

Paper 14

The future of *Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today*

Walking the Way Steering Group

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Francis Brienen francis.brienen@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 36</p> <p>In affirming that whole-of-life discipleship is the primary long-term focus of the United Reformed Church, General Assembly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) requests that those reviewing the future of the URC, as agreed by Mission Council in March 2021, take full account of the importance of whole-of-life discipleship.b) instructs the Walking the Way Steering Group to continue its work until the end of the calendar year 2022, whereupon the work of the group in supporting the embedding of whole-of-life discipleship across the denomination will be continued by the Deputy General Secretaries for Discipleship and Mission.c) asks those responsible for the finances of the Church to find ways to continue the role of Walking the Way Project Manager until the end of the calendar year 2022. The Project Manager should focus firmly on embedding the whole-of-life discipleship ethos of Walking the Way across the denomination, working closely with the Deputy General Secretaries for Discipleship and Mission in collaboration with the Walking the Way Steering Group, whilst it is in place.d) invites all committees and groups connected with the life of the United Reformed Church to hold the whole-of-life discipleship ethos of Walking the Way at the heart of their work.

	<p>e) instructs the Walking the Way Steering Group, through the Project Manager, and in collaboration with other Church House staff, to develop a range of resources to better embed the whole-of-life discipleship ethos of Walking the Way across the Church.</p> <p>f) welcomes collaborative work across the Church to facilitate and resource the whole-of-life discipleship ethos of Walking the Way across the Church’s life, work and witness.</p>
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Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	This paper offers proposals for General Assembly’s consideration regarding the future of <i>Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today</i> , as well as an update on the Steering Group’s current work.
Main points	Feedback from across the Church demonstrates continuing confusion about <i>Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today</i> as a focus for the whole Church rather than a programme in its own right. There is also a strong desire for more collaborative work, less duplication and for new resources only to be produced when necessary. To assist with this, the Steering Group proposes that it focus its energies firmly on embedding whole-of-life discipleship across the Church, working collaboratively at all levels of Church life, with a view to passing on this work, and that of the Walking the Way Project Manager, to the Deputy General Secretaries for Discipleship and Mission at the end of the calendar year 2022.
Previous relevant documents	<p>Mission Council 11/15 papers M1 and M2</p> <p>Mission Council 3/16 paper M1</p> <p>General Assembly report 2016, p.11</p> <p>Mission Council 11/18 paper I2</p> <p>Mission Council 11/19 paper I3</p> <p>Mission Council 03/20 paper I3</p> <p>General Assembly report 2020, p.195</p> <p>Mission Council 11/20 paper M1</p> <p>Mission Council 03/21 paper I4.</p>
Consultation has taken place with...	<p>Mission</p> <p>Communications</p> <p>Education and Learning</p> <p>Children’s and Youth Work</p> <p>Finance.</p>

Summary of impact

Financial	If the resolution above is passed, the Project Manager role and the work of the Steering Group will require funding for the calendar year 2022.
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External (e.g. ecumenical)	Consultation and events considering whole-of-life discipleship with ecumenical partners, including Churches Together in England and Christian Aid, continue, especially around online discipleship and hybrid church.
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1. The current situation

- 1.1 *Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today* is the United Reformed Church's focus on whole-of-life discipleship, exploring what it means to be a follower of Jesus in everyday life. It is all about celebrating and sharing experience and wisdom to empower people to be the presence of Jesus through their everyday lives by recognising that, whoever we are and whatever we are doing, God is with us, working through us to make a difference in the world.
- 1.2 The Walking the Way Steering Group, which includes representatives from networks across the denomination, seeks to work with people across the URC, sharing stories, suggestions, resources and good practice as widely as possible.
- 1.3 Every synod is responding to this focus in a different way, relevant to its own context and needs. The Steering Group seeks to support this work.

2. Clarity of message

- 2.1 At the close of 2020 and opening weeks of 2021, the Steering Group consulted widely with groups across the Church on the success of *Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today*. A summary of findings can be found in Mission Council Paper I4 from March 2021.
- 2.2 Perhaps the most prominent message revealed through the feedback is that it is still not clear to many across the denomination that *Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today* is designed to support whole-of-life discipleship development as a priority across the Church, and that it is not a programme in its own right. This has led to much confusion over what it is, how it can support the existing work of local churches, synods and other groups, as well as how the support it provides can be accessed easily.
- 2.3 It is clear that significant change is needed to the denomination's focus on whole-of-life discipleship in order to make sure that its message is shared and supported in clear and helpful ways.

