanied, empowered and enabled. The life of Jesus had come among them, in the Spirit of Jesus.

Telling it this way might suggest that the Spirit was completely unknown in Old Testament times. That is not the case. But there are some differences between Old Testament and New. The New Testament tells of the Spirit as a constant presence rather than occasional; as available to all the friends of Jesus, not just to a few leaders or prophets; as 'holy' – the term 'Holy Spirit' is not common in the Old Testament; and as the Spirit of Jesus.

The Spirit is holy

To call the Spirit 'Holy' is to speak of the life of God. God is holy – distinct, perfect, not dependent upon us, yet shaping our world with goodness. The Spirit carries that holiness into our life today and helps us to respond to God and to share in God's nature.

So the Spirit calls us to faith, reminding us of the reality of Jesus and of the truths he brought us (John 14:26). The Spirit bears witness in our hearts and prompts us to reach out in Jesus' name as children of the God whom Jesus called Father (Romans 8:15-17).

The Spirit is the invisible power in Christian worship, kindling within us a desire to praise God and acting as conduit and interpreter of our prayers. The Spirit makes our sacraments deep moments of connection with the life of heaven.

The Spirit knits Christians together in fellowship, calling us to be one body in Christ, and giving us a bond of love with one another that reaches beyond the limits and boundaries of language, culture, tradition and background.

The Spirit calls us to a lifestyle that mirrors and embodies the values of Jesus. 'Sanctification' is an old name for this – the process of becoming holy in practice. Goodness is not a quality we can attain by pulling upwards on our own moral and ethical shoelaces. It needs to be a gift from God. Surely we have to respond to the Spirit. But when forces of temptation, habit or custom try to pull us off the path of Jesus, we are not in the struggle on our own. The inner strength of God's Spirit works for us, with us and within us.

And the Spirit gives the church energy to make Jesus known. There are many words for this – mission, outreach, witness. The church was never meant to be an ingrown community. The Spirit gives us the confidence and credibility to look outward, to declare by word and action that Jesus is alive, and to represent his truth and goodness by what we say and do. Again, we are not in this on our own. We are agents of the Spirit.

The Spirit is alive

Finally, it is worth noting that different people in the United Reformed Church would tell parts of this story in different ways. Some would stress the Spirit's role in creation (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30) and speak of the Spirit working all over the world, not merely among Christians. Others would underline the Spirit's relationship to Jesus, and expect to encounter the work of the Spirit specifically in places where Jesus is named and known. Of one thing, however, we can be sure – God's Spirit regularly has surprises in store for us. Let us be ready to respond to these with faith, hope and joy, for Jesus' sake.