

# Synod Moderators' report

## Receding but Reseeding

### Synod Moderators

#### Basic Information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	The Revd Simon Walkling <a href="mailto:simon.walkling.urcwailes@urc.org.uk">simon.walkling.urcwailes@urc.org.uk</a>
<b>Action required</b>	Discussion. Potential to be used as a conversation starter at local church level.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>None.</b>

#### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	The report is offered to General Assembly and local churches <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to consider how we balance talk of managing decline with the hope-filled things that are happening in many local churches;</li> <li>to help us think about what connects us with God as the source of our life and hope;</li> <li>to grow disciples;</li> <li>to find renewed vision.</li> </ul>
<b>Main points</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Receding and re-seeding are descriptions of our reality which lead us into different patterns of thought.</li> <li>Working with metaphor can give varied insights; 'garden' and 'meadow' are fruitful images with Biblical resonance.</li> <li>We see shoots of new growth and re-growth, but there are still difficult decisions to be made.</li> <li>We can talk about decline and closures with despondency, or we can discuss dying to unfruitful ways and rising to new life with hope</li> </ul>
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Previous Synod Moderators' Reports to General Assembly
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Synod Moderators

#### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	No direct impact from the report.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	Potential for local churches to reflect on mission and partnerships.

## Receding but Reseeding

1. At the time of preparing this report, it is hard to know how much will have changed by the time it is printed and again by the time it is read. The coronavirus and COVID-19 will have changed many lives. There may be more information about the impact of climate change. Changes in the relationship between the UK and the European Union may be clearer. Some United Reformed Churches will have closed, others will have grown. It is not easy to create an overview across different timescales and various contexts.
2. The synod moderators occasionally say that, between us, we know all the churches and all the ministers across the URC. That might give us the possibility of providing an overview of our Church, but the situations of congregations are varied and their life-cycles unpredictable. We can identify that key factors in growth are a core group of committed people with a vision undergirded by prayer. Likewise, we notice that for churches that are dying, a lack of vision is as significant as lack of numbers.
3. It is easy to tell each other stories of how we are 'receding', but we have been working on ways of 'reseeding'. We have shared synod strategies for supporting churches and new ways of being church. We have talked about the congregations where positive things are happening, some of them small shoots and others lush growth. There is a great range of activity, from seed-trays for discipleship like synods developing small intentional missional communities, to churches with significant projects serving their communities and a weekly footfall of 2,000 people. Congregations are varied and so are synods, but we find support and encouragement in each other. We have also found challenge and have asked how we can continue to be expansive in talking of God's Kingdom whilst realising that we are now a small denomination. That may free us to lay down some things and work on developing others, keeping our primary purpose in mind.



## Garden and Meadow

4. Some of the stories we have shared grew from careful planning, involving building confidence among members, establishing community support, developing business plans and putting funding bids together. Seeds of ideas have been planted and nurtured, then potted on until they are hardy enough to survive in the open air. We worked with the metaphor of the garden, deciding what crops could thrive in rotation and what flowers would produce a riot of colour giving joy.

Jesus also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

Mark 4:30-32 NRSV

5. Other situations arose because of something unpredictable: new people turned up; members had personal experience of the reality of life for homeless people, refugees or food-bank users; or an unexpected opportunity was grasped, rather than being seen as too much trouble. Seeds of possibility blew in on the wind and found fertile ground in a faith-filled environment. We worked with the metaphor of the meadow, with the Spirit scattering wild-flower seed and biodiversity developing to enrich the environment.

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.  
John 15:1-5 NRSV

We reminded ourselves that sometimes congregations don't always know where the effect of their work bears fruit. Sometimes scattered seed grows somewhere different. We may help seeds of faith to germinate within people who then become active somewhere else. We don't always see what happens, nor can we count the yield. It has always been so in the Church, as Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 3:6-9.

We could add references to John's metaphor of the vine, with God as the gardener (John 15), or the parable of the sower and mustard seed (Mark 4 and parallels). The phrase 'spiritual meadow' goes back to the writings of John Moschus in the early 7th century.

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'"  
Mark 4:30-32 NRSV

6. Since March 2020, we have seen how a virus can blight our hopes and concerns, and disrupt habitual ways of working. Whilst recognising the real existential threat, we are heartened to see the response of intentional pastoral care in many of our fellowships, and changes which might have been resisted when they were a choice have been embraced once they became a necessity. There has been lots of creativity in developing ways of staying connected in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and using phone, newsheets and social media to develop discipleship.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.  
1 Corinthians 3:6-9 NRSV

## Examples of Small Shoots

7. We shared about places where small things had made an impact. A church where a homeless person had joined in with discussion groups and been baptised, creating different conversations over coffee, and changing the answers to how Jesus helps us live our lives.
8. We heard about the church in Kidderminster that hosts a food bank and found community support when it was burgled. Or the church in Gillingham where the local church leader had thankful letters from addicts and offenders for the ways they had found support there. We were told about the pies and peas in Stockton and the drama therapy workshop where broken people found space enough to offer a welcome, and God's economy of love can be seen in action.
9. There are churches like Purley where an international link has changed the outlook and opened up multi-faith links.
10. In each of these situations, there is an authentic experience which has opened up new areas of reflection on faith in action.