3. The future

- 3.1 Aware of the long-term nature of the Church's focus on whole-of-life discipleship, the Steering Group has spent time considering the future of this focus, bearing in mind the aforementioned feedback, and proposes several ways forward for General Assembly's consideration:
 - 3.1.1 *Whole-of-life discipleship to be at the heart of the ongoing Church Life review* – This would help to keep whole-of-life discipleship firmly at the denomination's heart, whatever direction the future might take.
 - 3.1.2 *Collaborative working rather than a Steering Group* – The Steering Group believes that, given the current direction of its work, it would be best for the

group to remain in place until the end of 2022, at which point the Deputy General Secretaries for Discipleship and Mission should continue the work of monitoring and supporting the development of whole-of-life discipleship across the denomination. The group believes that the Walking the Way Project Manager role should finish at the end of the calendar year 2022, having focused explicitly, in its final year, on a strategy for embedding, including collaborative work with the Steering Group and the Deputy General Secretaries for Mission and Discipleship. This would make it clear that whole-of-life discipleship should be a focus which flows through everything the Church does, rather than an entity or programme in itself.

- 3.1.3 *Collaborative work across the church on whole-of-life discipleship* – If whole-of-life discipleship flows through everything the Church does, then it needs to be at the heart of all the Church's work. In the URC's conciliar structure, this means considering matters of discipleship carefully and regularly across all committees and groups at all levels of Church life as a core value which informs and shapes everyone's work. There should also be more collaborative work in terms of resource production, building on the strength of existing collaborative projects such as the Advent and Lent materials produced with Children's and Youth Work, Education and Learning and Church and Society. Such collaborative work should focus on the embedding of whole-of-life discipleship across the Church.

4. Update on continuing work

4.1 The Steering Group has continued its work according to the priorities set out in its report to Mission Council held in July 2020 under the following headings:

- a) *Resources and communications* – Plans for a URC podcast with a firm focus on discipleship are well underway with recording for several episodes already taking place. The podcast, to be launched in late May 2021, will look at a range of topics, including being a Christian in the workplace, climate justice, money, antiracism and the Covid-19 crisis a year on. Feedback has revealed that the Walking the Way website and social media content continues to be difficult to navigate and use easily. We have altered the social media strategy to produce more relevant content for the platforms it uses and help more people to find it. Work is also ongoing with Communications to combine as much content as possible into a single webpage which is easy to navigate.
- b) *Accompaniment* – Feedback on *Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today* continues to show a need for accompaniment and mentoring support as local churches unpack what it means to follow Jesus in their context. The continuing Covid-19 pandemic has brought many challenges for churches in Southern Synod participating in the pilot accompaniment programme with the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC). However, they have been able to make use of technology to keep in contact, encouraging each other in building a whole-of-life discipleship ethos. Churches in Mersey Synod are also preparing to begin their journey with the LICC soon.
- c) *Online discipleship* – The Steering Group has hosted three online events, open to everyone in the URC with an interest in online discipleship, to share wisdom, explore challenges and ask questions. Demand for a third

session to enable deeper conversations about these issues is great, and it is hoped that a network will be created out of these sessions to support the continuing grassroots development of approaches to discipleship in online environments, as well as the use of online technology in discipleship generally. Events and consultation from Churches Together in England and Christian Aid on this ever developing topic have also proved fruitful.

- d) *Stepwise* – The Steering Group and Stepwise development group continue to enjoy representation in each other’s meetings to ensure that Stepwise can benefit from the Steering Group’s insights and vice versa. Further information on the development of Stepwise can be found in the Education and Learning report.
- e) *The URC’s 50th Anniversary* – The Steering Group has now set up a task group to plan for this important milestone in the denomination’s life, keeping a focus on whole-of-life discipleship at the heart of the celebrations. For further information on the group’s progress, see paper I3.
- f) *Networking* – Communication continues with synod teams (Children’s and Youth Development Officers, Training and Development Officers, Mission Enablers, etc.) with stories, resources, events and opportunities shared regularly. Online meetings of people from across the Church’s networks to share news and good practice on whole-of-life discipleship continue to be well attended. It is clear that whole-of-life discipleship is still a priority across the denomination, but more needs to be done to enable effective collaboration, cross-fertilisation and shared learning.