## Examples of Re-growth

11. We shared about places where new energy was generated. Paulerspury URC had reduced to five members, yet a conversation about supporting their vision with some level of stipendiary ministry has led to that number more than doubling.
12. We heard about Totteridge, where there were 19 members, but by working through conversations about resources and mission, stronger churches have been able to support them in connecting with Latin American people in the area, doubling the congregation.
13. We have also talked about churches that have rediscovered something of the vision which grew them in the first place. In Dartmouth, Flavel URC was named after an itinerant preacher who wanted to bring the Good News to the town. There were six members remaining when the Synod's Interim Minister came to help them renew their vision and address some building issues. A Pioneer Network couple arrived and worked with the church, and the congregation has grown to 25, including young families.
14. St John's URC-Methodist in Stone had a failing building. The Trust was happy to sell the building and to invest the proceeds back into the congregation for mission. The congregation now worship in a Community Centre, having had a time in a school using a 'Church in a Box'. They became more visible to the community using public buildings than they had been behind closed church doors, and they are flourishing.
15. Stoke in Coventry have united with another URC and sold their buildings, but are looking at having a shopfront in their original area and are working with a Church Related Community Worker to connect with the community.
16. In Doncaster, Hall Gate URC was left with a tenth of the members they had at the start of the last decade. They decided to begin a journey of discovery to develop their engagement with the town centre and its night culture, moving out of the

listed worship area, but retaining the schoolrooms and a shop to work with the community and Street Pastors. People are now excited about the future.

17. On Holy Island, St Cuthbert's had no elders left and the future was not clear, yet pilgrims were knocking on the door when they visited the island. The St Cuthbert's Centre may not have a traditional congregation, but it now offers prayer and hospitality in a flexible space, with a ministry to visitors that is not just about the heritage, but living faith.

## Difficult Decisions

18. As synod moderators, we have sat and listened to faithful servants in local churches who have no-one to whom they can hand on their roles. There can be a sense of failure, but also a realisation that the mission of their congregation has been accomplished in that place at this time.
19. We have heard how exploration does not always lead to easy answers. A congregation of four members, after three failed applications to rebuild the church, wanted to develop their buildings as a gym for the village, but whenever major redevelopments are suggested there need to be people who can carry them through.
20. We heard from one synod where they could see the merit of telling of stories where things have not worked. There can be good news in trying something different, even if it does not produce the desired results, and this shows that we need to take the risk of a number of failures to achieve some successes.
21. Sometimes input of ministry gave leadership for a congregation to choose to close, rather than drifting. We also heard of churches that became so minister-dependent that they could not cope when the ministry came to an end, and they closed.

## Dying and Rising

22. In all this, we have seen that it is tempting to look for someone to blame: leaders past or present for not reading the signs of the times aright; people 'out there' for not responding to our welcome or God's call; and sometimes God for not honouring our faithfulness and hard work. It is also easy to be undermined by shame: that decline has worsened in our time and we can't find the answer that can solve everything. The antidote to blame and shame is God's grace. When we are open to God's free gift of love, we can find healing for hurt, forgiveness for failings and freedom from guilt. That can renew us for our future life as part of God's people and partners in God's work.
23. We have shared how closing congregations can leave a legacy of life. Returning to the gardening metaphor, there can be compost from the resources released. South Western have development grants that are possible because of sold redundant buildings. In Yorkshire, legacy funds allowed for each church to receive £3,000 to spend on mission; this changed the mood and attitude of many congregations, encouraging fruitful thought and action, even when the ideas did not cost a lot of money. In Mersey, there is a church extension fund from

building sales, and some redundant pews were even used to make beds for homeless people.

24. We can talk about decline and closures with despondency, or we can discuss dying to unfruitful ways and rising to new life with hope (John 12:24-25).

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

John 12:24-25 NRSV

## Personalia

25. Since our last report to General Assembly, Andrew Mills has moved on to ministry in a local pastorate; Nicola Furley-Smith has been appointed as Secretary for Ministries; and Peter Meek and Kevin Watson have retired. We have welcomed Brian Jolly, Geoffrey Clarke and Jamie Kissack. We look forward to welcoming new colleagues who will be called to Southern and Thames North Synods.

## Questions for discussion in local churches

1. What gives us hope?
2. Where do we see seed-trays for new disciples?
3. What gives us life and renews our energy?
4. From our experiences of church life during the COVID-19 pandemic, what do we want to sustain when we can meet physically again? What did we have to stop that would be unwise to resume?
5. How do we connect with the risen Christ for the miraculous to happen?
6. What is our vision, and what is the first step towards that vision?

New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved worldwide. <http://nrsvbibles.org>

Copyright: photo can be used according to Creative Commons CC-BY-SA  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/michaelheiss/14272922640/in/dateposted/>